

T.S.
Eliot

The
Confidential
Clerk

SIR CLAUDE

What's happened? Have they gone? Is Colby coming back?

LADY ELIZABETH

My poor Claude!

[LUCASTA crosses to SIR CLAUDE and kneels beside him]

KAGHAN

You know, Claude, I think we all made the same mistake —
All except Eggers . . .

EGGERSON

Me, Mr. Kaghan?

KAGHAN

We wanted Colby to be something he wasn't.

LADY ELIZABETH

I suppose that's true of you and me, Claude.
Between not knowing what other people want of one,
And not knowing what one should ask of other people,
One does make mistakes! But I mean to do better.
Claude, we've got to try to understand our children.

KAGHAN

And we should like to understand *you* . . .
I mean, I'm including both of you,
Claude . . . and Aunt Elizabeth.
You know, Claude, both Lucasta and I
Would like to mean something to you . . . if you'd let us;
And we'd take the responsibility of meaning it.

[LUCASTA puts her arms around SIR CLAUDE]

SIR CLAUDE

Don't leave me, Lucasta.

Eggerson! Do *you* really believe her?

[EGGERSON nods]

CURTAIN

The Confidential Clerk

By T. S. Eliot



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THE
CONFIDENTIAL CLERK
A PLAY

T. S. ELIOT

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THE evolution of this play from the earliest draft to the final text, has been influenced at every stage by suggestions offered, and by objections raised, by Mr. E. Martin Browne and Mr. John Hayward, to both of whom I wish to make grateful acknowledgment.

T. S. E.

November 1953

The Cast of the First Production at the Edinburgh Festival

August 25–September 5 1953

Sir Claude Mulhammer	PAUL ROGERS
Eggerson	ALAN WEBB
Colby Simpkins	DENHOLM ELLIOTT
B. Kaghan	PETER JONES
Lucasta Angel	MARGARET LEIGHTON
Lady Elizabeth Mulhammer	ISABEL JEANS
Mrs. Guzzard	ALISON LEGGATT

Presented by HENRY SHEREK

Directed by E. MARTIN BROWNE

Settings designed by HUTCHINSON SCOTT

Characters

SIR CLAUDE MULHAMMER

EGGERSON

COLBY SIMPKINS

B. KAGHAN

LUCASTA ANGEL

LADY ELIZABETH MULHAMMER

MRS. GUZZARD

Act One

The Business Room on the first floor of SIR CLAUDE MULHAMMER'S London house. Early afternoon. SIR CLAUDE writing at desk. Enter EGGERSON.

SIR CLAUDE

Ah, there you are, Eggerson! Punctual as always.
I'm sorry to have to bring you up to London
All the way from Joshua Park, on an errand like this.
But you know my wife wouldn't like anyone to meet her
At Northolt, but you. And I couldn't send Colby.
That's not the way to arrange their first meeting,
On her return from Switzerland.

EGGERSON

Impossible, Sir Claude!

A very delicate situation —
Her first meeting with Mr. Simpkins.
But I was glad of the excuse for coming up to London:
I've spent the morning shopping! Gardening tools.
The number of things one needs for a garden!
And I thought, now's the moment to buy some new tools
So as not to lose a moment at the end of the winter.
And I matched some material for Mrs. E.,
Which she's been wanting. So *she*'ll be pleased.
Then I lunched at the store — they have a restaurant;
An excellent lunch, and cheap, for nowadays.
But where's Mr. Simpkins? Will he be here?

SIR CLAUDE

I had to send him to the City this morning,
But he'll be back, I hope, before you leave.

EGGERSON

And how's he getting on? Swimmingly, I'm sure,
As I've heard nothing since the last time I came.

SIR CLAUDE

Well, of course, Eggerson, you're irreplaceable . . .

EGGERSON

Oh, Sir Claude, you shouldn't say that!
Mr. Simpkins is far better qualified than I was
To be your confidential clerk.
He was finding his feet, very quickly,
During the time we worked together.
All he needs is confidence.

SIR CLAUDE

And experience.

With a young man, some readjustment is necessary.
But I'm satisfied that he's getting the hang of things,
And I think he's beginning to take a keen interest.

EGGERSON

And getting over his disappointment?
Of course, I never mentioned that:
It's only what you told me.

SIR CLAUDE

About his music.

Yes, I think so. I understand his feelings.
He's like me, Eggerson. The same disappointment
In a different form. He won't forget
That his great ambition was to be an organist,
Just as I can't forget . . . no matter.
The great thing was to find something else
He could do, and do well. And I think he's found it,
Just as I did. I shall tell him about myself.
But so far, I've left him to his own devices:
I thought he would fall into this way of life more quickly
If we started on a purely business basis.

EGGERSON

No doubt that's best. While he's still living
With his aunt in Teddington, and coming up daily
Just as I used to. And the flat in the mews?
How soon will that be ready for him?

SIR CLAUDE

They have still to do the walls. And then it must be furnished.
I'm trying to find him a really good piano.

EGGERSON

A piano? Yes, I'm sure he'll feel at home
When he has a piano. You think of everything.
But if I might make a suggestion: window boxes!
He's expressed such an interest in my garden
That I think he ought to have window boxes.
Some day, he'll want a garden of his own. And yes, a bird
bath!

SIR CLAUDE

A bird bath? In the mews? What's the point of that?

EGGERSON

He told me he was very fond of bird watching.

SIR CLAUDE

But there won't be any birds — none worth watching.

EGGERSON

I don't know, Sir Claude. Only the other day
I read a letter in *The Times* about wild birds seen in London:
And I'm sure Mr. Simpkins will find them, if anybody.

SIR CLAUDE

Well, we'll leave that for the present. As we have a little
time

Before you start for Northolt — the car will be ready —
Let's think what you're to say to Lady Elizabeth,

Coming back from the airport, about Colby.
I think, you ought to give her warning
Of whom she is to meet on her arrival.

EGGERSON

How would you like me to approach the subject?

SIR CLAUDE

Of course, she knows you were wanting to retire,
As we had some discussion about replacing you.
But you know she regards you — well, completely
As one of the household.

EGGERSON

That's a great compliment.

SIR CLAUDE

And well deserved; but rather inconvenient
When it comes to appointing a successor.
Makes it very difficult to replace you.
She thinks she ought to have a hand in the choosing;
And besides, she is convinced that she, of all people,
Is a better judge of character than I am.

EGGERSON

Oh, I wouldn't say that, Sir Claude!
She has too much respect for your business genius.
But it's true she believes she has what she calls 'guidance'.

SIR CLAUDE

Guidance. That's worse than believing in her judgment:
We could argue about that. You can't argue with guidance.
But if she appears to be puzzled, or annoyed
At my making the appointment during her absence,
You must say you had to leave under medical orders.
She's always been concerned about your state of health,
So she'll be sympathetic. And as for Colby —
Say that Mr. Simpkins was highly recommended,

And say that I had to make a quick decision
Because he'd had another very tempting offer.
Something like that. Don't make too much of it.
And I rather hope that she will take to him at once:
If so, she is certain to come to believe
That she chose him herself. By the way, don't forget
To let her know that he's very musical.
She can take him to concerts. But don't overdo it!

EGGERSON

I'll remember that. Music.

SIR CLAUDE

And by the way,
How much have you actually told him about her?
You remember, I asked you to prepare him a little;
There are some things you could say better than I could,
And ways in which you could reassure him
Better than I. He's more at ease with you
Than he is with me.

EGGERSON

Oh, you mustn't say that!
Though I've done my best to gain his confidence.
I did mention her interest in *Light from the East*.

SIR CLAUDE

And the *Book of Revelation*? And the *Wisdom of Atlantis*?

EGGERSON

Well, to tell the truth, Sir Claude, I only touched on these
matters,
They're much too deep for me. And I thought, Mr. Simpkins,
He's highly educated. He'll soon begin to grasp them.
No, I haven't told him much about Lady Elizabeth.
But there's one thing I should like to know —
If you don't mind — before I go to meet her.
How soon do you propose to . . . *explain* Mr. Simpkins?

Regularize his position in the household?
You told me that was your eventual intention.

SIR CLAUDE

When — or indeed whether — I reveal his identity
Depends on how she takes to him. This afternoon
She will only learn that you have finally retired
And that you have a young successor,
A Mr. Colby Simpkins.

EGGERSON

Merely Mr. Simpkins.

SIR CLAUDE

The reasons for starting him during her absence
Are perfectly clear. But beyond that point
I haven't yet explained my plans to you.
Why I've never told her about him,
The reason for meeting him as merely Mr. Simpkins,
Is, that she has a strong maternal instinct . . .

EGGERSON

I realise that.

SIR CLAUDE

Which has always been thwarted.

EGGERSON

I'm sure it's been a grief to both of you
That you've never had children.

SIR CLAUDE

No worse, Eggerson,
Than for you and your wife, to have had a son
Lost in action, and his grave unknown.

EGGERSON

And you're thinking no doubt that Lady Elizabeth
Would be put in mind of the child *she* lost.

SIR CLAUDE

In a very different way, yes. You might say *mislaid*,
Since the father is dead, and there's no way of tracing it.
Yes, I was thinking of her missing child:
In the circumstances, that might make her jealous.
I've explained all this to Colby — Mr. Simpkins.

EGGERSON

I see what you mean.

SIR CLAUDE

She must get to like him first:
And then, Eggerson, I am not unhopeful
That, under the impression that he is an orphan,
She will want us to adopt him.

EGGERSON

Adopt him! Yes, indeed,
That would be the solution. Yes, quite ideal.

SIR CLAUDE

I'm glad you agree. Your support will be helpful.

EGGERSON

I'm sure I shall be very happy to commend him.

SIR CLAUDE

You mustn't overdo it! But your approval matters.
You know she thinks the world of your opinion.

EGGERSON

Well, I believe that once or twice, perhaps . . .
But I'm afraid you overrate my influence.
I have never been able to make her like Miss Angel;
She becomes abstracted, whenever I mention her.

SIR CLAUDE

But she knew about Lucasta — Miss Angel, from the start.
That was one difficulty. And there are others.
For one, they're both of them women.

EGGERSON

True.

SIR CLAUDE

But I don't think she takes much notice of Miss Angel.
She doesn't see her. And Miss Angel
Will soon be getting married, I expect.

EGGERSON

And so I hope. A most suitable arrangement.
But will you tell me this: if it comes to the point
At which Lady Elizabeth wants to adopt him —
An admirable solution — then what follows?
Will you let her know, then, that Mr. Simpkins
Is actually your son?

SIR CLAUDE

That's where I'm in the dark.

I simply can't guess what her reaction would be.
There's a lot I don't understand about my wife.
There's always something one's ignorant of
About anyone, however well one knows them;
And that may be something of the greatest importance.
It's when you're sure you understand a person
That you're liable to make the worst mistake about him.
As a matter of fact, there's a lot I don't know
About you, Eggerson, although we worked together
For nearly thirty years.

EGGERSON

Nearly thirty-one.

But now you put it so convincingly,
I must admit there's a lot that *I* don't understand
About my wife.

SIR CLAUDE

And just as much
She just doesn't know about you. And just as much

You don't know about me — I'm not so sure of that!
My rule is to remember that I understand nobody,
But on the other hand never to be sure
That they don't understand me — a good deal better
Than I should care to think, perhaps.

EGGERSON

And do I infer
That you're not sure you understand Mr. Simpkins, either?

SIR CLAUDE

A timely reminder. You may have to repeat it.
But he should be back by now. And then I'll leave you.
I must telephone to Amsterdam, and possibly to Paris.
But when you return with Lady Elizabeth
I'll be ready waiting to introduce him.
[Enter COLBY SIMPKINS with brief case]

SIR CLAUDE

Ah, Colby, I was just saying to Eggerson
It was time you were back. Was your morning satisfactory?

COLBY

I've got what you wanted, Sir Claude. Good afternoon,
Mr. Eggerson. I was afraid I'd miss you.

EGGERSON

I'm off in half an hour, Mr. Simpkins.

SIR CLAUDE

I'll leave you now. But when Eggerson comes back
With Lady Elizabeth, I will rejoin you.

[Exit SIR CLAUDE]

COLBY

I'm glad you don't have to leave just yet.
I'm rather nervous about this meeting.
You've told me very little about Lady Elizabeth,