

## **Poor Harold!**

BY FLOYD DELL  
A COMEDY

TO DUDLEY FIELD MALONE

CHARACTERS:

Harold  
Isabel  
Mrs. Murphy  
Mrs. Falcington

*A room in Washington Square South. By the light of a candle, a young man in tousled hair and dressing gown is writing furiously at a little table. A clock within strikes seven.*

*A door at the back opens, and a young woman looks in, sleepily. She frowns. The young man looks up guiltily.*

SHE. What are you doing?

HE. *(innocently)* Writing.

SHE. So I see. *(She comes in, and sits down. It may be remarked that a woman's morning appearance, in dishabille, is a severe test of both looks and character; she passes that test triumphantly. She looks at the young man, and asks)--*Poetry?

HE. *(hesitatingly)* No....

SHE. *(continues to look inquiry).*

HE. *(finally)* A letter....

SHE. *(inflexibly)--*To whom?

HE. *(defiantly)* To my wife!

SHE. Oh! That's all right. I thought perhaps you were writing to your father.

HE. (*bitterly*) My father! Why should I write to my father? Isn't it enough that I have broken his heart and brought disgrace upon him in his old age--

SHE. Disgrace? Nonsense! Anybody might be named as a co-respondent in a divorce case.

HE. Not in Evanston, Illinois. Not when you are the local feature of a notorious Chicago scandal. Not when your letters to the lady are published in the newspapers.--Oh, those letters!

SHE. Were they such incriminating letters, Harold?

HAROLD. Incriminating? How can you ask that, Isabel? They were perfectly innocent letters, such as any gentleman poet might write to any lady poetess. How was I to know that a rather plain-featured woman I sat next to at a Poetry Dinner in Chicago was conducting a dozen love-affairs? How was I to know that my expressions of literary regard would look like love-letters to her long-suffering husband? That's the irony of it: I'm perfectly blameless. God knows I couldn't have been anything else, with her. But I've always *been* blameless--in all the seven years of my marriage, I never even kissed another woman. And then to have this happen! Scandal, disgrace, the talk of all Evanston! Disowned by my father, repudiated by my wife, ostracized by my friends, cast forth into outer darkness, and dropped naked and penniless into Greenwich Village!

ISABEL. (*laughing*) Oh, not exactly naked, Harold!

HAROLD. One suit! And that--(*he throws off his dressing gown*) evening clothes! I might as well be naked--I can't go anywhere in the daytime. I tell you I'm not used to this. One week ago I had a house, a motor car, a wife, a position in my father's law-office, a place in society--

ISABEL. That's just it--that's why I was afraid you were writing to your father. He'd send you money, of course. But if you ask him for it,

I'll never speak to you again. And as for clothes, you know there's a suit of clothes in there,--a perfectly good suit, too, and I think you're an idiot not to put it on.

HAROLD. Yes. One of Jim's old suits.

ISABEL. Well, what if it is? It would fit you perfectly.

HAROLD. Oh, Isabel! Can't you *see*?

ISABEL. No, I can't see. If Jim is generous enough to give you a suit of clothes--

HAROLD. Yes. That's just it. Jim's girl--Jim's clothes--! Well-- (*sullenly*)--I think Jim's generosity has gone far enough. I'll be damned if I'll take his clothes.

ISABEL. You're perfectly disgusting. If you weren't a silly poet and didn't know any better--Yes, Harold Falcington, for a nice boy as you are in most ways, you have the most antiquated and offensive ideas about women! *Jim* knows better than to have ever considered me his property....

HAROLD. (*taken aback by her fierceness*) Good heavens, Isabel, I didn't mean *that*!

ISABEL. Yes, you did, Harold; but I'm glad you're sorry. It's a good thing you were thrown out of Evanston, Illinois. It's a good thing you came to Greenwich Village. And it's a good thing that I've a strong maternal instinct. If you'll just get the idea out of your head that you're a ruined man and a lost soul because you've been talked about and have lost your job in your father's office, and if you'll just stop thinking that poor dear innocent Greenwich Village is a sink of iniquity and that I'm a wicked woman--

HAROLD. Isabel! I never said you were a wicked woman! I never thought such a thing!

ISABEL. But you think you're a wicked man; and so it comes to the same thing. Look! it's broad daylight. (*She goes to the window, and*

*opens the curtains.*) Put out that candle, and read me the letter you've written to your wife.

*She comes back, blows out the candle herself, and sits down comfortably opposite him.*

HAROLD. No, I can't.

ISABEL. Why not? You've read me all the others. Is this just like them? (*Teasingly*)--"Dear Gertrude: I know you will not believe me when I say that I have been the victim of a monstrous injustice, but nevertheless it is true. It has all been a hideous mistake." That's the preamble. Then a regular lawyer's brief, arguing the case--ten pages. Then a wild, passionate appeal for her to forget and forgive. I know how it goes. You've written one every night. This is the seventh.

HAROLD. This one is different.

ISABEL. Good. What does it say?

HAROLD. It says that I am in love with you.

ISABEL. Don't prevaricate, Harold! It says you are now hopelessly in the clutches of a vampire--doesn't it?

HAROLD. (*desperately*) No!

ISABEL. (*warningly*) Harold! The truth!

HAROLD. (*weakening*) Well--

ISABEL. I knew it! That's what you would say. You've told her it's no use to forgive you now.

HAROLD. Yes--I did say that--I don't want her to forgive me, now. I am reconciled to my fate.

ISABEL. Ah--but I'm afraid it's too late, now!

HAROLD. What do you mean?

ISABEL. I mean that your other letters will have done their work. Your wife by this time has been convinced of your innocence--she realizes that she has acted rashly--she is ready to forgive you. And she is probably at this moment on her way to New York to tell you so, and take you back home!

HAROLD. (*frightened*) No!

ISABEL. Yes! If she is not already here and looking for you....

HAROLD. Impossible!

ISABEL. Those letters were very convincing, Harold!

HAROLD. (*shaking his head*) Not in the face of the universal belief of all Evanston in my guilt.

ISABEL. Then she has forgiven you anyway.

HAROLD. (*sadly*) You do not know her.

ISABEL. Don't I? No, Harold, this is to be our last breakfast together. You wouldn't have her walk in on us, would you?--And that reminds me. We're out of coffee. You must go and get some while I dress. And go to the little French bakery for some brioches.

HAROLD. In these clothes?

ISABEL. Or Jim's. Just as you like.

HAROLD. Very well. I shall go as I am. (*Gloomily*) After all, I don't know why I should mind one more farcical touch to my situation. A grown man that doesn't know how to earn his living--

ISABEL. I've suggested several ways.

HAROLD. Yes, acting! No. I'd rather starve.

ISABEL. There are other alternatives.

HAROLD. Yes. Looking over the scientific magazines and finding out about new inventions, and writing little pieces about them and selling that to other magazines!

ISABEL. Why not?

HAROLD. A pretty job for a poet! What do *I* know about machinery?

ISABEL. All the poets I know pay their rent that way. And they none of them know anything about machinery.

HAROLD. All right. I'm in a crazy world. Everything's topsy-turvy. Even the streets have gone insane. They wind and twist until they cross their own tracks. I *know* I'll get lost looking for that French bakery. (*He goes to the door.*) Greenwich Village! My God!

*He goes out. She, after a moment, goes into the back room. The charwoman enters, and commences to clean up the place. Isabel comes back, partly clothed and with the rest of her things on her arm, and finishes her toilet in front of the mirror. A sort of conversation ensues.*

THE CHARWOMAN. A grand day it's going to be.

ISABEL. (*after a pause*)--Do you think I'm a bad woman, Mrs. Murphy?

MRS. MURPHY. Come, now, it's not a fair question, and me workin' for you. I've no call to be criticizin' the way you do behave. It's my business to be cleanin' up the place, and if 'tis a nest of paganism, sure 'tis not for my own soul to answer for it at the Judgment Day. And a blessed thought it is, too, that they that follow after the lusts of the flesh must go to hell, or else who knows what a poor soul like me would do sometimes, what with seein' the carryin'-s-on that one does see. But I'd not be breathin' a word against a nice young lady like yourself.

ISABEL. What do you think of Mr. Falcington?

MRS. MURPHY. Well, as my sister that's dead in Ireland used to say, and we two girls together, "Sure," she said, "there's no accountin' for tastes," she said. And you with a fine grand man the like of Mr. Jim, to be takin' up with a lost sheep like this one. But I'd not be sayin' a word against him, for it's a pretty boy he is, to be sure. Well, there's a Last Day comin' for us all, and the sooner the better, the way the young do be shiftin' and changin' as the fancy takes them. I say nothin' at all, nothin' at all--but if you've a quarrel had with Mr. Jim, why don't you make it up with him?

ISABEL. But Jim and I aren't married either, you know.

MRS. MURPHY. It's too soft you are, that's why. You take no for an answer, as a girl shouldn't. Let you keep at him long enough, and he'll give in. Sure the youth of this generation have no regard for their proper rights. Never was a man yet that couldn't be come around, if he was taken in his weakness. A silk dress or a wedding ring or shoes for the baby, it's all the same--they have to be coaxed twice for every one thing they do. It's the nature of the beast, so it is, God help us. Well I remember how my sister that's dead in Ireland used to say, and we girls together, "Sure," says she, "it's woman's place to ask," says she, "and man's to refuse," says she, "and woman's to ask again," says she. Widow that I am this ten year, I could tell you some things now-- but I'll not be sayin' a word.

ISABEL. Do I look all right?

MRS. MURPHY. It's pretty as a flower you look, Miss. And I'd not be askin' questions, for it's none of my business at all, but who are you fixin' yourself up for to-day, if you know yourself?

ISABEL. What difference does it make? I go into rehearsal next week, and there's a manager that will want to make love to me, and he's fat, and I'll get to hate and loathe the sight of male mankind--and this is my last week to enjoy myself! (*She goes to the door at the back.*) Besides, Jim may have another girl by this time, or Mr. Falcington's wife may come.

*She goes into the inner room.*

MRS. MURPHY. His wife--God help us!

*She shakes her head, and starts to go out.*

*There is a knock. She opens the door, and admits a woman in a travelling suit.*

THE WOMAN. Is Mr. Falcington here?

MRS. MURPHY. (*disingenuously*) There's a party of that name on the east side of the Square if I'm not mistaken, ma'am, in the Benedick, bachelor apartments like--'tis there you might inquire.

THE WOMAN. There's no Mr. Falcington here?

MRS. MURPHY. On another floor, maybe. 'Tis a lady lives here.

*The woman turns to go.*

ISABEL. (*within*) Who is asking for Mr. Falcington?

THE WOMAN. I am Mrs. Falcington,--his wife.

ISABEL. (*at the inner door*) Oh!

MRS. FALCINGTON. And you are Isabel Summers?

ISABEL. Yes.

MRS. MURPHY. The Lord have mercy!

*She escapes.*

ISABEL. Sit down.

MRS. FALCINGTON. Thank you. I will. (*She does so.*) Harold is out?

ISABEL. Yes. (*A pause*) Getting brioches for breakfast. (*A pause*) You look tired. Won't you have some coffee? It's ready.



MRS. FALCINGTON. Thank you. Yes.

*Both the women give an impression of timid courage.*

ISABEL. (*pouring the coffee*) He ought to be back soon. He talked of getting lost in the crooked streets of the Village, and I'm afraid that's what has happened to him.

MRS. FALCINGTON. Yes. Harold is all at sea in a strange place.

*She takes the coffee and sips it.*

ISABEL. Tell me--how did you know?

MRS. FALCINGTON. (*smiling*) Private detectives.

ISABEL. (*a little shocked*) Oh!

MRS. FALCINGTON. Please don't misunderstand me. I'm not going to make any trouble.... But I did want to know what became of him.

ISABEL. Yes ... naturally.

MRS. FALCINGTON. And then--you see, I wanted to know what you were like; and--and whether he was happy with you. I don't think detectives are very intelligent. They couldn't get it into their heads that I wanted the truth. They gave me a--a very lurid account of--of you. And of course Harold's letters gave me no help. So I came down to see for myself.

ISABEL. (*rising*) Mrs. Falcington: here is a letter that Harold was writing this morning. It tells about me--and I fancy you won't find it so essentially different from the detectives' account. Read it and see.

MRS. FALCINGTON. (*reading the letter*) He says he loves you.

ISABEL. In those words?

MRS. FALCINGTON. No--he says he is involved in a strange and sudden infatuation. But it means the same thing.

ISABEL. No it doesn't. He isn't in love with me. I'll tell you straight--he's in love with *you*.

MRS. FALCINGTON. How do you know?

ISABEL. From the letters he wrote you.

MRS. FALCINGTON. Oh! he showed them to you, did he? How like him!

ISABEL. But he *is* in love with you. And he *isn't* happy with me.

MRS. FALCINGTON. Why not?

ISABEL. He hates this kind of life. He wants order, regularity, stability, comfort, ease, the respect of the community----

MRS. FALCINGTON. He used to tell me all those things bored him to death.

ISABEL. (*pleading*) You *must* take him back!

MRS. FALCINGTON. Don't you want him?

ISABEL. Well--(*she laughs in embarrassment*)--Not that bad!

MRS. FALCINGTON. His father will make him an allowance to live on.

ISABEL. I've told him I would never speak to him again if he took it.

MRS. FALCINGTON. You don't expect him to *work*, do you?

ISABEL. Yes--if he has anything to do with me.

MRS. FALCINGTON. Then if you can make him do that, by all means take charge of his destinies!

ISABEL. But--but--that's not the point. He loves you. He wants to go back. He didn't do any of those things he was accused of, you know.

MRS. FALCINGTON. Did he tell you that?

ISABEL. Yes.

MRS. FALCINGTON. Well--he told a story. (*Isabel is shocked.*) Oh, there's no doubt about it. (*Her tone leaves none.*)

ISABEL. But she was ugly!

MRS. FALCINGTON. Did he tell you that?

ISABEL. Yes! Wasn't she?

MRS. FALCINGTON. There *are* handsome poetesses--a few--and this was one of them. She is one of the most beautiful women in Chicago.

ISABEL. Then he lied....

MRS. FALCINGTON. Oh, yes--of course. He just can't help it. Any more than he can help making love----

ISABEL. You mean this is not the first----

MRS. FALCINGTON. In the seven years of our marriage, he has made love to every pretty woman he came across.

ISABEL. (*sharply*) Why did you stand for it?

MRS. FALCINGTON. Because I was a fool. And because he is a child.

ISABEL. (*almost pleadingly*) He *can* write poetry, can't he?

MRS. FALCINGTON. Yes. Yes! Oh, yes!

ISABEL. Then--I suppose--it's all right. But I'm angry at myself, just the same, for being taken in.

MRS. FALCINGTON. It's strange.... You feel humiliated at having been made a fool of for seven days. I've been made a fool of for seven years, and I've never realized that I had a right to feel ashamed.

ISABEL. That's the difference between Greenwich Village and Evanston, Illinois.

MRS. FALCINGTON. Yes. But when I go back I shall lose the sense of it. I'll think I'm an injured woman because he was unfaithful to me, or because he brought scandal upon the family, or something like that. Now I realize that it's none of those things. It's--it's just an offence against--my human dignity. I've been treated like--like an inferior. But why shouldn't I be treated like an inferior? I *am* an inferior. When I go back to Evanston, and take up grass-widowhood and the burden of living down the family scandal, and sit and twiddle my thumbs in a big house, and have my maiden aunt come to live with me----

ISABEL. But why should you do that? If that's what it means to go back to Evanston, don't go! Stay here!

MRS. FALCINGTON. But--what could I do?

ISABEL. Do? Why--why--go on the stage!

MRS. FALCINGTON. (*rising*) Are you in earnest?

ISABEL. Look here. You've a good voice, and you're intelligent. That's enough to start with. I don't know whether you can act or not--but you'll find out. And if you can't act, you'll do something else. Your people will stake you?--give you an allowance, I mean?

MRS. FALCINGTON. To go on the stage with? Never. But I've a small income of my own. Only about a hundred a month. Would that do?

ISABEL. Do? Yes, that will do very well! And now it's my turn to ask you--are *you* in earnest? Because I am.

MRS. FALCINGTON. You are the first human being who even suggested to me that I could do anything. I've wanted to do something, but I couldn't even think of it as possible. It *wasn't* possible in Evanston. And as for *acting*, I kept that dream fast locked at the very bottom of my heart, for fear if I brought it out it would be shattered by polite laughter--

ISABEL. You'll have to expose that dream to worse things than polite laughter, my dear.

MRS. FALCINGTON. I can, now. It won't get hurt. I'm free now to take care of my dream--to fight for it--to make it come true. You have set me free.--I'm going to go and get a room--*now!*

ISABEL. Let me go with you and help you find one!

MRS. FALCINGTON. And to-morrow--

ISABEL. To-morrow--

*Harold enters. He stops short in the doorway, and drops the brioches. He looks at one woman, then at the other. Suddenly he goes between them with arms outspread as though to keep the peace.*

HAROLD. No! no! I am not worthy of either of you! (*They stare at him, bewildered. He goes on*)--Why should you struggle over me? Do not hate each other! For my sake, be friends! Ah, God, that this tragic meeting should have happened! And now I must decide between you.... (*He goes to Mrs. Falcington and throws himself on his knees before her.*) Forgive and forget! Come back with me to Evanston!

MRS. FALCINGTON (*over his head to Isabel*) The perfect egotist!

*The curtain falls, and then rises again for a moment. Harold is now on his knees to Isabel.*

HAROLD. Marry me!

ISABEL. Harold! You have not been all this time getting brioches. I smell--heliotrope!

*The curtain rises and falls several times, showing Harold on his knees alternately to the two women, who look at each other above his head, paying no attention to him.*