

The Falmouth Letters

a one-act play

by

Christine Woolf

ISBN: 9781873130742

The Playwrights Publishing Co.

Performances or readings of this play may not legally take place before an audience without a licence obtainable on application to:

The Playwrights Publishing Co.,
70 Nottingham Road,
Burton Joyce,
Nottingham, U.K.,
[44] (0)1159-313356
playwrightspublishingco@yahoo.com

To avoid possible disappointment, application should be made, preferably in writing, as early as possible, stating: -

- (i) Name and address of applicant
- (ii) Name and address of Society;
- (iii) Name and address of theatre or hall where performance(s) would be held;
- (iv) Times and dates of performances.

A fee will be charged for this licence which must be paid prior to the first performance otherwise the licence is automatically cancelled and the performance becomes illegal.

SYNOPSIS:

The play, a small tragedy, is an imaginative reconstruction of a romance in Falmouth during the years 1904 – 1907. Katie, whose father is a prosperous manufacturer in Glasgow, comes on holiday to her sister's home in Falmouth, and meets James, a young pharmacist. A romance blossoms but the opportunities to meet are rare, and the constraints of letter writing eventually prove too great for the relationship to continue.

The action is woven around a box of letters which have been in the possession of the author's family for about 55 years. There is nothing slanderous or libellous in the play.

CAST

James Hocking	a young pharmacist
Katie Carswell	a young Glasgow woman
Mrs Hocking	James' mother
Mr Hocking	James' father
Harry	the shop apprentice
Meg	Katie's sister living in Falmouth
Emma	Katie's sister living at home in Glasgow
Ida	Young Falmouth
Lilian	women
Bessie	housemaid at Murcia
Gerard Pascoe	a Falmouth business man

3M; 7F, 1 boy (2M, 3F, 1 boy with doubling)

Scene: Flexible – various venues around Falmouth and Glasgow.

[There are several venues in which the story is played – so flexible staging is needed with entrances up and down stage on both sides. Two focal points need to be constant – the pharmacist’s counter and shop in Falmouth, and the morning room at Murcia, Pollokshields, Glasgow. Lighting should be clear and white/blue for Murcia, and a mellower light for all the Falmouth sequences. The play should work on the proscenium stage, though to play it in the round would allow great flexibility.]

[The letters should be treated as dialogue – spoken straight to their recipients, so that there is action and reaction.]

Fade up a warm sunny light on the pharmacist’s shop, focussing particularly on the counter area. In front of the counter is a doormat on which lies a scattering of letters

SEQUENCE 1 - THE BEGINNING.

Enter James from door USR. He is wearing his white dispensing coat, and carries a tray of negatives, which he places on the counter. He holds each negative up to the light from the doorway and examines it. As he holds up the third negative, he notices the letters on the mat.

He picks them up, sorts through them until he comes to a small envelope. He examines the writing, discards the rest onto the counter. He slits open the envelope and removes a sheet of writing paper. His expression is bright and intent. He reads aloud.

James: *(reading)* ‘Murcia, Pollokshields. 12th August 1904. Dear Mr Hocking *(he grimaces at the formality)* I have always been expecting the snapshots which you promised me. Surely they are very fine to take such a time? I am afraid you must have a very bad opinion of me, or are very lazy yourself. I read that you are

having great heat in the sunny South West just now; it must be a nice change for you folks!

‘I am taking Pa away for the weekend today. My sister Emma went away ages ago so I have just written to enquire if she intends returning for the Christmas festivities. You should have your holiday before the fair weather takes wings and flies to Bonnie Scotland. I supposed you will be boating a lot if it’s so hot – I trust your style has improved – *(he pauses and repeats on a rising inflection)* – I trust your style has improved? – the cheek of the maid! – ‘Yours very sincerely, Katie Carswell.’

(He replaces the letter in the envelope and puts it in his pocket. He takes a number of photo envelopes from the counter and looks through them rapidly, finds the one he wants. He takes a sheet of paper and starts to write.)

James: ‘Dear Miss Carswell, Thank you for your letter. I enclose the shots for which you asked and hope you like them, especially the one of you at the oars catching crabs’

As he reads, lights fade in the shop area, and fade up on the morning room of a comfortable Glasgow home – floor area perhaps marked with a carpet square. There are several chairs and a small table. Katie stands reading James’ letter aloud. The snapshots are in one hand, the letter in the other. Their voices initially overlap.

Katie: *(reading)* ... ‘especially the one of you at the oars catching crabs...’ Oh! The cheek of the monkey! ‘I hope that when you next come to visit your sister and brother-in-law, I will be permitted to help you improve your oarsmanship. Truly, though, I look forward to your anticipated Spring 1905 holiday. Believe me, yours sincerely, James Hocking.’ *(Katie flings her arms in the air and whirls round the room. Unseen by Katie, the housemaid, Bessie, enters and watches her)* Oh James, I’ve heard from you – and in the Spring I’ll be coming to stay with Meg and Tom and I’ll see you again.

Exit Katie UL.

Bessie: Well I never. James, she said? Whatever next?

Exit Bessie.

SEQUENCE 2 - BREAKFAST TIME

Pause. Lights dim. Passage of time denoted by music.

Breakfast table for three is set DC. with three chairs. Enter R Mrs Hocking. Sits C. Enter R. Mr Hocking, sits L, leaving chair R for James. Enter James from DR.

Mr Hocking: Morning, James.

James: Morning father – mother.

Mrs Hocking: There's a letter for you James. I've put it by your plate.

James: Yes. Thank you.

Mrs Hocking: The postmark's Glasgow.

James: Yes, I can see it is mother.

Mrs Hocking: And who do you know in Glasgow may I ask?

James: You can ask mother, but it could be one of half-a-dozen people, probably wanting their photographs developed.

Mrs Hocking: Really? I should have thought business letters would be addressed to the shop. *(slight pause)* I hope it's not that young lady you were seen with, walking along Castle Drive?

James: Now why should you hope that?

Mrs Hocking: Because she is not suitable for you.

James: But she ...

Mrs Hocking: Don't bother to argue James. She is one of these flighty modern young women I see only too often nowadays. No commonsense whatever – white dresses, broderie anglaise, silly shoes, all totally unsuitable for wear about our town. Goes to one of these Scottish churches, I shouldn't wonder – and certainly not a life companion for you.

James: *(spluttering)* Life companion? I take a girl for a walk along Castle Drive and you infer from that that I'm going to marry her?

Mrs Hocking: No of course I don't. But you're going to make a name for yourself if you're constantly seen in her company. Why, Mrs Kitto said only yesterday ...

James: Oh, I see now, Mrs Kitto. That woman has eyes everywhere. Surely you know by now that you can't believe half of what she says?

Mrs Hocking: Mrs Kitto is a good friend of mine. Anyway, open the letter and tell me who's writing to you.

Mr Hocking: Now Ellen, you forget. James is a grown man. He doesn't have to explain to us who sends him correspondence.

James: Thank you father. Well, it's time I was off.

Exit James DR. Enters UR. to shop area. He goes to the counter, and writes.

James: 'Wilmer, Dispensing Chemist, Market Strand, Falmouth. Dear Katie, Thank you for your letter. I am pleased you like the photographs. However, in future would you please direct your letters to the above address? That is, if you care to write to me again, as I hope you will. This would avoid a number of inconvenient questions at home ...'

Fade.

SEQUENCE 3 - LAS PALMAS

Bright popular music, perhaps Spanish? Fade up on James at counter.

James: *(reading)* A postcard – handsome building. 'Metropol Hotel, Las Palmas. 19 May 1905. We expect to arrive home by the first and are trying to have from the 28th in London to see the shops. We sail on the Orion – hope it's a decent boat. Our boat is in before its time and so we leave here this morning. Weather been simply lovely. None of us were seasick. K.O.C.' Lucky girl – and very soon she'll be here again.

Fade.

SEQUENCE 4 - A BUNCH OF FLOWERS

Fade up on room at Pendennis House, Falmouth. Enter Meg. She crosses L to other (R) side of stage and calls. Small boy enters L with flowers. He stands just inside entrance.

Meg: *(calls)* Katie, Katie.

Katie: Yes, I'm here.

Meg: There's a small boy at the door, completely hidden by the most enormous bouquet of flowers – he says they are for you.
Enter Kate, in wrapper.

Katie: For me? Are you sure? Where is he? *(Sees the boy, Harry, and crosses to him).*

Harry: I'm right here, Miss – and please Miss, they're for you Miss. From Mr Hocking Miss. And I've got a letter for you, Miss, somewhere.

Katie: I expect it's in your pocket. Here, let me take the flowers.
(She buries her face in the bouquet and sniffs deeply). How beautiful! Roses, carnations, freesias – just smell them Meg.
(Meg sniffs the flowers).

Meg: Lovely. Enough to fill every vase in the house I should think.

Harry; Here's the letter Miss. It's got a bit bent, Miss, in my pocket. *(Katie takes the note and gives bouquet to Meg).*

Katie: Never mind – mm. *(As she reads letter Meg and the boy stand, gazing at the flowers).*

Katie: *(to Harry)* Wait a moment, you can take Mr Hocking a note from me. *(She turns aside, sits at table and writes briefly).* 'Thanks very much for flowers, they are beautiful. Was just in my tub when they arrived. *(She looks up at audience and lowers her voice, conspiratorially)* I'll not lock the door tonight in case you get away in time and pass here, but I won't expect you.' *(She folds note, puts it in envelope, writes name on envelope and gives it to Harry).* Please give this to Mr Hocking, as soon as you get back to the shop. And wait. *(She exits swiftly and returns with coin)*

Katie: Here's a sixpenny piece for you. And don't forget the note.

Harry: No Miss, thank you Miss. Thank you very much. *(He runs out, followed by Meg.)*

Fade.

SEQUENCE 5 - THE GARDEN

Fade up – evening. Enter Katie. It is deep twilight in the garden.

Katie: I am not expecting him – of course I'm not. But even so I've slipped out of the conservatory door. I've walked slowly and very casually, in case anyone was watching from one of the windows – past the lily pond, past the sundial with Meg's tea roses – the scent this evening is unbelievable – through the gap in the privet hedge and into the lower garden – our wild garden, Meg calls it – though I've heard the gardener call it other names – old apple trees and honeysuckle and white cosmos floating like ghosts all around me. I've brought the key to the tall green door in the wall, that leads into the back lane. And now I'm waiting in case he comes. I'm tempted to sit on the grass, but green stains wouldn't be very becoming on my dress.

Sound of door opening

Katie: Yes, he's here.

Enter James. He has taken off his jacket, which he carries over his shoulder and so we see his white shirt and her white dress. He comes close to her.

James: Kitty! *(he takes her hand)* I thought I'd never get away – late duty again and half Falmouth appears to be down with some germ or other – Kaolin et Morph we can expect – but cough linctus in June?

Katie: But you're here now.

They kiss lightly. He spreads his jacket on the grass and they sit on it.

James: I've brought you this. I hope you like it. *(he gives her a small box).*

Katie: Oh, Grossmith. How I love the scent of lily of the valley.

James: I know you do. I noticed your perfume when you came in yesterday.

Katie: (*smiling*) Very perceptive of you, Mr Hocking.

James: Not at all, Miss Carswell.

Katie: I thought (*pause*) you'd bring my film back, all developed.

James; They're not ready yet, I'm afraid. They're still drying out. They'll be ready by – probably tomorrow afternoon.

Katie: Och – tomorrow Meg and I are off to tea with some stuffy friends of hers. You know, endless chatter about children and nannies, and confidences about husbands, whispered of course as I'm too young and innocent to understand. So I won't be coming into town. Perhaps you could bring them here after work?

James: Probably. But I was going to ask you anyway if you'd like a game of tennis tomorrow evening? I'm sure I can book a court.

Katie: I'd love to.

James: Good. Then can you be ready – say – by seven?

Katie: Yes, easily.

James: Right. I'll ask T.H. tomorrow morning – I'll go across to his office.

Katie: There's no need to ask permission of Thomas Henry, surely?

James: I think there is – after all, he is your brother-in-law, and you're staying at his house.

Katie: At his and Meg's house, you mean. How formal!

James: Well, it's a formality certainly expected in Falmouth. (*short pause*) And I've been thinking, we could go up river in my boat on Wednesday afternoon.

Katie: But we can do that anyway. Do you know what I'd really like to do? I'd like to go on the ferry right up to Truro. If you took a day off, we could go together. It would be such fun.

James; It would be. But I can't take days off, I'm afraid. If I'm to become a junior partner in the business, Mr Wilmer

wouldn't be very happy if I started taking days off. We're always extra busy in the summer too, what with the dispensing and the photographic side. I'm sorry Katie, but only Sunday is my day off. Other days aren't an option at the moment.

Katie: *(coolly, somewhat off hand)* Oh very well, if you say so.

James: So I'll book the court for tomorrow evening, shall I?

Katie: *(crossly)* I'm not sure. I'll let you know.

(Pause. Then James rises and pulls her up. He picks up his jacket.)

James: Well, in that case – goodnight.

Katie: *(uncertainly)* Good night.

James moves towards the garden door, he turns and raises his hand in farewell. Katie runs towards him, but stumbles so that he catches her.

Katie: I'm sorry. that was very rude of me. Of course I want to play tennis tomorrow – and ask T.H. by all means if that's what you'd prefer.

James: Silly girl. I'll book the court.

Katie: And we can go out in your boat on Wednesday afternoon?

James: Of course, weather permitting.

Katie: I'll examine Meg's seaweed. She keeps it hanging by the garden door. She swears it always tells her when it's going to rain.

James: Lots of people do. Till tomorrow then. I'll call for you at the front door.

Katie: *(leans forward and kisses him on the cheek)*. But it's much more fun meeting in the garden isn't it?

James: *(kissing her lightly)* Much more.

Offstage Meg calls

Meg: Katie. *(louder)* Katie.

Katie: It's Meg. *(calls)* I'm here Meg, in the wild garden.

Meg: *(calls)* Come along now, I want to lock the garden door.

James: Goodnight then, dear little Kitty.

Katie: *(lightly mocking)* Good night, dear little Jimmy. I must go.

She kisses her fingers and touches them to his lips, laughs and exits towards house – exit James into the lane.

Fade.