

THE ROCKING-HORSE WINNER

A PLAY IN ONE ACT

By **D. H. Lawrence**
Dramatized By **Roy C. Booth**

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THE ROCKING-HORSE WINNER

By D. H. Lawrence

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CAST OF CHARACTERS

(5 Men, 4 Women, 2 Flexible)

NARRATOR (48 lines)
VOICE(S) (6 lines)
HESTER CHESMOND an extravagant woman (35 lines)
GEOFFREY CHESMOND her husband (1 line)
PAUL CHESMOND their son (68 lines)
JOAN CHESMOND their eldest daughter (2 lines)
KATHRYN CHESMOND their youngest daughter
OSCAR CRESSWELL Hester's brother (51 lines)
BASSETT the gardener (14 lines)
MRS. WILMOT nursery nurse (Non-Speaking)
THE FRENCHMAN horse racing enthusiast (Non-Speaking)

PLACE: A large country house in England.

TIME: Early 20th century.

AT RISE:

A spot appears on HESTER. Throughout the play spots and limited lighting techniques are used to not only convey the different scenes of time and place, but to add to the mystical eeriness that the story lends.

NARRATOR: There was a woman who was beautiful, who started with all the advantages, yet she had no luck. She married for love, and the love turned to dust. She had bonny children - -

Enter PAUL, JOAN, and KATHRYN, smiling.

NARRATOR: Yet she felt they had been thrust upon her, and she could not love them.

CHILDREN step away, crestfallen.

NARRATOR: They looked at her coldly, as if they were finding fault with her. And hurriedly she felt she must cover up some fault in herself. Yet what it was that she must cover up she never knew. Nevertheless, when her children were present, she always felt the center of her heart go hard. This troubled her, and in her manner she was all the more gentle and anxious for her children, as if she loved them very much. Only she herself knew that at the center of her heart was a hard little place that could not feel love, no, not for anybody. Everybody else said of her:

VOICE: She is such a good mother. She adores her children.

The CHILDREN stare at HESTER.

NARRATOR: Only she herself, and her children themselves, knew it was not so. They read it in each other's eyes.

BLACKOUT.

There were a boy and two little girls. They lived in a pleasant house, with a garden, and they had discreet servants, and felt themselves superior to anyone in the neighborhood.

Although they lived in style, they felt always an anxiety in the house. There was never enough money. The mother had a small income, and the father had a small income, but not nearly enough for the

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social position which they had to keep up. The father went into town to some office. But though he had good prospects, these prospects never materialized. There was always the grinding sense of the shortage of money, though the style was always kept up.

Spot up on HESTER.

NARRATOR: At last the mother said:

HESTER: I will see if I can't make something.

NARRATOR: But she did not know where to begin. She racked her brains, and tried this thing and the other, but could not find anything successful. The failure made deep lines come into her face. Her children were growing up, they would have to go to school. There must be more money, there must be more money.

HESTER exits spot. GEOFFREY enters spot, grinning from ear to ear.

NARRATOR: The father, who was always very handsome and expensive in his tastes, seemed as if he never would be able to do anything worth doing.

GEOFFREY exits spot, spot blacks out.

NARRATOR: And the mother, who had a great belief in herself, did not succeed any better, and her tastes were just as expensive. And so the house came to be haunted by the unspoken phrase:

VOICE: There must be more money! There must be more money!

Spot on PAUL, JOAN, and KATHRYN playing with the rocking-horse, doll, and other toys.

NARRATOR: The children could hear it all the time though nobody said it aloud. They heard it at Christmas, when the expensive and splendid toys filled the nursery. Behind the shining modern rocking-horse, behind the smart doll's house, a voice would start whispering:

VOICE: There must be more money! There must be more money!

NARRATOR: And the children would stop playing, to listen for a moment. They would look into each other's eyes, to see if they had all heard. And each one saw in the eyes of the other two that they too had heard.

VOICE: There must be more money! There must be more money!

NARRATOR: It came whispering from the springs of the still-swaying rocking-horse, and even the horse, bending his wooden, champing head, heard it. The big doll, sitting so pink and smirking in her new pram, could hear it quite plainly, and seemed to be smirking all the more self-consciously because of it. The foolish puppy, too, that took the place of the teddy-bear, he was looking so extraordinarily foolish for no other reason but that he heard the secret whisper all over the house:

VOICE: There must be more money!

Spot fades, CHILDREN exit.

NARRATOR: Yet nobody ever said it aloud. The whisper was everywhere, and therefore no one spoke it. Just as no one ever says: "We are breathing!" in spite of the fact that breath is coming and going all the time. Then, one day - -

Spot appears to find HESTER seated. A pile of bills rest in her lap. PAUL stands nearby.

PAUL: Mother, why don't we keep a car of our own? Why do we always use uncle's, or else a taxi?

HESTER: Because we're the poor members of the family.

PAUL: But why are we, mother?

HESTER: Well - - I suppose - - *(Slowly and bitterly.)* It's because your father has no luck.

Pause as PAUL thinks this over.

PAUL: *(Timidly.)* Is luck money, Mother?

HESTER: No, Paul. Not quite. It's what causes you to have money.

PAUL: *(Vaguely.)* Oh! I thought when Uncle Oscar said filthy lucker, it meant money.

HESTER: Filthy lucre does mean money. But it's lucre, not luck.

PAUL: Oh! Then what is luck, Mother?

HESTER: It's what causes you to have money. If you're lucky you have money. That's why it's better to be born lucky than rich. If you're rich, you may lose your money. But if you're lucky, you will always get more money.

PAUL: Oh! Will you? And is father not lucky?

HESTER: *(Bitterly.)* Very unlucky, I should say.

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PAUL: (*Watching her with unsure eyes.*) Why?

HESTER: I don't know. Nobody ever knows why one person is lucky and another unlucky.

PAUL: Don't they? Nobody at all? Does nobody know?

HESTER: Perhaps God. But He never tells.

PAUL: He ought to, then. And aren't you lucky either, Mother?

HESTER: I can't be, if I married an unlucky husband.

PAUL: But by yourself, aren't you?

HESTER: I used to think I was, before I married. Now I think I am very unlucky indeed.

PAUL: Why?

HESTER: Well—never mind! Perhaps I'm not really.

PAUL looks at her to see if she meant it. But he saw, by the lines of her mouth, that she was only trying to hide something from him.)

PAUL: (*Stoutly.*) Well, anyhow, I'm a lucky person.

HESTER: (*With a sudden laugh.*) Why?

Pause as PAUL stares at her.

PAUL: (*Assertively.*) God told me.

HESTER: (*With a bitter laugh.*) I hope He did, dear

PAUL: He did, Mother!

HESTER: Excellent!

NARRATOR: The boy saw she did not believe him; or rather, that she paid no attention to his assertion. This angered him somewhat, and made him want to compel her attention.

BLACKOUT.

NARRATOR: He went off by himself, vaguely, in a childish way, seeking for the clue to "luck." Absorbed, taking no heed of other people, he went about with a sort of stealth, seeking inwardly for luck. He wanted luck, he wanted it, he wanted it.

Spot finds PAUL, JOAN, and KATHRYN in the nursery.

NARRATOR: When the two girls were playing dolls in the nursery, he would sit on his big rocking-horse - - (*PAUL does so.*) Charging madly into space, with a frenzy that made the little girls peer at him uneasily. Wildly the horse careered, the waving dark hair of the boy tossed, his eyes had a strange glare in them. The little girls dared not speak to him. When he had ridden to the end of his mad little journey, he climbed down and stood in front of his rocking-horse, staring fixedly into its lowered face. Its red mouth was slightly open, its big eye was wide and glassy-bright.

PAUL: (*Overheard.*) Now! Now take me to where there is luck! Now take me!

NARRATOR: And he would slash the horse on the neck with the little whip he had asked Uncle Oscar for. He knew the horse could take him to where there was luck, if only he forced it. So he would mount again and start on his furious ride, hoping at last to get there.

Enter WILMOT.

WILMOT: You'll break your horse, Paul!

JOAN: He's always riding like that! I wish he'd leave off!

NARRATOR: But he only glared down on them in silence. Nurse gave him up. She could make nothing of him. Anyhow, he was growing beyond her.

WILMOT, JOAN, and KATHRYN exit.

NARRATOR: One day his mother and his Uncle Oscar came in when he was on one of his furious rides. He did not speak to them.

OSCAR: Hallo, you young jockey! Riding a winner?

HESTER: Aren't you growing too big for a rocking-horse? You're not a very little boy any longer, you know.

Pause as PAUL goes at it full tilt as HESTER watches on anxiously. At last he stops forcing his horse into the mechanical gallop and slides down.

PAUL: Well, I got there!

HESTER: Where did you get to?

PAUL: (*Flaring.*) Where I wanted to go!

OSCAR: That's right, son! Don't you stop till you get there. What's the horse's name?

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PAUL: He doesn't have a name.

OSCAR: Gets on without all right?

PAUL: Well, he has different names. He was called Sansovino last week.

OSCAR: Sansovino, eh? Won the Ascot. How did you know his name?

JOAN: He always talks about horse races with Bassett.

OSCAR: Hmm - - I see.

BLACKOUT.

NARRATOR: The uncle was delighted to find that his small nephew was posted with all the racing news. Bassett, the young gardener, who had been wounded in the left foot in the war and had got his present job through Oscar Cresswell, whose batman he had been, was a perfect blade of the "turf." He lived in the racing events, and the small boy lived with him.

Lights up to find OSCAR with BASSETT.

NARRATOR: Oscar Cresswell got it all from Bassett.

BASSETT: (*Seriously.*) Master Paul comes and asks me, so I can't do more than tell him, sir.

OSCAR: And does he ever put anything on a horse he fancies?

BASSETT: (*Seriously.*) Well—I don't want to give him away—he's a young sport, a fine sport, sir. Would you mind asking him himself? He sort of takes a pleasure in it, and perhaps he'd feel I was giving him away, sir, if you don't mind.

BLACKOUT.

NARRATOR: Bassett was serious as a church. The uncle went back to his nephew and took him off for a ride in the car.

Lights up on OSCAR and PAUL seated as if in a car.)

OSCAR: Say, Paul, old man, do you ever put anything on a horse.

PAUL: Why, do you think I oughtn't to?

OSCAR: Not a bit of it! I thought perhaps you might give me a tip for the Lincoln.

PAUL: Honor bright?

OSCAR: Honor bright, son!

PAUL: Well, then, Daffodil.

OSCAR: Daffodil! I doubt it, sonny. What about Mirza?

PAUL: I only know the winner. That's Daffodil.

OSCAR: Daffodil, eh?

Pause.

PAUL: Uncle!

OSCAR: Yes, son?

PAUL: You won't let it go any further, will you? I promised Bassett.

OSCAR: Bassett be damned, old man! What's he got to do with it?

PAUL: We're partners. We've been partners from the first. Uncle, he lent me my first five shillings, which I lost. I promised him, honor bright, it was only between me and him; only you gave me that ten-shilling note I started winning with, so I thought you were lucky. You won't let it go any further, will you?

OSCAR: (*Laughing uneasily.*) Right you are, son! I'll keep your tip private. Daffodil, eh? How much are you putting on him?

PAUL: All except twenty pounds. I keep that in reserve.

OSCAR: (*Smiling.*) You keep twenty pounds in reserve, do you, you young romancer? What are you betting, then?

PAUL: (*Gravely.*) I'm betting three hundred. But it's between you and me, Uncle Oscar! Honor bright?

OSCAR: (*Bursting in a roar of laughter.*) It's between you and me all right, you young Nat Gould! But where's your three hundred?

PAUL: Bassett keeps it for me. We're partners.

OSCAR: You are, are you! And what is Bassett putting on Daffodil?

PAUL: He won't go quite as high as I do, I expect. Perhaps he'll go a hundred and fifty.

OSCAR: (*Laughing.*) What, pennies?

PAUL: (*With a surprised look.*) Pounds. Bassett keeps a bigger reserve than I do.

Pause.

OSCAR: Now, son, I'm putting twenty on Mirza, and I'll put five on for you on any horse you fancy. What's your pick?

PAUL: Daffodil, uncle.

OSCAR: No, not the fiver on Daffodil!

PAUL: I should if it was my own fiver.

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OSCAR: Good! Good! Right you are! A fiver for me and a fiver for you on Daffodil.

BLACKOUT.

NARRATOR: The child had never been to a race meeting before, and his eyes were blue fire. He pursed his mouth tight and watched. A Frenchman just in front had put his money on Lancelot.

Lights come up to find PAUL, OSCAR, and the FRENCHMAN watching the race from the railing. The race begins. All throughout the FRENCHMAN calls out, "Lancelot! Lancelot!" The race continues on and ends with:

VOICE: Daffodil in first, Lancelot second, Mirza third!

PAUL, flushed and with eyes blazing, is curiously serene. OSCAR leaves to collect their winnings.

FRENCHMAN: Fah! Lancelot! Fah! *(He tears up his program and tickets, then exits.)*

OSCAR returns waving four five pound notes. PAUL has won four to one.

OSCAR: What am I to do with these?

PAUL: I suppose we'll talk to Bassett. I expect I have fifteen hundred now; and twenty in reserve; and this twenty.

Pause as OSCAR studies his nephew carefully.

OSCAR: Look here, son! You're not serious about Bassett and that fifteen hundred, are you?

PAUL: Yes, I am. But it's between you and me, uncle. Honor bright?

OSCAR: Honor bright all right, son! But I must talk to Bassett.

PAUL: If you'd like to be a partner, uncle, with Bassett and me, we could all be partners. Only, you'd have to promise, honor bright, uncle, not to let it go beyond us three. Bassett and I are lucky, and you must be lucky, because it was your ten shillings I started winning with - -

BLACKOUT.

NARRATOR: Uncle Oscar took both Bassett and Paul into Richmond Park for an afternoon, and there they talked.

Enter BASSETT. Lights up.

BASSETT: It's like this, you see, sir. Master Paul would get me talking about racing events, spinning yarns, you know, sir. And he was always keen on knowing if I'd made or if I'd lost. It's about a year since, now, that I put five shillings on Blush of Dawn for him—and we lost. Then the luck turned, with that ten shillings he had from you: that we put on Singhalese. And since then, it's been pretty steady, all things considering. What do you say, Master Paul?

PAUL: We're all right when we're sure. It's when we're not quite sure that we go down.

BASSETT: Oh, but we're careful then.

OSCAR: But when are you sure?

BASSETT: It's Master Paul, sir. It's as if he had it from heaven. Like Daffodil, now, for the Lincoln. That was as sure as eggs.

OSCAR: Did you put anything on Daffodil?

BASSETT: Yes, sir, I made my bit.

OSCAR: And my nephew?

Pause as BASSETT, obstinately silent, looks at PAUL.

PAUL: I made twelve hundred, didn't I, Bassett? I told uncle I was putting three hundred on Daffodil.

BASSETT: That's right.

OSCAR: But where's the money?

BASSETT: I keep it safe locked up, sir. Master Paul he can have it any minute he likes to ask for it.

OSCAR: What, fifteen hundred pounds?

BASSETT: And twenty! And forty, that is, with the twenty he made on the course.

OSCAR: It's amazing!

BASSETT: If Master Paul offers you to be partners, sir, I would, if I were you; if you'll excuse me.

Pause as BASSETT starts to exit.

OSCAR: I'll see the money.

BLACKOUT.

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NARRATOR: They drove home again, and sure enough, Bassett came round to the garden house with fifteen hundred pounds in notes. The twenty pounds reserve was left with Joe Glee, in the Turf Commission deposit.

Spot finds BASSETT, PAUL and OSCAR together again.

PAUL: You see, it's all right, uncle, when I'm sure! Then we go strong, for all we're worth, don't we, Bassett?

BASSETT: We do that, Master Paul.

OSCAR: And when are you sure?

PAUL: Oh, well, sometimes I'm absolutely sure, like about Daffodil, and sometimes I have an idea; and sometimes I haven't even an idea, have I, Bassett? Then we're careful, because we mostly go down.

OSCAR: You do, do you! And when you're sure, like about Daffodil, what makes you sure, sonny?

PAUL: Oh, well, I don't know. I'm sure, you know, uncle; that's all.

BASSETT: It's as if he had it from heaven, sir.

OSCAR: *I should say so!*

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