

PETER (*offstage*) No, no, darling, I'll take the rest.

The buzzer goes again. BRIAN looks to the main bedroom, then decides he has to answer. He still has to balance the pile of books.

BRIAN (*on the intercom*) Yes, yes, who is it?

NEEDHAM (*offstage*) Is Mr Hunter there, please?

BRIAN I don't know. Who wants him?

NEEDHAM (*offstage*) He won't know me. It's confidential business. My name's Arnold Needham.

BRIAN Oh! Are you the man from Hounslow?

NEEDHAM (*offstage*) I came through Hounslow, yes—from Twickenham.

BRIAN Ah, it's about the books and things.

NEEDHAM (*offstage*) You could say that. Who's that speaking?

BRIAN I don't know, you don't know me, I don't want to know. You'd better come up. (*He presses the door release switch, then goes running towards the bedroom, calling*) Peter! Peter! It's the man from Hounslow!

PETER *enters with a pile of books.*

PETER What, already? Thank God for that. We can have the whole thing out with them at last. (*He puts the books on the sofa table*)

FRANCES *comes out of the main bedroom also carrying a pile of books.*

FRANCES Did you say the man from Hounslow?

PETER That's right. Now you'd better leave him to me. There's always a chance he may turn nasty—cut up rough. (*To BRIAN*) Put them in there, Brian.

BRIAN I can't, I'm going into the kitchen.

There is a sharp knock at the door. PETER opens it, to reveal MR NEEDHAM standing outside.

BRIAN scuttles into the kitchen with the books, shutting the door behind him.

NEEDHAM Good evening. Mr Hunter?

PETER That's right, come in, come in.

NEEDHAM I must apologize for calling so late at night.

PETER Not at all. We're only too pleased to see you so soon.

PETER is a little nonplussed because NEEDHAM is not what he expected. He is balding and dapper with heavily-framed spectacles. He is soberly dressed in a pinstripe suit off the peg and carries a small overnight suitcase. NEEDHAM is indeed precise and slightly officious and this trait is borne out by the row of pens in his breast pocket. As we shall discover he is an insomniac and therefore somewhat restless. He has a nervous habit of clearing his throat frequently.

NEEDHAM *(coming in)* I hope you don't mind me mentioning it, but did you know there's a van outside?

PETER Yes, my wife and I were just loading it up. This is my wife.

FRANCES How do you do?

NEEDHAM How do you do, Mrs Hunter. I do hope I haven't called at an inconvenient time.

FRANCES Oh, no, not at all. We were just waiting for you.

NEEDHAM *(blankly)* Waiting for me? You knew I was coming?

PETER Of course. That's why we were putting all the books in the van.

NEEDHAM Putting them in the van? Whatever for?

FRANCES So you can take them back to Hounslow.

NEEDHAM I don't want to take them to the Hounslow branch. I want to deal with them here in the morning.

PETER We can't wait till tomorrow! There's all this trouble over the vicar and the Women's Bright Hour.

NEEDHAM Women's Bright Hour?

FRANCES Yes, it wasn't so bad with the cards. We just threw them into the river.

NEEDHAM (*goggling*) You threw the cards into the river? But what about the records?

PETER Records? Thank God, we've never had any.

NEEDHAM Never had any?

FRANCES No, and if they're anything like the books we don't want any, either.

NEEDHAM Mr Hunter, are you seriously telling me you've thrown the cards away, you've never had any records and you don't propose keeping the books?

PETER That's precisely what I'm telling you. And nothing you can say will make me change my mind either.

NEEDHAM But I've never heard anything like it. (*Sarcastically*) I suppose you don't keep a key register, either?

PETER No, we don't keep a key register... (*He gives a take*) Did you say key register?

NEEDHAM Naturally. It's normal banking procedure—not confined to the National United.

FRANCES Aren't you the man from the book people?

NEEDHAM Certainly not. I'm Arnold Needham. I've come to start a bank inspection in the morning.

BRIAN (*poking his head through the kitchen doors*) Oh, blimey O'Reilly!

NEEDHAM What was that? Who said that?