

FANNY OTCOTT

A one-act drama by
Hal Corley

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CAST OF CHARACTERS

FANNY OTCOTT, 40s, a great actress.

SAMPSON*, her young attendant, 17.

GEORGE ATCHESON, 40s, an old friend of Fanny's.

The 1891 Theatre Royal, Brighton

Princess of Cathay Company:

YOUNG FANNY, 23 ("Faizella, Princess of Cathay").

YOUNG GEORGE, 21 ("Rowland").

BYRON TREMAYNE, 20 ("Arturo").

MOIRA WILLARD, 22 ("Sidra").

STAGE MANAGER, 30.

MRS. ELLEN NYE CHART, owner, Theatre Royal, 60s.

IRENE CRAIG, 20 ("Sidra's Attendant Number 1").

EMILY BAILY, 20 ("Sidra's Attendant Number 2").

AMBROSE WARREN*, Mrs. Nye Chart's assistant, 16.

EXTRA CITIZENS OF THE ISLE OF CATHAY

*Character can be double cast.

THE TIME

An unseasonably warm autumn afternoon, 1917.

And then, a drizzly November night in 1891.

THE PLACE

Fanny Otcott's home in Wales.

And then, on stage at Theatre Royal, Brighton, England.

(Wales, 1917. A mostly empty stage; lighting suggesting late-day autumn sun slanting across a verdant stretch of lawn on a modest estate. As lights rise, MRS. OTCOTT, a great actress in the grand tradition of Sarah Siddons with a career spanning the late 19th and early 20th centuries, sorts through memorabilia and beloved mementos. She's had her weathered, much-traveled steamer trunk placed next to a downstage right wrought iron table, upon which she pours over old engravings, playbills, letters, contracts, jewelry, ribbons and other pieces of costumes – in short, her past. She is striking, witty, by now self-sufficient and pragmatic about life's exigencies – but still capable of the prima donna's vanity; every item out of the old trunk inspires an exclamation or gesture, suggesting renewed indignation or pleasure. She's attended by an adolescent boy in a uniform, dozing upstage, a newspaper over his chest.)

MRS. OTCOTT: Sampson! Am I not overdue for my tea?

SAMPSON: *(Springing up, yawning:)* Might be, Ma'am! I was just reading up on them U-boats. Did you know in a single month they sank two hundred thirty ships, all bringing us food?

MRS. OTCOTT: I didn't. Two hundred thirty!

SAMPSON: *(Picking up paper, reading:)* Says here, "Five hundred thousand tons of shipping," all on account of German attacks –

MRS. OTCOTT: *(Interrupting:)* And everything reported so precisely, one wonders how? I've learned Medea, Andromaque and Portia in less than a fortnight, but have no head for figures. And so as usual, failed to count the last time the clock chimed in the church tower. Could've been three, might've been four.

SAMPSON: Might've even been five, Ma'am.

MRS. OTCOTT: We're no help to one another are we? And that sundial down there is even less obliging. No one's been able to make use of those obsolete eyesores for centuries.

SAMPSON: The Red Grouse flying overhead seem to enjoy it, Ma'am. But not for telling time.

(Sampson wrinkles his nose, Mrs. Otcott chuckles.)

With or without a streak of cream in your tea today? 'Long as we still *have* cream.

MRS. OTCOTT: Without. Oh—and tell cook: none of her iced gingersnaps. My costumes for *Mrs. Warren's Profession* have become a bit snug. Of course, I may never play it again anyway, with not a single young man *out* of uniform available for Frank Gardner. I shall probably be forced to teach *you* the role.

SAMPSON: Gingersnaps are tasty. And you shouldn't pass up anything sweet, Ma'am. Some people in the village say we'll be rationing sugar by Christmas.

MRS. OTCOTT: I refuse to fret about all *that*. We've had the best wheat harvest in decades. War hasn't stopped us; we've proven we're made of stronger stuff.

SAMPSON: Miss my potatoes though. Never enough of them, now.

MRS. OTCOTT: Then at least have *my* gingersnaps. I've seen you filch one en route.

SAMPSON: Sorry Ma'am.

MRS. OTCOTT: I'm just jealous; when I was your age I survived on sweets. Used to hide chocolate jellies in my dressing room, toss down handfuls during intervals for *The Second Mrs. Tanqueray*. No more.

SAMPSON: I'm fond of chocolate jellies m' self, Ma'am.

MRS. OTCOTT: If you help me stay away from cook's biscuits, and fend off nosy villagers, you may find yourself with a box all your own from Father Christmas.

SAMPSON: If we still *have* chocolates, come December. Some say meat, butter, cheese are just as likely –

MRS. OTCOTT: No more bulletins from those fear-mongering magpies!

SAMPSON: (*Shaking newspaper persuasively:*) Mr. Lloyd George *himself*, Ma'am.

MRS. OTCOTT: Well I've had it with this bloody war and won't hear another discouraging word about *sacrifice!* We need to rally, of course, Sampson, but we need gaiety, too, music, *art!* What will *become* of us if everyone ceases to go the theater!

SAMPSON: No more gingersnaps?

MRS. OTCOTT: Not you and I, our dispirited *people*. If only the Widow Nye Chart were still 'round to inspire.

SAMPSON: *Who?*

MRS. OTCOTT: Mrs. Ellen Nye Chart, proprietress of Theatre Royal, Brighton. A lady who not only loved her theater, but knew its curative power. Oh listen to me; I'm the one needing the nap. Tell *anyone* who asks that I'm not at home. Especially not the talkative lady with the cascading saffron curls...a jejune style she should've abandoned a decade ago, by the way...or the fellow with the black beard, overdue for the barber. I always expect something to crawl out of it and race down his arm.

SAMPSON: You do make me laugh.

MRS. OTCOTT: And if they seem to know I *am* at home, say I've gone up in my tower.

SAMPSON: Now there's an idea. Not a cloud in the sky. You can see them turning leaves atop Mt. Snowdon.

MRS. OTCOTT: I won't climb those stone stairs for a glimpse of autumnal foliage. It's become my private refuge, Sampson, when my spirits ebb.

SAMPSON: Low spirits, *this* day? Word of them new battles 'what done it?

MRS. OTCOTT: Not every tear shed is tied to our heroic struggle in Belgium, Sampson. These black spells show up unannounced. Especially when I revisit my past.

SAMPSON: You'll feel better with your tea, Ma'am. That's *without* cream. And no interruptions from villagers while you're melancholy.

MRS. OTCOTT: *Stop!* Do not say *that!* My goodness, I share my state of mind with you in confidence, because I value your company as much as your loyalty.

SAMPSON: Thank you Ma'am.

MRS. OTCOTT: Without Mr. Otcott, you've become family. The child I never had.

SAMPSON: I do like it when we do them puzzles together, rainy nights.

MRS. OTCOTT: And I share my *moods*, because, well, you're not an *actor*—not yet—and actors listen only to themselves. Oh how many stories I've endured that should've been told to the looking glass instead. But I do expect you to be discreet.

SAMPSON: I try my best. Better fetch that tea, Ma'am—

MRS. OTCOTT: (*Interrupting:*) Wait—see this, Sampson? 'Wore that the night the King dined with me on stage.

SAMPSON: You and King George, sharin' steak and kidney pie!

MRS. OTCOTT: King Edward, Sampson. And *Estouffade de boeuf*. A buffet after a performance of Mr. Max Reinhardt's *Oedipus* in Drury Lane. I was his Jocasta, and a very fine one if I do say so. Run on, now! And do keep the inquisitive chinwags from my yard. The rest of this afternoon I will devote to another woman entirely: *me*.

(Sampson goes out. Mrs. Otcott picks up a packet of letters. One look, she tosses them away; rises, goes and stamps on them with a hearty laugh. She returns to pick up a playbill, reading the heading with glistening eyes:)

"Fanny Otcott as Faizella in *The Princess of Cathay*. First Night."

(She then reaches into her trunk, rummages through various old costumes and finally pulls out an elaborate, faded silk brocade gown, befitting mythological royalty. She holds it up. As she does, YOUNG FANNY – Mrs. Otcott at age 23 – appears upstage behind her, wearing a brighter, more luminous version of the gown. As Mrs. Otcott strides about, lost in thought, Young Fanny bows. SOUNDS of applause and "Brava!" ring out. Mrs. Otcott stops, then, caught up in the reverie, almost walks into a man, entering through the hedge. He wears a black hat and cape, and a solemn, world-weary expression. Young Fanny disappears into her memory – and the wings.)

ATCHESON: Mrs. Otcott?

MRS. OTCOTT: *(A stunned pause, then:)* No.

(He picks up the dropped costume, nervously hands it back.)

Yes. It is you!

ATCHESON: Oh I'm sure I'm unrecognizable – but *you* –

MRS. OTCOTT: George Atcheson! Dear, sweet, foolish *George!* Suddenly, right here in my yard!

ATCHESON: 'Should've sent word ahead, requested a proper meeting, but frankly, I came on impulse.

MRS. OTCOTT: *Did you?*

ATCHESON: 'Considered it for weeks, of course, but today simply found myself *here*, moments ago!

MRS. OTCOTT: And in your fervor bent the branches on my hedge – unable to stop yourself?

ATCHESON: I felt compelled to speak to you, to discuss something – *serious*. At least to me.

(Mrs. Otcott, suddenly very pleased, waits for more information.)

Everything involving – this *particular* subject.

(Young Fanny appears from the wings, radiant in her gown. Atcheson glances over at her – a girl in his memory, too.)

MRS. OTCOTT: *(Assuming she's the subject:)* Now, now, I'm sure I can relieve your apprehension *somehow*.

(Atcheson's attention pulled back to Mrs. Otcott.)

Look at you! Poor, bewildered George, do sit down. You always were a serious boy. That's why you made such a – *disappointing* Hamlet.

ATCHESON: I was a poor Hamlet because I couldn't learn his speeches.

MRS. OTCOTT: Yet had an expert to cue you.

ATCHESON: That cockney lad with the thick spectacles, who always had the hiccoughs?

MRS. OTCOTT: *Me* of course.

ATCHESON: You did your best; by our first night knew the Prince of Denmark as well as I.

MRS. OTCOTT: And the hours we spent in my attic room on long, wet afternoons, on that last act.

(They hold a look; Atcheson turns away, blushes.)

ATCHESON: They gave me the part at the last minute, against my *considerable* protestations, when that tall actor broke his leg and no one was on hand to play it. Oh, I never understood that confounded Dane, and hated that *head*.

MRS. OTCOTT: *Head?*

ATCHESON: That *skull* Hamlet clutches?

MRS. OTCOTT: *That's* where your memory failed you, nightly, as you fingered the clammy thing. Took to giving your hands a good scrub with lye soap, remember? Your poor fingertips turned bright scarlet. But we'd fooled you. Convinced you the skull was human.

ATCHESON: It *wasn't*?

MRS. OTCOTT: Dead ape's from the Dublin zoo. As if that were better.

ATCHESON: A dead *gorilla's* head was meant to be *Yorick's*?

MRS. OTCOTT: 'Course not, George! I'm tricking you yet again! Still such easy prey? The skull was plaster of Paris; our stage manager smeared suet on it, creating a vivid aroma.

ATCHESON: Was I so gullible?

MRS. OTCOTT: Charmingly so. We only teased to distract; 'help you over your habitual stage fright.

(Upstage of them, a timid YOUNG GEORGE appears, all in black, holding a human skull very cautiously. Mrs. Otcott glances over at him, in her mind's eye:)

"Alas, poor Yorick! I knew him, Horatio..."

YOUNG GEORGE: (*As Hamlet:*) "Alas, poor Yorick! I knew him, Horatio..."

ATCHESON: That's it! Act Five! "...a fellow of infinite jest, of...of –"

MRS. OTCOTT: "...of most excellent fancy..."

ATCHESON: "...most excellent fancy!"

YOUNG GEORGE: (*As Hamlet:*) "...of most excellent fancy. He hath...hath – Borne me on his back a thousand times! And now, how...how –"

YOUNG FANNY: (*Quickly appearing from the wings; a loud stage whisper:*) " – how abhorred in my imagination it is!"

YOUNG GEORGE: (*As Hamlet:*) "How abhorred in my imagination it is!"

(Young George, meek, grateful, manages an appreciative grin toward Young Fanny.)

MRS. OTCOTT: Surely those golden days aren't abhorred in your imagination, George?

(He doesn't answer; Young George disappears again.)

Was it unbidden reminiscence 'made you burst through my shrubbery this bright afternoon? I understand. I revisit our halcyon past myself from time to time. (*Takes out a weathered playbill:*) After *Hamlet*, we played more profitable fare. Look here, surely you can't forget my exotic Faizella in *The Princess of Cathay*.

ATCHESON: *The Princess of Cathay!*

MRS. OTCOTT: Theatre Royal, Brighton, that frigid fall.

ATCHESON: When it drizzled incessantly...

MRS. OTCOTT: ...And we had to do our technicals without heat. Three years later they would remodel. But in '91,

Theatre Royal was far from hospitable. And not just because of the cold.

(Behind them a company of actors begins to assemble, circa 1891, all dressed in bright, exotic Cathay finery. Slowly, via lighting alone, the expansive area upstage center of Mrs. Otcott and Atcheson becomes the empty stage at the Theatre Royal, Brighton. Standing near Young Fanny are: MOIRA, another young actress in the company; BYRON, a young leading man; and EMILY and IRENE, ambitious ingénues, playing featured roles.)

Still, I was never more fearless than in that silly melodrama. Really a bit of a ham sandwich, just a panto at that, cribbed shamelessly from *Orlando Furioso*. But audiences ate it up like warmed-over Christmas pudding. You played opposite me. The "Orlando" role was named –

(Entering behind them carrying an earmarked prompt book, a beleaguered STAGE MANAGER calls rehearsal to order:)

STAGE MANAGER: Rowland! Where the devil is our Rowland!

MRS. OTCOTT: Which made sense, as the whole thing was stolen from *The Song of Roland*.

BYRON: Saw him down in the stalls earlier, our shy Georgie, crouched down behind the seats. All peaky and perspiring, like a schoolgirl overfed on bonbons. Trying to put huge portions of the script into his small brain.

MOIRA: His brain is ever so much larger than your talent, Byron.

YOUNG FANNY: George knows his speeches, I can attest to that.

STAGE MANAGER: Fine, but we need proof, need him *here* now, in the flesh.

MOIRA: Poor George's having a bit of tussle with Rowland's confining wardrobe.

ATCHESON: The costume *was* poorly tailored, but in truth I dithered from greater concerns: once again *positively* paralyzed with nerves.

MRS. OTCOTT: And it was only a final dress rehearsal.

BYRON: He's Charlemagne's nephew, a knight on a perilous mission to the Far East. Yet he cuts the pitiful profile of a court jester.

MOIRA: 'Was a mix-up, all of it, the costume built for a much smaller actor.

BYRON: Just "an actor" would make that a sufficiently truthful statement.

ATCHESON: I was always the *replacement!*

YOUNG FANNY: When he has his words, George can be *quite* persuasive.

BYRON: Competent! *At best!* When a true *presence* is called for!

MRS. OTCOTT: Another actress in the company was even more your defender.

MOIRA: Stop ridiculing him!

ATCHESON: Moira?

MRS. OTCOTT: Playing the evil ugly sorceress Sidra. She had magical powers, could make herself appear beautiful and bewitch courtiers who entered her realm.

ATCHESON: And in truth, Moira couldn't have been more *unlike* a witch.

MOIRA: Really, Byron! Just because you coveted the role and weren't asked!

(Before Byron says more, Young George bursts in, dressed in constricting 9th century knight's regalia – leggings and something between a tunic and a toga – comic yet oddly flattering, showing off his physique.)

YOUNG GEORGE: Sorry, everyone, the – the *back*, there, just refused to close properly.

BYRON: Why does my cherubic sister frolicking in her bathing costume suddenly come to mind?

(George looks down self-consciously.)

MOIRA: You look entirely – credible, George.

BYRON: Talk about damned with faint praise.

EMILY: (Going to George's aid:) Let's see if I can help. 'Once squeezed a Falstaff into Romeo's garb.

STAGE MANAGER: Places, please!

BYRON: 'Seems more poised to toss a pink-striped ball than a lance.

YOUNG FANNY: Could we get down to the critical business at hand!

STAGE MANAGER: The climactic cave scene! 'Most important one, and dangerously *under-rehearsed!*

ATCHESON: If memory serves, in *Princess of Cathay* you ultimately triumphed. But we almost didn't open, thanks to that last run-through.

YOUNG GEORGE: (Moving downstage nearer the footlights; terror:) Who...are...*they?*

YOUNG FANNY: Ignore them.

MRS. OTCOTT: For the Theatre Royal's owner, that big-hearted entrepreneur, the Widow Nye Chart, had a revolutionary innovation in audience expansion up her sleeve.

MOIRA: Don't worry, George, they're *nobody*.

YOUNG FANNY: Simply pretend they aren't there.

(Young George continues to squint into the house, terror mounting.)

STAGE MANAGER: *(To audience, peering out, hand at his brow:)* Greetings, gents! And a hearty welcome to Theatre Royal! Sorry we're s' chilly this evening. If you think it's cold out here, try our damp dressing rooms—ask these shivering ladies, here, who've had to endure ice crystals in their paint pots!

YOUNG FANNY: *Rehearsal*, Phillip, please?

STAGE MANAGER: Right away! Now, allow me to pull you *into* our tale. Pretend if you will, we're *far* from rain-soaked Brighton and instead on a sun-dappled island in the mysterious Orient. Choked with exotic flora, overrun with dangerous fauna. Rowland, played by Mr. George Atcheson here, is a dauntless French paladin from the court of Charlemagne, *madly* in love with Miss Faizella, lovely daughter of the King of Cathay, played by Miss Fanny Somerset over *here*. *She*, in turn, loves Arturo, her young Saracen paramour played by Mr. Tremayne over *there*. So! Rowland's fruitless pursuit of Faizella, encouraged by the malevolent Sidra, played by Miss Moira Willard, hiding bashfully under that *expertly* crafted crone mask—'made it m'self, isn't it fierce?—causes Rowland first to be trapped in a cave, and then to go *insane* with jealousy, quite literally...

YOUNG FANNY: For goodness sake, Phillip, don't give *away* what they're about to *witness*.

MRS. OTCOTT: But of course they witnessed little that night.

YOUNG GEORGE: Who *are* all those *people*! This is a rehearsal!

MOIRA: Guests. Mrs. Nye Chart invited inmates from the local workhouse.

YOUNG GEORGE: *What?*

MRS. OTCOTT: She'd planned to admit them to the Christmas panto, so strongly did she believe in theater's redemptive influence. As a kind of trial, she invited an entire row-full to see a bit of *our* rehearsal.

ATCHESON: Throwing me into blind panic. Oh, I feel beads of perspiration pop out on my neck just *thinking* of that night!

(Moira, Young Fanny and Byron, and Emily and Irene as Sidra's Attendants, take their places upstage. Young George remains frozen.)

STAGE MANAGER: Places! Rowland? George?

MOIRA: *(As Sidra:)* "Come, dutiful hand-maidens! Dally no more. Loiter not near the ingress of this blackened grotto, await not overdue revelation. For the power of disclosure belongs to your mistress alone. And I shall at long last wreak a fitting vengeance, once I impart a searing truth to the young knight-errant held captive within!"

MRS. OTCOTT: Moira wasn't *bad*, in the right role, but never could camouflage the plummy tinge of purple in her dialogue.

MOIRA: *(As Sidra:)* "Yes! The identity of the man our Princess of Cathay truly loves!"

EMILY: *(As Sidra Attendant #1:)* "The lovesick paladin will surely go mad with jealousy!"

IRENE: *(As Sidra Attendant #2:)* "His anguished cries shall resound across the isle!"

YOUNG FANNY: *(As Faizella:)* "Arturo, my cherished, we will at last be one."

BYRON: (*As Arturo:*) "Oh, the countless nights I've endured in empty isolation, the forfeited moonlit hours denied your embrace."

YOUNG FANNY: (*As Faizella:*) "Wait no more, for my father, charitable sovereign of Cathay, shall honor our covenant and bid you the welcome your loyalty and ardor merit."

MRS. OTCOTT: *I always tried to eliminate the excess in my own speeches.*

(Moira/Sidra makes a grand cross to George/Rowland:)

MOIRA: (*As Sidra:*) "Bedeviled cavalier! I offer but candor, bring you tardy enlightenment! But stand admonished!"

(Young George doesn't move or speak.)

"But stand admonished! Sir!"

(No reaction.)

"But stand admonished..."

STAGE MANAGER: (*Stage whisper:*) "I accept your counsel..."

YOUNG GEORGE: (*As Rowland:*) "I—I accept your counsel..."

STAGE MANAGER: (*Stage whisper:*) "...and stand forewarned."

YOUNG GEORGE: (*As Rowland:*) "...and stand forewarned."

MOIRA: (*As Sidra:*) "For Faizella, pious Princess of Cathay, loves another!"

(George rises, sways, teeters, and fully taking the stage, cries out as if from his soul:)

YOUNG GEORGE: (*As Rowland:*) "No...no!"

(Silence; everyone watches and waits.)

(As Rowland:) "No! Noooooooooo!"

MRS. OTCOTT: Your soliloquy, the centerpiece of the cave scene, evaded you in its entirety.

ATCHESON: Not a single syllable sprang to mind! The humiliation! I can still feel my cheeks color!

MRS. OTCOTT: But in all fairness, that one echoed cry, *I* thought, quite eloquent. And the men invited to the rehearsal from the workhouse?

ATCHESON: Cheered. Loudly.

(Applause rings out, cheers, clamorous approval voiced.)

MRS. OTCOTT: If only what happened *next* hadn't occurred.

ATCHESON: Fearing I might lose my slowly unfastening tunic, I lost *consciousness* instead...

(Young George, in pain as Rowland, simply passes out.)

MRS. OTCOTT: The former divinity student fainted.

(Pandemonium. Cheers from the audience. Onstage, everyone reacts: Moira flings off her Sidra crone mask and joins Young Fanny, rushing to his side. Young George remains out cold on the stage.)

STAGE MANAGER: Halt, everyone! Player down! And don't be slapdash with that mask! 'Took me hours!

BYRON: Now I have seen it all! He's got the bloody vapors!

MOIRA: Oh do shut up for once, Byron!

IRENE: Maybe the snug costume's the cause?

EMILY: Saw it happen once in Leeds, early in *The Scottish Play*. Tight sash 'round the neck turned into a tourniquet. Thane of Cawdor's head went all mauve.

IRENE: I'll get the smelling salts.

MOIRA: The poor man hasn't eaten properly all week! His digestion's in knots!

(Moira cradles Young George's head.)

George? George!

YOUNG FANNY: Don't shake him so, Moira, you'll make his condition worse.

MOIRA: Oh what do you know about caring for a man like *George*?

YOUNG FANNY: Plenty! You know nothing of my—friendship with Mr. Atcheson.

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