

The Proposal

A Ten-Minute Play

By

Stephen Bittrich

This Regency Era play was published in [*2006: The Best Ten-Minute Plays for 2 Actors*](#).

The play was first performed at The Drilling Company, Hamilton Clancy Artistic Director, in New York City in a one-act evening titled *Security* with the following cast:

Julia Stephanie Cozart
Mr. Ainsworth Josh Foldy

The play was directed by Carol Halstead.

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"THE PROPOSAL"

BY STEPHEN BITTRICH

SETTING:

The sprawling grounds of Willowbrook Estate near Bishops Waltham in Hampshire, England, 1815.

AT RISE:

JULIA HIGHTOWER, 20s, handsome and proud, but clearly distraught, paces about the garden. WILLIAM AINSWORTH, late 30ish, proud and rakishly handsome, enters the lengthening evening shadows and observes her a moment before he speaks.

MR. AINSWORTH

There you are Miss Hightower. I was beginning to think I'd be called upon to fish you from the trout stream.

JULIA

Beg your pardon, I required a bit of air.

MR. AINSWORTH

Ah, yes. Lovely evening for it.

(pause)

And are you sufficiently pleased with the grounds of Willowbrook?

JULIA

Of course.

MR. AINSWORTH

Splendid--then you approve?

Julia

Who could find fault with...*the grounds*, Mr. Ainsworth?

MR. AINSWORTH

No indeed. No indeed.

(beat)

But then I derive from your careful inflection that there is that at Willowbrook which you *could* find fault with, Miss Hightower.

JULIA

I--I cannot--

MR. AINSWORTH

Ah, tush, tush, not another word of it.

(beat)

Beautiful, clear night. Did you take in the full moon rising above the peat bogs?

JULIA

I marked it.

MR. AINSWORTH

Dramatic indeed.

(pause)

You know, Ms. Hightower, I rather blush to say, but the highlight of my trip to Sussex last summer was not the tedious family business which beckoned me thither, no, no,

but rather my brief sojourn in Heathfield and the various social gatherings during which I was privileged to make the acquaintance of you and your family.

JULIA

(with a taste of irony)

It was a thrilling season.

MR. AINSWORTH

And during the picnic at Heathfield Park I must confess I was most smitten with your wonderful charcoal sketches of the countryside. It is thrilling indeed to discover a woman of such varied and studied accomplishment. Upon leaving there, I admit, I could think of not much else for sometime...but you...and your beautiful sketches.

JULIA

You flatter, Mr. Ainsworth.

MR. AINSWORTH

No, indeed, I do not. I very greatly wished to be... connected to you and your great talent--to have some ownership in it.

JULIA

Ownership?

MR. AINSWORTH

And when your family took lodgings in Hampshire this Spring it seemed a fortuitous event indeed.

JULIA

Quite fortuitous. I must return to the house, Mr. Ainsworth. It grows cold.

MR. AINSWORTH

Then let me warm you, Ms. Hightower...Julia.

JULIA

No--

MR. AINSWORTH

Please, take my coat.

JULIA

I fear the chill has deeply set in. There is no remedy you can provide.

MR. AINSWORTH
(relinquishing all false
civility)

I grow weary of these intrigues and double entendres. I am not a stupid man, Miss Hightower. I know the particulars for your family's visit. Plainly, your parents mean to parade you about polite society as a farmer at the county fair flaunts his choicest pig--

JULIA

Mr. Ainsworth!

MR. AINSWORTH
--but, and please excuse my audacious candor, you won't be winning any ribbons, I'm sorry to say, nor any husbands for that matter. As sordid as it may be, there are scurrilous and unseemly tongues that wag this way and that 'round this tiny little hamlet. And they wag, Miss Hightower, about you.

(JULIA appears almost dizzy
from MR. AINSWORTH's utter
lack of decorum)

JULIA

I'm sure...I'm sure I haven't the faintest notion--

MR. AINSWORTH
You are a marked woman. There it is. Sorry to be the bearer of ill tidings. But there 'tis. You may as well sew your old maid's weeds forthwith because no suitors of any repute will be knocking at your door.

JULIA

How dare you, sir!

MR. AINSWORTH
I dare, Miss Hightower. As the first born son of the wealthiest man in Christendom, I dare. Mere social convention is a paltry constraint for my sizeable wealth and stature. The fates, however, have been less kind to you. Being without a male sibling, your birthright, such that it is, has been entailed away, and your future, but for the unsecured and certainly meager offerings of an obscure male relative, can promise nothing more than abject poverty.

JULIA

(after a beat, regaining her
composure)

And yet...I do not tremble, Mr. Ainsworth.

MR. AINSWORTH

(after a beat, taking her in)

And yet you do not. There is much to be admired in you,
Julia.

JULIA

And much to be abhorred in you.

MR. AINSWORTH

And still...such an abhorred man as I might yet be your
salvation.

(beat)

I like you, Julia.

JULIA

Mr. Ainsworth, you've said quite enough.

MR. AINSWORTH

Yes, I like you. You are as handsome a specimen as ever
I've seen, lively and energetic, talented in music and art,
intelligent almost to a fault. These attributes, I
daresay, when matched with my own myriad graces, could well
produce exceptionally pleasing off-spring.

JULIA

Thank you for your astute observations, Mr. Ainsworth, but
despite your previous reference to prized livestock, you'll
be surprised to learn, I am no farm animal. Producing
"exceptionally pleasing off-spring" is not my life's chief
objective.

MR. AINSWORTH

(ignoring and pressing on)

Be assured, I am not looking for love, Julia, and I am
quite certain that you do not love me. However, I do
require a wife, a partner, in the business of expanding my
honorable lineage. It is a grand, unbroken line spanning
centuries before me, and I am called upon to bid adieu to
the temptations and distractions of my youth and perform my
familial duty. I see you as a worthy candidate.

JULIA

Mr. Ainsworth, though your described partnership of
convenience is no doubt brimming with fruitful promise, you

will be shocked to discover your eloquent declaration of affection met with rejection. I hope the disappointment will not linger with you for long. Good evening, sir.

(SHE starts to leave, and HE cuts her off)

MR. AINSWORTH

Julia, certainly you are not ignorant of what I can offer a woman such as yourself. Not that I care a jot for social mores, but you cannot be completely unaware that your very reputation has recently been called into question. Your association with a local artist, a certain Monsieur Legard, whose name alone inspires suspicion, is fatty meat for the maw of outrage, namely, the elder matrons of Bishops Waltham.

JULIA

My association with the gifted Mr. Legard is of my concern alone--

MR. AINSWORTH

Unjust, I know. Your guilt in this, real or imagined, has set you alone and adrift at sea. And I alone am your last hope for *security*, Ms. Hightower.

JULIA

Really, Mr. Ainsworth, I think you missed your calling. Prize pigs, gristle filled maws, adrift at sea. It seems you have a bent toward the poetic. But perhaps you should have said, "I alone might offer a sturdy mast and sail"...or "I alone am a fruitful uncharted isle in your course" or better still "I alone am the *God Poseidon* deigning to grant fair seas for your passage home."

MR. AINSWORTH

Perhaps I might have.

JULIA

Mr. Legard, whom, as you have intimated, is of French heritage is in fact as true an Englishman as you or I. He is my friend, and his skill with either brush or chisel is equal to anything I have seen displayed in the National Gallery. I admire his talent.

MR. AINSWORTH

Yes, I agree he is talented. I've seen his nudes. He's an eye for detail.

(SHE starts again to leave.
HE grabs her arm)

JULIA

Mr. Ainsworth, you will let go my arm!

MR. AINSWORTH

(pulling her close)

The deal is sealed, Ms. Hightower. Your parents have already accepted my offer of matrimony and despite social proprieties dictating the contrary, have accepted a generous gift of real estate in this accord. You have been sold--

THE PLAY CONTINUES FOR ONE MORE PAGE.

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