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False Pretences

A comedy

Eric Chappell

Samuel French — London
www.samuel french-london.co.uk



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CHARACTERS

Kevin, an estate agent; late 30s

Valerie, his wife; 30s

Lucy, their vivacious friend; 30s

Victor, Valerie's brother; early 40s

Tank Turner, the bank manager; 50

Soapy Simpson, 30s

Toby, a jeweller; 40s

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The play was derived from the author's television series *The Bounder*, starring Peter Bowles and George Cole.

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Up and Coming
We Don't Want to Lose You (from *Fiddlers Three*)
Wife After Death

ACT I

SCENE 1

Kevin and Valerie Bunce's living-room. Early evening

A spacious room with reproduction furniture and a chintz-covered suite. A simulated log effect fire glows in the Regency-style fireplace. Upstage stands a leather-topped desk with phone and high-backed swivel chair. L of the desk are french doors, usually open, which lead into a long, glass conservatory, with ferns and flowers, which continues out of sight L. A window, DR, gives a partial view of the road. Beyond the conservatory is a broad, suburban garden. A revolving cocktail cabinet stands DL. A door, R, leads off to the hall. The effect of the room is of someone aiming for good taste and missing slightly

As the CURTAIN rises, Kevin Bunce enters from the hall, carrying a briefcase. He is a soberly dressed man in his late thirties. He is given to deep internal groaning when things go wrong which he accomplishes without moving his lips, but at the moment he is wearing a self-satisfied smile

Kevin *(throwing down his briefcase)* Val, where are you?

Valerie Bunce follows him almost at once. She is a few years younger than her husband with a warm smile faintly tinged at the moment with apprehension

Kevin turns

Has she arrived?

Valerie Yes ... *(She glances anxiously back towards the hall)*

Kevin Is something wrong?

Valerie No.

Kevin She's all right? She's not still grieving?

Valerie No — it has been a couple of years. She's over all that. Life moves on.

Kevin That's true. It would be nice if she met someone.

Valerie *(another look back)* Yes ...

He regards her uncertainly

(Brightly) Had a good day?

Kevin Yes. I think I've finally sold Greenacres.

Valerie The house by the crematorium?

Kevin (*frowning*) I didn't mention that.

Valerie Oh.

Kevin I thought you'd be pleased.

Valerie I am. This calls for a drink. (*She crosses to the cabinet and begins to pour*)

Kevin Well, it is a little early but why not? It'll be nice seeing Lucy again. I don't think we've met since her wedding ... (*He takes a drink and chokes*) God! This is strong.

Valerie I thought you liked it strong.

Kevin Yes, but not lethal. (*Suspiciously*) There is something wrong, isn't there?

Valerie closes the door and hesitates

Valerie Yes.

Kevin Is it your brother?

Valerie (*sitting*) It's been a bit of a shock ...

Kevin (*hopefully*) Is he ... dead?

Valerie No, he's out.

Kevin Well, he's not coming here.

Valerie He is here.

Kevin Then get rid of him.

Valerie I can't. He's my brother — and your best man. And he's very fond of us.

Kevin If he's fond of us why doesn't he stay away? (*Concerned*) Has Lucy met him?

Valerie No, she was changing for dinner.

Kevin Good. Get him out of the house before she comes down.

Valerie I can't ask him to leave. We haven't seen him in years.

Kevin Of course we haven't. (*Hissing*) He's been in prison. If we'd wanted him to call we'd have had to send him a cake with a file in it!

Valerie checks that the hall door is firmly closed

Valerie I hope you won't keep mentioning that.

Kevin What?

Valerie That he's been in prison.

Kevin Don't worry. I shan't mention it at all. I'm trying to keep it quiet. I have my reputation to think of.

Valerie I wasn't thinking of your reputation — I was thinking of his. He has paid his debt to society, Kevin.

Kevin He may have paid his debt to society but he still owes me a few quid. (*Pointing to a vase on the mantelpiece*) He hasn't paid for his wedding present yet — and that was ten years ago! He still owes us for that vase.

Valerie Kevin, you're getting agitated. You know it's bad for your digestion.

Kevin And what about Rockfast Investments Ltd? They may not have been fast but my God, they were certainly rocky!

Valerie That wasn't his fault. He never was good at figures.

Kevin He certainly wasn't.

Valerie He did nothing wrong. He was innocent. I'm not ashamed of my brother.

Kevin Aren't you? Then why do you never mention him?

Valerie I do.

Kevin Have you mentioned him to Lucy?

Valerie Well, no ...

Kevin Does she even know he exists?

Valerie I've no idea.

Kevin It seems I'm not the only one who's ashamed of him.

Valerie (*after a pause*) He's changed.

Kevin He hasn't changed. (*Sitting*) He'll still patronize me. It may be years but he'll come in here as if it were only yesterday — and my collar will start to prick. He'll take my chair. He'll take my desk. And he'll call me Kev. If he calls me Kev — I swear I'll go for him.

Valerie Perhaps you'll feel differently when you see him.

Kevin What do you mean?

Valerie Prison's left its mark I'm afraid. You'll be surprised at the change in him. So try and act naturally.

Kevin Don't worry, I intend to act naturally. I've only one thing to say to your brother and that's — (*He breaks off*)

Victor Blake enters the room. Victor is pale, well groomed, and leaning heavily on a stick. He is in his early forties. He gives Kevin a brave smile

Victor Hello, Kev.

Kevin (*staring*) Victor.

Victor limps forward to take Kevin's hand

Victor It's been a long time.

Kevin (*rising*) Yes.

Victor Thank you. (*He takes Kevin's chair and looks around*) Nice to be back in the old room. Is that a real fire, Kev?

Kevin (*suspiciously*) No — it's a simulated log effect.

Victor A simulated log effect! Well, you could have fooled me. What will they think of next? Ah! (*Pointing at the vase with his stick*) You still have it. "Thou unravished bride of quietness."

Kevin What?

Victor The vase. Look after it. I won't tell you how much it cost.

Kevin (*bleakly*) We know.

Valerie (*quickly*) We do love it, Victor.

Kevin Drink, Victor?

Victor Thanks. A scotch.

Kevin proudly spins the cocktail cabinet towards him

Hm. I didn't know they still made those ...

Kevin frowns and hands Victor his drink

Kevin Er, will you be staying long, Victor?

Victor Now, Kev — don't start that. Don't press me to stay because I can't. I must find a place of my own.

Kevin (*relieved*) Of course.

Victor I can only stay a few weeks.

Kevin Weeks?

Victor Sorry, Kev — I can't make it any longer.

Kevin You mean just until you get on your feet ...

Silence. Victor looks down at his leg and sighs

Victor You could say that ...

Valerie (*frowning*) Kevin meant until you find a place of your own.

Victor Yes, you could be useful there, Kev.

Kevin You mean a place around here?

Valerie Of course he means a place around here. I'm sure Kevin can find something, Victor.

Victor Good. The sooner the better. After all, two's company — three's a crowd.

Kevin But it's not three — it's four.

Victor Four?

Kevin Yes.

Victor looks from one to the other

Victor Congratulations! I didn't know. This calls for a big cigar, Kevin. I'm delighted. To tell the truth, I always thought there was something wrong ...

Kevin (*sharply*) I'm not a father, Victor. We have a guest.

Valerie An old school friend.

Kevin (*with emphasis*) A widow. Recently bereaved. Been through a great deal. Picking up the pieces. Not strong. Needs peace and quiet.

Victor regards them thoughtfully

Victor And you think I'll be in the way.

Valerie No.

Victor Does she know I'm here?

Kevin and Valerie exchange glances

Valerie Er, no.

Victor You haven't told her?

Valerie Not yet.

Victor So if I were to tiptoe out of here, she'd never know.

Valerie There's no need for that, Victor.

Victor I think there's every need. I can understand your embarrassment — and if I could tiptoe, I would, unfortunately I can't. (*He looks broodingly at his stick. He rises awkwardly*) Could you bring my case down, Kevin. The stairs are a problem.

Kevin Certainly.

Valerie No, Kevin. Victor, at least stay for dinner.

Kevin (*glumly*) Dinner?

Victor (*sitting*) You're very sweet, Val but I'd hate to embarrass you.

Valerie You've never embarrassed me, Victor. (*A sharp glance at Kevin*) I'll start dinner — and I'll tell Lucy you're here — and you can stay as long as you like.

An internal groan from Kevin

Valerie exits

Victor Lucy. Delightful name.

Kevin Yes.

Kevin watches Victor as he rises from his chair, his face contorted in pain, and limps across the room. Kevin hastily takes possession of his chair then realizes that Victor has taken possession of his desk

Victor Is this the sort of desk that comes apart?

Kevin (*frowning*) Yes.

Victor I thought it was that sort of desk. Must be careful. Don't want it to come to pieces ... (*He swings round in the chair*) Nice view of the garden. Hope I shall be able to concentrate on my work.

Kevin What work? You haven't got any work.

Victor I have been prepared for life outside, Kevin. It wasn't all sewing mailbags. We had courses for everything. Pottery, Bricklaying, Art classes.

Kevin What did you choose? Creative writing?

Victor How did you guess?

Kevin It's the obvious choice. You certainly showed plenty of creativity when you prepared the prospectus for Rockfast Investments. Why not write your life story. You could call it "A Fair Cop".

Victor (*sighing*) I hope it isn't always going to be like this, Kev. The prejudice — the distrust.

Kevin Victor, we have a good life here. I have friends, I've become respected and trusted. And that's not easy for an estate agent.

Victor I see. What do you tell your friends about me?

Kevin I say you went abroad.

Victor Abroad.

Kevin The Congo.

Victor The Congo! Kevin, are you ashamed of me?

Kevin Yes.

Victor Let me tell you something, Kevin, there were four hundred men in that hellhole.

Kevin Hellhole! It was an open prison!

Victor Four hundred pretty tough characters — ruthless and hard-bitten. They'd seen it all — you couldn't fool them. They all said there were only two men in that place who were innocent — myself and the governor. Although I wasn't entirely sure about the governor.

Kevin How can you say that? The evidence was overwhelming. You haven't a leg to stand on ... (*He breaks off*)

They regard Victor's leg

Victor (*sighing*) That's true.

Kevin Sorry, Victor, I didn't mean ...

Victor I took most of the blame to protect my accountant. He had a wife and six children. I haven't seen him since and neither have they. My mistake was that I believed in people. (*Emotionally*) But do I have to pay for that mistake for the rest of my life?

Kevin Of course not.

Victor All I ask is a chance to bury the past.

Kevin I'll get a spade.

Victor (*smiling*) Good man. We'll strike a bargain. You won't tell your friends I've been in prison — I won't tell mine you're an estate agent.

Kevin What!

Valerie and Lucy enter. Lucy is nothing like Kevin's description. She is an attractive, vivacious woman in her thirties with a mischievous smile

Lucy ...

He embraces her

Lucy Kevin.

Valerie Lucy, this is my brother, Victor. Victor — Lucy.

Victor (*holding out a tired hand*) Forgive me for not rising only my doctors have advised me not to stand ...

Lucy I do understand. Val told me. I must say, until now, I didn't know you had a brother, Val.

Kevin (*hastily*) Let me get you a drink, Lucy. Sherry? Gin and tonic? (*He whirls the cocktail cabinet around*)

Valerie He's been away — it's been years.

Lucy But you've never mentioned him once.

Valerie becomes flustered by Victor's stern gaze

Valerie It was too painful.

Lucy Why?

Kevin Dry white wine?

Valerie We didn't know when he'd come out.

Kevin Scotch!

Lucy Out? Out of where?

Valerie and Kevin look desperate

Valerie Hospital.

Kevin The jungle.

Lucy (*staring*) A hospital in the jungle.

An internal groan from Kevin that he turns into a cough

Victor (*smoothly*) Val, you could hardly call that place a hospital. Just a few primitive dwellings and a missionary. (*To Lucy*) They took me there after I was gored.

Lucy Gored!

Victor Charging rhino. Rifle jammed. Tried staring it out but the porters panicked. They carried me for days on a simple litter — rambling and incoherent — then one morning I felt this cool hand on my brow. I found myself gazing into the eyes of a beautiful nun. For a moment I thought I was in heaven.

Kevin (*desperately*) Gin and It? Gin and orange? Gin and lime?

Lucy I must say I find that hard to believe.

Victor What?

Lucy That you were ever rambling and incoherent.

Victor I know it's hard to believe now, Lucy, sitting here in this comfortable suburban drawing-room — or do you call it a lounge, Kev?

Kevin (*frowning*) No.

Victor In this comfortable suburban drawing-room with a simulated log effect burning in the grate ... It seems light years away.

Lucy Were you out there long?

Victor I stayed on after I recovered. I felt I had to give something back. Worked amongst the lepers for some years.

Lucy Lepers?

Another muted groan from Kevin

Victor But circumstances forced me to leave.

Lucy Not leprosy as well?

Victor No. The nun and I had become rather too close to each other. She had begun to leave off her rosary, which was rather worrying. I thought it was time to move on.

Valerie (*suddenly*) I think I'd better get dinner.

Victor Ah. I promised my doctors I'd take a short stroll before dinner. Perhaps just round the rose garden ... (*He rises with difficulty*) Lucy, could I borrow your shoulder?

Lucy Certainly ...

Lucy assists Victor through the conservatory into the garden

Kevin (*groaning*) Oh, no!

Valerie What's the matter?

Kevin My collar's started to prickle. Did you hear all that? She didn't believe a word of it.

Valerie He can be very persuasive. He once persuaded his young cousins they were fairies and they flew straight out of the bedroom window.

Kevin She was laughing at him.

Valerie Well, she hasn't had much to laugh about these last few years.

Kevin Gored by a rhino! And what about the leper colony?

Valerie Well, you introduced the jungle. The trouble is he gets carried away.

Kevin (*bitterly*) I wish he would — on a litter — rambling and incoherent. And did you hear that snide remark about our simulated log effect?

Valerie Kevin, he's staying — at least until he's better.

Kevin I suppose he does need that stick?

Valerie Of course he does. Why do you say that?

Kevin He seems to be flourishing it a great deal — almost as if he's just got it. Probably took it from a cripple.

Valerie crosses and looks out into the garden

Valerie You can see he's not well.

Kevin joins her

Kevin What about that limp? First it's one leg then the other — he doesn't seem to be able to make up his mind.

Valerie That's your imagination. (*Pause*) They look good together, don't they?

Kevin What?

Valerie They make an attractive couple.

Kevin Don't start that.

Valerie What?

Kevin Matchmaking.

Valerie I'm not matchmaking.

Kevin It's out of the question.

Valerie Of course it is. (*Pause*) But they would be good for each other. He needs someone like Lucy. And she's been very lonely since John died.

Kevin No one's that lonely! She's your friend. Why pick on her?

Valerie I'm not picking on her.

Kevin Have you forgotten how many times he's been engaged? He had that ring on a string. It's always been his ambition to marry money.

Valerie He never found the right woman.

Kevin He never found the right bank account. John Myers was a decent, honest man. A pillar of the church and a member of the Rotary. He didn't prepare Lucy for someone like Victor.

Valerie He'd have to tell her the truth ...

Kevin Then we're safe on both counts. He couldn't tell the truth and she couldn't face it.

Valerie Sh!

Victor and Lucy enter from the garden

Victor (*as he enters*) ... and there by the bed sat my faithful mongoose, covered in blood, the snake dead at his feet, looking up at me as if to say, “sleep on, gentle master”. And I swear, if a mongoose could smile, he was smiling ...

Lucy He must have been very fond of you.

Victor He was.

Valerie (*panicking*) I must get dinner.

Lucy Let me help you, Val. (*She smiles*) After all, we have another place to set ...

Lucy and Valerie exit

Victor limps back to the desk and sits. He catches Kevin's suspicious gaze

Victor Kevin, I want to ask you something as a friend ...

Kevin I haven't got it.

Victor Got what?

Kevin Money. I'm still cleaned out from last time.

Victor This isn't about money, Kevin.

Kevin It isn't?

Victor There are other things. I've just experienced a moment of blinding clarity. A moment the Japanese have a word for. A moment when you see your future life for the next seven years — all in a second.

Kevin Seven years?

Victor Yes.

Kevin (*anxiously*) I wasn't in it, was I?

Victor Not you. Lucy.

Kevin What!

Victor I'm in love.

Kevin You can't be.

Victor It only takes a second, Kev. I never thought it would happen again.

Kevin You mean after the nun?

Victor Blind fate has struck again.

Kevin Not so blind. It's the money, isn't it?

Victor (*innocently*) Is there money?

Kevin She's a wealthy woman. I'm sure one walk round the rose bed would have established that.

Victor Then she's not a widow struggling on a fixed income and facing an uncertain future?

Kevin No!

Victor That makes it more important that I talk to you.

Kevin Me?

Victor I wondered if you could see any snags.

Kevin I can see a few. You've been in prison — you're out of work — you haven't any money — you've told her a pack of lies — and you've got a bad leg.

Victor Yes, but apart from that.

Kevin There's no apart from that!

Victor What about the good points?

Kevin There aren't any.

Victor (*slyly*) There's one as far as you're concerned ...

Kevin What's that?

Victor Doesn't she live in Surrey?

Kevin Yes. Big house, must be worth a million.

Victor Well, Surrey's a long way from here ...

Kevin Oh no! If you think I'm going to stand by and let this happen. I may be an estate agent but I have principles. I believe in a full and frank disclosure. I have never recommended a run-down property without pointing out the drawbacks — the dry rot — the rising damp — the smell of the drains...

Victor The smell of the drains? Is that how you see me?

Kevin Yes.

Victor Well, let me point out one or two other good points. I do have money. It's a numbered account in a Swiss bank. Unfortunately, there's a problem.

Kevin You can't remember the number.

Victor I'm tied to the Swiss franc at the moment.

Kevin What a pity.

Victor And I do have work — my writing. When the book takes off —

Kevin What book?

Victor takes a manuscript from the desk. Kevin stares in surprise

Victor I finished it in prison. I'm very excited about it. I read some of it to Val before you came home. She was speechless.

Kevin Then we've nothing to worry about. We just wait until you've sold the film rights.

Victor You don't believe me? It's a potential bestseller. Listen. (*He opens the manuscript. Reading*) "Mark Tempest confronted Amanda Merrydew in the vestry. There was no pity in his thin smile. He seized

her brutally by the wrist. 'I must arrange these flowers'. But the words were stifled on her lips by a fierce kiss. Outside she could hear her husband leading the choir in Evensong. The organ rose in a crescendo of sound and she was aware of the roses being crushed against her bare skin and Mark's sardonic sneer. Her head began to swim and she caught the tang of his aftershave as they slid beneath the vestry table ..."

Silence

Kevin Vestry table?

Victor Yes.

Kevin Is it all like that?

Victor It gets better.

He hands the manuscript to Kevin

Read anywhere you like. You're instantly gripped.

Kevin (*reading*) "Mark took her in his arms." (*He breaks off*) He's doing it again! (*Reading*) "She felt her face pressed against his rough tweed jacket. The sun cascaded into a thousand stars and the petals of the geraniums floated down into her startled eyes ..." (*He breaks off*) Geraniums?

Victor She was potting geraniums whilst her husband was mowing the lawns.

Kevin Her husband? The vicar?

Victor Yes.

Kevin The vicar's out there mowing the lawns whilst they're in the greenhouse — and he's pressing her face against his rough tweed jacket?

Victor Right.

Kevin Is it a comedy?

Victor No.

Kevin But wouldn't he see them?

Victor That's my point. Mark Tempest would dare anything for the woman he loves.

Kevin Are you sure it's not a comedy?

Victor When the vicar discovers Amanda's infidelity and hangs himself from his own bell rope — certainly not. (*Pause*) Well, what do you think?

Kevin It's absolute rubbish.

Victor You don't like it?

Kevin No.

Victor I must say that's been the general reaction.

Kevin There's no reality. No one would act like Mark Tempest. He's not real.

Victor Yes, he is.

Kevin Well, I've never met any one like him.

Victor You're standing in front of him.

Kevin You? Well, you're not pressing Lucy against your rough tweed jacket — not while I'm mowing the lawn. And you'll have a long wait before that book's published. And in the meantime you're not living at my expense. Your trouble, Victor, is that you don't live in the real world. You're not Mark Tempest — and she's not Amanda Merrydew. You should try a little honesty for a change — especially with Lucy.

Victor (*doubtfully*) You mean tell her the truth?

Kevin Well, don't look like that — some people do it all the time.

Victor (*hesitating*) Not even a few white lies?

Kevin Certainly not.

Victor Perhaps you're right. The truth? It's an old trick but it just might work. Make a full and frank disclosure like the honest estate agent. That gives me an idea. I could work for you.

Kevin What!

Victor Just until my currency problems are sorted out. I can sell, you know that.

Kevin (*hastily*) That's not necessary, Victor. Houses are selling themselves these days.

Victor Then I could do your paperwork — answer the phone — all the menial jobs. I'm not proud. I could make life easier for you...

Kevin That won't be necessary.

The phone rings on the desk. Victor snatches it up

Victor I've got it, Kev. (*Into the phone*) Hello? Yes. Can I take a message? ... You've decided on Greenacres. An excellent choice. ... Yes. I know it well. It's the house next to the crematorium ... yes. (*Pause*) Hello? Hello? That's strange — they've rung off ...

Kevin gives a long, low groan

CURTAIN

SCENE 2

The same. Three weeks later. Midday

As the CURTAIN rises, Kevin enters, throwing down his coat and looking vengeful. He sees the walking stick leaning by the desk. He crosses and snatches it up

Kevin Ha! Got him. Val!

Valerie enters looking puzzled

Valerie What's the matter?

Kevin He forgot his stick. I knew there was nothing wrong with him.

Valerie He certainly seems to have improved.

Kevin Improved! He's been in my sock drawer too often for a man who can barely walk.

Valerie You don't begrudge him your socks, surely?

Kevin He comes into our bedroom without knocking. We could be doing anything.

Valerie (*tartly*) Not in the week, Kevin.

Kevin This house isn't big enough for both of us, Val.

Valerie Well, it's not as if he's here all the time. He's usually out with Lucy.

Kevin Yes, he's spending a fortune on her. How does he do it?

Valerie He uses credit cards. He hops from one to another.

Kevin He'll hop once too often. There'll be a reckoning — then what's going to happen?

Valerie I don't know.

Kevin There'll be a caper.

Valerie He doesn't do things like that.

Kevin Doesn't he? What about the map of Sierra Leone and a fortune in uncut diamonds that looked strangely like bath crystals? Remember that? And what about the dating agency? He never had enough clients so he put everyone on the books, including your mother — and me! When I pointed out I was engaged to you he said, "What's wrong with a night out"! And what about your poor mother? She arrived on her date just in time for his funeral — she was chased down the street by the widow. And when she came back, justifiably distressed, all he could say was, "Did they say anything about a subscription?"

Valerie You're getting agitated again, Kevin. You know you shouldn't talk about Victor on an empty stomach — it gives you indigestion. I'll cut you some sandwiches. Why don't you go into the conservatory and transplant some seedlings?

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