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A Comedy in One Act
by
ALBERT CARRIÈRE

A Very Grammatical
Family



THE DRAMATIC PUBLISHING COMPANY

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A Very Grammatical Family

A Comedy in One Act

FOR SEVEN BOYS AND SEVEN GIRLS

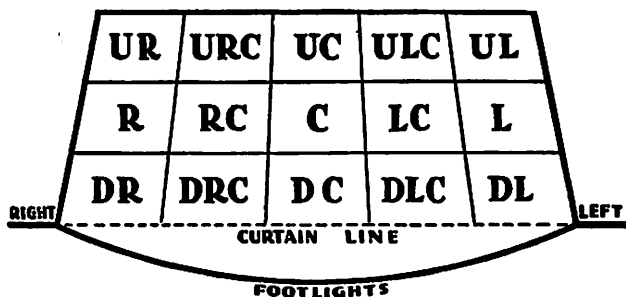
CHARACTERS

BILLY BROWN	<i>who doesn't like English</i>
MRS. BROWN	<i>Billy's mother</i>
MR. MEMORY	<i>who is really a villain</i>
MISS COMMON SENSE	<i>who is our heroine</i>
MR. NOUN	} <i>one big happy family</i>
MR. PRONOUN	
MR. VERB	
MR. ADVERB	
MISS ALSO-ADVERB	
MISS ADJECTIVE	
MISS INTERJECTION	
MISS PREPOSITION	
MISS CONJUNCTION	} <i>over the radio</i>
VOICE	

PLACE: *The living-room in Billy Brown's home.*

TIME: *The present. Eight o'clock of a winter evening.*

CHART OF STAGE POSITIONS



STAGE POSITIONS

Upstage means away from the footlights, *downstage* means toward the footlights, and *right* and *left* are used with reference to the actor as he faces the audience. R means *right*, L means *left*, U means *up*, D means *down*, C means *center*, and these abbreviations are used in combination, as: U R for *up right*, R C for *right center*, D L C for *down left center*, etc. One will note that a position designated on the stage refers to a general territory, rather than to a given point.

NOTE: Before starting rehearsals, chalk off your stage or rehearsal space as indicated above in the *Chart of Stage Positions*. Then teach your actors the meanings and positions of these fundamental terms of stage movement by having them walk from one position to another until they are familiar with them. The use of these abbreviated terms in directing the play saves a good deal of time, speeds up rehearsals, and reduces the amount of explanation the director has to give to his actors.

PERSONAL PROPERTIES

BILLY: Books, pencils, notebook.

MR. MEMORIZE: Cane (light, so that it can be easily broken), huge dictionary, large paper bag containing marshmallows (supposed to be chalk dust).

MR. PRONOUN: Sign, lettered "He."

MR. VERB: Sign, lettered "went."

MISS PREPOSITION: Sign, lettered "to."

MR. NOUN: Sign, lettered "bed."

GENERAL: Signs for all the parts of speech, indicating the part each represents.

NOTE ON STAGING: For the voice over the radio, have the actor stationed backstage at the approximate position the radio occupies on stage. The lines are read through a megaphone. If available, a public address system may be used, and the voice is then actually relayed through the radio loudspeaker.

A Very Grammatical Family

SCENE: *The living-room in the home of Billy Brown. It is a very neat, comfortably furnished room. In the R wall is a fireplace. Downstage of the fireplace, D R, is a door which leads to the front hallway. Facing the fireplace is a small divan. Left of C stage is a library table, with chairs above and left of it. There is a cabinet radio D L. If convenient, other furniture may be used to dress the stage, and there may be windows in the rear wall of the set. These, however, are not necessary to the action of the play.]*

AT RISE OF CURTAIN: *BILLY BROWN is sitting in the chair behind the library table L C. He is studying—or trying to. Several books, pencils, and a notebook are scattered in front of him. At the moment, BILLY leans his head wearily on one hand as he gazes dully at the open book in front of him. BILLY is a pert-looking boy of twelve—and all boy. He wears school clothes.]*

BILLY [*muttering to himself*]. A noun. A noun? [*He scratches his head, and then rumples his hair.*] A noun is—A noun—[*He writes uncertainly in his notebook.*] No! That's wrong! [*He scratches it out.*] Let me see. . . . What is a noun? Well, I'll just skip that one. A pronoun is . . . [*He bites on his pencil.*] Aw, gee! Guess I'd better skip that one, too. [*He shakes his head in despair.*] An adjective. An adjective is . . . Now, what is an adjective? [*He throws his pencil on the table and stares glumly at his books.*] I can't do this homework! Gosh! I hate English! Darn! [*He rises, thrusts his hands in his pockets, and walks agitatedly back and forth at C stage.*] I detest English! [*He walks suddenly across the room to D L and turns on the radio.*] Yes! And I

haven't much use for English teachers! I'd like to know what they mean by giving us so much homework! Huh!

VOICE [*over the radio, as the radio warms up*].—and there is no question in my mind that the subject of the greatest value to the high school student, in fact, to any student, is—

BILLY [*belligerently*]. Is what?

VOICE.—is English!

BILLY [*jumping up and down and shaking his fist at the radio*]. That's a lie!

VOICE [*continuing*]. Indeed, I know of no other subject—

BILLY [*fuming*]. This is a put-up job!

VOICE.—that so helps the young student truly to appreciate the classics!

BILLY [*to the radio*]. You're a phony! I bet somebody is paying you to say all that!

VOICE. I therefore conclude that English is the most valuable subject in any school curriculum!

BILLY. Well, I just bet it isn't!

VOICE. I venture to assert—

BILLY [*picking up the chair left of the table L C and aiming it at the radio*]. I'll venture something, all right!

[MRS. BROWN enters D R just as BILLY is about to throw the chair. She wears a neat dress and carries her coat and hat and gloves. She stares in amazement at BILLY. MRS. BROWN is kindly and understanding, but firm.]

VOICE.—that people who do not care for the study of English are led into lazy habits of thinking!

BILLY. Yeah? Well, I don't like English, see?

VOICE. Furthermore—

BILLY [*getting ready to do it*]. And I'm going to throw this chair at you!

MRS. BROWN [*hurrying D L*]. Billy Brown! What on earth are you doing? [*She turns off the radio.*]

BILLY [*catching himself*]. Huh? [*He shakes his head and puts back the chair.*] What?

MRS. BROWN. Why, you were just about to throw a chair at the radio!

BILLY [*rather dazed*]. I was?

MRS. BROWN. Yes, you were!

BILLY. Gosh! I don't know, Ma! [*He puts his hand to his head.*] I'm just awfully worried about English! [*He moves to the divan and leans against the back of it.*]

MRS. BROWN [*as she starts getting her things on*]. Well, Billy, judging from the marks you've been getting in English, you *should* be worried.

BILLY. I'm absolutely upset about it, Ma! [*He groans and holds his head with both hands.*] Sometimes I think I'm going to have a nervous breakdown.

MRS. BROWN [*as she draws on her gloves*]. Nervous breakdown? From what?

BILLY. From studying too much!

MRS. BROWN [*laughing*]. You're letting your imagination get the better of you! Supposing you sit down at that table, and begin concentrating on your English. I'm going downtown to meet your father: We've a little shopping to do. We'll be home early. [*She crosses to him.*] Good night, Billy. [*She pats him on the shoulder and starts D R.*]

BILLY [*quickly*]. Ma! Could you give me a little help with my homework before you go?

MRS. BROWN [*turning to BILLY*]. What homework, Billy?

BILLY. Well, Miss Quill wants us to write a description of the eight parts of speech.

MRS. BROWN [*surprised*]. Can't you do that? Why, I read the definitions to you only last night. They're in your English book.

BILLY. I know that—but Miss Quill wants us to write our own definitions. She doesn't want us to use the definitions from the book.

MRS. BROWN. Well, that sounds easy enough!

BILLY. It isn't easy, Ma! It's hard! Gosh! Why doesn't she let

us use the book? What's the good of having a book if you can't use it?

MRS. BROWN. Perhaps Miss Quill wants to make sure you understand what each part of speech is.

BILLY. Gosh, Ma! I can't do this homework by myself! It's too hard!

MRS. BROWN [*sharply*]. Billy Brown! I've heard quite enough grumbling for one evening! Now, you get busy! [*She points to the table L C.*]

BILLY. Yes, Mother. [*He crosses L C slowly and sits above the table.*]

MRS. BROWN. Good night, Billy. [*She sighs.*]

BILLY. Good night, Ma.

[*MRS. BROWN goes out D R and closes the door behind her. BILLY groans, picks up his English book, and looks intently at it.*]

BILLY. Grrr! I hate English! I hate each part of speech, each noun and pronoun and preposition. And I hate each composition we have to write! I hate each clause and phrase, and—well, I just hate everything about the old subject! [*He rises and walks about reflectively.*] I wonder what makes people become English teachers? I bet they do it just to make fellows like me mad!

[*Suddenly there is a pounding on the door D R. BILLY looks up quickly.*]

BILLY. Who's there?

MR. MEMORIZE [*offstage D R*]. It is I! Come and open the door!

BILLY [*crossing to the door D R, mumbling to himself*]. I wonder who's calling at this time of night! [*He opens the door.*]

MR. MEMORIZE [*entering and bowing*].

My name will fill you with surprise!

For I'm called Mr. Memorize!

[*MR. MEMORIZE is an elderly, gray-haired gentleman. He is*

dressed completely in black. He carries a cane and a huge dictionary.]

BILLY [*staring at the newcomer*]. Mother and Dad went out for the evening. I guess they weren't expecting you.

MR. MEMORIZE [*chuckling*]. I guess they weren't, Billy. [*He pokes BILLY with his cane.*] And I'm sure you weren't expecting me, either!

BILLY [*retreating to C stage*]. No, sir!

MR. MEMORIZE [*crossing to him*]. Billy, I came to see you because you're the only one who can help me.

BILLY. I?

MR. MEMORIZE [*chuckling, and again poking BILLY with his cane*]. Yes, you!

BILLY. What can I do?

MR. MEMORIZE. You can save my life!

BILLY. Gosh! How?

MR. MEMORIZE. Well, it's like this, Billy! My name is Mr. Memorize! For years I've wandered around in schools all over the world. And for years I've plagued the spirit out of millions of students! [*He laughs a dry, cackling laugh.*] Ha, ha! Just think of it, son! Millions of young ones, like yourself, bending over books, moving their lips, straining their eyes, clutching their textbooks with cold, ink-stained fingers! And all because of me! Oh, I tell you, boy! [*He pokes BILLY with his cane.*] It's a wonderful thing to have all that power! Yes, siree!

BILLY [*retreating cautiously toward the table L C*]. It must be!

MR. MEMORIZE. Ah-ha! You don't believe me! Well, all right! Be like all the rest! But I'm warning you, my boy! If you cross me, you'll be sorry! I'll make you dance a merry jig! [*He suddenly places the dictionary on the table L C, reaches into his pocket, and removes a large paper bag. Then he takes a white substance from it and stuffs it into his mouth.*] I'll make you help me! [NOTE: Marshmallows may be used.]

BILLY. What's that you're eating?

MR. MEMORIZE. I'm eating chalk dust!

BILLY. Chalk dust? Why?

MR. MEMORIZE [*chuckling*]. Because it helps make me nasty! [*He snarls at BILLY.*] I can feel myself growing nastier and uglier by the minute! Ho, ho, ho, boy! [*He swings his cane at BILLY.*] I'll make you suffer!

BILLY [*ducking*]. Hey! You stop that! [*He backs away and picks up the chair left of the table L. C.*] If you come near me with that cane, I'll throw this chair at you!

MR. MEMORIZE [*craftily*]. Why, Billy, there's no need to feel alarmed. Put that chair down, now, like a good boy.

BILLY. I will not!

MR. MEMORIZE. Do you want me to sprinkle you with my magic powder? [*He takes a handful of the white substance and starts toward BILLY.*] If I do, you'll turn into an inkwell, a cracked inkwell!

BILLY. Well, gosh! I don't want to turn into an inkwell, especially a cracked inkwell!

MR. MEMORIZE. Then do as I say!

[*There is a pounding on the door D R. MR. MEMORIZE is alarmed and turns abruptly. BILLY puts down the chair.*]

BILLY. Who's there?

MR. MEMORIZE. Don't open the door, Billy!

MISS COMMON SENSE [*offstage D R.*]. Open up!

BILLY. Just a minute! [*He walks towards the door.*]

MR. MEMORIZE. That's the person who's trying to kill me! I must hide! [*He looks around the room for a hiding place.*]

BILLY [*opening the door*]. Good evening.

MISS COMMON SENSE [*as she enters*]. Hello, Billy.

[*MISS COMMON SENSE is a trim, neat, pretty girl. She is tastefully dressed.*]

MR. MEMORIZE [*when he sees MISS COMMON SENSE*]. I'm lost!
I'm lost!

BILLY [*obviously impressed by her*]. I'm very happy to see you, I'm sure.

MISS COMMON SENSE [*raising her hand*].

With needless etiquette dispense,
And just call me Miss Common Sense.

MR. MEMORIZE [*retreating L stage as MISS COMMON SENSE looks at him*]. Don't you dare touch me!

MISS COMMON SENSE [*coming to C*]. Be quiet! I'm not going to hurt you; that is, not unless I have to.

MR. MEMORIZE. You're lying! You want to destroy me! [*He raises his cane.*] But I'll fight to the death!

MISS COMMON SENSE. You're half dead now, if only you'd realize it.

MR. MEMORIZE. I'm not half dead! I'm not even a quarter dead! [*He stuffs his mouth with chalk dust.*] Indeed, I'm very much alive. You've come too late. That boy—[*He points to BILLY.*—is my slave. [*He laughs his dry laugh.*] Ha, ha, ha, ha!

BILLY [*still D R*]. I'm not your slave!

MR. MEMORIZE. Oh, no? [*He points his cane at BILLY.*] What is a noun? Quick!

BILLY [*promptly*]. A noun is a word used as the name of a person, place, or thing.

MR. MEMORIZE. See? [*He sneers at MISS COMMON SENSE.*] Sheer memory! Just like a parrot! And he doesn't understand a word of what he is saying!

BILLY [*mechanically, in spite of himself*]. A noun is a word used as the name of a person, place, or thing!

MR. MEMORIZE [*pointing his cane at BILLY*]. Quick! What is a conjunction?

BILLY [*promptly, as if in a trance*]. A conjunction is a word used to connect words or groups of words! A conjunction is a word used to connect words or groups of words!

MISS COMMON SENSE [*taking a step toward him*]. Stop it, Billy! Stop it!

MR. MEMORIZE. Oh-ho! Stop it, indeed! He can't stop! He's in

my power! [*He surveys BILLY with a satisfied air.*] Completely in my power!

BILLY [*continuing, still in a trance*]. A conjunction is a word used to connect words or groups of words!

MISS COMMON SENSE [*crossing to him and shaking him*]. Stop that nonsense!

[*BILLY stands as though in a trance.*]

MISS COMMON SENSE. You villain! [*She crosses L, grabs MR. MEMORIZE's hand, and pulls the cane away.*] I'll teach you to do this to young people. Make parrots of them, will you? [*She breaks the cane over her knee.*] There! [*She tosses the pieces to the floor.*]

MR. MEMORIZE [*tearing his hair and shrieking*]. My cane! My magic cane! I—I—I—[*He totters, and falls into the chair left of the table L C.*] You've taken my power from me—you fiend, you! [*He leans weakly back in the chair and stares at MISS COMMON SENSE.*]

MISS COMMON SENSE. Now, I want you to restore Billy to his right senses!

MR. MEMORIZE [*laughing weakly*]. Ha, ha, ha! That's a good one! I can't do it!

MISS COMMON SENSE. Can't do it? [*She is about to shake him.*] If I shake you until your teeth fall out, you'll do it!

MR. MEMORIZE. No! No! I can't! You've broken my cane. When you did that you took every ounce of power from me! [*He shrugs his shoulders.*] I'm as helpless as you are!

MISS COMMON SENSE. Well, there are lots of things you can't do that Common Sense can do!

MR. MEMORIZE [*sadly*]. Yes, I daresay there are!

MISS COMMON SENSE [*crossing to C*]. I'll prove to you that Common Sense never lets a person down! [*She cups her hands and calls.*] What ho! The Guard! The Guard!

[*Instantly the eight PARTS OF SPEECH burst into the room from D R. They are: MR. NOUN, MR. PRONOUN, MR. VERB, MR.*

ADVERB, MISS ADJECTIVE, MISS CONJUNCTION, MISS PREPOSITION, and MISS INTERJECTION. Each of the PARTS OF SPEECH wears a black costume or gown over which is a large sign which bears his or her name. The PARTS OF SPEECH enter in pairs, one pair behind the other, marching briskly. They cross to MISS COMMON SENSE and stand facing her attentively.]

MR. NOUN [*saluting*]. Hello, Miss Common Sense! What's on your mind?

MISS COMMON SENSE. Mr. Noun, I need your help!

MR. NOUN. Need help, eh? Well—I'll do whatever I can.

MR. PRONOUN. I'll take your place, Mr. Noun, if you want me to.

MR. NOUN. Thank you, Mr. Pronoun.

MISS COMMON SENSE. It's about this boy. [*She points to BILLY, who is still standing D R, as though in a trance.*] He has been put in a trance by Mr. Memorize.

MR. MEMORIZE. Yes, I've put the boy in a trance! And you'll never get him out of it! Ha, ha! I enjoy walking tiptoe along school corridors, walking up behind an unsuspecting student—and screaming into his ear like this! [*He screams.*] Memorize this passage! Ho, ho, ho! What jolly fun!

MR. VERB. I think we ought to punish him!

[*The PARTS OF SPEECH start after MR. MEMORIZE. MR. MEMORIZE gets up hastily and backs toward L stage.*]

MR. MEMORIZE. You leave me alone! I'm an old man.

MISS COMMON SENSE [*holding up her hand*]. One moment!

[*The PARTS OF SPEECH turn and look at MISS COMMON SENSE.*]

MISS COMMON SENSE. There's no need for violence! All we need here is a little brain work!

MR. PRONOUN. That's good common sense!