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THE GRASS IS
GREENER

A Comedy in Two Acts

by

HUGH AND MARGARET WILLIAMS



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The Grass is Greener

This play was first produced at the St. Martin's Theatre, London, on 2nd December 1956, with the following cast:—

VICTOR	..	..	..	..	..	..	..	<i>Hugh Williams</i>
SELLARS	..	..	..	..	..	..	..	<i>Moray Watson</i>
HILARY	..	..	..	..	..	..	..	<i>Celia Johnson</i>
CHARLES	..	..	..	..	..	..	..	<i>Edward Underdown</i>
HATTIE	..	..	..	..	..	..	..	<i>Joan Greenwood</i>

The play was directed by JACK MINSTER, with décor by HUTCHINSON SCOTT.

The action of the play takes place in a house in Hampshire in the month of May.

ACT ONE

SCENE I A Friday afternoon

SCENE 2 A week later

ACT TWO

SCENE I The following evening

SCENE 2 Later that night

No character in this play is intended to represent any person, alive or dead.

NOTE: *Running time of this play, excluding intervals, is approximately one hour and fifty-five minutes.*

PRODUCTION NOTE

WHEN the curtain rises there should be a not too obtrusive murmur of voices as of a party being shown round the house. Presumably, they have just reached and are passing the private rooms in which the Rhyalls live. We see a very attractive and comfortable part of their living room. The noise dies away as Victor closes the door and is heard only once again when Hilary has her short telephone conversation. In London we had these sounds recorded. This is not really necessary, however; but on each of the two occasions the noise should be recognizably similar, as the same things are probably being said by the guide and the reactions are likely to be the same.

The room should be full of spring sunlight and mellow and very lived-in. Soon after Hilary's entrance, Victor says to her that spring is a turbulent season and warns her that as one grows older the fiercer and more poignant it becomes. She replies that she finds it very disturbing and already a possible complication for one or other of them is sign-posted. Romance is about again.

The play should be played with a light gravity. It is high comedy; and breadth of playing, working for laughs or milking of situations should be eschewed. David Garrick is quoted as saying that you can fool the town with Tragedy, but Comedy is a serious business. When after Victor's exit at the end of Act One, Scene I, Hilary tells Charles that he (Victor) "is not usually as facetious as that" it is merely the word she appears to choose being anxious and perhaps a little put out. Victor has not played the scene facetiously, but rather with a mock-seriousness, and with a hint of banter, yet always with good manners as well as with style.

The play deals in jealousy, possessiveness, apprehension, self-doubt, loneliness comedically rather than dramatically, and while we laugh we think a little, too, for wit has an edge to its humour. The duel in the final scene has a touch of cloak-and-dagger romance about it—mock heroics—but never insincere.

Should the actress who plays Hattie have seen Miss Greenwood play the part, she would be wise not to attempt an echo of her performance, but rather to make it quite her own, and to be good, amusing and gay entirely in *her* way and no other. One can emulate a performance but

PRODUCTION NOTE

not a personality—and, here, amusing as the performance was, the personality was very strong. Imitation can only be reach-me-down. In fact, the only wise thing for the producer to do is to give the part to the actress at his disposal who has the most amusing personality, provided that she is suitable in other ways.

The lighting in the second scene of Act One is almost the same as in the first, except that it is a shade later in the day. The first scene of the second act opens with the acting area round the sofa and mantelpiece lit for the evening, the rest of the lights being added by Sellars on his first exit. The final scene opens with only the passage light showing Charles, and the full lighting coming up after the shooting on Sellars' entrance, which follows that of Charles and Victor, the passage light being extinguished at the same time.

It merely remains for me to wish you luck with the production whenever it is done, and to suggest as with all plays that send an audience away pleased and with their spirits raised a little that you, too, should seem to have enjoyed yourselves while acting it—as no doubt you will, in fact, have done—for it is a charming and delightful and amusing play.

JACK MINSTER

CHARACTERS

in order of appearance

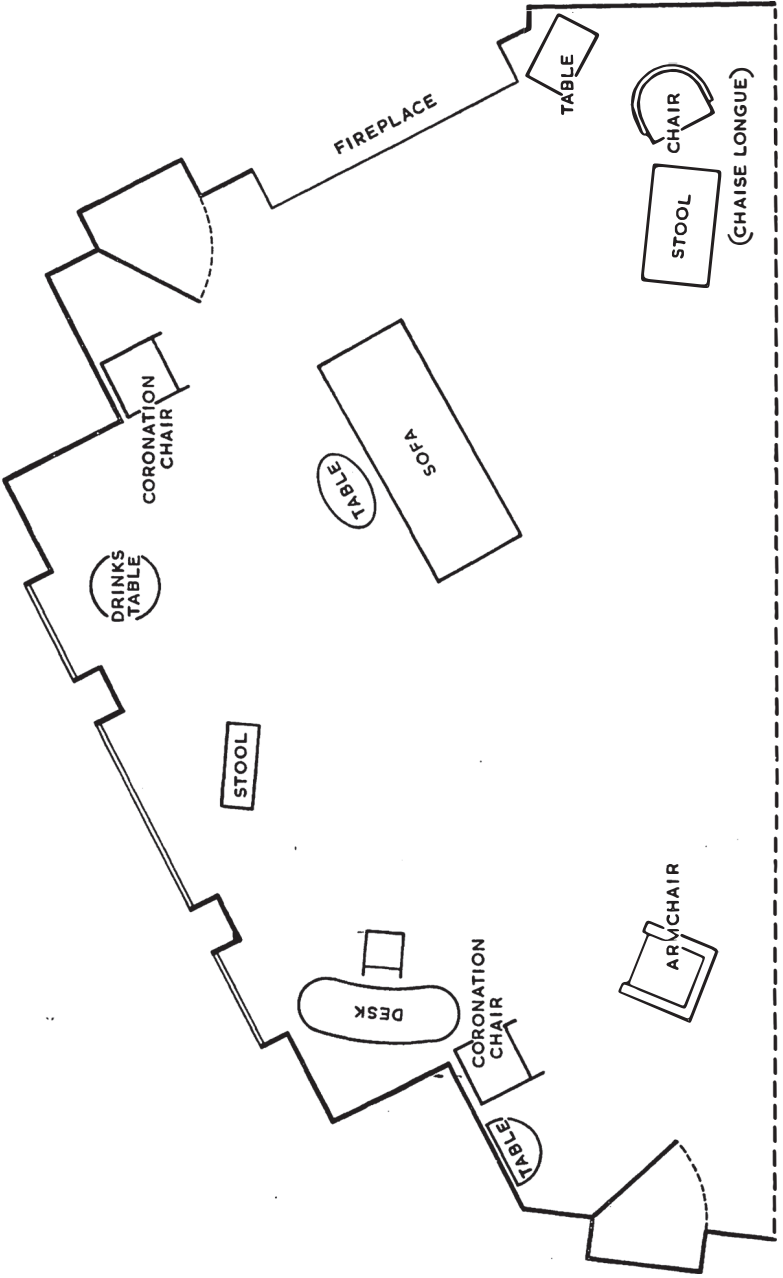
VICTOR

SELLARS

HILARY

CHARLES

HATTIE



*THE GRASS IS GREENER

ACT ONE

SCENE I

The curtain rises on a small, charming upstairs sitting room in the private part of one of the stately homes of England. Through the long windows, which face the audience, can be seen the dark branches of a cedar tree. It is early spring.

There is a door on the L. which leads to the parts of the house open to the public, and another on the R. leading to the wing occupied by the family.

A large flat writing table is prominent on the right-hand side of the room, comfortable sofas and armchairs, a drink table, and a beautiful fireplace. The general appearance and atmosphere of the room has probably not changed greatly in the last two hundred years.

Gay spring sunlight is pouring through the long windows. It is a beautiful little room, but also comfortable and rather cosy.

VICTOR is seated at the writing table doing his accounts. He is a nice looking man, attractive, and dealing with middle age as he does with everything else—with skill and assurance.

The door to the public rooms is open and voices can be heard of people being shown round.

VICTOR rises and shuts the door. As he crosses back to the desk the telephone rings. He picks up the receiver.

VICTOR. Good afternoon. Yes it is. Oh, hullo, Vicar, how are you? Good. And Mrs. Jordan? Good. Yes, it's a lovely day, isn't it—real spring. I suppose you want to give me the Lessons for Sunday? Just a second, I'll jot it down. Deuteronomy chapter twenty-eight, from the beginning—down to the fifteenth verse. O.K., and the second?

(He continues writing.) Matthew—yes—yes. That sounds a long one—you promised me no long ones. It isn't? I suppose I shall have to believe you. Is it all right if I drop the altar flowers in to you tomorrow morning? I won't cut 'em till then. Tell Mrs. Jordan I'm

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going to bring her round some tulips. See you then. Good-bye.
(*He sits in desk chair and starts doing his accounts again.*)

(*Enter SELLARS, the butler. Though dressed conventionally, his face is a little too intellectual for a butler, consequently his appearance is not so much disappointing as disarming. He seems a little out of character, which indeed he is. He crosses to R. side of desk, facing VICTOR.*)

SELLARS. Am I disturbing you, milord?

VICTOR. Yes, you are, Sellars.

SELLARS. I'm sorry, milord. (*He is not prepared to leave however and moves round above desk to behind VICTOR and level with him.*)

VICTOR. You've made me forget what one hundred and forty-three half-crowns are. Eights into one hundred and forty-three—

SELLARS. I make it seventeen pounds seventeen and six. I wonder if I might have a word with you.

VICTOR (*pleased*). So do I. So we're probably right. Not bad. Not bad at all, considering last Saturday wasn't a very nice day. (*Turns to face SELLARS and picks up a booklet from desk.*) Funny, the Saturday people don't buy a booklet, only fourteen copies, disappointing!

SELLARS. They're very good on teas, milord.

VICTOR. Yes, and more profit on teas than the booklet, so we mustn't grumble. I always feel a little hurt when they don't buy the booklet. I thought you and I wrote it rather well. Of course what we really want is a licence.

SELLARS. A wine and spirits licence, milord?

VICTOR. M'm. And beer of course.

SELLARS. Wouldn't that attract the wrong sort of people?

VICTOR. If the riff-raff who parade through my house and gardens leaving nut shells and apple cores all over the place are the right kind, I'd just as soon have my privacy invaded by the other sort. The possible eventualities I incur, through allowing the public into my house, make me very jumpy.

SELLARS. In what way?

VICTOR. Supposing someone slid down the banisters and broke a hip. (*SELLARS breaks u.s. a little.*) Anything could happen really.

SELLARS (*back to level with VICTOR*). I should have thought a licence would encourage that sort of thing, milord.

VICTOR. I dare say. It was only a thought. An attempt to be enterprising. I got the idea the other day when I passed a pub called "The Duke of Bedford". How much is fourteen one and sixes?

SELLARS. A guinea, milord.

VICTOR. How charming. Now I can't do my accounts with you standing there. What do you want?

SELLARS. I beg your pardon, milord, I came to ask if you'd finished with "The Times".

VICTOR. Yes, I think so, why? (*He starts putting three full bags of half-crowns into the big money bag.*)

SELLARS. Then would you mind if I took it now, milord?

VICTOR. What do you want "The Times" for—to light a fire? What do you want to light a fire for? Much too warm for a fire.

SELLARS. I want to read it.

VICTOR. Oh! Yes of course—by all means. It's about somewhere. (*He returns to his accounts.*)

SELLARS (*crosses above sofa looking for "The Times"*). Doesn't it strike you as a little odd, milord, that your butler should want to borrow "The Times" in the middle of a Friday afternoon? When his day off is on Thursday, I mean.

VICTOR (*putting loose half-crowns into empty bag*). I hadn't really thought about it. Yes, I suppose it does. What's the matter—you bored?

SELLARS (*picks up "The Times" from floor at L. end of sofa*). To death, milord.

VICTOR. Why aren't you working?

SELLARS. I haven't any work to do.

VICTOR. How's that?

SELLARS. I've done the silver. I've nothing to do now until I serve your tea at four-thirty.

VICTOR. No, no, no, I didn't mean that sort of work, I meant your novel. Why aren't you working on that?

SELLARS. I'm stuck badly. I nearly tore the whole thing up last night.

VICTOR (*disengaging himself from his work for the first time*). Now you mustn't do that. (*He leans back, looking at SELLARS. He has some half-crowns in one hand and a money bag in the other.*) What's the trouble?

SELLARS (*to below sofa*). Almost certainly the basic trouble is myself. I'm fundamentally happy and contented. That's bad enough of course, but on top of that I'm normal. That's fatal.

VICTOR. D'you mean you'd prefer to be unhappy and abnormal? (*Putting money into bag and keeping four half-crowns in his hand.*)

SELLARS. But of course! (*Round D.R. end of sofa.*) I want to be a success. And to be a success one must at least start off by being contemporary, which unfortunately I'm not. (*VICTOR puts money bag into big bag.*)

It means I've no feeling of insecurity or frustration—no despair.
(*Back to level with VICTOR.*)

VICTOR. And that's essential:

SELLARS. The first essential. And I feel perfectly contented—really rather blameless. And hardly resent anything at all.

VICTOR. Oh, Lord. (*He puts the big bag away in desk drawer except for the four half-crowns which go in his pocket.*) But you must have known all this when you chucked teaching to become a writer.

SELLARS (*turns to face VICTOR*). I don't think I did chuck it to become a writer. Oh, don't misunderstand me, I want to write, but I don't think that was the real reason I gave up teaching.

(*VICTOR rises and crosses below sofa to fireplace. He takes a board with a lot of lists on it from mantelpiece and crosses back to below sofa.*)

VICTOR. Then you're here under false pretences. You answered my advertisement, and when I asked you what your real qualifications were, you said you held a degree in science. Despite such a ludicrous recommendation I engaged you as my butler, partly because you said you wanted to write a novel, and you couldn't write after teaching all day, and partly because I remembered your father when he was butler, and a very good one, too, I always understood. (*Sits on R. arm of sofa.*) Luckily it's turned out very well. I'd like to know what your reason was if it wasn't to write. Were you sick of teaching?

SELLARS. No. (*Pause.*) I began to disapprove of what I taught. I began to disapprove of science.

VICTOR. I beg your pardon?

SELLARS. I maintain that scientific progress has gone too far too quickly. As Bertrand Russell said "Science has outstripped wisdom". I felt—I felt—well simply I felt I couldn't go on teaching it any more. Perhaps disapprove is the wrong word.

VICTOR. Is distrust the right one?

SELLARS (*nodding*). Maybe it is.

VICTOR. Yes, I see.

SELLARS. But you're quite right, milord, I am here under false pretences, and it worries me—a great deal.

VICTOR. How d'you mean?

SELLARS. Well, milord, the point is I feel such a waste of money. I don't really think you should have a butler at all.

VICTOR. Oh really.

SELLARS. I don't mean to be impertinent, but—

VICTOR. Go on, in for a penny in for a pound.

SELLARS (*taking the plunge*). You see, milord, you're not contemporary, either.

VICTOR. You mean I'm an antique?

SELLARS. No, milord, you're traditional.

VICTOR. Well, go on.

SELLARS. Ever since your family first lived in this house, they've always had butlers—in earlier times I suppose they called them stewards. From your point of view that's sufficient reason to have one now. But don't you see, milord, nowadays you don't need one? Really you don't. There's no work for me. (*Crosses below VICTOR and wanders right round sofa.*) Years ago when there were big families, and entertaining was part of the life of a great house, and the whole place was occupied, and it was open house to your friends and not just the public—then my job must have been fun, and very hard work. But today—today, I've really nothing to do. (*Back to level with VICTOR.*) And I—and I—

VICTOR (*who has been listening attentively.*) What, Sellars?

SELLARS. I should feel much happier, if you'd either sack me or reduce my wages by three pounds a week. (*There is a pause.*) That's what I came in here to say, milord, not really to borrow "The Times".

VICTOR. Yes, I see. (*He crosses below SELLARS. He puts the board of lists in a desk drawer, then goes on round R. side of desk to behind sofa.*) What you're saying, in effect, is that I'm out of date, old fashioned, and clinging to a way of life that's had dry rot in it since nineteen thirty-eight. (*Takes cigarette from packet in his pocket.*)

SELLARS. No, I didn't say that.

VICTOR (*by chaise longue*). Well, you're wrong. You've never been so wrong in all your born days. And I'll tell you why you're wrong. This house and these lands may be mine in title, but I regard them as a small part of England that I hold in trust—in trust for the future, not for my son. I find that fascinating and stimulating. There are treasures, and beauty, and history in this house, and I'm preserving them in the most modern, streamline, commercial way it's possible to do. The farm pays, the market garden pays, the hens pay, and her Ladyship's mushrooms pay.

SELLARS. Yes, I do see all that. (*Crosses below sofa to light VICTOR's cigarette with matches from his pocket.*)

VICTOR. And the reason I employ you is because I know jolly well the two-and-sixpenny public are far more thrilled by catching a glimpse

of a real live butler than they are by the Velasquez at the top of the staircase. In spite of what you may think to the contrary (*Sits on edge of chaise longue.*) I am, in fact, extremely contemporary, highly efficient, and very businesslike. And to prove it to you, I'll accept your offer and reduce your wages by three pounds a week as from next Monday.

(*Enter HILARY D.R. She is younger than VICTOR and beautiful by any standards; she has remained soft and sweet and unspoiled and her husband, quite rightly, loves her very much. She is carrying gardening gloves and she crosses up to R. side of desk.*)

And now I suggest you go and teach your grandmother to suck eggs.

HILARY (*putting on her shoes which are under U.S. end of desk*). No he can't. I want Sellars to do something for me. (*To SELLARS.*) Would you do the mushroom run for me? They're all ready packed now, but as long as you have them at the station by six-thirty.

SELLARS (*crosses below sofa to D.R. door*). Certainly, milady.

HILARY (*crossing above sofa table to fireplace*). And I think the van wants petrol, so watch out. Get five gallons at Pickards. My account, remember. It's getting towards the end of the month and I want to hot it up a bit. (*Takes off her jacket and throws it over the chaise longue.*)

SELLARS. Very good, milady. (*Turns to go.*)

VICTOR (*rising and crossing below sofa to desk*). Sellars, how many half-crowns in three pounds?

SELLARS. About a bus load, milord. (*Exit.*)

VICTOR (*sits desk chair, laughing*). You know I like him more and more.

He's that rare being—a man who obeys the dictates of his conscience.

HILARY. What are you talking about?

VICTOR. About what he and I were talking about.

HILARY (*puts gloves in drawer of sofa table*). And what was that?

VICTOR. You could call it progress, I suppose.

HILARY. You know, I've been wondering.

VICTOR. What, my love?

HILARY (*up to C. window*). D'you think he liked teaching?

VICTOR. I think so, why?

HILARY. I wonder if he misses it.

VICTOR. He said he was bored just now. Maybe he does. What's all this leading up to?

HILARY. D'you think if I was terribly clever with him, he'd give Emma her lessons?

VICTOR. Give Emma her lessons! Have you gone out of your mind?

HILARY. Only from nine-thirty to twelve.

VICTOR. He's a butler, not a governess.

HILARY. It would mean we needn't have a governess. (*Down R. of sofa to sit on R. arm.*) Emma's no trouble now, I can manage her perfectly well. It's simply a question of her lessons.

VICTOR. You mean sack Miss Mathews?

HILARY. Yes.

VICTOR. D'you know something?

HILARY. What?

VICTOR. I adore you.

HILARY. Do you, my darling? I'm so glad.

VICTOR. And I think that's the most bloody marvellous idea you've ever had in your whole life.

HILARY. We'd have to give him a little something extra, I suppose.

VICTOR. We'll give him three pounds a week extra.

HILARY. Then you approve?

VICTOR. My dear girl, if we sack Miss Mathews and sell the television we'd return to a civilized way of life. What a pity we can't sell Miss Mathews. (*He picks up "A.B.C."*) When can she leave? Let's look up a train.

HILARY. Yes, that's always fun. (*Rises and crosses to D.R. door.*)

VICTOR (*a sudden thought*). But d'you think he will?

HILARY. Sellars? If Emma and I work on him right he will. (*Exit D.R. Pause. Off.*) Darling. (*Enters to just inside door with a copy of "Henley"*.)

VICTOR. What?

HILARY. I'm sorry, but I want to work on you, too.

VICTOR. Very unlike you, to warn me.

HILARY (*shutting door*). Don't be beastly.

VICTOR (*looking at her affectionately*). Beauty and the beastly.

HILARY. Thank you, darling, how good you are to me!

VICTOR. To you or for you?

HILARY. Both, I'm happy to say.

VICTOR. Then you're lucky, aren't you?

HILARY (*just below R. end of sofa she turns D.S. to VICTOR*). Very lucky.

VICTOR. What are you reading?

HILARY. I wanted to look something up.

VICTOR. What?

HILARY. "Henley."

WAIT, THERE'S MORE!

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