

Lost Empires
a play of memory

By

Grifyn Thomas

© 2005, Grifyn Thomas
grifyn.thom@proton.me

Cast of Characters

<u>OLD GRACE:</u>	An woman of almost 100 years; gaunt, but not ill. Filled with waves of energy and humor, occasionally interrupted by fatigue.
<u>AGATHA:</u>	A striking woman in her mid-forties, a regal countenance and a formal propriety resting over a passionate and anguished soul.
<u>YOUNG GRACE:</u>	A 17-year old girl who seems more mature than her years. Precocious, musical and romantic. Agatha's daughter.
<u>BERNADETTE:</u>	Thirty-five; Irish. A once wild-spirited woman who has given up on the world. Grace's personal maid. Nicknamed "Bernie."
<u>PATRICK:</u>	Agatha's husband. Thirty-three. Remarkably handsome; a rogue charmer and professional idler.

Scene

The general setting for the play is a blank black space, into which are introduced a few pieces of furniture. For most of the play, OLD GRACE is seated in a large, nondescript institutional chair high above the stage; she is in a nursing home and also lost in her imagination. She wears an enormous white dress which covers much of the stage, flowing from her like some strange bridal train, draping the stage like a tent or one of those mosquito nets that were used during the Raj to protect a bed. A large white hospital bed floats in the air near her, as does a bedside table. Far down SL is a doorway, also hanging mid-air. SR of the bed is a window, through which, perhaps, may be glimpsed the arm of a tree, some sky, and the dark shape of a large building.

Time

1996 and October, 1914.

LIGHTS RISE on the setting floating in the air, a nursing home in the Bronx, 1996. At first, the lights are focused just on OLD GRACE's face. Gradually, the light expands as she speaks happily, bursting with energy. Gradually, we see the floating elements of her room, and finally, the great white dress flowing outrageously from the confines of her chair. It is autumn. The door is open. There is a vase of flowers on the tray table before her. She talks to someone who seems to be in front of her.

OLD GRACE

. . . Now I have to stay put and I'm very thankful to be here. I don't know anything about these places, but I think this is exceedingly well-run. I've had no trouble, nobody pays old Grace no mind.

(Pause)

No one ever stops here, because they all say "Old Grace don't talk."

(Laughs)

I don't talk when I have nothing to talk about. For instance, I wouldn't talk to you about the weather. I'd talk to you about Innndia. You'll go around the world some day and, of course, if you fall madly in love -- well, such a shame. We call that love. So many people close the door once they've got that respectability. And, of course I was lucky -- pardon me for talking about myself, I can't keep away from it. I didn't have to close the travel book when I fell in love; marriage was my door to travel -- and travail. It ended so tragically. He was a jewel, much too fine for me, and that's the right attitude, you know. When I lost him, I closed the book on everything. I'm finished now, I might as well be dead.

(Laughs; not feeling sorry for herself)

Oh, yes. I'm as dead as, they say, the "dead mackerel." Is the mackerel the deadest fish? That's what people say. "Dead Mackerel" must be the top of the dead line.

She takes one of the flowers from the vase before her and begins tearing off the petals and tossing them down. They cascade down the front of her white dress, to the floor far below her.

OLD GRACE

I'm dead, I really am. But I have no complaints, honey, because Life gave me everything and among everything was the

(MORE)

OLD GRACE (cont'd)

World Trip. I don't put that aside for anything. Take it from an oldster. When you've done that, you feel you possess the world -- it owes you nothing. And you have a right, yes a right, to see it. For instance -- did I mention the Himahl-yan Mountains?

(Pause, she smiles)

In moonlight, in India, if you ever think of me, remember me then, when you're looking across at the Himahl-ya Mountains, snow-capped, in moonlight, but you're standing in India. Isn't that a pretty thought? People count happiness by money and I'm not fool enough to sit here and say money doesn't count -- I'm not that stupid. You can't go far without it. I've seen beautiful talents fade and die when a little money would have put them on their feet. But there are so many things that money can't buy and a moonlit night looking across from India at the Himahl-yan mountains -- well, you can't just go out and buy it!

(Laughs; tearing another flower)

But now I'm here -- I don't mean to be melancholy -- but I'm just waiting to die...

BERNADETTE enters below, walking where the hem of OLD GRACE's dress meets the floor; it vexes her. She wants inside it.

OLD GRACE (cont'd)

...And I'll tell you something -- it'll be a long wait! I'm so full of Viv! as the French say, I'm so full of life. But I never brood about what I've lost. If you're going to live, you've got to lose something. Anybody else would make you weep. But I haven't lost so much -- I've still got superb health. Don't ask me how old I am, because I don't like to mention it and therefore I don't remember it -- it's too old to count. But I feel absolutely not more than sixteen. That's a natural-born fool. Here I am, I don't try for anything and I'm healthy enough to die, but I don't. After you've traveled the world, you'll come around to talk about moonlight on the Himahl-yas, and I'll be sitting right here. I'm incurably healthy...

BERNADETTE leaves, returns momentarily with a feather duster. She dusts the flower petals from OLD GRACE's dress and sweeps them into a pile.

OLD GRACE (cont'd)

...I sit here and watch my memories on that blank wall behind you. I went to India! I traveled from Tutticareen down in the toe, all the way up to look across at the Himahl-yas. I stayed above a dungeon near the Grand Canal,

(MORE)

OLD GRACE (cont'd)

and in the closet of a Croatian palace. I went sailing above the ruins of Atlantis, and I hiked Mount Athos. I have so many memories. If you want a few, I honestly think I can spare them...

OLD GRACE tears another flower and talks. BERNADETTE looks up, irritated, at the falling petals. She sweeps them all into a little pile. She doesn't have a dust pan. Looks about, frustrated, stalks off stage.

OLD GRACE

...And if I suffer now, even the tiniest bit, I deserve to. You see, in my own family I caused a perfectly horrible tragedy, for I've got the worst trait one can have: I'm profoundly selfish. In other words, I'm human. Ha-ha-ha...!

BERNADETTE reenters with the broom, picks up the hem of OLD GRACE's dress and sweeps the flowers inside it. She starts to walk away, but then realizes what she has just done. Returning to the dress hem, she shyly picks it up and peeks beneath it -- amazed, she drops it. Paces back and forth. Returns to the hem, picks it up and slips under it, disappearing inside.

OLD GRACE (cont'd)

...The only thing I worked at selflessly was music. You know, when you study piano -- well, if that doesn't get on your nerves, nothing can. I pupated for years with the great Constantine Von Sternberg and he wouldn't take just anybody. He was a monarch of the piano forte. He didn't think I was a genius or anything, but he thought I was good enough and advanced enough and it really helped build my life. People said, of course, that he liked me overly, but that wasn't true...

A candle is lit inside OLD GRACE's dress. And another, along with a lamp or two. A warm shadowy glow fills the cavern of the dress. The sound of crickets and other night creatures begins, faintly, to be heard. BERNADETTE moves amid the furniture beneath the dress, dusting and arranging things.

OLD GRACE (cont'd)

...Not about him. That was gossip. But he did often appear where I happened to be. And now, he's had the foolishness to go off and die... Now I'm completely alone. And I ought to be capable of that because so much tragedy has happened to me, and that experience should build character. But, in me, I think it's dismantled my character instead. I've been a failure so long that I don't think I even remember how to spell success. It has two esses, I know. Is there an "h" somewhere, too? I mean, I always do the wrong thing. Take my marriage. He was 27, but I was just a youngster. Had to have parental consent and all that sort of thing. I remained just 18 hours -- the extent of my honeymoon. I walked out. I just don't like to be tied to one thing in one place. I want to flit around, you know? So I walked back. And then out, and then back again. I had a revolving door marriage...

BERNADETTE appears from under the skirt, looking up. A rope drops from high above the stage. BERNADETTE motions for another, but none is forthcoming. She disappears offstage. The silhouette of AGATHA appears inside the glow of OLD GRACE's dress.

OLD GRACE

...I did a lot of flitting in the world. But he held me for years. I couldn't get loose. Had no grounds. You can't just marry and walk out. The law says no, you've got to have a good reason. It's difficult to say why I walked out. But I will tell you one short reason why I walked in, got married in the first place -- although I shouldn't be talking about myself, because I always tell the wrong things. Anyway. I wanted to get away from a situation in my --

BERNADETTE reappears and blows a whistle, looking upwards. Another rope drops, and another and another -- too many ropes fall and BERNADETTE blows her whistle for them to stop. She toots gently a couple times and several ropes return to the rafters. She attaches the remaining ropes to the hem of the dress and leaves the stage.

OLD GRACE (cont'd)

...To make it very short -- a man who shouldn't have been was quite wild about me. Too wild. And I was just 14 or 15. I had to get away from the lure of him. So at a court ball in Vienna I picked out a man, a perfect stranger, and said to my escort "There's one I like, bring him over to dance!"

(MORE)

OLD GRACE (cont'd)

That was the end of him; I married the poor divil. And the amazing thing was, he was the perfect man: he had a beautiful character. I don't believe he ever had a thought that wasn't high-minded and noble and honorable. And in the State Department he was appointed to an important diplomatic post. So of course, I had to be on my good behavior, which I was. For a while . . .

A library clock tolls the hour: five haunting gongs. The hem of OLD GRACE's enormous dress begins to rise from the stage floor very slowly, gradually revealing a room in India, circa 1914. It is near sunset, in a fancy parlour in Agra. The room is cast in shadow. AGATHA, an elegant woman somewhere in her forties, is alone at the desk. Slowly, she opens and reads a letter which seems, at first, to amuse her; she smiles gently. Suddenly, she is overcome with savage tears.

OLD GRACE

. . . Unfortunately, you can't be a good diplomat and tell the truth. Tell people the truth a couple of times and they're finished with you. I thought that I had a strong will; but no, no. You think you've got a plan in life that you're going to follow, and there are, maybe, some humans who manage... but for me, someone came along. Something else revolved besides my marriage. And I caused a terrific tragedy. Terrific. In India! In moonlight. In the wilds of India!

The curtain of dress, being pulled upward, obscures OLD GRACE, who becomes a silhouette behind it. Tabla and flute music floats in the distance. Lights rise fully on AGATHA, who sits upright in a chair and sobs, her arms ground into the chair arms, her eyes open. She clutches the letter as though it were a knife. As quickly as they began, the tears cease. She takes a deep breath and speaks, quietly.

AGATHA

Liar.

She takes the letter, calmly folds it, and returns it to its envelope. A knock is heard at the door. She takes out a piece of stationery, a pen, and begins to write. Another knock, longer. She doesn't seem to notice it. More knocking, louder. She lights a hurricane lamp. Insistent knocking. She looks up.

AGATHA (cont'd)

Medhi, someone is at the door.

The knocking continues. She stands. Medhi?! Amma?! Someone please get the door this instant!

More knocking. Annoyed, she rises. Honestly, I knew I should have brought my own servants!

She exits left; a door is heard. Heavens! Grace! What on earth are you doing here? You're supposed to be in Vienna! Why are -- well, never mind, I'm not supposed to be answering the door, either, am I? Welcome to India, where nothing is ever as it should be. What a surprise!

She re-enters, followed by GRACE, in a beautiful white dress, and BERNADETTE, dressed modestly, in grey-green.

YOUNG GRACE

Almost as much a surprise as not finding you in Dehli! Why did you leave? I might never have found you if I hadn't run into that rummy old friend of yours.

AGATHA

Which rummy old friend?

YOUNG GRACE

The lieutenant.

AGATHA

The lieutenant, lieutenant...oh, you mean the Colonel, darling!

YOUNG GRACE

Whatever. Something military.

AGATHA

And he's bourbony, Grace, not rummy. He cannot abide rum; unless it involves a pack of cards. Where did you run into the Colonel?

YOUNG GRACE

At your old hotel. He was just checking out when we arrived. Can you send someone to the station for my bags?

AGATHA

I'd love to, but I don't know where they've all got off to. I called and called for them to answer the door just now, but they were as scarce as gin at a tent meeting. Oh, wait! I remember. How stupid of me! Tonight is one of their festivals. One of their Gods is having a birthday.

BERNADETTE

That's what all 'em people was up to on the way from the station.

YOUNG GRACE

Yes, Bernie, you must be right. There was this perfectly enormous crowd in the street on the way here; our driver had to take a long detour down away from the river. Everyone was singing and waving lanterns and candles. It looked very exotic and mystical.

AGATHA

Oh, good, it's one of their happy pagan rituals, then. There's nothing more distressing than a sad pagan ritual.

YOUNG GRACE

Except, perhaps, a happy Christian one.

AGATHA

Grace! I don't know which is worse -- that you think of things like that, or that you say them.

YOUNG GRACE

I was just joking, ma-maa.

AGATHA

Well, be careful. Certain subjects are far too dangerous to be funny.

YOUNG GRACE

Like marriage?

AGATHA

Exactly. Speaking of which -- I thought George needed you to accompany him to the Viscounts Ball this month -- what made him let you run off like this?

YOUNG GRACE

I wouldn't know. I didn't tell him I was going.

AGATHA

Bernadette, you'd better go to the station and see to the bags. Go to the ticket office, ask for Ramdas -- here, I'll write his name down . . .

BERNADETTE

Ramdas; you don't need to write it, ma'am. I'm a quick learner.

AGATHA

So you are, I forgot. The people here could learn a thing or two from you. Oh, I'm so glad to see you. Both of you. Tell Ramdas I told you to see him and explain about the bags. He'll send someone.

BERNADETTE

Yes, ma'am.

(She exits)

AGATHA

You are so smart to bring that girl with you. These Indians are passable I suppose -- naturally subservient, really -- but they are alarmingly unreliable. And they're always having these pagan parties of theirs. Give me an Irish Catholic girl any day of the week over these Hindu-Moslem types. At least an Irish Catholic understands money. You pay them a little extra and they'll work Christmas. I should have brought Arlene and Richards with me, that was really an awful . . .

YOUNG GRACE

I've left George, ma-maa.

(Pause)

AGATHA

To come to India, you mean. Of course. You must be tired. Why don't you go lie down on my bed until Bernadette comes back and makes up yours?

YOUNG GRACE

I'm going to ask him for a divorce.

(Pause)

AGATHA

Now how long are you planning to stay? I was thinking of going to Tuticareen tomorrow. I met this perfectly lovely couple -- friends of the moghul prince who's letting me this suite -- and they've invited me to come visit for a week or so...

YOUNG GRACE

I don't love him anymore. Maybe I never did. I don't know. But I don't love him now, I'm sure of that.

AGATHA

(Pause)

Does he love you?

YOUNG GRACE

No.

(Pause, miserably)

He adores me.

AGATHA

(Laughing gaily)

Then what more do you want? It's the perfect marriage. At least you already know you don't love him. You wouldn't want it the other way around, would you?

YOUNG GRACE

No, I wouldn't. I've seen what that does to a woman.

AGATHA

What do you mean?

YOUNG GRACE

I want out; I'll never forgive myself if I do that to him.

AGATHA

Do what?

YOUNG GRACE

Make him a laughing stock. Grist for the rumor mills. Have every parlour maid and two-bit princess gossiping about what a fool he is! Oh, I couldn't stand it a moment longer, ma-maa. His gentleness, his kind words, were driving me mad! I couldn't stand to be with him. Alone, or in public. Just before I left, I missed two state dinners and the reception for the Serbian Ambassador due to phantom headaches!

AGATHA

That's just as well. The Serbians are so terse. You can never tell if they're really laughing or about to burst into tears. When are you going back?

YOUNG GRACE

Ma-maa...Never. I am never going back.

AGATHA

Well, you can't stay in India forever, you know. The summers are dreadful. So, what are you going to do?

YOUNG GRACE

I told you. I'm going to get a divorce.

AGATHA

I see. And then?

GRACE

Well...I thought you and I might travel together for a while.

AGATHA

I'm going back to London soon. Patrick is winding up his business on the Continent and he wants me to return. I just received a letter from him this afternoon. He misses me. And a wife is duty-bound to come when her husband calls.

YOUNG GRACE

I see. That doesn't look like his handwriting. Is he ill?

AGATHA

You could come stay with us for the summer. We'll be renting the house in Coventry again.

YOUNG GRACE

How soon were you planning to go back?

AGATHA

Oh, quite soon. Right after I come back from Tuticareen.

YOUNG GRACE

But, ma-maa, what will I do?

AGATHA

You should have asked me that question before you got married, my dear. You made your marriage, now you must lie in it.

YOUNG GRACE

You're so cruel!

AGATHA

I?! What about the daughter who at the unbaked age of fourteen decides she's had it with being a daughter and wants to be a wife? What about the daughter who tells her mother and stepfather she's getting married -- doesn't really ask their consent, even though the law requires it -- doesn't seek their advice -- tells them. What about her? Is she kindness personified? Is she thoughtful? And then she goes flitting all over Europe like some sort of American Butterfly, landing here and there for a day a two, never writing, only visiting when she needs a shoulder to cry on or a handout. Don't tell me about cruelty, Grace. You've taught me more vividly with your actions than your words ever will.