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SF PERUSALS

CORNELIUS

A Business Affair in Three Transactions

BY

J. B. PRIESTLEY

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CORNELIUS

Produced at the Duchess Theatre, London, W.C.2, on March 20th, 1935, with the following cast of characters:

(In the order of their appearance)

Mrs. Roberts	*Muriel George.*
Lawrence	*Tom Gill.*
Miss Porrin	*Ann Wilton.*
Biddle	*James Harcourt.*
Cornelius	*Ralph Richardson.*
Rug Man	*Albert Ward.*
Eric Shefford	*William Rodwell.*
Paper Towel Man	*Paul Smythe.*
Coleman	*Felix Irwin.*
Young Woman	*Hazel Carnegie.*
Ex-Officer	*Raymond Huntley.*
Judy Evison	*Victoria Hopper.*
Dr. Schweig	*Felix Irwin.*
Fletcher	*Raymond Huntley.*
Elderly Man	*Albert Ward.*
Mrs. Reade	*Dorothy Hamilton.*
Pritchet .	*Victor Tandy.*
Mortimer	*Robert Gilbert.*
Three Creditors	*Paul Smythe.* *Robin May.* *Arthur Howard.*
Robert Murrison	*Harcourt Williams.*

Play Produced by Basil Dean.

SYNOPSIS OF SCENERY

The action takes place in the General Office of Briggs and Murrison, Birdcage Street, Holborn.

ACT I

Monday Morning.

ACT II

Wednesday Afternoon.

ACT III

Friday Evening. Two Weeks later.



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[*Photograph by Stage Photo Co.*

CORNELIUS

ACT I

SCENE.—*The Office of Messrs. Briggs & Murrison, aluminium importers, Birdcage Street, Holborn. Monday morning.*

An ordinary general office room of the more old-fashioned kind, with a recess at the back lit by opaque window in the wall. Window to street on L., *main door on* L. *at right angles to window. On right wall, door to Private Office. Two desks in recess at back, one of them with a typewriter and a telephone. Small table with typewriter and typist's chair in front of window on* L. *Copying-in corner by recess on* R. *Ledgers, files, etc., prominent on walls.*

(*See Photograph of Scene.*)

When CURTAIN *rises, the office is empty. There is a pale wintry sunshine coming through window on* L. *Then private office door opens, and* MRS. ROBERTS *backs out, followed by gusts of smoke. She coughs and angrily mutters:* "Oh, blast the thing!" *then goes back into the room. She is a stoutish Cockney woman in her fifties, with a red face, a hoarse voice, and a ripe character.* LAWRENCE *enters* L., *a rather weedy youth of nineteen, wearing a raincoat that is not very adequate for this cold weather. He blows on his hands, then sees* MRS. ROBERTS *coming out of the private office again, followed by smoke.*

LAWRENCE (*taking letters out of the basket on the door*). Hello, you're late.

MRS. ROBERTS. Yes, and you'd be late if you'd that devil of a thing in there to deal with. (*She backs to* R.C., *coughing.*)

LAWRENCE (*idiotically, as he crosses* C.). It's smoking again.

MRS. ROBERTS (*turning and speaking with immense irony*). Do you know, I believe it is. (*With gusto.*) Smoking! You can't see across that little bit of a room for smoke.

(LAWRENCE *crosses* L., *takes off his hat and coat and hangs them on the stand up* L.)

(*Going to the cupboard down* R. *for a mop.*) If I've told 'em once, I've told 'em fifty times. There's something wrong with that chimney. The place's full o' soot. I give it up.

(LAWRENCE *from now on is getting on with his first duties. He puts the letters on various desks. He fills all the inkwells from a large*

bottle of ink on the desk at back, puts clean sheets of blotting-paper on the various desks, takes the covers off the two typewriters, and so forth.)

LAWRENCE (*distributing the letters*). Well, it doesn't matter.

MRS. ROBERTS. It doesn't matter to me if it doesn't matter to them.

LAWRENCE. Mr. Murrison's still away, and Mr. Cornelius won't mind. He nearly always stays out here, anyhow.

MRS. ROBERTS. Good luck to him!

LAWRENCE. Only we'd better get his table out.

MRS. ROBERTS. Come on, then. I want to finish up.

(*They go into the private office and return carrying a small working table. The top is covered with newspapers. They put this near the door into the private office, and then, while* MRS. ROBERTS *is taking off the newspapers and beginning to dust a little,* LAWRENCE *returns to bring out a chair, which he puts behind the table. He then shuts the door. During the dialogue that follows, while* LAWRENCE *gets on with his ink and blotting-paper business,* MRS. ROBERTS *does a little more perfunctory dusting.*)

LAWRENCE (*grumbling, as he goes to* MISS PORRIN'S *desk with ink*). Look at me. Still doing this!

MRS. ROBERTS. Well, what about it?

LAWRENCE. This is an office boy's job.

MRS. ROBERTS. What of it? Aren't you the office boy?

LAWRENCE. Yes.

MRS. ROBERTS. Well, then?

LAWRENCE. I'm nineteen.

MRS. ROBERTS. Never! (*She then stares at him speculatively.*) No, I dare say you are.

LAWRENCE. There's no *dare say* about it. I know I am. I'm nineteen, I've been here nearly five years, and I'm still the office boy.

MRS. ROBERTS (*moving up to* BIDDLE'S *desk*). Fancy!

LAWRENCE. They won't get a kid to do this. They won't promote me. And I'm nineteen. It's absolutely rotten.

MRS. ROBERTS. Why don't you leave, then?

LAWRENCE (*moving across to* BIDDLE'S *desk*). I would if I could get another job. I keep trying.

MRS. ROBERTS (*crossing to mop under* JUDY'S *desk*). That's right. You keep on trying. And if at first you don't succeed—suck eggs. (*She gives a sudden roar of laughter.*)

LAWRENCE (*properly ignoring this and going to* CORNELIUS'S *table down* R.). I've written for hundreds of jobs. I'm taking a correspondence course in wireless now.

MRS. ROBERTS. Now that's a good job—wireless. I've a nephew—my sister's oldest—who's in that. Has a shop of his own in Hackney. Wireless and gramophones.

LAWRENCE. I'm making a gramophone. I've nearly finished it.

MRS. ROBERTS. Well, I call that clever. I wouldn't know how to start.

LAWRENCE. I've made lots of wireless sets.

MRS. ROBERTS. You're just like my nephew—the one at Hackney. Of course he's older. But I expect you'll be taking the girls to the pictures now—eh? Or don't you bother with 'em?

LAWRENCE (*gloomily*). Not much.

MRS. ROBERTS. Alfred—my nephew—was just the same. He'd rather be doing his wireless and what not. (*She returns to table* R. *to put down duster and mop.*) But then one fine day—before you could say Jack Robinson—lo and behold!—he goes and gets married, and to as flighty a little piece as ever I saw. One o' these fancy blondes that's always having their hair waved. Goes right from Hackney to Kensington High Street—Pontings and Derry and Toms—to do her shopping. At least, that's what *she* says. (*She empties* BIDDLE'S *waste-paper basket into the pail* C.) I wouldn't trust her a yard. I'd like to have a look at her Derry and Toms. And I think that'll do.

(*She takes her apron off.* MISS PORRIN *enters* L. *She is a little woman in her early thirties, spectacled, rather dried up, very simple in manner.*)

MISS PORRIN. Oh—good morning, Mrs. Roberts.

MRS. ROBERTS. Morning, miss. Quite strangers, aren't we? How are you getting on among it all?

MISS PORRIN. Quite well, thank you. And how are you?

MRS. ROBERTS (*at the cupboard down* R.). Fair—just fair. (*Putting the things away.*) I'm not getting any thinner and you're not getting any fatter—that's right, isn't it?

MISS PORRIN (*taking off her hat and coat*). It looks like it, doesn't it? Good morning, Lawrence.

LAWRENCE. Good morning.

MRS. ROBERTS (*crossing* L. *with the heap of coal*). Here—how's Mr. Cornelius these days?

MISS PORRIN. All right, I think.

MRS. ROBERTS. He hasn't got married again, has he? (*She puts the coal on the window-sill.*)

MISS PORRIN. Oh—dear no. (*She crosses and sits at her desk.*)

MRS. ROBERTS. Well, he ought to, a big fine man like him. He must have been a widower now—oh—for seven or eight years. I call it too long. You ought to set about him yourself, Miss Porrin. (*She puts on her coat.*)

MISS PORRIN (*brightly*). Such a strange thing happened to me—just now—in the bus. I was carrying my German book—I'm studying German, you know, Mrs. Roberts—I'd been reading it in the bus, but then I'd stopped because it made my eyes ache and the bus gave a jerk and I dropped my German book, and a gentleman sitting opposite picked it up and handed it to me. And do you

know—wasn't it strange ?—he was a German himself. He told me so when he saw what the book was. Wasn't it strange ?

MRS. ROBERTS. When are you meeting him ?

MISS PORRIN. Oh, no, certainly not. I'm not meeting him anywhere. It wasn't like that at all. He just picked up the book and——

LAWRENCE (*brutally*). And gave it back to you and told you he was a German. We know.

MISS PORRIN. Don't be rude, please, Lawrence. (*Smiling at* MRS. ROBERTS.) But that's all that happened.

MRS. ROBERTS (*crossing* C. *for the pail and back again*). Good job too, if you ask me. Don't you start taking up with foreigners, Miss Porrin. You don't know where they'll land you.

LAWRENCE (*in melodramatic tone*). White Slave Traffic !

MRS. ROBERTS (*lighting a cigarette*). Well, a girl I used to know married one o' them Germans—a waiter he was—and she got White Slave Traffic all right, a basin full, for he kept her at it, washing and scrubbing and cooking, from morning till night. (*Picking up coal from window-sill.*) Well, I'll be off. And tell 'em they can't blame me for the soot and mess, not till they got that chimney in there properly done. I can't work miracles. If I could, I wouldn't be here. Ta-ta.

(*She goes out.* MISS PORRIN, *at her desk, takes some papers out of a drawer, looks at her typewriter, etc.* LAWRENCE *is slowly finishing his little jobs. The telephone rings.*)

LAWRENCE (*at the telephone*). Hello ! This is Briggs and Murrison. No, we're not. Well, I ought to know, oughtn't I ? We're Briggs (*deliberately*) and Murrison. (*He puts down the receiver.*) And that's silly, when you come to think of it.

MISS PORRIN. What is ? Wrong number ?

LAWRENCE. No. (*He begins sharpening a pencil from* BIDDLE'S *desk into the waste-paper basket* L. *of the desk.*) But every day except Sunday for years at that telephone, I've been saying Briggs and Murrison, Briggs and Murrison, and for years and years you've been writing down Briggs and Murrison, Briggs and Murrison, and all the time there hasn't been a Briggs in the firm at all, only Mr. Murrison——

MISS PORRIN. And Mr. Cornelius. He's a partner.

LAWRENCE. Yes, but I call it a waste of time and breath going on year after year, saying Briggs, writing down Briggs, when there isn't a Briggs. And nearly everybody else doing the same thing.

MISS PORRIN. It doesn't matter.

LAWRENCE. It does. I call it silly and clumsy. You couldn't make a gramophone or a wireless set like that.

MISS PORRIN (*turning to him*). That's because they're new things, Lawrence. All new things are neat, like that, but old things aren't. And a lot of business is really old.

LAWRENCE. Yes, but why? Why shouldn't all this be neat and new and sensible? Why should it be so old-fashioned? I'll bet it needn't be. I'll bet——

(*But* MR. BIDDLE *has entered. He is a clerkly, elderly man, obviously very neat and methodical. He is well wrapped up and carries a folded newspaper—the "Morning Post." He takes off his overcoat, hat, and muffler during the following speeches.*)

BIDDLE. Good morning, Miss Porrin. Good morning, Lawrence.

MISS PORRIN } (*together*). Good morning.
LAWRENCE }

BIDDLE. It s still raw, very raw. Very little sign of spring about. (*He sniffs.*) Hello, has that chimney been smoking again?

LAWRENCE. Yes, Mr. Biddle. Ma Roberts says it's completely blocked up.

BIDDLE (*crossing* R.). We must have it attended to before Mr. Murrison comes back. Mr. Cornelius doesn't mind being out here, but Mr. Murrison wouldn't like it. Where's Miss Evison? (*He unlocks a drawer at his desk.*)

MISS PORRIN. She hasn't come yet.

BIDDLE (*changing his coat*). I shall really have to talk very seriously to Miss Evison. She's late nearly every morning now, and even when she is here, her mind's not on her work.

MISS PORRIN. I don't think she's very well, Mr. Biddle.

BIDDLE. Possibly not, possibly not. But that's no real excuse. Mr. Murrison—in my opinion—isn't very well, hasn't been well for some time, but there he is—in the Midlands—up North—travelling all the time, visiting all our customers, not sparing himself. (*He sits at his desk.*)

(MISS PORRIN *rises and goes to the key-drawer in* BIDDLE'S *desk. She then unlocks the safe and takes out the stamp-book, bank-book and petty cash.*)

LAWRENCE. I think that's quite different.

BIDDLE (*banteringly—starting to open letters*). Oh—you think that's quite different, do you, Lawrence? And why might it be different?

LAWRENCE. This is Mr. Murrison's own show. It's his firm.

BIDDLE. And it's my firm. And it's your firm.

LAWRENCE (*not too rudely*). No, it isn't. This is simply the place where I come and put out blotting-paper and copy letters for twenty-five bob a week.

BIDDLE. Yes, and you don't always do that very well. Get me the Day Book and the In Ledger.

(LAWRENCE *goes to get the books from the table at back. The telephone rings and is answered by* MISS PORRIN, *who has returned to her desk and is busy checking stamps and cash.*)

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