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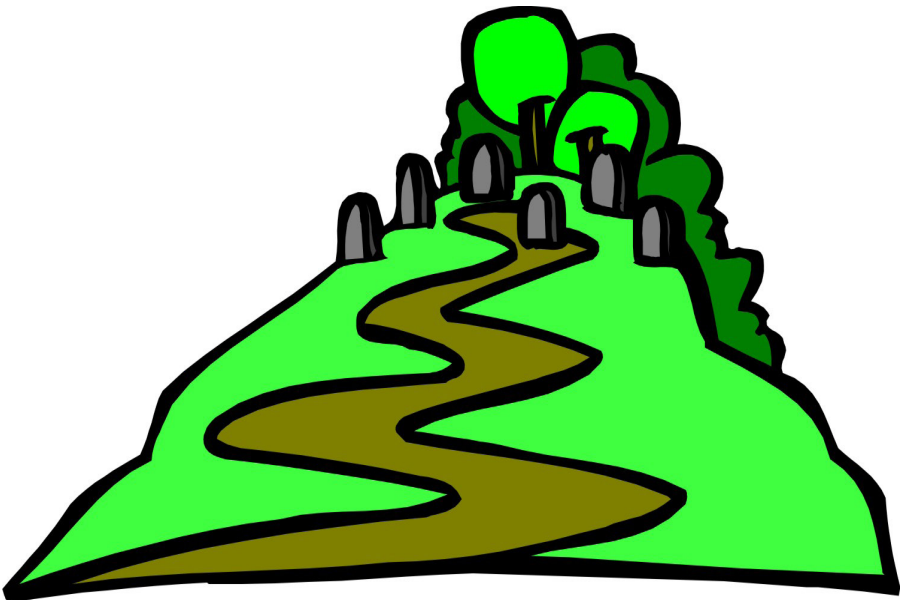
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Family Plays

CHARITY CASE

Drama by
Ford Ainsworth



CHARITY CASE

Charity Case, winner of a superior rating at a statewide junior college drama festival, is an ideal contest play. The characterizations are well drawn, giving all four actors an opportunity to exercise their talents. The plot is suspenseful, and the theme is dramatic and significant.

“The thesis of the play grew out of the character of Tommy as I imagined him. He became a double symbol. He is the imaginative dreamer who can cope with the ‘real’ world only in terms of his imagination, but he is also the hapless individual who is unintentionally victimized by the impersonal social institutions which are designed to rescue him from his plight. Neither the law nor organized charity can help him without ‘locking him up’ in one way or another. His only escape from the bars that threaten to cage his free spirit is through the world of his imagination. His ‘escape,’ of course, only removes him further from the world of reality.” (Author, Ford Ainsworth)

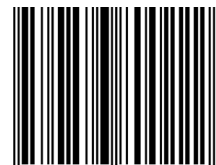
Drama. By Ford Ainsworth. Cast: 4m., 4w. This play opens in a cemetery, where an orphaned boy is searching for relatives. The thing he dreads most is being returned to the “Haven,” from which he has escaped. This poignant drama shows one of the major problems of our times: the impersonal institutions that are supposed to aid the helpless, the lonely and the handicapped but can’t provide the needed help without depriving the individual of his freedom. To be helped, the boy must be locked up. The play has a timeless quality that will affect audiences anytime, anywhere. It deals with man’s fear of captivity, his fear of repression of spirit and his resentment of institutionalism. It portrays one of man’s most desperate tragedies—loneliness, and one of his most basic necessities—the need to belong. A gripping play for all groups. *Approximate running time: 30 minutes. Code: CK7.*

Family Plays

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Charity Case

Charity Case

A play in one act

By FORD AINSWORTH

Family Plays

311 Washington St., Woodstock, IL 60098

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(CHARITY CASE)

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ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Ford Ainsworth is one of those rare playwrights who don't care whether their plays are published or not. A successful, discriminating director of contest plays, he discovered that there is a severe shortage of good contest plays (as all successful, discriminating directors of contest plays do eventually). Ainsworth's solution was to write his own.

"The plays were performed and then tucked away in boxes without thought of publishing them," he said.

In spite of coaxing from publishers, he still hasn't gotten around to finding most of those boxes, and CHARITY CASE is only the second of his manuscripts to be published.

A native of Georgetown, Texas, he received bachelor and master of arts degrees in English and drama from Southwestern University. He has taught and directed plays at Daniel Baker College and at Schreiner College. He also directed at the Brownwood Community Playhouse and the Point Summer Theatre, a stock company at Ingram, Texas.

His other published play is "Cave Cat" (Dramatic Publishing Co.), a winner in the Texas Educational Theatre Assn. Playwriting Contest.

ABOUT THE PLAY

CHARITY CASE, winner of the superior rating at a statewide junior college drama festival, is an ideal contest play. The characterizations are well drawn, giving all four actors an opportunity to exercise their talents. The plot is suspenseful, and the theme is dramatic and significant.

"The thesis of the play grew out of the character of Tommy as I imagined him," Ainsworth said. "He became a double symbol. He is the imaginative dreamer who can cope with the 'real' world only in terms of his imagination, but he is also the hapless individual who is unintentionally victimized by the impersonal social institutions which are designed to rescue him from his plight. Neither the law nor organized charity can help him without 'locking him up' in one way or another. His only escape from the bars that threaten to cage his free spirit is through the world of his imagination. His 'escape,' of course, only removes him further from the world of reality, the world of social institutions which only intensify problems which they were created to solve."

The play was inspired by an old snapshot of the author's wife, at age 16, seated in a dejected attitude on a family tombstone. "The snapshot had been designed as a youthful joke," he said, "but it intrigued me when I ran across it years later. The 'waif' on the tombstone became Tommy McElroy, and his story is my imaginary explanation of how he came to be there. Mrs. Rountree, Willard Abney, and the constable were drawn rather freely from my memories of people and attitudes in and around Georgetown."

The play has a timeless quality which will affect audiences anytime, anywhere. It deals with one of man's most desperate tragedies—loneliness. And with one of man's most basic necessities—the need to belong.

DRAMATIS PERSONAE

Tommy McElroy, *a young boy of 15 or 16*
Andy Thornton, *the caretaker, about 60*
Jim Bailey, *the constable, about 25*
Willard Abney, *the minister, about 40*

Place: *A cemetery in a small town*
Time: *Yesterday, or thereabout*



This play was presented for the first time at the Texas Junior College Speech Association Drama Festival, March 19 & 20, 1964, at Lon Morris College, Jacksonville, Texas. The producer was Schreiner Institute of Kerrville, Texas, with the following cast under the direction of the author:

Tommy McElroy John Thomason
Andy Thornton Harvey Bell
Constable Jim Bailey . . . Jimmy Loveless
The Rev. Willard Abney . . . Kenneth King

CHARITY CASE won the superior rating at the festival, and the actors playing Tommy and Andy were named on the all-star cast.

CHARITY CASE

The scene is a cemetery lot containing a central tombstone and six graves, each with a separate headstone. At Center is the heavy, flattopped tombstone which bears the name "McElroy." There are two graves [Henry and Sarah] on the downstage side of the tombstone. Two more [Jeremiah and Adelaide] are on the upstage side. T. H. McElroy's grave is at the right side of the tombstone and Clementine's is at the left. Beside Clementine's and T. H.'s headstones are two long unused bottles for bouquets. Tommy's worn tennis shoes are placed beside T. H.'s grave. Weeds grow profusely around all of the headstones, but the weeds have been pulled from around the tombstone and tossed into Up Left, Down Left, and Down Right. Either drops or curtains may be used for background with entrances Up Right and Up Left. [The same basic arrangement may be used for either proscenium or arena staging.]

As the curtain rises, TOMMY McELROY is discovered seated on the McElroy family tombstone. A bunch of weeds dangles from his hand, and his head is thrown back in rapt attention as he listens to the song of a mockingbird. After a moment, ANDY THORNTON, carrying a hoe, enters Up Right and pauses to watch Tommy curiously.

ANDY. *[Sourly]* Now just what you call yourself doing?
TOMMY. Shh! Listen! *[Both listen for a moment.]*
That's not the same one.

ANDY. [*Suspiciously*] Not the same what?

TOMMY. Not the same mockingbird. Listen. [*The BIRD trills hysterically.*] Nope. That couldn't be him.

ANDY. You listening for some special mockingbird?

TOMMY. Used to be one would sing in that tree every afternoon. Always the same one. Do birds live a long time? As long as people?

ANDY. I don't know about birds, but I do know kids ain't allowed to fool around this cemetery. You get down from there.

TOMMY. [*Swinging his legs off the tombstone*] Maybe he died while I was gone.

ANDY. Maybe. Boys come out here with air rifles. I reckon they kill a few.

TOMMY. No, not air rifles. You know what I think? I think maybe he was an old mockingbird. I think he was real old—like Mrs. Rountree. She got old and died. I think he was just so old he died.

ANDY. [*Craftily*] Maybe not. Maybe he got tired of singing out here. This ain't a very lively bunch to sing for. There's lots of mockingbirds down at City Park. Bet you'd find him down there.

TOMMY. [*Thoughtfully, resuming his seat and pulling up his legs*] I don't much think he would have gone there. You haven't heard him lately, have you?

ANDY. I wouldn't know it if I had. This cemetery is full of mockingbirds. They all look alike, they all sound alike.

TOMMY. This one you could tell. I guess he's dead too.

ANDY. [*Losing patience and stepping forward with his hoe slightly raised*] I guess so. Now you get down. It ain't respectful to these dead folks to sit on their tombstone.

TOMMY. [*Reassuringly*] Oh, they don't mind. I got permission from Mr. Conlee. He's the caretaker. You ask him.

ANDY. [*Advancing threateningly*] Mr. Conlee ain't here no more. I'm the caretaker now, and a cemetery ain't no place for kids. You get along now and don't give me no trouble.

TOMMY. [*Leaving tombstone and crossing Down Left to kneel at Sarah's grave and pull weeds*] What happened to Mr. Conlee? Did he die?

ANDY. [*Impatiently*] No, he didn't die! He's off somewhere living with one of his married daughters.

TOMMY. [*Suspiciously*] I didn't know he had any married daughters.

ANDY. [*Exasperated*] Well, maybe it's his *sister* then! I don't know anything about him. He took sick in December, and they had to send him off for somebody to look after him. His daughter, or sister, or *somebody*.

TOMMY. [*Thoughtfully*] December was a long time back. Maybe he died.

ANDY. [*Exploding*] And maybe he didn't! Why does everybody have to die all the time? Couldn't he maybe have got well? He's probably living like a king with his married daughter waiting on him hand and foot!

TOMMY. [*Unimpressed*] I don't much think he had a married daughter. If he had got well, I think he would have come back. He must have died.

ANDY. [*Crossing to Tommy threateningly*] All right! He died! Everybody's dead around here but me, and I got work to do, so you clear out. You can't loaf around here!

TOMMY. [*Rising indignantly*] I'm not loafing! See all them weeds I pulled? [*He picks up bottle from Clementine's grave and crosses to right end of tombstone*] Soon as I get this lot cleaned off, I'm going over there in the pasture and pick some sunflowers or something. I already got bottles to put them in, see?

ANDY. Somebody paying you to clean this lot? That's against the rules. They're supposed to pay into the Cemetery Association. Then the Association tells me which lots to keep up. If somebody is paying—

TOMMY. [*Shocked*] Nobody's paying me! Mr. Conlee said it was all right for me to look after my own folks.

ANDY. [*Doubtfully*] Your own folks? These your folks?

TOMMY. [*Placing bottle on tombstone and kneeling to point out the name*] McElroy. That's my name, Tommy

McElroy. It's carved right there, see. These are my folks buried here.

ANDY. [*Reluctantly*] Well—that's different. President of the Association said folks could look after their own lots, but . . . you sure these really are your folks?

TOMMY. [*Amused*] Can't you read my name right there? Why, I could read my own name time I was five years old, Mrs. Rountree said!

ANDY. [*Stubbornly*] Yeah, I know these are the McElroys, but I ain't so sure about *you*! President of the Association said not to bother with this lot because there wasn't nobody to pay for it. He said the McElroys are all dead.

TOMMY. [*Proudly, rising*] They sure are! They been dead a long time too! I'm an orphan, Mrs. Rountree said.

ANDY. Who's Mrs. Rountree? She some of your folks?

TOMMY. Not really my folks. But I sure would have looked after her if they would have buried her in this cemetery. I would of liked to look after Mr. Conlee, too. I wonder why they didn't bring him back and bury him here?

ANDY. Maybe because he ain't dead! I told you he went to live with his daughter—[*He catches Tommy's eye.*] or sister, or somebody. Your Ma and Pa are buried here? [*He moves Center to examine the inscriptions on Henry and Sarah.*] Which ones are they?

TOMMY. Not my Ma and Pa. They went off somewhere and never did come back. They must of died wherever it was they went off to, Mrs. Rountree said. These here are mostly just uncles and aunts, I guess. [*He kneels beside T. H.'s headstone*] This is my favorite uncle. I'm probably named for him. See? T. H. McElroy. I bet the "T" stood for Tommy.

ANDY. [*Crossing to him*] He was your uncle? What does it say there?

TOMMY. [*Delighted*] His name. T. H. McElroy!

ANDY. I mean the rest of it. Let me see. [*He reads.*] Born May 7th, 1890—Died August 18th, 1913! Why you never even seen him!

TOMMY. [*Patiently*] I never seen any of them. Like Mrs. Rountree said, I'm an orphan.

ANDY. Let's see the rest of them. [*He crosses from Adelaide to Jeremiah and Clementine, reading the dates as he goes.*] 1900 . . . 1875 . . . 1881! They been dead even longer than he has! [*He looks back at Tommy who is industriously pulling weeds from T. H.'s grave.*] You just come clean up the old family lot once in a while, huh?

TOMMY. [*Cheerfully*] It's going to look real nice when I get the flowers out. [*He rises and brings bottle from T. H.'s grave to tombstone.*]

ANDY. You know, I think that's real nice. Shows a kind of respect. Kids don't have much respect nowadays. Yes sir! I'd say that was downright respectful. [*He chops a couple of weeds from Clementine's grave and kicks them into a pile of weeds Down Left.*] You ought to have some weed killer, though. Just pulling them up don't do much good. Time you get around to cleaning off this lot again, they'll be all growed up.

TOMMY. [*Setting to work on Henry's weeds*] Oh, no they won't! I'll be here every single day.

ANDY. [*Amused*] Now that would be a little too respectful, don't you think? Tell you what: you get it cleaned off good today, and I'll keep an eye on it for you. I'll spray a little weed killer around to help keep them down, then you come out—say once a month—and tidy up. How would that be?

TOMMY. [*Smiling brightly*] Well, I'm much obliged, but—I better do it. They're my folks. I'll be here every day anyway.

ANDY. You aim to spend your whole life in this cemetery pulling weeds?

TOMMY. Why not? You do, don't you? You live in Mr. Conlee's old house.

ANDY. [*Defensively*] Sure, but . . .

TOMMY. Well, that's in the cemetery, ain't it? You live here all the time!

ANDY. [*Crossing to tombstone and leaning his hoe against it*] That's different. I get paid for it. If there was anything else I could do, I'd blame sure do it!

TOMMY. [*Utterly amazed*] You mean you don't like it?

ANDY. [*Hotly*] It ain't a question of whether I like it or not! It's my job. But it ain't as if I had spent my *whole* life in a cemetery! I may spend the *rest* of my life here, but I ain't spent *all* my life here. [*He crosses to Tommy and becomes persuasive.*] You're young. You got plenty of other things to do. There ain't much future in a cemetery. You got to think about the future.

TOMMY. [*Discouraged*] That's what Mr. Abney always says! [*He attempts to ignore Andy by concentrating on his weed pulling.*]

ANDY. Well, whoever Mr. Abney is, he's right! You never even knew these folks when they was alive. What if they are your folks? You never even *saw* any of them. Certain amount of respect is due them, of course, but you can't afford to be more interested in dead folks than you are in live folks.

TOMMY. [*Retreating to tombstone*] But I ain't got no live folks. They're all dead!

ANDY. [*Relentlessly*] But *you* ain't! You're alive, ain't you? [*TOMMY takes refuge on the tombstone and covers his ears to keep from hearing.*] They don't care whether you pull them weeds or not! You could spend every minute of your life pulling weeds off their graves, and what would they care? They would just as soon have me spraying weed killer over them. It don't matter to them which one of us does the job or whether *anybody* does it! It's all the same, whether they're your folks or my folks or whose folks! They're dead folks, and that's all there is to it. [*TOMMY huddles on the tombstone and buries his face in his arms. ANDY becomes disturbed and moves to him.*] What's the matter? You ain't crying, are you? [*TOMMY refuses to answer.*] I didn't mean to hurt your feelings. I didn't think how you must feel about all your folks being dead. I'm sorry.

TOMMY. [*Raising his head*] I don't mind them being dead. But they're my folks, and I got to look after them.

ANDY. [*Gently*] Sure, you do! And maybe they do care who pulls their weeds. Ain't no way of knowing about that. I just didn't realize how you felt is all. I thought you

was just carried away with the idea. You know how most kids are. You see, I been here since December, and here it is July. You ain't been out here before now, so naturally I thought . . .

TOMMY. [*Defensively*] I would of been if I could. I been gone a long time.

ANDY. [*Happy to change the subject*] Where you been?

TOMMY. [*Vaguely*] Away off. To another town. They sent me to . . . this place.

ANDY. [*Disturbed*] They sent you? [*TOMMY nods.*] They made you go? [*ANDY becomes suspicious.*] What was it like, this place they sent you to?

TOMMY. [*Avoiding the question*] I didn't like it. So I came back.

ANDY. You ran away? Is that it?

TOMMY. [*Alarmed*] You won't tell Mr. Abney, will you?

ANDY. Who is Mr. Abney? Is he the sheriff, maybe? Or the judge?

TOMMY. [*Relieved*] If you don't know Mr. Abney, you can't tell!

ANDY. Now see here . . . ! [*TOMMY suddenly scrambles down from the tombstone and crouches beside it.*] What's the matter with you?

TOMMY. [*Frightened*] Are they getting out of the car?

ANDY. What car?

TOMMY. [*Pointing off Up Right*] Down by the gate, see?

ANDY. [*Looking toward gate*] Oh! Yeah, somebody's getting out. Hey! That's a police car! [*He turns back to Tommy hurriedly.*]

TOMMY. You won't tell, will you? They'll send me back. Promise you won't tell!

ANDY. If the police are after you . . .

TOMMY. Promise you won't!

ANDY. . . . they'll catch you anyway.

TOMMY. Not if you don't tell. They'll go away. All right? [*He runs out Up Left. ANDY follows him to exit, calling after him.*]