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Caramba's Revenge

A comedy

William Norfolk

Samuel French — London
New York - Toronto - Hollywood



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ISBN 978 0 573 01771 1

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CHARACTERS

Lottie, late 60s

Doris, late 60s

Marge, late 60s

Ronnie (short for Veronica), 20

Augustus Grubb, late 30s

Rose, 70s

Grace, 70s

The action of the play takes place in the living-room of a terraced house

Time: the present

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(See also page ii)

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SYNOPSIS OF SCENES

ACT I

SCENE 1	A Saturday in Autumn. Noon
SCENE 2	One hour later
SCENE 3	The following Thursday. Morning
SCENE 4	The following evening. 7.30 pm

ACT II

SCENE 1	Immediately following
SCENE 2	The next morning. 10.45 am
SCENE 3	Half-an-hour later
SCENE 4	One week later. Evening

**Other plays by William Norfolk
published by Samuel French Ltd**

The Charlatan

Hunting Pink

The Lights Are Warm and Coloured

Old Quebec

ACT I

SCENE 1

A Saturday in autumn. Noon

The scene is a much-lived-in, much cluttered living-room of a terraced house. In the back wall is a window overlooking a garden, or garden wall. There is also a doorway here to the kitchen, part of which is seen when the door is open. An exit leads from the kitchen to the garden. A door R leads to the stairs—visible when the door is open—and to the unseen front door. The furniture is utilitarian and well-worn, and includes a table, four chairs, a sideboard and a TV

The three old ladies who occupy the house, all of them approaching seventy—two of whom are present when the curtain rises—have the same hairstyle: cut straight to just below the ears, with a fringe descending almost to the eyebrows. Lottie's is a natural salt-and-pepper, whilst that of Marge is subtly mauve. Doris's is of a more positive colour: reddish auburn. Their clothes, which are clean and neat, cover a fashion period spanning forty years or so

Doris stands by the table, unloading her shopping trolley, while Lottie sits reading from an exercise book, occasionally correcting, or making notes

Lottie I finished chapter seven of my novel this morning.

Doris Nice. Pilchards have gone up fourpence.

Lottie Fourpence, old money?

Doris Ninepence ha'penny, old money.

Lottie Would you like me to read it to you?

Doris Ten per cent, give or take a fraction.

Lottie (*reading*) "Vanda Lane sat deep in thought, her shapely chin cupped in her delicate hands: her seductive silk-clad legs tucked demurely beneath her chair. She stood, smoothing her dress over her pale, alabaster thighs. 'Cast those luscious lamps over this, babe,' Tod Mallet ejaculated sardonically——"

Doris "Ejaculated"?

Lottie (*firmly*) Sardonically!

Doris The fish in these fish fingers is unspecified.

Lottie (*continuing to read*) "Vanda smiled, revealing a tantalising glimpse of perfectly matched teeth; and, tossing back her fiery golden locks, caught the last of the winter sun in them. Her bosom heaved with rampant emotion."

Pause

Why did Marge chuck you out of the kitchen?

Doris (*sighing*) She's experimenting again.

Lottie What is it this time?

Doris A pie, using three types of beans. She says they're cheap, and it'll be full of proteins, and things.

Lottie Farts, mainly. Let me help you with that. (*She crosses and helps unload the trolley*) You stopped for a port and lemon on the way back.

Doris I swear I——

Lottie You must spend a fortune on extra-strong mints.

Doris It's my——

Lottie If you're about to use the fallacious argument that you used your own money, you have no "own money". None of us have. That's what being part of a co-operative's all about. (*She picks up a small jar*) What's this?

Doris Caviare.

Lottie It says "lumpfish".

Doris The poor man's caviare. We've got to treat ourselves every now and then.

Lottie I hope this lemon doesn't indicate you're hoping to sneak a bottle of gin through the housekeeping accounts?

Doris It's to squeeze on the caviare. And if there's enough left over, it'll do as a beauty treatment for the hard skin on your elbows. Though, frankly, I think nothing short of paint stripper will shift that.

Lottie (*searching the bottom of the trolley*) What have you done with the gun?

Doris I didn't take it with me.

Lottie What if you'd been raped?

Doris I'd have asked him back for lunch.

Lottie And where's the receipt?

Doris I must have lost it.

Lottie Tut tut; no sense of accountability. (*She gets out a pocket calculator and tots up the items from the labels on them*) You'd lose your head if it wasn't screwed on, and what would you do then, without a mouth to pour all that booze into? The house is being watched.

Doris (*wearily*) Oh, Lottie: not again? That's the third time this——

Lottie A girl: about nineteen or twenty. Four pounds, twenty-seven. (*She holds out her hand for the change*)

Doris gives it to her. Lottie then proceeds to place it in a cash box, which she locks, and makes an entry in the accounts book

I saw her when I put the rubbish out. Sitting on the wall opposite. Casing the joint, obviously.

Doris Or waiting for a bus! (*She sighs*) I'll go and have a quick peep through the letter-box.

Lottie Is that advisable, dear? Last time you did that it took you a couple of days to fully straighten up.

Doris Very well: I'll go upstairs and look out of the window.

The kitchen door opens, and Marge emerges

Ah, Mrs Beeton's arrived. Nice to know the kitchen's no longer out of bounds.

Doris sweeps into the kitchen

We hear the sound of running water

Marge (*indicating the lumpfish*) What's this?

Lottie Lumpfish: the poor man's——

Marge I was questioning its presence: I'm perfectly aware what it is. It's the roe from an uncouth spiny-finned, leaden-blue fish, which clings tightly to objects by a sucking-disc on its belly.

Doris enters with a watering can

Doris I'll give the window-box a little drinkie while I'm at it.

Doris goes and is heard ascending the stairs

Marge While she's at what?

Lottie The window. She doesn't believe the house is being watched. How come you know all about lumpfish?

Marge "Fish Cookery for the Ambitious". Tolpuddle Evening Institute, Spring, nineteen seventy-nine. Did Doris pop into Oxfam?

Lottie I told her not to bother.

Marge But, Lottie, I need some new shoes!

Lottie Nonsense, Marge: you've a cupboard-full!

Marge They're dancing pumps, and at least thirty years old. They go back to the days when Roger and I were members of Iris Willis's Latin American Formation Team.

Lottie We're on the breadline, dear, and things are not going to improve. Not in this age of acquisition and greed. No-one would bat an eyelid were everyone over sixty-five to lie down, take a good swig of hemlock, and make a nice tidy end to things!

Marge Death didn't make a nice tidy end to things for poor Violet, did it?

Lottie Don't be morbid.

Marge Not even a Christian burial. I often wonder what they did with the body——

Lottie Just thank your lucky stars they weren't able to trace it to us!

Pause

Doris has been on the razzle, already. She's probably up there at this very minute, helping herself to another "little drinkie" along with her geraniums!

Marge Where does she get the money from?

Lottie Heaven knows! God knows I keep a very careful check on her! But, more puzzling still ... where does she hide the booze? I've taken her room apart——

Marge (*appalled*) You've searched her room?

Lottie Our constitution clearly states there shall be no locked doors.

Pause

Her drinking's becoming a problem.

Marge It's nothing to what it used to be.

Lottie It was different when she lived alone, and before Violet.

Pause

Haven't you noticed the frequency with which she nips up to the loo during the evenings? Loo, be damned! She pops up to her room for a quick swig, and comes down on a pink cloud of peppermint and euphoria. Excuse me a moment, while I jot that down... (*She gets her notebook and writes in it*) "Vanda Lane ... wafted down on a ... pink cloud..."

Marge There are times I envy that Vanda Lane.

Lottie (*reading as she writes*) "...cloud of peppermint and euphoria ... her delicate fingers ... entwined about a refreshing *crème de menthe frappé*..."

Marge She never drops a vanilla ice-cream down the front of a brand new skirt...

Lottie (*reading as she writes*) "...served in a glittering crystal goblet..."

Marge Or misses the last bus, or mislays her teeth. She's got it made, what with being accident free, and endowed with high firm breasts, and thighs like polished alabaster.

Lottie Doesn't it occur to you that Doris is putting us all at risk? At the moment, it's the odd one on the way back from the shops; the next thing, it'll be two, then three. How long before she's chewing the fat with some of her old cronies, and becoming ... expansive ... should the subject of Violet ever crop up?

Marge She's not that much of a fool!

Lottie In her cups, she's every kind of a fool! How long before the fuzz carts us all off to the nearest nick?

Doris enters

Well? Is the girl still there?

Doris (*nodding*) She's taking notes.

Lottie There! Trouble! I knew it!

Marge I wonder what she wants.

Doris Go and ask her.

Marge Why me?

Lottie Well, you did take judo lessons at the Tolpuddle.

Marge Karate, but I never completed the course. It was interfering with my flamenco lessons. You go, Lottie: you're the one who knows the right sort of stories to tell, if she's from the DSS. Would you say she looked like a policeperson?

Doris She's wearing jeans, and an anorak.

Lottie Well, if she is casing the joint she'd hardly want to look like the fuzz, were she acting as a "tail", would she?

Marge I don't know what we're worrying about. We covered all our tracks, didn't we?

Lottie Unless you left a clear footprint, and they've been able to trace a thirty year old dancing pump back to us.

The doorbell rings. A slight pause as they look at each other

Who's going to answer it?

Doris Don't look at me: I'm the shortest.

Lottie But by far the heaviest.

Doris Marge is the one with pugilistic ambitions.

Marge I couldn't even toss a wineglass over my shoulder this morning.

Lottie (*taking the revolver from the drawer*) Both of you go; I'll stay here and give you back-up.

Marge and Doris go into the hall

Lottie stands behind the door. The front door is opened, and a mumble of voices heard

The door is closed, and Doris enters, followed by Ronnie, a sturdy girl of twenty, then Marge. Ronnie has an Australian accent

Lottie takes up an American police stance, legs apart, revolver held before her in both hands

Freeze!

Ronnie (to Doris) Is that gun for real?

Doris A war souvenir. (She takes the gun from Lottie) This is Violet's granddaughter, Ronnie.

Lottie What are you doing out of Australia?

Ronnie Oh, we're allowed out now, you know; it's no longer a penal colony.

Lottie Why were you taking notes?

Ronnie (puzzled) Notes? (After a pause she laughs) I was writing a couple of postcards: to folks back home.

Marge She's come to see her granny.

Lottie Violet wouldn't like that at all.

Ronnie Mum didn't ask me to come; she doesn't give a damn whether Gran's alive or dead.

Lottie Violet'd hate to be called Granny.

Ronnie Why? We all have to grow old, don't we? It's the natural order of things. Where is she?

Slight pause

Marge (inspired) On holiday.

Ronnie Where?

Marge Where did she say, Lottie?

Lottie Doris remembers, don't you, dear?

Doris Er—we don't know exactly.

Ronnie That's a bit weird, isn't it?

Doris Not really. It's a ... a caravan holiday!

Ronnie At her age?

Marge Oh, she's still able to cock her leg high enough to get into the trailer.

Lottie Despite the natural order of things. Ronnie's an unusual name for a young girl, isn't it?

Ronnie I'm twenty, and it's short for Veronica.

Doris Oops! Must rush to the loo!

Doris exits

Ronnie When are you expecting Gran back?

Lottie (looking at her exercise book) How long are you here for?

Ronnie I go back on Wednesday.

Lottie Oh, what rotten luck. Isn't that rotten luck, Marge?

Marge Very rotten luck: she comes back on Thursday.

Lottie Why did you want to see her?

Ronnie I've always felt that anyone who hates Mum as much as she does can't be at all bad!

Lottie It's not so much hate, as the wish your mother had been born to someone else.

Ronnie Besides, I've always felt it unfair that other kids had two grans, but I never had one.

Marge It's time I got back to my cooking.

Marge goes into the kitchen and closes the door

Ronnie Did I say something?

Lottie Duty calls: she's our gastronomic genius. Give her a pound of herrings and a couple of crusty loaves, and she'll feed the entire borough. I'd offer you a cup of tea, had I the strength to overpower her, and take command of the kitchen.

Ronnie I had one just before I came.

Lottie Just as well. It would probably have been a re-cycled Earl Grey tea-bag. Marge got 'em cheap at a jumble sale, and they're absolutely disgusting!

Ronnie Then why don't you just throw them away?

Lottie Ah, but you see, by saving a few pennies on food, buying our clothes at jumble sales, cutting each other's hair, and not switching on electric fires until the temperature drops below freezing, we can have a week's holiday each year at Bexhill-on-Sea.

Ronnie Sounds great!

Lottie Off-season, half-board, at *Bella Vista*, just behind the bus station.

Ronnie Wonderful!

Lottie You can take my place any time. But the others seem to enjoy it. I gather you're none too fond of your mother?

Ronnie Hate her guts. It's mutual. Why has Gran——?

Lottie Violet.

Ronnie Why has Violet ignored Mum for all these years?

Lottie It was all to do with your father.

Ronnie My real father?

Lottie There can only be *one* father.

Ronnie Well, I've a stepfather, too, you know. Mum says my real dad died when I was three months old, trying to save a small boy from drowning. Why are you smiling? It's not true, is it? You don't have to lie to save my feelings, you know.

Pause

Lottie Your mother was the one whose father died when she was three months old. Not you. During the war.

Ronnie Killed in action?

Lottie It might be construed that way, I suppose. He fell off a ladder, hanging the holly in the canteen. Violet always said she'd have made a truly beautiful widow, but, being wartime, decent black was very hard to come by. She had to dye her wedding dress for the funeral.

Ronnie Didn't she marry again?

Lottie No, but she gave ... brief harbour ... to many ships that passed...

The kitchen door opens, and Marge pokes out her head

Marge Have you seen my pastry brush?

Lottie Last I saw of it, Doris had it.

Marge She'll have to go!

Marge slams the kitchen door shut

Ronnie What has Grandad's death got to do with my father?

Pause

Lottie Your mother, from all accounts, was an extremely ugly child——

Ronnie She's now an extremely ugly woman!

Lottie ——completely bypassing the beauty and charm of her mother.

Ronnie Was Violet so beautiful and charming?

Lottie Ravishing, according to Violet. Anyway, there was your mother, first, in her teens, then in her twenties, living the life of a geriatric nun, while Violet was living the life of Old Riley! And, as it became distressingly clear that your mother Gloria was not going to blossom into a swan, jealousy set in.

Ronnie I still don't see where my father comes in.

Lottie Stage left, child, at this very moment. He was an Australian named Bluey, who rode a monocycle in a travelling circus.

Ronnie Was it a big romance?

Lottie A brief encounter. He was old enough to be her father, which wasn't surprising, considering he was Violet's current innamorato.

Ronnie And he seduced her daughter?

Lottie According to Violet, your mother caught poor Bluey, quite literally, with his trousers down, answering the call of nature, and absolutely legless with the drink. Your mother, it seems, never one for missing an opportu-

nity, crept up on him and pounced. Bluey swore it was over so quickly, she might have been a passing shadow.

Marge emerges from the kitchen

Marge I'm off to class.

Lottie (*continuing her tale*) But for Gloria, it was a triumph! She'd usurped her mother's bed!

Marge Well, if one's a stickler for accuracy, it was up against the side wall of *The Knave of Hearts*. When you hear the pinger in the kitchen, will you take the pie out of the oven to cool? And, should you chance upon Doris trying to gain entry to the kitchen, shoot her dead!

Marge goes into the hall

Ronnie (*whispering*) What sort of class?

Lottie Swimming.

Ronnie At her age?

Lottie Will you please desist from referring to old age as if it were some dreadful disease picked up from a lavatory seat?

Marge enters

Marge One of my gloves is missing. Oh well, I'll just have to keep one hand in my pocket. Don't forget about the pie.

Lottie When the pinger——

Marge And don't forget about Doris: straight between the eyes!

Marge goes. The front door slams

Lottie Some day she'll have that door off its hinges.

Ronnie Did Bluey marry Mum?

Lottie Like some people offer a cup of tea, so he'd offer his hand in marriage.

Ronnie Bigamy?

Lottie On a truly heroic scale.

Pause

Ronnie So I'm a bastard?

Lottie A one-parent-something-or-other, to use the current euphemism. It used to be "born on the wrong side of the blanket". But it all amounts to the same thing: yes, child: you are a bastard.

Ronnie laughs

Oh, dear. I do hope that's not the prelude to a bout of hysterics.

Ronnie (*still laughing*) I love you, Lottie! I think it's great: the most marvellous thing that's ever happened to me. It makes me feel sort of ... special. Bluey sounds just the sort of a father I'd have invented for myself. Was he very handsome?

Lottie Like a Greek god, according to Violet. But then, of course, she *was* always prone to vast exaggeration.

Ronnie Are there no photographs of him?

Pause

Lottie Oh, I'm sure there must be one or two somewhere among her things...

Ronnie (*excitedly*) Do look! Please! It's like ... being born all over again!

Lottie Very well. I'll go up and see what I can find. If you like you can have a peek at my novel. It has a ... cheeky little presumption which I think you'll find amusing.

Lottie goes, and quickly ascends the stairs

Ronnie begins reading the book. A moment later much slower steps are heard descending the stairs

Doris enters. She has been drinking

Doris What's she doing in Violet's room?

Ronnie Looking for some old photographs.

Doris Did she tell you you could read that?

Ronnie Yes.

Doris Load of old crap, isn't it? But we all have our little foibles, don't we? Apart from seeing herself as England's answer to Raymond Chandler, Lottie's main one is a totally unfounded conviction that the co-operative is the perfect way of life.

Ronnie Well, I'd say it has a lot going for it, if people who need each other get toget—

Doris It's like a prison. Lottie could live in a vacuum. But not me: nor Marge. I mean, if Marge lived in a vacuum, where would she keep all her junk?

Ronnie What junk?

Doris Her foible's an enquiring mind. For years, now, she's had the entire staff at the Evening Institute run off its feet while she's journeyed into the mysteries of the contrabassoon, karate, trade-unionism, creative cookery, dried flower arrangement, archery, furniture restoration, and Spanish dancing: to name but a few. The relics of which reside in her room like the debris from some gargantuan orgy. Where is she, by the way?

Ronnie Swimming.

Doris Ah, yes. Flavour of the month. I suspect that means we'll have her prancing about the beach at Bexhill in a bikini next year.

Ronnie I thought Bexhill was a special treat?

Doris For who? We go because it doesn't cost much, and it doesn't cost much because you don't get much. But the other two seem to enjoy it... (*She shrugs*)

Slight pause

Ronnie And what's your foible?

Doris Drink.

Ronnie Just ... drink?

Doris Well, it has to be alcoholic, of course. Port and lemon, or rum and blackcurrant, for choice. But I'm not fussy. Anything, really. Not that the community chest allows money for that sort of thing. Oh, no!

Slight pause

(*In a conspiratorial whisper*) In fact, the co-op's made a sort of ... criminal of me.

Ronnie In what way?

Doris (*loud whisper*) I've had to devise a ... secret ... dishonest means of ... stashing away enough dosh ... for the odd tippie now and then...

Pause

Ronnie You just said "the other two" enjoy Bexhill...

Doris Did I? Well, I've had one or two little tots this morning...

Ronnie (*thoughtfully*) And a little while ago, when Lottie was talking about Violet, she said Violet *was* always prone to exaggeration. Past tense: as if she wasn't ... coming back.

Doris (*nervous laugh*) Oh, you know what writers are like. No respect for grammar. Make it up as they go along; "style" they call it. (*After a slight pause she deliberately changes the subject, her tone a little too bright*) What were you talking about while I was upstairs?

Ronnie My father.

Doris And Violet?

Ronnie And Violet.

Doris That must have been nice for you. I do hope she's having a nice time down in ... in ... wherever Marge said she'd gone to.

Ronnie Are you sure there isn't something else I should know? About Gran, that is?

Doris (*too brightly*) What a suspicious girl you are! What could there possibly be?

Ronnie (*doubtfully*) I don't know. (*After a slight pause she, too, is a little too bright*) Talking of drink's given me a thirst. (*She laughs*) It's thirsty work, I can tell you, suddenly being told you're a bastard!

Doris Eh?

Ronnie I'm a bastard: isn't it great?

Doris Are you sure you've not already been drinking?

Ronnie What d'you say? Why don't we go out and celebrate? Just the two of us. After all, it's not every day you get a visitor from down under! Let's go along the road for a couple of drinkies.

Doris (*tempted*) Well... I wouldn't be able to buy you one...

Ronnie Ronnie's treat.

Doris Just so long as that's understood.

Ronnie I've a couple of cards to post, anyway.

Doris Then what are we waiting for? But we'd better creep out softly. Lottie doesn't approve of my drinking...

Ronnie (*whispering*) We'll be as quiet as mice...

Doris giggles as they creep into the hall. A moment later the front door is quietly closed

Shortly, Lottie's footsteps descend the stairs, and she enters the room looking at a couple of black and white photographs

Lottie I'm sorry I took so long, but... (*She stops, surprised, at seeing the room empty*)

Lottie looks into the kitchen, then goes into the hall

(*Off; calling*) Doris! Doris!

Lottie is heard climbing the stairs and opening a door. A moment later she rushes down the stairs and into the living-room. She pauses, deciding what to do, then goes into the hall and a moment later the front door is heard to close

The pinger sounds in the kitchen. The stage darkens

SCENE 2

One hour later

Lottie sits working at her novel, pausing occasionally, her mind wandering. The front door opens and closes and she turns, expectantly

Marge enters

Lottie Oh, it's you.

Marge *(taking off her coat)* Sorry: maybe I should go back and drown? *(She sniffs the air)*

Lottie Yes, it's sad news, I'm afraid.

Marge The pie!

Marge throws down her coat and rushes into the kitchen

Lottie I'm truly sorry, dear; it's a sort of ... dark mahogany colour.

Marge enters crestfallen

Marge That pinger can be heard from Land's End to John O'Groats!

Lottie I wasn't here——

Marge Next time I'm passing Oxfam I'll see if I can get you an ear-trumpet!

Marge removes her hat, takes it into the hall together with her coat, and re-enters

Lottie Doris is missing.

Marge Since the place smells like a forest fire, who can blame her? She probably fled to safety, with her hair smouldering!

Lottie This is serious.

Marge I'll say it is. I spent all morning on that pie. I suppose you were far too engrossed in the exploits of the lovely Vanda, stuffing keys, half-eaten apples, and the like, down that desirable bosom of hers?

Lottie I was out, trying to trace Doris—she's on the loose!

Marge What sort of a state was she in?

Lottie I didn't see her go.

Marge I'll rephrase the question: what sort of a state were you in?

Lottie I went upstairs to fetch some photographs, and when I came down, they were both gone. Together, I feel sure.

Marge But ... why?

Lottie I'd have thought it obvious. The girl's taken her out to find out what she can about Violet.

Marge You think she didn't believe our caravan saga?

Lottie Who knows what doubts Doris has put into her head. I rushed out and looked in all of the awful spit-and-sawdust saloons she used to frequent. But there was no sign of them.

Pause

She's dangerous, if she spills the beans. They both are.

Marge Even if she does, what can we do?

Lottie As you said earlier, she'll have to go.

Marge Go? Where?

Lottie We'll decide when we know the damage.

Pause

Marge D'you think she will rat on us?

Lottie A few drinks and she'll sing like a canary. As Tod once remarked, in a moment of brute philosophy, "You show me a crooked broad who's a lush, and I'll show you one twenty-two-carat stool-pigeon!"

Pause

Marge Doris isn't exactly "a crooked broad," is she? Nor are we planning for her to end up at the bottom of some river, wearing a concrete overcoat. I mean, who'd help us carry a bath of cement, plus Doris, up the Putney towpath?

Lottie Be serious!

Marge I'm trying awfully hard, but the conversation appears to have got ... a little bit out of hand. What, precisely, have you in mind for her?

Lottie Well, it would certainly need to be ... something pretty drastic!

Marge Dare I ask ... how drastic?

The doorbell rings

Well, it's not Doris: she has a key.

Lottie (*on her way to the door*) "But," I ask myself, "is she able to locate the keyhole?"

Lottie goes into the hall and returns with Ronnie

Marge Where's Doris?

Ronnie Sleeping: on a bench by the cemetery.

Marge Oh, dear. (*To Lottie*) Shall I take Big Bella and pick her up?

Hungry for More?

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