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The Kingfisher

A Comedy in Two Acts

by William Douglas Home

A Samuel French Acting Edition



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OPENING NIGHT, DECEMBER 6, 1978

BILTMORE THEATRE

Elliot Martin
with
Hinks Shimberg
in association with John Gale
presents

Rex Harrison
Claudette Colbert
George Rose

in

The Kingfisher

a new comedy by
William Douglas Home

Setting Designed by
Alan Tagg

Costumes Designed by
Jane Greenwood

Lighting Designed by
Thomas Skelton

Directed by
Lindsay Anderson

The Producers and Theatre Management are members of
The League of New York Theatres and Producers, Inc.

CAST

(*in order of appearance*)

HAWKINS ..... *George Rose*

CECIL ..... *Rex Harrison*

EVELYN ..... *Claudette Colbert*

The scene is set throughout in Cecil's garden.

The Kingfisher

ACT ONE

SCENE 1

A garden, with a stream tinkling just beyond it, Off Stage. A great beech tree. On the opposite side is a little garden house or shed, in which SIR CECIL WARBURTON *is typing as the Curtain rises.*

All that we see is the open window. HAWKINS, *his butler-valet is arranging tea on a garden table. As he goes into the house to get his last load of equipment, with an empty tray, he knocks on the garden house door.*

HAWKINS. Tea time, Sir Cecil.

CECIL. (*Off.*) Shut up. (HAWKINS *goes on in. A cuckoo calls. The typing goes on.* HAWKINS *comes back. The typing stops.* CECIL *comes out.*)

HAWKINS. How did you get on this afternoon?

CECIL. Not too well. (*He moves to his seat at the tree near the tea table.*) In fact, I'd only just got going when you interrupted.

HAWKINS. My apologies, Sir Cecil.

CECIL. Coleridge had a maid—you know, the poet, Samuel Taylor. And she barged in and said 'Lunch is served', and scuppered Kubla Khan. That's why it's so short.

HAWKINS. Mercifully so, in my view.

CECIL. You're a Philistine.

(HAWKINS *begins to arrange the rug for* CECIL's *legs.*)

CECIL. That's all right, Hawkins, don't fuss.

HAWKINS. Are you sure you'll be warm enough, Sir Cecil?

CECIL. Yes, man, warm as toast.

HAWKINS. You should have settled for tea in the house, Sir Cecil, at this time of year. The summer's not established yet.

CECIL. Rot. It's as warm as toast. There's going to be a heat wave. Said so on the radio at lunchtime. And they look like being right, for once. Remember to put out my summer vest and pants tomorrow.

HAWKINS. Cast no clout, Sir Cecil, till May—

CECIL. Don't be so damned cissy.

(*During all this,* HAWKINS *has been preparing the tea table, and at this point he heads back into the house to get some equipment.* CECIL *fills his pipe, suddenly looks up, drops his pipe, and fixes his gaze on the Off-Stage river, gets up, scattering his rug and taking his field glasses off the back of his chair, and goes over to the river bank and looks upstream.* HAWKINS *enters.*)

HAWKINS. Oh, Sir Cecil, really! I'd just got you settled in your rug.

CECIL. Don't shout, man. It's the kingfisher. He's settled on that post up at the corner. Lovely little creature! Want to have a look?

HAWKINS. (*Taking the glasses, and looking upstream.*) It's gone, Sir Cecil.

CECIL. I expect you frightened it away. Which way did it go?

HAWKINS. Further downstream.

CECIL. Ah, yes. Oh, well, p'raps it'll come back up if we don't chivvy it. (*He returns to his chair, hanging up the glasses again on the chair back.* HAWKINS *picks up the rug and re-arranges it.*) Hawkins.

HAWKINS. Sir Cecil?

CECIL. Have you ever felt the urge for company in your declining years?

HAWKINS. I have the pleasure of your company.

CECIL. No. Female company, you damned fool.

HAWKINS. What's the difference, at our age, Sir Cecil?

CECIL. Speak for yourself!

HAWKINS. Very good, Sir Cecil—

CECIL. Anyway, you never liked them, did you?

HAWKINS. I was fond of dalliance as a young man, Sir Cecil.

CECIL. You're romancing, Hawkins, you're believing things that never happened. (HAWKINS' *brow furrows uncertainly.*)

HAWKINS. It's not easy to distinguish between fact and fiction any more.

CECIL. Why try?

HAWKINS. Yes, why indeed, Sir Cecil.

CECIL. So you think I'm in my dotage, do you?

HAWKINS. Not at all, Sir Cecil. All I'm saying is that to a non-medical eye like my own, it would appear that the first flush of youth has passed you by.

CECIL. But not the second. (HAWKINS *goes on laying the table.*) Did you hear that, Hawkins? Not the second.

HAWKINS. Yes, Sir Cecil.

CECIL. And I'm not referring to my second childhood. I'm referring to my second spring—or is it summer?

HAWKINS. Indian, it could be—

CECIL. Well, it isn't. Just imagine what a summer's like in India. Flies everywhere, and steaming sacred cows with flapping ears, and tigers licking cart tracks of caked mud until their tongues bleed. No, it's spring.

HAWKINS. And when did this condition evidence itself, Sir Cecil, if I might ask?

CECIL. Breakfast time on Monday morning. When I read The Times obituary and saw Townsend, Reginald. If I'd been a bird, I would have started singing. As it was, I whistled in my bath.

HAWKINS. I heard you. But I put it down to general well-being.

CECIL. Well, it wasn't. It was Reggie Townsend popping off. He married Evelyn.

HAWKINS. Evelyn.

CECIL. Evelyn Rivers. Just before your time. The loveliest girl that you ever saw. I kissed her underneath this very beech tree once. Well, more than once. (HAWKINS *goes on arranging the crockery.*) She loved me, Hawkins.

HAWKINS. Naturally, Sir Cecil.

CECIL. But I didn't love her. Can you beat it? Everything the doctor ordered in one lovely girl, with blue eyes and corn-coloured hair under a beech tree. And I put her back.

HAWKINS. A not unknown experience, Sir Cecil.

CECIL. Evelyn sparkled, Hawkins, that's the word I'm looking for. She sparkled like those things that children hold at Christmas. And she made me laugh. I don't remember laughing since.

HAWKINS. Come, come, Sir Cecil.

CECIL. And I put her back! And Reggie hooked her the next day, and landed her. That's when I grew up, Hawkins. Fifty years ago, the morning that I read the paper and saw Reggie Townsend was engaged to Evelyn Rivers. That's what changed my life. Or rather, brought it to a close.

HAWKINS. You've lived life to the full.

CECIL. I haven't, Hawkins. All I've done is stick it between covers. I've not lived, not in the fullest sense. Not yet. Not in the way I should have. But I've got the opportunity at last. That's why I've fixed tea out here, underneath this beech tree.

HAWKINS. So it's Mrs. Townsend coming?

CECIL. No, it isn't, Hawkins. Lady Townsend's coming, on her way back from the funeral. They knighted him for some damned crookery or other in between the wars. As luck would have it, he conked out in Polzeath. He was playing golf. It damn well serves him right, if you ask me, at his age. Showing off, I call it. Anyway, when I wired my condolences, she wired back saying she'd be passing on her way home, and could she stop in for tea. So, now, you're in the picture and you're evidently not mad on it?

HAWKINS. Well, Sir Cecil, with Sir Reginald so recently interred.

CECIL. What's his interment got to do with me?

HAWKINS. It seems a trifle premature, Sir Cecil.

CECIL. Premature? It's fifty years too late!

HAWKINS. Nonetheless, to come straight from the graveyard to tea with an old admirer seems a shade too like Renaissance Italy for my taste.

CECIL. Nonsense, Hawkins. It's the perfect timing. I believe in striking when the iron's hot. And I can't think of any time when it'll be hotter than this afternoon. And she's bound to be emotional—well, isn't she?

HAWKINS. The odds are certainly in favour of it, yes.

CECIL. Well, what could be a better moment? Catch her on the jump and hook her while a man's voice still means something to her.

HAWKINS. Marry her, you mean, Sir Cecil?

CECIL. Why not—if she'll have me? You don't like the idea, do you?

HAWKINS. I'm concerned about your happiness, Sir Cecil.

CECIL. Good—hang onto that. (*A bell rings in the hall.*) Wish me luck, Hawkins.

HAWKINS. Good luck, sir.

CECIL. Thanks. Now then, run along and show her

where I am. Then bring the tea and make yourself scarce.

HAWKINS. Yes, Sir Cecil. (HAWKINS *starts to go.*)

CECIL. Oh, and Hawkins—if she's got a chauffeur with her, fill him up with scones, then cut him through the pack until she wants to push off.

HAWKINS. Very good, Sir Cecil.

CECIL. (*Calling after him.*) And don't come and clear away the tea until I ring. (HAWKINS *goes. We hear the cuckoo again.*) Shut up. (EVELYN *comes through from the house.*)

EVELYN. Cecil.

CECIL. Evelyn. Everything go off alright?

EVELYN. Yes, thank you. What do you mean, Cecil? Wouldn't it have been surprising if it hadn't! Actually, someone did tell me once that they'd been to a country funeral where the bell ringers got tight and thought it was the harvest festival and the bells kept peeling all through the service.

CECIL. You needn't make jokes like that, Evelyn. Let yourself go. Have a good cry. (*He moves away—tactfully—then starts eyeing her.*)

EVELYN. I'm alright, Cecil.

CECIL. You've still got your figure.

EVELYN. Thank you, Cecil.

CECIL. Evelyn, look at me. (*She does.*) You've changed.

EVELYN. So have you.

CECIL. You've lost something.

EVELYN. That's right. I've lost Reggie, Cecil.

CECIL. No, I don't mean that. You're not the girl I held in my arms here in 1927.

EVELYN. Here?

CECIL. Yes. Underneath this beech tree. It's the same one, Evelyn.

EVELYN. So it is, and there's the stream.

CECIL. As you say, there's the stream.

EVELYN. How too extraordinary.

CECIL. It isn't really. I bought up the land when my first book was a success, and built the house.

EVELYN. Why did you choose here?

CECIL. Why not? It's a very nice place.

EVELYN. True enough. And so, I'm not the girl that I was fifty years ago. Is that surprising?

CECIL. I suppose not. No.

EVELYN. And you're not the man who held me, if it comes to that.

CECIL. It always does, they say.

EVELYN. In what way do you find me different?

CECIL. You're tougher.

EVELYN. So's the beech tree, I imagine. So are you, I shouldn't wonder.

CECIL. On the contrary. (HAWKINS *comes in with the tea pot and the hot water.*) Ah, Hawkins. This is Lady Townsend.

HAWKINS. We've already met, Sir Cecil.

CECIL. I know. But this is the formal introduction.

EVELYN. I'm so glad to meet you, Hawkins.

HAWKINS. (*Bows only.*) How d'ye do, my lady.

CECIL. Lady Townsend says that everything went off well, Hawkins.

HAWKINS. So the chauffeur's just been telling me.

CECIL. You've got a chauffeur with you, Evelyn?

EVELYN. Yes. I hope it isn't inconvenient.

CECIL. Not at all, we planned it that way. Hawkins has tea ready for him.

EVELYN. Oh, how very thoughtful of you, Hawkins.

HAWKINS. Not at all, my lady. It's a pleasure.

CECIL. Well, nip off and give it to him, and stop chattering. (HAWKINS *goes.*)

EVELYN. Shall I pour?

CECIL. Why not?

EVELYN. Milk?

CECIL. Yes, please.

EVELYN. Sugar?

CECIL. No, thanks.

EVELYN. Don't tell me you're slimming, Cecil.

CECIL. I'm not slimming. I just don't like sugar.

EVELYN. Reggie loved it.

CECIL. So I should imagine.

EVELYN. What does that mean?

CECIL. Well, he liked the good things of life, obviously. What hole did it happen on?

EVELYN. The seventeenth.

CECIL. Oh, nearly made it. Was he doing a good round?

EVELYN. Twelve over. Not bad, for him. And his tee shot was pin high. It's quite a short hole.

CECIL. Were you playing with him?

EVELYN. No, no. I was playing bridge back in the Clubhouse with the other wives. I'd just gone six No Trumps when the Pro rushed in.

CECIL. Did you make it?

EVELYN. Cecil, you've not changed at all. I'm glad it happened at St. Enedoc because he used to play there as a boy.

CECIL. Did you love Reggie?

EVELYN. What a question!

CECIL. Never mind the question. What's the answer?

EVELYN. Have a scone. You know the answer quite well. Butter?

CECIL. Thank you.

EVELYN. Jam?

CECIL. No, thank you. Don't keep asking silly questions.

EVELYN. You began it.

CECIL. Fifty years with someone that you didn't love. You've weathered it well, Evelyn.

EVELYN. Thank you.

CECIL. Better than the same without someone that you did.

EVELYN. Sorry, I don't follow.

CECIL. Fifty years with someone that one didn't love, like you with Reggie, judging from your general appearance, may be less wearing than fifty years without someone one does love—like me without you.

EVELYN. You're telling me you loved me, Cecil?

CECIL. Yes.

EVELYN. You had a funny way of showing it.

CECIL. Not funny—natural.

EVELYN. For animals, I daresay, but not human beings.

CECIL. Both.

EVELYN. Not if you wanted marriage. You lacked all restraint. You frightened me.

CECIL. I see that, now.

EVELYN. That's why I ran back to the Suttons.

CECIL. I know, and I'm sorry. Jim's still living there, you know—at Sutton Place.

EVELYN. I know—he wired when Reggie died.

CECIL. Oh, did he? Good for Jim.

EVELYN. When did you realise you loved me, Cecil?

CECIL. Following you back to the Suttons.

EVELYN. But you never said so.

CECIL. No, I never got the chance. We played that awful game all evening. Then you went to bed. Then, the next morning—

EVELYN. I'd gone to London.

CECIL. You'd gone to Reggie.

EVELYN. Yes. We got engaged that evening.

CECIL..On the rebound?

EVELYN. Cake?

CECIL. Please. Answer, Evelyn.

EVELYN. I have answered.

CECIL. In a thoroughly facetious manner. Was it on the rebound?

EVELYN. Does it matter—now?

CECIL. To me, yes—very much.

EVELYN. Why?

CECIL. Because all my life's been spent on the assumption that it was. That's why I never married. That's why I played fast and loose with women—why I'm where I am now.

EVELYN. Sitting pretty.

CECIL. Sitting lonely—standing by for death, without the least experience of life.

EVELYN. You, Cecil—don't be silly! You—without experience of life! You're the best selling, the most famous author in the British Isles—and you say, without experience of life—

CECIL. Of living, then.

EVELYN. Ah, that's a different thing.

CECIL. Wouldn't Reggie let you see me?

EVELYN. No, I promised.

CECIL. Or write to me?

EVELYN. No, I promised that, too.

CECIL. That explains it. I wrote every day for three years.

EVELYN. Don't I know it.

CECIL. And did Reggie?

EVELYN. Yes. He used to burn them. Wait until he had enough to make a good-sized bonfire in the garden —and then burn them.

CECIL. All unopened?

EVELYN. All except one.

CECIL. And who opened that one?

EVELYN. I did.

CECIL. What did it say?

EVELYN. That you wanted me to run away with you.

CECIL. They all said that.

EVELYN. I think this must have been the first one.

CECIL. Why?

EVELYN. Because it gave the time and place and date.

CECIL. Victoria—the boat train platform—9:15 a.m. on May 10th.

EVELYN. That's right.

CECIL. It was the first one.

EVELYN. Were you there?

CECIL. Yes. I was. Where were you?

EVELYN. In Ullapool.

CECIL. Where's that?

EVELYN. In Scotland. We were fishing. At least Reggie was. And I was walking through the heather, thinking.

CECIL. Of what?

EVELYN. You. How long did you wait?

CECIL. Till the train went.

EVELYN. Then what did you do?

CECIL. I got a refund on the tickets.

EVELYN. More tea?

CECIL. No, thanks. Then you started breeding.

EVELYN. Yes.

CECIL. How many did you notch up?

EVELYN. Two. To make sure of security of tenure. And to stop you tempting me away from Reggie.

CECIL. Did he ever talk about me?

EVELYN. Not if he could help it. Only when your first book came out.

CECIL. What did he say then?

EVELYN. He said that it confirmed his worst opinions of you.

CECIL. Literally speaking?

EVELYN. No, no. He conceded that the style was quite good. But he didn't like the content.

CECIL. I don't blame him.

EVELYN. He assumed the bore that she rebounded onto in the second chapter was himself.

CECIL. He was quite right.

EVELYN. And that the girl was me.

CECIL. Right, too.

EVELYN. And that the young man who seduced her was yourself.

CECIL. With licence.

EVELYN. I should hope so. Underneath a beech tree, near a stream, of all the cheek. Just think of the discomfort! Beech mast, sticks and baby thistles.

CECIL. Don't forget they had a rug.

EVELYN. We didn't.

CECIL. What a lot we missed!

EVELYN. You're just a dirty old man! I've heard the expression often, but I've never seen it in the flesh before.

CECIL. I'm just a dreamer, Evelyn.

EVELYN. Nonsense.

CECIL. Dreaming of what might have been, if I'd played my cards right.

EVELYN. If you'd played them right, you would have married me.

CECIL. That's what I wanted.

EVELYN. Nonsense. What you wanted was a good affair. The only thing I'd guess that ever meant a thing to you as far as women are concerned. And you didn't want marriage, so please don't pretend you did.

CECIL. I did. And I'll prove it to you.

EVELYN. How?

CECIL. By asking you to marry me now.

EVELYN. That proves nothing.

CECIL. It proves everything.

EVELYN. It doesn't. It's the only thing you can ask now.

CECIL. Don't you believe it.

EVELYN. Don't be silly, Cecil. Be your age. It's out of reach, that aspect of the matter. Gone beyond recall. So we're down to second best. And I'm not playing.

CECIL. Second best?

EVELYN. Yes. What's the use of asking me to marry you now? It's like giving somebody an empty boiled-egg shell for breakfast, it's a favorite joke with children—But not very popular with grown-ups.

CECIL. I thought that you loved me.

EVELYN. So I did. But not enough to put your slippers out, and knit your pullovers. That isn't what I dreamed about for fifty years.

CECIL. You can't have really loved me, then.

EVELYN. I did. I loved you day in, day out, till it nearly drove me mad.

CECIL. I loved you in the same way.

EVELYN. Well, you should have shown more self-control.

CECIL. Please don't rebuke me, Evelyn. I can't bear it.

EVELYN. I think I'd better go.

CECIL. No, don't go, Evelyn. Please don't go. Stay here the night—a few days. Stay and see if you could bear to stay here always. You could have a free hand in the garden—and the house. You could refurnish it, according to your taste—re-do it altogether. I'm well off. Extremely well off. I'd give you a free hand.

EVELYN. No, thank you, Cecil. It's too late. I'm sorry but it's fifty years too late. The young man who was lying underneath this beech tree fifty years ago, was quite a marriageable proposition. Well, comparatively speaking. You were arrogant, of course, and cynical and irresponsible. But you were honest, at least. Flora was the trouble, wasn't she?

CECIL. That was before I met you.

EVELYN. She was most attractive wasn't she? I'm

surprised she didn't come and see you when her husband died.

CECIL. She did.

EVELYN. Did you ask her to marry you?

CECIL. Yes.

EVELYN. And you say you've always loved me!

CECIL. I thought Reggie was immortal.

EVELYN. What was her excuse?

CECIL. The same as yours. That it was fifty years too late.

EVELYN. And what about the Paris woman?

CECIL. So you know about her?

EVELYN. It was in the papers.

CECIL. So it was.

EVELYN. She shot herself.

CECIL. She missed.

EVELYN. What was her name?

CECIL. You tell me.

EVELYN. Yvette—Yvette something.

CECIL. That's right.

EVELYN. A bit of luck for you, that—wasn't it?

CECIL. You mean that she missed me as well?

EVELYN. No. That she didn't kill herself. You would have been in trouble.

CECIL. Not at all. I thought so at the time, I must admit. I panicked for a moment, but if women go round shooting themselves just because they fall in love, it's really up to them—one can't be held responsible.

EVELYN. Have you seen Yvette since then?

CECIL. Yes. She came here seven years ago. Her husband had just died.

EVELYN. You seem to do a thriving line in widows. Did she turn you down, too?

CECIL. Yes, indeed she did.

EVELYN. The same excuse?

CECIL. Precisely.

EVELYN. I'm not sorry. Yvette rather shocked me, if you must know. Not herself, I mean, the melodrama.

CECIL. And the bullet only missed me by a bee's wing. Hawkins told me—he worked out the angles. You're not armed, are you? Except with integrity!

EVELYN. You're still as irresponsible as ever, Cecil. You're still prepared to pay a compliment, and carry on outrageously at the same time.

CECIL. I haven't been outrageous.

EVELYN. No! You sit there asking me to marry you, and then, without a blush, you tell me that you've done the same thing to two other women when their husbands died.

CECIL. What's that but honesty?

EVELYN. For one thing, it's bad manners.

CECIL. Not at all. You must remember that I'm getting on. I have to take my chances when they come. For all I know, old Reggie might have gone on playing golf till Kingdom come. Well, he did, didn't he? So, you can't blame me, can you?

EVELYN. I'm not blaming you. I'm merely telling you it isn't any use.

CECIL. Because it's fifty years too late?

EVELYN. Yes.

CECIL. Not because you don't still love me.

EVELYN. I must go.

CECIL. Go? Why the devil did you come here then?

EVELYN. (*Gets up.*) To have a cup of tea. How do we get hold of the chauffeur?

CECIL. I'll ring for Hawkins. (*He rings a hut bell.*) It was sex in fact, on your side. And once that was over, well, it wouldn't have worked anyway.

EVELYN. What makes you think so?

CECIL. Well, your present attitude. If you'd really loved me, then you would have married me.

EVELYN. You never asked me.

CECIL. Yes, I did. Just now.

EVELYN. Oh, Cecil—can't you understand—don't go on so. (HAWKINS *enters.*)

HAWKINS. You rang, Sir Cecil?

CECIL. Yes. Has Lady Townsend's chauffeur had his tea?

HAWKINS. He's waiting by the car, my lady.

EVELYN. Thanks, Hawkins. Well, goodbye, Cecil.

CECIL. Goodbye, Evelyn.

EVELYN. Don't get up. And, thank you for the tea.

CECIL. Thank Hawkins, not me. He prepared it.

EVELYN. Thank you, Hawkins.

HAWKINS. Not at all, my lady. It's been a great pleasure.

CECIL. Show her to the car, now, Hawkins.

HAWKINS. Yes, Sir Cecil. Follow me, my lady, please. (*He goes.*)

CECIL. Perhaps we'll meet at Wimbledon, or somewhere, Evelyn.

EVELYN. Perhaps.

CECIL. Anyway, I'll write to you. The chances are they might get read, now.

EVELYN. They might, Cecil.

(*She goes, and* CECIL *sits listening to the sounds of departure.* HAWKINS *returns.*)

HAWKINS. Time you went in now, Sir Cecil. Nearly News time.

CECIL. I'm alright, don't fuss. She turned me down, flat.

HAWKINS. So I should imagine, sir.

CECIL. I'm not much of a proposition these days, am I, Hawkins?

HAWKINS. Neither of us are at our age.

CECIL. We are not discussing you that I'm aware of.

HAWKINS. Naturally not, Sir Cecil. (*He moves to-*

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