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SF PERUSALS

TOWARDS ZERO

by Agatha Christie

SAMUEL FRENCH

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TOWARDS ZERO was presented by Arthur J. Beckhard at Martha's Vineyard Playhouse, Massachusetts on September 4, 1945. The performance was directed Clarence Derwent, with sets by Pamela Judson-Styles. The cast was as follows:

O'DONNELL ..... J.P. Wilson
THOMAS ROYDE ..... Jack Howells
KAY STRANGE ..... Althea Murphy
NEVILLE STRANGE ..... Rand Elliot
LADY TRESSILIAN ..... Elfrida Derwent
JANET COLLIER (COLLIE) ..... Esther Mitchell
MACGREGOR ..... Ruth Chandler
AUDREY STRANGE ..... Shirley Collier
ANGUS MCWHIRTER ..... Ned Payne
PETER DE COSTA ..... Eldredge Clark
INSPECTOR LEACH ..... Wells Richardson
SERGEANT HARVEY ..... William W. Sanders
DR. WILSON ..... Leon Forbes

CHARACTERS

O'DONNELL
THOMAS ROYDE
KAY STRANGE
NEVILLE STRANGE
LADY TRESSILIAN
JANET COLLIER (COLLIE)
MACGREGOR
AUDREY STRANGE
ANGUS MCWHIRTER
PETER DE COSTA
INSPECTOR LEACH
SERGEANT HARVEY
DR. WILSON

NOTES ON CASTING

AUDREY STRANGE is left-handed and should be seen drinking tea, smoking, etc. with her left hand.

ANGUS may double with **PETER DE COSTA**.

MACGREGOR (Female) and **DR. WILSON** (Male) may double with appropriate gender switch to one of the roles.

Minimum number of performers: 11.

SETTING

The action of the play takes place at Lady Tressilian's house in Gull's Nest, Saltcreek. Early September.

TIME

ACT I

An afternoon in late summer.

ACT II

Scene One: Five days later. Evening.
Scene Two: The following morning.

ACT III

Scene One: The same evening.
Scene Two: The following morning.

NOTES ON PUBLICATION

Arguably the best-known adaptation of Agatha Christie's novel *Towards Zero* was that of prolific writer Gerald Verner in 1951. However, a few years ago, it was discovered that Agatha Christie had in fact written her own stage adaptation of the novel which was commissioned by the Schuberts in 1944, and it is this version that we present as part of The Collection.

Christie's playscript followed her formula of neat plotting with a surprise outcome, but as was often the case with her playwriting she paid particular attention to characterisation and motivation.

Both versions of the text follow a similar narrative and pattern. The events of both plays explore how the characters, through their various interactions, move towards a "zero hour" of murder. Both explore the idea that murder shouldn't be the beginning of a story but the end.

However, there are important differences involving setup of the production. Christie's adaptation is a three-act, five-scene drama set to take place over eight days with thirteen actors, whilst Verner's version is again three acts but with six scenes set over seven days involving eleven actors.

Angus McWhirter is perhaps the most important character missing from Verner's text but makes a very significant contribution to Christie's original. His interactions with Audrey are perhaps the most profound of the play – allowing Christie to explore thematically the notions of mortality, suicide, depression and even redemption. These discussions offer both a torment and perspective to Audrey's situation, but more importantly, McWhirter's background as a depressive and many failed suicide attempts allow him to recognise in Audrey a vulnerable person in need of help.

Moreover, a significant distinction between the two texts is the setting; Christie's is set at Lady Tressilian's house in the open air on the terrace, whereas Verner's takes a more familiar path and is set in the drawing room of Lady Tressilian's house.

By all accounts Christie's original is a far more ambitious and dramatic piece of writing. Not only staged outdoors, it deals with a controversial theme and attempts to delve deep into the psyche of its characters.

NOTES ON SENSITIVE TERMINOLOGY

Language used by the author in her stage directions and by her characters to describe mental and physical conditions and disabilities is of the period in which the play was first performed. We are confident that the author's intention was to be neutral within the stage directions – not to convey anything other than the facts of the characteristics relevant to a character's portrayal. The dialogue, however, is the embodiment of the character speaking and must express his or her intentions at that point in the play. This means that the author will have chosen terminology to be spoken with varying degrees of precision, sensitivity and, possibly, deliberate insensitivity according to the character and the circumstances in which he or she is speaking.

In our published version, therefore, we have applied the following logic:

• In stage directions, we have used terminology which is as neutral and factual as can be conceived, knowing that this will sometimes still fail.

• In dialogue, we have preserved the author's words as originally written.

We license this play on the basis that terms used in dialogue relevant to the physical and mental conditions of these characters may be changed in production to whichever terms best convey the author's intention for the audience. Sometimes this will be a neutral term, sometimes it will be a term which reflects the character's personality and/or the context in which they are speaking. Which of these applies is for directors and actors to interpret.

ACT I

(The scene is Lady Tressilian's house, Gull's Nest. The house overlooks Saltcreek Estuary. On the other side, far in the distance, Easterhead Bay Hotel can be seen. Dominating the scene is the house, which is built on the cliff edge. It has a loggia and terrace in front of it, with basket chairs and small tables. Two French windows give access to the loggia and are used by people going in and out of the house. Next to it is a small, disused conservatory. The house is enclosed with a high wall on one side and a smaller, terrace wall on the other. The high wall has a big front gate set in it, which leads on to the main road. The terrace wall has a small, ornamental gate that gives access to a narrow path. On the other side of this path is a sheer drop to the sea, and it leads precariously up a grass cliff to a big rock, Gull Rock. It is a fine afternoon in late summer. There is a ring and knock on the front gate. An old Irish butler, **O'DONNELL**, *comes out through the French windows, along the loggia and opens the gate.* **THOMAS ROYDE**, *a sunburnt, stolid man of thirty-five, comes in with a suitcase heavily covered with steamship labels. He shakes hands with* **O'DONNELL**, *who then takes the case from him.)*

O'DONNELL. Ah, 'tis Mr. Thomas himself, and it's glad I am to be seeing you after these long years, Mr. Thomas.

THOMAS. How are you, O'Donnell? Still going strong?

O'DONNELL. Indeed and I'm not getting any younger, Mr. Thomas.

THOMAS. Nonsense, you look just the same.

(He looks around.)

Everything looks just the same. Nothing much changed here.

O'DONNELL. No, indeed, her ladyship's not one for changes, praise be to God.

THOMAS. How is she?

O'DONNELL. She keeps to her room a good bit. She's feebler, I'd say, than she was. But it's the fine spirit she has, and her ruling us all with a rod of iron. Sit you down, Mr. Royde, and I'll be after telling her ladyship you're here. They're still in the dining room but they'll be out in a jiffy.

(He exits into the house with the suitcase. **THOMAS** *sits.* **KAY STRANGE** *comes out through the French windows. She is an ultra-modern and glamorous young woman. She stops abruptly at seeing* **THOMAS**.*)*

KAY. Hullo.

*(***THOMAS** *rises politely.)*

I'm Kay Strange – Neville Strange's wife.

THOMAS. How do you do. I'm Thomas Royde.

KAY. Oh yes, you're just home from Cochin China or Siam, or somewhere, aren't you?

THOMAS. Malaya.

KAY. I knew it was somewhere like that.

(She sits.)

Don't tell me about it, will you? I simply can't bear hearing about places.

(There is a pause. **THOMAS** *is rather at a loss for conversation.)*

THOMAS. Old Neville here too?

KAY. Yes. He's playing porter to Lady Tressilian. They'll all be out in a minute, we've just finished lunch.

THOMAS. Are you staying here?

KAY. Oh no, Neville was playing in the Saltington Tennis Tournament – got knocked out in the semi-final this morning, so we toddled over here for lunch.

(Amused.) But we've got to make a quick getaway because Neville's ex is turning up this afternoon to stop here.

THOMAS. Neville's ex?

KAY. Ex-wife. Audrey, you know.

THOMAS. Yes, I know.

KAY. She made a great pretence of being broken-hearted over it all, so Neville and she can't possibly meet.

*(***THOMAS** *sits, quietly angered by this last comment.)*

THOMAS. Was it pretence?

KAY. Well, it isn't really necessary to make a frightful fuss about these things. They're bound to happen, aren't they?

THOMAS. Seems so.

KAY. But of course, you're a great friend of hers, aren't you?

THOMAS. We played together as kids.

KAY. That sounds most frightfully touching.

*(***NEVILLE STRANGE** *wheels* **LADY TRESSILIAN** *out in a wheelchair.* **COLLIE** *follows fussily.* **NEVILLE** *is a good-looking, athletic man of thirty-four.* **LADY TRESSILIAN** *is a white-haired, extremely autocratic old lady.* **JANE COLLIER (COLLIE)** *is middle-aged, kindly, and companion to* **LADY TRESSILIAN**.*)*

NEVILLE. Hello, Royde.

THOMAS. Hello, Strange.

(He goes to **LADY TRESSILIAN**. *She stares up at him appraisingly.)*

LADY TRESSILIAN. Well, how's Silent Thomas?

THOMAS. Oh – er – very well.

LADY TRESSILIAN. You remember Collie?

THOMAS. Of course.

(He shakes hands with her. **LADY TRESSILIAN** *turns to* **COLLIE**.*)*

LADY TRESSILIAN. Did you bring my spectacles? And my bag?

*(***COLLIE** *produces both, handing them to her.)*

No, put them on this table. And give me another cushion.

*(***COLLIE** *does so. She quickly grabs a cushion and attempts to settle it behind* **LADY TRESSILIAN**. **O'DONNELL** *comes out with a rug.)*

Can you never put a cushion in the proper place?

O'DONNELL. *(Autocratically.)* I'll do it, Miss Collier.

(He adjusts it.)

That's fine. And you'd best have this rug over your knees.

LADY TRESSILIAN. I don't need it. It's perfectly warm.

O'DONNELL. There's a breeze from the sea. It's no use your catching a chill.

LADY TRESSILIAN. I won't have it, I tell you.

O'DONNELL. I'm not having you catch your death with rheumatism.

(He puts the rug over her knees then goes into the house.)

LADY TRESSILIAN. O'Donnell's still master of the house, you see. He's becoming quite impossible. If he hadn't been with me over thirty years I'd give him notice.

COLLIE. Oh, you couldn't do that!

LADY TRESSILIAN. I could do it – but he wouldn't take it. Thank goodness his eyesight is too bad to drive the car anymore. He got an idea into his head that, "He'd

not yield the crown of the road to anyone!" You can imagine what that embroiled us in!

THOMAS. Have you still got MacGregor?

LADY TRESSILIAN. Yes! She and O'Donnell are still at daggers drawn. They'll be fighting over my dead body.

COLLIE. Sometimes they don't speak to each other for days.

LADY TRESSILIAN. Rows distress Collie. I like 'em. You should have more spirit, Collie. I'm always telling you so. I know I lead you a dog's life – but you ask for it. Never mind, you're a kind, devoted soul, and when I'm dead and gone you'll find that I've remembered you in my will. Then you can enjoy yourself for a change.

COLLIE. *(Distressed.)* Oh, but Lady Tressilian, I am very happy – very happy indeed to be with you – I –

LADY TRESSILIAN. I know, my dear. Now you go and write those notes so as to get them off by the afternoon post.

*(***COLLIE** *exits into the house.)*

Such a nice, kind creature, but such a bore. I bully her disgracefully. Now, Thomas, sit here and talk to me.

*(***THOMAS** *sits where indicated.* **NEVILLE** *exits into the house.* **LADY TRESSILIAN** *studies* **THOMAS** *keenly for some moments.* **KAY** *yawns and stares out to sea.)*

You have exactly the same owlish look you had seven years ago. And no more conversation now than you had then.

*(***NEVILLE** *returns, carrying a notebook.)*

Now what are you going to do, Neville? Have you got to play games every single minute of your life?

NEVILLE. *(Grinning.)* Just going to show Kay why it is she always takes six shots to get out of a bunker.

LADY TRESSILIAN. Men never seem to grow up. They start with a fluffy ball in their bassinets and go on playing with different kinds of balls all their lives. Tennis this morning, golf this afternoon.

*(**THOMAS** turns to **NEVILLE**.)*

THOMAS. Hear you were knocked out in the semi-final.

NEVILLE. Yes, my backhand was clean off.

(He demonstrates various backhand swings.)

Couldn't keep the ball in.

THOMAS. Always thought your backhand was pretty hot.

KAY. Yes, it's his specialty. It's far stronger than his forehand.

NEVILLE. Oh well, youth will tell. My opponent was only twenty-three. He wore me down.

*(He takes **KAY** aside and begins to instruct her. **LADY TRESSILIAN** calls after them.)*

LADY TRESSILIAN. Be careful of my turf, Neville.

NEVILLE. Don't worry, Camilla, there shan't be any divots to replace.

THOMAS. Neville still the complete sportsman?

LADY TRESSILIAN. More than ever.

(There is a pause.)

Go on – talk – tell me something. Don't sit there blinking at those two. Tell me things.

THOMAS. What do you want to know?

LADY TRESSILIAN. I want news – gossip – something spicy. I'm a helpless old woman and I have to be entertained. Entertain me!

*(**THOMAS** grins at her.)*

Don't grin in that silly way, Thomas Royde.

THOMAS. You know I never had the gift of the gab. Not like Adrian.

LADY TRESSILIAN. Sometimes I can't believe you and Adrian can have been brothers.

THOMAS. Seems odd, doesn't it?

LADY TRESSILIAN. Adrian was a clever, witty talker – an asset to any dinner party.

THOMAS. Yes – good old Adrian.

LADY TRESSILIAN. And you – you! God help the poor woman who sits next to you at a dinner table! "Er" – "hum" – "er" – "ha" – are all you seem to contribute.

THOMAS. Somebody's got to do the listening. I got into the habit at a very early age of leaving all the talking to Adrian.

LADY TRESSILIAN. *(Sighing.)* That boy had a very promising career ahead of him. His being killed in that motor crash was really cruel. A man with the world at his feet. Let me see, how long ago is it? Three years?

THOMAS. It will be three years next February.

LADY TRESSILIAN. Poor Adrian.

(There is a pause.)

Audrey's arriving this afternoon.

THOMAS. Audrey – hum…

*(***LADY TRESSILIAN** *rolls her eyes in frustration.)*

LADY TRESSILIAN. Yes. Audrey, hum!

*(***THOMAS***' gaze has slipped to watching* **NEVILLE** *and* **KAY***.)*

THOMAS. *(Confused.)* Eh? She seems a glamorous young woman.

LADY TRESSILIAN. *(Vigorously.)* Glamorous? Pah! Empty-headed. Quite the wrong wife for Neville – no background – no roots. Brought up in hotels abroad – her mother was notorious all over the Riviera. She meets Neville on the tennis courts, makes a dead set at him and never rests until she gets him to leave his wife – of whom he was extremely fond – for he was fond of Audrey. I blame Kay entirely. It was all her doing that Neville's marriage was broken up.

THOMAS. Bit hard on her, aren't you?

LADY TRESSILIAN. Men always sympathise with a good-looking woman. I tell you, Neville was quite devoted to Audrey. I am convinced that he would never have left her if it hadn't been for this girl's persistence.

THOMAS. Don't you think, perhaps, you're judging without knowing all the facts?

LADY TRESSILIAN. I know quite enough! And my sympathies are entirely with Audrey. I am very fond of Audrey.

THOMAS. I know you are.

(He looks at her affectionately then starts filling his pipe. **LADY TRESSILIAN** *watches him with intrigue.)*

LADY TRESSILIAN. You've always been in love with Audrey, haven't you, Thomas?

THOMAS. *(Mumbling.)* Er – hm – suppose so.

LADY TRESSILIAN. From the time you were children together?

THOMAS. Er…hm.

LADY TRESSILIAN. And then Neville came along and carried her off from under your nose.

THOMAS. Oh well, I always knew I hadn't got a chance.

LADY TRESSILIAN. Pah! Defeatists!

THOMAS. I've always been a dull dog.

LADY TRESSILIAN. Dobbin'.

THOMAS. Good old Thomas. That's what Audrey has always felt about me.

LADY TRESSILIAN. *(Forcefully.)* And always will unless you do something about it. No good standing about looking devoted. You've got to make love to the girl. Good Heavens, you don't expect her to make love to you?

THOMAS. Sorry.

LADY TRESSILIAN. All the time, Thomas! The doglike devotion of a lifetime does sometimes get its reward.

THOMAS. That's what I've been hoping.

LADY TRESSILIAN. *(Softened.)* Yes – I rather thought so. *(Affectionately.)* My good wishes, my dear.

THOMAS. Thanks.

*(***MACGREGOR***, a stern, elderly Scottish maid, appears at the French windows.)*

MACGREGOR. Time for your rest, my lady.

LADY TRESSILIAN. You're as punctual as an alarm clock, MacGregor – and nearly as annoying. I've still got MacGregor you see, Thomas.

THOMAS. How are you, MacGregor?

MACGREGOR. *(Gloomily.)* As well as I can expect to be, Mr. Royde. I'm not long for this world.

LADY TRESSILIAN. Nonsense, MacGregor – you're always offensively healthy.

*(***MACGREGOR** *sees the rug.)*

MACGREGOR. You didn't tell me you wanted the rug, my lady.

LADY TRESSILIAN. I didn't want it. It was O'Donnell – insisted on it.

MACGREGOR. What business is it of his, I'd like to know?

LADY TRESSILIAN. Everything's his business. You ought to know that by this time.

*(***NEVILLE** *and* **KAY** *make their way back over.* **MACGREGOR** *turns* **LADY TRESSILIAN** *in the wheelchair.)*

I shall only rest for a short time, MacGregor – and mind you come at once when I ring my bell.

THOMAS. Still got the same bell?

LADY TRESSILIAN. Yes, and I mean to stick to it.

KAY. What bell?

LADY TRESSILIAN. One you pull by the hand in the good old-fashioned way. None of these electrical, newfangled push things that get out of order.

NEVILLE. *(Grinning.)* Ting-a-ling-a-ling all over the house – and it's got to be answered in double quick time.

LADY TRESSILIAN. I hate waiting. Goodbye, Neville. Goodbye Kay. Sorry about this morning, Neville, but I dare say it's kept you from being too pleased with yourself.

*(***NEVILLE** *tries to stop her.)*

NEVILLE. I rather wanted to talk to you, Camilla –

LADY TRESSILIAN. Not today. There's no time.

*(***MACGREGOR** *wheels her through the French windows.* **NEVILLE** *stands looking rather baffled.* **KAY** *strolls across to the terrace wall and stands looking out to sea.)*

NEVILLE. Well, what do you think of her?

THOMAS. Hasn't changed much – that I can see.

NEVILLE. She's one of the old school, all right.

(He frowns.)

Tiresome sometimes.

THOMAS. Er hum.

(He busies himself with his pipe.)

NEVILLE. Staying here long?

THOMAS. A fortnight.

NEVILLE. Some time since you've been home, isn't it?

THOMAS. Seven years.

NEVILLE. Sounds like, what's his name serving for Rachel.

(He suddenly bites his lip.)

THOMAS. It does a bit. Think I'll stroll down to the ferry.

(He moves slowly to the front gate and exits. **NEVILLE** *looks after him, frowning. He then turns and goes over to* **KAY**.*)*

KAY. Who's the old friend of the family? What a crushing bore! How boring your relations are, Neville.

NEVILLE. *(Offended.)* Sorry about that.

KAY. Now I've hurt your feelings, I suppose.

NEVILLE. We've had this out before. Sir Mathew and Lady Tressilian were my guardians. I always came here from school for the holidays. I'm fond of the place.

(He looks around.)

Gull's Nest is absolutely tip-top to my mind.

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