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*Dramatic Publishing*

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A One-Act Mystery

# **An Open and Shut Case**

By  
**JOHN MATTERA**



**THE DRAMATIC PUBLISHING COMPANY**

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(AN OPEN AND SHUT CASE)

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AN OPEN AND SHUT CASE  
*A Play In One Act*  
For Five Men and Five Women

C H A R A C T E R S

- Elizabeth Benton. . . . . a woman in her sixties  
Harold (Harry) Benton . . . . . her husband, in his thirties  
Inga Slayton. . . . . the cook  
Lisa LaRouche . . . . . the housekeeper  
Beth Flinn . . . . . the nurse/companion  
Zachary Flood . . . . . the groundskeeper  
Officer Riddle. . . . . a plain clothes policeman  
Officer Short . . . . . a plain clothes policeman  
The Conscience of Elizabeth Benton  
The Conscience of Harold Benton

TIME: The Present

PLACE: The living room in the plush home of the Benton's

## PRODUCTION NOTES

The entire action of this play takes place in the living room of Elizabeth and Harold Benton. It is a tastefully furnished room with an over-stuffed chair placed left of a couch. To the left of the chair is an end table with a lamp on it. At far stage right is another small table with a telephone on it. (It is important that this table be near a leg or other curtain.)

## AN OPEN AND SHUT CASE

SCENE: The living room in the plush home of Mr. and Mrs. Harold Benton.

AS LIGHTS DIM UP: MRS. ELIZABETH BENTON is seated in a wheelchair at L. Behind the wheelchair stands MR. HAROLD BENTON, Elizabeth's husband. He is massaging his wife's neck.

At stage R [which is in near darkness] there is also a wheelchair with a woman seated in it and a man standing behind it. [These characters represent the consciences of Mr. and Mrs. Benton.] Their faces are made up with clown white, as are their hands. They are clad in black body suits.

ELIZABETH. Lower, dear. Harder now. Mmmmm. Just a little harder. (HAROLD puts his hands around her neck as if to strangle her.) Not that hard, dear. (She coughs.) Harold! Harold, you're choking me! (HAROLD loosens his grip.) You really must be more careful, Harold.

HAROLD. Yes, dear.

ELIZABETH. Harold, do you remember Laura Putnam?

HAROLD. No, dear.

ELIZABETH. It's been years since I've seen her. I wonder how she's looking these days.

HAROLD. Not very well, I should think, dear.

ELIZABETH. Now, why do you say that, Harold?

HAROLD. Because she's been dead over ten years, dear. She was dead long before we were even married. We've gone through this same discussion at least a dozen times before.

ELIZABETH. Yes, that's right. My, my, my, where has my memory gone to? Harold, would you be so good as to get me a cup of tea? It would warm me so.

HAROLD (stops massaging). Yes, dear. (He exits.)

ELIZABETH (talking to herself). In high school, Laura and I had so much fun. So much fun. We were young and alive then. I remember when we were just kids we went to a dance. I couldn't have been more than sixteen years old and Laura was only two years older than me. How we would dance all night until the sun was nearly up. We would dance and dance, then dance some more. But all that's gone now. Gone. Dead and gone. And Laura's gone, too. Dear, dear Laura. Dead and gone. Oh, how I would like to see her again. What I wouldn't give to see her one last time. (The WOMAN seated in the wheelchair at R speaks.)

WOMAN. You're old, Elizabeth. Old and useless. You'll see your dear old friend Laura soon enough. You know that, but you can't accept it, Elizabeth. You can't accept it. You'll also join your first husband, Barney. How could you expect Harold to fill Barney's shoes? Why, he's little more than a boy.

(HAROLD re-enters the room. He puts the tea tray on the table.)

HAROLD. Here's your tea, dear. Nice and warm to soothe your . . . to soothe you.

ELIZABETH. To soothe my old bones. That's what you were going to say, wasn't it, Harold? Wasn't it?

HAROLD. Don't be silly, dear. You're still a young woman. Age is a state of mind. You're as young as you feel, and that's a fact.

ELIZABETH. But I feel very old, Harold.

HAROLD. Nonsense. You have many more good years

ahead of you. Years to enjoy the many pleasures that life affords.

ELIZABETH. Oh, stop it, Harold. You sound like you're reading cue cards.

HAROLD. But Eliz —

ELIZABETH. Even if I did have years ahead of me, what good is being alive when all I can do is sit in this awful wheelchair day after day?

HAROLD. There are plenty of things you can do, even from a wheelchair.

ELIZABETH. Like what?

HAROLD (hesitating). Like . . . like reading a good book.

ELIZABETH. And getting lost in the pages of the story?

HAROLD. Or . . . or . . .

ELIZABETH. Or what, Harold? Or what! Watching the TV perhaps, or how about a stroll around town — of course, accomplished by reading the newspaper, or better yet, letting my fingers do the walking through the yellow pages. Or, how about a jaunt through the woods of New England courtesy of Robert Frost . . .

HAROLD. Self-pity will do you no good, Elizabeth.

ELIZABETH. Who else is there to pity me besides myself, Harold? You?

HAROLD. No. I've never pitied you and I never will. There's much too much you have to be thankful for. If you weren't so bitter, you could lead a happy, productive life.

ELIZABETH. Turn it off, will you please, Harold? (Sarcastically.) A happy, productive life. Two happiness pills, please. Yes, the blue ones will do fine. And a glass of productiveness to wash them down. Black label. A charming picture, don't you agree? A crippled old woman, drugged and passed out in her wheelchair. Temporarily at liberty to escape her confinement and find comfort in her euphoric dreams, the only place where she really can be productive. In her dreams she can walk and dance and



even perform the amazing feat of walking to the bathroom by herself. And she can take a bath all by herself. And she can step into the bathtub all by herself.

**HAROLD.** Stop it, Elizabeth. Stop torturing yourself. What good does it do?

**ELIZABETH.** Such untold luxuries as taking a bath. (Pause.) Temporarily free. Until the effect of the pills wears off. Then I'm back in my old chrome and vinyl prison on wheels. There's only one time I'll be truly free, Harold — when I'm dead and in the ground. (**HAROLD** lifts his hand in anger. They both freeze in position as the **MAN** and **WOMAN** at **R** become animated.)

**MAN.** And that's exactly where you will be, but not soon enough, you old crone. I long to be rid of your endless whimpering once and for all. (Freeze.)

**HAROLD.** I love you, Elizabeth. Isn't that worth something?

**ELIZABETH.** Of course it is, Harold. Of course it is. I'm so lucky to have you, to have a husband like you. I'm sorry, Harold. I'm so sorry. Forgive me for being such a self-indulgent old fool. Say you forgive me, Harold.

**HAROLD.** Certainly I forgive you, dear. (He pours her a cup of tea.) Now here, have some tea. (He hands her the cup.)

**ELIZABETH** (sipping the tea). Oh my, Harold, I'm afraid the tea's gotten cold. Please be a dear and warm it up again for me, won't you, Harold?

**HAROLD** (holding back his anger). Yes, of course I will, Elizabeth. But . . . but first we need to talk. I've been wanting to speak with you for some time . . . I know how you hate the subject, but Elizabeth, I don't see any reason why we can't hire some help. A live-in housekeeper for one and a full-time nurse. They could tend to your needs and offer you companionship. We also need a cook and a man to tend the grounds. And we certainly can afford

them, dear. Frankly, this large house is too much for me to keep up, plus waiting on you . . . not that I mind waiting on you, of course . . . but it takes up all of my time. If I'm not pruning the roses, I'm making the beds or cooking the meals.

ELIZABETH. But you don't have to go out and work at a job, Harold. I've provided you with everything so you'll never have to worry about being a common laborer.

HAROLD. I know, dear. That's just it. I'm . . . I've been reduced to being a puppet — your puppet. You give me money . . . you wind me up and I perform little jobs for you. Elizabeth, don't you see, I am a man, a man, and I need to feel like one.

ELIZABETH. But a housekeeper and a nurse could never be as loving and as caring as you are, dear.

HAROLD. No, and I wouldn't want them to be. I'd still be here to provide you with all the loving and caring you need.

ELIZABETH. I feel so selfish, Harold, but I want you and only you. I love you, Harold.

HAROLD. Then there's only one solution. If you won't let me hire the help needed to keep this place up, we'll have to move to some place smaller. Maybe a condominium or even an apartment.

ELIZABETH. Never! I won't hear of such a thing.

HAROLD. I'm afraid there are no other alternatives. If we stay here, I must have help.

ELIZABETH (long pause). Very well, Harold. Very well. But you must promise me that having others around won't interfere with our lives and separate us in any way.

HAROLD. I promise. (He kisses her on the head. They freeze.)

MAN. You old fool. Now I've got you. You've just dug your own grave. Soon, my darling wife, you *will* be free, and so will I.

WOMAN. Am I that much of a burden to Harold? Of course

I am. How could I be so selfish? He's young and vibrant, and I'm old . . . worn out. Maybe he would be better off without me . . . better off if I were — no, I can't think like that. Harold loves me. If I were gone, it would tear him apart.

HAROLD. I'll go to the agency first thing in the morning and inquire about qualified help. Naturally, I'll accept only the most highly recommended people.

ELIZABETH. I'm tired, Harold. I think I'd like to go to bed now.

HAROLD. Of course, Elizabeth. You must be exhausted. (He wheels her offstage L. Then, from offstage:) Good night, Elizabeth.

MAN. Or should I say good-bye. (Lights dim.)