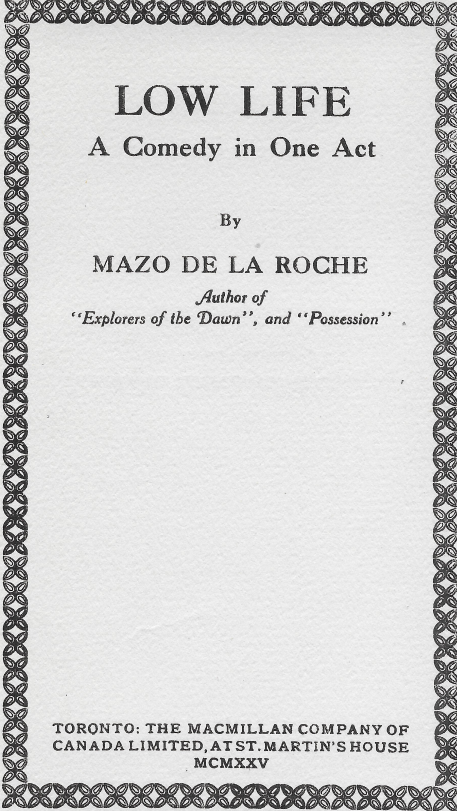


LOW LIFE
A COMEDY IN ONE ACT
By
MAZO DE LA ROCHE

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Author of
"Explorers of the Dawn", and "Possession"

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To
Mrs. James Warnock

LOW LIFE was submitted simultaneously to two competitions held respectively by the Imperial Order of the Daughters of the Empire and the Dramatic Section of the Montreal Branch of the Canadian Authors' Association in the winter of 1925. It won first prize in both competitions.

LOW LIFE

A Comedy in One Act

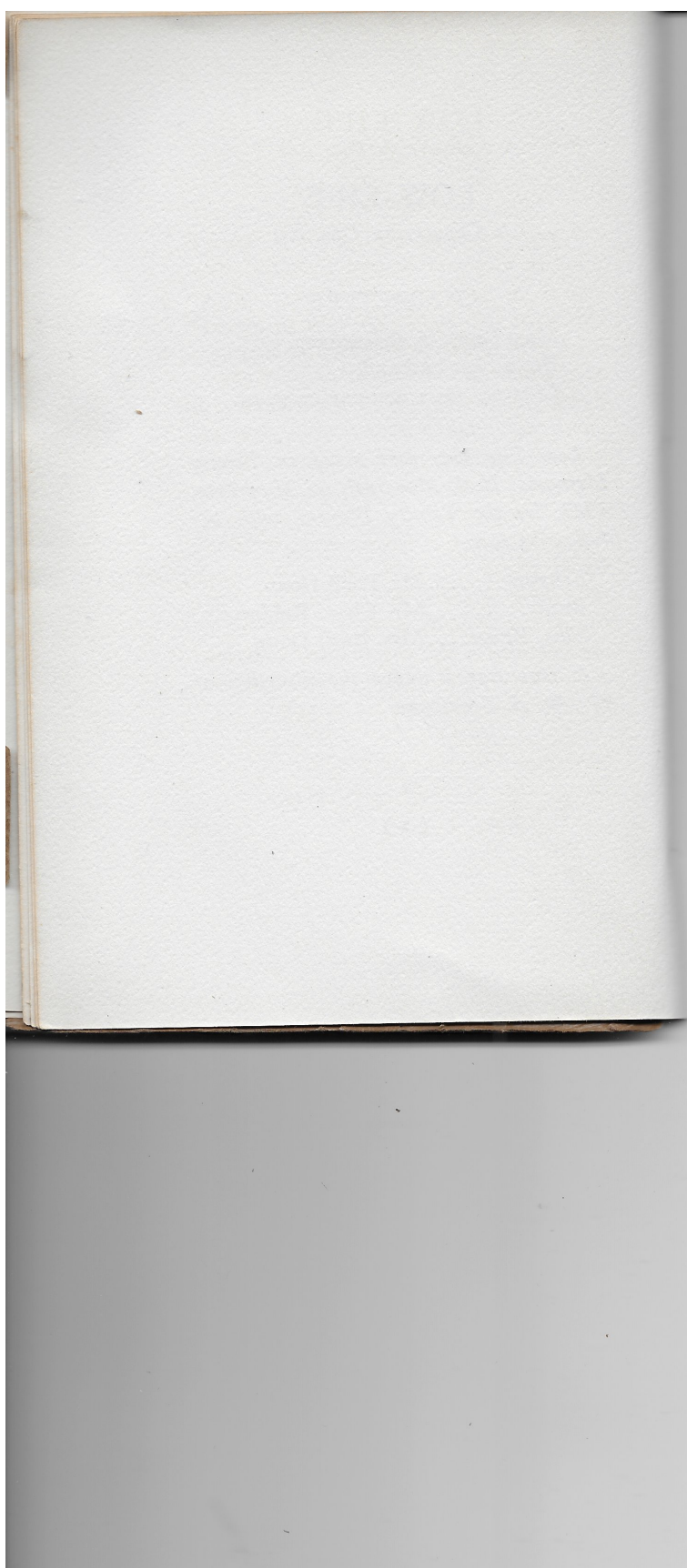
CHARACTERS

MRS. BENN, A charwoman.
BENN, her husband.
LINTON, their non-paying guest.

Low Life was first acted in Trinity Memorial Hall, Montreal, on May 14th, 1925, by the Trinity Players, with the following cast:

LINTON Mr. Basil Donn.
BENN Mr. Chas. Robinson
MRS. BENN . . . Mrs. Basil Donn.

It was staged under the direction of Mr. W. A. Tremayne.



LOW LIFE

A Comedy in One Act

SCENE.

A poor room at the top of a lodging house in a city in eastern Canada. The time is late afternoon on a foggy day in Spring, but the light coming in at the one window is sufficient for the two men who sit at a table in centre playing at cribbage. At the back of the room is a cupboard, a small stove, and a door leading into the passage. At the left, a door leading into a bedroom. At the right, under the window, a tumbled cot bed.

The men are intent upon their game. Benn, plump, common, good-natured, in shirt and trousers and stockinged feet; Linton, tall, shabby, with an air approaching gentility. He has the self-conscious melancholy of the fallen gentleman, but he really had not very far to fall.

LINTON.—Two for a pair (*pegs*).

BENN.—Six for three pairs (*pegs*).

LINTON.—Ha! I suppose you think you'll
peg out.

BENN (*excitedly*).—Pl'y!

LINTON.—Twenty-eight.

BENN.—Thirty-one! Gime! And look at
me 'and. (*Spreads out his cards.*)
Never needed to count it. Double
run of four, five, six.

LINTON (*stretching*).—I have no luck.

BENN.—Unlucky at cards, lucky in love.

LINTON (*darkly*).—Love! Women have
been my undoing. What I've suf-
fered on their account! Thank God,
I never married.

BENN (*humorously*).—Well, you can
thank God I did.

LINTON (*stretching*).—Ho, hum! a long
day.

BENN.—Did you ever see the like for the
time of year? I've been in this coun-
try twenty years and I've never seen
such a Spring. The climate's gettin'

worse all the time. July, August, and Winter. Them's our seasons. These 'ere immigrants from the 'Ebrides, I wonder wot they'll think of it. They'll find this's a worse place than the one they come from. Might as well be back *in* the 'Ebrides, I'd s'y. Wot I want to know is, w'y does the Government bring 'em out? Wot are they goin' to do with them? There's enough 'ere now.

LINTON.—We need them on the land.
(*He stretches again and rises*). Lord, how stiff I am! A night like last night gets into one's bones. That bench felt pretty hard towards morning. I couldn't help thinking of you so snug and comfortable here.

BENN (*anxiously*).—Now that you're up, just 'ave a look at the clock. It must be nearly time for the missus.

(*Linton draws aside the dingy curtain and peers, with head on one side, out of the window.*)

LINTON.—It's so foggy I can't see the face of the clock. The tower's almost hidden by it. Lord, what a night!

BENN (*uneasily*).—Oh, I don't think it's going to be too bad. It's not cold.

LINTON (*shivering*).—But the fog. That's what chokes you like cotton wool.
(*He returns to his seat by the table and puffs gloomily at his pipe.*)

BENN.—Well, even if we can't see the clock we'll 'ear the whistles blow for six. It'll be time enough then.

LINTON (*mildly*).—Where's she working to-day?

BENN (*musings*).—It's Thursday. H'm. Her reg'lar d'y at Mrs. Horning's, Argyle Road. Not so far off neither. It'll not tike 'er long.

LINTON (*placidly*).—Yes, but she's got to go to the Day Nursery for the kid.

BENN.—Yes, she's got to go to the Nursery. I believe the fog's lifting. Try if you can see the clock now.

(Linton obediently goes to the window, draws back the curtain and cranes his neck as before.)

LINTON.—Not a whit better. I can just make out the tower itself. There's no sign of the face of the clock.

BENN *(rising with a look of desperation)*.

—Well, I know it's getting on for five.

But, look 'ere, you've got to 'ave something to eat before you go.

LINTON *(with a pretence at lightness)*.—

Oh, don't mind about me.

BENN *(angrily)*.—Mind about you! I'd like to know where you'd ha' been if I 'adn't minded about you!

(Linton, who has been writing on the fogged pane, now returns to the table, leaving the bit of curtain looped back on the string that supports it. With an apologetic look at Benn he drops into his chair and shades his face with his hand. Benn anxiously investigates the cupboard and extracts a cold potato, a piece of bread and two cold

sausages. He places these on a plate, arranging them in an effort to make them appear as a hearty meal. Linton watches him eagerly between his fingers.)

BENN (*setting the plate on the table before Linton*).—It's not much but it'll stay you.

LINTON (*falling to*).—Thanks. I don't suppose there's a drop in the bottle.

BENN.—Oh, I forgot. (*he hesitates and then adds, uncomfortably*). There is a drop in the bottle but she said this morning that she 'ad a mind to mix 'erself a good 'ot toddy to-night and see if it would drive the cold out of 'er.

LINTON.—I'm glad she's going to do that. She doesn't half take care of herself. It would be a very bad thing if she got down sick.

BENN.—Pretty bad for us, eh?
(*They look at each other and laugh rather shamefacedly.*)

LINTON (*attacking the last sausage*).—

She's a fine woman—I say it—even
if she was a bit rough on me last night.
She's a wonderful woman.

BENN.—She's a great worker. W'y, when
that last biby come, 'ow long do you
suppose she laid off? One week. Just
seven d'ys, and she was up and at it
again. She only let one week's char-
ing collect on 'er.

LINTON (*wiping his lips*).—She's a marvel.
I suppose she soon caught up with
that too.

BENN.—Oh, yes, she's never let nothink
collect on 'er for long.

LINTON.—I wonder if I could have a cup
of tea. It would warm me up so I'd
not feel the cold so much in the park
tonight.

BENN (*contritely*).—Tea! Of course you
can. The kettle's just on the boil.
Just 'ave a squint at the clock again
while I stew it. (*Linton goes to the*

window and peers out. Benn pours hot water on the tea. His expression suggests both pity for Linton, and anxiety for his departure.)

LINTON.—You could cut it with a knife. The lights are on now. You never saw such a blurry-looking mess of a night. An awful night to —

BENN.—'Ere's your tea. (*He hands him the cup and, while Linton drinks he goes himself to the window and looks out.*)

LINTON (*sardonically*).—Well, what do you make of it?

BENN.—It ain't inviting but—I've seen worse. Anyw'y, you know wot she said last night. And, after you'd put your coat on and gone out she kept at it for an hour or more in bed.

(A whistle sounds hoarsely in the distance through the heavy air. Both men start like criminals. Linton gulps the last of his tea and sets the cup down with a shaking hand. Benn

immediately snatches it up, also snatches up a tea-towel, wipes frantically the cup and the plate, and thrusts them into the cupboard. Meanwhile Linton is getting into a very shabby overcoat and tweed cap, in which he looks the picture of down-at-heel gentility. A door slams below. Both men stand listening while heavy steps begin slowly to ascend far-below stairs.)

BENN.—It's 'er, as sure as death. For God's sake, Mr. Linton, get out of 'ere!

LINTON.—How can I? She'll meet me on the stairs.

BENN (*hysterically*).—Get out, I s'y. 'Ide in the passage. It's dark. Flatten yourself against the wall. She's at the second flight now! (*He pushes Linton into the passage, softly shuts the door on him, and stands listening, with beating heart. The steps draw nearer; they pause for a moment out-*

side the door, then it opens, and Mrs. Benn, her baby on one arm, the other laden with packages, appears. She is a strong-looking woman, but her broad face is pale and tired. She is not very dirty, considering that she has been charing all day long. She throws her husband a half contemptuous, half-motherly look, as she marches past him to the table and begins to lay her packages thereon.)

BENN (*deprecatingly*).—You're a bit early, eh?

MRS. BENN (*cryptically*).—I'd need to be, after the d'y's work I done.

BENN (*brightly*).—'Ow's biby?

MRS. BENN.—Nurse said 'e was a bit peevish this morning. I expect 'is rash was botherin' 'im but 'e was all laughin' and crowin' when I went in. Nurse says there ain't a finer kiddie in the nursery.

(*Benn comes and peers down at the bundle on her arm.*)

BENN.—Hullo! Daddy's boy! Hullo, 'Ector!

MRS. BENN.—Stop your fooling. I want 'im to go asleep. 'E was all but off when I came in.

BENN (*poking at the baby*).—Hullo, 'Ector!

MRS. BENN.—Nip around now and begin to l'y the tible while I put biby on the bed. There's brawn in that flat package, and there's a lettuce and some Chelsea buns.

(She goes into the other room. A door slams below. Benn goes to the window and looks down into the street. He gives his head a doleful shake and then returns to the table and begins to untie the packages. He abstracts a slice of brawn from one, two biscuits from another, and breaks off a piece of cheese. These he drops into the pocket of his coat.)

MRS. BENN (*re-appearing*).—Well, you are slow. 'Ere, let me. (*She espies*

the teapot standing on the tea-kettle).
Tea! What 'ave you been mikin' tea for?

BENN (*eagerly*).—For you, m'dear. I thought as 'ow a cup of tea would go good after the chill and the fog. I thought I'd 'ave it all ready for you the minute you'd pop in.

MRS. BENN.—Listen to Mr. Beau Brummel! Well, I never! Do you think I can 'ave you wycin' tea like that? 'Owever, since it's mide—(*She pours herself a cup and stands by the stove drinking it, while Benn pushes the packages to one end of the table, places a scrap of table-cloth on the other end, and lays two places.*)

MRS. BENN.—Why aren't you l'yin' a plice for Gladys? Why ain't she 'ome at this hour?

BENN.—Teacher came and fetched her to practice for the M'ypole dance. Took her off in 'er own car if you please.

MRS. BENN (*aghast*).—Lord! Don't tell me teacher come up 'ere in this untidy 'ole?

BENN.—Oh, no. She w'ited in the street below.

MRS. BENN (*smiling broadly*).—It wouldn't look swell nor nothink to see a car witin' for our Gladys.

BENN.—Rather not. And the Simpkinses saw, and the Clapps, and the Ryders. 'Arf the street was at their doors.

MRS. BENN.—And did Gladys put on her clean frock?

BENN.—*I* put it on 'er. Buttoned it up myself, and while she tied up 'er 'air ribbon, I put on my collar and tie, got my 'at and walking stick and escorted 'er down to 'er car for all the world like a little lidy. Lizzie, it would 'ave brung the tears to your eyes to 'ave seen 'er sittin' there beside Miss Philips as chipper as the Queen of Sheba.

(Mrs. Benn is deeply moved by the vision thus conjured up. In a sort of golden haze she gets the bread and adds another spoonful of tea to the pot, and lights the oil lamp.)

MRS. BENN.—She's a wonderful little kid if I do s'y it. Dances like a fairy.

BENN (*gallantly*).—She's got a wonderful mother and I don't care who 'ears me s'y it.

MRS. BENN.—Silly! (*She feels in her pocket and produces a nice large orange.*) 'Ere's a orange Mrs. Horn-
ing gave me for 'er. I'll put it where she'll see it first thing when she comes 'ome. (*She lays the orange on the window sill. At the same instant she sees Linton's name scrawled on the foggy pane.*) Wot's that mean? That nime on the pine! 'E's been 'ere again. Didn't I tell you? Didn't I tell 'im? What do you think I'm made of? Putty? When was he 'ere?

BENN.—Lizzie, Lizzie, don't tike on so. 'E just stepped in for a minute to get 'is 'andkercher. 'E'd forgot it last night when you sent 'im off. 'E didn't stay but a minute. While I 'unted up the 'andkercher—I'd used it to wipe off the stove by mistake—'e stood there by the window and wrote 'is nime on the pine—just for somethink to do like.

MRS. BENN (*snorting*).—That's about all the effort 'e's got the ambition for—to write 'is nime. I like 'is cheek. On my winder, too. (*She savagely wipes the pane clean with a corner of her apron and straightens the curtain.*) Well, 'e can write 'is nime on a bench in the park to-night for all I care. We're shut of 'im.

BENN (*musingly*).—It's a good nime, too, Linton. None of your little, cheap nimes—

MRS. BENN (*scornfully*).—Like Benn.

BENN.—Yes, like Benn. I knew as soon as I met 'im that first day last September—we was both applying for the sime job, I mind—I knew 'e was a gentleman. Or somewhere near it.

MRS. BENN (*seating herself at the table*).—Well, 'e'll not spunge on me no more. Not if I know it. It's bad enough to 'ave one man to keep, and 'im fit for nothink much but to be a father.

BENN (*reproachfully*).—Lizzie, we've only two kids.

MRS. BENN.—What about the three that didn't live in between times, what with me wearin' myself out with charin' and all?

BENN (*also seating himself and looking very small*).—Oh, well, accidents will 'appen in the best regulited families.

MRS. BENN.—Accidents? Accidents? I call them *calamerties*.

(*They eat in gloomy silence for a space except that Mrs. Benn ejacu-*

lates once—"Writin' 'is nime on my winder-pine! I like 'is cheek!" Then the warmth of the room, the pleasant lamplight, the good meal, have their effect, the atmosphere becomes more mellow.)

MRS. BENN.—Wot about the Igency? Were you over there to-day?

BENN (*his mouth very full*).—Yes. No-think there.

MRS. BENN.—And wot about the plice as chauffer? Did you try there? (*Benn, his mouth too full for speech, nods.*)

MRS. BENN.—Well, wot about it?

BENN (*gulping down his mouthful*).—The lidy thought I wouldn't do. She wanted someone who'd show off a smart livery. She thought I'd a kind of down-trodden air.

MRS. BENN (*angrily*).—Oh the very ideer! I like 'er cheek. I'd down-trod 'er if I 'ad 'er 'ere! I don't know a man that'd set off a 'andsome livery better than you.

BENN (*swelling his chest*).—I reely think I could.

MRS. BENN.—Did you answer that add for sandwich-man?

BENN (*patiently*).—Yes. They thought I was too plump to make a proper sandwich. They thought I'd 'old the boards out at such a angle that folk 'ud get a wrong perspective.

MRS. BENN.—Well, I'm glad I don't 'ave to be a blooming sylph nor a screaming beauty to 'old my job. (*She turns sidewise in her chair and ruefully rubs her knees.*) My knees feels like two jelly-fish to-night from goin' over Mrs. Horning's floors three times. This was one of 'er particular days. If you'd ha' ever 'eard 'er fussin' over the washin'! Afraid 'er pink undies'd run! I'd mike 'em run, and her in them!

(*They grin at each other appreciatively. Then, their grins fade as they hear steps slowly ascending the stairs.*)

The step is only too familiar to them.)

MRS. BENN (*throwing up her head*).—It's Linton. It's 'is step.

BENN.—It isn't. It can't be. It's that new lodger in the back room. (*But he knows it is Linton.*)

MRS. BENN.—You can't fool me. 'E must be crizy. I'll teach 'im. I'll l'y 'ands on 'im, I will!

BENN.—'E must be drunk. Let me go out and stop 'im.

(He goes towards the door but she catches his arm, and drags him back. Together they stand, as the steps cease and a hollow knock sounds on the panel.)

MRS. BENN (*with dangerous politeness*).—Come in.

(The door slowly opens and Linton appears. He has a haggard look. He carries his cap in his hand. Benn makes a warning gesture but Linton's eyes are on Mrs. Benn.)

LINTON (*imploringly*).—Mrs. Benn. I—
I—

MRS. BENN (*extending her arm threateningly*).—Now you go. I tell you, I'm dingerous. It'll take more than Benn 'ere to 'old me if I turn on you. Wot do you think I am? A slive to work my fingers to the bone and my knees to jelly to feed the likes o' you?

LINTON.—Mrs. Benn. I—I— (*He advances a step.*)

MRS. BENN (*savagely*).—You won't go, eh? Let me at 'im! (*Benn clutches her and holds her but hard work has made her stronger than he. She tears herself away and snatches up the poker.*)

BENN.—For pity's sake, go, Mr. Linton!
We don't want the perlice up 'ere.

LINTON.—You're a kind woman, Mrs. Benn.

MRS. BENN (*with a flourish of the poker*).
—I'm not a kind woman! I'm a 'ard

woman. I've felt it comin' on me for weeks—gettin' 'arder and 'arder. Now I'm as 'ard as n'ls. So, get out! Mike 'iste!

BENN.—Lizzie! Lizzie!

MRS. BENN.—'Old your tongue. It was you that brung 'im 'ere. Eight long months ago.

LINTON.—You were a kind woman then, Mrs. Benn.

MRS. BENN.—I was a softy. The sime 'as Joe, 'ere. But I'm not a softy any longer. Why, look 'ere. I want to tell you somethink I did. Yesterd'y, when I was cleanin' in a cellar I took a bit of charcoal and I figured out on the wall 'ow many meals I'd give you. Eight months—thirty d'ys a month—two 'undred and forty d'ys. Three meals a d'y equals seven 'undred and twenty times 'ave you drawn your chair up to my board. Think of it! Seven 'undred and twenty times

you've 'ad the run of your teeth at my tible!

LINTON.—You're forgetting the time I was in hospital three weeks Mrs. Benn, and how weak I was afterward. I only ate enough to keep a child for another month.

MRS. BENN.—Enough to keep a child! That's just it. It was enough to 'ave kept *my* child.

BENN.—You forget, Lizzie, 'ow 'e's tried to get work, sime as I 'ave. There's been other fine men besides us out of work this Winter and Spring.

MRS. BENN.—That's not to s'y I 'ave to keep 'em all, is it?

BENN.—But it's not as though 'e 'adn't tried, Lizzie, sime as me.

MRS. BENN.—Well, let 'im go to a insti-tootion. I ain't goin' to 'ave my 'ouse turned into a insti-tootion for dec'yed gentlemen. Let 'im marry a wife to keep 'im, sime as you. Let

'im marry two. It'd tike two to keep 'im the w'y 'e'd like to be kept, with his collars and ties and shiving soap and all.

LINTON.—Mrs. Benn, why did you not tell me that my collar and tie offended you? I would have left them off and let my beard grow if it would have pleased you. But you misunderstand me. I didn't come back here to-night to ask you to take me in again but simply to thank you for all you have done for me—last night you were too much upset to take things rationally. I wanted, also, to ask you for a few old newspapers. Mr. McFee, at the corner, is letting me sleep in his empty garage, but the cement floor seems pretty cool and damp. I thought if you had a few old newspapers, or maybe a bit of worn-out quilt—

BENN.—Think of that, Lizzie. A cold, damp floor after a good warm bed

like that. (*He points to the cot-bed in the corner with an imploring gesture.*)

MRS. BENN (*fiercely*).—Yes, think of it! That's your daughter's bed. Gladyses bed! And she's never been able to sleep in it for eight months because of 'im. She said to me this mornin'—"Oh, mother, it did feel good to 'ave my own bed again instead of sleepin' acrost the foot wiv you and daddy!" It's no w'y for 'er to do—a clever little girl like Gladys that the teacher calls for in 'er own motor car. (*She looks defiantly at the men but her fierceness has departed. She lays down the poker and goes towards the bedroom.*) I'll let you 'ave a quilt off our bed. We can do without it now the nights are milder. (*She goes into the bedroom.*) *The men, left alone, look at each other sheepishly, then, Benn's gaze wandering, he sees the orange on the window-sill, snatches*

it up and offers it to Linton. Linton sadly shakes his head but mechanically drops the orange into his pocket. He also deprecatingly accepts the slice of brawn, the biscuits and bit of cheese which Benn stole from Mrs. Benn's packages, and puts them in his other pocket. He then sits down, and buries his face in his hands. Mrs. Benn returns, carrying an old quilt and some newspapers.)

MRS. BENN (*with a kind of savage cheerfulness*).—'Ere we are! 'Ere's the very thing. Now look. You must spread a layer of these newspapers down first. There's nothink better to keep the cold and damp out. 'Old up yer 'ead and tike a little interest in wot I'm tellin' you. Just pretend I'm a demonstritor in a shop window and your nose glued to the pine.

(Linton uncovers his face and gazes meekly at the newspapers laid on the floor.)

LINTON.—Ah, yes, I see. I'm to spread the papers on the floor to keep in the damp and cold.

MRS. BENN.—Nonsense. To keep the damp and cold *out*. *Out* not *in*.

LINTON.—Oh, yes. *Out* not *in*.

BENN.—The question is will they do it?

MRS. BENN.—O' course, they'll do it. Arctic explorers uses piper to keep out the cold. There ain't nothink better.

LINTON.—Oh, I'm sure you wouldn't give them to me, Mrs. Benn, if they weren't nice and warm.

MRS. BENN (*hurriedly*).—Now, you spread down the quilt, doubled so, then you l'ys yourself on the under 'alf, and draws the hupper 'alf over you, see?

LINTON (*leaning forward*).—Just how was that, Mrs. Benn? I don't seem to grasp your meaning.

MRS. BENN.—Lord! The man's no more fit to look after 'isself than a biby. (*She proceeds with exasperation.*) You see them newspipers don't yer?

LINTON.—Yes, Mrs. Benn.

MRS. BENN.—Very well. L'y them down *first*. Then the quilt folded *so*, then yourself in between.

LINTON (*anxiously*).—You mean I'm to get in between the newspapers and the quilt.

MRS. BENN.—*No, no, no*. Now look. (*Linton drops to his knees on the floor beside the quilt.*) You are to get in between the two layers of quilt.

LINTON.—Ah, I see. But, then, what are the newspapers for?

MRS. BENN (*on a deadly note*).—To keep the cold and damp out. (*Benn has lighted his pipe while watching the proceedings. Now, between puffs, he speaks.*)

BENN.—To be sure. There's nothink much colder and damper than a cement floor. You'd get your death sleepin' on it if you didn't 'ave them nice warm noospipers under yer. And

we'd feel responsible for your death, and we'd never enjoy another peaceful night's sleep because your spirit would 'aunt us.

MRS. BENN.—Oh, 'e'd 'aunt us, I expect!
(She sits on her heels with a worried look. Linton now arranges himself on half the quilt and draws the other half over him with a deprecating gesture.)

LINTON.—Is this the way?

BENN.—Yes, yes, that's the w'y, Mr. Linton. And you could curl the end of the quilt under your 'ead for a pillow.
(He arranges it for Linton.)

LINTON *(closing his eyes)*.—How comfortable! How warm!

MRS. BENN *(brightly)*.—Don't you think you'd better tike up your bed and walk now?

(Linton stretches out a trembling hand and clutches the hem of Mrs. Benn's apron.)

LINTON.—Oh, Mrs. Benn, don't send me away from you, and Joe, and Gladys! I ask nothing but to sleep here where I am on the floor, under the same roof with you. Let Gladys have her bed undisturbed. As I've said often before, when I am in a position to repay all your kindness I will repay it a hundred-fold. And that time will come soon, I'm sure.

BENN.—Once the Spring properly opens up, 'e'll 'ave a chance. (*Looks down at Linton hopefully.*)

LINTON.—Why only on Tuesday last, a man from whom I was asking employment, said to me—"Don't you worry, sir"—

BENN.—Called 'im "sir", you'll notice, Lizzie.

LINTON (*still on the flat of his back*).—He said—"Don't you worry, sir, a man of your fine presence, a man of your commanding figure"—

MRS. BENN.—Yes, you do look a commandin' figger, don't yer?

LINTON.—“A man of your dominant glance need entertain no fears, your day will come. The day when you will be appreciated.”

MRS. BENN.—W'y didn't 'e tike yer on hisself then?

LINTON.—He was the owner of a prosperous peanut stand and he wanted an assistant, but he feared that I would lend such an air of dignity to the stand that the urchins would be afraid to present their coppers.

MRS. BENN.—Well, I never!

BENN.—But it's true, Lizzie, it's true. W'y talk about dignity, he even lends dignity to this little 'ome of ours. When he tikes Gladys for a walk, there's an eye at every window, and all the mothers on the street are envious to see our child led along by a gentleman like 'im. I expect they think he is her tooter.

MRS. BENN.—Ha!

(Linton rises to his knees. He and she face each other, eye to eye in silence for a space.)

BENN.—And not only that, Lizzie. When teacher come for Gladys to-day, she says to me, says she—"Mr. Benn, wotever has come over Gladys? She's so much more refined than she was. You'll pardon me sayin' so, I 'ope, but she used to be as wild and rough a child as there was in the school."

MRS. BENN.—She dared say that! I won't say a thing to 'er! I won't tell 'er where *she* gets off nor nothink!

BENN *(excitedly)*.—But wait, Lizzie. Teacher says then—"She's a perfect little lidy, she is now, so mannerly, and so refined, there must have been some strong influence at work."

MRS. BENN.—Well, 'is hinfluence is the only part of 'im that will work, then.
(But she is immensely pleased.)

BENN.—A strong influence at work, she said.

(Linton rises from his knees, and stands draped against the door frame, wearing a somewhat remote, aloof expression.)

BENN.—Teacher said—"You 'ave reason to be proud of your daughter, Mr. Benn. She has the manners of a patrician. I can't teach 'er nothink."

MRS. BENN (*astounded*).—She said that about our Gladys?

BENN.—About our Gladys.

LINTON (*mildly*).—I did what I could.

BENN.—And you should have 'eard 'im, Lizzie, when I was a tying of Gladyses 'air ribbon. 'E'd just stepped in for 'is overcoat. "Now," 'e says, "mind your manners, you young limb. None o' your coarse Canadian w'ys of speakin'. S'y—"Yes, teacher," prettily, not "yeh" or "huh-huh". And "teacher," mind, with the last syllable

nicely clipped, not "teachur," or you'll never grow up to marry a gentleman.

. . . Lizzie, we've got to think of Gladys' future, 'ave'n't we? A refined influence at work, says teacher.

(An atmosphere of warmth, of hospitality steals through the little room.

It is made visible in the new ease of the men's attitudes, in the softening of Mrs. Benn's aspect. She bends and slowly rolls up the quilt, and carries it to the next room. Returning, she goes to the cupboard, takes out an extra plate, cup and knife, lays them on the table, takes more brawn from the package, places it on the platter, and draws up another chair.

MRS. BENN.—Sit in, men.

(They come forward with alacrity but Linton does not sit down till he has assisted Mrs. Benn to her seat with the utmost gallantry. She blossoms into smiles.)

MRS. BENN.—Did you get chilled in the fog?

LINTON (*seating himself*).—Oh, not badly.

MRS. BENN.—There's a mouthful in the bottle, Joe. Give it to 'im before 'e goes to bed. I'll not need it.

BENN.—'Ave some brawn, Mr. Linton.

LINTON.—Very little.

MRS. BENN.—'Ave some cheese. It's nice and nippy.

LINTON.—Oh, I daresay my appetite will come back to me.

(A door slams below. Small feet begin stamping up the stairs.)

A child's voice, below: Mother!

BENN.—It's Gladys, back from the practice.

(Mrs. Benn springs to the door and opens it.)

CHILD'S VOICE.—Hold the lamp, mother. It's awful dark.

(Linton turns in his chair with a look of pain.)

LINTON (*loudly*).—Not awful, Gladys, awfully—or exceedingly, my dear.

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(Mrs. Benn takes up the lamp and goes into the passage holding it high and smiling expectantly. The two men also rise. Benn takes the orange from Linton's pocket and holds it towards the door.)

MRS. BENN.—Ah, she looks a pictur,'
bless 'er 'eart.

BENN.—And 'ere's 'er horange, all ready
for 'er!

CURTAIN.

PRESS OPINIONS

. . . . Miss de la Roche in this little drama reveals herself as not only possessed of a keen imagination, sympathetic humanity, and a mastery of dialogue, but a fine dramatic sense. Simple in theme as the play is, the manner in which it held the audience from beginning to end is a fine tribute to the clever technique of the dramatist.

—*Wilfrid Still,*
in The Montreal Herald.

. Mazo de la Roche's "Low Life" has a virility that is arresting. Her characters are boldly drawn and clearly outlined, and the action moves with a steady rhythm.

—*S. Morgan Powell,*
in Montreal Star.

The prize winner is easily the best one act play that has come out of a Canadian contest. . . . It is "Low Life" by Mazo de la Roche of Toronto . . . "Low Life" in its quiet unobtrusive way stands out as the first worthwhile play that has won the prize in a Canadian contest. . . . "Low Life" has already been staged in Montreal with great success . . . acted well . . . having real character as well as literary quality.

—*Fred Jacob,*
in The Mail and Empire.