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THE PARACHUTE.

Drawn from:

**FOUR
SHORT PLAYS**

BY

LADY BELL

LONDON
ARTHUR L. HUMPHREYS
187 PICCADILLY, W.
1922



THE PARACHUTE.

A Comedy in One Act.

Characters in the order of their appearance:

MRS MAITLAND.

MARY (*her daughter*).

TOM WELBURN.

CANON HARTLEY (*the Rector of the Parish*).

MRS WELBURN.

SCENE: MRS MAITLAND'S *little house, looking on to a village green*. MRS MAITLAND *knitting at a small table R., a book open beside her*. MARY *doing nothing, sitting on chair down stage from window L*.

MRS MAITLAND. My dear child, what is the matter? You never seem able to settle to anything now.

MARY. The truth is, mamma, I'm bored.

MRS MAITLAND. Bored, when after our long separation during the war you've come home to live with your mother?

MARY. That's just it.

MRS MAITLAND. What's just it?

MARY. I've come home to live with my mother.

MRS MAITLAND. Mary! Do you mean to say you don't like it?

MARY. Not at all.

MRS MAITLAND. Oh, how dreadful this is! Oh, the girls of the present age!

MARY. That's what you're always saying, mamma, but I can't help being of the present day, can I? I'd cheerfully be of another time if I could. [*Going to window*]. Nothing ever happens here—nothing exciting, and I, who have been a V.A.D. in France during the war, and have conveyed wounded officers by myself to hospitals at midnight [*MRS MAITLAND holds up her hands in horror*] look out of the window for months and see nothing at all. [*Goes aimlessly to window—gives a cry*].

MRS MAITLAND. What is it?

MARY. Something is happening at last! Look, look, something is coming down from the sky. Oh, what can it be? Yes, it's a parachute and a man hanging to it. He'll come down in the garden; I must render first aid quick.

[*Rushes out*].

MRS MAITLAND [*agitated, goes to window, looks out, starts*]. Yes. He has fallen! Oh, dear! Oh, I can't bear that kind of sight. He must be knocked to pieces. [*Covers her face with her hands*]. Mary has picked him up; she is wonderful.

[*Goes to door L. MARY appears at door L, supporting WELBURN*].

MRS MAITLAND. Oh, Mary, is he dead?

WELBURN [*speaking very feebly*]. No, no, I think not—thank you very much.

MARY. He is suffering from shock. [*In a business-like tone*].

Lie down, warmth, and quiet—cover extremities.

WELBURN [*feebly*]. Yes, quite right—keep me warm and quiet and cover my extremities.

MARY. Now you are not to talk.

WELBURN. Very well, I won't. But I must tell you in case you should ask me—I remember nothing before it happened.

MARY. Of course, that's very customary with an accident.

WELBURN [*emphatically*]. It's more than that—I'm so anxious there should be no mistake about it—I've quite lost my memory. I've forgotten who I am—clean forgotten—it's no use your asking me, it would only excite me.

MRS MAITLAND. No, we won't, of course, my dear young man.

WELBURN. I like being called young man. It's a compliment when one's turned forty.

MARY [*alert*]. Oh, you do know that?

WELBURN [*alarmed*]. No, I don't. What did I say?

MARY. You said you were turned forty.

WELBURN. No, no, I couldn't have said that if I don't know who I am. I have no idea.

MRS MAITLAND. It's too sad, really. The poor fellow! He may

have a wife and family, and we can't tell them he is here.

WELBURN. No, no, you can't. I should be sure to remember my wife if I had one. Don't tell me about it—it will excite me.

MARY. Mother, he really must be kept quiet.

MRS MAITLAND. Oh, dear, it's all so mysterious and disquieting, Mary. I shall go round to the Rectory and tell the Canon about it. He is so wise.

MARY [*anxious to get her away*]. Yes, do, mamma. I'm sure that will be the best thing.

MRS MAITLAND [*going out*]. I shall be back in a minute. I shan't put on my hat. I'll just take my parasol to look respectable.

WELBURN. Where is she going?

MARY. To the Rectory. It is just across the green.

WELBURN. That sounds very soothing—a Rectory across the green.

MARY. Yes. Now don't talk any more; try to be quite quiet. Are you comfortable?

WELBURN. Immensely.

MARY. Now close your eyes and I daresay you will go to sleep.

WELBURN. Yes, that's what I always do when I go to sleep—I

close my eyes first.

MARY [*humouring him*]. Of course; then do it now.

WELBURN [*jumping up with a shriek*]. Ah, ha! you there! You standing there!

MARY. What is it? Why are you speaking so loud?

WELBURN. You don't think I'm mad? Don't you mind being left alone with someone who has dropped from the sky and has lost his memory?

MARY. Not in the least. I dealt with many worse things during the war.

WELBURN. Admirable one! Have you a good head, a ready brain, a resourceful mind?

MARY. Yes, I have all those.

WELBURN. I'll tell you what I want—I need a confederate.

MARY. What?

WELBURN. Oh, this time you think I'm mad, don't you?

MARY. Well, something like it.

WELBURN. Not in the least. I'm as sane as you are. Listen, I must have a confederate to get me out of this hole.

MARY. What hole?

WELBURN. Why, my disappearing from my home, jumping from an aeroplane, and tumbling into your garden.

MARY. Your home! But I thought you had forgotten it!

WELBURN. Nothing of the kind.

MARY. Not lost your memory?

WELBURN. Of course not. That was only to put you off the scent.

MARY. Off the scent?

WELBURN. Yes, yes, yes. Now look here, my dear young lady—can I trust you?

MARY [*speaking very calmly*]. Certainly.

WELBURN. Very well then—this is my sad story. I'm tired of life—I'm tired of the world and of all the things that are happening in it.

MARY. And you wish to commit suicide? Yes, that is a very common symptom.

WELBURN. Not at all! On the contrary. I don't mean to take my own life—that is, I want to take it for my own and nobody else's. And my wife will insist on my sharing hers. It's a perfect mania with her, and I can't bear it any longer and I mean to disappear. She has opinions about everything in creation, and I have none!

MARY. None? That must be very dull.

WELBURN. Dull? If I were left to myself I shouldn't be dull for a moment. I have two cherished pursuits—golf and music. I play golf and I play the 'cello. And that would be enough for me. I don't want to know about the things they talk about in the papers. My wife does. She went to College, and a woman always comes away from the 'Varsity with her head chock full of ideas—I never knew one who didn't—it's something awful. And my wife has views about every blessed thing that's mentioned in the papers, and she will talk to me about them all. I can't stand it any longer. I don't want to hear about Politics or Commerce or New Art or Advanced Science, or the rates or the taxes or the Axes or inflammation of the lung or inflation of the currency or the Moplahs or the blacks or the whites or the browns, or the East and the West, and the Tigris, and the Thames, and Ireland, and Mesopotamia, and the Dublin Parliament whose name I can't pronounce, and the London Parliament whose doings I can't follow, and Bridge, and the film, and the censors, and the traffic, and the Czecho-Slovaks, and the Japanese, and the Murmanskis, and Bolsheviskis, and the Colonies, and the bank rate, and deferred shares, and preferred shares, and committees, and conferences, and Coalitions, or France, or Belgium, or Italy, or America, and the Colonies, and the Dominion, and Australia, and housing questions, and the servant problem, and the League of Nations, and amalgamations, or reparations, or war babies, or adoption, or the Church, or the stage, or the Cubists, or the psycho-analysts, or the unemployed, and the doles, and the Poles, the South Pole, or the North Pole, or the Polish Poles, or the telephone, or the penny postage, and the trams, and the strikes, and the weather, and prize-fighting, and the football

matches. She has views on 'em all! And she tries to make me share them by suggestion. Can you wonder that I fly?

MARY. Oh, is that why you came by aeroplane?

WELBURN. No, no, you mistake. I use the word fly in a metaphorical sense. I mean, can you wonder that I keep trying to escape?

MARY. Oh, you have done it before?

WELBURN. I have tried four times. The first time by train, the next by steamer, the third by car, the fourth on foot, and every time that too devoted woman has got me back. The moment I disappear she circulates a description of me and I'm found at once. It's up in all the police offices. 'A man of good appearance, looking between 35 and 40, of middle height, pleasant and genial countenance. Probably suffering from loss of memory; answers to the name of Tom.' You see that's enough to identify me at once.

MARY. Then do you suffer from loss of memory?

WELBURN. Of course I don't. But when I'm found I have to say something, so I pretend I don't know who I am.

MARY. And what happens next?

WELBURN [*groaning*]. Well, then she tries bringing my memory back by suggestion! And when I can't bear that any longer, I pretend I've got it back. And now this last—the fifth—time I've tried a new way. I've come by aeroplane and jumped out.

MARY. That ought to cover up your tracks.

WELBURN. Yes, I'll tell you what I did. I have a pal who is mad on flying and who was going to do a stunt in Norfolk, somewhere near King's Lynn, so I went to Paddington and took a ticket for a small station due west of London to put them off the scent—a place I saw in Bradshaw called Camperton.

MARY. Camperton! Oh, yes.

WELBURN. Never heard of it before. We went off north-east—at least I hope we did, but I believe the fellow lost his way or something went wrong. He was turning round and round and his confounded things made such a row I couldn't make him hear, so I thought I'd chance it and I jumped out. I have practised jumping with his parachute several times before. And now I haven't an idea where I am, but a good bit north-east of London, I hope.

MARY. Wretched man, you are five miles from Camperton.

WELBURN. Good heavens! Then I'm undone! She'll come down in the car and find me as sure as I'm alive. Oh, my dear girl, what am I to do? You'll help me, won't you?

MARY. Of course I will. She'll never think of looking for you here.

WELBURN. Won't she!

MARY [*looking from window*]. Oh, there's my mother! and the Rector coming. Quick, quick, lie down again.

[WELBURN *lies down and is covered*].

WELBURN. Who is the Rector?

MARY. Canon Hartley.

WELBURN. Hartley—not Bob Hartley?

MARY. Yes, his name is Robert.

WELBURN. Good Lord! He was with me at Oxford. We used to make music together, and he used to pretend I played out of tune. Good gracious, what are we to do?

MARY. You be quiet, and remember you have lost your memory, and I'll play up. I'm a great authority on shocks and accidents.

[*Enter the* RECTOR *and* MRS MAITLAND].

RECTOR [*heartily, but speaking with a little precaution*]. Well, Miss Mary, at work again! at work again!

MARY. Take care, Rector, I think he's dozing.

RECTOR. He's lost his memory, Mrs Maitland tells me.

MARY. Entirely.

RECTOR. These cases are most distressing. Have you no clue at all to where he came from or who he is?

MARY [*firmly*]. None whatever. The only thing we can do is to let him lie still for the present.

[WELBURN *groans*].

RECTOR. He seems to be suffering, but it is uncertain. He may be quite unconscious that he is groaning. I have seen a good many of these cases and have indeed had a good deal of success in dealing with them. I should like to see this man, that I may judge for myself of his condition.

MARY. No, no, Rector—really if he is disturbed I will not answer for the consequences.

RECTOR [*stiffly*]. Really, my dear young lady, may I say that you take a little too much on yourself. It is most important to do everything we possibly can to prove this poor fellow's identity. As Rector of this parish I feel it to be my duty to investigate this case. [*Goes toward WELBURN, and lifts up the cover. WELBURN rolls over with his face away from him and groans*].

RECTOR [*soothingly*]. Now, now, my poor friend, I won't disturb you. [WELBURN *groans again*]. I only want to help.

WELBURN. Keep off! Get out! Go away! [*rolls over*].

RECTOR. Do you know, I believe I know that voice!

MARY. You are exciting him dreadfully.

RECTOR. All the same, I think I know this man, and I must see his face. [*He bends over WELBURN and succeeds in seeing his face*]. Yes, I do! Isn't that amazing!

MARY and MRS MAITLAND. You know him?

RECTOR. Yes, unless I'm strangely mistaken, we were at Oxford together; his name is Welburn.

MRS MAITLAND. How providential!

MARY. But are you sure you are not strangely mistaken?

RECTOR. My dear young lady, older people are right sometimes.

MARY. Everyone is mistaken at times.

MRS MAITLAND. Not the Rector.

RECTOR. It is my duty to do what we can to help my poor friend back to his normal condition. I shall interrogate him quite quietly—nothing to excite him. Welburn! Welburn! [WELBURN *looks at him vaguely*].

WELBURN. What does that mean?

RECTOR. Isn't that your name? Welburn, I said.

WELBURN. I can't remember what my name is. I don't know. I can't imagine.

RECTOR [*to the others*]. There isn't a doubt that it's Welburn. [*To WELBURN*]. Look here, old boy, don't you remember the good old times we had at Oxford when we used to make music together?

WELBURN. Music? No.

RECTOR. Don't you remember the Beethoven Sonata in A and that place in the last movement where you always got that E on the A string out of tune—

WELBURN [*loudly*]. Out of tune!

RECTOR [*excited*]. There, you see he remembers! Yes, yes; you remember that E.

WELBURN [*catching himself up*]. What E?

RECTOR. The E on the A string.

WELBURN. What's an A string? Why is there an E on it?

RECTOR. You know that surely: you used to be such a good 'cello player.

WELBURN. Good what?

RECTOR. 'Cello player—this sort of thing, you know. [*Pretending to play on a 'cello. WELBURN looks at him vaguely, then tries to imitate him*].

WELBURN. Oh, is that what it is? Like that? No, I don't remember. Why should I have done like that?

MARY. I'm sure this must be doing him harm.

RECTOR. My dear girl, it is not. Leave him to me. He had a glimmer just now of recollection. It may gradually come back to him.—Come now, you remember the pretty girls at Somerville?

[WELBURN *shakes his head and groans again*].

RECTOR. Come now, nothing to groan at in that. Do you remember that charmer in pink? Who got a First, by Jove!

WELBURN. A First! [*Groans*].

RECTOR. Remember that?

WELBURN. Remember what?

RECTOR. The girl at Somerville.

WELBURN [*blankly*]. I don't know. The girl where?

RECTOR. At Somerville, dear friend, at Somerville. [*To the others*]. It needs an infinite patience and kindness to deal with these sad cases. At Somerville, the ladies' college, you know.

WELBURN. I don't know.

RECTOR. And yet at that time you seemed interested in her.

WELBURN. I tell you I don't remember. I remember nothing! I've lost my memory and I've lost my senses, and I don't know who I am or how I came here or anything. And I don't know who you are and why you're going on talking.

RECTOR. Quite so, quite so, don't excite yourself, pray.

WELBURN. It's you who are exciting me with all this chattering and wanting me to remember this and remember that. You're

doing me a great deal of harm, and I tell you what, if I don't know anything that happened in the past I do know what's going to happen in the future, and that is that I shall punch your head in a minute if you ask me any more questions—so now! [*Behaves as if he were mad*].

[*He jumps up*].

RECTOR [*retreating*]. Oh, pray, dear sir, keep calm. [*Trying to smile*]. No need for you to punch my head or any one else's.

WELBURN. I'm not so sure.

RECTOR [*to the others*]. What a sad condition to find him in. But there isn't a doubt that he's Welburn.

WELBURN. What's that you're saying—that I'm Welburn? What's that? Don't call me names. You take care not to say it again.

RECTOR. My dear sir, I won't say it if you don't like it. I'll leave you to rest a little longer, and I will call again.

WELBURN. No, don't you call again, please.

RECTOR. Dear sir, don't be agitated.

MARY. Now you lie down again, and you shall not be disturbed.

WELBURN. Thank you very much. [*Lies down—MARY covers him and he draws the things over his head and groans*].

MRS MAITLAND. Oh, Rector, what do you think about it? I do

depend on your advice.

RECTOR. My dear lady, you are positively trembling. These harrowing scenes are not good for you. Come out into the air for a few minutes. Walk across the green with me to the Rectory; the air will do you good.

MRS MAITLAND [*faintly*]. Yes, I think I will. [*To MARY*]. We are within call if you want us.

MARY [*ironically*]. Thank you, mamma. [*MARY watches them out of window*]. They're gone.

[WELBURN *sits up*].

WELBURN. The old fool badgering me about Oxford! That was an inspiration, wasn't it, pretending to be mad. How was it? Was that all right?

MARY. Splendid.

WELBURN. Upon my word, I feel almost mad in reality when I think of his saying that I played out of tune, and raking up the Somerville girls, and all that.

MARY. Had you really forgotten the charmer in pink?

WELBURN. Forgotten her! [*Groans*]. How could I? I married her.

MARY. What! Was she—

WELBURN. My wife? Of course she was—of course she *is*—that's the point I mind most.

MARY. She must be very clever if she took a First.

WELBURN. That's just it. She is—that's the awful part. Now I'm not clever, you know. I didn't take a First. She knows that, so she thinks she has a better head than I have, and upon my soul, I don't know what to do about it.

MARY. About your head?

WELBURN. No, hers—I mean about hers and mine together. That's the mistake—

MARY. But you're trying to remedy it, by separating then?

WELBURN. Yes, but I have never succeeded. That's where the brains come in, you see. Each time I try to get away and hide from her, she gets me back again. Oh! if only I can pull it off this time.

[WELBURN *gets up, pulls his coat down, etc., and begins strolling up and down, his hands in his pockets while he thinks it out*].

MARY. Take care you're not seen from outside. It's all right—they're still talking at the Rectory gate. They're both wondering evidently what to do next.

WELBURN. I say, it's really awfully funny, isn't it?

[*They both laugh*].

MARY. I must say it is. But it'll take some doing, you know. What is your plan?

WELBURN. A very simple one. I shall be left some time with you to look after me, and when that happens you will avert your eyes for a moment, and I shall open the door and walk out. That's always the best thing to do when you're shut up anywhere if it can be managed.

MARY. If! Yes! But I'm game to do anything.

WELBURN. Look here, you really are one of the best. How can I ever thank you!

MARY. Well, really, I'm awfully grateful to you for having brought excitement into our lives.

WELBURN. Oh, they are coming back this way. Then I must subside again. [*Jumps on to couch. MARY covers him*].

MARY [*looking from window*]. Oh! this really is a wonderful day. Something else is happening. There's a car driving through the village—

WELBURN [*anxiously*]. A car?

MARY. It's going very slowly—it's going to stop.

WELBURN. It's detectives! I'm sure! I'm lost.

MARY. No, it's being driven by a lady—she's alone.

WELBURN. A lady! [*Gets under the rug*].

MARY. She is looking at a map. Now she is speaking to my mother. She must be asking the way—

WELBURN. Your mother will bring her in here, and I'm a dead man.

MARY. Yes—my mother is bringing her in.

[*Enter MRS MAITLAND and the RECTOR, with MRS WELBURN*].

MRS MAITLAND. Mary, I want the large scale map. This lady is asking the way to Camperton.

MRS WELBURN. Thank you very much. [*She is tall and masculine looking, and speaks in a deep voice*].

MRS WELBURN [*looking at WELBURN*]. You have an invalid here?

MRS MAITLAND. Yes, this poor gentleman fell from an aeroplane into our garden—at least he jumped from a parachute. He might have been killed.

MRS WELBURN. How much is he hurt?

MRS MAITLAND. I don't think he is very much hurt, but he is suffering from shock and loss of memory, and ought to be kept absolutely quiet.

MRS WELBURN. Loss of memory, indeed? I have a good deal of experience in dealing with loss of memory, as a near relation of mine frequently suffers from it. But I find that it always yields to suggestion. Have you tried that?

MARY. We have not. From the patient's condition it was evidently most essential that he should be kept quiet.

MRS WELBURN. Suggestion would do him no harm. You can suggest to a patient that he should be calm, and he becomes calm—and then after that it is very rare that loss of memory does not yield to further treatment—at least that is my experience.

RECTOR. I believe it would be a good thing to try suggestion in this case.

MRS WELBURN. Ah! You believe in it too? I am glad to hear this from one of your cloth.

RECTOR. I don't know that I do in every case. But this one has special interest for me, and I am anxious to try everything, as I know this man, although he has not so far recognised me.

MARY. He doesn't remember who he is himself.

MRS WELBURN. Quite a common symptom. But it is an extremely important factor in the case that you recognise him. Are you quite certain?

RECTOR. Absolutely. We were at Oxford together—his name is Welburn.

MRS WELBURN [*slowly*]. His name is Welburn? So is mine!

ALL. Yours!

MRS WELBURN [*advancing to couch and uncovering WELBURN*]. Of course, yes, that's my husband. He is always doing it. Thomas!

[WELBURN *groans without moving*].

MRS WELBURN. Yes, that's the way he groans in his sleep when he has one of these attacks. He has had four of them—and he wanders away from home unconscious of his actions.

MRS MAITLAND. Oh, how sad!

MRS WELBURN. But he always recovers. Thomas! [*Shakes him*].

MARY. Oh, I'm afraid you will do him harm.

MRS WELBURN. Young lady, I am much obliged to you for your kind care of my husband, but now you had better leave him to me.

RECTOR. Quite so. [*He and MRS MAITLAND nod at one another approvingly*].

[MRS WELBURN *pulls WELBURN up—he sits up and looks blankly at her without recognition*].

MRS WELBURN. Thomas! Do you know me?

WELBURN. I don't. Who are you?

MRS WELBURN. I am your wife.

WELBURN. My wife? I don't think I've got one. At least I can't remember. [*As though trying to collect his thoughts*].

MRS WELBURN. Oh, you will remember presently. You'll get your memory back all right. Now look at me. Look straight into my eyes.

WELBURN. I don't like looking at you.

MRS WELBURN. He has these delusions at times, but they pass off. I will take him away with me in the car, at once, back to his home. Come, Thomas.

WELBURN. Where do you want me to go? [*To MARY, with a forlorn hope*]. Can't you help me? I don't like going away with this stranger.

MARY [*to MRS WELBURN*]. Do you mind my saying that we have no proof that this is your husband?

MRS MAITLAND. Oh, my dear Mary, it is so evident!

MRS WELBURN. No—now that was a sensible remark for a girl. Girls are generally foolish. You shall have proof. I can tell you what the motto and crest are on that signet ring he wears: the motto is *Semper Volans* and the crest is a swallow. Though a goose would have been more appropriate. [*Takes his hand*]. There you may see for yourself.

RECTOR. So it is. Oh, my dear madam, we have every confidence in you, and we have only to congratulate you and your husband on being brought together by such a wonderful chance.

MRS WELBURN. Thank you very much. Come then, dear, we must go. [*Helping WELBURN up*]. Lean on my arm—I daresay you still feel shaky.

[*WELBURN looks round him desperately, then thrusts his arm through hers. They go towards the door*].

MRS MAITLAND. Poor fellow!

MARY. Poor fellow, indeed!

RECTOR. I do hope he will soon recover his memory.

MRS WELBURN. I am quite sure he will. It always yields to suggestion.

[*WELBURN gives a loud groan, with one more look at MARY. They go out*].

CURTAIN *as they pass out.*



Occasional missing punctuation has been silently added. A missing final "s" was supplied in a single instance.

The following substantive change was made near the beginning of the play and can be identified in the body of the text by a grey dotted underline:

[*Goes to door* L. MARY *appears at*
door L, ***support*** WELBURN].

[*Goes to door* L. MARY *appears at door*
L, ***supporting*** WELBURN].

[The end of *The Parachute* (from *Four Short Plays*) by Bell,
Florence Eveleen Eleanore]