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# D O N ' T

## *A PLAY*

In One Act

*By*

MARY MEEK ATKESON

New York  
Orange Judd Publishing Company, Inc.  
1922



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PERSONS OF THE PLAY

MRS. JANE HARPER, *the capable and conscientious mother of  
CARRIE and BOB.*

CARRIE HARPER, *a girl of the "awkward age."*

BOB HARPER, *a boy about twelve years old.*

UNCLE JOHN GREGORY, *Mrs. Harper's brother. A victim of  
neuritis, he has come from the city for rest and recuperation.*

MRS. DOLER, *a neighbor who "enjoys bad health."*

PARSON OLDEN, *the village minister.*

KIRTLEY BRIGHTWELL, *a returned soldier.*



# DON'T

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SCENE.—*The Harper farmhouse sitting room.*

*It is blue Monday in the HARPER farmhouse sitting room—one feels that as the curtain goes up, and one feels, too, that a gray rain drips round the house unceasingly, even though one can't see it through the windows. The room is large and would probably be rather cheerful on a bright day, though there are a lot of useless bric-a-brac about, and gloomy-looking enlarged portraits on the walls. These relics of her early housekeeping days are carefully preserved by MRS. HARPER, partly because they remind her of her husband, who has been dead three years, partly because the care of them has become a habit with her.*

*The widowed MRS. HARPER, however, seems the most cheerful person in the room. One feels that she gets a real satisfaction out of her service for her home and children. She sits near the window with a big mending basket at her side, peering closely at her work in the gray light, as she sets a patch on a pair of trousers. One wonders why she doesn't light a lamp, until one notices the red rose-decorated monstrosity on the center table. It is evidently more for looks than illumination, and probably is another of the treasured wedding gifts.*

*At the right in a carved morris chair sits UNCLE JOHN GREGORY, his feet on a low stool and a shawl folded about his shoulders. He does not look much like an invalid, however, though his face is rather pale and has a tense expression, and he drums with nervous fingers upon the chair arm. The general sleekness of his appearance, the nose glasses, and his white hands show that he is lately from the city. Near the middle of the stage on a little old-fashioned settee is sprawled the ungainly figure of a girl about fourteen years of age. Her head is propped up on one arm of the settee and her long legs draped awkwardly over the other as she reads a book. Evidently the story is interesting,*

for her face has brightened and she reads on eagerly as her mother turns and notices her.

MRS. H. (*horrified*): Carrie, how many times will I have to tell you not to sprawl round like that? A great girl like you!

[*The light goes out of the girl's face instantly, as she slams her feet to the floor and jerks herself to a sitting position, her face clouded with anger.*]

CARRIE: There it is again! Right in the midst of my story! (*Mocking*) "Carrie, don't; Carrie, don't!" What do I care where my legs are, I'd like to know, with Cynthia falling in love with a real live prince!

[*She flings the book aside petulantly, knocking a cheap, decorated vase off a table near her.*]

MRS. H. (*now really distressed*): Oh, Carrie! And a vase I've had ever since your pa and I were married!

CARRIE: Well, I don't care. Everything we've got you've had ever since pa and you were married. It was a sham, anyway. It wouldn't hold water for flowers or anything. (*She glares at the loaded mantel.*) I hate 'em, I tell you. Sham vases and sham clocks and sham lamps that won't give any light but just sit up there to be dusted. Some day I'm goin' to smash 'em, every one.

MRS. H. (*evidently used to such outbursts, going on with her sewing*): Carrie, don't make such a spectacle of yourself before your uncle.

CARRIE (*now quite beside herself*): I don't care—

MRS. H. (*breaking in*): Listen to me. You go out in the kitchen and see what little brother's doing—and tell him not to.

[*CARRIE stares at her speechlessly for a moment.*]

CARRIE: Well, you *are* the limit!

[*She rushes out and slams the door behind her. BOB, in outdoor clothes, enters from the other door.*]

BOB (*boisterously*): Maw! Maw—

MRS. H.: Bob, don't leave your hat on in the house. Go and clean your feet—just look what you're doin' to the carpet.

BOB (*after his feet are cleaned*): Oh, maw, can't I go fishin' down under the bridge? It's a fine day for 'em to bite—jest a little drizzle.

MRS. H.: No, you can't. You'll get wet and take your death o' cold.

BOB (*whining*): But, maw, Bill an' Jim're goin'. I don't see how I'm any sicklier'n they are.



MRS. H. (*sternly*): That's enough, Robert. Don't give me any of your sauce.

BOB (*beginning to cry*): That's always the way. I knowed you wouldn't let me—before I axed you!

[*He goes out howling lustily.*]

[MRS. H. *glances at her brother, who has been an interested spectator of the scene, and sighs deeply.*]

MRS. H.: Well, John, I'm afraid you'll not find much rest and quiet here in the country at this rate. To think that my children could be so rude and ill-bred—I can't understand it. I'm sure I try to do the right thing by them. If only Howard had lived—

[*She wipes her eyes on one corner of the garment she is patching.*]

UNCLE J. (*ignoring her last remark*): Didn't you ever feel that way when you were their age?

MRS. H. (*surprised*): No, I'm sure I never did. Why, you know, John, I never spoke to my mother in any such way.

UNCLE J.: Neither did I—on the surface—I guess I was afraid to, but down underneath I was all one wild revolt. (*He loses himself a moment in his thoughts of the past.*) It's been coming back to me since I've been sitting here with nothing else to do. I don't know but Carrie is just more honest than I was, when she speaks out frankly what she thinks—and maybe she is right—

MRS. H.: I don't see how you'd call that right—when she doesn't mind a single word I say, or show the least respect for her elders.

UNCLE J.: It shows a vigor of character, anyway, and a power to think for herself. The fact is, Jane, you're too capable. You've done your children's thinking for them so long while they were babies that you can't give up now that you have a real force to reckon with. It's a different matter. You can't live your children's lives for them, you know, no matter how capable you are.

MRS. H. (*sighing*): Well, I don't know, I am sure—(*looking out at the window*)—I do believe that's Lucy Doler coming. Now we're in for it.

[*A knock is heard at the door and MRS. DOLER enters shaking her umbrella and removing coat and rubbers. She is a slender, rather pretty woman, but with a petulant, dissatisfied expression on her face.*]

MRS. H. (*not very cordially*): Well, you *are* brave, Lucy, to come out in weather like this.

MRS. DOLER: Oh, yes, ain't it awful, the weather we're havin'? I was just sayin' to Miz Perkins it ain't safe to stick your nose outside o' the door here lately without an umbrella over it. It's bad for us, too. I always notice a spell like this brings sickness and sufferin' after it. My rheumatiz is mighty bad, but, Jane, I felt I just *had* to come over when I heard your poor dear sick brother was here. (*To UNCLE J.*) I'm *so* glad to meet you. (*UNCLE J. does not seem particularly overjoyed, however.*) Zeb Smith, he was tellin' me about you. He said you had somethin' awful the matter with you—somethin' new, he said. But I couldn't figger it out. I couldn't think o' nothin' but pneumonia and pneumatics—only that's somethin' to do with bicycles, ain't it? Tee-hee! Now, do tell me what it is, Mr. Gregory.

UNCLE J. (*evidently being polite with difficulty*): Neuritis. Yes, it's new—it's quite the thing in the city now-a-days. Everybody's havin' it.

MRS. D.: Neuritis! Now, ain't that funny? And I never heard of it before. Poor man, it must be awful. Do tell me what are your symptoms.

UNCLE J. (*pulling his shawl closer about him*): It hasn't any—or rather it's all symptoms—but nobody could understand who hasn't had it.

MRS. D.: Oh, ain't that awful! I know just how it feels. You look just like Lem Haskell. He set around that way for a long time and didn't get no better an' then he up and died suddent-like without a bit of warnin'. Seems like when a body gits down once the sooner he gits under the sod the better; he don't never seem to git rightly over it.

UNCLE J. (*his eyes twinkling*): You certainly have a very cheerful disposition, Mrs. Doler.

MRS. D. (*with satisfaction*): Oh, yes, you might say I'd been sanctified by trouble, I guess. I've had an awful time. I had such a misery in my side I was just clean tuckered out—and it kep' on an' on an' kep' on an' never got any better. An' then they took me to the hospital an' operated—I was under ether four hours—an' that just made me worse. Yes, I was that weak the doctor made me go to bed an' not wiggle my little finger—for, oh, months and months.

UNCLE J. (*cheerfully*): And then you got better?

MRS. D. (*dismally*): No, I just got worse and worse all the

time. I just drag around and don't dast lift a finger for anything—my appetite's so bad an' I just have no strength at all. (*She sighs. She has been looking about the room and now notices the broken vase.*) Why, Jane, what can have happened?

MRS. H.: Oh, Carrie knocked that vase off and broke it just now.

MRS. D.: Oh, that's too bad. I know just how you feel about it, poor thing. That's the reason I can't never seem to use our parlor any more—for fear somebody'll be careless. I can't bear to have a thing changed—so many of our dear ones have died and been carried out o' that very room. (*She wipes her eyes.*) But then everybody don't have the same feelin' for their relatives that I have. (*She shakes her head mournfully.*)

MRS. H. (*evidently glad to change the subject*): I heard that Kirt Brightwell had got home from France. Have you seen him yet?

MRS. D.: Yes, I just met him down the road an' he said he'd stop in here on his way back. He looks pretty well, too, but law! they say they get things over there that don't show for a long time—an' then they're just awful!

UNCLE J. (*eagerly*): He must be the soldier I saw going by a while ago. There's a sort of shine about his face—it does one good just to look at him. It's strange how our boys who left us for over there have come back with an American spirit to bear fruit in American life; now, we shall really be the great nation they were willing to die to save.

[MRS. DOLER *has lost interest and evidently doesn't know what he is talking about.*]

MRS. D.: Well, I must go—it's time to take my medicine and Doctor Sorly said, "Don't miss it whatever you do." (*Looking out at the window.*) Ain't that the parson coming? Do come over to see me, Jane, dear. I just love to hear you talk. (MRS. HARPER *sees her out.*)

MRS. H.: Only she never gives me a chance!

[CARRIE *enters.*]

MRS. H.: Where's the baby?

CARRIE: Oh, he's asleep. I reckon you're glad—now he can't do anything he oughtn't to.

[PARSON OLDEN *enters. He is a kindly old man with the best intentions in the world and very conscientious in his work among his people.*]

MR. OLDEN: Good evening, Mrs. Harper—and Carrie. I

heard your brother had come and thought I'd stop in to meet him. Oh, pleased to meet you, Mr. Gregory. We're glad to have you with us, though we regret that your illness has been the cause of your visit. I hope you will soon be better in our quiet country here—if this rain would ever let up. Very unusual weather for the time of year, very unusual.

MRS. H.: Yes, we have all been hoping for fair weather while he is here—the country is so much more interesting.

MR. O. (*seating himself comfortably*): I was glad to hear, Mrs. Harper, that your children were not at the village dance last night. I wish other mothers were as careful of their children as you are.

MRS. H.: Yes, Carrie wanted to go but I didn't think it best.

[*She glances anxiously at CARRIE, who has dropped into a chair near the minister and seems on the verge of an explosion. MR. O. observes this, too.*]

MR. O.: You are right to see that such temptations be kept away from your children, Mrs. Harper. (*Patting CARRIE'S shoulder soothingly.*) Our little girls are so precious we cannot let them do things that will cause them sorrow in the future. (*Benevolently.*) That is why I've been preaching my sermons lately on the temptations of the young—to warn them before it is too late of some of the chief dangers of the period of youth.

CARRIE (*exploding as she shakes off his hand and jumps up*): I know you do, and I hate it! Don't smoke. Don't dance. Don't play cards. Don't swear. I don't want to know what to don't—I want to know what to do!

MRS. H. (*shocked beyond measure*): Carrie! How could you!

CARRIE: Well, you told me, Don't tell a lie. Then what am I to tell except the truth? I've lied often enough, goodness knows, sitting up there and pretendin' to be pious when I wasn't, when I wanted to stick dynamite under that church and blow it all to flinders! So there! Don't, don't, don't! [*She stamps her foot angrily. MRS. H. is speechless with mortification, and even the parson sees that it is no time for soothing sirup. UNCLE JOHN is looking on with amused interest. Fortunately just then BOB throws open the door boisterously and pulls in KIRT BRIGHTWELL, the returned soldier. With him comes a brighter atmosphere. It may be that a few sunbeams are beginning to come out, or perhaps it is just the reflection of a happier presence in the room.*]

BOB (*loudly*): What's the row?

MRS. H.: Why, Kirt! [*She rushes forward to kiss him. The others shake hands delightedly and for a moment all try to talk at once.*]

MR. O.: When did you come?

MRS. H.: How are you! How well you're looking!

UNCLE J.: Glad to know you, indeed, I am.

CARRIE (*delightedly*): My, your uniform is good-looking!

KIRT (*laughing*): One at a time, one at a time. I just got back this morning. Gee, it's good to be here and see all you folks again. I feel as if I'd been away fifty years. Honest, I do.

MRS. H.: Sit down. Carrie, tell Judy to bring some doughnuts and cider.

[*CARRIE goes to the door a moment to give the message, but returns promptly to KIRT'S side in evident enthusiasm over this real doer of deeds.*]

KIRT (*sitting down in the chair they have all rushed to get for him*): This is just like old times, Mrs. Harper. It sure seems good to me.

BOB (*who always insists on going to the bottom of a subject*): But say, what was the row when we came in?

MRS. H.: Row? Bob, such language! Why, Carrie was excited over nothing as usual. Now, never mind, Bob.

MR. O. (*who likes to show a Christian spirit*): Miss Carrie says she doesn't like my sermons.

BOB (*who, it seems, has a grievance of his own*): Gee, I got a lickin' when I got home last Sunday, too.

MRS. H. (*sternly*): For misbehaving in church. You know you did, Bob.

BOB: I didn't do nothin' but have a little box turtle in my pocket, an' it didn't do nothin'. It's slow—(*with sudden boyish impudence*) but gee, parson, it crawled up an' down the seat a dozen times while you didn't get anywhere!

MRS. H. (*horrified*): Robert! Mr. Olden, I can't seem to control my children at all any more. I don't know what to do with them.

KIRT (*who has been watching CARRIE'S face*): Why, what's the matter, sis? Can't you tell a fellow?

CARRIE (*earnestly*): Everything's the matter, Kirt. Just because I'm getting big, mother won't let me do a thing. It isn't nice to play with boys. It isn't ladylike to climb trees. She wants me to be cooped up in the house and yard like a chicken,

an' I say I won't! So there! What am I to do? I'm too big to play with dolls, and too little to gossip at the sewin' circle. And it's Don't, don't, *don't!* all day long.

KIRT (*with quick sympathy*): Well, that *is* hard luck, Carrie. I know how it goes. That's the way it used to be with me, Mrs. Harper. Mother was so careful of her only boy she made me miss half the fun of life. Why, I could hardly dress myself without her to lay out my clothes for me and tie my necktie. (*He laughs heartily at the recollection.*) And when I went to the table she'd fix up little extra things for me to eat, for fear I wouldn't be properly nourished. [*They laugh.*]

UNCLE J. (*joking*): You look rather sickly.

KIRT: Don't I, though? But I tell you when I went over there it didn't take me long to learn a few things. When the time came to *get*, we *got*, and no questions asked. When they wanted us to go over the top, they said "Go!" and over we went. We never stopped to think what might happen to us.

BOB (*enthusiastically*): Gee, I bet you didn't!

KIRT: And we slept in the wet cold and wallowed through the mire knee-deep in the trenches, and it didn't hurt us a bit. We went without anything to eat for twenty-four hours at a stretch—but (*with a joyful recollection*) maybe it didn't taste good when we did get it. Mother's extras were nothing to that. It makes me hungry right now to think of it. Those doughnuts are just in time, Carrie.

[*CARRIE brings the cider and doughnuts from the door. They fill the glasses and pass them. MR. O. tastes his cider rather doubtfully.*]

KIRT (*teasing*): That's all right, parson. It's less than one per cent.

MR. O. (*laughing*): How do you know?

KIRT: Well, it *is* pretty hard to say Don't! to Mother Nature when she gets to workin' up a little alcohol. That's a fact. [*They laugh and eat.*]

KIRT (*teasingly, as he holds up a doughnut*): This is the kind of doughn'ts we had in France, Carrie. (*Significantly.*) They had holes in them.

CARRIE (*instantly ready to fight*): Well, there ain't any holes in ours. They're plumb solid—not a loophole anywhere.

[*They laugh. CARRIE laughs with them, becoming really pretty as her face lights up with laughter, as KIRT seems to notice.*]

KIRT: That's a lot better, Carrie. Be a sunbeam. You know

a gloomy face is catchin'—bad as measles. We used to say in camp that a fellow ought to be quarantined till he's cured of trouble—it's so terribly contagious. But then, so's happiness, for that matter. Why, you could just see those Yankee grins of ours begin to ripple over France the very minute we got there. Honest, you could. Faces, too, that hadn't smiled for four whole years. I tell you, it was great to see it.

ALL (*absorbed in his story*): It must have been.

KIRT: They had gone their limit, you see, and still the Germans were pushing them back. When we got there—well—there was so much to do nobody cared how—so long as we got it done.

UNCLE J. (*with enthusiasm*): And, my boy, you did it too!

KIRT (*modestly*): Well, every fellow tried to do his share, I guess, all the way through—though some of us hadn't done much for our country over here before we left it. It makes me tired to think what a lot of pep we wasted before the war, when it might have gone into making our country what it ought to be.

MR. O. (*soothingly*): The ways of peace are quiet ways, you know.

KIRT: Yes, too quiet. If we'd stir up a little row once in a while against the real forces of evil it'd be better for all of us.

UNCLE J. (*with energy*): You're right, there, my boy. We stay-at-homes are often the basest slackers in more ways than one.

KIRT (*aghast at this interpretation of what he has said*): I didn't mean that, Mr. Gregory, you *know* I didn't mean that! That's just like my blunderin' tongue!

CARRIE (*her hand on KIRT's arm, as she defends him eagerly*): Why, Uncle John, you know he didn't mean it!

UNCLE J. (*quietly*): Yes, I know he didn't, but it's true just the same. We're too ready to give in to little inhibitions—to little ailments—when we ought to stand up and fight our way out (*teasingly*) like little Carrie here. I got to thinking of it a while ago when Mrs. Doler was in—

ALL: Oh, Mrs. Doler! [*They groan and laugh at the same time.*]

CARRIE: I bet she'll be having neuritis herself before the week's out.

UNCLE J.: She's a good tonic, I guess, by her horrible example to save us from letting our spirits slide downhill. We're all too ready to quit when the doctor or somebody else says Don't! and give up to invalidism, when the fact is, there's so

much to be done in the world it doesn't really matter if we do have a little pain somewhere. Now, here I've been—doomed to a chair—just because I've been cooped up in a stuffy office till I got all the oxygen out of my system. All I need is a chance to work as the Lord intended man to work—with his muscles. [*He throws back his shawl and feels his arm rather doubtfully.*]

KIRT: That's like Doctor Sorly (*acting it out.*) He comes in and looks at your tongue and feels your pulse—asks you what you've been doing and tells you not to. Do you smoke? Well, don't do it. Do you drink coffee? Don't do it. Have you been working? Then quit it—it's bad for you. [*The others laugh.*]

CARRIE: That's just like him. I hate Doctor Sorly!

BOB: Oh, pshaw, sis, you hate so many things.

CARRIE (*warmly*): I don't either. I just hate to be forever told not to do this and not to do that—and I hate it no matter who tells me. So, there!

MRS. H.: Carrie, don't— (*She stops in confusion, while the others laugh. She goes on apologetically.*) I guess I do say that pretty often, though I never realized it before. It's a habit we mothers get, I fear.

UNCLE J. (*with more vigor than he has shown yet*): I guess we've all had the habit and never realized it exactly. What we need is to join our forces and give these headstrong youngsters of ours so much to do they won't have time to be impudent. Isn't that it, parson?

MR. O. (*hesitating for fear he may be agreeing to something too radical in its nature*): I'm beginning to think you are right, Mr. Gregory.

UNCLE J.: I've heard that the Indians, when their young folks get about the age of our Bob and Carrie, here, put them to work for the tribe—hard work, too—and to proving their worth as future leaders in war and peace, until all this wild eagerness to do something is turned in a good direction. Suppose we give up this old gospel of Don't! and try having them *do* the things that are worth while. A girl who can make doughnuts like these of Carrie's has a place in the neighborhood as big as any Salvation Army girl's in France—and (*teasingly*) her smiles are just as sweet.

KIRT (*with enthusiasm*): You're right, there.

[*The others laugh and CARRIE tries to hide her face, though it is easy to see that she is pleased.*]

UNCLE J.: It's only too easy to see the dangers of doing



things. When a boy goes swimming he may be drowned; if he crosses the road in these days he may get run down by an automobile; if he drives a horse it may run away. Yet a boy must learn to swim if he is ever to save himself and others in an accident on the water—he can't always stay on one side of the road—and to learn to control himself he must teach that lesson of control to his driving horse. So it goes. Even though he shuts himself up in a little room, along may come a deadly germ and carry him off by disease. Life is a pretty dangerous business at its best, and sooner or later we all come to the great adventure. What does it matter when it comes if our hearts are right and our courage is high and we are busy doing the things that must be done? I guess that's about the way a soldier feels, isn't it, Kirt?

KIRT (*confused before the implication of any such heroism*): Well, I reckon so, though I wouldn't put it just like that.

MR. O. (*still hoping to justify his sermons*): But you must admit, Mr. Gregory, there are grave dangers for the young—that they ought to be warned.

UNCLE J.: Yes, there are. And the warning should be given. But most of the things we worry over never come to pass. If a little fraction of one per cent of all the disasters people see ahead would really happen, this world would be in a pretty fix. Now, wouldn't it?

MR. O. (*still doubtful*): Yes, I suppose it would.

UNCLE J.: Kirt, you're not too much worn out to help with some plans for the youngsters of the neighborhood, are you?

KIRT: Why, of course not. I tried to do my part in the war, but it's no time to quit now—with the whole world to be made over into peace.

UNCLE J.: Right you are. This job is big enough for us all. I do believe you are converted, parson, and Jane, here, too.

MR. O. (*who prides himself on being a good loser*): Yes, I am. (*Jocosely.*) I see the light.

UNCLE J.: Light! (*Looking round at the windows through which the sunshine is now streaming.*) Why, we've even talked the sunshine into the sky—and (*teasing*) into Carrie's face. Who would ever have thought it! [*They laugh.*]

KIRT (*reluctantly*): Well, I must go.

MRS. H.: Can't you stay to supper with us—and you, too, Mr. Olden?

KIRT: No, not this time, Mrs. Harper. Mother will be expecting me.

MR. O.: I promised Mrs. Smith I'd be down her way by suppertime. Thank you, Mrs. Harper.

[*The men have risen and are putting on coats and hats. UNCLE JOHN rises from his chair.*]

UNCLE J.: Here, Bob, hand me my coat. I'll walk down a piece with them.

MRS. H.: Why, John! The doctor said (*catching herself just in time*)— You'll take your death of cold.

UNCLE J.: Oh, no, I won't. It's a little wet, that's all. I'm going to work in the field awhile to-morrow. Getting his feet wet never yet hurt a real man, did it, Kirt?

KIRT (*hesitating before this vigorous application of his ideas*): Maybe you'd better not go too far.

UNCLE J. (*getting into his coat*): I'll be careful. It wouldn't do for me to get down and out with this new job on our hands. If we can't send all our boys and girls over to France to learn what Kirt has learned over there, we can at least put them to work for their country here at home. We'll start a real campaign of Americanism. Let's have a neighborhood plan, with plays and parties and athletic games—something to keep us all out of mischief every day in the week. Let's all get busy at our job of making a better America—and everybody say Let's do! instead of Don't! Now, what do you say, people?

[*During this speech they have grouped themselves. MR.*

*OLDEN'S hand is on KIRT'S shoulder. CARRIE has timidly drawn near to KIRT with girlish hero worship in her eyes.*

*BOB is reaching for the last doughnut on the plate.]*

ALL (*with laughter and great enthusiasm*): Yes, LET'S DO!

CURTAIN





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