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Clerical Errors

A Comedy

Georgina Reid

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CHARACTERS

Julie Briggs
Pete Briggs
Gran Briggs
James Martin
Mrs Martin
Sylvia Grey
Miss Pearson
Theodore Brown

The action of the play takes place in a disused Methodist Chapel

ACT I SCENE 1 Early morning, December 1st
SCENE 2 Later the same evening

ACT II SCENE 1 A fortnight later, morning
SCENE 2 The following Saturday afternoon

Time—the present

ACT I*

SCENE 1

A small disused Methodist Chapel. December 1st. Early morning

The chapel has not yet fallen into decay or disrepair, though the paint, walls and furniture are decidedly drab. There is no altar. On the central back wall we can read in letters of tarnished gold "Come Unto Him All Ye That Labour And Are Heavy Laden". Underneath this are two rows of choir stalls

To the right is a door to the vestry. To the left is a fairly plain pulpit with steps leading up to it. The offertory table has been pushed to one side, against the right wall. It has on it a small pile of hymn books, half a bottle of milk and a battered packet of cornflakes. There is a small pile of folding chairs against the left wall. Both right and left walls have a plain arched window

At the side front of the stage there are a few steps leading down into the auditorium and there is a pile of ancient kneelers near by, on the floor of the hall. The audience is in the position of the congregation

After a moment, the door opens and Sylvia, carrying a shopping bag, comes in with Mrs Martin. Sylvia, aged twenty-seven, is quite pretty and very determined whereas Mrs Martin is gentle, warm-hearted and middle-aged

Sylvia Heavens, it's cold in here!

Mrs Martin Yes, it always was a chilly building, even when the boiler was alight. I used to make James wear his thickest underwear when he was preaching here.

Sylvia (*smiling*) You spoil him. (*She sees the cornflakes and milk*) Good gracious, who's left their breakfast here?

Mrs Martin Breakfast? (*She sees the food*) That's very odd. Perhaps it's something left behind by the Sunday School.

Sylvia It's a bit thoughtless to dump it here, now the chapel is shut up. The milk will have gone bad and the food will attract mice. As soon as I've packed up these hymn books I'll take it away. (*She starts packing hymn books into the shopping bag*)

Mrs Martin (*looking around sadly and sighing*) What a strange, musty smell one finds in a place that's been shut up for weeks on end.

Sylvia Yes, damp and stale.

Mrs Martin It always used to smell of furniture polish and flowers. I feel very sad to see the place like this, unused and forgotten.

*N.B. Paragraph 3 on page ii of this Acting Edition regarding photocopying and video-recording should be carefully read.

Sylvia (*briskly*) It's been going downhill for years. If people won't come to chapel they must expect to see it closed down.

Mrs Martin James was very upset about it.

Sylvia Yes, I know. But at least he has more time now to give to his other chapels where he's more appreciated. Have you heard how soon you can move into the manse?

Mrs Martin The decorators hope to be out by the New Year. It'll be nice to be in our own place again. Furnished rooms never seem quite like home ... and there's simply nowhere for James to keep all his books.

Sylvia There ... that's all I can carry for the time being. (*She finishes packing up hymn books and picks up the cornflakes and milk*) I'll just get rid of this old junk——

Julie suddenly rears up from where she has been hiding in the pulpit. She is thin, scruffy and nearly eighteen. She wears jeans, an old jumper and a torn anorak

Julie 'Ere! You put that down!

Sylvia and Mrs Martin whirl round with a gasp

Sylvia I beg your pardon?

Julie Take your 'ands off that food!

Sylvia (*putting it down*) I had no idea ... please don't imagine I wanted it. I thought the place was empty.

Julie Well, it ain't.

Sylvia But it should be. It's been closed down. I mean ... what are you doing here?

Julie (*after a brief pause*) Prayin'.

Sylvia (*disbelieving her*) Praying?

Julie Yes, prayin'. That's what people do in church, innit?

Mrs Martin But ... you're in the pulpit.

Julie I know I am. The pulpit's the best place for prayin'. I tried them pews, (*she points to the audience*) but they was draughty.

Granny Briggs and Pete now show their heads above the choir stalls. She is sixty-five. He is sixteen. Both are unkempt and grubby

Mrs Martin Sylvia! There are more of them!

Sylvia (*to Gran and Pete*) Who are you?

They don't answer

(*To Julie*) What are they doing here?

Julie They're prayin' too.

Sylvia It didn't look as though they were praying. They were lying down.

Julie You can pray lying down can't you? God don't mind, does 'e? I bet God wouldn't mind if you was to pray standing on yer 'ead.

Mrs Martin It would hardly be reverent.

Sylvia Well, if you've finished praying I'll see you out and lock up behind you.

Julie I 'aven't finished. I've got a lot to pray about. Some people need more advice than others and I reckon I'll be 'ere for hours yet.

Sylvia (*very sweetly, but determined*) Look, I don't think you understand. This isn't the sort of chapel where people can come and go as they please. It's out of use. Closed down. I don't know how you got in but I'm afraid I must ask you to go.

Julie You must! Is it *your* chapel then?

Sylvia I'm engaged to the minister and this lady is his mother.

Julie I don't reckon that gives you the right to turn me out.

Sylvia But don't you see, you're trespassing.

Julie Trespassin'? When all I want is a quiet pray?

Sylvia (*picking up the cornflakes*) It looks more like a quiet picnic to me.

Julie (*angrily*) Put that food down. It's mine.

Sylvia (*to Mrs Martin*) Where's James?

Mrs Martin Outside, talking to Mr Brown.

Julie I'll fetch him. You keep an eye on things.

Sylvia exits R

Mrs Martin stands looking embarrassed

Pete, you get them cornflakes before somebody pinches 'em.

Pete emerges from the choir stalls. He is not by any means a half wit, but just a bit simple. He stands by the table, plunging his hand into the cornflakes and eating them dry

Gran Pass 'em round, lad. We're all 'ungry.

Pete offers the packet to Mrs Martin

Mrs Martin Er . . . no thanks. I've already had breakfast.

Gran Don't waste 'em on 'er, Pete. Come and sit by Gran. Bring the bottle too.

Pete takes her the milk and the cornflakes

Julie Don't drink too much milk, Gran. We 'aven't got any more.

Pete Julie, that lady wants us to get out. Will we 'ave to go?

Julie (*determinedly*) No. We're stopping.

Pete That's good. It's nice 'ere.

Gran It's bloody cold.

Julie Never mind about cold. It's a roof over yer 'ead.

Pete Charlie likes it. I made 'im a little nest between two kneelers and 'e's as warm as toast. Do guinea-pigs like cornflakes? 'Ere, Charlie, 'ave some breakfast. (*He feeds the invisible guinea-pig in the stalls*)

Julie You better put Charlie back in 'is box for the time being. (*She peers out of the left window*)

Pete But Julie . . .

Julie Do as I say. That woman's fetching the vicar. I can see 'em coming up the path.

Mrs Martin It's not the vicar. My son is a *Methodist* minister.

Julie What do I call 'im . . . "your reverence"?

Gran They like you to call 'em "Father".

Mrs Martin No, no, simply call him Mr Martin. And I think you ought to come down out of that pulpit.

Julie No fear. I feel safer up 'ere. Now you two, keep quiet and leave the talking to me.

Sylvia enters R, closely followed by James Martin, a pleasant-featured young man, muscular, healthy-looking, aged about thirty. He wears a dark suit with clerical vest and collar

James (*jovial and fatherly*) Now then, young woman, what's this I hear?

Julie Well, I dunno what she told you, do I?

Mrs Martin They've been having their breakfast, James. And she won't get down from your pulpit because she says she feels safer up there.

James Yes, I know the feeling. When you're rather nervous, it's like a little fortress all round you. But there's no need to grip it like a drowning man. Nobody's going to hurt you, I promise you.

Julie (*glaring at Sylvia*) She wants to throw us out.

James I assure you, no-one will lay a finger on you, so why not come down and be introduced?

Julie I can be introduced from up 'ere. My name is Julie Briggs and this is my family. That's Gran and this 'ere is Pete.

James How do you do. My name is James Martin.

Julie I know. She told me.

James I am the minister in charge of this chapel. Don't you think you ought to have asked my permission, instead of walking in uninvited?

Julie I never knew people 'ad to be invited to go to church.

James How long have you been here?

Julie Since last night.

James How did you get in?

Julie We broke a window. I'm sorry. We was desperate.

Sylvia They're vagrants, James. Nothing but vagrants.

Gran Oh no, we ain't. You mind 'oo you're calling names.

Julie We're displaced persons.

James Where were you displaced *from*?

Julie Pike's Farm cottages. We was evicted.

James Evicted?

Mrs Martin Oh dear, how very unfortunate.

Sylvia (*with decision*) Leave this to me, James. I'll soon get this sorted out.

Sylvia exits R

James Look, I do wish you'd come down.

Julie Where's that woman gone? 'As she gone for the police?

James Of course not. Now, Miss . . . er . . . Briggs, what were you evicted for?

Julie Not paying the rent. We was three months in arrears.

James Three months! Good heavens, how did your parents fall so far behind?

Gran 'Aven't got no parents.

James You're an orphan?

Julie Course not. Me dad's in prison and me mum's . . . left 'ome.

Gran (*with venom*) She ran off with a bookie, the bitch. My son would tan the 'ide off 'er if 'e was 'ome.

Julie Gran, shurrup.

Gran Nasty, useless little trollop!

Julie Gran!

The old woman subsides and eats cornflakes

James And so there was no money coming in? Didn't you have a job?

Julie Yes, but I lost it. 'Ad to go on UB.

James UB?

Julie Unemployment Benefit. It ain't nearly enough.

James (*to Pete*) Well, what about you? Surely you've been earning something?

Pete cowers back, terrified. Julie rushes down the steps of the pulpit to come between Pete and James

Julie (*fiercely*) You leave 'im alone!

James I only asked if he'd been earning something.

Julie Don't you ask 'im nothing. Leave 'im alone. (*She turns to Pete and speaks more gently*) Pete, why don't you take Charlie outside for a bit of exercise? 'E could eat some grass in the graveyard.

Pete All right, Julie.

He picks up the shoe box containing the guinea-pig and hurries out R, cringing nervously as he passes James

James What's the matter with him? Did I frighten him?

Julie Everybody frightens 'im. 'E's very nervous and people scare 'im.

Gran 'E was always the same at school. Most of the time 'e was too scared to go. The attendance officer was always after 'im.

Julie 'E can't do a job, you see. 'E's not clever enough, and if somebody says something a bit sharp to 'im, like "'Urry up, you!" 'e starts to tremble and drop things, and the next day 'e won't go.

James And is he on UB too?

Julie No, 'e gets the Supplementary.

James And your Gran gets her pension?

Julie Huh. Never see that.

James Why not?

Julie Drinks it. (*She sees their disapproval*) Well, she's old, ain't she? She's not got much pleasure left in life. Why shouldn't she 'ave 'er drop of gin?

James So you never managed to pay the rent?

Julie Not very often. I tried to put away a bit every week, but it was no good. There was always somethink else cropped up. And we 'ad to eat, didn't we, and keep up the payments on the telly. In the end Mr Pike . . . the landlord . . . said 'is patience was exhausted and 'e was coming to put us out, tomorrow. Well, I wasn't going to wait for that and let the

neighbours see it 'appen, so last night, when it was dark, I brought 'em out of it.

Gran That's right, she brought us out of it—like Moses brought 'is people out of Egypt.

James Moses? (*He smiles wryly*) And you chose this as your Promised Land?

Julie Well, why not? (*She points upwards*) It says up there, "Come Unto 'Im, All Ye That Labour And Are 'Eavy Laden."

James (*gently*) I didn't think you'd done much labour lately.

Julie Well, any rate I was 'eavy laden, carrying that damn great suitcase all across the town. (*She indicates a battered suitcase standing, half hidden, behind the pulpit*)

James sighs and turns away in thought

(*To Mrs Martin*) I read in a book at school that even if you're a criminal they won't turn you away from a church. And we're not criminals, except for owing money.

Mrs Martin My dear, I feel terribly sorry for you but you can't think of living here. It would have to be deconsecrated.

Julie What's that? Like disinfected?

Mrs Martin No, no. But it's been blessed by the highest dignitary of the Methodist Church. It's sacred and must be used for holy things.

Julie But that's just the point. It ain't being used at *all*, is it? Is it?

Mrs Martin Well . . . no.

Julie Well, if no-one wants to use it for sacred things, why can't we use it to live in? (*She turns to James*) It'd only be for six months, till my Dad comes out of prison. We'd treat it proper, honestly. I'm sorry I broke that window. I'll stick a piece of cardboard over it.

During this speech, Sylvia has entered R

Sylvia (*to James*) It's all right, darling. I've fixed it. I rang the Social Services and they're sending someone right away.

Julie Oh! What did you go and do *that* for, you silly bitch?

James Now Miss Briggs, you'll do yourself no good with that kind of language.

Julie Well, what d'you think I went to all this trouble for? To get away from them welfare folk. Now they'll come and try to split us up.

Gran Don't let 'em split us up, your reverence. We've got to stay together.

Sylvia That may not be possible.

Julie We've got to. I promised our dad, when our mum left 'ome. I wrote and promised 'im.

Sylvia Surely your father would want what's best for you, even if it meant a temporary separation?

Julie No, no. Our Pete's got to sleep near me, else 'e gets nightmares. Mr Martin, can I speak to you on your own? It is your church, ain't it?

James Well, I'm the custodian, I suppose.

Julie Does that mean yes?

James Um . . . yes.

Julie Well then, I'd like to 'ave a private talk.

Sylvia (*decisively*) There's no need for that. Mr Martin is on his way to a meeting. If you'd like to go ahead, darling, I'll wait here until the Social Service Officer comes.

James I feel I ought to stay and see what can be done for these people. They've obviously been through a hard time and I'd like to . . .

Sylvia I know, dear, and you can safely leave it to me. You don't want to be late for the meeting, do you?

Julie That's right, you go and 'ave coffee and buns with the Mothers' Union. Don't you worry what 'appens to us. It's bugger you, Jack, I'm all right!

Sylvia (*coldly*) Please don't make a scene, Miss Briggs.

Julie Oh no, of course, it's common to make a scene, ain't it? Let a lot of selfish sods arrange your life and don't let on if it's breaking your 'eart, is that the way?

Gran Julie, Julie, that tongue of yours!

Julie Oh Gran, they aren't 'uman. They're s'posed to be religious but they just don't want to know.

Theodore Brown enters R. He is a rather common, self-important man aged fifty

Brown Ah, there you are, Reverend. Morning, Mrs Martin, morning, Miss Gray. Reverend, I really must protest . . . am I interrupting something?

James What's the matter, Mr Brown?

Brown As you know, I was putting some flowers on my dear wife's grave. I come every week without fail, and have done since the day she was buried. No making do with everlasting flowers for my Dora.

Mrs Martin It does you great credit, Mr Brown.

Brown Thank you, Mrs Martin. Well, I'm bringing her this lovely bunch of chrysanthemums and what do I find? A great lout of a lad sitting on my Dora's grave, as comfortable as you please, boots up on the kerb, grinning like an idiot. I hastened towards him to remonstrate and what do you think? He had a guinea-pig there, eating my Dora's grass! Like a horrible ginger rat, it was.

Julie 'E's not 'orrible. 'E's a very nice guinea-pig.

Brown You know this . . . this person then?

Julie That's my brother, Pete. 'E wouldn't do no 'arm to your wife's grave, just sitting on it.

Brown But it's sacrilege! Downright sacrilege! Isn't it, Mr Martin? And disrespect for the dead.

James Is he still there?

Brown No. As soon as I hollered at him, he picked up his guinea-pig and ran away. But the nerve of it! Whatever are we coming to that such things can happen?

Julie Pete don't understand about respect for the dead. 'E's a bit . . . you know . . . simple.

Brown Simple? I'll give him simple if I catch him!

James Er . . . Mr Brown, this young lady is Miss Briggs and this is her grandmother.

Brown (*not impressed*) Oh yes?

James They have rather a problem. You see, the trouble is, they have nowhere to live.

Brown Oh? Since when?

James Since this morning. They have in fact been evicted through inability to pay the rent. I don't suppose you can think of any solution, can you?

Brown Solution? Well, they can't live with me, that's for sure. I have to keep my spare room handy for when my daughter comes to visit.

James Of course.

Mrs Martin And as you know, James and I are living in furnished rooms until the manse is ready for us to move in, so *we* can't help.

Sylvia And my brother's home from college, so *we're* full up.

Brown And in any case, you'll have trouble finding anyone willing to give house room to the likes of her.

Julie (*fiercely*) What do you mean, "the likes of me"?

James What are you implying, Mr Brown?

Brown Well, Reverend, you dwell above such matters, as it might be expected of one of your calling, but all the men of these parts know about *her*.

Julie They don't! That's a dirty lie!

Brown Look, young woman, I've seen you hanging about the pub, night after night, seeing who you could pick up. You can't deny it.

Gran She goes to the pub to buy me a bottle of stout. That's all it is. Our Julie's a good girl.

Julie Mr Martin, please don't listen to what 'e says. I'm not asking anyone to take us in, you know I'm not. All I want is your permission to let us stay in this building.

Brown What? Do my ears deceive me! You want to *live* in this sacred place? A girl of your reputation? Reverend, you're not considering letting her and the other two live in this *chapel*?

James The building is empty, Mr Brown . . .

Brown Reverend, I beg to contradict you. With all respect, this dear old chapel may be closed down but it will never be empty while it is full of precious memories. Why, it was on this very spot that my dear wife and I were wedded. Are these down and outs to be allowed to sleep on such hallowed ground? In that font down there, (*he points above the heads of the audience*) my beloved children were christened. Is she to be allowed to wash her knickers in it?

Mrs Martin (*outraged*) Mr Brown!

Brown I beg your pardon, ladies, my feelings got the better of my good manners. But oh, Mr Martin, you wouldn't consent to such sacrilege, would you? If you did, every honest, chapel-going family in the town would rise up in outrage.

Sylvia Don't worry, Mr Brown, we've sent for the social worker and she'll sort it out to everyone's satisfaction.

Julie Not to mine, she won't. I wish I'd never come 'ere. I thought a church was a refuge. Summat about a present 'elp in time of trouble and all that.

James looks stricken

'Stead of which you're going to turn us out and separate us.

Mrs Martin You may not have to be separated. What about Mrs Beckett's boarding house?

Sylvia They'd never afford the rent.

Brown And in any case, Mrs Beckett keeps a *respectable* house.

Julie Ere! Just you . . .

James (*hastily*) Mr Brown, I wonder if I could talk to you about . . . about the choir practices at Flint Street Chapel. Perhaps we could go outside for a few minutes?

Brown Of course, Reverend. Did you want to change the night?

James I had wondered if it might be expedient . . .

James and Brown exit R, talking together

Mrs Martin I do wish the social worker would come. We're already late for the meeting.

Sylvia I wish James would go on without me. Quite honestly I think I could deal with this better without him.

Mrs Martin Why do you say that, dear?

Sylvia Well, I'm more practical than he is, don't you think? And he's putty in the hands of anyone with a hard luck story.

Mrs Martin Putty? I wouldn't say that. James can be quite firm when he makes up his mind.

Sylvia Then he'd better be firm this morning or Theodore Brown is going to rouse half the town in protest.

Julie (*sunk in gloom*) A pretty fine birthday this turned out to be.

Mrs Martin Oh, is it your birthday today? What a shame for you. We really must think of a place where you and your family could stay. Sylvia, do you think if I had a word with Mrs Beckett and reminded her . . .

Julie Don't bother. It wouldn't work. Even if we could afford the rent, she would never stand for . . . (*She glances at Gran who is eating cornflakes at the back, then goes and whispers in Mrs Martin's ear*)

Mrs Martin (*shocked*) Oh! (*She goes and whispers in Sylvia's ear*)

Sylvia (*turning and looking at Gran in distaste*) Oh no.

Julie Yes. That's 'ow it is, I'm afraid. (*She sits DL, biting her nails*)

James and Miss Pearson, a cheerful, business-like woman, enter R. She is carrying a briefcase

James This is Miss Pearson, the social worker.

Sylvia I'm glad to see you, Miss Pearson. I rang you because . . .

Miss Pearson (*gaily*) I know. I know. No need to say a word. I know Julie Briggs and her family. I've lived with 'em for years, you might say. Well, Julie, I never thought the day would come when I'd see you in church . . . and your Granny too. Where's Pete?

Julie Outside with Charlie.

Miss Pearson Good old Charlie! Now, you'd better do some explaining, young woman, because I've been on leave and only got back yesterday.

Julie Mr Pike was going to evict us so we got out last night and come 'ere.

Miss Pearson But . . . I thought Mr Pike said you could stay as long as you paid the rent.

Julie Yes . . . well, we 'adn't paid for weeks, see, 'cos we wanted the money for other things, and then Mr Pike said 'e wanted our cottage for the new man 'e was taking on.

Miss Pearson Oh, I wish I'd known. Something could have been arranged, if only there'd been time. Really, you know, it's not worth going on leave. One always comes back just in time to pick up the pieces. A month ago I had this case nicely worked out. Well, it's no use moaning. We've got some talking to do, so I don't think you ladies need stay. (*She urges them to the door*)

Sylvia Are you quite sure you can manage?

Miss Pearson Quite sure. Thank you for calling me. Don't *you* go, parson. I'd like you to stay and give me your advice. Good-morning, ladies. Shut the door as you go out, will you?

Sylvia and Mrs Martin exit R, rather unwillingly

Mrs Briggs, I take it you don't mind if the parson hears your case history?

Gran No, no. Let the 'oly father join the party.

James My name is Martin. James Martin.

Miss Pearson Right, Mr Martin. Now if you don't mind, let's have that table out, and some of these folding chairs, shall we? Things seem to sort out better if we sit round a table.

James helps her lift the table to C stage, then while she opens her briefcase he helps Julie bring three folding chairs to the table

Julie Come on, Gran, come and sit at the table.

Gran Is it dinner time?

Julie (*helping her to sit down*) No such luck.

Gran My stummick's rumbling like the very devil.

Julie So's mine. Pretend we're 'aving fish and chips, eh?

Gran Faggots and peas would be nice.

Julie You bet.

Gran and Miss Pearson sit, James remains standing. Julie is never at rest for long in any position, whether sitting, standing or leaning

James I'd like a few more details about this affair, if I may.

Miss Pearson Yes, of course. Their troubles began, as you can imagine, when Julie's father went into prison. You see, he worked on Pike's Farm and the cottage went with the job.

James Oh, a tied cottage?

Miss Pearson Exactly. There's not supposed to be such a thing any longer, but believe me, there is. Anyway, when Briggs was put inside, Mr Pike could reasonably have asked to have the cottage vacated, but he didn't want to be hard on them so he gave Julie's mother a job in the house,

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