

Tempest

Productions

The Cavendish Gift

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THE CAVENDISH GIFT

Miss Clements

Mr Darker

Miss Pearson

Mrs Cavendish

SCENE 1

Clements

Miss Pearson has a good heart, Mr Darker. Mr Darker! Are you listening? She has as good a heart as anyone I know.

Darker

So you keep telling me, Miss Clements. But you have to understand that this is wartime. We're all a little different in wartime.

Clements

And she was as good-hearted in the last war as she is in this one. She's the one that got us knitting socks and scarves for the boys at the Front. That was all her doing. And do you know why?

Darker

Why?

Clements

Because she hated the thought of all those young men cold and shivering and feeling like nobody cared. She very much cared. That's the kind of heart she has.

Darker

Miss Clements, I appreciate what you're doing but I am not in need of a character witness for your friend. She's not in the dock. Not yet at any rate. I need you to help me ascertain from her what exactly happened. She might talk to you in a way that she won't to anyone else. We must make our way sensitively.

Clements

Well I'm very glad to hear you say it.

Darker

But all the same, looting is a serious offence. You do understand that we must handle it with some severity. We can't be seen to be making exceptions for anyone, not even unmarried ladies of the parish. Theft is theft.

Clements

I'm shuddering at the thought that Phoebe could do such a thing. It's simply bizarre, Mr Darker. I find myself wanting to laugh out loud.

Darker

I'd appreciate it if you didn't. No levity at all when we speak to her. Do you understand me?

Clements

Look at her, the dear good soul. How nervous she seems, sitting there, waiting to be interviewed. Phoebe Pearson in a police station. I tell you, I might laugh out loud.

Darker

She doesn't seem at all nervous to me. You mature ladies are a formidable lot. It's a wonder Hitler dares bomb you.

Clements

Well he's got a nerve, I'll give him that.

Darker

Shall we approach our subject, Miss Clements?

Clements

Do remember her goodness of heart, Mr Darker, won't you? She knows you're a legal man and she'll be in awe of your mind. She was never the brightest at school but that's surely not a crime.

Darker

Not a crime in the slightest. We are here to ascertain things, that is all. Why won't she let go of the object in her hand? No one can prise it from her. Doesn't she realise that it might possibly land her in jail?

Clements

Phoebe Pearson in jail. Can you see it? Mr Darker! Honestly, can you see it?

Darker

No. I must be frank, I cannot. Let's just get her story and tell them there is no case here. And let us all move on and deal with bigger things. We are only little people, with little lives. We never asked to be a part of world events

[Pause as they approach Miss Pearson]

Now then, Miss Pearson. Here we are. I must thank you for your patience. I've brought your friend Miss Clements. I hope you don't mind.

Clements

Phoebe.

Darker

She assures me that you are not the type to break the law. And I'm inclined to agree with her. We want this all cleared up and sorted out and you sent on your way. Show us what's in your hand.

Pearson

Lilian? You look so old in this half-light.

Clements

We're neither of us spring chickens, my dear.

Pearson

Who is this?

Clements

You know Mr Darker, Phoebe. You know him very well. He's my lawyer. The police have been very kind and said he could talk to you first. As a special favour. He'll be ever so tactful.

Pearson

Does he think I'll fall apart?

Darker

I assure you I don't, Miss Pearson. Your friend here speaks of you as though you are a delicate piece of china, but I know what you unmarried ladies of the parish are like. Stalwarts. Nobody knows that better, let me assure you.

Pearson

Do you want to know what is in my hands?

Darker

I do. It will help us get to the bottom of things.

Pearson

I don't see why. Why does everyone seem to care about it so much?

Darker

Miss Pearson, you must know that in extraordinary times like these, it is essential that the law is upheld. Ordinary little laws that make life tolerable. Bombs are a huge crime against humanity. But that does not mean we can take our eyes off smaller misdemeanours.

Clements

Open your hands, Phoebe dear. Your knuckles are quite white from clinging on.

Pearson

But you'll take it from me.

Darker

If it doesn't belong to you, then yes, we will.

Pearson

Well then, she gave it to me, so there's no problem. There is no crime.

Darker and Clements

Who?

Darker

I shall ask the questions from here on in, if you don't mind, Miss Clements.

Clements

I'm so sorry.

Pearson

They were all very cutting about me at school. Lillian included. They bah-d at me, like I was a sheep.

Clements

That was 40 years ago, Phoebe. I'm not in the habit of making animal noises any more.

Darker

The past is the past, Miss Pearson. We are here to discuss the present.

Pearson

She gave me a present.

Darker

You misunderstand.

Pearson

You misunderstand me!

Clements

Phoebe!

Darker

[Confiding] I really think, Miss Clements, that this might be easier if it's just me and the subject. I've come across this before, this playing to the gallery.

Pearson

What are you whispering about?

Clements

Phoebe, my dear, you're not to be naughty. This is very serious. You've heard of looting?

Pearson

Well of course I've heard of it. It's vile. It's awful. People should be punished.

Clements

Well that's why we need to know where you got that... that thing in your hand. You see it's very valuable.

Pearson

You think I stole it?

Darker

Please, ladies. There is a process to follow here. I must ask you, Miss Clements, to refrain from putting direct questions to the subject. You're running way ahead of everything.

Clements

I'm merely trying to be of service, Mr Darker. I just thought I'd help get to nub of things. I mean, what's the point of dithering?

Darker

Legal process is not dithering. I'm surprised you should see it that way. Evidence must unfold. Every path must be followed, every corner looked around. The subject must take us on the journey, not we her.

Clements

I'm sorry, I'm sure.

Pearson

He's very forward with you, Lillian.

Clements

Isn't he!

Pearson

I mean to say, who exactly is the suspect here?

Darker

Please! Please, let's not use the term *suspect*. I'm taking every care to be both prudent and meticulous. I think that should apply all around.

Pearson

I don't understand him. Lillian, I'm afraid I don't. What does he want from me?

Darker

Now, Miss Pearson, I must introduce a new name to the proceedings. I want you to think very carefully when I say it. Are you ready?

Pearson

What does he want from me, Lillian?

Darker

Are you listening to me?

Clements

Please listen to Mr Darker, Phoebe.

Darker

Mrs Emma Cavendish. Do you know that name?

Pearson

Who's that then?

Clements

Oh Phoebe! You know who that is. Margaret Cassidy's eldest. Lives on Harper Street. **[Pause.]** Or *lived*, at any rate.

Darker

Now this is becoming exasperating. Please, I must ask you to remove yourself from the questioning. Are you a solicitor, Miss Clements?

Clements

Of course I'm not.

Darker

Are you a police officer?

Clements

You know I'm not, Mr Darker.

Darker

Then the floor must remain mine. And you, Miss Clements, are lucky even to get a seat.

Clements

Well. I see how it is now.

Pearson

What was your question?

Darker

What? Oh my question. I want to know if the name Emma Cavendish means anything to you.

Please give me a straight answer, Miss Pearson.

Pearson

I don't know her. That straight enough for you?

Darker

Are you sure? Please think carefully.

Pearson

I know what I know and I know what I don't know and I don't know her.

Darker

Really? Are you really, absolutely certain?

Clements

Phoebe, please don't be so dense. That's her silver box you're grasping to your chest. With the ruby in the lid. It was identified by Mrs Cavendish's father-in-law.

Pearson

This?

Darker

Yes indeed. The same.

Pearson

This little silver box? The one in my hand?

Darker

Yes, Miss Pearson. That silver box.

Pearson

And she's called Mrs Cavendish?

Darker

She is.

Pearson

Well she gave it to me. It was a gift. She said: *take this, please, take it*. I said I didn't want to but she was very insistent. In fact, she offered me all sorts of things. It is a dear little thing, though, isn't it. I don't care for the ruby – it spoils the look – but the box is so smooth and lovely and opens a treat. Look at its tiny legs at the corners. If she wants it back, then she must come and ask for it herself. When a person accepts a gift, they really don't expect the giver to ask for it back. I mean, do they?

Clements

Mr Darker, do you think I might just have a word with you? In private.

Darker

Is it really necessary?

Clements

Would you indulge me?

Darker

Very well.

Miss Pearson, excuse us. And please stay in your place. You may relax your hold on that box. Nobody is coming to claim it from you. But I would ask you to look closely at it while we are gone and then look just as closely into your own soul.

SCENE 2

Clements

I'm wondering if we should take another tack, as it were.

Darker

Another tack! What are you implying? My methods are standard. They are tried and they are tested. What tack could you possibly be suggesting?

Clements

Well I'm just wondering if we should delve a little more into the psychological.

Darker

Miss Clements, must we have this conversation? I beg of you that we don't.

Clements

I really don't wish to step on your toes in any way...

Darker

...and yet you are about to...

Clements

But I think perhaps the key to questioning Phoebe Pearson lies in her childhood.

Darker

I don't hold with that kind of business. It's befuddling. It's all speculation. There's no fact in it.

Clements

All I'm saying is that her rather abrupt way with people might well stem from her most unhappy youth. She was adopted quite late, you see, because her mother didn't want her, abandoned her when she was only six. And when she arrived at our school, she was treated very cruelly. She was mocked and told she was stupid.

Darker

And you don't think she is?

Clements

I think she sees the world a little differently. Because of what she went through. Her adoptive parents were not exactly ideal. They had a baby only a few months after she arrived and instantly lost interest in her. She must have resented that baby, don't you think, but she never once showed it.

Darker

But what has this to do with me and my questioning methods?

Clements

I thought if you were made aware of her background, you might tread more gently. You see, I've

grown to understand her. I've seen all her little unnoticed kindnesses, her particular fondness for orphan animals. If she says that trinket was given to her then I'm inclined to believe her.

Darker

And the fact that the giver of the trinket – as you call it – was killed when her house was flattened by a bomb some time earlier does not strike you as a little hard to swallow?

Clements

We don't know if Mrs Cavendish was alive at the time when Phoebe says she was passing.

Darker

Miss Clements. The house was bombed at around 11.45 on Tuesday morning. Your friend has stated already that she was passing the area at noon, when the sirens were silent. She must have been one of the first on the scene. Are you suggesting that Mrs Cavendish crawled from the rubble and beckoned Phoebe Pearson over and offered her the box?

Clements

I don't know what I'm suggesting.

Darker

I have served the Medway towns as a solicitor for the past 23 years. I have handled all manner of cases, from petty thefts to much more serious crimes against society. I have some idea of the way these things go. It's denial, denial, denial all the way, until at some point they crack. They realise that lying is not only a bad idea, but very tedious to keep up.

Clement

Yes, but it's not lying, is it? She's not lying. She's incapable of lying. She's the most painfully frank individual I know. Her first words to me were not *hello Lillian* or *how nice to see you Lillian*. She just commented on how old I looked. No, she doesn't lie. It's just a case of our asking the right questions.

Darker

You're suggesting to me that my questions are wrong? You say that to me? A solicitor?

Clement

Oh I don't know what I'm saying any more. I don't wish to offend you, Mr Darker. I only wish to be of service. And to help dear Phoebe along the way.

Darker

Then the best thing you can do is to keep your eyes on the facts, Miss Clements. The bomb that hit the Cavendish home on Tuesday morning was so powerful it took out three other houses completely. Mrs Cavendish was in the house at the time with her two youngest children, a three-year-old and an infant. All three, tragically, were crushed by a falling external wall. They were found there by the auxiliary fire brigade at fourteen minutes past twelve, when the area was deemed safe to approach and the fires put out. The raid took us all by surprise, as you must recall. These things usually happen at night. Very few had the wit to run for the shelters. Mrs Cavendish was found clutching her baby. Do you really think she was in a position to hand out her possessions to passing neighbours?

Clements

No. No, I don't.

Darker

Can you in all seriousness think that this gift was given to Miss Pearson *after* the bombing had taken place?

Clements

No, I don't suppose I do.

Darker

Then there can be only one explanation. That Phoebe Pearson, who happened to be first on the scene, even before the ambulance men, saw the treasure and, in an act of gross stupidity, snatched it for herself.

Clements

Oh please don't call her stupid.

Darker

How else can I explain her flagrantly walking around the town clutching the item? The Cavendish family recognized it almost immediately. It's an heirloom. It's very valuable and very easy to spot. That ruby in the lid gives it away at once.

Clement

Oh Phoebe. What have you done?

Darker

They've suffered enough, don't you think? With their son away at war, then daughter-in-law and two of their grandchildren killed so horribly, so randomly. Should they feel insulted as well as heartbroken? How would you feel to see this family heirloom brazenly touted about the town days after it was taken from the ruins of your happy family home?

[Pause]

Clements

Then let's do what we must. But please don't judge her badly. If she was, as you say, acting rashly and stupidly, then she can't help herself. She doesn't make a habit of looting bombed-out buildings. Why she did it this time we may never know.

Darker

Well, we must have a jolly good go at it. We owe that much to her. Now, are you ready to come back in with me so that we can finally get to the bottom of things? I need your support, Miss Clements, preferably your moral support. Not your outspoken suppositions.

SCENE THREE

Pearson

Why were you gone so long? I'm hungry. Does nobody care? My lunchtime was eighteen minutes ago.

Clements

Honestly, Phoebe. Don't you think this might be a bit more important than your lunch?

Pearson

I don't see how.

Darker

Miss Pearson, I'm going to ask you about the circumstances around your acquisition of the Cavendish silver box.

Pearson

Are you now?

Darker

I'd like to know what you were doing in the area at the time.

Pearson

I can't remember.

Clements

Phoebe, of course you can. It was only last Tuesday. When did we last have an air raid at that time of the day?

Darker

Quite. Had you been in a shelter?

Pearson

No, I'd been in the park.

Darker

During a raid?

Pearson

Well I didn't know there was going to be a raid, did I! I spent the morning in the park. I often do. I like a bit of space to myself.

Darker

And you went home via Harper Street?

Pearson

I suppose I did.

Darker

Even though a bomb had just landed on it? Bomb sites are immediately closed off, you must know that.

Pearson

Well there was no one there yet to close it off.

Darker

But it was extremely dangerous. Didn't you fear for your safety?

Pearson

No.

Darker

I really can't understand what made you go down a newly-bombed street.

Pearson

Because I wanted to.

Darker

Please don't treat this questioning so lightly, Miss Pearson. I can easily hand this over to the police at once.

Clements

Phoebe, we're just trying to understand how you came to have such a valuable item in your hands.

Pearson

She gave it to me. She asked me if I wanted it and I said yes. She offered me all kinds of things.

Darker

This is preposterous. You're telling us that Mrs Cavendish was alive and well despite the complete collapse of her house and offering you the contents of her home.

Pearson

I wouldn't say she was well.

Darker

She wasn't very well at all. She wasn't alive!

Pearson

Oh she was alive alright. That's why I went over, because she called me.

Darker

She called you over to give you something?

Pearson

Yes, that's exactly what she did!

Darker

I don't understand.

Pearson

I was going along the road and I heard her calling, only her voice was very quiet and weak. I suppose she must have felt very poorly with everything falling on top of her. I went to see where the sound was coming from.

Clements

Oh my goodness. This is horrendous.

Darker

So she was trapped but alive?

Pearson

Well she couldn't move.

Darker

And what did she say to you?

Pearson

She wanted to give me things. But I didn't want them.

Darker

You took the silver box, though, didn't you?

Pearson

Yes, I took the little silver box. It's so pretty. I really wanted that.

Clements

Phoebe, you're really not helping yourself.

Darker

Your friend is right, Miss Pearson. She has tried to impress me with the goodness of your heart but I'm struggling to find evidence for it in this scenario.

If Mrs Cavendish was alive, as you state she was – and I very much doubt it – then why didn't you call the emergency services at once?

Pearson

They'd be there soon enough.

Darker

Well why didn't you pull her to safety?

Pearson

She never asked me to.

Darker

Oh dear Lord.

Pearson

Lillian, why is he so upset with me? What have I done wrong?

Clements

Oh Phoebe...

Pearson

I feel like I'm at school again or in the nursing home. Or anywhere where people always tell me how stupid I am, how slow and dull. That's why I take myself off to the park, because I can walk and walk and walk and nobody bothers me.

Darker

Even in an air raid?

Pearson

What do I care? It's like rain. It's like a storm, that's all. It's all noise. Anyway, you're better off outdoors than under bricks and mortar, aren't you. Children should be kept outdoor these days. That's my view.

Darker

I don't know what to think. I really don't.

Pearson

May I go? I'm hungry.

Clements

Can she go, Mr Darker? I'm finding this very wearing. I doubt we'll get anywhere with her.

Pearson

I can hear you, you know. You're like all the others who talk in front of me like I'm witless. As though I'm too dense to understand.

[A knock on the door]

Darker

One moment, ladies. It appears I'm wanted. Please, Miss Clements, remain silent while I am away. I shan't be long. Silent now.

Clements

Of course, Mr Darker.

[Pause. Door closes]

Phoebe, you really are being beyond queer, you know. I saw you on Tuesday afternoon and you never indicated for one moment that such terrible things had happened.

Pearson

I'm going to leave now.

Clements

You certainly are not. Mr Darker is here to help you and to get to the bottom of things. I expect the police want to know what's taking him so long.

Pearson

What do you want me to say, Lillian? Tell me what to say and I'll say it.

Clements

Tell them you found it. It was so far away from the bomb site that you had no idea where it was from. The blast must have hurled it far from home. Tell them that you were going to bring it back. But please don't bring that poor woman's name into it. Her family has suffered enough.

Pearson

She wanted me to have it.

Clements

Oh for the love of God!

Pearson

It's nice when there are presents, when someone thinks about you. And it's so nice when they need you. You don't feel left behind any more. I love to hold things in my hands, Lillian, don't you? Look at it? Isn't it the most perfect thing you've ever seen?

Clements

Nobody gave it to you, Phoebe. You took it. If you can live with that, then God save you. I daresay there are worse crimes being committed these days.

Pearson

She did so give it to me. She offered me other things and I didn't want them. She told me to take them but I wouldn't. What would I want with them?

Clements

What other things, Phoebe? What does it matter what she offered you? The poor woman was dying. She wasn't in her right mind.

Pearson

Well she shouldn't have called me over. I didn't want to stop anyway.

Clements

Did she really call you over? Have you made all this up out of mischief? Are you simply seeking attention, Phoebe Pearson, walking around Chatham with your silver box, like you're royalty? Doesn't it occur to you that it's distasteful? I told Mr Darker that you didn't have it in you to tell lies. Was I wrong about you?

Pearson

You were the worst. You treated me like I was dirt at school.

Clements

I hope that's not true. I'm sorry if it is. I want things to be better for you now.

Pearson

People telling me what to do, take this, take that. Pushing things through the rubble at me. I won't be told what to do.

Clements

What *things*, Phoebe? What things?

Pearson

You know perfectly well what I'm talking about.

Clements

I don't!

Pearson

And you wouldn't have taken it either.

[Long pause.]

Clements

[Speaks quietly and in shock] Oh dear God.

Pearson

He thinks he knows what we're like, your lawyer friend. But he doesn't know us. He doesn't know how empty and pointless everything about us is.

Clements

[Still in shock] Phoebe, for God's sake, don't say anything. Don't tell him what you've done.

Pearson

Why should you care about me now? You never have before.

Clements

That's not true. I just didn't understand you. I wanted to. I always wanted to help.

Pearson

If you say so. All I remember is being laughed at behind my back.

Clements

Have I so totally misunderstood you?

[Darker is coming back into the room. He is calling to someone as he returns]

Darker

Of course, Sergeant. Naturally we want the same thing. We shan't be long now.

[To the women]

I trust there has been sepulchral silence while I've been gone.

Miss Clements you seem very pale.

Clements

Just let her go home. Go home, Phoebe. I don't want to see you.

Darker

What on earth can you mean? No one's going anywhere.

Pearson

I'm hungry.

Clements

Get up! Get out of my sight.

Darker

Now stop this at once. Stay where you are, Miss Pearson. **[Raising voice]** I said stay where you are!

Pearson

You can't tell me what to do. None of you can. I'm going for my lunch.

Darker

Stop at once!

Pearson

You can't make me. You all seem to think you own me, but you don't. **[Mocking his voice]** / *know what you unmarried ladies of the parish are like.* What do you know about my life? You question me like I'm guilty of something. But I'm not. Why can't I have a present? No one's ever given me anything valuable. I've never loved anything this much before.

Darker

I don't... I don't recognize you.

Clements

[To Darker, deeply upset] Why didn't you listen to me? She's right – you know nothing about me or her or anyone.

Darker

You're turning on me? Miss Clements...

Clements

Yes, I'm angry, Mr Darker. I'm angry. And I'm appalled. And I'm broken-hearted.

Pearson

Now look what you've done.

Clements

Don't you utter another word, Phoebe Pearson, unless it's making a statement to the police.

Darker

I will decide when she is ready to make a statement. I am the one with authority and experience and a past record of...

Clements

Oh please just shut up.

Darker

What happened while I was out? Did you ladies confer about something? I told you that it was vital that you keep quiet. How will this look in court?

Pearson

What's a statement?

Darker

You have to tell us what happened and you must sign it to show that it's the truth.

Pearson

If you want.

Darker

Miss Clements, why are you suggesting that she makes a statement? Is she admitting to it?

Clements

Just let her tell it. She won't lie. She hasn't lied for even one second. We just didn't understand what she was telling us. I told you we were asking the wrong questions. I told you.

Darker

I don't understand what's happening. I only left you for a moment.

Clements

Let her tell you. The way she sees it. Listen to her. She doesn't lie. She never lies.

Darker

[Calling] Sergeant! Would you come in here for a moment?

SCENE 4

[SFX fire, falling masonry, distant air raid siren petering out.]

Cavendish

[Weakly] Please... please, you over there. Please help me.

[SFX bricks scatter – Miss Pearson is approaching]

[To herself] Oh thank God... thank God.

Pearson

What's wrong? What do you want?

Cavendish

You've got to help me.

[Shouting] No! Don't move. This wall will collapse any minute. It's swaying, can you see it? It's going to fall on me. No, don't go away. Please don't.

Pearson

The firemen will be here in a minute.

Cavendish

There's no time. But you've got to help me.

Pearson

What do you want from me?

Cavendish

Take my baby. I'm going to hand her out carefully. I can move my arms, you see. But if I try and move the rubble off my legs, I'm afraid everything will fall.

Pearson

It looks dead to me.

Cavendish

No, no, she's not. She's breathing. She's alive. I'm going to hand her out now and you must take her. I'll wait here for the firemen. Take her as far away as possible.

Pearson

I'm not sure.

Cavendish

What are you saying? Take my baby now.

Pearson

I don't want a baby.

Cavendish

What's wrong with you, woman! Are you stupid? I'm not asking you to keep her, just to take her to safety.

Pearson

Why did you call me stupid?

Cavendish

I'm sorry. I'm so sorry. Please, please don't go. I need to you to help me. What? What are you looking at? You like that? You want it? Take it! It's yours.

Pearson

What is it?

Cavendish

It's a box, it's a beautiful box. It's very valuable. Go on, take it. I'm giving it to you.

Pearson

It's mine?

Cavendish

Yes, it is. It's all yours. Now, wait there. I'm going to hand you the baby. Are you ready?

Pearson

But I don't want a baby.

Cavendish

[In despair] What's wrong with you!

Pearson

I'll just take this.

Cavendish

Please, please. That wall is not going to stay upright. It's toppling. I haven't got long.

[Distant fire engine sirens, getting louder]

Pearson

It's alright, they're coming. They'll help you. **[Leaving scene.]** Just be patient. You'll be alright.
I've got to go now.

Cavendish

Come back! Please... please don't leave us here....

[Sirens very loud now]

ENDS

