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The Astonished Heart

A Play in Six Scenes

From *Tonight at 8:30*

By Noël Coward

A SAMUEL FRENCH ACTING EDITION



New York Hollywood London Toronto

SAMUELFRENCH.COM

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THE ASTONISHED HEART

Produced by John C. Wilson at the National Theatre in New York City on November 24, 1936, as one of a series of nine one-act plays by Noel Coward, under the title of "TO-NIGHT AT EIGHT-THIRTY." The play was directed by the author and the cast was as follows:

CHRISTIAN FABER	<i>Noel Coward.</i>
BARBARA (His Wife) . . .	<i>Joyce Carey.</i>
LEONORA VALL	<i>Gertrude Lawrence.</i>
SUSAN BIRCH	<i>Joan Swinstead.</i>
TIM VERNEY	<i>Anthony Pelissier.</i>
ERNEST	<i>Edward Underdown.</i>
SIR REGINALD FRENCH . .	<i>Alan Webb.</i>

The action of the entire play takes place in the drawing-room of the Fabers' flat in London.

SCENE I.—Late afternoon, November 1935.

SCENE II.—Late afternoon, November 1934.

SCENE III.—Midnight, January 1935.

SCENE IV.—Dawn, April 1935.

SCENE V.—Evening, November 1935.

SCENE VI.—Late afternoon, November 1935.

CHARACTERS

Produced at the Phoenix Theatre, Charing Cross Road,
London, W.C.2, in January, 1936, with the following cast of
Characters :

CHRISTIAN FABER		<i>Noel Coward.</i>
BARBARA (his Wife)		<i>Alison Leggatt.</i>
LEONORA VAIL		<i>Gertrude Lawrence.</i>
TIM VERNEY		<i>Anthony Pelissier.</i>
SUSAN BIRCH		<i>Everley Gregg.</i>
SIR REGINALD FRENCH		<i>Alan Webb.</i>
ERNEST		<i>Edward Underdown.</i>

The action of the entire play takes place in the drawing-room
of the Fabers' flat in London.

SCENE I.—Late afternoon. November 1935.

SCENE II.—Late afternoon. November 1934.

SCENE III.—Midnight. January 1935.

SCENE IV.—Dawn. April 1935.

SCENE V.—Evening. November 1935.

SCENE VI.—Late afternoon. November 1935.

THE ASTONISHED HEART

SCENE I

The action of the entire play takes place in the drawing-room of the FABERS' flat in London. The flat is on the top floor of one of the newly-erected apartment buildings in the region of Hyde Park. The furniture is comfortable and good without conceding too much to prevailing fashion. On the R. double doors lead to the hall, dining-room and BARBARA'S bedroom and bathroom, etc. On the L. other double doors lead to CHRISTIAN'S part of the flat, his bedroom, consulting-room and office.

When the CURTAIN rises it is late afternoon in November 1935. The lights are on, but the curtains have not been drawn and BARBARA is standing looking out of the window into the foggy dusk. She is a tranquil, intelligent woman of about thirty-six or seven. Her back is to the room and she is drumming her fingers on the window-pane. SUSAN BIRCH is seated on the sofa with her hands clasped on her lap. Her age is somewhere between thirty and forty and she is plainly and efficiently dressed as befits a secretary. She is sitting very still, although occasionally she bites her lip nervously. TIM VERNEY, a nice-looking man in the early thirties, is standing in front of the fireplace on the L. smoking a cigarette. There is an air of strain in the room as though any one of them might cry out at any moment. The silence is broken by BARBARA.

BARBARA (up R.C.). It looks terribly dreary out, but it's like that anyhow at this time of year, isn't it?

TIM (*at the fire*). Yes.

BARBARA. The traffic seems slower than usual—I expect that's my imagination.

TIM. Don't you think you'd better come away from the window now?

BARBARA. Yes, I suppose I had.

(*She comes slowly down and sits on the sofa next to SUSAN, L. of her.*)

Don't worry, Tim, about the window I mean, it's something we've got to get used to like everything else—part of the whole thing.

TIM. Yes, I know.

BARBARA (*to SUSAN*). She answered the telephone herself, didn't she?

SUSAN (*with an effort*). Yes.

BARBARA. She ought to be here by now.

SUSAN (*looking at her wrist-watch*). Yes—yes, she ought.

BARBARA. I suppose Ernest would be shocked if we had a cocktail, wouldn't he?

TIM. That doesn't matter.

BARBARA (*almost irritably*). I know it doesn't matter, Tim, I was only thinking how funny it is that whether Ernest should be shocked or not shocked should come into my mind at all—will you ring for him?

TIM. All right. (*He rings the bell by the fireplace.*)

BARBARA. I expect you think I'm talking too much.

SUSAN (*trying to smile*). No, I don't, dear.

BARBARA. Talking's useful, it makes a little noise, but not too much, just enough to distract the attention—

SUSAN. I know. (*She gets up and begins to move up stage.*)

BARBARA. What is it?

SUSAN. I thought perhaps I'd better go into the office.

BARBARA (*moving to R. end of the sofa*). No, don't, sit down again, stay with us.

SUSAN (*coming down c.*). Very well. (*She sits down again, at L. end of the sofa.*)

(ERNEST, *the butler, enters R.*)

ERNEST. You rang, madame ?

BARBARA. Make a cocktail, will you, Ernest, a Dry Martini I think, don't you, Tim ?

TIM (*absently*). Yes, a Dry Martini.

ERNEST. Very good, madame.

BARBARA. When Mrs. Vail arrives—I'm—I'm expecting her—— (*Her voice breaks slightly.*)

ERNEST. Yes, madame.

(*He goes out R.*)

BARBARA. That was silly of me, wasn't it ?—Unnecessary—he knew perfectly well we were expecting her——

TIM. She's probably held up in the traffic.

BARBARA. Yes, it's bad at this time of day—I'd like a cigarette, Susan, there's a box just by you.

(SUSAN *silently hands her the box and she takes a cigarette and lights it.*)

TIM. Poor woman.

BARBARA. Leonora ? Yes—it's awful for her.

SUSAN (*bitterly*). She'll get over it.

BARBARA. So shall we, I expect—in time.

SUSAN. It doesn't matter to her, not really, not like it matters to us—she'll cry a lot and be beautifully heartbroken——

BARBARA. Don't be unkind.

SUSAN (*violently*). I hate her.

BARBARA (*turning away*). Oh, don't, Susan—what's the use of that——

SUSAN. I don't care whether it's any use or not—I hate her, more than I've ever hated anyone in my whole life——

BARBARA. You might just as well hate a piece of notepaper because someone's written something cruel on it.

(SIR REGINALD FRENCH comes through the double doors up L. *He is an authoritative, elderly surgeon.*)

SIR REGINALD. She hasn't arrived yet? (*He comes a little way into the room.*)

(BARBARA rises and faces up to him.)

TIM. She's on her way.

SIR REGINALD. Good.

BARBARA. There isn't much time, is there?

SIR REGINALD (*gently*). No, I'm afraid not. (*He turns to go again.*)

BARBARA. Is he—conscious?

SIR REGINALD. Only for a brief moment, every now and then.

BARBARA. It's then that he asks for her? In those brief moments?

SIR REGINALD. Yes.

BARBARA. I'll send her straight in when she comes. (*She sits again.*)

SIR REGINALD. Do, my dear.

(*He goes out.*)

SUSAN. Oh God!

(*She breaks down and cries softly. BARBARA puts an arm round her.*)

TIM. Shut up, Susan.

SUSAN. I can't help it—it would have been much better if only you'd let me go into the office when I wanted to.

BARBARA. I'd rather you cried here with us than all by yourself in there.

(*There is a pause.*)

SUSAN (*dabbing her eyes*). I'm all right now.

BARBARA. Don't make too much of an effort, Susan, it's a dreadful strain—I'd cry if I could—tears are a little relief—they let the grief out for a minute or two—I envy them—

(ERNEST enters with a tray on which is a cocktail-shaker and four glasses.)

Put them on the small table, Ernest—thank you, Ernest.

(ERNEST puts down the tray on the table L. by the fire and goes out. TIM takes a cocktail to SUSAN and BARBARA and then one for himself.)

TIM (drinking). He's certainly made it dry enough.

BARBARA (sipping hers and smiling faintly). Strong enough too—oh dear——

(There is the sound of the front-door bell. They all jump slightly.)

TIM. Here she is—at last——

BARBARA (suddenly). How extraordinary—d'you see what I mean? (She rises, moves down and turns up.) It's the same, exactly the same as a year ago—you were there, Tim, just where you are now, with a cocktail glass in your hand—you were there, Susan, only you had your glasses on and a packet of papers in your lap—don't you remember—the first time she ever came into this room——?

(ERNEST opens the door and announces: "Mrs. Vail" as the lights fade.)

SCENE II

When the lights come up on the scene, BARBARA, TIM, SUSAN and ERNEST are all in the same positions as the preceding scene. SUSAN is wearing glasses and has a packet of papers in her lap, her jumper is blue instead of grey. BARBARA is wearing a tea gown. TIM is in the same suit.

ERNEST (announcing). Mrs. Vail.

(LEONORA VAIL enters. *She is a lovely creature of about thirty, exquisitely dressed and with great charm of manner.*)

BARBARA (*greeting her*). My dear—after all these years——

(*They meet c.*)

LEONORA. Isn't it lovely?

(*They kiss affectionately.*)

BARBARA. Bring some fresh cocktails, Ernest.

ERNEST. Yes, madame.

(*He goes out.*)

BARBARA (*introducing her*). This is Susan Birch, Chris's right hand.

(LEONORA *shakes hands with SUSAN.*)

And this is Tim Verney, Chris's left hand—or perhaps it's the other way round—settle it among yourselves—Leonora Vail—Ames that was——

(*They "How do you do."*)

LEONORA. Leonora Ames, terrible at games! Do you remember?

BARBARA. Of course I do.

(*They both laugh.*)

LEONORA (*shaking hands with TIM*). I think Barbara wrote that beastly little rhyme herself.

TIM (*smiling*). Was it true?

LEONORA. Absolutely.

BARBARA. I can't possibly say you haven't changed, you've changed more thoroughly than anyone I have ever seen.

LEONORA. Having our hair up makes a great difference.

(TIM *pours out a cocktail.*)

BARBARA. Your voice has changed too, but I recognized it on the telephone.

LEONORA. I'd have known yours anywhere.

TIM. Have a cocktail, it's mostly water now—perhaps you'd rather wait for a fresh one.

LEONORA (*taking it*). That'll do beautifully. (*She holds it up towards BARBARA.*) The nastiest girl in the school. (*She is down stage L.C., her back to the audience.*)

BARBARA (*laughing*). But the best King Lear.

LEONORA (*also laughing*). Oh, of course—I'd forgotten that.

BARBARA. I foresee a flood of reminiscence.

TIM (*making a movement to go up to the doors L.*). So do I—come along, Susan, we'd better go.

BARBARA. No, don't go—you can bear it, Tim, you'll probably discover a lot of useful little psychological echoes from my childhood—

SUSAN (*rising*). I must go anyhow—all these have to be dealt with. (*She indicates the papers in her hand.*)

TIM. Is there a patient in there now?

SUSAN (*glancing at her watch as she moves up R. of the sofa*). Yes, but her time's nearly up.

LEONORA (*at the fire, putting her glass down—to BARBARA*). Does he work all day long, your husband?

BARBARA. Yes, most of the night as well sometimes.

LEONORA. What's he like?

BARBARA. Horrible.

LEONORA. I sympathize, mine was an absolute darling, so much so that I divorced him after eighteen months—

SUSAN. Good-bye, Mrs. Vail.

(*She exits up L.*)

LEONORA. Good-bye.

TIM. We shall probably meet again very soon.

LEONORA. I hope so.

BARBARA. Ask Chris to come in for a second if he can when he's got rid of his patient.

TIM. All right.

(*He goes out.*)

LEONORA. What a nice man. (*At the fire, looks at herself in the mirror.*)

BARBARA. Tim's a dear, he's extremely brilliant too; Chris thinks the world of him. (*She gets the cigarette-box from the table L. of the sofa.*)

LEONORA. He must be wonderful. (*She crosses to the sofa.*)

BARBARA. Who, Chris?

(*She hands her a cigarette.*)

LEONORA. Yes, a little frightening, though, I should think.

BARBARA (*sitting at R. end of the sofa and smiling*). Oh no, he's not in the least frightening—he gets a bit abstracted every now and then—when he's working too hard.

LEONORA (*sitting at L. end of the sofa*). Dear Barbara, how nice this is—how long ago is it?

BARBARA. Seventeen — no eighteen years — I'm thirty-five now, I left long before you did——

LEONORA. I remember missing you dreadfully.

BARBARA. It was after the War when you went to America? (*She lights her cigarette.*)

LEONORA. Yes, just after. Father left Brazil in 1918 and at the beginning of 1919 we went to Washington.

BARBARA. When were you married?

LEONORA. Oh, a long while after, several years.

BARBARA. Was he really such a—a darling?

LEONORA. Oh, it was all horrid. He was much older than me, very rich—fortunately—that's all there was to it really.

BARBARA. And you never wanted to marry again?

LEONORA. I wanted to once, but it wasn't possible, everything went wrong——

(*ERNEST comes in with fresh cocktails, and crosses in front of the sofa to the cocktail table.*)

BARBARA. I'm so sorry.

LEONORA. I minded horribly at the time, but I

travelled a bit and got over it, it's a long while ago anyhow.

BARBARA. How long have you been in England?

LEONORA. Only two weeks—I've got a darling little house, only rented of course. When will you come and dine?

BARBARA. Whenever you like.

LEONORA. And your husband, Chris?

BARBARA. I'm sure he'd love to, but it all depends, you can never count on him—

LEONORA. I'm longing to see him.

(ERNEST, *having deposited the cocktail-shaker on the tray, goes out, taking with him the empty one.*)

BARBARA. He'll probably come in soon for a moment.

LEONORA. Is it never more than a moment?

BARBARA. Oh, yes—not quite as bad as that—but being married to eminence requires a little forbearance, especially if the eminence is dear to you. (*She rises and crosses to the cocktail table.*)

LEONORA (*moving to R. end of the sofa*). No holidays?

BARBARA. Yes—last year we got a full month—we went to Italy, Como first and then down to Venice, it was lovely. He got a bit restive during the last week, but I persuaded him to stay the course.

LEONORA. I should be jealous, I think.

BARBARA. Jealous?

LEONORA. But you're better balanced than I am—less emotional—you always were—

BARBARA (*bringing a cocktail to LEONORA*). It would be tiresome to go on being emotional after twelve years of marriage. (*She gives her the cocktail.*)

LEONORA. I don't really want another.

BARBARA. Come on—one more—I will too.

LEONORA. All right. (*She drinks.*) What does he do exactly?

BARBARA (*gently*). He's only one of the most famous psychiatrists in the world, dear. (*She sits at L. end of the sofa.*)

LEONORA (*laughing*). I know that—be patient with

me—psychiatrist is only a word to me—it's nothing to do with bone-setting, is it?

BARBARA (*laughing too*). No, nothing whatever—you're thinking of osteopathy—

LEONORA. No, I'm not, it's something like psychiatrist—another word.

BARBARA. Chiropracter.

LEONORA. That's it.

BARBARA. You'd better not mention that to Chris, he doesn't approve of chiropracters at all—

LEONORA. What's a psychiatrist then?

BARBARA. Someone who cures diseases of the mind—

LEONORA. Oh, repressions and inhibitions and all that sort of thing.

BARBARA. Yes, all that sort of thing.

LEONORA. How exciting.

BARBARA. Yes, more interesting than exciting.

LEONORA. You have a superior look in your eye, Barbara, and I resent it deeply.

BARBARA. I'm sorry, dear.

LEONORA. I know I'm idiotic really, but it's most tactless of you to remind me of it. How does he start his treatments? Just a series of embarrassing questions?

BARBARA. Frightfully embarrassing.

LEONORA. I've read about it in books. You have to remember sinister little episodes of your childhood—falling in love with the cook—or being frightened by a goat—then you have to determine the cook or sublimate the goat or something, and you go away completely cured and sleep like a top.

BARBARA. I see that your ignorance was only an affectation, you have the whole thing in a nutshell.

LEONORA. It must be fascinating work, unearthing everybody's rattling little skeletons and fitting them together like Meccano. What about himself?

BARBARA. How do you mean?

LEONORA. Does he know all about himself right

from the beginning? Is everything cut and dried and accounted for?

BARBARA. I expect so.

LEONORA. And you? Has he a chart of you hanging up over his desk?

BARBARA. He doesn't need a chart of me, Leonora.

LEONORA. Something in your manner tells me that I've gone too far—— Oh dear—I didn't mean to—don't be cross.

BARBARA (*smiling*). I'm not in the least cross.

LEONORA. I suppose he'd know all about me in a minute, wouldn't he? The very first second he clapped eyes on me.

BARBARA. Certainly.

LEONORA. How terrifying.

BARBARA. Don't pretend, Leonora, I'm perfectly sure you're not terrified of anyone.

LEONORA. Do his patients fall in love with him?

BARBARA. Practically always.

LEONORA. Don't you hate that?

BARBARA. You are funny, Leonora.

LEONORA. Am I? Nicely funny or nastily funny?

BARBARA. Charmingly funny.

LEONORA (*rises and moves down stage, looking at the room*). Oh dear, I can't wait to see him, do tell someone to hurry him up, I shall have to go in a minute. He hasn't got a moustache, has he? (*She goes to the cocktail table and puts down her glass.*)

BARBARA. No.

LEONORA. Beard?

BARBARA. No beard.

LEONORA. Tall or short?

BARBARA. Short.

LEONORA. Fat?

BARBARA. Not exactly fat, let's say a little podgy.

LEONORA. Oh, Barbara!

BARBARA. He has very little chance of getting exercise, you see; still, he does his best with those things in the bathroom——

LEONORA (*horrified*). What things ? (*Leaning on the back of the upstage armchair L.*)

BARBARA. You know, they're attached to the wall and you gasp and strain and they snap back again—he has a rowing machine too.

LEONORA. I know, I've seen them in gymnasiums on ships.

BARBARA. He finds it very effective.

LEONORA. You're lying, aren't you ?

BARBARA. Yes, Leonora.

LEONORA. I suppose he's eight feet high and absolutely bewitching.

BARBARA. If you care for long black moustaches, yes.

LEONORA. I've made up my mind to fall in love with him on sight.

BARBARA. He's quite used to that.

LEONORA (*sits on the arm of the upstage armchair*). You're positively smug about him, Barbara—tell me seriously—do you really adore him ?

BARBARA. I love him very much.

LEONORA. How marvellous. And does he love you ?

BARBARA. Really, Leonora !

LEONORA (*rising*). I know I'm behaving badly, do forgive me— (*At the fire.*) Darling, I think I'd like just another little sip if there's any more in the shaker—

BARBARA (*rising*). It's practically full— (*She crosses to the cocktail table.*)

(BARBARA *re-fills her glass*. CHRISTIAN FABER *comes into the room from the door up L. He is about forty years old, tall and thin. He moves quickly and decisively as though there was never quite enough time for all he had to do.*)

LEONORA. At last ! (*She gets down stage by the fireplace, facing up stage.*)

CHRISTIAN (*surprised*). What ? (*He gets to L.C.*)

BARBARA. This is Mrs. Vail, Chris, one of my oldest friends. We were at school together—

CHRISTIAN (*absently*). Oh—how do you do. (*He goes and shakes hands.*)

BARBARA. Cocktail?

CHRISTIAN. No, I've got some more work to do.
(*He moves up to BARBARA.*)

LEONORA. I think it only fair that you should know that until Barbara disillused me I thought that you were a chiropracter.

CHRISTIAN (*smiling perfunctorily*). Did you really?
(*To BARBARA.*) Listen, dear, we are dining with Mary to-night, aren't we?

BARBARA. Yes.

CHRISTIAN. Well, you go without me and tell her I'll come in for coffee—

BARBARA (*laughing*). She knows that already, darling, she told me on the telephone this morning.

CHRISTIAN (*with a smile*). Mary is one of the most intelligent women I know.

LEONORA (*with slightly forced impudence*). I also thought you had a long moustache!

CHRISTIAN (*not quite understanding*). What—?

BARBARA (*quickly*). Moustache, dear, Leonora thought you had a moustache.

CHRISTIAN (*with a completely empty smile*). No—I haven't a moustache.

(*He bows politely and goes out up L.*)

LEONORA. I'd rather he was a chiropracter. (*She crosses back to the sofa.*)

BARBARA. Never mind.

LEONORA (*below R. end of sofa*). He didn't even see me, I do think it's a shame.

BARBARA (*at L. end of sofa*). He saw you all right.

LEONORA. You're being superior again, it's odious of you.

BARBARA. When do you want us to come and dine?

LEONORA. I shan't even ask him, I like the other young man much better, Tim whatever his name was, bring him instead—next Wednesday?

BARBARA (*going behind the desk to get her book from it*). Wait a minute.

LEONORA (*R. of the desk*). Do you want to go to a play or just sit and talk?

BARBARA. I don't mind a bit, whichever you like—but I'd rather make it Thursday.

LEONORA. All right—Thursday—we'll decide whether to go out or not later. (*Putting on her gloves.*)

BARBARA. That'll be lovely.

LEONORA. I really must go now——

BARBARA. You're sure you wouldn't like to stay and have your bones set or anything?

LEONORA. No, I've given up the whole idea.

BARBARA. What whole idea?

LEONORA. About falling madly in love with your husband and him falling madly in love with me and then me having a lovely "old friends together" scene with you and everyone behaving beautifully and making sacrifices all round——

BARBARA. What's your telephone number?

LEONORA. You're not going to put me off, are you?

BARBARA. Don't be so silly, of course not.

LEONORA. Kensington three-three-eight-two.

BARBARA (*scribbling it down*). Kensington three-three-eight-two.

LEONORA. I'll expect you on Thursday—about eight?

BARBARA. Do you really want me to ask Tim?

LEONORA. Of course, he's an angel, and bring your old chiropodist too if he'll come—— (*Going to the door.*)

BARBARA (*laughingly, as they go out*). I'll try to persuade him——

(*Their voices are heard talking and laughing in the hall.*)

TIM comes in up L. and goes over to the desk. He rummages about on it. BARBARA returns.)

Oh, Tim, you made me jump. What are you doing?

TIM. Is there a Bible in the house?

BARBARA (*coming to R. of desk*). I suppose there must be somewhere. Whatever do you want it for?

TIM. Chris wants a quotation to use in his lecture on Friday——

BARBARA. Does he know a special one——?

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