

**SETTING:** London, 1885. A time of enormous political, emotional and sexual change. People are bursting their corsets with unbridled desire. There are half a million more women than men living in England. The women's suffrage movement is fuelled by sheer numbers. Women demand rights. Those who protest are 'unsexed.' But the tide is too strong. Passions erupt and confusion reigns ...

#### **CHARACTERS**

**Mary Barfoot:** Sixty years old – definitely not an *old lady*. Charismatic, egocentric, sexy. Enjoys young women's attention and admiration. An ex-militant suffragette who now runs a school for secretaries. Is in love with Rhoda.

**Rhoda Nunn:** Thirty-five years old. An orphan who has become a New Woman with a tendency to zeal. Loyal, idealistic, physically passionate – about to burst into flower. Mary's lover and a teacher at her school.

**Virginia Madden:** Forty years old. Anxious, agitated and hyperbolic. Impoverished ex-governess and alcoholic. Confused about her sexuality – secretly desires to dress as a man.

**Alice Madden:** Forty-six years old. Ex-governess and sister to Virginia. The take-charge older sister – deeply conservative, but full of inner passion. Chastity is more than comfortable for her.

**Monica Madden:** Twenty-one years old. Delectable younger sister to Alice and Virginia. Provocative and playful. Struggles with an intense natural sexuality which becomes a revolutionary perspective.

**Everard Barfoot:** Thirty-five years old. Sensual, confident, enticed by the New. Cousin to Mary Barfoot. Ex-doctor just beginning a life of leisure. Falls in love with Rhoda and the Woman Question.

## ACT I

### SCENE I: THE DREAM

*Mary Barfoot's sitting room.  
It's a large, lush room, modern yet Victorian.  
Piles of paper litter a desk.  
Cushions are scattered on the floor.*

*Mary is in her nightgown, hair down her back. Rhoda is dressed.  
Mary sits on cushions, leaning against Rhoda's knees while  
Rhoda brushes her hair.*

MARY: Ohhh, that's fabulous.

RHODA: It's still so lovely and thick.

MARY: Still?

RHODA: Not 'still' but –

MARY: Yes, 'still'. I'm not balding. Some women do get very ...  
ohhh exquisite, there must be sensory attachments in the  
scalp area –

RHODA: You haven't dreamt of the hunger strikes in a long time.

MARY: Then the dream returns and 'unmans me'?

RHODA: Tell me.

MARY: You know everything –

RHODA: Not everything –

MARY: True ... you lie on your hard cot and hear them coming,  
keys rattle, the prison cell is open, two doctors and four  
wardresses, with the equipment –

RHODA: You appeal to the wardresses but they've been hardened beyond recognition –

MARY: That's when you start writhing, even before their filthy hands hold you down, then a / steel instrument –

RHODA: A steel instrument prises / pardon, I –

MARY: A steel clamp prises the jaws open as far as they can go, it breaks the teeth, gouges the lips, blood running / from –

RHODA: Buckets of blood –

MARY: Not buckets –

RHODA: Then the / feeding tube –

MARY: The feeding tube, smelling of the previous woman's vomit, rammed down your clamped-open mouth –

RHODA: Agony, the tube is too large, it rips the throat, tears the organs, the pain is excruciating –

MARY: They pour the food down, there is a moment's relief, then the stomach revolts, vomits up the food through the tube, truly suffocating now, choking, gagging, hands clawing the air for breath, writhing like an animal. What a stupid woman I am, you think. How appallingly foolish. You don't care about women's rights, you care only for your own suffering.

RHODA: I've always wondered why the food is vomited up. Is it the consistency of the tube that makes it so difficult?

MARY: The stomach has shrunk, they pour down a rancid porridge – no, I'll say no more. You love the gory bits too much. A very female attraction to suffering, I suspect.

RHODA: Nonsense.

MARY: The dream always reminds me of what a coward I was.

RHODA: I hate it when you say that. You were a political prisoner, you marched, planned actions, were beaten with clubs.

MARY: I was always terrified and finally I fled.

RHODA: Remember, I've seen every one of your scars. You were a warrior.

MARY: A 'suffragette.' Hateful term. It made us seem like dancing girls kicking our legs out of pique. We were suffragists demanding nothing less than a total transformation of the lives of women from cradle to grave.

RHODA: You deserve to rest after what you accomplished and continue to accomplish.

MARY: Lying on satin cushions with roast goose in my teeth while my sisters –

RHODA: You are not a coward.

MARY: The last time they shoved me out the prison door I could barely walk. There was no reception to meet me, no carriage, no cheers at the gates. I couldn't help thinking of the rich women who always had a carriage waiting, pillows for their arses, new dresses to complement their slim figures.

RHODA: You felt the gap between rich and poor within the struggle.

MARY: I had barfed and bled for the last time. I found I wanted money. I wanted it, I wanted women to have it. You don't know me.

RHODA: I do.

MARY: A weak warrior.

RHODA: An Amazon.

MARY: Laying down my sword to open a school for female secretaries.

RHODA: I only wish I had the same opportunity to prove myself.

MARY: Do you? I never realized.

RHODA: I worry about it at times –

MARY: You want to know how you'd react under fire?

RHODA: I worry that I would run away as soon as I was truly challenged.

MARY: Shall I torture you to find out? Use the dreaded clamp?

RHODA: You'd have to arrest me first.

MARY: I arrest you and demand bail for your release. I demand ... a kiss.

*They kiss.*

Shall we leave this place of business and retire to my rare and sinister boudoir?

RHODA: Your boudoir is ever a garden of delights, but you are upset, I am restless, and the accounts have been piling up. Let's stay awake and do some sinister business.

MARY: Such a practical woman. Yes, a great pile of outstanding loans. Bella Royston still hasn't paid her fee – she can pay, she found a good placement.

RHODA: She still comes to the Wednesday meetings. Remember when she arrived wearing your old suffragette banner and tripped over it –

MARY: She gets up grandly, tramps on it again / rips it down the middle –

*They laugh helplessly.*

RHODA: That high-minded look / reeking with self-righteousness –

MARY: Supercilious look –

RHODA: (*laughing*) Slowly, proudly walking up the aisle –

MARY: (*laughing*) As if behind a funeral –

*Pause.*

You shiver.

RHODA: There's a draft.

MARY: You were up when I began dreaming. Reading?

RHODA: Just restless.

MARY: Restless.

RHODA: I started on the accounts.

MARY: You're so plain. I'm glad that you're plain.

RHODA: But I dress well.

MARY: I pay you well. Still cold?

RHODA: Not really. *What has happened? Has something happened?  
Suddenly I want to crawl into the safety of her belly –*

MARY: *She's going to leave me, perhaps not, yes she will, she doesn't  
know but I know –*

RHODA: *Press the folds of her skin to my lips –*

MARY: *I'm on the brink of old age, all my flirting done / oh lord what  
a fate –*

RHODA: *What has happened?*

MARY: *Do not pack a bag in the middle of the night, do not tell me in  
a mature and confiding womanly way / that would send me to  
the grave –*

RHODA: *The force of her intellect gushing through mind and body,  
saving me from poverty, blindness, mediocrity –*

MARY: *I've filled her head, done nefarious acts to her body –*

RHODA: *Too timid to find my own body till she opened its secrets.*

MARY: *The icy breath of change.*

RHODA: *Nothing has changed.*

MARY: *Don't hate me when it's done. I'm going back to bed.  
Are you coming?*

RHODA: I'll just finish this note to Bella.

MARY: Don't be too long.

*Mary exits.*

**SCENE 2: THE BUMP**

*A London street outside Victoria Station.*

*Virginia is drunk. Rhoda is not.*

*Virginia and Rhoda smack loudly into each other.*

*Virginia lands heavily on the ground.*

RHODA: Ughhhh!

VIRGINIA: Ahhh!

RHODA: I beg your pardon!

VIRGINIA: I've been hit by a train, a horse, a great black steed, my limbs / are severed, my arm is falling off –

RHODA: No, not a train, a person, we bumped into each other, are you hurt / let me help you up –

VIRGINIA: Not hurt, not hurt –

RHODA: Virginia? Virginia Madden? It's Rhoda Nunn.

VIRGINIA: Nunn?

RHODA: Rhoda. We knew each other as girls.

VIRGINIA: Rhoda Nunn. Of course. You argued with my father about Parliament –

RHODA: How are your sisters?



VIRGINIA: Two are dead.

RHODA: My condolences –

VIRGINIA: There's only Alice and pretty Monica left –

RHODA: So many tragedies.

VIRGINIA: Ohh, dizzy ...

RHODA: There's a tea shop just around the corner –

VIRGINIA: Tea shop? You think I can afford tea shops on five pence a day? Ohh, faint –

RHODA: Let me help you. Where do you live?

VIRGINIA: When Father died the whole world became a jungle, he was the lion and now there is nothing / but weeping spinsters as far as the eye can see ...

RHODA: Put your arm over my ... not that way ... no, no, turn toward me – Virginia? Do you feel my arm?

VIRGINIA: Arm.

RHODA: Do you feel its strength?

VIRGINIA: Lovely. Yes.

RHODA: Then lean into me and I will take you home.

### SCENE 3: BEDSIT

*Three chairs represent a barren bedsit.*

*Alice has a bad cold.*

*Virginia and Rhoda enter.*

ALICE: Achoo!

VIRGINIA: Alice! Look who I met on the street –

ALICE: Virginia! Where were you? I woke up from a nap and you were gone –

VIRGINIA: Alice, look / It's Rhoda Nunn, she was passing by –

ALICE: You cannot go wandering about by yourself, what would father have said? Rhoda who?

VIRGINIA: Rhoda Nunn!

ALICE: How could you have brought a guest / a guest! Rhoda who?

RHODA: Alice, we knew / each other as girls –

VIRGINIA: I was taken ill and she put out / her strong arm and –

RHODA: I have no intention of bothering you / but your sister –

ALICE: Ill? Are you ill? Do we need a doctor?

VIRGINIA: I am better now. It's Rhoda –

ALICE: Of course, Rhoda Nunn, from a happier time, forgive me, forgive my illness, forgive this room. We must sit down. We must be pleasant and civil. A visit. How gay.

RHODA: Perhaps we should visit at some other time –

ALICE: Pray be seated. Virginia, you are ill, lie down. I am in my nightdress.

VIRGINIA: Shall we have tea?

ALICE: Tea? Are you insane?

VIRGINIA: There must be some leaves left –

ALICE: No tea.

RHODA: I wrote when your father passed away but then moved house and –

ALICE: You were our poor little orphaned friend.

RHODA: Orphaned and poor? Yes, I suppose I was.

ALICE: Father, who was the whole world to us, where is his protection, oh God, his protection.

VIRGINIA: She looks pink-cheeked and prospective. Parsimonious?

ALICE: Prosperous.

RHODA: I have been fortunate. And ... you?

ALICE: Father died. Then sister Martha died.

VIRGINIA: Sister Isabel expired horribly in the madhouse.

ALICE: Our guardian, Mr. Humelford, died of the putrid fever.

VIRGINIA: The house was sold, all our belongings sold.

ALICE: There is nothing left. We have recently lost our positions and presently are at leisure –

VIRGINIA: We did work. Have you ever been a governess? Five children looked after for room and board, not a penny of salary, and then they all went to Paris without me. They want

certificates now. Formal education. The children were so much larger than I was, even the baby. Very very large.

RHODA: (*dizzily*) I must go.

ALICE: You will not.

VIRGINIA: Now Rhoda is looking faint.

RHODA: I am not given to fainting – *run from the cloying air, the genteel starvation, the stink of lavender, sweat and something else, something with yeast* –

ALICE: *She was a priggish girl even then, as if she were above us, as if she was going to get away, I'd like to smack her in the puss.*

RHODA: *But for a few bits of luck I could be them – I feel the sisters pulling at me, trying to drag me down, don't you dare, I've come too far, too hard* –

VIRGINIA: *I can smell the meat on her, mighty hunks of beef, grizzling platters of lamb* –

ALICE: We are not destitute, however it may appear. When our father died he left us eight hundred pounds.

RHODA: Eight hundred pounds? Not riches, but a fair sum.

ALICE: To be divided among five sisters. Three left. None married.

RHODA: Three? Of course, there was a little girl.

VIRGINIA: Our dear little Monica.

ALICE: Six pence a day for food. Fourteen shillings and tuppence a week. Two pounds, sixteen shillings and eight pence a month for three months and then ... and then ...

RHODA: Eight hundred pounds could be invested in any number of enterprises.

ALICE: We were advised by the guardian our father appointed never to touch the / principal.

VIRGINIA: Never touch the principal.

ALICE: It is our only security, the only bit of ground we stand on –

VIRGINIA: When we grow old and useless –

ALICE: When no one will give us even board and lodging for our services –

VIRGINIA: Then the principal will be all that keeps us from –

ALICE: The workhouse.

VIRGINIA: The workhouse.

RHODA: Women must stop leaving money matters to male guardians and protectors.

VIRGINIA: Father always said that no woman, old or young, should ever have to think about money.

ALICE: Monica is employed in a shop. They work her half to death, but she is pretty and she will marry.

VIRGINIA: Monica is pretty, Monica will marry.

RHODA: (*standing*) But how? How will she marry? Is it possible you aren't aware of it? For the first time in recorded memory there is an imbalance in the population of such enormity that it must be a sign from God, if you believe in God. Half a million more women than men in this land. Some say a curse,

we say a miracle. The greatest opportunity has been given to us, as though someone were saying, 'I take away your props, your supports, your income, ay your slavery and degradation. You cannot marry, you cannot have children, you must rise up – you must be odd!'

*Pause.*

VIRGINIA: Is that chair uncomfortable? Try this one. I will move here, and you can move there.

ALICE: Too hard a chair. She needs a pillow, would you like a pillow?

VIRGINIA: She should have a pillow.

ALICE: Not that pillow.

VIRGINIA: It's the only pillow unless we use the bed pillow.

ALICE: We cannot use the bed pillow.

RHODA: No pillow! Forgive me. I've been told that I'm something of a zealot – get red in the face when I get going.

ALICE: Nothing of the kind – *very red*.

VIRGINIA: *So pleasantly red.*

ALICE: 'Odd,' as in ...?

RHODA: Women who will never be paired.

ALICE: Oh. You're not married?

RHODA: I am not.

VIRGINIA: You sound proud of it.

RHODA: I am.

VIRGINIA: You support yourself?

RHODA: I work for a woman of independent means. My employer and I run a school for odd women, meaning –

ALICE: Your employer is a woman?

RHODA: Women must come to grips with two things in this age. Loneliness and money. I must go. I invite you to visit my employer, Miss Mary Barfoot. She's a remarkable woman who may be able to assist you.

ALICE: Well, we / might ...

RHODA: Good, it's settled. And please bring Monica. Sunday next?

VIRGINIA: Ah ...

RHODA: Good –

ALICE: Then you are odd, Miss Nunn?

RHODA: Ferociously odd. Good day.

*Rhoda exits.*

ALICE: *Something is changing, a tonic that makes the eyes burn, like mountain air, too cold too bright –*

VIRGINIA: *As if a tonic had been administered. So thrilled, my breath is panting, every nerve springs forward at attention, a burning sensation throughout my limbs, a barking sensation in my mouth – She is like a man –*

ALICE: Prosperous.

VIRGINIA: And like a man. Resolving –

ALICE: Acting, planning, ordering people about.

VIRGINIA: We'll go for Monica.

ALICE: For Monica.

**SCENE 4: BUDDING MORSEL**

*Sunday in a city park.  
Bright sunshine,  
ducks in a pond,  
Everard and Monica walk together.*

MONICA: This is my one free day. I often come to the park to enjoy the sun. You must know that I never go out with gentlemen I don't know. But as I am not acquainted with any gentlemen, my sisters know none, there are none in the streets, none in the shops ...

EVERARD: So if you are to have any male company at all, you must take a risk.

MONICA: You seem safe.

EVERARD: *As safe as I can be around a budding young morsel.*

MONICA: *Be contained and virtuous, do not allow the flutterings down below – the fit of his fine wool trousers stretched over well-nourished thighs – no stop – I work in a shop.*

EVERARD: How lovely.



MONICA: I am endlessly in between – caught, you see. My sisters made me half a lady and half a shopgirl. *I want to lie with him while he licks fine wine off my belly, no, can't stop thinking about it, always thinking about it –*

EVERARD: What a delightful little metamorpho you are. I should put you on exhibit, 'Ladies and Gentlemen, here you see a hermaphroditus, half lady! Half shopgirl!' *And probably a virgin, about to be initiated / by someone –*

MONICA: *My eyes drop, of course they drop, to his marriage finger, that singular finger –*

EVERARD: *Ripe, needing to be plucked, breasts like / great round apples –*

MONICA: *And there is no ring –*

EVERARD: *Let me suck the cranberries of your nipples / suck the juice –*

MONICA: *Handsome, educated, a waistcoat that would cost / me a year's wages –*

EVERARD: *Let it dribble down my chin onto your tight little ...*

MONICA: *Is he crippled in mind or body / has he detestable vices?*

EVERARD: *Teach you mysteries –*

MONICA: *No ring on his finger, no ring – You're not married?*

EVERARD: I can't afford to be married.

MONICA: But you're rich.

EVERARD: I'm not. I did work.

MONICA: But now you don't?

EVERARD: Now I'm a man of leisure with a small inheritance.

MONICA: *Monica is pretty, Monica must marry.*

EVERARD: Meet me here next Sunday. I want to see the sunlight glitter on your throat, I want to hear you prattle.

MONICA: My sisters are withered old maids. The sight of them makes me want to off myself. I'm bad, aren't I?

EVERARD: I too saw my family and thought, 'I will never be like them,' and so I became nothing. *She'll come next Sunday, I see it in her eyes.*

MONICA: *I've been immodest, I've been desperate.* I am so weary.

EVERARD: Yes, I believe you are. *I am striving to be a good man, yet a virile man, to search for my happiness without hurting others, to take pleasure in women because not to do so is to repress one of life's great joys, and so I do dally but often do not taste, I am not at the mercy of my staff, I have practiced the breathing methods of India to control my urges – yet when I see a woman of a certain shape, a certain smell, all the husbands I know are in a state of abject misery, this bargain is impossible to make, and yet I see a woman at my hearth, no not a hearth, in Venice, in Paris, a salon with a woman presiding, giving as good as she gets – could this odd girl become a real woman, a New Woman? I want to embrace my age, the machines and the women, I want to measure and to annotate, perhaps I might even work again if a woman were there to do what they do, to encourage and support, I would let her be free, I am no barbarian to lock a woman up, forbid her to walk alone, yet we would walk together.* Next Sunday then?

MONICA: Perhaps.