

THE TIME OF YOUR LIFE

A PLAY IN THREE ACTS

BY

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THE TIME OF YOUR LIFE

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CHARACTERS

Mathilde Summers.....	A widow, twin sister of Belle Harrison. Charming and kind.
Belle Harrison.....	A spinster, sister of Mathilde Drinks whisky, reads Racing Post.
Helen Braden.....	Mathilde's daughter. Good looking, well dressed, confident.
Judy Merivale.....	Great niece of Mathilde and Belle. Naive and pretty
William Travers.....	A writer, in his forties, dark, a bit withdrawn
Kelly.....	An Irish pedlar, any age, an eye for the ladies
Bertie Harrison.....	Brother of Mathilde and Belle. A large man, very English
Sophie.....	A maid, in her thirties. Slight Cockney accent
Arthur Appleby.....	A solicitor. Tall, old-fashioned, dependable
Policeman	Very young and tall

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TIME: The early 1970s

PLACE: A large middle class house in the country

FURNITURE: 3 seater sofa with 2 matching armchairs, sideboard, drinks cabinet – all rather well worn – French windows to garden at rear

ACT I:

Scene I Morning

Scene II Mid-morning

Scene III Afternoon

ACT II: The following day

ACT III:

Scene I Next morning

Scene II Late morning

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ACT I - SCENE I

Period: the 1970s.

(The sitting room of Mrs. Summers' house. It is a comfortably furnished upper middle class home. Sophie is clearing away some coffee cups. William sits in the armchair reading the paper. Through the French windows a garden can be seen, which is filled with flowers – it is high summer. Belle is frowning over a crossword puzzle. She is smoking a small cigar and wears a shooting jacket and trousers. She shakes her head and looks up at William.)

Belle: Do you think the Simpson shares are likely to rise again, Mr. Travers?

William: I'm not much of a gambler but I should imagine they would continue to rise for some time yet.

Belle: So I would be ill advised to sell at the present time?

William: Oh yes.

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- Belle:** Then Arthur has grossly misled me. For a business man he has very little idea of how to handle money. I suppose he thinks it doesn't matter now whether I sell or not, but as a matter of fact I am greatly attached to those little shares, we've had them in the family such a long time. And besides I am a great believer in the maxim of Uncle Sam, that if one looks after the pennies the pounds look after themselves.
- William:** Really – I didn't know you had any American connections?
- Belle:** No, dear, he came from Cleethorpes
- William:** **(puzzled)** I see.
- Sophie:** I was going to spend my holidays in Cleethorpes last year because my friend Beryl's mum had a friend who opened a boarding house there, but within 3 months she had to close it down.
- William:** Why was that?
- Sophie:** On account of it was haunted
- William:** I see, I suppose the guests refused to stay?
- Sophie:** On no, it was Beryl's mum as couldn't stay. **(Confidentially)** She drank something shocking and since she was the only one as saw the ghost, I draw my own conclusions like everyone else
- Belle:** She should have had it exorcised, I know an amazing man in Tunbridge Wells
- Sophie:** Oh no, Mum, she couldn't on account of her thrombosis
- Belle:** Couldn't what dear?

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Sophie: Take too much exercise

Belle: If you've finished clearing away, Sophie, would you start the washing up?

Sophie: Yes, Mum.

Exit with tray.

Mathilde: **(Outside the French windows)** *She is wearing twinset and pearls and tweed skirt, her hair is an interesting shade of lilac.)*

Take as many of the lupins as you like, but not the peonies, they drop so quickly and anyway the vicarage is always stuffy, poor Lydia has little idea of healthy indoor temperatures. Ah, there you are, Belle, finished the crossword yet?

Belle: No and I do think you're mean about the peonies, you know how Lydia loves them

Mathilde: Oh dear, am I? **(Calling through the French windows)**
Percy on second thoughts, you may take some of the white lilac and a few irises as we have plenty – one must try to be charitable. Good morning, Mr. Travers, is there any interesting scandal this morning?

William: Good morning, Mrs. Summers. I know very little about local scandal, perhaps you should ask Sophie.

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Mathilde: I am not much interested in local scandal, Mr Travers. After hearing from a long succession of vicar's wives which of the village girls is about to become an unmarried mother, how the health centre is progressing and why the schoolmaster's wife has suddenly turned Communist, it no longer grips my attention. I was referring to the paper you are reading whose scandal – though no doubt less honest than ours – is surely of more general interest?

William: Well, it appears that the Foreign Secretary was well received in Brussels and that the Tanzanian Embassy gave a dinner in honour of Sir Charles Fitzherbert last night.

Mathilde: And no doubt Wall Street has reached an all time low. Which fact does not concern me one jot, Mr. Travers. Are there no amusing anecdotes about Caroline Walters' latest escapades in Monte Carlo, or photographs of Tom Langley water ski-ing in his top hat?

William: I'm afraid not. There is a picture of the Minister of Transport planting a rose tree in Greenwich Park.

Mathilde: Show me **(pause)** H'm, the way he's handling that spade he's bound to damage the roots. There's no getting away from it, men are not what they were in my youth. There is no 'joie de vivre'. No gallantry, no excitement any more.

Belle: Perhaps they miss your inspiration, dear. Mayfair hasn't been the same since you gave up dyeing your hair green and put your green fingers to more useful purposes.

Mathilde: Don't try to be catty, dear, you're far too old. With this present dearth of real men I am very worried as to what will become of our poor little Judy after we are gone.

William: You feel her future is rather insecure?

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- Mathilde:** Yes, she's a sweet child, but a trifle naive by modern standards. What she needs is a nice healthy young husband, with a steady job and his feet on the ground.
- Judy:** **(at the French window)** With money in the bank, an old school tie and riding to hounds twice a week. How simply awfully dull that would be. Hallo everyone, I just collected the post from Ted, I saw him at the gate.
- Mathilde:** Hallo darling. Is there anything nice in the post? Don't show me if they're only dreary circulars.
- Judy:** **(distributing the letters)** There's one for Mr Travers, one for you Aunt Belle and two for you Aunt Mathilde, this one looks like Aunt Helen's writing – it's from Paris.
- Mathilde:** **(Tears open envelope and reads contents)** Good heavens, Helen is arriving tomorrow morning!
- Belle:** What, here?
- Mathilde:** Well, of course, where do you think?
- Belle:** Oh dear, we'll have to get a room ready for her. Is she coming by herself?
- Mathilde:** Yes, it appears she has just divorced Pierre and wants to come home for a rest.
- Belle:** I'm not surprised. I should think two husbands in three years must be very exhausting.
- Mathilde:** Poor Helen, Pierre was her third husband, I did think she might be lucky with him.
- William:** Who is Helen?

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- Mathilde:** Oh, how rude of me, Mr Travers, do forgive me. She is my daughter and Judy's god- mother. We don't see her very often, she travels so much and is constantly falling in and out of matrimony. In fact it must be nearly three years since she's been home.
- Belle:** The one virtue which Helen's husbands have in common is their enormous amount of money. Such a necessity in a husband, don't you think, Mr. Travers?
- William:** I would say it was an asset.
- Belle:** I suppose writing brings you in a comfortable income?
- William:** I'm afraid when the gentlemen of the Inland Revenue have finished with it it's not quite so comfortable as I would wish.
- Belle:** I'm sure you are being too modest. Personally I think it is high time our little Judy started looking for a husband. If a girl leaves it too late she may lose her chance altogether. When I was a young girl I was always far too busy to go man-hunting. And when I had the time there weren't any suitable men left.
- William:** How is it that you were so busy?
- Belle:** I was interested in politics.
- Mathilde:** She means she was a suffragette.
- William:** A very worthy cause if I may say so.
- Belle:** Good heavens!
- Mathilde:** What now?
- Belle:** I have suddenly realised why Helen is coming home now –she must have remembered it's our birthday next week.

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Mathilde: Of course she has, the dear child. Do you think she'll bring us some French undies?

Belle: Really, Mathilde, at your age. No, I mean she must have realised how old we are.

Mathilde: That's a very calculating thing to say – Helen's mind doesn't work like that at all.

Belle: Then she must be less intelligent than I had always imagined.

Sophie: **(At the door)** Telephone for you Mum, Mr Appleby.

Mathilde: Arthur? Oh good, just the very person I wanted to speak to. I hope none of you will make any more unpleasant remarks about Helen while I'm gone.

Exit with Sophie

Belle Well, I'll leave you two young things together. I'm sure you must have lots to say to each other.

Exit

William: They're an extraordinary pair. Just like something out of a book.

Judy: They're rather sweet though, aren't they?

William: Yes, I'm getting very fond of them. I don't quite understand about their birthday though – don't tell me they're twins?

Judy: Oh yes, didn't you know? They'll be seventy-one on Tuesday.

William: I must get them some flowers. I don't see why they're making so much fuss about it though?

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Judy: Perhaps I should explain things to you properly. Great-grandfather left his money to his eldest child, Great Uncle Bertie. But Uncle Bertie went off to Australia years and years ago and as no-one has heard of him since, he's been presumed dead and Aunt Belle and Aunt Mathilde come into the money on their seventy-first birthday.

William: Why not until then?

Judy: Apparently there was a slight error in great grandfather's will and instead of it saying they should inherit at twenty-one, it says they inherit at seventy-one. I believe they had a very dodderly old solicitor whose writing wasn't very clear and great grandfather never troubled to read documents through because he was always so busy inventing things.

William: It sounds quite incredible. Aren't your aunts very bitter about this?

Judy: No, I don't think so. They never expected to inherit at all you see, as Bertie was the eldest.

William: I wonder what they'll do now?

Judy: I expect they'll stay here, they love this house. It's old and beautiful and they belong to it somehow. I don't suppose they'll change at all, they'll just go on leading their unhurried lives – having tea parties, making strawberry jam, taking pity on stranded travellers like you. Where were you going, William, when your car broke down?

William: I hadn't any definite plan, but I was heading for Penzance and I thought I might spend some time in the Scilly Isles.

Judy: Are you glad you've stayed?

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- William:** Yes, very glad. It's given me the opportunity of meeting you and your delightful great aunts, they're such characters.
- Judy:** Do you always think of people as characters?
- William:** Yes, I suppose I do really.
- Judy:** You must have a little card index in your brain where you file away all the interesting people to be used at a later date in one of your books. Will I ever be in one of your books, William?
- William:** I shouldn't be surprised. You're such a perfect little innocent, Judy, almost too good to be true.
- Judy:** It's infuriating the way people say I look so innocent and I'm not really, you know. I've read a great many books, some of them quite outspoken and I assure you I'm not innocent at all.
- William:** My poor Judy, what a child you are. Experience of life is so much more than reading risque novels.
- Judy:** There you are, you see, you're as bad as everyone else. Why won't people accept me as an adult? Why good heavens, I'm nearly twenty, plenty of girls are married and running homes at my age.
- William:** That's the difference you see. They have their tangible claims to maturity – husband and home, while you, my poor Judy, have just yourself. But don't try to grow up too fast, enjoy being young. Be like the song, you know, stay as sweet as you are.
- Judy:** But I don't want to be all sweet, I want to be terribly worldly and sophisticated, rather like Aunt Helen.
- William:** Tell me about your aunt, do you know her well?

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Judy: No, not really. She hasn't been to England for three years, but she's an exciting person, full of energy, always doing something new.

William: She sounds rather exhausting. A kind of younger edition of Mathilde, I imagine.

Judy: Do you think Belle and Mathilde were ever young? I never think of them being young, I expect them to have always been the same.

William: We were all young once – even me. I used to wear a beard and baggy corduroy trousers and go on CND protest marches – it wasn't always punk rockers and the permissive society, I'm glad to say.

Judy: Oh William I should love to see you in corduroy trousers!

Mathilde: **(entering suddenly)** What an extraordinary remark, dear. I'm sure Mr Travers looks respectable in any sort of trousers. That was Arthur on the phone, he's coming over on Tuesday to read the will. It's just a formality of course but you know what a fuss-pot he is for doing the right thing. I must say I feel quite excited about all this, it's like opening one's Christmas stocking. And now it'll be so much nicer with Helen here. You'll find her a charming girl, Mr Travers, if a little eccentric.

William: You mean she has certain idiosyncrasies?

Mathilde: Well I should think all these husbands and so much travelling must be very upsetting. I'm afraid I never cared for abroad very much, one always encounters such numbers of strange foreigners with very slight knowledge of cooking and still less idea of sanitation.

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William: Don't you ever think that they regard you as a foreigner, too?

Mathilde: Englishmen, Mr Travers, are never foreigners.

Judy: I'd love to go abroad, I think it would be simply marvellous, but I've never been further south than Truro.

Mathilde: Well, my darling when our financial situation has been made clear perhaps you shall make the Grand Tour and Belle and I will chaperone you.

Judy: I can just imagine it, Paris, Rome, Venice ...

Mathilde: We might perhaps pop into Bruges, it's a nice little town, though the canals are not as clean as one would wish. But then one feels one can trust the Belgians, they're really more like English people than most foreigners, which is a great comfort.

William: I think you're wonderful, Aunt Mathilde. Oh, I beg your pardon. May I call you Aunt

Mathilde: Please do, Mr Travers, and I shall call you William, such a splendid English name and so popular with the Royals, some of our finest monarchs I always think ...

William: The Dutch had one also –

Mathilde: Ah yes, the dear Hollanders, like the Belgians really, not entirely foreigners and so clean as well. How long is it William that you've been with us? I'm afraid my memory's so bad these days.

William: Nearly three months. I do hope I'm not behind with the rent or anything, am I?

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Mathilde: Good gracious, no, don't trouble about that dear boy. You know we love to have you for as long as you wish to stay. You are so good for Judy too, you bring her out of herself.

Judy: Like a sort of health cure, do you mean? Enema and tonic all in one.

Mathilde: **(Shocked)** The trouble with your generation, my dear, is that there is no romance anymore. It's the fault of people like William, they are too shrewd, they scrutinise us and analyse us so that we have no illusions left.

William: Don't blame it all on me, blame two world wars and the splitting of the atom.

Judy: It's all so scientific now, there is no room for illusions.

Mathilde: My dear child, without illusions life would be very empty indeed. You'll realise one day it is the illusions that make life liveable. Oh, such long faces! This isn't a new problem – remember the Industrial Revolution? They thought hundreds would be unemployed, didn't they? But people adapted themselves, that is what one has to do all the time. Adapt to one's circumstances.

Enter Sophie.

Sophie: He's here, Mum, do you want to see him ?

Mathilde: What extraordinary phraseology. First tell me who is here, child, then we shall know whether or not we wish to see him.

Sophie: I don't know his name. You know, the bloke who sells bootlaces and things – calls himself Kelly.

Judy: Oh Kelly! Yes of course we want to see him, Sophie. Don't keep him waiting outside.

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Mathilde: Everybody seems to know who he is but me. Who is Kelly, Judy? Do I know him?

Enter Kelly

He is tall and dark haired, wearing a kind of doublet and hose and carrying a half-open holdall in which assorted items can be seen

Kelly: If you don't, madam, that is your misfortune but here I am now and delighted to be under your gracious roof once more.

Mathilde: Well, I'm sure we're very pleased to see you Mr – er- Kelly.

Kelly: Just call me Kelly, no mister I beg you madam. I'm always called Kelly.

Mathilde: Isn't that your name then?

Kelly: Well likely it is and likely it isn't, but after all what are names for but to be called by?

Mathilde: What indeed?

Sophie: The cheek of it – didn't I tell you to wait in the kitchen while I saw if they was disengaged?

Kelly: You did sweetheart, and your apple pie sitting there on the table was out of this world – though I could have done with some cream to go with it.

Sophie: You cheeky layabout, I put that ready for my elevenses, growing girl as I am I need plenty of calories. Like my mum says, God helps her who helps herself.

Kelly: I do agree with you.

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- Sophie:** All you commercial travellers are the same – beg, borrow or steal so as you won't have to do an honest day's work.
- Kelly:** Please don't call me that. I may sell in order to live but never let it be said that I live in order to sell.
- Sophie:** It's all the same. Here, got any of them bikini briefs this time?
- Kelly:** I have indeed – black, lavender and scarlet.
- Sophie:** I don't fancy lavender really, I think I'd better stick to black. My friend says black suits me because it shows up my pale skin.
- Mathilde:** Yes, very true. No doubt due to lack of nourishment. Now perhaps you'd get on with the washing up and transact your business with Mr –er- Kelly when he leaves.
- Sophie:** Right ho, Mum. See you handsome
- (Sophie winks and exits)**
- Judy:** You know Mr Travers don't you Kelly?
- Kelly:** We have seen each other at a distance, but never been formally introduced. How do you do, sir?
- William:** How do you do. What a fascinating collection you have there. What exactly do you sell?
- Kelly:** Well, to be honest I couldn't tell you exactly - a bit of this and a bit of that, you know. I can sell you a seed catalogue or an encyclopaedia or a pair of bootlaces in any shade you fancy.
- William:** And you find you make a profit?
- Kelly:** It depends what you mean by profit. I make enough to live as I wish, that is without actually having to work.

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- Judy:** Isn't he marvellous, William? That's the way to live, no ties, a law unto yourself.
- William:** We couldn't all live that way. It's idealistic and a bit irresponsible. You cannot live in society without having certain obligations.
- Kelly:** I did have a job once – I used to be a ladies' hairdresser.
- Judy:** Were you really, Kelly, I can't imagine it. What made you give it up?
- Kelly:** It seemed a little dishonest making women pay for something they could do so much better themselves.
- Judy:** But that's the point, women go to the hairdresser's because they can't do it themselves.
- Kelly:** Of course they could if they put their minds to it.
- Mathilde:** Why don't you go back to hairdressing, Kelly? I'm sure you'd be good at it. You have all the charm your countrymen are credited with. The boy I was engaged to before I married my husband was Irish, he was a dear boy. Blue eyes and such a voice
- Kelly:** And I'm thinking ma'am, you still have a soft spot for him? Do you mind my asking how you get your hair that wonderful lilac colour – I feel sure you're one of those clever women who do it themselves?

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Mathilde: You're quite right. I use a little bottle of stuff that they sell for colouring icing, I forget what it's called. It just happened to fall into the basin when I was rinsing my hair one day and a few drops leaked out. I was so pleased with the colour I've used it ever since. At one time I had green hair which I achieved with a mixture of cabbage water and crème de menthe, but the crème de menthe was rather expensive and I prefer it mauve. It's a very good colour for evening wear.

Kelly: It suits you charmingly, dear lady, no other woman I know could wear that colour with such panache.

Mathilde: How kind.

Kelly: And now I really must be going **(To William)** Delighted to have made your acquaintance, sir, and if at any time you need any bootlaces, wristwatches or second-hand copies of the Encyclopaedia Britannica, remember the name Kelly, won't you?

William: I will indeed.

Kelly: **(To Mathilde)** Goodbye dear lady, I trust we shall meet again very soon, for to do business with you would be the greatest pleasure, and pleasure's the very best sort of business.

Mathilde: Goodbye Kelly, come again any time and we shall talk of Ireland.

Kelly: Goodbye Judy, God bless.

Judy: Goodbye Kelly – don't forget to see Sophie on your way out,

Kelly: I won't **(exit)**

Mathilde: Well, now, we can't all stand here talking, it's high time we started getting ready for Helen.

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William: Sounds rather like an invasion.

Mathilde: That's a very apt description, William, believe me. Come along now, everybody. Judy, go and pick some roses and tell Sophie we shall have beef olive for luncheon tomorrow, that was always Helen's favourite. Perhaps you would come upstairs with me, William, I may need some furniture moving. I do hope the linen is aired, really that spare room is quite damp. Last time I took some sheets out of the ottoman they were green at the edges. I shall just have to put the electric fire on even if it is June **(Exit)**.

Judy: Don't you think she's wonderful?

William: Mathilde or Helen do you mean?

William: Yes she is, they both are really. I think Helen must be quite a girl to have provoked all this activity and she's not even arrived yet.

Judy: I expect you'll fall madly in love with her, people always do, I believe.

William: I'll try to be original and remain immune. Off you go – gather ye rosebuds while ye may – operation Helen is under way.

Exit Judy and William

END OF SCENE ONE.

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