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Falling Off a Log

A Comedy

Georgina Reid

A SAMUEL FRENCH ACTING EDITION

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FOUNDED 1830

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CHARACTERS

Gerald Prentice

Sophie Lang

Pip

Mother

Spike

The action of the play takes place on the verandas of No. 10 and No. 12, Birch Walk.

Time—the present

ACT I	SCENE 1	The veranda of No. 10
	SCENE 2	The veranda of No. 12. Afternoon, a week later

ACT II	The veranda of No. 12.
	Sunday morning, two weeks later

NB: The two verandas are identical. There is no scene change.

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published by Samuel French Ltd:**

**Clerical Errors
Death and the Maiden
Gone Up in Smoke
Ladies of Spirit
Wolfsbane**

ACT I

SCENE 1

The veranda of number ten, Birch Walk

It is devoid of any kind of horticulture apart from a dead shrub in a tub. UR is a bare trellis. The rear area, adjoining the house, has a transparent roof supported by two wooden posts. French windows lead into the house. There is a telephone just inside the french windows. On the veranda is a garden table and three garden chairs

Gerald is sitting at the table. He is approaching forty, quite good-looking, and has a lazy charm when he troubles to exert it. On the table beside him is a bottle of beer and a glass, two gardening magazines, writing materials and a half-finished letter. Gerald writes for a few minutes, then pauses for thought, takes out a letter in an airmail envelope, leans back and reads it

Mother's voice is heard, reading the letter aloud. She is a warm-hearted, rather sentimental woman of about seventy. Her accent is slightly American

Mother's Voice Dear Boy, Your letter, as always, caused me the greatest happiness. I don't know what I would do without regular news from England. Sitting here, under these hot, merciless skies, surrounded by scorched brown landscape, I only live on memories of the lovely garden I left behind five years ago. Hearing your description of it lifts me into a kind of trance, so that I can clearly see the lawns and the beds of flowers, and smell the glorious smell of the new-mown grass. When you write again, dear, put me in a few blades of grass. The scent might linger long enough to cross the Atlantic. And if there's room, put in a few petals of the dark red rose that's smothering the veranda with its intoxicating blooms.

Gerald looks up at the veranda, bare of any roses, and inhales deeply

I hope you don't work too hard in the garden, dear. I know what a perfectionist you are, and I hate to think of you being wearied out by your labours. But if you are tired at the end of the day, you can sit in the little paradise that you have created and realize the truth of the words, "One is nearer God's heart in a garden than anywhere else on earth".

Mother's voice fades away. Gerald pours himself a drink and looks front as if at the garden

Gerald (*smirking*) "The little paradise that you have created."

He drinks deeply, stands, stretches and goes out DR

After a moment, we hear Sophie calling, off

Sophie (off) Gerald? Are you in the garden?

Sophie enters from the house. She is a forthright, unsentimental woman of about forty or more

Gerald? (She sees the half-written letter on the table, picks it up and reads the beginning, snorts with indignation, pours herself a glass of beer and sits in the chair, reading the letter)

After a moment, Gerald appears R, looking cross

Gerald Do you always read other people's private letters?

Sophie This isn't private. It's just family stuff.

Gerald Even family stuff can be private.

Sophie Then you shouldn't leave it lying about.

Gerald Sophie, give it to me.

Sophie Just a minute, I'm reading all about the delphiniums . . . "like a shimmering sea of blue at the end of the lawn".

Gerald snatches away the letter

A shimmering sea of blue . . . My God, Gerald, haven't you any conscience at all?

Gerald My conscience or lack of same is not something I care to discuss with you, Sophie dear. What are you doing here anyway? Why aren't you engaged in cooking Jim's lunch or taking Jim's smalls to the launderette?

Sophie I happen to be taking Jim's children to the swimming baths. I thought I'd leave them there for half an hour and come to visit you.

Gerald Aren't you afraid they'll pick up some horrible germs?

Sophie I expect they'll give as good as they get. Anyway, after half an hour wallowing in chlorine, they should be quite sterile.

Gerald (sitting) And have you come round here to enquire after my health?

Sophie Any reason why I shouldn't?

Gerald I can't think of any reason why you should.

Sophie It so happens that I promised Mother I would keep an eye on you. She seems convinced that you don't take proper care of yourself. Have you had breakfast?

Gerald Of course. I've had polyunsaturates for my arteries, orange juice for my complexion and bran for my bowels.

Sophie Marvellous. Of course, you need to keep your strength up, . . . all that effort you put into turning the compost heap yesterday, under the blazing sun. (She indicates the letter) Where is the compost heap, anyway?

Gerald (gesturing vaguely) Oh, I don't know, somewhere up the end there, I suppose.

Sophie Smelly, is it?

Gerald The stench made me reel. The sweat poured off me in rivers. Mother will be overawed by my devotion to duty.

Sophie What overawes me is your shameless hypocrisy. How you can deceive your own mother . . .

Gerald What's a small deception if it has a good result? It keeps the old girl happy. She'll never know the truth . . . unless you tell her.

Sophie If I wanted to, I'd never find the words to describe it.

Gerald Oh, I expect your natural acidity would come to your aid.

Sophie Don't goad me, Gerald. I'm not a tell-tale, but one of these days, you'll go too far. (*A pause*) This veranda is covered with bird droppings.

Gerald Is it?

Sophie You shouldn't throw down crumbs so near the house. Where's the broom?

Sophie rises and goes indoors

Gerald has another look at his mother's letter. Mother's voice is heard

Mother's Voice When your letter comes each week, I can't wait to open it and find out what you have enclosed from the garden. I press all the flowers carefully in Webster's *Dictionary* which is very large and heavy. I show them to Elmer and he just laughs at me, so I don't let him see me smelling them like some dope-addict sniffing glue. Elmer is a dear sweet man in many ways, but I don't think his sense of smell is very good, which isn't surprising at his age. Mine is as good as ever, I'm glad to say.

Gerald exits DR

I've always been very susceptible to scents. When I was a little girl, my father used to grow a dark purple flower called heliotrope which smelt divine, but it's gone out of fashion now. I don't think you can get them anymore.

Sophie enters with a broom and starts to sweep the veranda

Elmer hasn't been too well lately. He drinks too much, of course. The doctor says his liver is pickled. We had six film stars staying here over the weekend. Most of the time they were asleep in bed or asleep beside the pool. I never got properly introduced to them. I'm sure they thought I was the maid. One of them gave me a tip and another one pinched my bottom! Elmer says he never invited them. What a crazy country! No wonder everyone has to go to a psychiatrist. Elmer wants *me* to visit one. He says I'm a mass of British repressions and a session on the couch would make a new woman of me.

Gerald enters DR with a red rose

Sophie Where did you get that rose?

Gerald Next door.

Sophie But . . . didn't anyone see you?

Gerald Not much danger of that. They're away. Sailed off in a taxi last Friday with never a backward glance.

Sophie Where have they gone?

Gerald No idea. We weren't on gossiping terms. Not a very forthcoming pair, either of them.

Sophie Well, who's this coming forth, then?

Gerald What d'you mean?

Sophie That young woman steaming up your garden path.

Gerald (*staring DR*) I never saw her in my life before.

Sophie She came through a gap in the hedge.

Pip enters DR, wearing a towelling wrap over her bikini. She is young, and pretty, and angry

Gerald She must be the daughter. She doesn't look very pleased. Good-morning. Can I do something for you?

Pip Yes, you can give me back my stolen property.

Gerald (*rather haughtily*) I beg your pardon?

Pip Oh, don't come the high and mighty. I saw you steal that rose. I was sunbathing on the other side of the hedge.

Gerald I think there must be some mistake.

Pip Do you deny that you stole a rose from my garden?

Gerald I may have just . . . smelled one in passing.

Pip I'm not blind, Mr Prentice, and I wasn't born yesterday. Smelling it or stealing it, you were having a good look at me in my bikini, weren't you?

Gerald Certainly not. If I'd known you were there I would never have touched the wretched rose.

Pip So you admit that you picked it?

Gerald Well . . . er . . . yes. As a matter of fact I wanted a rose for my mother.

Pip Oh, how charming. Is it Mother's Day?

Gerald No, she asked me to pick her one, but there don't seem to be any nice ones in our garden, just now.

Pip That's the understatement of the year. (*She gives a scathing look at the garden*) Why not admit it, you're just a peeping Tom?

Sophie goes off into a peal of laughter

Gerald For heaven's sake, Sophie, I need a bit of help and all you do is laugh.

Pip Doesn't your wife mind your nasty habits?

Gerald She's not my wife, she's my sister.

Sophie (*rising*) You might introduce me properly.

Gerald This is Mrs Lang . . . And you must be — ?

Pip Philippa Beresford. (*She shakes hands without enthusiasm*)

Sophie Won't you sit down?

Pip No thanks. This isn't a social call. I want my rose back, and an apology.

Gerald But surely you can spare a rose to make an old lady happy. You have so many.

Sophie Mother lives in America.

Gerald In Texas. Where the roses aren't so good.

Pip Oh. Well then . . . all right, she can have it, if it's going to make her happy.

Gerald Thank you. I knew you wouldn't be ungenerous.

Pip Are you going to tell her it grew in *your* garden?

Gerald Er . . . yes.

Pip Doesn't she know that your garden is . . . is . . .

Gerald Is what, Miss Beresford?

Pip (*desperately*) Rather neglected.

Sophie Rather neglected? No-one has done a hand's turn in this garden since Mother went away five years ago.

Gerald Sophie, you make it sound as if I'm bone idle.

Sophie Well, so you are. This was a pretty place when you and Mother first moved in. Now it's a jungle.

Gerald But it's just not my fault, honestly, Miss Beresford. I'm death to all growing things. Grass withers where my feet have trod. Flowers wilt beneath my gaze, trees become stunted, vegetables languish. It's true, isn't it, Sophie? (*Pointing to the plant tub*) You see that sad stump of a bush in that tub? That was a fine flourishing hydrangea when I brought it home from the shop, but under my evil influence it upped and died in two days.

Pip (*to Sophie*) Is he really as bad as he says?

Sophie Well, my husband won't have him anywhere near our garden.

Gerald And I may add that any form of garden implement can be relied on to disintegrate if I touch it. We have a shedful of seized-up mowers and clapped-out clippers . . . all the work of my hand. Do sit down and have a drink. Oh, there's none left.

Pip It doesn't matter. I'm not thirsty. (*But she is more friendly now and sits down in a chair*)

Gerald So can you blame me, Miss Beresford, if I not only pinch one of your beautiful roses, but I describe your splendid garden in my letters?

Pip Do you really?

Gerald Yes, every week, just as if it were my own. I've just filled two pages eulogizing over the delphiniums.

Pip Why?

Gerald Well, you must admit, they're very nice.

Pip Yes . . . but I don't see why your mother wants to know. I mean, week after week. It must get very boring for her.

Gerald Don't you believe it. My mother is a gardening maniac. The only way she can survive in horrid, torrid Texas is by dreaming of her lovely English garden.

Pip Is she going to stay long in horrid, torrid Texas?

Gerald She's there for good. She married an American oil magnate five years ago and shook the soil of England off her feet.

Pip An oil magnate? How exciting.

Gerald Oh, Elmer's not exciting. He's a pain in the neck.

Sophie I don't think you should say that, Gerald. From Mother's point of view it was quite romantic. I was there when they met. He took one look at Mother's big blue eyes and just fell overboard.

Gerald Nonsense. It was Mother's chocolate biscuits that did it. I was there too, remember. It was a scene I shall never forget . . . The vicar's garden party, the Boy's Brigade standing in the rain playing *The Desert Song*, everyone rushing into the marquee and the vicar's wife introducing us to

this funny bandy-legged creature in an enormous stetson hat. His face was like a bit of chewed-up leather. Sophie gave him a cup of tea, didn't you, Sophie?

Sophie Yes. He took one sip and said, "Holy cow!"

Gerald The vicar pretended not to notice. Then Mother shoved a plate of biscuits at him with her sweetest smile. Next thing I know, he's sweeping off his hat and saying, "Lady, you sure make swell cookies" and inviting himself to dinner.

Sophie And before many days had passed he was asking her to make those swell cookies for him for the rest of his life. Mother was simply swept off her feet.

Gerald And they were married within a month.

Pip Well! He must have enormous charm.

Gerald D'you think so?

Pip Of course, if he could persuade her to leave her beloved garden. It would take a lot of charm to make her leave that.

Gerald Oh, he had a lot all right. Half a dozen wells, all pumping out lovely black oil . . . crude but comely as you might say. Mother was torn, of course. Who wouldn't be? Horticulture on one side, millions of dollars on the other—but when Elmer shoved a hunk of diamond on her finger and said she should come home every summer to see her garden, she walked into the Register Office without a backward glance.

Sophie (*indignantly*) You're making Mother sound thoroughly mercenary. She only did what any woman would do. Father had left her very little—you were earning next to nothing. She had a great many money worries.

Gerald Yes, that bandy little man must have looked like the angel Gabriel.

Sophie Bandy or not, his money pays the rates for you. Don't be so ungrateful, Gerald. I'm going in to make some coffee. (*She rises*)

Gerald Good idea. You will stay, won't you, Miss Beresford?

Pip I'm Philippa. Generally known as Pip.

Gerald I'm Gerald and my sour-faced sister is called Sophie.

Sophie (*going*) If I'm sour-faced, it's probably your fault.

She goes into the house

Gerald (*calling after her*) Nonsense, it's all those horrible children of yours.

Pip How many children has she got?

Gerald Four at the last count. She's sterilizing them at the local baths. She ought to take her husband along and get him sterilized too.

Pip How long before your mother is due home again?

Gerald Due home? Never, I hope and trust.

Pip But didn't you say she came home every summer?

Gerald No, I said Elmer told her she could . . . but that was before she crossed the awful, heaving ocean.

Pip She didn't care for that?

Gerald She damn near died of fright. That was the first and last time my mother stepped off terra firma and when she arrived, pale and shaken, on the other side, she took a vow she would never cross the Atlantic again.

Pip Not even by boat?

Gerald Boat or plane or hot air balloon, it makes no difference. Mother knows when she's met her Waterloo. So why should I slave myself to a shadow on a garden she'll never see again?

Pip Then, why do you take all these gardening magazines? (*She indicates various magazines lying on the table*)

Gerald So that I can write intelligently to Mother about the things I'm doing. For example . . . (*he picks up a magazine and opens it*) let me quote you from page three of *Greenfingers Weekly* . . . (*Reading*) "How the azaleas enjoy a good mulch!" Doesn't that sound impressive?

Pip (*giggling*) It sounds rather rude to me.

Gerald I'm working it into this week's letter.

Pip Shall you tell her about me?

Gerald I will if you'll stay to mulch . . . er . . . lunch. I'll tell her you came round to borrow our hedge-trimmer. I did have a hedge-trimmer once. It worked for five minutes and then seized up. Are you shocked?

Pip At what?

Gerald All the lies I tell.

Pip Well . . . I suppose it's done in a good cause. Let's hope it pays off.

Gerald Pays off?

Pip You know . . . when she dies, I hope she makes it worth your while.

Gerald That's a very cynical remark. I hope Mother won't die for ages yet.

Pip No, no, of course not. I didn't mean that.

Gerald (*with a wicked grin*) On the other hand, *Elmer* can't last for ever . . . His doctor says his liver is pickled . . . and when he's summoned to that great heavenly oil field in the sky, my mother will be a very rich woman. Of course, I don't want to *hasten* Elmer's demise, but one can't help thinking about it from time to time. But that's enough about us. Tell me something about yourself. How have I managed to live next door to you for five years without realizing my good luck?

Pip I was at boarding-school till I was eighteen, then at college. I've just finished. Now I've got to start the dreary business of earning a crust.

Gerald That shouldn't be difficult for a girl like you, with brains and beauty.

Pip You don't need a secretary, I suppose?

Gerald Me? A secretary? What d'you think I am, a business tycoon?

Pip What are you then . . . apart from a full-time gardener?

Gerald (*rather embarrassed*) I . . . I compose.

Pip Compose? Music? What sort?

Gerald Er . . . piano music. I'm what's known as a rising composer.

Pip How far have you risen?

Gerald (*ruefully*) Haven't broken the surface yet.

Pip Father's a teacher. Head of history at the local school.

Gerald Nice long holidays.

Pip Yes. He and Mummy have gone off on an archaeological trip to the Middle East. Won't be back for six weeks! Left me in charge.

Gerald Six weeks? Good heavens, who'll do the gardening?

Pip Oh, I shall cope. It's just a case of regular mowing. I reckon I can keep things ticking over.

Gerald You mustn't get lonely in there all on your own. Come in any time. You will stay to lunch, won't you? I'll get rid of Sophie and we'll cook up something jolly.

Sophie enters with a tray of coffee

Ah, Sophie, isn't it time you collected those children? They'll be bleached as white as little haddocks.

Sophie Yes, I'll just gulp down a cup of coffee and then I'll go. Black or white, Pip?

Pip Black, please. No sugar.

Gerald Good God, you might just as well be drinking senna.

Pip Senna? What's that?

Gerald You pour boiling water on senna pods and get a dark brown infusion.

Pip Is it intoxicating?

Gerald No dear, it's a laxative, and very nasty too. (*He raises his cup*) Well, here's to horticulture. (*He drinks*) "A garden is a lovesome thing . . ."

Sophie God wot.

Gerald Rose plot,

Sophie Fringed pool,

Gerald Ferned grot . . .

The telephone rings

Sophie The phone's ringing.

Gerald Blast!

Sophie Aren't you going to answer it?

Gerald It's probably a wrong number.

Sophie It might be the BBC commissioning you to write them an opera.

Gerald (*going*) Oh, very funny! (*He goes into the house*)

Pip What was that poem you were reciting?

Sophie One of Mother's favourites. She collects poems about gardens and recites them in the most embarrassing way, in front of visitors.

Pip She sounds great fun. I'd like to meet her.

Sophie I don't think that's very likely . . . unless you go to Texas.

Gerald is now inside the window picking up the telephone. He is clearly visible and we can hear the conversation with his mother who is phoning from America. Sophie and Pip talk to each other in dumb show

Gerald Hello. This is Bellfield five-o-nine.

Mother's Voice Hello, Gerald darling!

Gerald (*pleased*) Mother! How marvellous!

Mother's Voice Can you hear me, dear?

Gerald Just as if you were in this room with me.

Mother's Voice Isn't that amazing?

Gerald What time of day is it over there?

Mother's Voice Bed time, honey . . . but I had to ring you. I'm afraid I've got bad news.

Gerald Bad news?

Mother's Voice Yes darling. It's Elmer. He's dead.

Gerald Elmer? Dead?

Mother's Voice Yes dear. He died last night in the middle of dinner . . . half-way through the fish chowder.

Gerald How appalling!

Mother's Voice Well, it was nice for him really. Fish chowder was always such a favourite with him.

Gerald But what a shock for you, Mother.

Mother's Voice Yes, I'm going to miss the old fellow. I had a real good cry last night but I'm feeling a bit better now.

Gerald You're not by yourself, are you?

Mother's Voice Oh no, all Elmer's children and grandchildren are rolling up, Elmer's oldest daughter, Lucy May, has taken charge of the funeral arrangements. She's a nice girl. I hope Elmer left her something in his will.

Gerald When will you know?

Mother's Voice After the funeral, I guess. The main part will come to *me*, of course. I shall be pretty well-off. And Gerald, dear, do you know the first thing I'm going to do with my money? I'm going to buy an airline ticket to England.

Gerald (*shocked*) You're *what*?

Mother's Voice As a matter of fact I've already bought it. I've booked a flight for next Thursday. Isn't that wonderful?

Gerald I . . . I don't believe it!

Mother's Voice That's just how I feel, too. I can't believe it.

Gerald But, I thought you were afraid to cross the Atlantic.

Mother's Voice I know I was but I've been cured. I've met the most wonderful head-shrinker.

Gerald What?

Mother's Voice A psychiatrist, dear. I told him all my fears and we talked it out together and it was all because I sat at the wrong end of the bath when I was little, and heard the water gurgling down the sink with that horrid sucking sound. And now I'm cured, and I'm coming home. (*A pause*) Gerald . . . are you there?

Gerald (*croaking*) Yes.

Mother's Voice I said, I'm coming home.

Gerald For good?

Mother's Voice No, just for a month. They can't spare me any longer. I've been practically running the business for Elmer these past two years.

Gerald And you're arriving next Thursday?

Mother's Voice Yes, isn't it thrilling?

Gerald I can't believe it's true.

Mother's Voice I knew you'd be thrilled.

Gerald I expect I'll wake up in a minute and find it was all a terrible dream.

Mother's Voice Terrible? Oh, you mean poor Elmer's death. Yes, he was rather a poppet, but he couldn't live for ever. Eighty-five was pretty good going. Now, you will tell Sophie, won't you, and one of you must come and meet me at Heathrow Airport at three-fifteen.

Gerald Mother!

Mother's Voice What, dear?

Gerald Are you sure it'll be safe? All that water . . .

Mother's Voice Now darling, don't be neurotic. Do you realize that you stand more chance of being killed crossing the road, than you do crossing the Atlantic? You've got to conquer fear, Gerald. The world was made to be lived in.

Gerald Mother, are you all right?

Mother's Voice Of course I am. But I'm a changed woman, thanks to Dr O'Toole.

Gerald Who's Dr O'Toole?

Mother's Voice My psychiatrist. He's wonderful. I talk to him for hours. I've told him all about the garden. He says it's the reason for my inner peace. Is it looking lovely, dear?

Gerald Er . . . yes. I was just writing to you about it.

Mother's Voice Bless you, dear, you've been so faithful with your letters, but now I'm going to see it as it really is. I can hardly wait. Goodbye darling. Don't forget, next Thursday! Bye!

Gerald (*putting down the phone*) I won't forget, Mother. (*With a stunned look, he moves away from the window and enters on to the veranda*)

Sophie and Pip are again audible

Sophie . . . and Trevor's the artistic one. Even though he's only eight he shows the most enormous promise. He drew a picture of his sister the other day that was quite lifelike . . . though she's not really cross-eyed, of course, he only did that to annoy her . . . and the freckles were perhaps a little bit over-emphasized . . . Oh, Gerald, was it a wrong number?

Gerald stand regarding them with a glazed stare

Gerald, is something wrong?

Gerald The bottom has fallen out.

Sophie (*peering at the chairs*) Out of what?

Gerald Out of my world, Sophie. But probably not out of yours.

Sophie Stop talking in riddles. What has happened?

Gerald Elmer is dead.

Sophie Dead?

Gerald As mutton. Only it wasn't mutton, it was the fish chowder that finished him off.

Sophie Oh, poor old dear. That was very sudden. But I'm not entirely surprised. How has Mother taken it?

Gerald Philosophically. The blow is no doubt softened by the prospect of inheriting most of his millions.

Sophie Golly, she's going to be as rich as Croesus. But didn't he have some children by a previous marriage?

Gerald Three.

Sophie Still, even if it's split between them, she'll be a very rich woman.

Gerald Yes.

Pip You don't look very pleased about it.

Gerald It won't really affect me, since I shall certainly be disinherited.

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