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SF PERUSALS

PRESENT LAUGHTER

A Light Comedy in Three Acts

by Noël Coward

SAMUEL FRENCH

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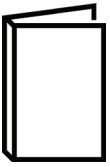
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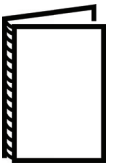
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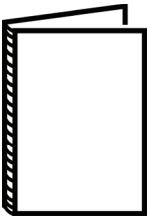
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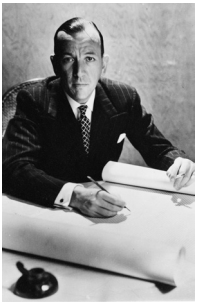
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ABOUT THE AUTHOR



Noël Peirce Coward was born in 1899 and made his professional stage debut as Prince Mussel in The Goldfish at the age of twelve, leading to many child actor appearances over the next few years. His breakthrough in playwriting was the controversial *The Vortex* (1924), which featured themes of drugs and adultery and made his name as both actor and playwright in the West End and on Broadway. During the frenzied 1920s and the more sedate 1930s, Coward wrote a string of successful plays, musicals and intimate revues, including *Fallen Angels* (1925), *Hay Fever* (1925), *Easy Virtue* (1926), *This Year of Grace* (1928), and *Bitter Sweet* (1929). His professional partnership with childhood friend Gertrude Lawrence started with *Private Lives* (1931), and continued with *Tonight at 8.30* (1936).

During World War II, he remained a successful playwright, screenwriter and director, as well as entertaining the troops and even acting as an unofficial spy for the Foreign Office. His plays during these years included *Blithe Spirit*, which ran for 1,997 performances, outlasting the war (a West End record until The Mousetrap overtook it), *This Happy Breed* and *Present Laughter* (both 1943). His two wartime screenplays, *In Which We Serve,* which he co-directed with the young David Lean, and *Brief Encounter*, quickly became classics of British cinema.

However, the post-war years were more difficult. Austerity Britain – the London critics determined – was out of tune with the brittle Coward wit. In response, Coward re-invented himself as a cabaret and TV star, particularly in America, and in 1955 he played a sell-out season in Las Vegas featuring many

of his most famous songs, including *Mad About the Boy*, *I'll See You Again* and *Mad Dogs and Englishmen*. In the mid-1950s he settled in Jamaica and Switzerland, and enjoyed a renaissance in the early 1960s, becoming the first living playwright to be performed by the National Theatre, when he directed *Hay Fever* there. Late in his career he was lauded for his roles in a number of films, including *Our Man In Havana* (1959) and his role as the iconic Mr Bridger alongside Michael Caine in *The Italian Job* (1968).

Writer, actor, director, film producer, painter, songwriter, cabaret artist as well as an author of a novel, verse, essays and autobiographies, he was called by close friends 'The Master'. His final West End appearance was *Song at Twilight* in 1966, which he wrote and starred in. He was knighted in 1970 and died peacefully in 1973 in his beloved Jamaica

For further information on Noël Coward's life and work, visit www.noelcoward.com and to join the Noël Coward Society, visit www.noelcoward.net.

PRESENT LAUGHTER

Produced at the Haymarket Theatre, London, on 16th April 1947, with the following cast of characters:

(In the order of their appearance)

DAPHNE STILLINGTON	Avis Scott
MISS ERIKSON	Daphne Newton
FRED	Billy Thatcher
MONICA REED	Joan Swinstead
GARRY ESSENDINE	Noel Coward
LIZ ESSENDINE	Joyce Carey
ROLAND MAULE	Robert Eddison
HENRY LYPPIATT	Gerald Case
MORRIS DIXON	Peter Gray
JOANNA LYPPIATT	Moira Lister
LADY SALTBURN	Gwen Floyd

SYNOPSIS OF SCENES

The action of the play passes in Garry Essendine's studio in London.

Time – the present.

ACT I

Morning.

ACT II

Scene One – evening. Three days later.
Scene Two – the next morning.

ACT III

Evening. A week later.



CHARACTERS

DAPHNE STILLINGTON
Pretty girl of about twenty-three

MISS ERIKSON
Thin, vogue-looking Swedish housekeeper

FRED
Garry's valet, smartly dressed and wears a black alpaca coat.

MONICA REED
Garry's secretary, pleasant, rather austere woman in the early forties

LIZ
Ccharming-looking woman in the thirties, and is well dressed, but not elaborate

ROLAND MAULE
An earnest young man

HENRY
Dapper and neat, forty.

MORRIS
Young, tall and good-looking,
and a little grey at the temples.

JOANNA
Exquisitely gowned woman in the early thirties.
Great deal of assurance and considerable charm.

GARRY

LADY

ACT I

SCENE. **GARRY ESSENDINE***'s studio in London. Morning / about 10.30 a.m.*

The furnishing is comfortable if a trifle eccentric. Down right there is a door leading into the spare bedroom. Up right is an arch into a hall leading to the front door. Just below and on the left of this is a staircase leading to **GARRY***'s bedroom. Left of the stairs is a service door. Up left is a large window, and below it a door leading into the office. Up centre is a grand piano with a duet stool. Up right against the wall is an oblong table used as a sideboard with a large mirror above it. Below the door right is a small three-tier table. Up left in front of the window is a large writing table. Down left below the door is a small two-tier table. Down centre is a large settee, behind which is a narrow table with a dial-type telephone on the left end and a large waste-paper box under the right end. At the left end of the settee is a small round table. Down right is a large armchair with a small oblong coffee table below it.*

See the Ground Plan at the end of the play.

When the curtain rises the studio is rather dim, the curtains being drawn. **DAPHNE STILLINGTON** *enters down right. She is a pretty girl of about twenty-three. She is wearing a man's dressing-gown and pyjamas, which are too big for her. She goes to the foot of the stairs, pauses, and then moves down to the telephone and, almost furtively, dials a number.*

DAPHNE *(into the telephone)* Hallo—hallo! Is that you, Saunders? Can I speak to Miss Cynthia? ...All right, I'll hold on... Hallo... Cynthia darling, it's Daphne... Yes—are you alone? Listen. I'm—you know where... Yes, I did... No, he isn't awake yet. There's nobody about at all... No, in the spare room... I've only just got up, I'm not dressed or anything... I can't go on about it now, someone might come in. If anybody rings up from home, will you swear to say I spent the night with you... Darling, you promised... In that case say I'm in the bath or something... Yes, as soon as I'm dressed, in about an hour I should think. Of course I can't wait to tell you... All right. *(She replaces the receiver.)*

MISS ERIKSON *enters up left. She is a thin, vogue-looking Swedish housekeeper, wearing a chintz smock, gloves and white plimsolls. She is smoking a cigarette and carries a duster and a syphon of soda.*

(a trifle nervously) Good morning.

MISS ERIKSON *(betraying no surprise)* Good morning. *(She goes to the window, puts down the syphon on the desk with a bang and opens the curtains.)*

DAPHNE What time is Mr Essendine going to be called?

MISS ERIKSON He will ring.

DAPHNE What time does he usually ring?

MISS ERIKSON *(picking up the syphon and taking it to the sideboard)* That depends what time he went to bed.

DAPHNE *(following her and speaking hurriedly)* I'm afraid we were rather late last night. You see, we were at a party and Mr Essendine very kindly said he'd drive me home, and then I found I'd forgotten my latchkey...

MISS ERIKSON *crosses below her to the centre table with the ashtray, which she empties into the box under the table.*

...and I knew I shouldn't be able to make any of the servants hear because they sleep at the top of the house, so Mr Essendine very sweetly said I could stay the night here—so I did.

MISS ERIKSON *(returning below* **DAPHNE** *to the sideboard with the ashtray)* If you were very late he will probably sleep until the afternoon.

DAPHNE *(following her again)* Oh dear! Couldn't you call him?

MISS ERIKSON *(picking up the empty syphon)* Alas no, we can never call him.

DAPHNE Well, do you think I could have some coffee or orange juice or...

MISS ERIKSON *(crossing left below* **DAPHNE***)* I will see.

DAPHNE ...or something?

MISS ERIKSON *exits up left.* **DAPHNE** *moves to the settee and sits gloomily on the edge at the right end. After a few moments* **FRED** *enters up left.* **FRED** *is* **GARRY***'s valet. He is smartly dressed and wears a black alpaca coat.*

(rising) Good morning.

FRED *(moving down left)* Good morning, miss.

DAPHNE Have *you* any idea what time Mr Essendine will get up?

FRED Might be any time, he didn't leave no note.

DAPHNE Couldn't you call him? It's nearly eleven o'clock.

FRED The whole place goes up in smoke if we wake him by accident, let alone call 'im.

DAPHNE Well, do you think I could have some breakfast?

FRED Well, now, what would you fancy?

DAPHNE Some coffee, please, and some orange juice, and...

FRED Rightyo, miss.

He exits up left. **DAPHNE** *resumes her seat on the edge of the settee. The front door slams and a moment later* **MONICA REED**, **GARRY***'s secretary, enters up right. She is wearing her hat and carries a bundle of letters.* **MONICA** *is a pleasant, rather austere woman in the early forties. She enters looking at the letters.*

DAPHNE *(rising)* Good morning.

MONICA *(looking up)* Good morning. I am Mr Essendine's secretary. Is there anything I can do for you?

DAPHNE Well, I'm afraid it's rather awkward—you see, Mr Essendine drove me home last night from a party and I idiotically forgot my latchkey and so Mr Essendine very sweetly said I could spend the night here—in the spare room.

MONICA I hope you were warm enough.

DAPHNE Oh yes, quite, thank you.

MONICA *(moving down right)* It's liable to be a bit nippy in the spare room.

DAPHNE I kept the heater on.

MONICA Very sensible.

DAPHNE And now I was wondering if somebody could tell Mr Essendine that I'm— *(She giggles)* well—here.

MONICA I expect he'll remember when he wakes up.

DAPHNE Have you any idea when that will be?

MONICA *(taking off her hat)* I'm afraid not. If he didn't leave any special time to be called, he might sleep on indefinitely.

DAPHNE I don't want to go away without saying goodbye and thanking him.

MONICA If I were you I should have some breakfast and dress, and if he isn't awake by then you can leave a message for him. Have you asked for any breakfast?

DAPHNE Yes, I think the man's bringing it.

MONICA *(sitting on the right arm of the settee)* Have you known Mr Essendine long? *(She puts the letters into her bag.)*

DAPHNE *(with one knee on the settee)* Well, no, not exactly—I mean of course I've known him for ages. I think he's wonderful, but we actually only met last night for the first time at Maureen Jarratt's party.

MONICA *(quizzically)* I see. *(She puts her hat and bag on the settee.)*

DAPHNE I think he's even more charming off the stage than on, don't you?

MONICA *(smiling slightly)* I can never quite make up my mind.

DAPHNE Have you been with him for a long while?

MONICA *(taking off her gloves)* Just on seventeen years.

DAPHNE *(enthusiastically)* How wonderful! I expect you know him better than anybody.

MONICA Less intimately than some, better than most.

DAPHNE Is he happy, do you think? I mean really happy.

MONICA I don't believe I've ever asked him.

DAPHNE He has a sad look in his eyes every now and then.

MONICA Oh, you noticed that, did you?

DAPHNE We talked for hours last night. He told me all about his early struggles.

MONICA Did he by any chance mention that Life was passing him by?

DAPHNE Yes, I think he did say something like that.

MONICA *(rising)* Oh dear!

DAPHNE Why?

MONICA I just wondered.

DAPHNE *(sitting back)* You've no idea how I envy you, working for him, but then I expect everybody does. It must be absolute heaven.

MONICA It's certainly not dull.

DAPHNE I do hope you don't think it's awful me staying the night here like this—I mean it does look rather bad, doesn't it?

MONICA Well, really, Miss...?

DAPHNE Stillington, Daphne Stillington.

MONICA Miss Stillington—that's hardly my business, is it?

DAPHNE No, I suppose not, but I wouldn't like you to think...

MONICA Seventeen years is a long time, Miss Stillington. I gave up that kind of thinking in the spring of nineteen-thirty.

DAPHNE Oh, I see.

FRED *enters up left with a tray of orange juice, coffee and toast.* **MONICA** *picks up her things from the settee.*

FRED *(coming down left of the settee)* Will you 'ave it in here, miss, or in the bedroom?

DAPHNE In here, please.

MONICA *(moving above the centre table with her hat and gloves)* I really think you'd be more comfortable in the bedroom. The studio becomes rather active round about eleven. People call, you know, and the telephone rings...

DAPHNE *(rising)* Very well. *(She hesitates.)*

MONICA I'll let you know the minute he wakes up.

DAPHNE *(crossing right to the door)* Thank you so much.

FRED *(following her)* Now, you pop right back into bed, miss.

DAPHNE *exits, followed by* **FRED** *with the tray.* **MONICA** *watches them off, then exits down left, taking her hat and gloves. She re-enters in time to meet* **FRED** *re-entering right.*

MONICA Is there any soap in that bathroom?

FRED *(moving above the settee)* Yes, but the tap's a bit funny. You 'ave to go on turning it till Kingdom come.

MONICA Did you tell her?

FRED No, she'll find out for herself.

MONICA You'd better send Miss Erikson in to her.

FRED Well, she's gone to the grocer's, but I'll tell 'er when she comes back.

MONICA Were you here last night?

FRED No. She's news to me.

MONICA If he hasn't rung by twelve we'd better wake him.

FRED You know what 'appened last time!

MONICA *(moving in a little)* It can't be helped. He's got to lunch out, anyhow.

FRED *(moving to left of the settee)* Well, if the balloon goes up don't blame me.

At this moment **GARRY ESSENDINE** *appears at the top of the stairs. He is in his pyjamas and dressing-gown and his hair is tousled.*

GARRY *(on the landing; furiously)* I suppose it's of no interest to either of you that I have been wakened from a deep deep sleep by everybody screaming like banshees! What's going on?

MONICA I've been talking to Miss Stillington.

GARRY Who the hell is Miss Stillington?

MONICA She's in the spare room.

GARRY *(coming downstairs)* I didn't ask *where* she was, Monica dear, I asked *who* she was?

FRED *looks at* **MONICA.**

MONICA We might look her up in the telephone book.

FRED She forgot her latchkey, if you know what I mean.

GARRY *(moving down below the right end of the settee)* Go away, Fred, and get me some coffee.

FRED *(moving up left to the service door)* Rightyo.

GARRY And don't say rightyo.

FRED *(turning and bowing)* Very good, sir.

GARRY Thank you very much.

FRED *exits.*

MONICA You met her at a party last night and brought her home here and told her about your early struggles, and she stayed the night.

GARRY *(crossing to her)* I remember now. She's a darling. And I'm mad about her. What did you say her name was?

MONICA Stillington. Daphne Stillington.

GARRY I knew it was Daphne, but I hadn't the faintest idea it was Stillington. How did she look to you?

MONICA Restive.

GARRY Poor little thing, I hope you were sweet to her. Has anybody given her anything to eat?

MONICA Fred's taken her some coffee and orange juice.

GARRY What's she doing now?

MONICA I don't know. Drinking it, I suppose.

GARRY Oh, it's dreadful, isn't it? What are we to do?

MONICA She wants to say goodbye to you and to thank you.

GARRY Whatever for?

MONICA That, Garry dear, I am in no position to say.

GARRY Why didn't you tell her to dress quietly like a mouse and go home? You know perfectly well it's agony here in the morning with everybody banging about, and the telephone ringing...

MONICA You might have thought of that before you asked her to stay the night.

GARRY She had to stay the night. *(Moving away to centre)* She'd lost her latchkey.

MONICA The sooner we turn that spare room into a library, the better.

GARRY She's probably sobbing her heart out.

MONICA Why don't you go and see?

GARRY *(crossing to her)* Lend me a comb and I will.

MONICA *(taking a comb out of her bag)* Here!

GARRY *(taking it)* What a deplorable-looking object. *(going to the looking-glass on the piano.)* Good God, I look ninety-eight.

MONICA Never mind.

GARRY In two years from now I shall be bald as a coot, with rows of angry false teeth leering at me from a tumbler. Then, perhaps, you'll be sorry.

MONICA *(moving up stage a little)* On the contrary I shall be delighted. There will be fewer eager, gently bred debutantes ready to lose their latchkeys for you when you've got a toupee perched on the top of your head, and life will be a great deal simpler.

GARRY *(thoughtfully)* I shall never wear a toupee, Monica, however bald I get. Perhaps on the stage I might have a little front piece, but in life, never! I intend to grow old with distinction.

MONICA I'm sure that will be a great relief to all of us.

GARRY *(turning to her again)* Here's your sordid little comb.

MONICA *(taking it and putting it back in her bag)* Now do go and do a nice goodbye scene, there's a dear, and get rid of her as quickly as possible. We've got to do the mail and Morris might appear at any minute and we can't have her littering up the place and getting in everybody's way.

GARRY I haven't done my exercises yet.

MONICA You can do those after she's gone.

GARRY I can't possibly go in there in my pyjamas, it's like an ice-box.

MONICA The heater's on. It's been on all night.

DAPHNE *enters down right.*

GARRY Very extravagant.

DAPHNE *(by the door)* Garry, I thought I heard your voice.

GARRY *(turning above the settee; tenderly)* My dear!

MONICA *(moving towards the door down left)* If you want me I shall be in the office, Garry.

GARRY *(shooing her off)* Go along, Monica.

MONICA *(turning)* You won't forget, will you, that at a quarter to twelve Mr Roderick is coming to discuss your special broadcast on the seventeenth?

GARRY What? Alan Roderick? *(He turns to* **DAPHNE.***)*

MONICA / **GARRY** *(together)* And that at twelve sharp Morris is coming to discuss what understudies you are going to take to Africa. And that at twelve-thirty you have given an appointment to Mr Roland Maule.

This sort of thing goes on every morning. She drives herself mad, and everybody else. I can never begin to tell you—it's absolute agony. Lists of appointments this long. People calling—telephone ringing ... *(He turns to* **MONICA.***)* I shall remember, Monica.

MONICA I'm so glad. Goodbye, Miss Stillington.

DAPHNE Goodbye.

MONICA I do hope we shall meet again.

GARRY *(as she goes)* You couldn't fail to meet her again...

MONICA *exits down left, shutting the door firmly.*

(He moves below the round table.) Darling!

DAPHNE *runs to* **GARRY** *and flings her arms round him.*

DAPHNE *(burying her face in his shoulder),* Garry! Oh, Garry! I'm ridiculously happy.

GARRY I'm so glad, darling.

DAPHNE Are you?

GARRY Happy?

DAPHNE Mm!

GARRY There's something awfully sad about happiness, isn't there?

DAPHNE What a funny thing to say.

GARRY It wasn't meant to be funny.

DAPHNE Don't you trust me?

GARRY Trust you? Of course I trust you. Why shouldn't I?

DAPHNE I've been in love with you for such a long time.

GARRY *(retreating to arm's length)* Don't—don't say that.

DAPHNE Why? What's the matter?

GARRY Don't love me too much, Daphne! Promise me you won't. You'll only be unhappy. No good can come of loving anyone like me—I'm not worthy of it, really I'm not.

DAPHNE You're more worthy of it than anyone in the world.

GARRY Foolish child.

DAPHNE I'm not a child. I'm twenty-four.

GARRY *(smilingly)* Twenty-four! Twenty-four! If only I were younger, *(He sits at the left end of the settee.)* if only you were older...

DAPHNE *(kneeling on the settee)* What does age matter when people love each other?

GARRY I wonder how tragically often that has been said.

DAPHNE It's true.

GARRY Look at me, Daphne. Look at me kindly, clearly and honestly—look at the lines in my face—my thinning hair—look at my eyes!

DAPHNE You're not so very old.

GARRY *(with a touch of asperity)* I didn't say I was so very old, Daphne, I merely said look at me. As a matter of fact, I'm only just forty.

DAPHNE What's forty?

GARRY *(rising and moving left of the settee)* Too old for twenty-four.

DAPHNE You mean you don't love me.

GARRY *(turning)* I don't mean any such thing.

DAPHNE Do you love me?

GARRY Of course I do.

DAPHNE Say it. Do you? Say it.

GARRY I love you, Daphne.

DAPHNE Oh, darling...

GARRY But this is goodbye.

DAPHNE *(rising; aghast)* Goodbye?

GARRY It must be. It's inevitable. Not for my sake, my dear, but for yours. Last night—suddenly—a spark was struck. The flame burned brightly for a little. That was happiness—wonderful, tremendous happiness, something to be remembered always ...

DAPHNE *(subsiding on to the settee; weeping)* You're different this morning—you don't love me—you didn't mean any of the things you said last night.

GARRY Youth never understands. That's what's so absolutely awful about youth—it never, never understands.

DAPHNE *(with spirit*; *sitting erect)* I don't know what you're talking about.

GARRY *(taking a pace towards centre)* Listen, my dear. You're not in love with me, the real me. You're in love with an illusion, the illusion that I gave you when you saw me on the stage. Last night I ran a terrible risk. I ran the risk of breaking that dear young illusion for ever—but I didn't. *(He moves to her and puts his hand under her chin.)* Oh, thank God, I didn't. It's still there—I can see it in your eyes—but never again— *(turning away to left he pushes*

her backwards) never—never again—that's all I can dare to hope for now—moments like last night—that's why I'm so lonely sometimes, so desperately lonely, but I have learned one bitter lesson in my life and that lesson is to be able to say goodbye... *(He moves up left of the settee.)*

DAPHNE *(rising)* But, Garry...

GARRY Let me go on, dear.

DAPHNE *(easing to centre)* But I...

GARRY "We meet not as we parted
We feel more than all may see;
My bosom is heavy-hearted
And thine full of doubt for me.
One moment has bound the free."

He crosses above the settee to the right of it. **DAPHNE** *turns to the settee and sits at the left end of it.*

"That moment has gone for ever,
Like lightning that flashed and died,
Like a snowflake upon the river,
Like a sunbeam upon the tide,
Which the dark shadows hide..."

DAPHNE *(turning to face him)* But, Garry...

GARRY *(easing to centre)* Be quiet for a minute, darling...

"That moment from time was singled
As the first of a life of pain,
The cup of its joy was mingled
Delusion too sweet though vain,
Too sweet to be mine again."

There now, that was Shelley. Don't you think it's beautiful?

DAPHNE Yes, but...

GARRY There was nothing Shelley didn't know about love, not a thing! *(crossing down left)* All the sadness, all the joy, all the unbearable pain...

DAPHNE I don't see why love should be so miserable.

GARRY *(turning)* That's because you're young, my sweet—young and eager and greedy for life...

DAPHNE *(rising and facing right)* You said last night that I was the one that you had been searching for always, and now that you had found me, you'd never let me go.

GARRY *(with beautiful simplicity)* That's perfectly true ...

DAPHNE *turns.*

...I never shall let you go. You will be here in my heart for ever.

DAPHNE *(weeping again)* Oh, Garry...

GARRY *(going to her and tenderly putting his arms round her)* Don't cry—please, please don't cry—I can't bear it...

DAPHNE *(clinging to him)* How can you say that I'm only in love with an illusion and not the real you at all...

GARRY Because it's true.

DAPHNE It isn't—it isn't—it was the real you last night, you weren't on the stage—you weren't acting.

GARRY I'm always acting—watching myself go by—that's what's so horrible. *(He puts his hand to his forehead and crosses below her to right.)* I see myself all the time eating, drinking, loving, suffering—sometimes I think I'm going mad—mad. *(He turns, left of the armchair.)*

DAPHNE *(kneeling on the right end of the settee)* I could help you if only you'd let me.

GARRY What, dear?

DAPHNE I could help you if only you'd let me.

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