

Murder at the Manor

ACT ONE - SCENE ONE

IT IS SPRINGTIME THE SCENE IS THE LIVING ROOM OR CONSERVATORY OF A SMALL MANOR HOUSE MARCUS WALKS ON THE STAGE—FROM THE DIRECTION OF THE HOUSE—HE PICKS UP THE TELEPHONE ARNOLD AND CYNTHIA CAN BE SEEN STANDING BY THE TWO EXITS AND CYNTHIA IS ON THE HOUSE SIDE AND ARNOLD IS ON THE OTHER SIDE

MARCUS: Hello, is that Johnson and Wilcox? Hetherington-Smyth here. Can I speak to Peter Wilcox? Thank you. Hello Peter, Marcus here. Thanks for confirming the changes. I received notification yesterday...Perfect... Super. By bloodline only. Ever so grateful to you Peter. Thanks for everything. Goodbye. **(PUTS DOWN THE PHONE)** Marvellous. That'll make a little surprise birthday present for someone **(HE LOOKS PLEASED WITH HIMSELF EXIT CYNTHIA TO THE HOUSE – ARNOLD WALKS IN FROM THE OUTSIDE, LOOKING HARASSED. MARCUS'S MOOD CHANGES IMMEDIATELY AND HE LOOKS IRRITATED)** Oh. For Heaven's sake, Arnold hurry up. There's just so much to do...and you haven't done it yet. I don't pay you to stand around looking. Do something man.

ARNOLD: But, Sir, Marcus...what would you like?

MARCUS: Do you really have to ask me? Use your initiative man. The birthday celebrations are tomorrow night. Forty-five, even though I don't look a day over thirty **(HE PREENS HIMSELF)** and, as my butler, I expect you to be...well, in control,, at the helm.

ARNOLD: **(TO AUDIENCE)** Yes, well you certainly aren't. **(TO SIR MARCUS)** Yes, Sir Marcus. I'll check with Lady Cynthia. **(CYNTHIA ENTERS FROM HOUSE)**

CYNTHIA: Ah, there you are Arnold, you poor old thing. Is Marcus being beastly to you again. Now, let me see...

ARNOLD: Food has been organised and drinks have arrived your ladyship. We're expecting 45 guests.

MARCUS: 45 guests at Trumpington Manor! That must be most of the village. Well, I sincerely hope, my dear, you haven't invited any riff-raff. **(HE GETS THE DRINKS)**

CYNTHIA: No, of course not dear. **(HE LOOKS HEAVENWARDS)**

MARCUS: And where's Nigel? He said he was popping in for a drink this morning before going to the Commons.

CYNTHIA: Well, I'm sure he'll come dear. He's probably been held up, that's all.

MARCUS: Held up! That's the trouble with the modern world. Too many damned unreliable sorts. Which reminds me, this morning I was looking for my mobile phone. You haven't seen it have you Cynthia?

CYNTHIA: No dear, of course not. Now, why don't you just relax? You're probably a bit overwrought with the birthday celebrations.

MARCUS: Birthday celebrations! Oh no, Cynthia. They are the least of my worries. Arnold, did you remember to organise the video?

ARNOLD: The video?

MARCUS: Yes, of course the video. You know I want the murder mystery on film.

ARNOLD: No problems, Sir Marcus. I'll see that it's done. I'll just go and check one or two final details. **(ARNOLD GOES TO THE BOOKCASE AND TAKE A BOOK. AS ACTION CONTINUES HE GOES OFF WITH THE BOOK, SMILING TO HIMSELF ARNOLD EXITS INTO THE HOUSE)**

MARCUS: Oh look, I'm sorry dear. I don't know what the problem is. I've been so worried lately about the estate. We're just getting further and further into debt. And I can't see a way out.

CYNTHIA: What about the stocks and shares you are always talking about? Surely we could cash some in?

MARCUS: Most of them are useless. You know with that insurance policy of ours I'd be better off dead than alive.

CYNTHIA: Marcus, don't say that. We'll manage....somehow. **(THE DOORBELL RINGS)** There's the doorbell. Where's Arnold? Oh I'll get it. I'll bet that's Nigel. Nothing like your brother to cheer you up. **(SHE GOES TO THE DOOR AND RETURNS FROM THE OUTSIDE - ENTER NIGEL)**

NIGEL: Hello, old boy. How are you keeping then? Just thought I'd pop in for a quick sherry on the way down to Westminster. Check that everything was O.K....back at the baronial mansion. **(HE LAUGHS)** Hey, what's the matter old boy? Mind if I fix myself a drink? Come on old chap, spill the beans. Not another hangover is it? You'd think you'd....

MARCUS: Oh for goodness sake, Nigel. Would you please make an effort not to be so damned cheerful all the time...especially when you can see a fellow's not feeling too clever. Cynthia, you don't know where that fool Rowbottom has got to, do you?

CYNTHIA: (MAKING AN EXCUSE) Now where did I put that guest list? I'll bet Arnold's got it. Won't be a tick dear. **(EXIT CYNTHIA INTO THE HOUSE)**

MARCUS: Fine pair we make, eh Nigel? It's nice that you visit us at home these days you know.

NIGEL: I know Marcus, it is for me too.

MARCUS: I don't think you know how much I missed our friendship. Remember the things we got up to as kids? Those tricks we used to play on the servants.

NIGEL: Remember cook's reaction when she discovered that her precious plum pudding had been laced with cleaning powder.

MARCUS: How could I forget? **(BOTH LAUGH)** That was you wasn't it? Forever the prankster Nigel. How's it going by the way? According to the Telegraph this morning, you've got a big vote on tonight.

NIGEL: Big vote, ha! Apparently Brussels wants us to standardise the amount of polyester used in shirts.

MARCUS: What?

NIGEL: Yes, and that damned Labour lot have agreed it's a good idea. Something to do with losing textile jobs in the North of England. **(ENTER ARNOLD AND CYNTHIA WITH THE GUEST LIST FROM THE HOUSE)**

MARCUS: Ridiculous.

NIGEL: Exactly. Who gives a damn about the North of England anyway.

ARNOLD: Hello, Sir Nigel.

NIGEL: Talk of the devil. Here's the man himself. 'The Hero From Heckmondwyke'. And how are you my good man? Happy with your lot in life?

ARNOLD: All the better for seeing you of course, sir. And how are you keeping?

NIGEL: Oh, you know, can't complain. What's that you've got there, Arnold? Not a love letter from one of the village girls I hope?

ARNOLD: No sir. Just something for the party.

NIGEL: Well come on then Arnold. Don't be so secretive. **(TAKES THE PAPER FROM ARNOLD EVEN THOUGH THE LATTER IS NOT KEEN. NIGEL READS)**

ARNOLD: Just something to add a little spice, sir. To the murder mystery, you understand.

NIGEL: Add a little spice. You're not kidding. Have you seen this Marcus? A copy of the family curse. How did you come by this then? **(GIVES FAMILY CURSE TO MARCUS)**

ARNOLD: I was given it by her ladyship sir.

CYNTHIA: Come on Arnold. You persuaded me to give it to you. You thought it might add to the atmosphere.

MARCUS: Add to the atmosphere? You're not joking are you? Do you realise how much trouble this has caused in the past? Apparently it resulted in the murder of my great-great grandfather. **(CYNTHIA TAKES THE FAMILY CURSE FROM MARCUS)**

CYNTHIA: Don't be so melodramatic dear. You know how fascinated the locals are by history and intrigue. It's a shame to keep these things hidden. **(CYNTHIA READING)**

"To the first"—oh that must be you Marcus

"A title yes but fear the worst"

Oh dear! It then says:

"But to the second, Banquo's fate

A title no, but children great."

MARCUS: Oh well, looks as though you're about to sire a whole dynasty Nigel. Pity you haven't started yet! Ha! Ha! Ha!

CYNTHIA: You don't know that Marcus.

MARCUS: Sticking up for my little brother are we now? Just like old times, don't you think?

NIGEL: Oh come on now Marcus, there's no need for that.

MARCUS: Isn't there Nigel? You have an affair with my wife, tell me it's all over; a couple of years later you discover you're missing out on things and decide to try to patch things up.

CYNTHIA: Oh Marcus, you know that was years ago.

MARCUS: Years ago it might have been for you Cynthia . But for me, it is just like yesterday. **(SILENCE. THE PHONE RINGS - ARNOLD MOVES TO TAKE IT)**

CYNTHIA: Don't worry, I'll get it. Trumpington Manor? Tom Bowtor? Would you spell that please? T-O-M-B-O-W-T-O-R. No, there's no one of that name here. I'm afraid you must have the wrong number. Goodbye. Tom Bowtor? I'm sure I've heard that name somewhere before. He's not an actor is he?

MARCUS: Damned British Telecom. Can't these people even make a correct connection these days?

ARNOLD: (TO HIMSELF) No, Sir Marcus, but one or two people in this room may have done.

NIGEL: Look Marcus, old boy, what about another drink? Arnold, would you mind....

MARCUS: Don't you patronise me Nigel. Arnold, you leave that bottle alone and come along into the village with me. It's about time we checked out if Caroline Shepherd has managed to get those murder mystery players organised. **(TO CYNTHIA)** See you later dear. **(TO NIGEL)** Have an exciting time in the Commons Nigel, if I don't see you before the big vote.

CYNTHIA: Bye, dear.

NIGEL: Goodbye Marcus.

MARCUS: Oh, and by the way, do leave a spot of whisky for me, won't you both. If Briony arrives, tell her I'll be back soon. **(WITH SARCASM)** Bye. **(SIR MARCUS AND ARNOLD EXIT TO THE OUTSIDE - NIGEL POURS A DRINK)**

NIGEL: One for you? Five years, and he still hasn't forgiven us Cynthia.

CYNTHIA: Be a realist, Nigel, for goodness sake. He's a proud man and he's had his honour insulted.

NIGEL: Yes, I know Cynthia, love. But he's always been like that. Quick to take offence when he feels he's the wounded party, but pretty slow to admit it when he's at fault.

CYNTHIA: Oh come on sweetheart. I know I sometimes think I must be the biggest fool in the world. Not content to love one man and marry his brother, I allow myself to have my lover's baby and pretend to the whole world, including my poor husband, that the baby's his.

NIGEL: Briony's a beautiful girl Cynthia. I'm very proud of her, you know. I'm sure she's going to do something worthwhile with her life and not waste it like me.

CYNTHIA: Don't be ridiculous Nigel. You're a respected Member of Parliament.

NIGEL: No darling, Member of Parliament I may be, but respected, well, perhaps, but that's no compensation for the debts.

CYNTHIA: Oh come on darling. You're beginning to remind me of Marcus.

NIGEL: (COMING ROUND AND SMILING) And that would never do, would it? **(PAUSE FOR ONE SECOND AND AN INTIMATE MOMENT - THE DOORBELL RINGS SHAKING THEM FROM THEIR REVERIE)**

CYNTHIA: (GUILTILY) Goodness me, that must be Briony back already. Not unless Marcus has forgotten something.

NIGEL: Or is trying to catch us out.

CYNTHIA: Don't worry about that Nigel. I'm sure he thinks those flames have long-since died away. **(THE DOORBELL GOES AGAIN)**

CYNTHIA: All right, all right. If there's one thing which Briony inherited from your side of the family Nigel, it's her complete lack of patience. **(OPENS DOOR. BRIONY ENTERS FROM THE OUTSIDE)**

BRIONY: Hello, mother dear.

CYNTHIA: Oh hello Briony darling. (Embraces her) And how is Cambridge?

BRIONY: Wonderful, Mummy, just wonderful. Uncle Nigel...I mean....this is silly. You know, I don't think I'll ever be able to call you Daddy.

NIGEL: You know that's probably no bad thing. **(EMBRACES HER)** Briony. Lovely to see you darling.

CYNTHIA: What about your cases dear?

BRIONY: I've had the taxi driver take them round to the back of the house. Arnold will take them upstairs. Where is he, by the way?

CYNTHIA: Gone to the village with your father. Come on Briony, make yourself at home.