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Dramatic Publishing

CIRCLES OF GRACE

A Play in Two Acts

by

PAUL NICHOLAS MASON



Dramatic Publishing

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(CIRCLES OF GRACE)

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to Michael, my father

CIRCLES OF GRACE

A Play in Two Acts
For 6 Men, 2 Women and 1 Girl

CHARACTERS

DUGGERY	.....	age sixty-five
ALAN	.....	his nephew
ESMÉ	.....	Duggery's granddaughter
SHARON	.....	Esmé's governess
MISS DECEMBER	.....	the gardener
BONHOFFER	.....	a captain in the Home Guard
SAZLO	.....	an officer in the occupying army
GAZA	.....	an officer in the occupying army
SOLDIER	.....	with the occupying army

The play is set in an imaginary island nation. It should have the feel of rural England in the early 1950s—though the reader will find a good many anachronisms if this sense of period is approached too piously. We are, figuratively, just down the road from Enid Bagnold's *The Chalk Garden*.

The language spoken by the occupying army is invented. It should sound harsh and guttural.

ACT ONE

AT RISE: *The living room of James Duggery's country house. DUGGERY enters, collects a newspaper from a small table, then goes to the French windows opening on the garden. He stands looking out. After a moment or two, he moves to an armchair, settles himself, opens his paper, and begins to read. ALAN BURGESS enters.*

ALAN. Good morning, Uncle.

DUGGERY. Good morning.

ALAN (*moves listlessly to the windows*). Anything in the paper?

DUGGERY. Rumours of war.

ALAN. Very unlikely. (*ALAN goes to the other armchair and throws himself down.*)

DUGGERY. On the contrary, I think it's very likely. I know you're not interested in my opinion, but I'm going to give it to you all the same. I think it's your duty to enlist.

ALAN. My duty?

DUGGERY. Your duty, yes.

ALAN. What an old-fashioned word that is, Uncle. It conjures up images of faithful widows and thank you letters and Sunday morning services.

DUGGERY. There are worse images.

ALAN. But they're so *boring*, and dear old Queen Vicki is long dead. If you're so keen on this war business, why don't *you* enlist?

DUGGERY. Because they wouldn't take me! I am sixty-five years old.

ALAN. You're a very vigorous sixty-five, Uncle.

DUGGERY. I've done my duty. I went when my country called. And you enjoy the fruits of freedom because of it.

ALAN. O, please—

DUGGERY. The fruits of freedom, sir! Can you dispute it? Are you obstructed in your debaucheries? You eat the fruits of freedom every day.

ALAN. I heard you.

DUGGERY. I hope you heard me.

ALAN. But what's the point of it, really? If we're invaded, we're invaded, and my efforts will mean nothing one way or the other.

DUGGERY. In my own youth we took the view that a man should at least walk like a man.

ALAN. And you're hoping that a little time in uniform would make a man of me?

DUGGERY. It couldn't hurt.

ALAN. Not only could it hurt, it could kill me. No, Uncle: I have no military training, I don't believe in hopeless causes, and loud noises unnerve me. I'd be a menace and a liability to my own side. Take my word for it, it's my patriotic duty *not* to volunteer. But I shall knit scarves and mittens for the troops if that will make you happier.

DUGGERY. You amaze me.

ALAN. Besides, I don't think there will be war. I think you're getting yourself all hot and bothered unnecessarily. These things blow over, you know. We have a fresh international crisis every week. Your paper just loves making a fuss. Relax.

DUGGERY. I wish I could share your optimism.

ALAN. Well, you can. It's free.

DUGGERY. That's where you're wrong. Everything you enjoy is dearly bought.

(SHARON enters.)

SHARON. James, there's a gentleman at the front door asking to speak with you.

DUGGERY. Who is he?

SHARON. He says his name is Bonhoffer. Captain Bonhoffer. He's wearing a Home Guard badge.

ALAN. O, God, a patriot.

DUGGERY. Please show him in, Sharon. And perhaps you could bring us tea.

ALAN. Or gin.

DUGGERY. No, henceforth alcohol is rationed. Thank you, Sharon. *(SHARON goes.)*

ALAN. I'm amazed you let her call you James.

DUGGERY. Sharon is not an ordinary domestic.

ALAN. What is she, then?

DUGGERY. She is Esmé's governess, and she is kind enough to help out in other ways from time to time. I will not have her taken for granted, Alan. This is not a hotel. You are welcome to seek one out.

ALAN. No, Uncle, there's nothing quite like lodging in the bosom of one's family.

(SHARON returns, with CAPTAIN BONHOFFER following.)

SHARON. Captain Bonhoffer.

DUGGERY *(rising)*. Thank you, Sharon. Captain Bonhoffer, I am James Duggery, and this is my nephew, Alan Burgess.

BONHOFFER (*shaking hands*). How do you do, sir? (*Nodding at ALAN, who has remained seated.*) Mr. Burgess. (*ALAN waves.*)

DUGGERY. What can we do for you, Captain? Please do sit down.

BONHOFFER. I'm afraid I'm here to impose. The Home Guard Office has ordered several thousand of us into the countryside to serve as a sort of human early warning system in the event of invasion. I must formally request that you allow me to pitch a tent on your property.

ALAN. Request?

BONHOFFER. Request.

DUGGERY. Is it just yourself, Captain Bonhoffer?

BONHOFFER. Yes. Just me. My nearest colleague is posted in the village.

DUGGERY. Then I won't hear of you pitching a tent. We have a spare bedroom, and you are most welcome to make use of it for as long as may be necessary.

BONHOFFER. That's very kind, but I'm quite prepared—

DUGGERY. No, no, please—I insist. It will be a pleasure to have you stay with us.

BONHOFFER (*bowing slightly*). I thank you for your kindness.

DUGGERY. But what news do you have, Captain? Do you know anything different from what the newspapers and the radio are saying?

BONHOFFER. I know only that the government expects an invasion within the next several days. My own commander spoke of it as a certainty.

ALAN. Just an excuse for military exercises.

BONHOFFER. I don't think so, Mr. Burgess.

ALAN. I'm sure of it. The military's always looking for a chance to intimidate people with a show of strength.

BONHOFFER. I hope that mine is not too threatening a presence.

DUGGERY. My nephew's talking nonsense, Captain; don't take any notice of him. May I ask what you do in civilian life?

BONHOFFER. I'm a minister, sir.

ALAN. O, really? What church?

BONHOFFER. Lutheran.

ALAN. O, yes: *Hier stehe ich*, and all that. All very medieval.

DUGGERY (*dryly*). Mr. Burgess is something of an authority on ecclesiastical affairs, Captain. He has some remarkable views on the resurrection. But I must introduce the rest of my household. Here comes the gardener.

(*MISS DECEMBER enters through the French windows.*)

DUGGERY. Miss December, my dear, I should like to introduce Captain Bonhoffer of the Home Guard. The Captain will be staying with us for the next little while.

MISS DECEMBER. I'm pleased to meet you, Captain.

BONHOFFER. Miss December.

DUGGERY. Miss December has a great gift for making things grow. Down the road a way is a property where the ground's mostly chalk—hadn't grown anything for years and years, possibly centuries. Miss December had the place blooming with azaleas and irises and bluebells and snapdragons a month after she began work. A miracle!

BONHOFFER. That does sound a gift.

ALAN. I don't like flowers. They attract insects.

MISS DECEMBER. Flowers are silent hymns.

ALAN. O, God.

DUGGERY. Are you fond of hymns, Captain?

BONHOFFER. Very much. When someone else is singing them.

DUGGERY. We must all sing this evening. This piano doesn't get enough use. Have you something fresh for our supper, Margot?

MISS DECEMBER. I took some zucchini and onions round to the kitchen. I hope you like vegetables, Captain. We don't have much meat at our table.

BONHOFFER. I am particularly fond of zucchini and onions. But, Miss December, yours is a very unusual name. Do you mind my asking if you know what its origins are?

MISS DECEMBER. The name originated with me, Captain. Twelve years ago I committed the indiscretion of posing nude for a men's magazine. I was the December pin-up. I keep the name to remind me of my youthful folly.

BONHOFFER. I'm sorry, I—

MISS DECEMBER. Please don't apologise. It's only natural that you should wonder.

ALAN. I'll lend you the magazine, if you like.

MISS DECEMBER. If Mr. Burgess has a copy, he must keep it as a kind of curiosity, Captain. He prefers cucumbers to flowers.

ALAN. This is an impertinent gardener, Uncle.

DUGGERY. Miss December is not paid to be submissive. She is paid to look after the garden—which she does admirably.

ALAN. Her life story is a sort of bonus, then, is it?

DUGGERY. This is a troubled household, Captain Bonhoffer. But you have not yet met everyone. The woman who showed you in is the governess of my ward, Esmé. Esmé Jessica.

MISS DECEMBER. A beautiful child!

ALAN. A centrefold in training.

MISS DECEMBER. Never!

(*ESMÉ JESSICA enters.*)

ESMÉ. Never what?

MISS DECEMBER. Never for you the squalor of Hefner's studios!

ALAN. Hey ho, the gardener is reminiscing again.

DUGGERY. Hold your tongue, Alan. (*To ESMÉ.*) Come, my darling, and meet our guest. This is Captain Bonhoffer of the Home Guard. Captain Bonhoffer, Esmé Jessica Duggery.

ESMÉ (*curtseying*). Good morning, Captain.

BONHOFFER. It's a pleasure to meet you, Esmé.

ESMÉ. Do you like flowers?

BONHOFFER. Flowers are silent hymns.

ESMÉ. Miss December, here is Mr. Right! I shall make you up a basket of morning glory for your bedroom, Captain.

BONHOFFER. Thank you.

ESMÉ. Grandfather, he is so gentle he cannot be a real soldier.

DUGGERY. Captain Bonhoffer is a minister in civilian life.

ESMÉ. A priest?

DUGGERY. Well, a Lutheran priest.

ESMÉ. Does he know we're Catholic?

DUGGERY. He does now.

ESMÉ (*to BONHOFFER*). Do you mind Catholics?

BONHOFFER. I like Catholics very much.

ALAN. What a very liberal Lutheran. But I should tell you, Bonhoffer, that some of us are more lapsed than Catholic. And the gardener is a Druid priestess.

BONHOFFER. Then we shall have a great deal to talk about, Miss December.

MISS DECEMBER. Provided you don't mind weeding while we talk. A garden as large as this one is a full-time job.

ALAN. I have always favoured putting the clergy to work. Visiting the sick and burying the dead strike me as exercises in a kind of perverted voyeurism.

MISS DECEMBER. Mr. Burgess is a specialist in such matters.

(SHARON enters, wheeling a tea trolley.)

DUGGERY. Tea, thank God. Esmé, would you carry cups for Sharon?

ESMÉ. Of course, Grandfather. *(The tea-serving ceremony unfolds.)*

ALAN. So, Captain, what will you do if we are invaded?

BONHOFFER. I don't know.

ALAN. Don't know?

BONHOFFER. I'm afraid not. At least, I don't know what I'm to do after I've telephoned my headquarters to report that an invasion is in progress.

ALAN. You mean you haven't got a gun?

BONHOFFER. No, there weren't enough rifles to go round, so we've been training with broomsticks. When it was decided to send some of us into the countryside, they gave guns only to those who were prepared to use them.

ALAN. Aren't you?

BONHOFFER. I could not.

ESMÉ. Of course not. I knew you weren't a real soldier.

BONHOFFER. Well, you were right. In fact I volunteered for the medical corps, but they wouldn't take me.

ALAN. Why not?

BONHOFFER. I have no medical training.

ALAN. Why even bother signing up?

BONHOFFER. A sense of duty. A desire to help. This country means something to me.

ALAN. And because it's one way for a poor cleric to get a cheap holiday in the country?

DUGGERY. I will not tolerate much more, Alan. It's only the memory of my dear sister, God rest her soul, that makes you welcome at all.

ALAN. Just calling a spade a spade, Uncle. (*A sound as of distant thunder.*)

ESMÉ. Thunder!

DUGGERY. Were thunderstorms forecast, Sharon?

SHARON. Not thunderstorms, no, but mists and showers and sudden rainbows; a red sky in the evening, a cool clear night.

DUGGERY. And for tomorrow?

SHARON. They were unsure.

DUGGERY. Well, that was remarkably honest of them.

ESMÉ. Miss December, what will Pascal do if it rains?

MISS DECEMBER. Pascal will be fine. He'll take shelter under a bush, or behind the stone wall.

ESMÉ. Doesn't he mind the rain?

MISS DECEMBER. He enjoys the rain. Sometimes, when it's warm, he dances in it.

BONHOFFER. Who is Pascal?

ESMÉ. Pascal is a unicorn. He lives in the garden.

BONHOFFER. It must be a very special garden.

ESMÉ. O, it is: it's a meditation.

BONHOFFER. How so?

ESMÉ. It's inspired by a poem. Isn't it, Miss December?

MISS DECEMBER (*quoting*). The world is charged with the grandeur of God.

ALAN. *So precious.*

DUGGERY. Well, if it is to rain, our guest must see the garden today. Come, Captain, Miss December will give us a guided tour. You can bring your tea with you.

BONHOFFER. Shall we see the unicorn?

MISS DECEMBER. Not tonight, I think. He'll be shy of you. Tomorrow, perhaps. From a distance.

ESMÉ. I'll lead the way!

ALAN. I think I'll stay behind. I have so much to do.

MISS DECEMBER. Don't strain yourself, Mr. Burgess.

ESMÉ. See you later, Uncle Alan! (*Movement. Freeze. Black-out.*)