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SF PERUSALS

STILL LIFE

A Play in Five Scenes

by Noël Coward

SAMUEL FRENCH

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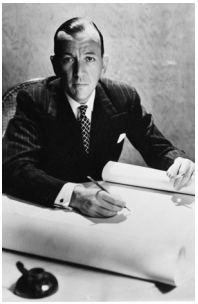
ABOUT THE AUTHOR



Noël Peirce Coward was born in 1899 and made his professional stage debut as Prince Mussel in The Goldfish at the age of 12, 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.

STILL LIFE

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

LAURA JESSON	Gertrude Lawrence
MYRTLE BAGOT	Joyce Carey
BERYL WATERS	Moya Nugent
STANLEY	Kenneth Carten
ALBERT GODRY	Alan Webb
ALEC HARVEY	Noël Coward
YOUNG MAN	Charles Peters
BILL	Edward Underdown
JOHNNIE	Anthony Pelissier
MILDRED	Betty Hare
DOLLY MESSITER	Everley Gregg

The action of the play takes place in the refreshment room of Milford Junction Station.

Time – the present.


GUINNESS
TIME

Scene One

The scene is the refreshment room of Milford Junction Station.

On the right of the stage is a curved counter piled with glass cases containing sandwiches, rock cakes, etc. There are rows of teacups and glasses symmetrically arranged, an expression of the fanciful side of **MYRTLE***'s imagination. Schweppes' bottles of soda and tonic water have been placed in circles and squares. Even the rock cakes mount each other on the glass stands in a disciplined pattern. There is a metal machine which gushes hot tea, a sort of cylindrical samovar.*

For drinking hours there are the usual appurtenances for the drawing of draught beer, and the wall behind the counter, except for a door up stage, is lined with looking-glass shelves supporting bottles, packets of chocolate, packets of cigarettes, etc.

There are two windows in the left wall. Between them is a door leading on to the platform. There is a table against the back wall, a stove in the corner, and two more tables against the left-hand wall. There are several advertisements and calendars in frames, and on each table is a vase containing very bright artificial flowers.

See photograph of scene.

MYRTLE BAGOT *herself is a buxom and imposing widow. Her hair is piled high, and her expression reasonably jaunty, except on those occasions when her strong sense of refinement gets the better of her.* **BERYL WATERS**, *her assistant, is pretty but dimmed, not only by* **MYRTLE***'s personal effulgence, but by her firm authority.*

When the curtain rises it is about 5.25 *p.m. on an evening in April. The evening sunlight streams through the*

left-hand windows, illuminating gaily the paraphernalia on the counter.

A **YOUNG MAN** *in a mackintosh is finishing his tea at the upstage centre table and reading an evening paper.* **LAURA JESSON** *is sitting at the downstage table, having tea. She is an attractive woman in the thirties. Her clothes are not particularly smart, but obviously chosen with taste. She looks exactly what she is – a pleasant, ordinary married woman, rather pale, for she is not very strong, and with the definite charm of personality which comes from natural kindliness, humour and reasonable conscience. She is reading a Boots library book at which she occasionally smiles. On the chair beside her there are several parcels, as she has been shopping.*

STANLEY *enters from the platform. He wears a seedy green uniform and carries a tray strapped to his shoulders. He goes to the counter. He addresses* **MYRTLE** *with becoming respect;* **BERYL**, *however, he winks at lewdly whenever the opportunity occurs.*

STANLEY I'm out of "Maries", Mrs. Bagot, and I could do with some more Nestlé's plain.

MYRTLE *(scrutinising the tray)* Let me see.

STANLEY An old girl on the four-ten asked if I'd got an ice-cream wafer. I didn't 'arf laugh.

MYRTLE I don't see that there was anything to laugh at – a very natural request on a faine day.

STANLEY What did she think I was – a "Stop me and buy one"?

BERYL *sniggers.*

MYRTLE Be quiet, Beryl – and as for you, Stanley, don't you be saucy. You were saucy when you started to work here, and you've been getting saucier and saucier ever since. Here you

are— *(She gives him some packets of biscuits and Nestlé's chocolate)* Go on, now.

STANLEY *(cheerfully)* All right! All right!

He winks at **BERYL** *and goes out.*

MYRTLE And see here, Beryl Waters, I'll trouble you to remember you're on duty—

BERYL I didn't do anything.

MYRTLE Exactly – you just stand there giggling like a fool. Did you make out that list?

BERYL Yes, Mrs. Bagot.

MYRTLE Where is it?

BERYL I put it on your desk.

MYRTLE Where's your cloth?

BERYL Here, Mrs. Bagot.

MYRTLE Well, go and clean off Number Three. I can see the crumbs on it from here.

BERYL It's them rock cakes.

MYRTLE Never you mind about the rock cakes; just you do as you're told and don't argue.

BERYL *goes to clean the table up left.* **ALBERT GODBY** *enters. He is a ticket inspector, somewhere between thirty and forty. His accent is North Country.*

ALBERT Hullo! Hullo! Hullo!

MYRTLE Quite a stranger, aren't you?

ALBERT I couldn't get in yesterday.

MYRTLE *(bridling)* I wondered what had happened to you.

ALBERT I 'ad a bit of a dust-up.

MYRTLE *(preparing his tea)* What about?

ALBERT Saw a chap getting out of a first-class compartment, and when he come to give up 'is ticket it was third class, and I told 'im he'd 'ave to pay excess, and then he turned a bit nasty and I 'ad to send for Mr. Saunders.

MYRTLE Fat lot of good he'd be.

ALBERT He ticked him off proper.

MYRTLE Seein's believing—

ALBERT He's not a bad lot, Mr. Saunders; after all, you can't expect much spirit from a man who's only got one lung and a wife with diabetes.

MYRTLE I thought something must be wrong when you didn't come.

ALBERT I'd have popped in to explain, but I had a date and 'ad to run for it the moment I went off.

MYRTLE *(frigidly)* Oh, indeed!

ALBERT A chap I know's getting married.

MYRTLE Very interesting, I'm sure.

ALBERT What's up with you, anyway?

MYRTLE I'm sure I don't know to what you're referring.

ALBERT You're a bit unfriendly all of a sudden.

MYRTLE *(ignoring him)* Beryl, hurry up – put some coal in the stove while you're at it.

BERYL Yes, Mrs. Bagot.

MYRTLE I'm afraid I really can't stand here wasting my time in idle gossip, Mr. Godby.

ALBERT Aren't you going to offer me another cup?

MYRTLE You can 'ave another cup and welcome when you've finished that one. Beryl'll give it to you – I've got my accounts to do.

ALBERT I'd rather you gave it to me.

MYRTLE Time and taide wait for no man, Mr. Godby.

ALBERT I don't know what you're huffy about, but whatever it is I'm very sorry.

MYRTLE You misunderstand me – I'm not—

ALEC HARVEY *enters. He is about thirty-five. He wears a moustache, a mackintosh and a squash hat, and he carries a small bag. His manner is decisive and unflurried.*

ALEC A cup of tea, please.

MYRTLE Certainly. *(She pours it out in silence)* Cake or pastry?

ALEC No, thank you.

MYRTLE Threepence.

ALEC *(paying)* Thank you.

He takes his cup of tea and goes over to the table up left. He takes off his hat and sits down. **LAURA** *glances at the clock, collects her parcels in a leisurely manner and goes out on to the platform.* **BERYL** *returns to her place behind the counter.*

BERYL Minnie hasn't touched her milk.

MYRTLE Did you put it down for her?

BERYL Yes, but she never came in for it.

MYRTLE Go out the back and see if she's in the yard

BERYL *goes.*

ALBERT *(conversationally)* Fond of animals?

MYRTLE In their place.

ALBERT My landlady's got a positive mania for animals – she's got two cats, one Manx and one ordinary; three rabbits in a hutch in the kitchen, they belong to her little boy by rights; and one of them foolish-looking dogs with hair over his eyes.

MYRTLE I don't know to what breed you refer.

ALBERT I don't think it knows itself—

There is a rumbling noise in the distance, and the sound of a bell.

MYRTLE There's the boat train.

There is a terrific clatter as the express roars through the station.

ALBERT What about my other cup? – I shall have to be moving – the five forty-three will be in in a minute.

MYRTLE Who's on the gate? *(She pours him out another cup)*

ALBERT Young William.

MYRTLE You're neglecting your duty, you know – that's what you're doing.

ALBERT A bit of relaxation never did anyone any harm—

LAURA *enters hurriedly, holding a handkerchief to her eye.*

LAURA Please could you give me a glass of water? I've got something in my eye and I want to bathe it.

MYRTLE Would you like me to have a look?

LAURA Please don't trouble. I think the water will do it.

MYRTLE *(handing her a glass of water)* Here.

MYRTLE *and* **ALBERT** *watch her in silence as she bathes her eye.*

ALBERT Bit of coal-dust, I expect.

MYRTLE A man I knew lost the sight of one eye through getting a bit of grit in it.

ALBERT Nasty thing – very nasty.

MYRTLE *(as* **LAURA** *lifts her head)* Better?

LAURA *(obviously in pain).* I'm afraid not – oh!

ALEC *rises from his table and comes over.*

ALEC Can I help you?

LAURA Oh, no, please – it's only something in my eye.

MYRTLE Try pulling down your eyelid as far as it'll go.

ALBERT And then blowing your nose.

ALEC Please let me look. I happen to be a doctor.

LAURA It's very kind of you.

ALEC Turn round to the light, please – now – look up – now look down – I can see it. Keep still— *(He twists up the corner of his handkerchief and rapidly operates with it)* There—

LAURA *(blinking)* Oh, dear – what a relief – it was agonising.

ALEC It looks like a bit of grit.

LAURA It was when the express went through. Thank you very much indeed—

ALEC Not at all.

There is the sound of a bell on the platform.

ALBERT *(gulping down his tea)* There we go – I must run.

LAURA How lucky for me that you happened to be here.

ALEC Anybody could have done it.

LAURA Never mind, you did, and I'm most grateful. There's my train. Goodbye.

She puts out her hand and **ALEC** *shakes it politely. She goes out, followed at a run by* **ALBERT GODBY**. **ALEC** *looks after her for a moment and then goes back to his table. There is the noise of the train rumbling into the station as the lights fade.*

Scene Two

The scene is the same and the time is about the same. Nearly three months have passed since the preceding scene, and it is now July.

MYRTLE *is resplendent in a light overall;* **BERYL***'s appearance is unaltered. The tables are all unoccupied.*

MYRTLE *(slightly relaxed in manner)* It's all very fane, I said, expecting me to do this, that and the other, but what do *I* get out of it? You can't expect me to be a cook-housekeeper and char rolled into one during the day, and a loving wife in the evening, just because you feel like it. Oh, dear, no. There are just as good fish in the sea, I said, as ever came out of it, and I packed my boxes then and there and left him.

BERYL Didn't you ever go back?

MYRTLE Never. I went to my sister's place at Folkestone for a bit, and then I went in with a friend of mine and we opened a teashop in Hythe.

BERYL And what happened to him?

MYRTLE Dead as a doornail inside three years.

BERYL Well, I never!

MYRTLE So you see, every single thing she told me came true – first, them clubs coming together, an unexpected journey; then the Queen of Diamonds and the ten – that was my friend and the teashop business; then the Ace of Spades three times running—

STANLEY *enters.*

STANLEY Two rock and an apple.

MYRTLE What for?

STANLEY Party on the up platform.

MYRTLE Why can't they come in here for them?

WAIT, THERE'S MORE!

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