

A dark, atmospheric photograph of a forest at night or in heavy fog. A path of wooden planks leads from the foreground towards a house in the distance. A single window of the house is brightly lit, casting a yellow glow that illuminates the path and the surrounding trees. The trees are tall and thin, their silhouettes dark against the misty background.

# **WHEN THE MOON HAS SET:**

**A New, Two-Act, Composite Version**

**By J.M. SYNGE**

**Edited by David Clare**

**CLARE PRESS**

This new edition of *WHEN THE MOON HAS SET*, by J.M. Synge, was edited by David Clare and first published on the website [www.classicirishplays.com](http://www.classicirishplays.com) in 2016. It is based on the various drafts and notes left by Synge, which are housed in the archives at Trinity College Dublin (TCD MS 4351, 4352, 4382, 4389, 4391, 4393). For a detailed account of how this script was put together, see:

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Text set in Times New Roman 12 point.

Design / Layout by Kenneth Keating.

# WHEN THE MOON HAS SET:

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CP

CLARE PRESS

The Burren, Co. Clare, Ireland

***CHARACTERS:***

Columb Sweeney

Sister Eileen

Bride Kavanagh

Pat Kavanagh

Mary Costello

***SCENE:***

A “Big House” in Co. Wicklow, circa 1900

# WHEN THE MOON HAS SET

## ACT ONE

*An old family library. Many books are in shelves round the walls, and, in the back left corner, a gun, dog-whips, etc. are lying as if carelessly thrown together. On the right is a fireplace with a large portrait above it, and, beside it, there is a door to the interior of the house. The back wall contains a large window with shutters, and on the left, opposite the fireplace, there is a door to the exterior of the house, partly covered with a curtain. A turf fire has burnt low on the hearth, and a lamp is lighting on the table where there are several old books and a pile of manuscript.*

*SISTER EILEEN, a young nun, is standing near the table making a large bow of crepe, such as is placed on the house door after a death. She holds it up for a moment, and then, laying it carefully on the table, she goes over, rubs the frost from the window, and looks out, shading her eyes with her hand. In a moment she turns back slowly to the table, handles the manuscript carelessly, and then picks up a leaf and reads in a low, clear voice.*

**SISTER EILEEN.** “Every life is a symphony and the translation of this sequence into music and from music again, for those who are not musicians, into literature, or painting or sculpture, is the real effort of the artist. The emotions which pass through us have neither end nor beginning, are a part of eternal sensations, and it is this almost cosmic element in the person which gives all personal art a share in the dignity of the world.

“Biography, even autobiography, cannot give this revelation, for the deeds of a man’s lifetime are impersonal and concrete, might have been done by anyone, while art is the expression of the abstract beauty of the person.

“Every writer...”

*A clock strikes the four quarters and one o’clock. SISTER EILEEN puts down the manuscript and goes back to the window. She peers nervously out again, looks at the fire, and goes to the door on the right after touching the bell-pull.*

*She calls in a clear voice but not loudly.*

**SISTER EILEEN.** Bride – Bride – Bring up some turf, the fire is nearly out, and we want the house warm when Mr. Columb and the doctor arrive.

*She goes back again to the window. BRIDE – a young country girl – comes in with her apron full of turf, and kneels down to arrange the fire.*

**SISTER EILEEN.** *(To herself, still looking out)* Where can they be?

**BRIDE.** *(talking with plaintive, west Wicklow intonation)* Ah and isn’t it a sad story altogether, the young master going out in the night and the great cold, and then his honour to die all in a minute.

**SISTER EILEEN.** *(Going over to the fireplace, where BRIDE is blowing the turf with her mouth)* You cannot light it?

**BRIDE.** The turf’s wet, Sister Eileen, for the roof has fallen in on the turf house with the weight of snow on it, and I haven’t a bit of sticks in the whole house. I told Murphy to bring some bog-wood with him out of the town – you can’t find a stick here anyplace with the snow lying on the earth – but he hasn’t come back; the Lord knows what’s keeping him.

**SISTER EILEEN.** (*Half to herself*) He should not have been sent at all and then he could have gone for the doctor instead of Mr. Columb. (*She kneels down by the fire.*) I think I could arrange that better.

**BRIDE.** (*Watching her*) You cannot, Sister Eileen. You're not used to the turf.

**SISTER EILEEN.** Long ago I could have done it.

**BRIDE.** (*With affection*) I do have to laugh when I see Mr. Columb and he making the fire; he throws it all about as if it was coal he had.

**SISTER EILEEN.** (*Reminded of Columb*) Oh, where can they be?... I think I will go out and see if there's any sign of them.

**BRIDE.** Please don't, Sister; you'll catch your death.

**SISTER EILEEN.** (*Already hurriedly putting on her boots and coat*) I must.

*BRIDE shrugs and keeps working at the fire. SISTER EILEEN leaves by the door on the left. BRIDE eventually gets the fire lit; she begins to tidy the room, occasionally looking out the window to take note of the direction in which SISTER EILEEN is headed. Suddenly, COLUMB bursts in from the door on the left.*

**BRIDE.** (*Turning around*) Your honour!... Are you back with the doctor?

**COLUMB.** (*Brushing snow off himself*) I'm afraid I never made it to the doctor. Between the dark and the snow, I got badly lost. How is my uncle?

**BRIDE.** (*Sympathetically*) Oh, your honour, he passed away not long after you left... (*Quickly resuming, hoping to soften the blow*) But don't be afeared – the master died without pain. The attack he had when you went out didn't last, and we thought he was getting better maybe, but he

soon passed away from the weakness. Sister was in the room, and didn't even realise he was after dying.

**COLUMB.** (*Calming himself down after the high drama of the past few hours.*) Ah, well, I suppose it is the best way to die. (*Reflectively, to himself*) What a life he had... I expect it is a good thing this aristocracy is passing away. They were neither human nor divine. (*Looking around and addressing BRIDE again*) Sister Eileen has gone to bed?

**BRIDE.** She has not, your honour. She's been in a great state fearing you were lost in the hills forever, and now she's after going down the hollow field to see would there be any sound of the wheels coming.

**COLUMB.** I came in the other way so she could not have heard me. (*Goes to the window*) Is she gone long?

**BRIDE.** A little while only.

**COLUMB.** I wonder if I could find her...

**BRIDE.** You could not, your honour, and you'd have a right to be sitting here and warming your feet, the way it's proud and happy she'll be to see you when she comes in.

**COLUMB.** (*Still looking out*) I hope she will not miss her way.

**BRIDE.** (*A little impatiently*) She'll be coming in a minute I'm telling you, and let you be taking your own rest. You're wanting it surely, for we were thinking it's destroyed you'd be walking alone in the night and the great snow, and you not used to anything but the big towns of the world. (*She pulls a chair to the fire.*)

*COLUMB comes over to the fire, wearily. He begins taking off his coat and heavy boots. BRIDE lifts up the bow of crepe from his chair.*



**BRIDE.** (*Showing it to him*) Isn't it a fine bow she's made with bits of rags that we found? I was watching her do it, and I'm telling you she's a wonder surely.

**COLUMB.** (*With reserve*) She is clever with her fingers.

**BRIDE.** (*Despite his reserve, inquisitive and a little jealousy*) Ah, it's a long way any person would go seeking the like of Sister Eileen, and it's very lonesome your honour'll be when she is gone away to the town in a day or two.

**COLUMB.** She will stay for the funeral.

*SISTER EILEEN comes in quickly from the door on the left. She is pleased and relieved when she sees COLUMB. She speaks as she starts taking off her coat and boots.*

**SISTER EILEEN.** You have come back? I was afraid something had happened.

**COLUMB.** I missed my way at the second crossing of the roads and got terribly lost. I doubt I would have made my way back home if I hadn't met a queer man talking to himself under some trees who told me how I was to go. I don't know who he can have been; he asked several times for my uncle and his voice seemed to remind me of someone, yet I think he was almost mad.

*BRIDE starts slightly and looks round with interest.*

**SISTER EILEEN.** I am afraid there are many people about here who are not quite sane. (*She moves towards the door on the right.*)

**COLUMB.** Won't you sit down?

**SISTER EILEEN.** I have to finish preparing the room where your uncle is laid out.

**COLUMB.** Then come down again before you go to bed... I want to talk to somebody; the house is so dismal.

**SISTER EILEEN.** So late in the night...?

**COLUMB.** Come for a little while. You will not sleep just yet.

**SISTER EILEEN.** (*With hesitation*) If you like, I will come down for a few minutes. (*Exit right*)

**COLUMB.** (*Addressing BRIDE*) The storm is getting worse.

**BRIDE.** (*Turning towards him*) Your honour seen no sign of Murphy and the car?

**COLUMB.** I passed it at the ford – where the bridge has fallen down. It had been kept back by snow drifts, and the branches that have been blown out of the trees.

**BRIDE.** Was the old man from the back gate-lodge upon it, your honour?

**COLUMB.** There was an old man sitting on the seat next to Murphy; it may have been him.

**BRIDE.** That was him, your honour; that was my father. He went into town this morning to see my mother, and I suppose he waited the way he would come back home with the car. I was afeared he might have drink taken and be fallen in the snow.

**COLUMB.** I was talking to that old man yesterday, but I did not know you were his daughter... You are not like him.

**BRIDE.** He's a very innocent poor man, God help him, but my mother is like a lady. (*Putting more turf on the fire*) I'm told they do call her 'your ladyship', below in the Asylum.

**COLUMB.** (*With a movement of surprise*) Is that where she is?

**BRIDE.** It is, your honour. She's there a good bit now, but they say she doesn't be lonesome in it at all, there do be so many coming in from all the grand houses in the country. (*Blows the turf for a moment with her mouth, and sits up rubbing the smoke from her eyes*) My uncle is a bit queer too, one time and another. I'm thinking it was him your honour seen this night upon the roads, for he does be always taking long walks like yourself, God bless you, and it's two years now since we seen him, though we've heard tell this last while, it wasn't far off from us he was living at all.

**COLUMB.** (*Lighting a cigarette from the fire*) Then it was your voice I was thinking of. Is he a tall man with a stoop, and a sort of beard, I could not see of what colour?

**BRIDE.** That's himself, your honour, He's a Costello from an old Castilian family, and it's fine people we were, and it's no lie I'm telling you. For my mother is a big tall woman herself, and I have an aunt, who is only a woman of the roads now, but who was once the finest girl, I've heard them say, you'd find in the whole world. She was reared with the nuns (*looking around at him with a curious expression*) and maybe you've heard his honour speak of her, God rest his soul. (*Crosses herself*)

**COLUMB.** I do not remember it. I have not often talked with my uncle.

*There is a noise of wheels under the window. BRIDE goes over and looks out.*

**BRIDE.** There's the car going round, and it's a long time they've been. (*Coming back and looking at the fire*)

*A low uncertain tap is heard at the door on the left.*

**COLUMB.** (*To BRIDE*) Who is that?

*BRIDE goes over to the door, opens it and whispers to someone outside, then turns back towards COLUMB.*

**BRIDE.** It's my father has brought a letter for you out of the town, and he has a little drink taken has made him say he'll give it to no one but into your own hand.

**COLUMB.** Bring him in.

*BRIDE leads in old PAT KAVANAGH. He is poorly dressed and a little unsteady on his feet.*

**PAT.** *(To COLUMB who stands up to meet him)* Your honour will be sick and sorry after your uncle dying on you, and you out in the snow, but it's a rich man you'll be from this day, and may the Lord preserve you.

**COLUMB.** You have a letter?

**PAT.** I have, your honour, and I was thinking I would do right to give it into your own hand, for there are queer people in this house, and round about it.

*COLUMB takes the letter, and PAT hesitates as if he wished to speak.*

**COLUMB.** *(Looking up at him again)* You saw your wife?

**PAT.** I seen her, your honour, and she as comfortable as any lady in England, France or Germany, walking round in the Asylum with fine shoes on her feet. *(Looking towards the door and coming closer to COLUMB)* There's another thing. Did you ever hear tell of the sister of the mother of that girl Bride?

**COLUMB.** Of your wife's sister? I heard of her tonight.

**PAT.** It will be queer things you heard?

**COLUMB.** That she was a fine girl once. – That is all.

**PAT.** There's a power to tell. My head's tired with the perishing cold of the air (*putting his hand to his head*) and maybe it will be better that I tell you the whole story in the morning, if the Almighty God keep us alive, but there's one thing, my wife and that girl had a brother... (*leaning out and whispering*) the maddest man is left walking in the world, and he has sworn a Bible oath he'll shoot the next heir, cousin or descendant of his honour, God rest his soul, who comes down into the place. (*Holding up his hand to mark his words*) I seen that man tonight, and he walking along, and talking to himself, below by the crossing of the roads.

**COLUMB.** I think I saw him also... He is a tall man with a stoop?

**PAT.** (*With astonishment*) That's him, your honour, and you seen him yourself?

**COLUMB.** He helped me find my way home again after I got lost.

**PAT.** And you talked together?

**COLUMB.** He walked beside me for half a mile, and told me how I should go.

**PAT.** The Lord have mercy on us all –

*SISTER EILEEN taps lightly at the door on the right and comes in. When she sees PAT and BRIDE she stops.*

**COLUMB.** (*To SISTER EILEEN*) Please come in, I was expecting you. (*To PAT*) We can talk about the whole matter in the morning. You want rest tonight. (*Motioning him to the door on the left; BRIDE follows at a distance*) Goodnight, Pat.

**PAT.** Goodnight your honour, and may the Almighty God preserve and prosper you. (*BRIDE mimes a half-ashamed goodbye to her father as he*

*leaves, then begins to make her way unobtrusively to the door on the right)*

**COLUMB.** *(Suddenly remembering BRIDE)* Goodnight, Bride.

**BRIDE.** *(Turning back and smiling, as she passes SISTER EILEEN)* Goodnight, your honour. *(Exit right)*

**COLUMB.** *(To SISTER EILEEN)* You have arranged everything?

**SISTER EILEEN.** As much as I can at this late hour.

**COLUMB.** I will write the letters that have to be written in the morning; there will be time enough before the hour of the post.

**SISTER EILEEN.** What did Pat want so late in the night?

**COLUMB.** He brought me a letter out of the town and he would give it to no one but myself. He has been drinking a little.

*COLUMB pushes an armchair to the fire for SISTER EILEEN. She sits down, looking at the letter in his hand.*

**SISTER EILEEN.** Read it if you wish.

**COLUMB.** *(Opening it)* It is from one of my friends in Paris. I had not time to bid him goodbye, but I left a line for him the morning I travelled. *(Looking through the letter)* I might read some out to you if you like.

**SISTER EILEEN.** Do, if it is interesting.

**COLUMB.** Wait till I see. He talks first about my leaving, and his money troubles, then... yes, this is interesting. "I have been drawing and painting very little lately, and yesterday Jeanette came and sat in the studio so that I could do nothing but talk. Have you noticed all the wit one squanders on women? It would be possible to write an article on the

‘Lost Gems of the Jester’, to show the misery of a man who is only articulate with girls, and spreads out humour, and fancies before them which he knows are never understood. You remember Rousseau’s – ‘C’était la seule fois de ma vie, mais je fus sublime.’ – We are all Rousseaus now; I have never said anything to a man that was worth saying to a woman, and rarely said anything to a woman that was not fit for a man...” He concludes, “My compliments to the little Irish pigs that eat filth all their lives that you may prosper. Ever etc....” (*He puts the letter back in the envelope and turns to SISTER EILEEN*) What do you think of it?

**SISTER EILEEN.** It is clever, I suppose, but there is irritating bravado in it... Is he a good man?

**COLUMB.** He is interesting. He lives in a low room draped in black from the floor to the ceiling. He has a black quilt on his bed and two skulls on his chimney-piece with girls’ hats on them. His matches are in a coffin, and his clock is a gallows. He sits there whenever he is not at work and drinks absinthe and vermouth.

**SISTER EILEEN.** You should make him live more wisely or he will go out of his mind.

**COLUMB.** He seems to think that the dreams and the excitement are worth the danger. For the matter of that, in the life of the cloisters, and in this life of Ireland, men go mad every hour and you do not ask them to change.

**SISTER EILEEN.** There is nothing here or in the religious life to make men mad... It is different in Paris.

*A gust of wind blows through the house. SISTER EILEEN shudders and looks round at the window.*

**COLUMB.** Madness is caused by the killing or exaggerating of some part of the personality, and life here has been withered away by men

that are held up in contrast to the French till we are more degenerate than they are.

*BRIDE comes in with a notebook in her hand.*

**BRIDE.** Your honour, there was a notebook was under the head of the master's bed. (*She gives it to COLUMB, and then walks over to the window and closes the shutters*) Don't open them shutters for the length of this night, your honour.

**COLUMB.** Why?

**BRIDE.** Between the dogs howling in the lane and the storms, there's more than common death round this house tonight. You'll be wanting nothing more?

**COLUMB.** Nothing more; goodnight, Bride.

**BRIDE.** Goodnight, your honour. (*Exit right*)

**SISTER EILEEN.** (*Looking at the notebook*) She must have gone on settling the room after I had come down.

**COLUMB.** I suppose we should see what is in it. (*Opening the notebook*) There is a drawing of a girl, a slip of paper and a key. (*Reads*) "In the box on the chimney-piece in the library I have left my will, some legacies, and a letter to be read by my heir."

**SISTER EILEEN.** (*Who has taken up the drawing*) Are you going to read it?

**COLUMB.** I don't know that I am his heir.

**SISTER EILEEN.** This girl's face is like some face I have seen.

**COLUMB.** (*Looking over EILEEN's shoulder, getting quite close to her*) It is like Bride, I think.



**SISTER EILEEN.** Like Bride?... I believe you are right.

**COLUMB.** There is a curious story about an aunt of hers that old Pat was going to tell me tonight, but his head was not clear enough.

*He puts the paper back in the notebook, and lays the notebook on the table. SISTER EILEEN still has the drawing in her hand. Another gust of wind howls at the window.*

**SISTER EILEEN.** *(Starting)* I never minded wind before, but these nights I have been sitting with your uncle it has begun to terrify me... I ought to go to bed; if it rises anymore, I will not be able to get to sleep.

**COLUMB.** Wait a little longer; I am going to warm some Burgundy; it will do both of us good.

*He opens an old press and takes out two curiously formed wine glasses with a saucepan and decanter. Then he arranges the turf, pours some wine into the saucepan and puts it on the fire.*

**SISTER EILEEN.** *(Looking up at the picture over the chimney-piece)* How much he changed since that picture was done. Yet he cannot have been old.

**COLUMB.** I remember him first when he came to my grand Aunt's funeral; he was not more than thirty-five.

**SISTER EILEEN.** I was eleven when she died... He must have been about fifty.

**COLUMB.** This night reminds me of the days we spent in the woods between her death and the funeral. Do you remember them?

**SISTER EILEEN.** Not clearly.

**COLUMB.** You ought to. When we once catch the "style" of our lives we find refrains of excitement in all we think and do.

**SISTER EILEEN.** (*Gesturing to the manuscript on the table, she teases him*) You sound like your manuscript.

**COLUMB.** (*Excitedly*) Did you read it?

**SISTER EILEEN.** I read the page that begins “Every life is a symphony”, but I did not quite understand it.

**COLUMB.** If you saw it with the context you would find it simple enough. I was trying to convey the bitter-sweetness of a life in which all our glory is constructed on the facts of love and death. (*Realising*) That might jar on you tonight... You really don’t recall that time in the woods when we were young?

**SISTER EILEEN.** I remember the flowers we picked for the grave... But not “the excitement”.

**COLUMB.** (*Slowly*) It was wonderful weather in June, and our sense of death seemed only strong enough to throw out the whirl of life among the trees. Then the intimate feeling I had of the splendour of the world changed my friendship for you and gave me my first mood of romance. Till that time I had been divided between a vague affection for my people and a dream world where I lived with my imagination, but in that week the death shadow behind the glory of the woods transfigured your reality, and lifted you to the level of my dreams...

*A pause. In a lull in the storm a stifled noise is heard under the windows.*

**COLUMB.** What is that?

**SISTER EILEEN.** It sounded like some coughing in the trees.

**COLUMB.** (*Goes over to the window, opens the shutters and looks out*) The snowing is over, and the stars have come out.

**SISTER EILEEN.** Can you see anything?

***COLUMB.*** It is too dark but the moon will rise in a few minutes. Look at the light on that little cloud above Tonagee.

***SISTER EILEEN.*** When the moon rises it will be as bright as day the snow is so white.

***COLUMB.*** Did you hear? That was certainly a cough.

***SISTER EILEEN.*** It may have been some of the animals.

***COLUMB.*** I hope it is not the avenging lunatic.

***SISTER EILEEN.*** What do you mean?

***COLUMB.*** (*Making light of it*) When Pat brought me the letter while you were upstairs, he told me there is a lunatic about the place who has sworn to kill every new proprietor who comes here. It is something to do with his sister, the girl my uncle had the drawing of in his notebook.

***SISTER EILEEN.*** But is there really a lunatic?

***COLUMB.*** It seems that it was the man who showed me the way when I was out.

***SISTER EILEEN.*** (*Shivering*) Come back to the fire. You are safe in the house tonight, in any case. (*She sits down in her chair*)

***COLUMB.*** The wine is ready. (*He goes to the fire, lifts the saucepan and pours out two glasses, giving one to SISTER EILEEN*)

*A clock strikes the four quarters and two o'clock.*

***SISTER EILEEN.*** I must soon go to bed.

***COLUMB.*** Don't leave me just yet. My nerves have been at a tension ever since I came here, and tonight I feel as if a movement might snap them.

**SISTER EILEEN.** (*Half-criticising and half-teasing*) You are easily overcome for such a man of the world.

**COLUMB.** If you had been brought from Paris to the foot of a desolate mountain, with death, vague madness and risk all about you, you would feel what I mean. We are at an ultimate climax of desolation, yet (*he throws more turf on the fire*) through it all it is possible to find a strange impulse of joy.

**SISTER EILEEN.** (*Finding this remark distasteful, she picks up the bow of crepe and starts arranging the ribbons*) Joy? Don't be unnatural. Death is always solemn. And, as to a "climax of desolation", you exaggerate wildly. Death may be sad but it is also perfectly normal and, indeed, inevitable.

**COLUMB.** Then you were different when you were a child. You felt the supreme moment of satisfaction we had on the threshold of a house shrouded with death as thoroughly as I did.

**SISTER EILEEN.** That is only some fancy you have conjured up.

**COLUMB.** The thing is universal wherever people are not ashamed to be human. All funeral games and Irish wakes are due to this feeling. (*Drinking*) Everywhere there is an imperious reaction from the weight of death... Even now my gaiety is rising.

**SISTER EILEEN.** (*Standing up*) You must not talk like that... Have you no reverence for your uncle?

**COLUMB.** Of course I have reverence for him, but I am not afraid to admit to having other feelings, as well – even feelings that are beggarly or half-insane. *You* are the one who is being "unnatural", cousin, by refusing to recognise any feelings that do not come to you in the livery of the saints. Distorted, parasitic ideas are holding you back from the ecstasy of freedom.

**SISTER EILEEN.** (*Moving from the fire*) It is time for me to go. I do not like the way you are talking. The cry for freedom in this world is only the pretext we use to get license for the lower portion of our nature.

**COLUMB.** You mistake me utterly. No sane man thinks the draught of bodily freedom can sate the divine intricacy of the soul. It is too simple. But in the ultimate symphony of the emotions, the animal impulse is one part of the glorious whole; it is heard far away sounding a beautiful and passionate rhythm with unappeasable lamentation. It has the power of the drum, but, like the drum, can only produce one note...

**SISTER EILEEN.** There is nothing to keep your theories from leading people to all kinds of wickedness. (*She lights her candle on the side table*)

**COLUMB.** Why?

**SISTER EILEEN.** Vague excitement without law or rule cannot make people good. (*She moves to the window*)

**COLUMB.** Life is made for luxuriance. You elide the turmoil of passion and elevate only one mode of the exquisite. It is a capital error.

**SISTER EILEEN.** Come and look at these trees, and the line of the hills. This white moonlight and the white landscape are the type of all I wish for.

**COLUMB.** But the divine chastity of the earth is only one mood; there is also the tumult of love, another mood that is divine...

**SISTER EILEEN.** (*Interrupting him*) Wait... Look at that man in the trees...

*A shot is fired and COLUMB falls to the floor. SISTER EILEEN pulls the bell-pull, and then bends over COLUMB who is nearly insensible. BRIDE runs in, half-dressed.*

**SISTER EILEEN.** Someone fired at him through the window. Send Murphy for the doctor.

**BRIDE.** I will, Sister! (*Quick exit right*)

*SISTER EILEEN tenderly nurses COLUMB, holding his head in her lap. BRIDE runs back in, looking guilty because she suspects it was her relation who shot COLUMB.*

**BRIDE.** Murphy is gone for the doctor, Sister, and he won't be long at all with the clearness of the moon.

**SISTER EILEEN.** Bride, the fire is dying. Bring in some turf, and get the room warm again.

**BRIDE.** Yes, Sister. (*Quick exit right*)

*SISTER EILEEN stanches the bleeding and continues to nurse COLUMB with deep concern as the curtain descends.*

**CURTAIN**

## ACT TWO

*Same scene: a clear evening in June – the first night of summer. BRIDE is laying a little table near the window with tea-things for two people. COLUMB comes in from the door on the left with his hat on and his arm in a sling.*

**COLUMB.** *(Talking a little listlessly, as if preoccupied)* It has been a beautiful evening.

**BRIDE.** It is true for you, and isn't it a grand thing to see the like of it in the month of June, and to see your honour getting his health for the fine time of year.

**COLUMB.** *(Pointing from the window)* I have just been up to that white stone you can see above Inchavor.

**BRIDE.** The Lord bless us to walk all that way and no one along with you. It's lonesome you must have been after Sister Eileen being beside you every hour in the day for three months or beyond it.

**COLUMB.** *(Changing the subject)* Were there any visitors while I was out?

**BRIDE.** Only a second cousin of mine who stopped in on his way home to the hills. He was down at the town this morning – at the assizes.

**COLUMB.** *(Turning quickly)* Then he saw Stephen Costello's trial?

**BRIDE.** He did, your honour.

**COLUMB.** What was done?

**BRIDE.** Dr. Burke below did all the swearing they wanted, and then they put him into a kind of a Criminal Asylum for the rest of his life.

It's the least he deserves, after the scurrilous way he treated your honour.

**COLUMB.** (*Turning to the window again, and changing the subject again*) Sister Eileen is not in?

**BRIDE.** She is not, your honour. (*Looking out beside him*) She was kind enough to look in on my father who has not been well. I hope she makes it home before the tea gets cold.

**COLUMB.** I suppose she will come presently.

*BRIDE pours COLUMB some tea, which he drinks in a desultory manner. She then commences to tidy the room. As she does, she notices a parcel on the table.*

**BRIDE.** Isn't it a strange thing my aunt hasn't come to pick up the parcel the master left for her in that old box?

**COLUMB.** (*Not interested*) You said yourself she is a woman of the roads. Perhaps word from my uncle's solicitor has not reached her yet.

**BRIDE.** But she never strays far from this part of the county and she attends every fair day, where someone is bound to have seen her.

**COLUMB.** Well, the parcel will be here for her, whenever she elects to call.

*SISTER EILEEN enters from the door on the left.*

**SISTER EILEEN.** Sorry I am so late. Old Pat is quite ill, and I did not like to leave him.

**COLUMB.** I have just come in.

**SISTER EILEEN.** Where did you go?



**COLUMB.** (*Pointing from the window*) The big white stone on the selvage of the hill.

**SISTER EILEEN.** That is much too far.

**BRIDE.** Sure, he's well now and I think it's soon he'll be walking away from us all together. (*As she starts to exit right*) He'll be too lonesome in it when yourself is gone away.

*SISTER EILEEN moves about the room putting ferns and foxgloves she has brought with her into bowls of water. COLUMB is leaning on the windowsill.*

**SISTER EILEEN.** She is right. I shall soon have to go – the Superior wrote me a letter; she says she is short of nurses and heard from Dr. Burke that you're nearly well.

**COLUMB.** Don't let us talk of it. I am too doleful tonight.

**SISTER EILEEN.** (*Looking around with surprise*) Everything is so beautiful I thought you would be perfectly happy.

**COLUMB.** There is an anguish in this splendour of June. One feels one's mortality. The last few nights – I suppose because I am not well – I have been haunted by that appalling sensation in which we realise the gulf of annihilation we are being whirled into... I suppose you have felt it also.

**SISTER EILEEN.** Sometimes when I am too tired. It is a kind of nightmare.

**COLUMB.** A very terrible kind... At one time it worked all over my consciousness and I used to walk about the Seine wondering how the men and women can go on with their working and love-making in the face of this stupendous doom. Then a beautiful "bonne" came to work in the window opposite mine and I forgot it.

**SISTER EILEEN.** It was well to shake it off. (*Taking his cup*) Let me give you some more tea; that must be cold. I don't know what you will do when you have to attend to yourself again. (*She pours tea into his cup.*)

**COLUMB.** I don't intend to.

**SISTER EILEEN.** What do you intend?

**COLUMB.** To keep you.

**SISTER EILEEN.** You must not talk like that.

**COLUMB.** You cannot deny what has grown between us. You are changing every day. You have learned in Kilgreine that the world is wider than a nut-shell.

**SISTER EILEEN.** (*Conceding*) I have changed a little.

**COLUMB.** You will change a great deal more, if you will allow yourself.

**SISTER EILEEN.** Cousin, as I have told you before, you underestimate my calling as a nun and a nurse, and you wilfully ignore my devotion to religious truth.

**COLUMB.** The only truth a wave knows is that it is going to break. The only truth a bud knows is that it is going to expand and flower. The only truth we know is that we are a flood of magnificent life, the fruit of some frenzy of the earth. If what I have said is false it does not matter. Humanity itself may die out, but a turmoil of life is within us. It has come from eternity, and any denial of it is a betrayal of the Author of Life.

**SISTER EILEEN.** (*To stop his philosophising*) When I was nursing Old Pat tonight, he finally told me the story of Bride's aunt, Mary Costello. Your uncle wanted to marry her although she was beneath

him, but when it was all arranged, she broke it off because he did not believe in God. After that, she left the convent where she had been educated, and tried to find steady work but couldn't. She refused to marry anyone besides your uncle, who she still loved, and refused to emigrate because she wanted to be near him, as well as to her own relations. Eventually, she ended up taking to the roads, sleeping rough, making long pilgrimages, and begging or doing casual labour as she could find it. Her brother blamed your uncle for ruining Mary's life and only desisted from killing him because of an oath he gave to his sister. Your uncle, meanwhile, shut himself up in this house, and never spoke of it to anyone ever again.

**COLUMB.** I suppose Pat told that story to you as a warning, having seen and heard what's grown between us... And yet I suppose you take Mary Costello as an example to be followed.

**SISTER EILEEN.** She did what was right. The Scriptures say that believers and unbelievers cannot be yoked together. Even if her life has been hard, she'll be happier than those who go against the will of God.

**COLUMB.** I doubt that what happened to her or to my uncle was the will of God.

**SISTER EILEEN.** (*Frustrated by his doggedness*) Columb, I'm afraid I can't speak of this subject anymore. And I wish you would not spoil what little time we have left together by arguing needlessly.

**COLUMB.** (*Coldly*) Fine. I will say no more about it. (*Starts to exit left, in a huff*)

**SISTER EILEEN.** Where are you going?

**COLUMB.** Another walk. (*Rudely*) But don't worry. I won't go far, and I will be back in time for supper. (*Exit left*)

**SISTER EILEEN.** Columb... (*She decides to let him go and resumes arranging the ferns and foxgloves*)

*After a time, a faint knock is heard at the door on the left. SISTER EILEEN opens the door. MARY COSTELLO mumbles something inaudible.*

**SISTER EILEEN.** Oh, Bride's aunt Mary. Please come in.

**MARY.** Thank you, Sister. It's a grand thing to enter a warm house and speak with another living soul. My head's perished with the night wind, and I do be lonesome the time I do be going the bog road, with the rabbits running round on it and they drowned with the dew.

**SISTER EILEEN.** Well, as someone must have told you, Albert Sweeney passed away recently, and he left a parcel for you, locked in an old box.

**MARY.** (*Studying SISTER EILEEN closely*) You're a fine handsome woman, God bless you, a fine beautiful woman I'm saying, and let you not be ashamed of it.

**SISTER EILEEN.** (*Sternly*) I am not ashamed. (*Handing her the parcel*)

**MARY.** (*Taking the parcel but still studying SISTER EILEEN*) And it's a fine neck you have, Sister, though who'd know it at all and you covered round in black as if it was an old widow you were or the thing they put scaring the crows.

*SISTER EILEEN is offended and does not respond. MARY opens the parcel to find a green wedding gown and a box with a ring in it.*

**MARY.** (*Sadly*) Tell us, what use are these to me now?... (*Plaintively*) There's great marrying in the world but it's late we were surely. A long rest to Albert, but he's nothing to me now... My mourning is for my children that wanted to live, God help them, if the nuns and the priests with them had let me be... (*Addressing SISTER EILEEN directly*) You know, Sister, I see my children sometimes when my head's bad and I do be falling asleep. There are five of them. They're always nice, Sister,

with clean faces, and nice frocks on them and little sticks in their hands... Ah, it's queer things I do be seeing the time the moon is full.

**SISTER EILEEN.** (*Letting go of her grievance and speaking with compassion*) Well, you're safe from the cold and from distressing thoughts here...

**MARY.** (*She looks piteously at SISTER EILEEN, then sees the little cross she has hanging round her neck; she takes the cross in her hand.*) Will you give me the little cross you have, Sister, for I've lost the one I had and I do be wanting the like of it to sit and hold in my hand. (*SISTER EILEEN gives it to her*)... May the Almighty God reward you, Sister, and give you five nice children before you die. (*She gives SISTER EILEEN the box with the ring in it.*)... My blessing be on that ring, and it going on your hand, and my blessing be on your hand and it working with the linen when the time is come. (*She looks at the crucifix in her hand.*)... This will be a quiet thing to be looking on, and it'll keep me still the long evenings when the moon is low, and there do be white mists passing on the bog, the time the little children who live in my dreams do be lepping, and crying out to each other, and making games in the dark night, and no Christian waking but myself only, and the white geese you'd hear a mile or maybe two mile away and they making a great stir over the bog. (*She moves towards the door.*)... I'll be going now I'm thinking, for I've a long way and this will be keeping me company in the dark lane through the wood. God save you kindly, Sister. Let you mind the words I was saying now and give no heed to the priests and bishops, for it's little the like of them knows about women or the seven sorrows of the earth. (*Exit left*)

*SISTER EILEEN is shocked. She paces around the room, thinking. Eventually, she takes the green gown and the ring box in her hands and exits by the door on the right. After a few moments, COLUMB enters from the left, takes off his coat, and begins to examine the books on the shelves. SISTER EILEEN comes in behind him from the door on the right in the green silk dress which is cut low at the neck.*

**SISTER EILEEN.** *(In a low voice)* Columb, I have come back to you.

**COLUMB.** *(Turning towards her)* You are infinitely beautiful, and you have done a great action... *(They meet in the middle of the room and gaze into each other's eyes; eventually, COLUMB speaks)* Listen to the tumult the birds are making in the trees. This is our marriage hymn. Without love this world would be a lonesome sandhill, and a soul without love is not a great deal better... Speak to me. I want to hear you; your voice will have a new cadence from today.

**SISTER EILEEN.** I seem to be in a dream that is wider than I am. I hope God will forgive me. I cannot help it.

**COLUMB.** How many people ask to be forgiven for the most divine instant of their lives. Let us be wiser than they are.

**SISTER EILEEN.** *(Handing him the ring)* This is the ring your uncle was to give to Mary Costello.

**COLUMB.** *(Softly)* Give me your hand... I, the masculine disciple of art, have overcome with worship you, the feminine scion of faith. From our harmonised discord new notes will rise. In the end we will assimilate each other and grow senseless and old. We have incarnated God, and have been a part of the world. That is enough. *(He takes her hand.)* In the name of the Summer, and the Sun, and the Whole World, I wed you as my wife. *(He puts the ring on her finger.)*

**CURTAIN**



COLUMB. I expect it is a good thing this aristocracy is passing away. They were neither human nor divine...

*The first play that J.M. Synge completed, When the Moon Has Set, is the most autobiographical of his dramas and provides fascinating insight into his early life, his sensitivity to Ireland's urban/rural divide, and his views regarding his own social class. The play was repeatedly rejected by W.B. Yeats and Lady Gregory of the Irish Literary Theatre (precursor to the Abbey Theatre), and most critics share their negative feelings about the work; however, those who have dismissed When the Moon Has Set as an unsatisfactory "apprentice" piece may have been too hasty. As W.J. McCormack has pointed out, Synge "never abandoned" the play, and, over the years, he completed various one- and two-act versions, as well as a putative three-act one. What's more, he left behind copious notes related to the play. Since there is no definitive version of the text, Dr. David Clare has compiled this "super draft" from the Synge manuscripts housed in the archives at Trinity College Dublin. The result is a new two-act version, which forces critics and all fans of literary drama to reassess an important work from one of Ireland's greatest playwrights.*

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CP

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