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I CAPTURE THE CASTLE

A ROMANTIC COMEDY

By

DODIE SMITH

Adapted from her novel of the same name



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I CAPTURE THE CASTLE

Presented by MURRAY MACDONALD and JOHN STEVENS LTD in association with LINNIT & DUNFEE LTD at The Aldwych Theatre, London, on the 4th March 1954, with the following cast of characters:

(*in the order of their appearance*)

CASSANDRA MORTMAIN	*Virginia McKenna*
ROSE MORTMAIN, her sister	*Yvonne Furneaux*
TOPAZ MORTMAIN, their stepmother	*Georgina Cookson*
THOMAS MORTMAIN, their brother	*Andrew Ray*
STEPHEN COLLY	*Roger Moore*
JAMES MORTMAIN, Topaz's husband	*George Relph*
MISS MARCY	*Joan White*
SIMON COTTON, an American	*Richard Greene*
NEIL COTTON, his brother	*Bill Travers*
THE VICAR	*Cyril Luckham*
IVY STEBBINS, a country girl	*Vivian Pickles*
MRS COTTON, Simon and Neil's mother	*Joan Henley*
LEDA FOX-COTTON	*Elizabeth Ashley*
AUBREY FOX-COTTON, her husband	*Victor Lucas*

The play produced by MURRAY MACDONALD
Décor by PAUL SHERIFF

SYNOPSIS OF SCENES

The action of the play passes in the kitchen of an old house grafted on to the ruins of Godsend Castle, Suffolk

ACT I

March to Midsummer

ACT II

Midsummer to October

Time: the middle nineteen-thirties

PRODUCTION NOTES

The Prompt Copy follows throughout the method of production used at the Aldwych Theatre.

The Journal and the Music

When the play opened in the provinces, the whole of Cassandra's Journal was spoken by means of a tape recording with a musical background throughout. This proved unsatisfactory in many ways. After much trial and error, the following method of presenting the Journal was thought best:

A short phrase of music was used to introduce each spoken Journal entry. This ended as the voice began. All Journal entries in Act I were given by means of the tape recording. The long opening speech helped the audience to get used to the convention of the recorded voice, and the use of the tape during the black-outs enabled Cassandra to make her quick changes. In Act II, there are fewer Journal speeches and Cassandra is on stage for all but one of them. It was therefore found best for her to speak the Journal entries, letting them flow into her soliloquies. The one exception was the speech which covers the lapse of time between Scenes 10 and 11, during which Cassandra has to make one of her quickest changes. This was given by means of the tape recording.

As originally composed the music consisted of a Castle Theme and a Journal Theme (which combined to make an overture), numerous variations on the Journal Theme and several short compositions used to bridge scenes. The complete list is as follows·

Castle Theme
Journal Theme
Waltz Variation of Journal Theme
Polonaise Variation of Journal Theme
Minor Key Variation of Journal Theme
"Stephen's Music"
Scherzo

The full overture was found to be too long and eventually the Polonaise Variation of the Journal Theme was used as an introduction to both Act I and Act II. The Journal Theme and its variations were used as indicated in the Prompt Copy, as were "Stephen's Music" and the Scherzo. Only a few bars of the Castle Theme were used at the Aldwych Theatre—to bring down the curtain at the end of both acts.

Both Journal and Music could, of course, be handled quite differently. If it is not possible to record the Journal, the whole of it could be spoken by Cassandra—if she can speak while making her quick changes. Alternatively, another actress could speak those extracts which are heard during the black-outs. (When an understudy played, audiences seemed unconscious of the difference between her voice and the tape recordings of Virginia McKenna's voice)

Other music could be chosen. It would even be possible to do the play without music. But it seems unlikely that Cassandra's changes and the small changes of furniture, etc., could be done quickly enough without a few bars of music to give extra time. It is of the greatest importance that (*a*) the intervals between scenes should be as short as possible and (*b*) that they should be covered by Journal extracts or by music. The audience should never be faced with silent blackness.

It was found practicable to speed many of the changes by means of help from the cast. Thus, before the scene in which the interior of the wash-house tower becomes visible, Cassandra and Thomas pushed the kitchen table out of the way during the black-out—by this means avoiding the necessity of two stage-hands coming on to the stage.

The whole play is capable of various experiments in production. For that reason, the author's original preface to the (as then) unproduced play is included, in the hope that it may stimulate the imagination of directors.

Methods of giving the play in three acts, instead of two, will be found in the Appendix on page 99.

AUTHOR'S NOTE

When *I Capture the Castle* was first published, so many people suggested it should be dramatized that I gave the matter considerable thought. I felt sure I should have little trouble with the characters, because I originally planned to write a play, not a novel, about them, so they were all conceived dramatically. And from the first I saw how I could manage with only one set, that of the castle kitchen, giving it variety by occasional glimpses of a bedroom and the interior of a tower. (Apart from the expense of having several sets, I thought my best chance of getting a really effective castle would be to concentrate on one set only) But I could find no way of telling the story without numerous time lapses, which would mean having a great many scenes and frequently stopping the action by a curtain fall. Also it seemed that the construction would have to be so odd—some of the scenes would need to be long, others could not last more than two or three minutes. Try as I might, I could not give the projected play any satisfactory shape. So at last I shelved the whole idea.

But I found myself taking it off the shelf every six months or so, and eventually—during the four days' train journey from New York to Los Angeles—I had what seemed to me a brainwave. It occurred to me that the cinema had accustomed audiences to a technique of dissolves and fade-outs, and the radio had accustomed listeners to disembodied voices which bridge from scene to scene. Both screen and radio have borrowed much from the theatre. Why should I not borrow from screen and radio and, by so doing, carry my plan on swiftly and variedly? The use of scene-endings similar to dissolves and fade-outs would enable me to have short scenes or long ones, just as I needed them. The use of radio narrative technique would avoid dead stops between scenes. Also narrative between scenes would keep the Journal form of my novel alive and make a reasonably artistic shape of the whole play. I might even achieve a slightly new form of play and one in which the necessities of the subject had originated the form, rather than a determined effort to be original—it being my firm belief that efforts to be original just for the sake of being original usually end in stuntiness and lack of dramatic tension.

In order to give the impression of continuity which I was striving for, I have not marked the end and beginnings of scenes in the usual way. Instead, I have put a numeral against the description of each new scene. I hope readers will slow down a little each time expressions such as "BLACK-OUT", "*The* LIGHTS

dim to darkness", etc., indicate the end of a scene, and then give a particularly imaginative reading to the inter-scene speech (when there is one) and the description of the new scene. Otherwise, the necessary transitions of time may not make themselves felt. In actual performance, the music, the changes of light and the impact of Cassandra's voice will prevent any such danger.

I have suggested that Cassandra, when reading her Journal aloud (both in the scenes and between them) should use a slightly stylized voice to show that it is her inner monologue we are hearing, which cannot be heard by other characters in the play. But I am not sure this stylized voice is advisable. It was an attempt to approximate the film technique whereby a character's thoughts are heard on a sound-track while the character's lips do not move. I gave some thought to the idea of letting Cassandra's Journal come to the audience by means of a previously recorded sound-track, while the actress playing the part remained silent, but I am convinced this would not be satisfactory. Apart from technical difficulties (sound-tracks cannot assess audience reactions, wait for variable laughs, etc.) it would deprive the actress of many good chances. I feel the best way of speaking the Journal is a matter for experiment; also a matter for the actress and director as well as for the author. But I am sure an effective result can be obtained in one way or another. And an extra advantage I hope to reap from the Journal is that I believe it will help audiences to accept straightforward soliloquy. Many playwrights have for some time felt that the soliloquy should be revived and various attempts have been made to revive it, but few seem to have been very satisfactory. I believe audiences will readily accept Cassandra's Journal; and once it is accepted, Cassandra can slide into her soliloquies without their standing out unnaturally.

As the curtain—or rather, the drop-scene—should only fall between the play's two acts, certain properties will have to be moved on and off stage during black-outs, but I don't think this will be difficult, particularly as I have already worked out ways in which it can be done (though I have not burdened the script with these suggestions). A rather more serious problem is that of the quick changes of costume which will have to be made by the cast, particularly by the actress playing Cassandra. Some of Cassandra's changes may appear, on paper, to be next door to impossible; but, again, I have worked out ways in which they can be done—just! To add to Cassandra's troubles, she sometimes has to speak her Journal at the same time she is making a quick change in a black-out. I admit this is asking a lot of a young actress, but I am convinced it can be managed. As planned by me, Cassandra's changes will be so simple that she will be able to stand in a quick-change room off stage speaking her Journal into a microphone while a dresser puts clothes on her.

It would even be possible to use a sound-track for just those inter-scene speeches during which Cassandra has to change. And the music, which is used to underscore all inter-scene speeches, can continue till she is ready. (Still, she's going to have to be a brisk girl)

Much of the music is introduced naturally, by way of a gramophone on-stage, singing, etc., but some of this is taken up by the orchestra and used atmospherically. And the Journal Theme and the Castle Theme are purely atmospheric. It may be necessary to have special music composed for those two themes, but I am hoping to avoid this. Specially composed music is seldom tuneful enough for the melodies to be picked up on a first hearing; and unless this can be done by audiences, the two themes won't instantly say "Journal" and "Castle" each time they are heard. I hope to find two tunes which are right in feeling and either well-known or very quickly recognizable. I should like them to be by some early English composer such as Purcell, or possibly on folk-song lines.

All my plays have been packed with detail and *I Capture the Castle* is more fully packed than any of them. I have found my detail acts well, but cannot be easily assimilated in script form. Again and again I have been told that one reading gives no clear picture of how my script will play. I therefore suggest that, however favourable or unfavourable a first impression may be, this play should be read twice, and as imaginatively as possible. It has taken even me a long time to become really familiar with it. And yet I am quite sure it will, in actual presentation to an audience, appear to be perfectly simple.

Finally, I believe the play's success will depend more than usually on a collaboration between author, director, scene-designer and cast, and that it should be approached by all in a spirit of gay experiment.

I CAPTURE THE CASTLE

ACT I

SCENE—*The kitchen of an old house grafted on to the ruins of Godsend Castle, Suffolk. A late afternoon in March during the middle nineteen-thirties.*

Of the castle, built by Etienne de Godys in thirteen thirty-two, little remains except the gatehouse, some towers and tumbled walls. The house is seventeenth century and the kitchen is a combination of both buildings. C *of the back wall stands the wash-house tower;* R *of it, a door leads to a passage and a staircase rises to a bedroom door. The larder tower is in the corner up* L. *Between the towers is a door opening on to the moat, and a large window. The sink is* R *with a diamond-paned window over it. Below the sink, a door opens on to the courtyard. In the wall* L, *a kitchen range and a brick copper have been built into the massive original fireplace. The ceiling is cut away, but with an indication of rafters* R, *and stone battlements and trees* L. *Above the rafters and battlements is the sky. The wall* R *of the door at the top of the stairs is of gauze, so that when illuminated, the interior of the bedroom behind it, may be seen. The front wall of the wash-house tower up* C *is also of gauze so that when illuminated, the interior of the ground floor of the tower can be seen. Over the door to the larder tower is a carved stone head. At night the room is lit by two oil lamps, one up* RC *and one* L. *The room is sparsely furnished with a long trestle table* C, *several wooden chairs and one easy chair above the fireplace. There is a dresser in a recess up* R.

(*See the Ground Plan and Photograph of the Scene*)

The theatre dims to darkness, then the Introductory Music is heard as the CURTAIN *rises on a painted Drop-Scene showing a ruined castle and the surrounding woods and pastures in rainswept March twilight. A room built over the gatehouse arch is still intact. Inside the courtyard a gabled seventeenth-century house can be seen across fallen masonry. Towers, remaining walls, and ruins are reflected in the moat, which is full to overflowing.*

1. *When the Drop-Scene rises the stage is in darkness.* CASSANDRA MORTMAIN *is seated on the draining-board of the sink* R. *She is aged seventeen, and is small, slim and attractive, though not conventionally pretty. She is writing in a fat, black exercise book. Her hands are stained with green dye, as the result of dyeing some sheets which are draped over a clothes-horse above the fireplace* L. *In front of the fireplace*

is an ironing-board set across the backs of two chairs. ROSE MORTMAIN *is ironing. She is a bright-haired, enchantingly pretty girl of twenty. A pale circle of twilight dawns* R, *revealing* CASSANDRA, *and the music fades as she is heard.*

CASSANDRA. I write this sitting in the kitchen sink. I can't say I am really comfortable and there is a depressing smell of carbolic soap, but I have found that sitting in a place where you have never sat before can be inspiring. I wrote my very best poem while sitting on the hen-house.

(*A rosy circle of firelight dawns* L, *revealing Rose at the ironing-board*)

(*She glances towards Rose, then continues writing*) Over by the fire, my sister Rose is ironing—though she obviously can't see properly and it will be a pity if she scorches her only nightgown. I have two, but one is minus its behind. Our situation is really rather romantic—two penniless, motherless girls in this strange and lonely house.

(*The lights begin to come up and the whole kitchen is now becoming visible*)

It was built in the reign of Charles the Second, grafted on to a fourteenth-century castle that had been damaged by Cromwell. There are two towers in this kitchen. One is our larder, the other our wash-house.

(*The kitchen is now lit by twilight from the windows* R *and up* L, *the glow of the fire and light from the lamp up* RC)

I said we were motherless and indeed we have been, for the last eight years. But three years ago, a stepmother was presented to us.

(TOPAZ MORTMAIN *enters at the top of the stairs. She is a strangely beautiful woman of almost albino-like fairness, age about thirty. She wears a lovely but dilapidated house-coat and carries a sock which she is darning. She slowly descends the stairs as* CASSANDRA, *who does not see her, describes her*)

She is a famous artists' model who paints and plays the lute. I know she is a bit bogus, but I love her dearly. She puts on a deep dramatic voice . . .

TOPAZ (*on the stairs*) What *are* you doing, dear?

(CASSANDRA, *startled, turns and looks at Topaz*)

CASSANDRA. Oh! I've begun a Journal.

TOPAZ. Splendid.

ROSE. I call it a waste of time. Why not write stories and try to sell them to magazines?

CASSANDRA. The Journal's *practice* for stories—I shall learn how to capture characters and scenery. And it'll be good for my style to dash along without much thought—my stories are always so self-conscious. Father says I must relax and let the words flow out of me.

TOPAZ (*moving down the stairs and standing above the right end of the table*) I wish I could make words flow out of your father.

ROSE. He only gets as far as the relaxing. He hasn't done a stroke of work for the last ten years.

TOPAZ. Men of genius seldom conform to normal behaviour-patterns.

ROSE. *Must* you say things like that? Anyway, a man can't be a genius on the strength of one book.

TOPAZ. He can. He can! I'm reading *Jacob Wrestling* again, for the fifth time.

CASSANDRA. Honestly, Topaz, do you understand it all?

TOPAZ. Certain profundities still remain opaque.

(CASSANDRA *giggles*)

(*She crosses to the sink*) And rightly so, I think. Men's deepest thoughts should be felt, not understood.

CASSANDRA (*hugging Topaz*) Darling Topaz, I do adore you.

TOPAZ. Oh, jeer at me if you like. But I won't have you jeering at your father. (*She crosses and sits on the chair above the left end of the table*)

CASSANDRA. I don't think I ever feel quite like jeering. Rose can say what she likes, but *Jacob Wrestling is* a famous book.

ROSE. *Was*, you mean. It doesn't earn enough money to pay the rent.

TOPAZ. You're so mercenary. It's the man I worry about, not the breadwinner. Sometimes when I look at him in the night . . . But I won't burden you children with my fears.

CASSANDRA (*clambering from the sink*) You know you're bursting to. (*She crosses to* R *of the table*) What are they?

TOPAZ. Have you never heard there's only a hair's-breadth between genius and madness? If he doesn't start writing again soon . . .

ROSE. Well, he won't, so that's that. We shall just go on getting poorer.

CASSANDRA. We *can't* get any poorer.

ROSE. Why don't you go to London, Topaz, and earn some money? You're the only one who can.

TOPAZ. Not enough to send much home. Nobody pays me well except Macmorris and I can't sit for him.

ROSE. Why not?

TOPAZ. Your father doesn't like me to. He says the men who paint me nude paint my body and think of their job, but Macmorris paints my head and thinks of my body. It's true, too.

I've had more trouble with Macmorris than I'd care to let your father know.

ROSE. I'd have thought it was worth having a little trouble, to earn some real money.

TOPAZ (*rising and crossing to* LC) Then *you* have the trouble, dear.

ROSE. I'm perfectly willing to. It may interest you to know that for some time now I've been thinking of selling myself. If necessary I shall go on the streets.

CASSANDRA. You can't go on the streets in the depths of Suffolk.

ROSE. But if Topaz will lend me the fare to London and give me a few hints . . .

TOPAZ (*equably*) I've never been on the streets. A pity, perhaps. One needs to sink to the depths to rise to the heights.

CASSANDRA. What a glorious Topazism. I shall put it in my Journal. (*She sits on the table at the right end*)

TOPAZ (*to Rose*) Anyway, you're the last girl to lead a hard-working immoral life. (*She moves to the window up* L *and puts her darning on the window seat*) If you really want to sell yourself, you'd better find a rich man and marry him respectably. (*She picks up the lute from the window seat*)

CASSANDRA. Don't think that idea hasn't occurred to her. Only she wants him to be handsome, romantic and lovable into the bargain.

ROSE. We shall never find *any* men down here—not even hideous, poverty-stricken ones.

TOPAZ (*moving down* LC) There must be *some* way of earning without leaving home. Suppose I gave a lute concert in the village? Or we might buy a pig.

ROSE. What with?

TOPAZ. I wonder if you can get them by instalments. (*She wanders up* L, *strumming her lute*)

CASSANDRA. I like the *idea* of a lute, but not the noise it makes.

TOPAZ (*indicating the sheets on the clothes-horse*) They're drying very streaky. I was afraid that green dye was too old.

ROSE. Why mess about with the sheets when we've so few?

TOPAZ. I just thought green ones might stimulate your father.

CASSANDRA (*rising*) Aren't my dyed hands revolting? (*She crosses to the sink*) I must attack myself with sandpaper.

(THOMAS MORTMAIN *enters* R *from the courtyard. He is a boy aged fifteen. He carries a satchel of school-books*)

THOMAS (*crossing to the table*) Our lane's just a bog. (*He puts his satchel on the right end of the table*) I had to carry my bicycle. (*He removes his coat and hangs it on the hooks below the door* R)

CASSANDRA (*sitting on the sink*) How funny! I suddenly saw myself coming home from school. How I hated those three miles from the station, on days like this.

THOMAS (*crossing and sitting on the stool below the table*) And the train seems to get slower and slower. (*He removes his boots*) I wonder how many thousand miles we've travelled to get an education.

TOPAZ. Was the lamp lit in the gatehouse?

THOMAS. Yes. I could see father at his desk——

(STEPHEN COLLY *enters* R. *He is an unusually handsome boy aged eighteen. He wears working clothes. He carries a hurricane lamp*)

—reading the *Encyclopaedia*.

(STEPHEN *hangs the lamp above the door* R, *then removes his cape and hangs it below the door*)

ROSE. He's run out of detective novels.

TOPAZ. Any of the hens laid, Stephen? (*She puts her lute on the window seat*)

STEPHEN. No, ma'am. You're spoiling your eyes, Miss Cassandra. (*He takes a folded note from his pocket*)

CASSANDRA. I've finished writing.

(TOPAZ *crosses down* L. STEPHEN *surreptitiously drops the note on to Cassandra's lap, then turns to Topaz*)

STEPHEN. Mr Mortmain's on his way in, ma'am.

(TOPAZ *crosses to* C)

No, he was coming along the walls.

TOPAZ. Light the lamp, Stephen. (*She crosses to Rose*) Rose, dear, if you've finished your ironing . . . (*She takes the upstage chair from the ironing-board, and places it* L *of the table*)

(STEPHEN *crosses to the lamp* L, *takes a box of matches from his pocket, and lights the lamp.* THOMAS *rises, crosses to the ironing-board, takes the downstage chair and sets it below the left end of the table*)

ROSE. Why we should put the red carpet down every time he comes from the gatehouse . . .

(STEPHEN *picks up the ironing-board, moves up* LC *and puts it in the wash-house tower.* CASSANDRA *glances at Stephen's note, then clambers from the sink.* THOMAS *picks up his boots, moves up* LC, *and puts them in the wash-house tower. During the next few speeches, he gets his slippers from the wash-house and puts them on.*

JAMES MORTMAIN *enters at the top of the stairs. He is a striking-looking man in his early fifties. He wears ancient tweeds, with an old plaid travelling rug around his shoulders*)

MORTMAIN (*with histrionic heartiness*) Ah, tea, tea! What, not ready yet?

TOPAZ (*moving up* RC) It's the new regime today, Mortmain. Tea an hour and a half later, combined with supper.

(STEPHEN *removes his coat and puts it in the wash-house*)

MORTMAIN. Of course. I forgot. Excellent idea. Economical, labour-saving. I'll be back. (*He turns to go*)

TOPAZ. Not along the battlements—they're so dangerous in the rain. Why not sit by the fire a bit?

MORTMAIN. I *am* a little chilly. (*He comes down the stairs*) Why the finery?

TOPAZ. I'm trying to save my working clothes.

(ROSE *picks up her ironed clothes, then moves up* L *and looks out of the window*)

MORTMAIN. I'd better come down to breakfast in my tails. (*He crosses above the table to the fireplace*)

(TOPAZ *stands above the table*)

Has Miss Marcy been with the library books?

(STEPHEN *comes out of the wash-house and crosses above Topaz to the sink. There is a sudden downpour of rain*)

TOPAZ. Not yet. She may not get here in all this rain.

CASSANDRA. I do hate it when the elements go to extremes.

ROSE (*gazing out at the moat*) I rather like it.

MORTMAIN. Then let me add to your simple pleasure in Nature's violence by saying there will soon be some glorious new leaks in our roof.

(ROSE, *ignoring Mortmain, crosses and exits up the stairs*)

STEPHEN. I'd better take a look at the attic. (*He picks up a bucket and two old saucepans from under the sink*)

(THOMAS *comes out of the wash-house, crosses below the table and sits on the stool below the right end of it.* CASSANDRA *crosses below the table to* L)

TOPAZ (*to Mortmain*) Have a piece of bread-and-butter to stay you till supper.

MORTMAIN No—no, really.

(TOPAZ *crosses and exits up* L *to the larder*)

(*He looks at the green sheets then turns to Cassandra*) I don't fancy sleeping between those. Have you been dyeing your dresses, too?

(THOMAS *opens his satchel and commences his homework*)

CASSANDRA. Topaz has. I've none to dye.

MORTMAIN. No grown-up dresses at all?

(STEPHEN *goes up the stairs*)

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