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Gone Up In Smoke

A Thriller

Georgina Reid

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CHARACTERS

Rod Lester

Marian Lester

Shelley

Ann

Eric Bowers

Inspector Hardwick

Walter Bowers*

The action takes place in the Lesters' drawing-room at Crockett's Public School for Girls

ACT I SCENE 1 Six o'clock on November the fifth

SCENE 2 Evening, five weeks later

ACT II SCENE 1 Next afternoon

SCENE 2 Ten minutes later

Time—the present

* This character should appear in your programme but is, in fact, doubled by the same actor playing Eric Bowers

ACT I*

The Lesters' drawing-room at Crockett's Public School for Girls. Six o'clock. November the fifth

It is a pleasant, unpretentious, lived-in sort of room with school photos on the walls and plenty of books in various places. There is a french window, L, with curtains drawn. Below this is a large knee-hole desk with piles of exercise books on it. UL is a large, high-backed swivel chair and there is a table for drinks against the back wall. There is a door to the hall, UR, and a sofa DR, with a large box of fireworks on it. There is a shield on the wall with the school motto on it. In the centre of the stage, well back, is a wheelchair in which is seated a life-sized, very realistic guy. If it were not for his pink plastic mask he would look almost human. He wears a battered old hat, a scarf, a dark jacket and trousers, woolly mittens on his hands but no shoes on his feet

Two schoolgirls in school uniform are standing in silence, gazing at the guy in admiration. They are both about seventeen years old and wear the badge of prefect. They are both well-spoken girls. Ann is rather plain, serious and retiring. Shelley is a pretty, giggly extrovert. They are both holding piles of exercise books

Shelley circles round the guy, observing him from all angles

Shelley Isn't he absolutely fantastic!

Ann Marvellous. Mrs Lester made him.

Shelley She's a clever girl, is our Marian.

Ann Sh! She'll hear you!

Shelley Wherever did she get this dreadful old hat? A jumble sale?

Ann More likely the staff cloakroom.

Shelley That jacket is Mr Lester's. I've seen him wearing it at weekends.

Ann It's awfully tatty and shapeless.

Shelley It never looked shapeless on *him*. He could look sexy in an old sack.

Ann Sh!

Shelley He really is an adorable guy. He's nearly as adorable as Mr Lester.

(She sits on the guy's knee and puts an arm round his neck) Darling Roddy, why is your face so pink?

Ann Shelley, stop it. Somebody might come in.

Shelley He's blushing. He thinks I'm going to kiss him.

Ann Shelley! Don't!

* N.B. Paragraph 3 on page ii of this Acting Edition regarding photocopying and video-recording should be carefully read.

Shelley kisses the guy

Shelley Oh, you gorgeous brute, my heart is pounding with desire. Why are you so unresponsive to my embrace? You do smell funny, my darling. I wonder what you're made of?

Ann I think Mrs Lester said she'd stuffed him with wood shavings from the carpentry room.

Shelley No wonder his lap is a bit lumpy.

Ann Well, get off it, you fool. Someone's coming.

Ann drags Shelley off the guy and she stands up just before the door opens

Roderick Lester enters. He is about thirty-five and is a good-looking, attractive man

Rod Ah, there you are, girls. Sorry to keep you waiting. I was having a second helping of apple pie.

Shelley Oh sir! You won't have room for any of the parkin and toffee apples.

Rod Shelley, I have had many years' experience of these Guy Fawkes' celebrations. I know that while I'm battling with the bangers and wrestling with the rockets, you girls will descend on the food like a swarm of locusts and consume every crumb. So I stoke up in advance. Now, have you brought your essays?

Shelley Yes, sir, I've written four pages.

Rod (*cringing dramatically*) Heaven help me! Four pages of your abominable handwriting to decipher. One would think it was written by a cross-eyed Chinaman. Well, put them at the back of my desk. I've no intention of starting them tonight. Tonight we celebrate. I'm not sure why, are you?

Ann I thought we were celebrating Guy Fawkes trying to blow up the Houses of Parliament.

Rod Oh yes, so he did! And it was a jolly good idea and he deserves eight out of ten for trying. Now—(*he gathers up some different exercise books and hands them over*) you can take back these books for the Lower Fifth. Leave them in my classroom, and at half-past six you can come back and get Laughing Boy. (*He indicates the guy*)

Shelley Oh, he's really too beautiful to burn.

Rod Nonsense. He looks like some elderly relation who has outstayed his welcome. If he sits there much longer, I shall leave home. How many guys are you burning tonight?

Ann At least three, if not more. Jenkins has taken charge of the actual burning and won't let us go near.

Rod The man's drunk with power.

Shelley And that's not all he's drunk with. The cider is flowing freely.

Rod Already? He must have some potent stuff. Don't let me see any of you girls trying any. And remember, there's coffee and hot sausage rolls here, for the prefects, at eight o'clock.

Shelley Yes, sir, thank you.

Rod Now buzz off. You can go through the french windows. It's quicker that way. (*He unlocks the window and lets them out*) And while I think of

it, don't let the juniors come anywhere near my box of tricks. Matron has got loads of sparklers and harmless things they can hold in their hands.

The girls go out

(Calling after them) And Ann! Keep your eye on those Third Formers! They're all budding delinquents! *(He draws back the curtains, watches them go and remains staring into the darkness)*

After a moment his wife, Marian, comes in and stands behind him holding a tray of toffee apples. She is an attractive woman of thirty-five and in many ways she is the dominant partner

Marian Oh, a rocket! I love rockets. Is it one of ours?

Rod It had better not be. They've been threatened with public expulsion if anyone lights so much as a Bengal match before I get there. *They think it's a safety precaution, but it's really because I can't bear to miss anything.*

Marian You're really just a kid, aren't you?

Rod Am I? And who's been making toffee apples all afternoon as if her life depended on it?

Marian The kitchen is overflowing with them. I've got to start laying things out in here. And then there's the sausage rolls for the prefects' little party afterwards. What d'you bet they'll drop them all over our new Wilton carpet?

Rod And tread them in with their dainty little feet.

Marian Can you clear me a surface on your desk, darling?

Rod *(as he clears the desk)* It's hard to explain the universal appeal of toffee apples. They're sticky to hold, it's impossible to make the first bite, and then they dribble most regrettably down one's chin.

Marian But they *look* so lovely—all glossy and dark and perfect.

Rod *(picking one up by the stick)* The bit I like best is the sort of raft of thin, brittle toffee that they sit on. *(He breaks a piece off and eats it)*

Marian Don't, you beast! Who wants to eat an apple after you've had a go at it?

Rod *(putting it back)* No one will see, in the dark.

Marian You hope. Jenkins has got the floodlights working at last.

Rod *(looking out)* That's a blessing. His language was getting so lurid I was afraid for our girls' tender ears.

Marian *(going out)* Tender ears? You must be joking.

She exits and comes back immediately with another tray of toffee apples

Have no fear for the tender ears of those girls. They may come from the best homes in the country, but they know every swear word in the book.

Rod *(taking the tray)* Ah yes, but they say them with such impeccable diction. *(He puts the tray on the drinks table)*

Marian *(seeing the box of fireworks on the sofa)* Oh! You've opened the box of fireworks! *(She sits and examines them, one by one. They are large and expensive)* Oh Rod, how lovely they are! Look at that Catherine Wheel—as big as a dinner plate! Rockets like torpedoes! Whizzbangs, Whirlybirds,—what's this? Satanic Screamer? Gorgeous! Nero's Nightmare.

Halley's Comet. Giant Sunburst. Who pays for all this extravagance?

Rod The parents, of course.

Marian How wonderful it must be to have money. Did *you* have this sort of thing when you were a child?

Rod My school usually put on a good display. Didn't yours?

Marian Not likely. The Bishop Bruce Secondary Modern didn't run to such things. We saved up our pocket money and had a little do in our back yard, but they were nothing compared with this. Our rockets were feeble little things that barely flew over the fence. Our Roman candles sent up a puff of smoke and two coloured balls and that was all. But we enjoyed ourselves. The sparklers were my favourite. A penny packet of sparklers was sheer magic to me.

Rod It still is, you know. The price has gone up but the magic is still the same. Matron's got a whole pile of them, for the juniors.

Marian Good. I shall go and see if I can scrounge a few.

Rod Where did you learn to make such a beautiful guy?

Marian My mother did that every year. Saved up all our old clothes. I used to help her stuff it with torn newspapers. The kids used to come from all the neighbouring streets to help burn our guy. She taught me to make toffee apples too.

Rod I wish I'd known her.

Marian Yes, you'd have liked her. I wish she could have lived to see this place. To see her daughter's husband, teaching at one of the finest public schools in the land. She'd have liked that. (*She pauses shyly*) I hope I don't let you down, Rod.

Rod Let me down?

Marian I'm not out of the same drawer as these girls. Sometimes I feel very conscious of my working class background.

Rod (*moving the guy and chair into the corner of the room*) Nonsense. You couldn't let me down if you tried. You're my idea of the perfect wife. You have beauty, brains and character, and without you I'm a lost soul crying in the wilderness.

Marian D'you mean it?

Rod Every word. I thought you knew.

Marian No. I thought it was just animal passion.

Rod Well, there's that too.

He begins to kiss her with passion but they are interrupted by the door bell

Damn!

Marian Who's that? Are you expecting someone?

Rod I don't think so. November the fifth is a sacred date in *my* diary, as you know.

Marian (*jumping up*) I'll go. You put the fireworks away.

She goes

Rod tidies the fireworks and puts them back in their box

Marian returns with Eric Bowers. He is a rather small, thin man with an

unhappy face. He is about forty-five years old. He wears a dark suit and carries neither hat nor outdoor coat

Darling, this is Mr Bowers. He . . . he'd like to have a word with you.

Behind Bower's back she points to her wrist-watch for Rod's benefit, and goes out

Rod (*extending a hand*) Good-evening, Mr Bowers.

Bowers Good-evening. (*He ignores Rod's outstretched hand and goes across to look out of the window*)

Rod I must warn you that I have an important engagement at six-thirty. (*He looks at his watch*) So I can only spare you a quarter of an hour.

Bowers (*unsmilingly*) A quarter of an hour will be sufficient, Mr Lester. You are Mr Lester, I understand? Roderick Lester, the history master?

Rod (*staring*) Yes.

Bowers I wouldn't want to get the wrong man.

Rod Won't you sit down, Mr . . . er . . . Bowers?

Bowers No, thank you. (*He stares out of the window*) The school appears to be floodlit tonight.

Rod Yes. It's all part of the fun. It looks very fine, doesn't it?

Bowers I used to think so. I've always admired the school buildings and I had great faith in the reputation of the school. When my daughter was born, I was determined that she should be educated here. I pictured her, during her formative years, absorbing all the fine old traditions of the school.

Rod And is she a pupil here?

Bowers She was until a few weeks ago. Sophie Bowers. Perhaps you remember her name?

Rod Oh, of course I do. A delightful girl and very keen on history. I haven't seen her since the half-term holiday. Not ill, I hope?

Bowers (*heavily*) Sophie will not be coming back, Mr Lester.

Rod I'm sorry to hear that, Mr Bowers. If you're . . . dissatisfied with her progress, you really ought to see the headmistress.

Bowers No. It's you I want to see, Mr Lester. I've driven all the way from Birmingham on purpose to see you. (*Pause*) What are all those girls doing, hanging around the playground?

Rod Getting ready for the fireworks, of course.

Bowers Ah. Guy Fawkes night. I'd forgotten. It would be better if they didn't see us. (*He draws the curtains across*)

Rod (*staring*) I don't understand you, Mr Bowers.

Bowers No. probably not. But you will. How many men are there on the staff here at Crockett's?

Rod Er—three. Jordan, Shapcott and myself.

Bowers Has it ever struck you, Mr Lester, that when a man takes a teaching post in an all-girls school he puts himself in a rather special position? They are young and full of romantic notions. A man who looks . . . even

reasonably attractive ... must often find himself the focus of their immature affections.

Rod (*embarrassed*) Of course. It's part of the job that we all come up against from time to time.

Bowers Do you Mr Lester, do you? And when it happens, do you take advantage of it?

Rod Of course not.

Bowers Somebody did, Mr Lester. Somebody who my girl admired took advantage of his position in the vilest possible manner.

Rod Are you saying ... ?

Bowers Yes. I'm saying that last July, one of the masters of this school seduced my daughter ... had carnal knowledge of my daughter ... on more than one occasion.

Rod Why, that's ... that's shocking! Sophie should have gone to the headmistress ... to the matron ...

Bowers Yes, or even to me. But she didn't. She felt, I suppose, a secret thrill at what seemed to her a full-blown, grown-up affair. She didn't realize that she was just being *used* by some selfish, randy devil, out for a cheap lay. (*He turns away*) Dear God, I wish I'd never sent her to boarding school. But my wife was dead and my work constantly took me abroad. I thought I was doing the best thing for her.

Rod You say it happened in July?

Bowers Yes. Then school broke up and she didn't see him again for six weeks. At the end of that time she began to feel rather sick, for the very good reason that she was pregnant.

Rod (*appalled*) Oh no!

Bowers Why do you sound so astonished? It's the natural consequence of that sort of behaviour. Nice little girls from decent homes don't dose themselves with contraceptive pills every morning.

Rod Bowers, this is appalling. How far have things gone? I mean, is it too late for ... ?

Bowers An abortion? Is that the solution that springs to your mind? Naturally it sprang to Sophie's too. But because she was frightened ... terrified ... of what her father would say, she did nothing about it. Just carried on kidding herself that it couldn't be true. Sitting in corners, day-dreaming. Telling herself she must be mistaken, God would never let it happen to *her*. And so she kept her secret to herself until three months had gone by, and then, in desperation, she went to a backstreet abortionist.

Rod But there was no need for that! Not a clinic in the land would have refused her a legal abortion.

Bowers No. But she didn't know that. And she was desperate to keep it a secret from me. So, two weeks ago, at half-term, she crept out of the house and took a train up to London, found the dingy, seedy address that someone had scribbled for her on the back of her diary, screwed up her courage to knock on the door and submit herself to some ghastly operation at the hands of an ignorant charlatan. And the almost

inevitable consequence was a bad infection which she kept to herself until it was too late.

Rod (*alarmed*) Too late?

Bowers Yes. Sophie died last week. For the sake of one man's thoughtless indulgence, my daughter is dead.

Rod drops into a chair, deeply shocked

What do you think should happen to that man, Mr Lester? He hasn't committed any crime that the law can punish him for. She wasn't even below the age of consent, so he can't be caught on that score. All he has done is corrupt and ruin an innocent child and bring about her early death. What should be the penalty, d'you think?

Rod Why are you asking me?

Bowers Because you are that man, aren't you?

Rod Certainly not. You have no reason to think that I . . .

Bowers I have every reason to think it. Sophie told me.

Rod She told you!

Bowers Before she died she told me everything. How she loved you, how you passed messages to her, how she used to creep out of the dormitory to meet you while your wife was away in Scotland. . . .

Rod For heaven's sake, man, keep your voice down.

Bowers You are the man responsible, Lester, and you're no better than a murderer.

Rod Bowers, for God's sake . . .

Bowers You're not going to get away with it, you devil. The law can't get you but I can. (*He gets out a gun*) After I've killed you, they can do what they like with me. Nothing matters now Sophie's dead.

Rod Bowers! No!

Marian enters and stops short with a stifled scream. Bowers turns his head.

Rod leaps at him and grabs the gun. They struggle, there is a report, Bowers goes slack and falls behind the sofa. Rod stands up, panting loudly. He kneels and feels for Bowers' heart, then rises with his hand covered in blood

Marian Rod! For heaven's sake!

Rod Oh no! God in heaven. No!

Marian He was going to shoot you!

Rod I think he's dead.

Marian But what happened?

Rod He wanted to kill me.

Marian He must have been mad. (*She kneels*) Where's he hit?

Rod Don't touch. It's an awful mess.

Marian I can't feel his pulse. I don't think he's breathing. (*She gets up, appalled*) Rod, I think you're right. He's dead.

Rod (*in panic*) What are we going to do? What are we going to do? I've killed him, Marian. I never meant to.

Marian It was self defence. I saw him point the gun at you.

Rod Oh God, what have I done? (*He drops into a chair, head in hands*) .

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