

The Man in the White Suit

Written by Roger MacDougall, John Dighton and Alexander Mackendrick
Based on a play by Roger MacDougall

Character descriptions

Sidney Stratton

A young scientist, specializing in the development of artificial fibres. Possibly a genius, he is so utterly dedicated to his researches that he is a complete simpleton in every other respect. He has never at any time given a moment's thought to the social implications of his scientific work. He is incorruptible and "idealistic," in the sense that he is wholly unconcerned with material rewards or political problems.

Mr. Birnley

Owner of the Birnley Textile Mills, an old fashioned but reasonably profitable British textile "extrusion" mill in the Midlands. Birnley is a true liberal, meaning that he is an enthusiastic supporter of progressive ideas so long as they contribute to his personal profit. He believes in enlightened self-interest.

Daphne

His daughter. Intelligent, well-educated and a genuine idealist which as the only daughter of a well-to-do industrialist she can afford to be.

Michael Corland

Engaged to Daphne. Owner of a rather less successful textile mill, he is hoping to persuade his future father-in-law to invest in his operations. It might be unfair to suggest that he has been courting Daphne purely for this reason but it is understandably a factor that may have attracted him to her.

Bertha, Harry and Frank

Three workers in the Birnley Mill. Frank is the Shop-Steward; Harry, a simple minded companion; Bertha the enthusiastic radical, passionate in the rhetorical defences of the workers' rights. Mistakenly convinced that Sidney is a victim of capitalist conservatism, Bertha is also somewhat in love with Sidney, who is quite unaware of her feelings.

Sir John Kierlaw

A very old, very rich, utterly realistic industrialist. Asthmatic, he looks as if he is about to fall apart at the seams, but appearances can be deceptive. Sir John is too old to have patience with fools and has some contempt for people who are less intelligent than he is, which means everybody in our story.

Mrs. Watson

Sidney's landlady. To supplement the income she gets from renting out the rooms in her gloomy little workman's cottage, she takes in washing.

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1) Corland's Mill. Michael Corland, who is engaged to Daphne, is trying to get her father to invest in his company. Birnley, aware that Michael is after his daughter's money, has agreed to visit the mill, but is unimpressed. Birnley discovers the odd-looking experiment. What is it? Nobody knows. An embarrassing investigation. It seems to have cost thousands of pounds, but nobody knows who is responsible. Daphne finally identifies Sidney Stratton.

2) Sidney's declaration in the lavatory. He went to Cambridge but has been getting fired from every position since. Someday, someone will recognize his genius. His work is of world-shaking importance (but what is it?).

3) Fired again, Sidney goes to the Unemployment Office and finds there is a job at the Birnley Mill, as a labourer.

4) Sidney meets Bertha, the firebrand Trades Unionist. She falls for him. He gets a glimpse of the marvels of the laboratory at the Birnley Mills.

5) The misunderstanding when the electron microscope is delivered. Sidney gets an unpaid position in the lab and starts work again.

6) Sidney's landlady is a washerwoman, Mrs. Watson. She and Bertha offer support to Sidney.

7) Birnley has turned down Michael's appeal. Michael loses interest in Daphne. Daphne, hurt, is furious at her father for holding Michael responsible over the incident involving the experiment. Encountering Sidney in a corridor, she belatedly remembers where she has seen him before, pursues him and discovers in the laboratory, and discovers the same experiment! Sidney pursues her, begs her not to expose him to her father. He tries to explain his experiments. (We get a little more information, but not much. We still don't know what it is).

8) Birnley discovers Daphne in the library of their home. She's reading the encyclopaedia on nuclear chemistry.

9) The Birnley Mills during lunch hour. Sidney is continuing his experiments. A breakthrough: achieving sudden success, he is now hysterical with joy that he throws caution to the winds. Discovered and exposed as a trespasser in the lab, he is summarily dismissed. His experimental sample is junked.

10) Desperate, Sidney tries to make contact with Birnley at his home. The butler won't let him inside the door. Birnley is in a meeting, trying to cope with the problems identical to those that were discovered at Michael's mill: thousands of pounds have been spent on God-knows what! Sidney finally gains entry through Daphne. But by now, everyone, the butler, Sidney, and Birnley are in such state of frustration that Sidney, out of his senses, insults Birnley in his own house. He is once more rejected. Daphne, in furious bad temper, finally tells Birnley what the invention is: "He made a cloth that never wears out and never gets dirty." Shaken, Birnley begins to wonder.

11) Birnley and Sidney return to the lab to announce to the staff that Sidney is to be offered another chance. He is to be given complete freedom to continue his research. The lab will be cleared and everybody moved out.

12) The experimentation is renewed, and results in a series of disasters. The experiment keeps blowing up. Bigger and bigger explosions! Rumour reaches the local press, but the work is kept completely secret. A final experiment. At this, Birnley and his accountant are actually present and would have been annihilated, except that this time it is a success. Birnley orders the process to go into production.

13) Scenes of the production process. The fibre cannot be cut but can be severed by a high intensity blow torch. It is so strong that it breaks their steel tensile testing apparatus. Woven into a cloth, it repels dirt. Astonished tailors have to be supplied with template patterns to cut the fabric with a blow torch.

14) Sidney comes to Daphne in a white suit that glows in the dark. Sidney is like "a Knight in Shining Armour." Daphne is emotional. He is a true hero, fighting the battle for millions of people around the world "against shabbiness and dirt."

15) An industrial spy reports back to the Corland Mill. Michael recognizing the implications, places a phone call to Sir John Kierlaw.

16) Sir John, an awe-inspiring figure, drives in a convoy of Rolls Royces from London to the Midlands, accompanied by an entourage of executives. Met by Michael, they descend on Birnley who has been about to hold a press conference. Birnley is nervous as Sir John appears in his office and demands: "Now then. Some fool has invented an indestructible cloth. Where is he? And how much does he want?"

17) Sidney, arriving for the press conference in the white suit, explains its properties to Bertha and her companions. They are interrupted by Michael who has slipped away from the group in Birnley's office in order to intercept Sidney. As Michael leads Sidney off, the shop steward, Bertha, and another worker belatedly realize the significance of Sidney's invention. "If this stuff never wears out, there will only be one lot to make!"

18) While Birnley protests to Sir John and the rest of the textiles executives, Michael rejoins them. He has made an interesting discovery. Birnley has no contractual rights over the process, because at the time it was actually invented, Sidney wasn't a paid employee. Birnley is aghast at this oversight. Sir John and his colleagues are maliciously delighted.

19) Sidney is summoned to Birnley's office. A new contract has been prepared and is laid before him. It is now apparent to us, if not to Sidney, that Birnley has had to sell out to Sir John. On the point of signing the revised document, Sidney begins to sense that there is reluctance to name the time at which the cloth will be put on the market. Sir John is blunt, and explain that the invention will be suppressed. A slapstick panic ensues as they chase Sidney around the building to the astonishment of the visiting reporters and the confusion of the works committee. As Sidney is cornered, an ornamental plaque falls on his head, knocking him out. Is he alive? Yes. "A pity," comments Sir John.

20) At Sidney's lodgings, Bertha and the other workers are waiting when Birnley's butler comes to fetch Sidney's clothes. Mr. Stratton will be staying with Mr. Birnley now. The shop steward takes this as proof that Sidney is afraid to face the works committee and has been bought out by the management.

21) Sidney is actually being held prisoner in Daphne's top floor room. Below, the argument between Birnley, Sir John Kierlaw, and Michael continues. What are they to do? Sidney refuses to sign over the rights and they can't hold him forever! When Birnley is otherwise engaged, the others have an idea. Daphne and Sidney are clearly friends and perhaps, if it is put to her properly, Daphne could "use her influence." To Daphne it is plain: she is being asked to seduce Sidney. Concealing her indignation, she agrees to make the attempt, but insists that she must be well paid. Sir John agrees, and before Birnley knows what the deal is, Daphne leaves.

22) Admitted to the locked room in which Sidney is held prisoner, Daphne embarks on the seduction of the bewildered inventor. At the critical moment, realizing what is involved, Sidney has to apologize. He can't go through with it. Daphne admits that she would have strangled Sidney if he had succumbed to her charms on these conditions. She sets about organizing his escape.

23) Contention is continuing among textile magnates. Rumours seem to be spreading, in spite of categorical denials. The market is collapsing and nervous phone calls are coming to the house from as far as Calcutta. Birnley's works manager arrives with the news that the works committee is calling for an immediate stoppage: they want an assurance that production will be halted at once.

24) The remarkable thread provides Sidney with a means of escape. Lowering himself on a single filament, he descends from Daphne's top floor window and runs off into the night.

25) Making for the railway station, Sidney finds that he is a few pennies short of the cost of a train ticket. A taxi driver refuses to lend him the necessary amount. Remembering that he has left some shillings for the gas meter at his lodging, Sidney sets off for Mrs. Watson's.

26) Though a new lodger is already in possession, Sidney discovers the necessary money. But he is intercepted by Bertha and another worker. Bertha is delighted at his escape. Sidney shares her outrage at the attitude of the bosses: "they wanted to suppress it." Sidney and Bertha confront each other. "So do we!" says Bertha. Appalled and doubly betrayed, Sidney retreats and is pursued. A struggle ensues as Bertha realizes that Sidney must be stopped from taking the story to the newspapers. She manages to lock him in his old room, and also to imprison the protesting new lodger in the scullery. Leaving her companion to guard the prisoners, Bertha goes to join the works committee. Belatedly, Birnley has learned of the scandalous suggestion that his daughter's honour was to be sacrificed to Sidney. While the works committee are arriving for the meeting with Sir John, Birnley hammers on Daphne's locked door. Heaven knows what shameful things are happening inside!

27) Confronting each other, management and workers are at daggers drawn. Bertha has joined the delegation and the shop steward now plays the trump card: Sidney is with the workers now. This shakes Sir John, who thought Sidney was safely incarcerated in the room above.

28) Birnley's ineffectual efforts to persuade his daughter to open the door are resolved when Sir John's bodyguard crashes through it. Daphne points to the window: their captive had fled.

29) But he hasn't. Disconsolate, Sidney is now a prisoner of the other faction. The window to the basement room is blocked with iron bars. But a small and dirty urchin, a little girl, has arrived to inspect Sidney's predicament. Presently, the girl enters by the back door to inform Sidney's jailor that his prisoner has escaped again.

Incredulous, Bertha's colleague opens the door and confirms that Sidney is nowhere to be seen. Darting out of the back door, he leaves the room unlocked so that Sidney can emerge from a cupboard and make his way out by the front door.

30) In the middle of the altercation at Birnley's house, a phone message arrives for Bertha: a new disaster, Sidney is free again! Workers and management face the unpleasant fact that they are both helpless until they recapture their common enemy, Sidney. Together, they stampede out of the house, commandeering Sir John's Rolls Royces for the pursuit.

31) The hunt leads back to the railway station. Sidney discovers that he is especially vulnerable because the white suit is still slightly luminous. Running unexpectedly into an old friend, Mrs. Watson, who is carrying home a load of washing, Sidney begs her to lend him something to wear on top of his too conspicuous clothing. To his utter astonishment, he finds that the pathetic little landlady has no desire to assist him. "Why can't you scientists leave well enough alone? What about my bit of washing when there's no washing to do!"

32) The lights of the Birnley Mill are dark while the workers are out on strike. A solitary watchman comes to find out who it is that is still working in the lab. It is Sidney's assistant, Wilson. But as the watchman pleads with him to leave, Wilson is making a terrible discovery. The first samples of the marvellous new fibre, sitting on a shelf in the cabinet, seem to look different. They are changing. The thread is frayed and disintegrating.

33) The shouting and the clatter of running feet is diminishing as the manhunt comes to its end. They have found Sidney. He is cornered in front of the closed gates of the Birnley Mill. Silent, but now much more sinister, the mob has begun to shuffle closer to the figure in the immaculately white clothes. Sidney, trapped, makes a single small movement to evade one of the threatening workers who grabs at his shoulder and comes away with a fluffy handful of what once was the indestructible cloth. First reaction is disbelief. Then, laughter, hysteric laughter, in waves. The crowd press closer to rip from Sidney every shred of the stuff that they feared and hated, scattering it like confetti or candy floss. The reactions are various. Michael and Sir John are jubilant. Birnley is dazed. It is in Daphne's face that we first see pity, and Bertha shares her feeling for the farcical figure that is now in underwear, quietly humiliated. Presently, the hilarity subsides and the worker who first assaulted Sidney begins to remove his raincoat, offering it to Sidney, "Here, Lad. Take this."

34) Later. Sunlight and the gates of the reopened mill. The voice of Birnley resumes the narration which began the tale. “The news of Sidney’s failure brought relief to the world. The crisis is over now.” Birnley looking out of the window of his office has a view of two small figures at the gates: Wilson is taking leave of Sidney. Both are a little sad. As Sidney starts to walk off, he is fingering the little notebook which contains his experimental formulae. “We’ve seen the last of Sidney Stratton,” continues Birnley’s voice with smug satisfaction. But Sidney has paused. A new thought has occurred to him. As he closes his notebook, his step seems more jaunty, optimistic. Birnley’s voice falters, uneasy. “At least, I hope we’ve seen the last of him.” The end music incorporates an unsettling sound, the noise of Sidney’s experiment, still bubbling.