



NO INNOCENT LAUGHTER

by James Green

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No Innocent Laughter

A play in 3 acts

by

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THE TIME IS THE PRESENT. THE PLACE, A PRETTY VILLAGE IN THE SOUTH OF ENGLAND WHERE THE HOUSES ARE VERY EXPENSIVE AND THE LOCALS LONG AGO FORCED TO LIVE ELSEWHERE. IT IS NOW PEOPLED BY THE NEW RICH WHO, LIKE THEIR PREDECESSORS OF THE 18TH CENTURY, ENJOY USING THEIR WEALTH AND TIME TO PLAY OUT A RURAL FANTASY.

CHARACTERS

LAURA A VERY SUCCESSFUL BUSINESS CONSULTANT

DENNIS LAURA'S HUSBAND, A TRAVEL WRITER

TANYA A WEALTHY NEIGHBOUR

GAVIN TANYA'S PARTNER.

REV. CLARKE THE LOCAL VICAR, FEMALE

DELIA PREBBLE A TV CELEBRITY WITCH

THE ACTION OF THE PLAY TAKES PLACE THROUGHOUT IN LAURA
AND DENNIS'S LIVING-ROOM.

ACT 1

SCENE 1 DAY-TIME INTERIOR

THE SET IS EMPTY. VOICES OFF ARE HEARD
THEN LAURA AND REV. CLARKE ENTER. THE
REV. CLARKE IS WEARING A BELTED CASSOCK.
LAURA IS IN SUNDAY SERVICE CHIC.

LAURA: I can't see it myself, I can't see why there's a problem.

REV. C: Yes, I know, and that's part of the problem. Do you know what I think
I hate most about Sunday services?

LAURA: No.

REV. C: It's you women, all dressed up as if you were going to lady's day at
Ascot, and you're the worst, Laura, because you've got the best
taste, you never overdo it. How much did that frock set you back?

LAURA: I don't know, I can't remember.

REV C.: Yes, I might have guessed that's what you'd say even if it is a black
lie. You've only worn it for two Sundays.

LAURA: So? We like to look nice for your service. How is that a problem?

REV. C: The problem's all round you, Laura, can't you see it?

LAURA LOOKS AROUND THE ROOM

LAURA: Sorry, still can't see it. Drink?

REV. C.: Of course, but easy on the Scotch and plenty of water, I've still got the afternoon to get through.

LAURA GOES TO MAKE THE DRINKS. REV. C.
SITS DOWN.

And ignorance is no defence in law.

LAURA: Culpable ignorance?

REV. C: Culpable blindness. You'd see it soon enough if you were a vicar, especially a vicar in this God-forsaken place.

LAURA BRINGS THE DRINKS

LAURA: God-forsaken? Marsh End? Hardly that, Clarkie. We have the best Early English church between the City and the South coast, and you can't say you haven't got a good congregation.

REV. C.: Good? By that I presume you mean numbers, because you can't mean morals.

LAURA: Oh dear, the sins of the people a bit scarlet? Surprising though, I wouldn't have thought of us as shocking material.

REV.C.: Shocking? God no. You're all as predictable as bloody Thursday and your sins aren't scarlet, they're more a dull grey.

LAURA: Oh dear, we've been a disappointment to you and you seemed so happy when you arrived.

REV. C.: Yes, I was pleased to get this parish. Inner city stuff is very rewarding but it's so damn wearing. When I was offered this place I thought, affluent village congregation, lovely country, beautiful church, cosy rectory, handy for London. I reckoned I was going to be in clover.

LAURA: And you gave urban zeal the elbow and signed up. Very sensible. So why you aren't you in clover? It looks a good kip to me.

REV. C.: You see, you don't understand. I knew you wouldn't.

LAURA: Well explain it to me. What's wrong with things as they are? I thought this morning's Service was perfect, Sunday morning in rural England just as it should be.

REV. C.: That's part of what I mean. There's a chocolate-box church which hosts a little social parade on Sunday mornings so you lot can dress up at weekends and play at being rural England. Other than presiding over the Sunday charade I get wheeled out for tea if someone wants a chat or get asked to dinner when an extra body is needed. The church isn't used for weddings now and none of you give birth any more so we don't have christenings. I dare say I might get asked to do the odd discreet interment if someone had the bad taste to die at home, but that's about it. You know what our main religious feast is here?

LAURA: Well that's Christmas surely?

REV. C.: No, not Christmas, most of you aren't here for Christmas, you're off skiing or getting winter sun.

LAURA: Easter?

REV. C.: The chocolate egg fest? No, our big religious bash is Harvest bloody Festival.

LAURA: Yes, we do that well don't we?

REV. C.: No, Harrods does it well ably assisted by Fortnum and Mason. The whole thing's catered. You know what Marsh End's motto is? If a thing's worth doing, pay someone to do it well.

LAURA: Poor Clarkie, not such a good kip then?

REV. C: I hear no innocent laughter here, Laura. You're all too clever, too knowing, too self-interested and too damn self-satisfied. There's no God or real goodness for me to plug into or build on. None of you are interested in finding the hard way to heaven, you've all happily opted for the easy way to hell.

LAURA: Are we all doomed then?

REV. C: (LAUGHS) No, Laura, I wish you were but the truth is I never could bring myself to believe in hell and eternal damnation. But you're none of you looking for the kind of heaven I believe in, that's for sure. You're all so busy telling yourselves you have heaven here already, I could never drum up interest in anything I could show you.

LAURA: So you think in the end we might all get off with just a caution?

(IN A SPOOF POLICE VOICE)

Na then, na then, you've all lived a very wicked, selfish lives but there's to be none of that there up here. We don't want you frightening the angels.

REV. C: Something like that except what really makes it really so hopeless for me is, not that there's no goodness here, there's no real wickedness either. You've all given up on God and the Devil alike. I mean, why am I here, Laura, what do you lot want a vicar for?

LAURA: I don't know, it's not something I've ever thought about. We have the church and we have the money so we get a vicar. I dare say you're right though, we're not a very prayerful lot are we if you think about it? But what about the locals? Some of the locals must still pray surely?

REV. C: What locals? You've driven them all out, no locals can afford to live here now. The few people who actually work in the village all live somewhere else.

LAURA: Rubbish. There must still be some locals.

REV.C.: Name three.

LAURA: Annie our cleaner ...

REV.C.: Who lives six miles away on the old council estate at Fenton.

LAURA: Really? She said she was born and brought up here.

REV.C.: So she was, but when she got married they had to move to Fenton. They couldn't afford anything here.

LAURA: Our gardener then, Mr. Price.

REV.C: Evan Price is from Llanelli for God's sake. Don't tell me you haven't noticed his accent.

LAURA: Oh yes, he is a bit Welsh isn't he? But he lives in the village doesn't he?

REV. C: He lives very comfortably and in sin at Overly with an undertaker's widow from Manchester. He only does people's gardens as a sort of hobby.

LAURA: Really! How fascinating. I must draw him out next time he comes.

REV.C.: Pry into his private life and you'll need a new gardener.

LAURA: No prying then. What about the Moggsses at the The Barley Sheaf. They're local. They live over the pub and go to church on Sunday so you've got to count them.

REV.C: Moggs is as local as I am. He was from Birmingham originally and came here about eight years ago to make his pile at the pub and then retire. He hates you all by the way.

LAURA: Moggs? Rubbish, he's the perfect landlord. Everybody thinks the world of Moggs and Mrs. Moggs.

REV.C: It's all an act, Laura. Before they bought the pub he was in provincial theatre and small TV parts. His wife came into a bit of money and that's when they decided to buy the Sheaf. He acts the jolly innkeeper and she acts the stern barmaid, only she's not had Moggs' professional training so sometimes there's a bit of a balls up.

LAURA: (LAUGHS) Oh yes, like when she called the Petersons a pair of...

REV.C: Exactly. Just like that. But Moggs is good enough to carry off the pair of them. He's got you all believing he's the perfect mine host and she's a curmudgeon with a heart of gold. Even the Petersons have swallowed it.

LAURA: Well I don't care, I count the Moggses as locals and I bet he prays enough for six. When he's in church he looks more like a saintly bishop than most saintly bishops do.

REV. C: Moggs a prayerful man? No, sorry, just part of the act, although he is a man of faith, I'll give you that.

LAURA: What do you mean, man of faith?

REV. C: If I told you Moggs is one of the few card-carrying Communist Party members left and that he still reads the Daily Worker, would you believe me?

LAURA: No!?

REV.C: OK, then I won't tell you. But that's why he hates you all, at heart he's still an unreconstructed, old-style Stalinist. He told me that he was disillusioned and thinking of given up Party membership but when he came here you lot re-kindled the flame for him.

LAURA: Oh Clarkie, I really am sorry. It must be awful to be a vicar with a flock like us. Are there no redeeming features? Are we all hopeless cases?

REV. C: Some of you aren't so bad as others, but then the others are so bloody awful. You Laura, are one of the very few exceptions. There are times when I think you could almost pass for a normal human being, with a bit of good coaching.

LAURA: I'll take that as a compliment.

REV.C: Do.

LAURA: Well at least you seem to get on with Annie, Evan Price and Moggs, they seem quite happy to tell you all about themselves. (PAUSE)
How did you find out that Mr. Price was living in sin, did he tell you in confession or did someone denounce them?

REV. C.: Ah, I was wondering how long it would take. Did you like the way I just dropped it into the conversation? Couldn't resist it could you?

LAURA: Well, it is rather scrummy isn't it? Nights of sin in Overly with an undertaker's widow from Manchester. How did you find out?

REV. C: Gloria told me...

LAURA: Gloria?

REV. C.: The fallen woman in the case, the Manchester undertaker's widow although she prefers Funeral Director. I offered to regularise things but she said 'no thanks', said it was rather nice to feel they were living in sin, it added spice to their sex life. It wasn't the sort of thing either of them got the chance of before. Moggs was always on the road and In Manchester, apparently, a Funeral Director's wife, like Caesar's, must be above suspicion.

LAURA: I suppose it's because you're a vicar.

REV. C: What is?

LAURA: That they talk to you. You've only been here a year and you seem to know more about us all than I've found out in five years. Or is it because you're a woman?

REV.C: Neither, Laura, it's because I take the trouble to listen and I care, that's why they talk to me. You lot use me as a sort of public toilet wall to scribble puerile obscenities or silly jokes on, 'Oh vicar, I must tell you all about...' or 'Well vicar, another clergyman caught with his