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Norman Maine Publishing

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“Don’t never
trust an actor...”

–Widow Boggs

The Not-So-Grand Hotel premiered at the Houston Country Playhouse Black Box, August 15-25, 2002: David Parker, director; Monette Turner, assistant director.

RUSTY: David Chatelain

DUSTY: Patrick Houston

PETER ATRIUM: Sam Castro

WIDOW BOGGS: Carolyn Montgomery

NITA: Abby Butcher

KELLY THE COOK: Dave Howell

MARY HOWARD KING: Yankee Grant

CHIEF GIBBS: Ken Watkins

REGINALD ROGER-ROGERS: Dean Turner

MISS TUTWILER: Salle Ellis

ALICE: Marge Prus

BETTY: Stephanie Smith

The Not-So-Grand Hotel

FARCE. With the front entrance still blocked from the last mudslide, business has been a bit slow for the dilapidated Hotel Horace. But as luck would have it, the town of Swampy Corners suffers another major mudslide, this time blocking the main highway. And with the new detour running right past the front door of the hotel, the owner decides to spruce up the place with the help of two lazy teenagers, a half-baked cook, and a bellhop. But when a police fugitive, British world traveler, math teacher, and two high school students arrive at the hotel, the hotel staff soon find themselves buried in an avalanche of madness!

Performance Time: Approximately 75-90 minutes.

Characters

(5 M, 7 F)

RUSTY: Lazy, slow-moving yard boy; sloppily dressed.

DUSTY: Not-too-bright yard boy; sloppily dressed.

PETER ATRIUM: Bellhop; wears a well-worn bellhop's uniform.

WIDOW BOGGS: Runs the rundown Hotel Horace; wears a gaudy apron with a large pocket in the front.

NITA BOGGS: Widow Boggs' niece, who has an eye for the bellhop; wears a plain housedress.

KELLY THE COOK: Half-baked cook.

MARY HOWARD KING: Writer for a newspaper syndicate.

REGGIE ROGER-ROGERS: World traveler from London; wears khaki shorts, a bush jacket, and a pith helmet.

CLARA TUTWILER: Complaining math teacher and travel chaperone.

ALICE: Fun-loving, flirtatious high school girl; smartly dressed.

BETTY: Alice's classmate and best friend; smartly dressed.

POLICE CHIEF GIBBS: Dim-witted police chief who is in love with Widow Boggs; wears a patched-up uniform, straw cowboy hat, and gun belt.

Setting

The present. The side patio of Hotel Horace, a dilapidated hotel in the small town of Swampy Corners. At Hotel Horace, the plaster is peeling, the furniture is in bad shape, and everything needs paint. At SR is a high board fence with a door that leads to the street. UC is a door with a few visible steps leading to rooms on the second floor. At SL is a door leading into the hotel through the kitchen. A rickety registration desk stands near the SL door. Several chairs, a bench, and dried-up plants are against the walls. Down center there is an uncovered well.

Synopsis of Scenes

ACT I

Scene 1: June, mid-afternoon. The side patio of Hotel Horace.

Scene 2: That evening. The patio is dimly lit.

ACT II

Scene 1: The patio, 20 minutes later.

Scene 2: The patio, early the next morning.

Props

2 Brooms	Handbags
Small canvas mail bag	Hotel registration book
Package	String of colored lights
Leaves	Garbage bag filled with
Whistle	leaves
Feather duster	Chair
Joke book entitled, "Best	Book
Vaudeville Jokes of 1927"	Bench
Suitcases	Towel
Laptop computer	Handgun
Camera with leather strap	Long sweeping gown, for
Desk bell	Mary
Pen	Feather boa or fur stole
Golf clubs	Dark glasses
Tennis racket	Cigarette holder
Polo mallet	Handcuffs
Keys	Simple dark dress, for Nita
Gun belt	

Sound Effects

Car approaching	Police siren
Car horn	Rattletrap car approaching,
Banging pots and pans	sputtering

Act I

Scene 1

(AT RISE: June, mid-afternoon. The side patio of the Hotel Horace in the small town of Swampy Corners. Rusty and Dusty, two slow-moving yard boys, sloppily dressed, lean on their brooms. Rusty is standing and Dusty is sitting on the well ledge half asleep.)

RUSTY: Hey...

(Pause.)

DUSTY: Huh...?

RUSTY: You sleeping, Dusty?

DUSTY: Not with you talking.

RUSTY: Did you hear anything?

DUSTY: Hear what?

RUSTY: I think the mountainside's moving again.

DUSTY: It don't move very fast.

RUSTY: That's good. *(Pause.)* Now maybe I can sleep.

DUSTY: Me, too.

(Peter Atrium enters in his well-worn bellhop's uniform, carrying a small canvas mail bag.)

PETER: *(Briskly.)* Good afternoon, guys!

(Pause.)

RUSTY: *(Yawning.)* Hi...Pete.

DUSTY: Back from the Post Office?

PETER: Can't put anything past you guys!

RUSTY: What you get this time?

(Peter takes a package out of the bag.)

PETER: Some books.

RUSTY: (*Disgusted.*) More books?

DUSTY: If I ever get out of school, I'll never look at another book.

PETER: If you never look at another book, you won't ever get out of school. These are from the American Hotel Association.

RUSTY: What do you need those for? You're already the best bellhop in Swampy Corners. (*Winks at Dusty.*)

PETER: You know darn well I'm the *only* bellhop in Swampy Corners. But I don't plan on being a bellhop forever. I'm going to improve myself.

DUSTY: Sounds like work.

RUSTY: That reminds me... (*Yawns.*) ...we got to sweep up.

DUSTY: (*Lazily.*) Reckon we do.

(*Neither one moves.*)

PETER: Don't let me keep you awake. If anyone wants me, I'll be up in my room studying. (*Exits UC.*)

RUSTY: You seen Widow Boggs?

DUSTY: More times than I wanted to.

RUSTY: She gets mad as mud when her summer workers loaf.

DUSTY: Speak for yourself. I'm a hard worker...when she's watching me. (*Nods off.*)

(*Footsteps are heard off SL.*)

RUSTY: Pssst!

DUSTY: What is it now?

RUSTY: I think she's coming.

(*Boys begin sweeping furiously. They sweep the same leaves back and forth. Widow Boggs enters from SL, wearing a gaudy apron with a large pocket in front.*)

WIDOW: I see y'all are working very hard...for a change.

RUSTY: *(Sweeping.)* Thank you, Widow Boggs.

DUSTY: *(Sweeping.)* Thank you, ma'am.

WIDOW: Yes, you're both good workers...when I'm watching you! *(The boys exchange a look. Widow thumps her chest with her fist as though she has a case of indigestion.)* That no-account, biscuit-burning cook!

RUSTY: Something wrong, Widow Boggs?

WIDOW: Everything's wrong! Can't you see that for yourself? *(The boys look around uncertainly.)* It's high time to hold a meeting of the hotel staff.

(Widow takes a whistle out of her apron, blows it loudly. Nita Boggs hurries in from UC, wearing a plain housedress and carrying a feather duster.)

NITA: Here I am, Auntie.

WIDOW: That's one.

(Widow steps toward SL, blows the whistle again. A moment later the Cook haughtily strolls in from SL.)

COOK: What do you want? I was busy in the kitchen.

WIDOW: Now you're out here, where you can't do no harm.

NITA: *(Being the peacemaker.)* Was there something you wanted to tell us?

WIDOW: I wasn't whistling Dixie, was I? *(Looks around.)* Where's Peter?

NITA: He's...indisposed.

WIDOW: How do you know that?

NITA: I'm just sure he must be.

WIDOW: I'm not waiting till he gets himself disposed again. Everybody sit down! On the well there, or anywhere. *(Glares at Cook.)* That goes for you, too, you miserable belly-cheater.

COOK: I serve up plenty at every meal.

WIDOW: Plenty of heartburn.

COOK: (*Snarling.*) Awwwwwww!

(The boys and Nita sit on the well ledge. Cook sits off by herself, frowning. Widow stays standing. Suddenly Peter rushes in from UC.)

PETER: Did I hear a whistle?

WIDOW: I thought you were indisposed.

PETER: No, I was in my room, reading.

WIDOW: You're supposed to be bell-hopping.

PETER: I can't hop when there's no bell to hop to.

WIDOW: That may be changing. Sit down. *(Peter sits on the well ledge. Nita slides a little closer to him.)* All right, folks...I got some bad news and some good news.

NITA: Good news! Let's hear it!

COOK: Good news always waits for bad news.

WIDOW: The bad news you already know. Hotel Horace is a whopping failure because we're too far off the main highway. *(All nod their heads sadly.)* Now for the good news. There's been a terrible mudslide on top of the highway.

NITA: Oh, Auntie, how can that be good news?

WIDOW: Don't you understand? Hotel Horace is now on the main detour!

NITA: *(Enthusiastic.)* The main detour!

PETER: We're back in business!

NITA: It's so exciting!

RUSTY: New folks coming by!

DUSTY: Maybe some girls!

NITA: New friends from new places!

PETER: People from the city!

DUSTY: Maybe some girls!

WIDOW: Now we'll be getting lots of rich tourists. You know what that means.... *(Looks from blank face to blank face.)* ...we gotta fix up the place!

NITA: The front entrance is still blocked by the last mudslide.

WIDOW: Peter, I want you to put up a sign out front so everybody knows to come through here to register.

PETER: But what are they going to think of us?

WIDOW: They'll think we're just like those ritzy hillside hotels in California. They get mudslides, too, don't they?

PETER: Hotels in New York don't get mudslides.

WIDOW: This ain't New York.

PETER: Don't I know it.

NITA: It'll be all right, Peter.

PETER: Sure, with you, everything's always all right.

NITA: (*Shyly.*) I wouldn't say that.

WIDOW: (*To Rusty and Dusty.*) And you two—I want you to stop sweeping leaves back and forth and start shoveling mud.

RUSTY: But there's already grass growing on it.

DUSTY: I thought it was like the new yard.

WIDOW: You idiots! We got plenty of yard. What we ain't got is a front entrance!

COOK: I got a question.

WIDOW: What is it?

COOK: Too many tourists mean too much work.

WIDOW: That's not a question.

COOK: If more people gonna be eating here, I gotta have more help in the kitchen.

WIDOW: (*Sarcastic.*) You need help in the kitchen, all right. But I can't afford any more hands.

NITA: I'll give you a hand, if you'd like.

COOK: Thank you. At least there's one Boggs who knows how to treat people.

WIDOW: I'm running a hotel, not a tea party.

PETER: But people from the city expect more than a room. You got to have a friendly way of making them feel at home.

WIDOW: You don't have to tell me that. When my dear old husband Horace was alive, he was real good at popping jokes. In fact, he left me something I've been meaning to study up on. (*Crosses to desk, opens a drawer, takes out a book.*)

Mr. Smarty-pants Bellhop, you're not the only one with a book.

NITA: Peter's not a smarty-pants.

PETER: What is it?

WIDOW: It's a book full of jokes, and I aim to learn a few so I can be funny like Horace was. I owe it to him, since he left me this hotel.

COOK: That was the biggest joke of all. *(Laughs sarcastically, stops cold when everyone stares.)*

WIDOW: Everybody get to work now and clean up this hotel! Inside and out! Let's go! *(Slips the book into her apron pocket.)*

PETER: Good idea!

RUSTY: Yes, Widow Boggs.

NITA: Let's all do our best!

PETER: This is our chance!

RUSTY: We're going to work.

DUSTY: Yeah, we're going.

COOK: Bah.

(Peter enthusiastically exits UC. Rusty and Dusty exit SR, dragging their brooms. Cook exits SL in disgust. Nita starts to follow after Peter.)

WIDOW: Nita, you wait.

NITA: Yes, Auntie?

WIDOW: I want a word with you, dear.

NITA: Of course.

WIDOW: I've seen the way you look at that know-it-all bellhop Peter Atrium.

NITA: He's not like that. And I don't look at him...not all the time.

WIDOW: Only when he's out in plain sight and not hiding in a book.

NITA: I can't help it. Peter's someone special.

WIDOW: The only thing special about him is the midnight special he'll be catching one of these days to leave Swampy Corners behind – and you with it.

NITA: *(Starts to cry.)* Oh, Auntie –

WIDOW: Please don't cry, honey. I love you as if you were my own daughter.

NITA: *(Sniffs.)* I know you love me. I also know you don't like Peter.

WIDOW: I'm sorry to say it, but he's not interested in you. He's only interested in learning how to run a fancy New York hotel. And you only find one of those in New York.

NITA: He's always had a lot of get-up-and-go.

WIDOW: And before you know it, he'll be got-up-and-gone. Better forget about him.

NITA: How can I forget about him when I can't stop thinking about him? *(Runs off SL, crying.)*

WIDOW: *(Musing.)* What a sweet thing she is, and so hopelessly in love. *(Sighs romantically, her mind drifting miles away.)* Ah, love...young love...any kind of love.

(Mary Howard King furtively enters from SR. She carries a small suitcase, a laptop computer, and has a 35mm camera hanging on a leather strap around her neck.)

MARY: *(Loud whisper.)* Excuse me...are we alone?

(Widow, daydreaming, does not respond. Mary goes to the desk and taps the bell.)

WIDOW: *(Snaps to.)* Oh, my heavens! Sorry...I was lost in thought, someplace I shouldn't have gone. Welcome to the Hotel Horace. What can I do for you?

MARY: *(Nervously glances around.)* Can we go inside to the office?

WIDOW: *(Indicates the desk.)* This is my office. We're remodeling inside. Outside, too.

MARY: I'd like to talk to the manager.

WIDOW: That's what you're doing. (*Introduces herself.*) Billie Mae Boggs.

MARY: I'm Mary Howard King. (*Looks for a reaction, gets none.*)

WIDOW: (*Shaking hands.*) Pleased to meet you, Mary Howard.

MARY: No, it's not like Billie Mae. Mary Howard King is my full professional name.

WIDOW: That's a mighty big name for a little lady. What do you do?

MARY: I'm a writer. (*Looks back nervously at door SR.*)

WIDOW: A book writer? (*Takes book out of her apron pocket.*) I've got a book, but my reading is poorly.

MARY: I've written two books, but my sales were poorly.

WIDOW: Why, mercy, if I'd written two books I'd be so proud I couldn't stand talking to myself. (*Pause.*) What are you doing in Swampy Corners?

MARY: I was sent here by the syndicate.

WIDOW: (*Frightened.*) Who?

MARY: The syndicate.

WIDOW: You mean that bunch of mafia gangsters? No, no, you can't stay here.

MARY: (*Patient smile.*) You don't understand. My "syndicate" is a newspaper syndicate.

WIDOW: (*Still unsure.*) Oh...

MARY: I might as well give you all the facts. There's a warrant out for my arrest.

WIDOW: You mean you're running from the law? You *are* with the syndicate. What did you do?

MARY: All I did was refuse to compromise my journalistic integrity in covering a Washington news story.

WIDOW: Washington? The government? This is getting sorta complicated.

MARY: Not really. I broke a big story on corruption in Congress, and it made headlines all across the country.

Everywhere but here, apparently. Then I was called before a Senate committee and told to reveal my sources. I refused, and a certain senator turned purple and took umbrage.

WIDOW: Whatever you did must've had a powerful bad effect for him to take that. Maybe he should have took sulfur and molasses.

MARY: *(Laughs.)* Are you for real?

WIDOW: I been real for as long as I been anything.

MARY: Honestly, Mrs. Boggs, I'm as innocent as a newborn press agent.

WIDOW: I don't rightly know what that means, but I'm a pretty good judge of character and I believe you.

MARY: Thank you. My editor suggested I get out of town, so I hopped on a bus, and the bus stopped here.

WIDOW: Thanks to the mud.

MARY: Can I hide out here for a while?

WIDOW: You'll be safe in my hotel.

(Mary glances around.)

MARY: I hope so. There's an all-points bulletin out, and every lawman in the country will be looking for me.

(Widow thinks.)

WIDOW: This sounds kinda risky. Police Chief Gibbs is mighty strict. If I don't report a fugitive, I could lose my hotel license.

MARY: Please, you've got to let me stay. I'll even help you with your publicity.

WIDOW: My what?

MARY: Publicity! Free write-ups in papers and magazines...about the hotel.

WIDOW: That won't do much good if I lose my license.

MARY: How about your book reading? I could work with you on that, too.

WIDOW: I sure want help with my book learning. And I'm not really worried about that man with a badge.

MARY: You won't be sorry.

WIDOW: Most times when somebody says "you won't be sorry," you can bet the farm you will be. But I guess I'll take a chance.

MARY: In spite of the local law?

WIDOW: The Chief gives me a pain, even if he says he wants to marry me. In fact, especially when he says he wants to marry me. *(Pauses to reflect.)* Honey, I'll do it. I'll put you up...but secret-like.

MARY: I'll be incognito.

WIDOW: No, you'll be in room number 4. *(Rings the desk bell loudly.)*

MARY: You have a bellhop?

WIDOW: Somewhere. *(A car approaches outside with two horn blasts.)* Uh-oh. It's him!

MARY: The bellhop?

WIDOW: No, the Chief. He's always tooting his own horn. Hurry—get your grip and go through here. Find Nita, my niece. She'll help you. But stay away from that troublemaker cook!

(Widow hustles Mary out the door SL, then turns around and straightens herself as Chief Gibbs enters from SR door, wearing a patched-up uniform, straw cowboy hat, and gun belt.)

CHIEF: *(Bellows.)* Widow Boggs!

WIDOW: Don't you yell at me, you big ox!

CHIEF: I've been called worse animals than that. But you might show a little respect for the uniform.

WIDOW: For that uniform?

CHIEF: All right, then, a little respect for me.

WIDOW: *(Mock innocently.)* Why, Chief, you know how much we all respect you.

CHIEF: There's an old saying: "Respect is the next-door neighbor of love."

WIDOW: Neighbors, maybe, but they ain't roommates.

CHIEF: You're a hard case, Widow Boggs.

WIDOW: Hard or soft, I'm very busy today. What do you want?

CHIEF: I'm looking for a woman.

WIDOW: You don't give up, do you?

CHIEF: I mean a woman who's running from the law.

WIDOW: What did this woman do? Kill some fella who kept after her?

CHIEF: What a way to talk.

WIDOW: Maybe she dynamited the mountain and caused the mudslide over the highway. Ha! I could thank her for the business it'll bring my hotel.

CHIEF: All you think about is yourself and your hotel. What about me?

WIDOW: I only got so much space for thinking. Besides, all you think about is your cardboard jail. It's in worse shape than my hotel.

CHIEF: Maybe so, but I still aim to do my job for the honor of Swampy Corners. That female fugitive was seen heading our way.

WIDOW: So what if she was? Maybe she kept on going, like most everybody else does.

CHIEF: Yes, but she's a writer. Imagine what she might write about us if we didn't manage to catch her.

WIDOW: Imagine what she'd write about us if we did.

CHIEF: I tell you she's big-time. She'd be sending her stories out all across the country.

WIDOW: Land's sakes, what's wrong with that? The more that's written about us, the more people might come to see us. And it wouldn't cost us anything. That's called..."publicissity."

(Peter enters from UC carrying a mail sack.)

PETER: *(Pleasantly.)* Hello, Chief!

CHIEF: Hello, young fella.

WIDOW: Where you been? Didn't you hear me ring for you?

PETER: You rang the bell? We had a guest check in?

WIDOW: *(Covering up.)* A guest? No. Who said we had a guest? I just rang to see if you'd come.

PETER: And here I am!

WIDOW: Fiddlesticks. I'll talk to you later. *(Pointedly.)* As soon as a certain person hauls himself out of here.

CHIEF: Remember what I told you, Widow Boggs.

WIDOW: Why should I start now?

CHIEF: One of these days you'll treat me right. *(Pompously exits SR.)*

WIDOW: *(Mutters.)* I'll treat you with a shovel upside your head, you old... *(Gives a waves of disgust after him.)* ...idiot man. Every time he comes around, he's nothing but trouble.

PETER: I like the old turkey. He's a good man at heart.

WIDOW: *(Loudly.)* You read too much! Too many books. It all goes to your head. Fills you up with crazy ideas!

(Nita enters quickly from SL.)

NITA: Is something the matter?

PETER: Everything's fine.

WIDOW: You can't fool me, Mr. Bellhop. You say nice things about the Chief because your late daddy was his deputy.

PETER: He was a good one, too.

WIDOW: Never said he wasn't.

NITA: Auntie, I put Miss King in room four.

PETER: You mean we do have a guest? You said we didn't.

WIDOW: She ain't a guest. She's working for me.

PETER: Doing what?

WIDOW: All sorts of things, and none of them any business of yours. Now you two young-uns get up on your toes and do whatever needs doing. Suppertime's coming, and I gotta go build a fire under that miserable cook. *(Exits SL.)*

PETER: If it weren't for her, the cook wouldn't be so miserable.

NITA: Peter...

PETER: Sorry, Nita.

NITA: Don't get me wrong. I think it's fine when you stand up to my aunt. Still, it's hard knowing you don't like someone I love.

PETER: It's not that. It's just that I feel held back here.

NITA: I admire your wanting to better yourself.

PETER: Thank you. (*Indicates mail sack.*) Right now I have to go back to the post office.

NITA: Would you like me to go with you?

PETER: What for?

NITA: (*Hurt.*) What for? Really, Peter...

PETER: Okay, I'm sorry again.

NITA: I've got feelings, you know...feelings for you.

PETER: Yes, but you shouldn't. You'd be better off forgetting about me.

NITA: That's what Auntie said.

PETER: She said that? Well...for once she's right. Pretty soon I'll be going to New York, where there are real hotels—big hotels with lots of bellhops, but I won't be one of them. I'm gonna move right on up in the hotel business with what I've learned. And then I'll be wearing nice suits and going to nightclubs with society girls in pretty gowns and all kinds of— (*Nita turns and runs out UC.*) Now what's the matter with her? Oh, well. I better get going. (*Exits SR.*)

(*A moment later, Widow appears in SL door, glances around the yard, then speaks over her shoulder.*)

WIDOW: Okay, missy, it's safe to come out. (*Mary enters cautiously, looking about.*) We can have our lesson out here in the fresh air.

MARY: Where's that book your husband left you?

(Widow takes the book from her apron pocket and hands it to Mary.)

WIDOW: Right here.

MARY: *(Reads title.)* "Best Vaudeville Jokes of 1927." *(Shakes her head in disbelief.)* Mrs. Boggs, you're too much.

WIDOW: *(Looks down at herself.)* Maybe tomorrow I'll go on a diet. *(Pause.)* But now I'm ready for my book lesson.

MARY: All right. Let's sit here. *(They sit at the well as Mary flips through the pages.)* We'll start with this one. *(Clears her throat in mock seriousness.)* Suppose a customer finds a fly in his soup.

WIDOW: I'd fire that lazy no-good cook. Her sow-belly soup ain't that good nohow.

MARY: No, no...you're getting off track. Now listen closely. I'm the customer. I say, "What's this fly doing in my soup?" You say... *(Gives book to Widow, points to line.)*

WIDOW: *(Reads hesitantly.)* "...the backstroke."

MARY: Wonderful! You've done this before!

WIDOW: No, really I haven't.

MARY: You could bring back vaudeville.

REGGIE: *(Offstage. Voice rises.)* Am I going the right way? Around here? Hello?

(Widow points Mary to SL door, indicating she should hurry out. Mary exits quickly.)

WIDOW: *(Shouts.)* Come in! This-a-way!

(Reginald Roger-Rogers enters from SR, wearing khaki shorts, a bush jacket, and a pith helmet. He is carrying two suitcases, golf clubs, a tennis racket, and a polo mallet. He sets these down near the well.)

REGGIE: Righto...here we are.

WIDOW: I been here all along.

REGGIE: Not to complain, but the taxi service is wretched...bumpy, bumpy.

WIDOW: It's the road that's bumpy, not the taxi. Welcome to Hotel Horace.

REGGIE: Can you give me a room and a bath?

WIDOW: Wait...I know that one. (*Flips through the joke book, reads laboriously.*) "Yes, sir, I can give you a room, but you have to take the bath yourself."

REGGIE: (*Chuckles.*) Jolly good.

WIDOW: Thank you!

REGGIE: The police chief recommended your hostel.

WIDOW: Hostile? He called me that? I run a friendly place.

REGGIE: He said it was the best one in the village.

WIDOW: He meant it was the only one. But it's all mine, including the 40 acres of rock garden in the back.

REGGIE: Not to mention the mud in the front.

WIDOW: That's not mine. It's just passing through.

REGGIE: And a rock garden, you said. I may do a bit of poking around. I hope you won't mind. I'm a geologist.

WIDOW: I don't mind. Baptists, Methodists—we take everybody.

REGGIE: I must say, I was quite taken with your police chief. Jolly nice chap. I'm a bit of a law-and-order man myself. Uncle of mine is in the Yard.

(Widow looks toward front and then back yard.)

WIDOW: Out front or back?

REGGIE: Scotland Yard, don't you know. First place I go to in a new town is the police station.

WIDOW: Even if you ain't done nothing wrong?

REGGIE: I'm a police buff, first, and a tourist, second. I told the Chief his jail is as flimsy as a house of cards.

WIDOW: He thinks it's aces.

REGGIE: Too bad he didn't have time to talk. Said he was busy looking for some desperado... an enemy of the country.

WIDOW: No such thing.

REGGIE: You're familiar with the case?

WIDOW: Me? No. I'm not familiar with nothing. Especially not with the Chief.

REGGIE: I say, are you putting me on?

WIDOW: No, sir, I'm putting you up. *(Hands him a room key.)* Here's the key to room 3. Just sign the register. *(Looks over his shoulder as he signs.)* Reginald Roger-Rogers. Kinda repeats itself, don't it?

REGGIE: You may call me Reggie. *(Crosses to his luggage.)* Do you have a luggage attendant?

WIDOW: Right now he's a post office attendant. Oughta be back before long.

REGGIE: Very well. I'll wait. By the by, what's to do around here?

WIDOW: Oh, everything. Hunting, fishing, horseback riding...

REGGIE: Do the natives ever hunt bear?

WIDOW: Wait a second. *(Refers to joke book.)* Do the natives hunt bear. Here it is. "No, they always wear hunting clothes."

REGGIE: *(Polite laugh.)* Smashing. Simply smashing.

(Sound of auto horn offstage SR.)

WIDOW: *(Calls UC.)* Nita! Nita!

(Nita enters from center.)

NITA: Yes, Auntie?

(Auto horn is heard again.)

WIDOW: I think we have some more guests, and Peter isn't back.

NITA: I'll see to them. *(Exits SR with a shy nod to Reggie.)*

WIDOW: Good girl. That's my niece.

REGGIE: Charming.

NITA: (*Offstage SR.*) Good afternoon, ladies. Your car is fine where it is. Just follow me.

REGGIE: (*Perks up.*) Ladies? Did she say "ladies"?

(*Nita enters.*)

NITA: (*Holds up three fingers.*) Three of them.

WIDOW: That's good news.

NITA: (*Sadly.*) No, that's bad news. Two of them are young and pretty.

(*Chaperone enters with Alice and Betty, smartly dressed high school girls. They each carry a suitcase.*)

WIDOW: Welcome to the Hotel Horace.

REGGIE: (*Eyeing the girls.*) Welcome, indeed.

CHAPERONE: (*Loud whisper to girls.*) Just look at this place. What a dump!

ALICE: I think it's awesome!

BETTY: It's so quaint.

CHAPERONE: (*Ever the complainer.*) The altitude is too high. The mud is everywhere. The yard needs repair, and the furniture is an abomination. (*To Widow.*) We shall need a suite with three beds.

WIDOW: I can give you the beds, but you'll have to get your own sweets.

REGGIE: Ripping! And you didn't even use the book.

CHAPERONE: I'll register for the three of us. (*Signs the register.*)

WIDOW: I'll put you in number one and the girls in number two. There's a radio in every room! (*Hands Chaperone two keys.*) Are you the mother of these pretty young girls?

ALICE: Our mother!?

(Girls snicker. Chaperone turns to them sternly.)

WIDOW: *(Aside.)* Not unless they took after their father.

CHAPERONE: *(To Girls.)* Ladies...please be just that and mind your manners. *(Turns back to Widow.)* I am Miss Clara Tutwiler, a high school mathematics teacher in the winter and a travel chaperone for young ladies in the summer. These are two of the brightest students in my class. Alice... *(Alice smiles and gives a little wave.)* ...and Betty.

(Betty imitates Alice's smile and wave, and both laugh.)

WIDOW: Nice to meet y'all. I'm Mrs. Boggs, and this is my niece, Nita.

(Nita looks at them self-consciously, smiles thinly.)

REGGIE: *(Sweeping statement.)* And I am Reginald Roger-Rogers. You may call me Reggie.

ALICE: Reggie.

BETTY: Reggie.

(Alice and Betty giggle.)

CHAPERONE: *(Coldly.)* Mr. Roger-Rogers.

REGGIE: You mentioned mud, I believe.

CHAPERONE: Mud was the least of what I mentioned.

REGGIE: But mud can be fascinating. Every year a great many people are buried in mudslides.

WIDOW: Uh, ladies, if you'll just —

REGGIE: Buried alive in vast avalanches of mud that sweep down mountainsides and destroy entire towns.

WIDOW: *(Tone of rebuke.)* Swampy Corners has been here for nigh on a hundred years, and mostly in one spot.

(Peter rushes in from SR.)

PETER: There's a fancy car outside with New York license plates! *(Sees the girls.)* Oh! Hello! Let me get your bags! *(Eagerly grabs up the girls' suitcases.)*

CHAPERONE: *(To Peter, indicating her suitcase.)* This one's mine.

REGGIE: *(To Peter, indicating his suitcases.)* And these belong to me.

PETER: *(Ignoring Reggie and Chaperone.)* Are you girls from New York?

ALICE: *(Friendly.)* Part of it.

BETTY: But not all of it, silly.

PETER: I'd like to see part of New York. I'd like to see all of it. And I'm going to!

ALICE: Good for you!

PETER: I just never thought I'd see two big-city debutantes here in Swampy Corners. It's like something I've dreamed of all my life.

(The girls smile flirtatiously.)

NITA: *(Aside.)* Oh! My life is ruined!

(Nita runs out SL. Reggie starts picking up his own suitcases, and the Chaperone stands fuming over her suitcase as the Widow bangs repeatedly on the bell, which Peter ignores. He continues attending to the girls. Blackout.)

Scene 2

(AT RISE: That evening. The yard is dimly lit and romantic. Peter is sweeping up a small pile of leaves. Rusty and Dusty enter through the SR door, holding opposite ends of a string of colored lights.)

RUSTY: Hey...

DUSTY: Huh?

RUSTY: *(Disapproving.)* Look at Peter.

DUSTY: I see him.

RUSTY: Peter, you shouldn't be doing that.

DUSTY: Better him than us.

RUSTY: *(To Peter.)* You're the most important guy in the hotel.

PETER: How many other guys are there? But thanks. I'm proud of my job.

DUSTY: Yeah? Who's going to appreciate it?

PETER: Widow Boggs, for one.

RUSTY: She appreciates us, too...because we work cheap.

DUSTY: If she paid us more, we might work harder.

PETER: If you worked harder, she might pay you more.

RUSTY: I wouldn't want to take that chance.

PETER: Let's talk about it some other time. I've got a lot to do tonight. *(Picks up a garbage bag filled with leaves and exits SR.)*

DUSTY: *(To Rusty.)* You see what happens when you read too many books?

(Alice and Betty enter from UC. They look very perky and are not the least bit bashful.)

ALICE: What a beautiful night!

BETTY: The air is so fresh and sweet.

ALICE: And look at that moon! *(With a flirty glance toward Rusty and Dusty.)* I wish we had someone to share it with besides each other...

RUSTY: (*Timidly.*) Good evening.
ALICE: Hi, there.
BETTY: What are you guys doing?
DUSTY: We're putting up colored lights.
ALICE: It's not Christmas, is it?
RUSTY: Widow Boggs wants to fancy up the hotel.
BETTY: Do you always work nights?
DUSTY: Only when there's night work.
ALICE: Don't your girlfriends mind?
RUSTY: We don't have girlfriends.
DUSTY: I did once. But no more.
BETTY: What happened?
DUSTY: Her brother ran me off.
ALICE: (*Turning on the charm.*) I don't have a brother.
BETTY: Neither do I. Not here, anyway.
ALICE: I'd sure like to see the town.
RUSTY: Not much town to see.
BETTY: But we've never seen it. How about showing us the sights?
RUSTY: First, we'd have to go home and clean up.
DUSTY: Then we'd have to gas up the car.
BETTY: We can wait.
ALICE: But not for long.
DUSTY: Oh, but what about the lights?
RUSTY: We can take care of those tomorrow morning.
BETTY: Some things can wait...and some things can't.
RUSTY: We'll be back soon. Meet you here on the patio.
ALICE: We'll be ready.

(*Rusty and Dusty exit SR.*)

BETTY: Do you think "Dragon Lady" will let us have dates?
ALICE: We'll tell her we're on a fieldtrip for astronomy...watching the moon.

(*They giggle as they head UC.*)

BETTY: I can hardly wait! Moon, don't go away!

(Betty and Alice exit UC as the sound of banging pots and pans rises from off SL, along with the angry voices of the Widow and the Cook. Widow appears in the doorway SL. She points SR.)

WIDOW: *(Shouts.)* Get out, get out! Go!

(Cook enters from SL.)

COOK: Don't tell me what to do!

WIDOW: You call what you cooked tonight a meal? It wasn't fit to eat!

COOK: It was fit enough. They asked for seconds!

WIDOW: They didn't know what it was! Or what it was supposed to taste like!

COOK: They ate it just the same, didn't they?

WIDOW: I told you to git, didn't I? I want you out of here faster'n if you had a bobcat chasing you.

COOK: More like an old wet hen. *(Arrogantly striding about.)* When I'm ready, I'll go. And not before.

WIDOW: Nobody throws temper fits in my hotel. *(Pause.)* Except me!

COOK: I won't work for a crazy woman.

WIDOW: You won't work for anybody.

COOK: What about my money?

WIDOW: I'll mail you a check.

COOK: The last one hasn't stopped bouncing.

WIDOW: You'll get paid.

COOK: When?

WIDOW: Next week.

COOK: You're a slave driver, Widow Boggs. But maybe I'll forgive you, temporary-like, since you got all these tourists in the hotel. You need me.

WIDOW: Maybe I do...maybe I don't.

COOK: Oh, yeah? Who'll cook the vittles?

WIDOW: I'll do some, and Nita will help. We'll manage.

COOK: You ain't serious.

WIDOW: You wait and see.

COOK: You'll be sorry. *(Starts to exit SR.)* Not as sorry as the folks you're feeding, but you'll be sorry just the same, afore I'm done with you.

WIDOW: Where do you think you're traipsing off to?

COOK: The police station.

WIDOW: What for?

COOK: I'm going to ask the Chief to help me collect my money.

WIDOW: *(Concerned.)* No! He's been poking his nose around here too much as it is.

COOK: Pretty soon you'll be seeing a lot more of him.

WIDOW: *(Becoming friendly.)* Let's not be hasty. After all, what's the hurry? You're tired. You've been working mighty hard in the kitchen. You need some time off.

COOK: I do? *(Pause, thinks.)* I do!

WIDOW: Why not relax a few days in my guesthouse...the one out behind the rock garden.

COOK: Stay here at the hotel?

WIDOW: Why, sure. Free of charge.

COOK: What about my money?

WIDOW: You'll get it as soon as these tourists settle their bills with me.

COOK: Okay, but if you don't pay up, I'm still gonna see the Chief. *(Exits SR.)*

WIDOW: I'd like to pay you off with some of them rocks, you crusty old... *(Calls off SL.)* Nita!

NITA: *(From off SL.)* Coming, Auntie!

(Widow picks up the string of lights.)

WIDOW: Those lazy, no-good boys.

(Nita enters.)

NITA: Yes? Did you want me?

WIDOW: You and me will have to do all the cooking for a few days.

NITA: (*Eagerly.*) I'm real good with turnip greens.

WIDOW: Yes, dear, you're right good with greens...except they always give me heartburn. (*Presses her chest.*) Here...would you mind finishing up what those no-count boys left half done? I wanted these lights strung up along there. (*Points above door UC.*)

NITA: No trouble at all. (*Takes the lights.*)

WIDOW: Thank you, dear. You're my good right arm.

(*Widow exits SL. Nita fiddles with the lights then stops.*)

NITA: Good right arm? But Auntie's left-handed. (*Nita shrugs, steps on a chair just left of the UC door to hang the lights. Peter enters through the door reading a book.*) Peter –

PETER: Oh! I thought the yard was empty.

NITA: Meaning you wouldn't have come out if you knew I was here?

PETER: No, I just meant I was going to sit outside and read awhile.

NITA: I'm sorry if I'm disturbing you.

PETER: Don't sweat it. That's a New York expression. (*As Nita turns brusquely back to her work.*) I just want to tell you, Nita, we'll always be friends.

NITA: You know what kind of expression that is? A dumb one. (*Frustrated, reaching over doorway.*) I can't get these lights.

PETER: Let me help. (*Peter sets down his book, takes the other end of the string of lights, climbs onto a chair on the opposite side of the doorway, and fastens the lights to the wall.*)

NITA: You don't have to help me.

PETER: I want to.

(Nita steps down from the chair, moves it several feet farther left, steps back up to fasten the lights there. Peter does the same on his side, moving right.)

NITA: I'm able to hang lights all by myself.

PETER: You were having trouble.

NITA: Just because I was having trouble doesn't mean I couldn't do it.

PETER: I'm sorry.

NITA: Don't sweat it.

(They finish fastening the lights and step down from their chairs.)

PETER: Now you sound like a New York girl.

NITA: Where are they, anyway? Those two "debutantes" of yours?

PETER: I don't know.

NITA: Wherever they are, I figured you'd be with them.

PETER: They're guests of the hotel, and I'm the bellhop. We just have a professional relationship.

NITA: How...*professional* of you.

(They start back toward each other, returning the chairs to their places.)

PETER: I would never lead anybody on when I knew it wasn't right.

NITA: Aren't you noble.

PETER: Not noble. Just practical. I'm going to New York, Nita.

(They stand facing each other closely now.)

NITA: So you've said. A million times.

PETER: It's nothing personal. It's just something I have to do.

NITA: Have to? Don't you know I've always cared about you, Peter? Ever since we were in grade school.

(Peter turns away.)

PETER: I've already got a suitcase packed. All I'm waiting for now is a package from San Francisco, and of course, for Widow Boggs to pay me.

NITA: *(Quietly.)* I wish you wouldn't go.

(Peter picks up his book.)

PETER: And my books...I've got all my books packed, too. Everything I need.

NITA: Everything that's important to you.

PETER: Listen, Nita...New York is a city of opportunity.

NITA: You can find opportunity other places than New York.

PETER: No...no, I've made up my mind. *(Turns quickly and exits UC.)*

WIDOW: *(Off SL.)* So far so good.

MARY: *(Off SL.)* Nobody's found me yet.

(Widow and Mary enter from SL.)

WIDOW: *(To Nita.)* I see you got the lights up.

MARY: Hello, Nita.

NITA: *(Dejected.)* Oh...hi. Yes, they're up.

MARY: Is something wrong?

NITA: No, ma'am.

MARY: You can skip the ma'am until my hair turns gray.

WIDOW: Nita, you ought to be smiling on a night like this, when it's just as pretty as you are. Smile and enjoy it.

(Nita turns away.)

NITA: *(Tearful.)* I can't. Not by myself.

WIDOW: Well then, stop thinking about yourself for a minute and run up to the Englishman's room and invite him down.

NITA: Yes, Auntie. (*Hurries out UC, hiding her face.*)

MARY: She's a sweet kid.

WIDOW: Yes, but she cries too blame much. Man trouble.

MARY: I'm no stranger to that. Would you mind if I had a little talk with her?

WIDOW: I'd be obliged. I hate to see her so unhappy.

MARY: Now what about this Englishman? Remember I'm laying low.

WIDOW: He won't know you. He's a foreigner. And a right dashing one, too.

MARY: Why, Widow Boggs—you old matchmaker. Thanks for the thought, but when I'm ready for a match, I'll strike one myself.

(*Reggie enters UC.*)

REGGIE: Good evening, ladies. I was just on my way down when I encountered Nita. You requested my presence?

WIDOW: Mr. Reggie, I want you to meet another of our guests...Mary.

REGGIE: (*To Mary, attentive.*) How do you do?

MARY: How do I do what?

REGGIE: No, I meant... (*Realizes, laughs.*) Crackerjack. Didn't I see you on the bus?

MARY: I couldn't say what you saw.

REGGIE: You American women are so clever.

MARY: How clever of you to say so.

(*An awkward pause as they all glance at each other.*)

WIDOW: Well, now, I just remembered something I forgot, so I'm gonna go see about it. You two have a seat and get to know each other. It's a pretty night for it. (*Exits SL.*)

MARY: (*Looking after Widow.*) American women *are* clever sometimes.

REGGIE: Shall we? (*Indicates a bench by the well.*)

MARY: (*English accent.*) Without even a cup of tea? (*Drops accent, giving in.*) Why not.

(*They sit together.*)

REGGIE: Quite a romantic setting, eh?

MARY: I'm underwhelmed.

REGGIE: Beg pardon?

MARY: Typographical error.

REGGIE: Oh, I see. More American humor. Are you enjoying your stay at the hotel?

MARY: I'm ecstatic.

REGGIE: Charming...quite charming.

MARY: Are you referring to the hotel?

REGGIE: Not at all. Did you know you're quite attractive?

MARY: Did you know you're quite obvious?

REGGIE: Only because I'm quite smitten with you.

MARY: That's quite, quite enough.

REGGIE: Quite. (*Pause.*) By the by, our hostess didn't mention your last name.

MARY: Why spoil what we have with formalities?

REGGIE: I don't understand your cloak of anonymity.

MARY: Old family custom. We never tell our whole name on the first date. We like to save something for the next one.

(*Pause.*)

REGGIE: (*Laughs heartily.*) Oh, ripping! Yes!

MARY: Who says the British don't have a sense of humor?

REGGIE: Indeed, we do. For example, do you know how we define a meteorologist?

MARY: How?

REGGIE: (*Leaning toward her.*) That's a man who can look into a woman's eyes and tell "whether."

MARY: You'll find a cloudy forecast.

REGGIE: All joking aside, my dear mystery woman, I'm rather worried about you.

MARY: About me? Why?

REGGIE: I heard from the cook that some mafia blokes may be looking for you and that you're—what's the expression? On the goat.

MARY: On the lam?

REGGIE: Yes, that one.

MARY: (*Laughs.*) You've got it all wrong.

REGGIE: Having someone out to kill you is no laughing matter. I know from my research that when an innocent person is in danger, he or she—through some psychological quirk—very often avoids the police.

MARY: Thank you, Alfred Hitchcock.

REGGIE: Whether you realize it or not, young lady, you need protection. And though I'm not Scotland Yard except by relation, nevertheless... (*Stands to attention and salutes.*) ...I am at your service.

MARY: I'm touched. Quite. But mind your own business. (*Rises.*)

REGGIE: Don't you know you're in danger every moment?

MARY: I don't need your protection. (*Starts to walk away SL.*)

REGGIE: You certainly need someone's! I'm going for help. The constable should know about this. (*Hurries out SR.*)

MARY: What? No! Wait! What are you—? (*Turns SL, calls.*)
Widow Boggs! Widow Boggs!

(*Widow rushes in from SL.*)

WIDOW: What's he doing to you? Where is he? Where'd he go?

MARY: To get the constable. I mean the Chief. That idiot twit of a Brit thinks I'm in danger.

WIDOW: You are now.

MARY: You, too. You could lose everything you've worked for — even go to jail for harboring a fugitive!

(Chaperone storms in from UC.)

CHAPERONE: I have a complaint! There's something wrong with my plumbing.

WIDOW: A good dose of salts should take care of that.

CHAPERONE: The plumbing in my room!

WIDOW: Oh. Okay, I'll send Peter up to fix it, soon as I can find him.

(Mary has turned away, concealing her face.)

CHAPERONE: Why is this woman hiding her face from me? I don't remember seeing her at dinner.

WIDOW: She's another guest, and she likes her privacy.

CHAPERONE: There's something going on in this flea-trap hotel.

WIDOW: Flea-trap! If you find any fleas in my hotel, you can have them.

CHAPERONE: *(Trying to see Mary.)* Haven't I seen you somewhere?

MARY: *(Tough accent.)* Was you ever in stir? Maybe we done time together.

CHAPERONE: *(Draws back.)* Certainly not! Criminals staying in the same hotel with me and my girls? I have a good mind to call the police! *(Storms off through UC door in a huff.)*

WIDOW: Uh-oh. First the Englishman, and now her. You can call the Chief all sorts of things, but if you call him twice, you might as well leave the light on and set the table. He'll be a-coming. *(Blackout. Intermission.)*

[END OF FREEVIEW]