

Scenes

Act One

Living room of the Wright-Dobie School
Late afternoon in April.

Act Two

Scene 1. Living room at Mrs. Tilford's.
A few hours later.
Scene 2. The same. Later that evening.

Act Three

The same as Act One. November.

Act One

SCENE: A room in the Wright-Dobie School for girls, a converted farmhouse about ten miles from the town of Lancet, Massachusetts. It is a comfortable, unpretentious room used as an afternoon study-room and at all other times as the living room.

A large door left center faces the audience. There is a single door right. Against both back walls are bookcases. A large desk is at right; a table, two sofas, and eight or ten chairs.

It is early in an afternoon in April.

AT RISE: Mrs. Lily Mortar is sitting in a large chair right center, with her head back and her eyes closed. She is a plump, florid woman of forty-five with dyed reddish hair. Her dress is too fancy for a classroom.

Seven girls, from twelve to fourteen years old, are informally grouped on chairs and sofa. Six of them are sewing with no great amount of industry on pieces of white material. One of the others, Evelyn Munn, is using her scissors to trim the hair of Rosalie, who sits, nervously, in front of her: she has Rosalie's head bent back at an awkward angle and is enjoying herself.

The eighth girl, Peggy Rogers, is sitting in a higher chair than the others. She is reading aloud from a book. She is bored and she reads in a singsong, tired voice.

Start

PEGGY. "It is twice blest; it blesseth him that gives and him that takes: 'tis mightiest in the mightiest; it becomes the throned monarch better than his crown; his sceptre shows the force of temporal power, the attribute to awe and majesty, wherein . . ." (Mrs. Mortar suddenly opens her eyes and stares at the haircutting. The children make efforts to warn Evelyn. Peggy raises her

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voice until she is shouting) "doth sit the dread and fear of kings; but mercy is above . . ."

MRS. MORTAR. Evelyn! What are you doing?

EVELYN (*she lisps*). Uh—nothing, Mrs. Mortar.

MRS. MORTAR. You are certainly doing something. You are ruining the scissors for one thing.

PEGGY (*loudly*). "But mercy is above. It . . ."

MRS. MORTAR. Just a moment, Peggy. It is very unfortunate that you girls cannot sit quietly with your sewing and drink in the immortal words of the immortal bard. (*She sighs*) Evelyn, go back to your sewing.

EVELYN. I can't get the hem thtraight. Honeth, I've been trying for three weekth, but I jutht can't do it.

MRS. MORTAR. Helen, please help Evelyn with the hem.

HELEN (*rises, holding up the garment Evelyn has been working on. It is soiled and shapeless and so much has been cut off that it is now hardly large enough for a child of five. Giggling*). She can't ever wear that, Mrs. Mortar.

MRS. MORTAR (*vaguely*). Well, try to do something with it. Make some handkerchiefs or something. Be clever about it. Women must learn these tricks. (*To Peggy*) Continue. "Mightiest in the mightiest."

PEGGY. "'Tis mightiest in the mightiest; it becomes the throned monarch better than his crown; his sceptre—his sceptre shows the force of temporal power, the attribute to awe and majesty, wherein—"

LOIS (*from the back of the room chants softly and monotonously through the previous speech*). Ferebam, ferebas, ferebat, ferebamus, ferebatis, fere—fere—

CATHERINE (*two seats away, the book propped in front of her*). Ferebant.

LOIS. Ferebamus, ferebatis, ferebant.

MRS. MORTAR. Who's doing that?

PEGGY (*the noise ceases. She hurries on*). "Wherein doth sit the dread and fear of kings; but mercy is above this sceptred sway, it is enthroned in the hearts of kings, it is an attribute to God himself—"

MRS. MORTAR (*sadly*). Peggy, can't you imagine yourself as Portia? Can't you read the lines with some feeling, some pity? (*Dream-*

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ily) Pity. Ah! As Sir Henry said to me many's the time, pity makes the actress. Now, why can't you feel pity?

PEGGY. I guess I feel pity.

LOIS. Ferebamus, ferebatis, fere—fere—fere—

CATHERINE. Ferebant, stupid.

MRS. MORTAR. How many people in this room are talking? Peggy, read the line again. I'll give you the cue.

PEGGY. What's a cue?

MRS. MORTAR. A cue is a line or word given the actor or actress to remind them of their next speech.

HELEN (*softly*). To remind him or her.

ROSALIE (*a fattish girl with glasses*). Weren't you ever in the movies, Mrs. Mortar?

MRS. MORTAR. I had many offers, my dear. But the cinema is a shallow art. It has no—no—(*Vaguely*) no fourth dimension. Now, Peggy, if you would only try to submerge yourself in this problem. You are pleading for the life of a man. (*She rises and there are faint sighs from the girls, who stare at her with blank, bored faces. She recites with gestures*) "But mercy is above this sceptred sway; it is enthroned in the hearts of kings, it is an attribute to God himself; and earthly power doth then show likest God's when mercy seasons justice."

LOIS (*almost singing it*). Utor, fruor, fungor, potior, and vescor take the dative.

CATHERINE. Take the *ablative*.

LOIS. Oh, dear. Utor, fruor, fung—

MRS. MORTAR (*to Lois, with sarcasm*). You have something to tell the class?

LOIS (*apologetically*). We've got a Latin exam this afternoon.

MRS. MORTAR. And you intend to occupy the sewing and elocution hour learning what should have been learnt yesterday?

CATHERINE (*wearily*). It takes her more than yesterday to learn it.

MRS. MORTAR. Well, I cannot allow you to interrupt us like this.

CATHERINE. But we're finished sewing.

LOIS (*admiringly*). I bet you were good at Latin, Mrs. Mortar.

MRS. MORTAR. Long ago, my dear, long ago. Now, take your book over by the window and don't disturb our enjoyment of Shakespeare. (*Catherine and Lois rise, go to window, stand mumbling and gesturing*) Let us go back again. "It is an attribute