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The Stubbs

A comedy

Steve Harper

Samuel French—London
www.samuel french-london.co.uk



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ISBN 978 0 573 12255 2

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THE STUBBS

First performed at The Princess Theatre, Hunstanton, on 13th
July 2012 with the following cast of characters:

Bill	Victor Tucker
Ethel	Anne Hyder
Violet	Evangelina Page
Trevor	Robert Hornet
Mrs Miller	Kathy Philipot
Toby Miller	Jack Hurst

Directed by Steve Harper
Designed by Steve Harper

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CHARACTERS

Bill
Ethel
Violet
Trevor
Mrs Miller
Toby Miller

The action takes place in the sitting-room of the lodge of
Blennington Hall

SCENE 1 An afternoon in May

SCENE 2 Twenty-four hours later

Time—the present

Also by Steve Harper published by Samuel French

Lions and Donkeys

THE STUBBS

A play about being careful of what you wish for

The Browns' sitting-room. An afternoon in May

We are in the Browns' sitting-room which is in the lodge cottage of Blennington Hall. There is an external door L, and the door to the kitchen R. On the back wall is a chimney breast and fireplace. The furniture has seen better days, and comprises a settee, a coffee table plus other assorted small pieces. The room is decorated with three or four cheap prints of framed "garish" art. A Tretchikoff (The Chinese Lady in Yellow Jacket) is over the mantelpiece, there is also a wall mirror near the door to the kitchen. Oh yes, and hidden away to the right of the chimney breast is a small George Stubbs oil painting of a racehorse in a gilt frame, circa 1798

William Brown sits in the settee with one shoe off contemplating a large hole in the toe of his sock and holding a tube of bunion cream

Ethel Brown, his wife, enters laden with plates and tea cups for afternoon tea that she arranges on the coffee table after removing Bill's shoe

Bill Just look at this, I only had these at Christmas. Five months wear and they need darning.

Ethel (*arranging plates*) I think you'll find that darning went out with powdered egg and doodle bugs, dearest. I believe what today's gentleman about town does, is visit Marks and Spencer's fine emporium where he purchases a new pair.

Bill A new pair, but these only need a bit of mending, oh come on, Ethel, you'll weave your bit of magic with your sewing box and fix 'em, won't you? My mother used to ...

Ethel Your mother, William, sainted woman though she was, could not perform miracles. (*Examining the sock distastefully*) What you would need to weave to resurrect these is not magic but Axminster. Throw them out. (*She looks at her watch*) But not right away. Right now, put your shoe on and get rid of the ointment. Violet is due back any time now with her new young man.

Bill (*putting the ointment away*) Spend, spend, spend, that's your answer to everything. You know what my old dad used to say: "Look after the pennies, and the pounds look after themselves". We need a back-up fund for our old age.

Ethel How many times have I heard this one? Look, we are not that short. Why don't we lash out, a holiday, a car ... new socks. Come on, William, how much is in your little bank book now?

Bill Ah, wouldn't you like to know. A damn site more than if we squandered it on new cars, holidays and new teeth for you.

Ethel (*examining her teeth in the mirror*) What do you mean new teeth, what's wrong with my teeth. You never mentioned my teeth before. They're good teeth they are.

Bill All I'm saying is, that if we want to retire to the seaside, like we talked about, we need a back-up fund. Do you know what you get for an old age pension now?

Ethel I haven't time to argue with you now. Violet will be here any minute.

Bill puts his shoe on

Ethel retreats to her kitchen, only to re-appear with a plate of sandwiches

Bill Oh sandwiches, are there any egg? I like egg.

Ethel There are some egg mayonnaise with black pepper and a dash of paprika.

Bill Ughhh. Ham then, any ham? You got some of that crumbed ham from Arkwright's, I saw the packet. He does do a nice bit of ham old Arkwright, even if his sausages are rubbish.

Ethel Yes, them, the brown ones near the middle.

Bill goes to take one, but has his hand slapped

Don't even think about it. These are for Violet's young man.

Bill What's he called again ?

Ethel He's called Trevor, Trevor Watson. You know sometimes I wonder if you listen to a word we say. We've been over this again and again.

Bill Oh yes, well let's see. He works in the big auction house near the river, er ... Anchor's.

Ethel And ...

Bill And it's his birthday, so Violet's bringing him here before they go out.

Ethel And ...

Bill And, er, Violet met him at her evening class. And his family is very hoity-toity and he went to some public school.

Ethel Winchester.

Bill Yeah, Winchester. He'll feel right at home here I shouldn't wonder. Sorry what I said about your teeth.

Ethel immediately turns to re-examine her teeth in the mirror, where-upon Bill pops a ham sandwich into his mouth

Ethel Oi! I saw that.

Doorbell

Bill They're here, blimey talk about saved by the bell.

Violet and Trevor enter R

Violet No need to ring the bell, silly. Mum, Dad, this is Trevor. Trevor this is my mum and dad.

Trevor Oh good afternoon, Mr Brown. (*He shakes hands*) Violet has told me so much about you. She didn't mention that you had a much younger wife though.

Ethel (*tittering*) Oh really now, Trevor, I'm not that much younger. And you must call us Ethel and William ... or Bill.

Bill There's only eight months between us ...

Ethel Oh Bill, now stop, do. I hope you're feeling hungry, Trevor, we thought we would have afternoon tea today.

Trevor Starving

Violet I thought we were having tea on the lawn ?

Bill No, it's going to rain.

Trevor Oh do you think so, er ... Bill.

Bill Yes, I do. I've got this bunion see, never fails, been giving me gyp all day. I was only just putting some cream on before you arrived.

Trevor Oh, (*looking at the hand he shook with Bill*) jolly good.

Ethel It will be nice to have it in here though, in the lounge.

Violet Yes of course, Mum, It was just that I was telling Trevor about the view of the hall from our back garden.

Trevor That's right, Blennington Hall, amazing old house, dates back to the sixteenth century apparently.

Bill Some of it does, a lot's been knocked down, and re-built. Cromwell took out the old tower with a bloody great cannon. Hitler managed to have a go at the west wing. The storm of '87 brought an oak down on the conservatory, and death watch beetle is doing its damndest to bring down parts of the old roof.

Violet Dad's quite an authority on Blennington.

Ethel And can talk for hours about it.

Trevor Have you lived here very long then, Bill?

Bill My dad was the handyman up there from 1943 right up to 1988.

Trevor Oh a handyman. So he came back during the war?

Bill Yes, he came back minus an arm, never thought he would get work, but old Lord Blennington had served in the same regiment and wasn't going to see Dad unemployed. I lived here all my life until I got married in '75. After Mum and Dad died the new Lord Blennington let Ethel and me have the cottage.

Ethel I come from Harrington, so when Bill and I were married we'd come over and see his parents. I know the hall quite well because Bill used to help his dad out when there was a two man job to be done.

Trevor You didn't take over from him then, Bill?

Violet Oh no, Dad had his own business by then.

Trevor So what do you do, Bill ?

Bill I'm a painter.

Trevor A painter, now that is interesting, where's your studio?

Pause

Oh you mean ...

Ethel He's the best painter and decorator in the county. He's done gold leaf and all-sorts.

Trevor Ah, emulsion rather than oils then.

Bill I do gloss work as well you know.

Ethel What about you, Trevor, what do you do?

Trevor Well, after Oxford Father managed to get me a post with Anchor's, he knows one of the partners. They're one of the better auction houses, do a lot of sub-contracting work for Sotheby's as a matter of fact. I'm in the fine art section, we do evaluations and category work, as well as sales. We deal with art worth millions.

Bill Blimey.

Ethel And you two are doing the same evening class?

Trevor Yes, Italian.

Violet We're doing conversations; *Nei Restorante* this week, Dad.

Bill Very nice. Go on then, say something in Eye-tie.

Trevor Oh, let's see. *Tesoro Viola, quanto tempo dobbiamo rimanere con loro?* [Violet darling, how long do we have to stay with them?]

Violet *Pazienza, sono andato a molta difficolta per il vostro compleanno.* [Patience, they have gone to a lot of trouble.]

Bill That's good What did you say?

Ethel Trevor asked how long he has to stay, and Violet told him to be patient.

Trevor (*aghast*) Oh, you speak Italian, Ethel.

Ethel Yes, done it at school for O level.

Trevor I feel rather silly now, but we are trying to practise whenever we can.

Ethel Yes, well I suppose it's all very handy for holidays and your work of course, Trevor. Lot of them painters was Italian weren't they? Some of them was very good, but my favourite is Mr Tretchikoff. He painted that one we've got over the fire-place. If you look, her eyes seem to follow you round the room.

Trevor Ah yes, The "Chinese Girl in Yellow Jacket", I believe.

Ethel Yes that's right. Oh Bill, Trevor knows about our picture.

Bill I don't know a lot about art, but I do know what I like. They wouldn't have it up at the hall. But then I wouldn't want half them old gloomy things they got up there.

Trevor I'd love to have a look at their collection, I don't suppose —

Ethel (*quickly*) Right, let's get this tea organized, come on Violet, give me a hand.

Violet All right, Mum.

Violet and Ethel exit through to the kitchen

Bill So birthday boy today then, Trevor?

Trevor That's right. *Tempus fugit* as they say.

Pause

Look, Bill, I know you probably think I'm a bit of a "hooray", but Vi and I just, well really sort of hit it off from day one. That's not long, but for me she's a bit special, and I'd like to think I can offer her a bit more out of life.

Bill Oh yes, and what would that be then?

Trevor Well, the finer things, Bill, travel, money, a chance to move with the right set.

Bill And she wants these things, does she?

Trevor Oh Lord yes, I mean who wouldn't.

Bill So you have discussed this with her then?

Trevor No not yet, we've only just got to know each other. But I just thought it's better that we clear the air, you and I. I mean you're old school, Bill, different values. Whereas Violet and I are up for it. We want it all, and we want it now as the song goes.

Bill Yes, I think we understand each other now, Trevor. Thank you for that.

Trevor I knew you'd see it my way. Look, Bill, my father gave me this rather grand hip flask; and there's a drop of pretty good brandy in it, I don't suppose I could tempt you with a little?

Bill It's a bit early, but go on then, why not. It would be rather rude to refuse a drink on your birthday.

Trevor Any glasses?

Bill (*getting two tumblers from the mantelpiece*) These any good? (*He gets a grubby handkerchief from his pocket and gives them a good wipe*)

Trevor Good enough for five-star brandy, Bill ... (*He pours two generous measures*) Bottoms up!

Bill Cheers. (*He sits down*) Blimey that is a good drop of stuff.

Trevor I think we could go another, don't you?

Bill Most kind ...

They drink again

Trevor Might as well finish it off, Bill, here allow me. (*He pours a third measure for them both*) So, tell me, Bill, the Blenningtons have looked after your family over the years?

Bill (*slightly the worse for the brandy*) That's right, but it worked both ways. The old man made sure Dad had work when he was invalided out of the army and they got on pretty well all things considered. His son let Ethel and me stay on here after Dad's death, but we've had our uses.

Trevor How's that then?

Bill Well my old dad saved Lord Blennington's life you know.

Trevor No!

Bill He did, true as I'm sitting here. September 1944. Rescued him from a Junkers 88.

Trevor (*also feeling a little drunk*) No way ! Hang on, he wasn't even fighting in '44, and old Lord Blennington must have been over seventy.

Bill No, they wasn't on the front line, you tit. They was here, the Junkers was probably limping home after a raid, drops a single bomb, got lucky and hit the west wing of the hall.

Trevor Wow.

Bill Old Blennington goes scuttling down there, gets trapped in the burning cellar, and my dad rescued him, didn't he. Only had the one arm, but dragged his lordship clear of the fire, then bugger me he only goes back to drag out some of the treasures they sent up from London.

Trevor Treasures, Bill?

Bill (*after a pause*) Yeah. Well I shouldn't be talking about it really, but the war's been over a fair bit, don't suppose it's an official secret anymore.

Trevor This is intriguing stuff, Bill, you're sure you're not making this up?

Bill No. My old man told me the story himself. Old Lord Blennington was a mate of Churchill's. Served in South Africa together, didn't they. And Churchill knew the old man was a collector.

Trevor A collector?

Bill Paintings, real old ones.

Trevor So?

Bill So, Churchill's worried that the national art treasures will get destroyed in the blitz. So he sends them out to safe houses all over the country. Some went down Welsh mines, some went up to Scotland ... and some of them came here.

Trevor Wow.

Bill Anyway Churchill knew that the old man would know about storage conditions and the like. Can't have your Rembrandts getting soggy. So a big truck load of stuff from the National Gallery turns up here with an army escort, and my dad helps carry it down to the cellars under the west wing.

Trevor What were the paintings?

Bill I don't know, Dad said they was all crated up. Everything is signed for in triplicate, witnessed and signed for again. Foolproof really; well apart from a Junkers 88.

Trevor So it was all destroyed in the fire.

Bill Some was, but then the rest of the staff, and the local fire brigade, turned up and a lot was rescued. All the other crates got moved away. Don't know where they went, but old lord Bennington was pretty upset. Apparently he blamed himself. Least that's what he wanted people to think.

Trevor Go on.

Bill Any more of that brandy left?

Trevor Yes, I think there's enough for one more. Here you go.
(*He pours the drink*)

Bill Ta. My old dad reckoned that not all the paintings that was reported as blown up, was blown up, if you get my drift.

Trevor Oh come on, Bill, this is getting to be a pretty tall tale. Listen, I'm in the art world, I think I would have heard about a massive art fraud like this if it were all true, don't you?

Bill You would have heard about it, son, if anybody believed it was true or if any of the paintings had gone back up for sale. But they never did. I told you, his lordship was a collector, he had enough money, didn't want to flog them. They might just as well have been blown up ...

Trevor No I'm sorry, Bill, I reckon you inherited your dad's ability to tell a good story, but that's all it is.

Ethel and Violet enter with tea, cakes and a gift-wrapped package

Ethel You was right, Bill, started to rain heavy now.

Violet You boys getting on all right?

Trevor Yes, we shared a drop of my birthday brandy, and Bill's been keeping me amused with some of his tall tales.

Bill I told you, Sonny-Jim, they ain't stories, it's what happened.

Ethel William Brown, where are your manners. You're always the same you are. You get a bit of drink in you, and you come over all argumentative. Now if Trevor's been kind enough to share his brandy with you I think the least you can do is say sorry. Well I never heard the like.

Trevor No, that's fine, Bill was just telling me about the bombing in 1944.

Ethel William, I think we'll say no more about the war, all right!

Bill Wasn't making it up. *(He gets up and walks to the fireplace)*

Violet Sorry, Trevor, Dad can get a bit maudlin at times. Anyway this is from all of us, happy birthday. *(She proffers the gift-wrapped package)*

Trevor Oh thank you. *(He opens the wrapping paper)* Oh, a tie, lovely.

Violet Yes, it's silk and it's got little anchors on it, so you can wear it to work ...

Trevor Ah yes, as in Anchor's Auctioneers.

Ethel But see, we also had your initial put on to personalize it. We had it done on the internet, W for Watson.

Trevor Just so. Well not many of the chaps at work will have a tie with W Anchor on it, that's for sure.

Ethel Oh I'm pleased you like it. Right I'll be Mum. Tea, Trevor?

Trevor Yes please.

Violet Help yourself to sandwiches and cake.

They do so

Bill takes the small gilt-framed picture from the wall on the right side of the fireplace and shows it to Trevor

Bill Right, if it was all stories, how did my dad end up with this then?

Violet Mum.

Ethel William Brown, now you are just being plain rude. You are spoiling what was going to be a nice afternoon, waving

your dad's old horse picture around at Trevor like that. Now sit down and be nice, and if you can't do that —

Trevor takes the picture and stares at it, incredulous

Trevor Where did you get this from?

Bill I told you old Lord Blennington had a few of them destroyed paintings snaffled away before you could say knife. Dad got given this to keep him quiet after he helped shift them all. He reckoned it reminded him of the 1940 Derby winner that he won five bob on.

Trevor But this is a Stubbs.

Ethel No dear, it's definitely an 'orse.

Trevor I know this picture, I've seen prints of it, it was in the National.

Bill That's right until it was destroyed in an air-raid in 1944. Only like I keep telling you, it weren't.

Violet Trevor, you don't have to look at Dad's old painting, not on your birthday.

Trevor No, you don't understand, any of you. This is a Stubbs, it could be worth ... (*bit of quick thinking*) ... thousands of pounds.

Ethel No, what that old thing?

Trevor Yes, I'd have to verify its authenticity of course, but —

Bill No, we don't want to sell it, I was just showing you it so that you knew I wasn't making it all up.

Violet There, Dad doesn't want to sell, so we can get on with our tea, then go out dancing like you said.

Ethel He might not want to sell it; but if it's worth that much ...

Trevor Exactly. The problem is of course provenance.

Ethel And what's that when it's at home?

Trevor Ownership.

Bill Well it's ours, been on that hook in the corner for, well must be over sixty years.

Trevor Yes, but having it on your wall for that length of time doesn't give you any right to sell it, Bill.

Bill Fair enough, I'll put it back.

Trevor No, there might be a way round that.

Ethel How's that then?

Violet Nothing illegal, Trevor, these are my parents we're talking about.

Trevor Oh sure. Vi. But it's just that I know this, er, lady, who has bought the odd piece off of me in the past, without too many questions into their origins.

Bill But I don't want to sell, it was my dad's old painting.

Ethel Don't you stand there griping about the bloody price of socks when we've got an easier life staring us in the face. It must be ten years since you've taken that old thing down, look at the wallpaper behind it, I feel quite ashamed.

Trevor I would need to take it away to check it out.

Bill What do you mean?

Trevor Well it could be a forgery.

Violet So how would you know?

Trevor We have this machine at work called a chromatic spectrum analyzer.

Violet What does that do?

Trevor I burn a small amount of the sample.

Bill Now hold on, I'm not letting you burn my dad's painting.

Trevor Not the painting, Bill, just the dust and varnish flakes from inside the frame. That shows me the chemicals and trace elements present. I know what chemicals should be there for canvas, paint and varnish that's two hundred years old, and this will prove it within five years either way.

Ethel And how long would this take?

Trevor Well if I started right away, and do the necessary paper research as well, I could probably have an answer in twenty-four hours.

Violet Only we're going dancing ...

Trevor Sorry, old thing, but this is much more important.

Violet But you promised ...Well thank you very much.

Violet slams out R

Ethel Don't mind her, Trevor, you got plenty of nights to go dancing after you sorted all this.

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