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Repertory Plays

James and John
by
Gilbert Cannan



Le Roy Phillips, *Boston*



JAMES AND JOHN

A PLAY IN ONE ACT

BY

GILBERT CANNAN
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BOSTON
LE ROY PHILLIPS
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PLAYS BY GILBERT CANNAN

- JAMES AND JOHN - - - - *one act.*
MILES DIXON - - - - *two acts.*
MARY'S WEDDING - - - - *one act.*
A SHORT WAY WITH AUTHORS, *one act.*

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CHARACTERS

John Betts

James Betts

Mrs. Betts

Mr. Betts

Scene: Their parlour.

JAMES AND JOHN

It is half past nine of an evening and the scene is the parlour of a little house in a gaunt row of houses in a street in a London suburb. By the fireplace at the back JAMES and JOHN BETTS are playing backgammon, the board on a little table between them. They are both grey. JAMES has a beard. JOHN is clean-shaven. JOHN wears glasses. Both wear morning-coats and both have carpet slippers. JAMES smokes, JOHN does not. JOHN has a glass of whisky on the mantelpiece within reach: JAMES is teetotal. They are absorbed in their game and pay no attention to their mother, a stout old lady who is sitting in her chair reading a novel, sleeping, and knitting. Her chair is by another little table on which the solitary lamp of the room is placed so as to cast its light on her book. She is directly in front of the fire so that her back is towards the audience. JOHN is sitting with his back towards her.

The room is ugly and Mid-Victorian. Its door is to the right. Its window to the left. In the window is a stand of miserable-looking ferns and an india-rubber plant.

JAMES

[*Looking up, abruptly.*] Very nice. I think I shall gammon you, John.

H'm.

JOHN

[*He rattles the dice furiously, seeing the game go against him.*]

JOHN

[*Triumphantly.*] I take you there and there . . .

JAMES

We shall see.

[*Silence.*]

MRS. BETTS

Did you say it was raining when you came in, John?

JOHN

[*Turning irritably.*] I have said so four times.

[*Silence. They devote themselves to their game again.*]

MRS. BETTS

[*Plaintively, as though she knew full well that her remarks would fall on deaf ears. She lays down her book.*] This isn't a very interesting book. . . . I don't think books are so interesting as they used to be . . . they all seem to be trying to be like real life. . . . I must say I like to know who marries who . . . and I don't like stories about married life. . . . I suppose the authors must be thinking of their own. . . . Depressing. . . . You haven't said how you like my new cap, Jamie. . . .

MRS. BETTS

You did say it was raining, John?

[No answer — only a frenzied rattle of the dice.]

I don't think anything has happened. . . .

The next-door people have had trouble with the servant again. . . . A thief this one. . . . I wonder if it is raining. . . . I wouldn't like it to be wet for him. . . .

[JAMES and JOHN look at each other and JAMES looks over at his mother. She is fumbling for her handkerchief.]

JOHN

Gammon. . . .

[He rises and looks down at his brother in triumph. Each takes a little note-book from his pocket and makes a note of the game.]

JAMES

I still lead by two hundred and twenty-three games. . . .

[MRS. BETTS is wiping her eyes and snuffling. JOHN goes to her and pats her shoulder kindly.]

JOHN

Would you like a game, mamma? . . .

MRS. BETTS

No — no-o-o . . . I couldn't — not to-night. . . .

JAMES

I thought we had agreed not to talk of it nor to think of it. . . .

MRS. BETTS

It — it is all very well for you boys to talk . . .
b-b-but . . . I can't help but remember
. . . all these years . . .

JOHN

Shall Jamie read to you, mamma?

MRS. BETTS

It — it was so — so dreadful . . .

JAMES

Yes, yes, mamma. . . . But we agreed that we
would . . .

MRS. BETTS

It all comes back to me so. . . . The whole
thing. . . . I suppose they never talk of it
at the bank now, Jamie . . .?

JAMES

[*Exploding.*] I wish to God he had never lived
to come back again . . .

JOHN

Tssh! — Tssh! . . .

JAMES

I say that he has ruined mamma's life, and your
life and mine. . . . I say again that I wish
to God he had never lived to come back. . . .

JOHN

Think of mamma. . . .

MRS. BETTS

Your own father . . .

[*She weeps.*]

JAMES

It is against my wish that he is allowed to come here at all. . . .

JOHN

Do let us try to forget the whole affair until . . . until he comes. . . . Don't you think it would be better if you went to bed, mamma?

[JAMES *has fallen to pacing up and down the room.*

MRS. BETTS

No; I must stay . . . to . . . to see him . . .

JOHN

You must be brave, then . . .

MRS. BETTS

[*Making an effort and gulping down her sobs.* Ye-yes. . . . [She takes JOHN'S hand and pats it, while she anxiously tries to watch JAMES in his pacing.] But, John . . . I'm afraid — afraid of Jamie. . . .

[*She says this almost in a whisper but JAMES hears her. He stops by the fireplace and stands with his back to the fire and glares at his mother.*

JAMES

I am, I hope, a just man . . .

JOHN

We have argued enough. . . . We must wait. . . . We can't have mamma breaking down before he comes. . . .

JAMES

John, you're a soft fool. . . . This man has done us all an injury. . . . He has brought misery upon this house. . . . He has no other place to which to turn: for a while he may rest under our roof. . . . Is that understood?

JOHN

Quite. . . . Can't you leave it alone?

JAMES

I wish to make myself clearly understood. . . .

JOHN

I think we both understand you . . . and you need not speak so loud.

JAMES

There must be no sentiment and he must be made to understand the terms on which I have consented to receive him. . . .

MRS. BETTS

We — we must be kind, Jamie — we must be kind. . . . He was always a kind man . . .

JAMES

Kind! . . . To treat you in the way he did — and you can call him kind. Oh! the foolishness of women. . . .

MRS. BETTS

He was never a bad man. . . . Is it raining, John?

[JOHN goes to the window and peeps out.

JOHN

Yes, mamma, it is raining.

MRS. BETTS

Oh! . . . It isn't too late for one of you to meet him at the station . . . is it?

JAMES

You know that that is impossible. . . . It is enough that he is permitted to come here at all. . . . It is my house. . . . The ordering of this affair is in my hands. . . . Let it be . . .

MRS. BETTS

He has been punished enough for his sin. . . .

JAMES

We have been punished. *I* have been punished. . . . Year after year I have been passed over and men younger than myself have been promoted. . . . For years I was made to feel that my continued presence in the bank was an act of charity. . . . For years I have felt rather than heard the miserable story whispered to every raw lad who came to the place . . . and suffered . . . because my father betrayed his trust. . . . And you say he was not a bad man . . .

JOHN

Jamie — Jamie —

[MRS. BETTS *beats feebly with her hands against him.*

JAMES

Jamie! — Jamie! — Well enough for you, John — you were out of it. . . .

[JOHN folds his arms as though he realised the hopelessness of endeavouring to stem the stream of his brother's indignation, and to indicate that he also has suffered but is too much a man to talk about it. This goads JAMES only to further indignation. JOHN mutters unintelligibly.

JAMES

What do you say? What do you say?

JOHN

I said that what's done is done and let the past bury its dead.

JAMES

It is not dead. . . .

MRS. BETTS

Don't quarrel — don't quarrel. I cannot bear it. . . .

JAMES

Mother, we must understand each other — you, John, and I — we must see this thing as it is. . . . Set aside the fact that this man is our father and your husband. . . . We must see what he did coldly, dispassionately, and judge accordingly.

JOHN

I read in a book that no man has the right to judge another man . . .

JAMES

Facts are facts. . . .

JOHN

We don't know what drove him to do what he did. . . .

JAMES

We know — what we know. We know the injury that he has done to ourselves. We know that because our father — because our father . . . [MRS. BETTS *now has her face in her handkerchief*; JAMES *is for a moment stopped but stiffens himself*] because our father robbed the clients of the branch of which he was manager in order to keep the women whom he had bought . . .

JOHN

You . . . [JAMES *raises his hand*.

JAMES

I will end where I have begun. . . . It is true that he was revered as an upright gentleman, that he gave large sums in charity, that he did much good for the poor of this district, that he did this, that, and the other thing which kept him conspicuous as a righteous man. . . . We know that he was an excellent man of business and that the directors gave him the opportunity to escape. . . . There is that to his credit that he had the courage to face the consequences of his actions. . . . But even in that he had no thought for us, to whom rather than to himself his thoughts should have turned. . . . We know only too well the shame and

disgrace of the arrest, the infamous revelations, the position irretrievably lost. . . . We know — you and I, John — we know the ruin that it has been to us. . . . We have seen other men of our own age fulfil their lives . . .

JOHN

Will you cease? —

JAMES

We know that we have been chained here, you and I, to rot and rot . . . men wasted . . . without pride of home or pride of work. . . . We have sat here year in, year out, waiting, waiting . . . for nothing . . . knowing that nothing could ever come to us. . . .

MRS. BETTS

O-o-oh, . . .

JAMES

We have suffered enough, I say, and if now that he has served his punishment and is free we take him under our roof again, to live here in this town, with us whom he has so — has so — so wrecked, in this town where he is still infamous . . . then that which is only now whispered of us will be common talk. . . . We shall be lower than we have ever been and lose all that we have. . . . That is all.

[He takes a pipe from his pocket, fills it with tobacco, lights it, and stalks out of the room. MRS. BETTS sobs quietly for a little.]

MRS. BETTS

John, dear — John . . .

JOHN

[*Without moving.*] Yes, mother?

MRS. BETTS

He was never a bad man.

JOHN

No . . . mother.

MRS. BETTS

It must have been bitter for Jamie . . .

JOHN

Yes, mother, it has not been . . . easy.

MRS. BETTS

He was always a kind man . . . always. . . .
I don't understand — I never shall understand what made him do . . . do . . . what he did. . . . He . . . he used to be so fond of children. . . . You don't think hardly of him, John? . . .

JOHN

Not — not for a long time now, mother.

MRS. BETTS

I never shall understand what made him do . . . because — because he — he never really turned from me . . . I should have known if — if he had done that. . . . Do you understand, John?

JOHN

I am trying, mother —

MRS. BETTS

He was sometimes impatient with me . . . and . . . and I was a foolish woman. . . . Such a clever man he was. . . . But he never turned from me . . .

JOHN

No —

MRS. BETTS

I remember now . . . often . . . when he told me. . . . How kind he was . . . and gentle. . . . He had been ill and worried for a long time, and then one day he came home and sat without a word all through the evening. . . . It was raining then. . . . About ten o'clock . . . [JOHN *is sitting with his head in his hands on the sofa between the fire and the window*] about ten o'clock . . . he came and kissed me, and told me to go to bed. Then he went out. . . . I do not know where he went, but he came back wet through, covered with mud, and his coat was all torn. . . . I was awake when he came back, but he spoke no word to me. . . . He came to bed and lay trembling and cold. . . . I took his hand. . . . He shook and he was very cold. . . . He — he turned to me like a child and sobbed, sobbed. . . . Then, dear, he told me what he had done. . . . He told

me that . . . that he had tried — tried to do away with himself . . . and — and could not. . . . He never asked me to forgive him. . . . He told me how the directors had asked him to go away to avoid prosecution. . . . He said that he must bear his punishment. . . . He is not a bad man, John. . . . Men and women are such strange creatures . . . there is never any knowing what they will do . . .

JOHN

You want him to come back, mother?

MRS. BETTS

Why, yes. . . . Where else should he go? . . .

JOHN

You know, mother . . . Jamie wanted to be married . . .

MRS. BETTS

Oh! yes — yes — yes. . . . Poor boy. . . .

JOHN

We're men. It has been a long time. We're old men . . . now . . .

[JOHN *mends the fire and takes his whisky and soda.*]

MRS. BETTS

John, dear . . . [JOHN *turns from poking the fire*]
I would like him to have his old chair that he used to sit in . . . and his old slippers

. . . and there's an old pipe that he had —
in my room . . . you know . . .

JOHN

Very well. . . .

[JOHN goes out. MRS. BETTS sniffs and dries her eyes. She takes up her book, reads it for a little, then lays it down, takes her knitting, plies her needles for a little, then lays that down. She fixes her spectacles and looks anxiously at the clock on the mantelpiece. It has an aggressively loud tick. Then she looks towards the window and, rising slowly to her feet, shuffles across, and looks out. JAMES returns and finds her there.]

JAMES

[Sternly.] I think you should sit quietly and calm yourself.

MRS. BETTS

Meekly.] Yes, Jamie.

[She shuffles back to her chair.]

JAMES

Would you like me to read to you?

MRS. BETTS

Please, Jamie.

[JAMES goes to the little dwarf bookcase in the recess by the fireplace and takes down a book. He moves the table with the backgammon board, and draws up his chair to

the right side of the fireplace, and then sits so as to have the light of the lamp on his book.

JAMES

[*Reading — “Pickwick,” Chap. xxxii.*] “There is a repose about Lant Street, in the Borough, which sheds a gentle melancholy upon the soul. There are always a good many houses to let in the street; —— ”

MRS. BETTS

Like our street.

JAMES

“It is a by-street and its dulness is soothing. A house in Lant Street would not come within the denomination of a first-rate residence, in the strict acceptation of the term; but it is a most desirable spot nevertheless. If a man wished to abstract himself from the world — to remove himself from within reach of temptation — to place himself beyond the possibility of any inducement to look out of the window — he should by all means go to Lant Street.

“Mr. Bob Sawyer embellished one side of the fire in his first-floor front, early on the evening for which he had invited Mr. Pickwick: and Mr. Ben Allen the other. The preparations for the visitors appeared to be completed. The umbrellas in the passage had been heaped into a little corner outside the best parlour door, the bonnet and shawl

of the landlady's servant had been removed from the bannisters: there were not more than two pairs of pattens on the street door mat, and a kitchen candle, with a very long snuff, burnt cheerfully on the ledge of the staircase window. —— ” Are you listening?

MRS. BETTS

Yes, dear.

JAMES

“ Mr. Bob Sawyer had himself purchased the spirits at a wine vaults in High Street and had returned home preceding the bearer thereof, to preclude the possibility of their delivery at the wrong house. The punch was ready made in a saucepan in the bedroom: —— ”

[The door is thrown open and JOHN comes staggering in with a great chair which he places on the left side of the fireplace. He takes a pair of red leather slippers from his pockets and places them in front of the fire to warm. From another pocket he produces a pipe and an old tin of tobacco and lays them on the mantelpiece. JAMES stops in his reading and scowls. The old lady starts up in her seat and watches JOHN'S movements intently. JOHN takes not the slightest notice of JAMES but goes out of the room again. JAMES opens his mouth to speak but decides to go on reading as though nothing had happened.]

JAMES

“ Notwithstanding the highly satisfactory nature of all these arrangements, there was a cloud on the countenance of Mr. Bob Sawyer as he sat by the fireside. There was a sympathising expression too in the features of Mr. Ben Allen, as he gazed intently on the coals: and a tone of melancholy in his voice as he said, after a long silence:

“ ‘ Well, it *is* unlucky that she should have taken it into her head to turn sour, just on this occasion. She might at least have waited till to-morrow.’ ”

[JOHN returns with a glass, a decanter of whisky, and a jug of water. These he places on the table by his mother's side. She looks up at him gratefully. JOHN, a little ostentatiously, takes a book and sits on the sofa. JAMES shuts “Pickwick” and remains gazing into the fire. They sit in silence for some time.]

MRS. BETTS

Is the clock right, John?

JOHN

[Looking at his watch.] A little fast. . . . I told Jane she might go to bed. I thought it better.

MRS. BETTS

Yes —

[JOHN is conscious that JAMES is scrutinising him narrowly, and becomes a little uneasy.]

He sits so that the chair he has brought is between himself and his brother. He can see his mother from this position. They sit again in silence for some time.

MRS. BETTS

There was a funeral in the street to-day. Quite a grand affair. . . . [Silence.] There have been quite a number of deaths in the district lately. . . . [Silence.] They go on having babies, though . . . I wonder why . . . [Silence.] I suppose everything happens for the best. . . . [Her prattle becomes intolerable to JAMES, who springs to his feet and walks furiously up and down the room. He subsides finally, having scared her into silence, and they sit mum while the aggressive clock tick-ticks, and faint noises from the street come into the room—the sound of wheels on cobblestones, of whistling boys, of a street-brawl. Then comes the boom of a great distant clock striking ten.] That's the Town Hall. When you hear it so clearly as that it means rain.

. . .

[Silence again. The bell of the house is heard to tinkle. JOHN leaps to his feet and goes from the room. MRS. BETTS starts up trembling and fearful. JAMES sits bolt upright and stern in his chair. They both turn and watch the door. JOHN returns alone.]

JOHN

Only the post.

JAMES

Anything for me?

JOHN

No; for me. . . .

*[He reads his letter and throws it in the fire.**JAMES and MRS. BETTS subside into their former attitudes. JOHN returns to the sofa and takes up his book again.*

MRS. BETTS

Who was it from, John?

JOHN

It was nothing of any consequence.

[They relapse into silence.

JAMES

It is past your bed-time, mother. [MRS. BETTS takes no notice.] It is past ten o'clock mother. . . .

MRS. BETTS

I know. . . . *[They are silent again. JAMES falls to plucking his beard, and MRS. BETTS to watching him.]* How like you are to your father, James! . . . I suppose that is why you could never get on together. . . .*[JAMES winces, but ignores the remark.*

JOHN

I think, mother, if we agreed not to talk it would be easier for all of us. . . .

MRS. BETTS

Very well, John . . . only — I — I couldn't bear the silence. . . .

[JAMES opens "*Pickwick*" again and pretends to be absorbed.]

JOHN

If you would read, Jamie . . .

JAMES

She does not listen . . . [MRS. BETTS has caught the sound of something outside the house. She turns and looks, half in fear, half in eagerness, towards the window. She lifts her hand and seems to point in that direction. The house bell is heard again. JOHN looks up, sees her agitation, and comes to soothe her. He moves towards the door, and has reached it when JAMES shakes himself and holds up a hand.] Stop! [JOHN turns.] I will go.

JOHN

I beg your pardon. I will go.

[He opens the door and goes out. JAMES assumes a commanding attitude by the fireplace. MRS. BETTS turns and watches the door. She hears murmurs of voices,

and, rising to her feet, begins to shuffle towards the door.

JAMES

[Without looking at her; in a firm, quiet voice.]
 Mother — sit down. [He never takes his eyes from the door. MRS. BETTS stands turning piteously between his command and her instinctive inclination. Then slowly she returns and subsides into her chair, but never takes her eyes from the door. MRS. BETTS begins to whimper.] Tssh! Tssh!

[The door slowly opens and JOHN comes in, grave, solemn. He holds the door open and presently MR. BETTS comes in. He is a big man, but a broken and a wretched; and yet there is a fine dignity in him. He stands by the door for some moments, his eyes fixed on his wife. He comes towards her slowly as though he were afraid, were not sure; that breaks in him, and he stumbles towards her and kisses her.]

BETTS

Wife . . .

[She breaks into a little moaning cry, fondles, and kisses his hand. JOHN comes and stands behind them. MR. BETTS turns from his wife to JAMES and holds out his hand. JAMES bows stiffly, and for a moment there is silence. The old antagonism leaps in both.]

JAMES

[*With stiff dignity.*] You are welcome, sir. . . .

[MR. BETTS *stretches to his full height and bows with a dignity no less stiff than that of his son.* JAMES *stands cold, while the other three are grouped together.* MRS. BETTS *tugs at her husband's hand.*

MRS. BETTS

Your chair, dear . . . John brought it down for you. . . .

[MR. BETTS *moves and sits in the chair by the fireplace.* JAMES *waits for a little and then, without a word, sits in his chair.* JOHN *brings up a chair and sits between his mother and father, nearer to his mother.* *They sit so in awkward silence, during which MR. BETTS turns his eyes from one to another of his family.* JAMES *alone does not look at his father, but studiously away from him.* JOHN *turns and mixes a glass of whisky and water for his father.* *This the old man takes gladly.* *He is reminded that he is cold by this attention, and shivers.* *He holds out a hand towards the blazing fire, then finds JAMES looking at it vindictively and withdraws it hastily.*

JOHN

Your slippers are there. . . . [MR. BETTS *takes off his boots and gives them to JOHN, who takes them out of the room.*] Will you . . . smoke?

MR. BETTS

Thank you. [*He takes his old pipe and tobacco and lights, looking at JAMES the while. He blows out a cloud of smoke gratefully. He thrusts out a leg towards the fire.*] The value of tobacco is best appreciated when it is the last you possess and there is no chance of getting more. . . . Bismarck said that . . .

MRS. BETTS

[*Who has been weeping quietly.*] I think — I think I must go to — to bed. [*She rises to her feet and shuffles slowly over to her husband. She bends over him and kisses him, and with her weak old hands pats his cheek.*] I — I hope you are not wet, dear. . . . It must be raining terribly. . . .

[*She shuffles over to JAMES, kisses him, and JOHN sees her to the door, then comes back and sits in her chair. MR. BETTS has watched his wife with burning eyes as she moved.*

MR. BETTS

How long? How long?

JAMES

[*Icily.*] It is six months since she was out of doors. . . . It is almost six years since she has been well enough to stay away from . . . from home. . . .

[MR. BETTS *draws the back of his hand over his eyes.*

JOHN

Be just, James, be just.

JAMES

[*In the same hard monotone.*] It is twelve years since we came to this house in this melancholy street. . . . In this room she has sat, day in, day out, year in, year out. . . . Day by day we have set out, I for the bank, John there for his office. . . . Year by year we have known that there was nothing to be done . . . that we must sacrifice everything to her. . . . We have known that. . . . We have known that we could bring her nothing, that she could bring us nothing. . . . There she sat . . .

[MR. BETTS *sits with bowed head, offering no protest.*

JOHN

Be just, James, be just. . . . She has been waiting for this day . . .

JAMES

[*Ignoring him.*] We have known that such an existence was futile . . . sterile. . . . We have all been . . . prisoners.

JOHN

Shame on you . . .

JAMES

I have told you in my letter the terms on which I bid you welcome to my house. . . . What have you to say?

[MR. BETTS *looks at JOHN, then to JAMES. Their eyes meet and for a moment they are man to man, enmity between them, the man judging and the man being judged. A little nervous laugh escapes from MR. BETTS. He puts up his hand to the place where his wife kissed him and caressed his face, and his eyes follow her slow path to the door. He shrugs, seems to shrink. He flings up his hands.*

MR. BETTS

Nothing. . . . There is nothing to say. . . . We are all so . . . so old . . .

[*There is a silence. The clock ticks more wickedly than ever. JAMES and JOHN sit with bowed heads.*

JOHN

[*To his father.*] Shall I show you your room?

MR. BETTS

Thank you, John.

[*JAMES rises, goes to the door, and opens it. As JOHN and MR. BETTS reach the door, JAMES holds out his hand to his father.*

JAMES

Good night — father.

MR. BETTS

Good night, James.

[JOHN *and* MR. BETTS *go out.* JAMES *puts out the light and follows.*

CURTAIN

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