

Murder At The Manor



A Whodunnit

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DRAMATIS PERSONAE
(IN ORDER OF APPEARANCE)

Sir Marcus Hetherington-Smyth: Lord of the Manor. An overbearing character who is middle-aged. Suffered by all who know him. Generally ill tempered, shows little patience with the rest of the world.

Arnold Rowbottom: Butler at Trumpington Manor. Like everyone else, suffers Marcus, but has to put up with more than most. As the play progresses, we come to learn that perhaps there is more to Arnold than his bluff exterior would lead us to believe.

Cynthia Hetherington-Smyth: Wife of Sir Marcus and Lady of the Manor. She has to spend a good deal of her time pacifying her irascible husband. Does this mean she is completely dedicated to him, or is she tempted to wander?

Nigel Hetherington-Smyth: Younger brother of Sir Marcus and Conservative Member of Parliament. Perhaps the term ‘sleazy’ was invented for Sir Nigel. Has previously had an affair with Lady Cynthia and has been forgiven by Sir Marcus, an achievement in itself.

Briony Hetherington-Smyth: Daughter of Marcus and Lady Cynthia and at present reading English at Cambridge. Briony has come down at the end of the summer term and is looking forward to seeing something of her boyfriend, Stephen Goodridge, again.

Caroline Shepherd: Former mistress of Sir Marcus. She has recently been promoted to the post of Chief Inspector in the local police force. As a single person, Caroline spends a good deal of her free time with the local amateur dramatic group. She has never quite forgiven Marcus for the way he has treated her in the past and has a formally polite, but fairly icy, relationship with Lady Cynthia.

MURDER AT THE MANOR

ACT ONE

Springtime. The living room of a small manor house.

MARCUS WALKS ON THE STAGE (FROM HOUSE). HE PICKS UP THE TELEPHONE.

ARNOLD AND CYNTHIA CAN BE SEEN STANDING BY THE TWO EXITS. 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 **(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.

Marcus: 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 **(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.

ENTER CYNTHIA (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. **(Gets drinks)**

Cynthia: No, of course not dear. **(Looks Heavenward)**

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 problem, 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 TAKES 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

Cynthia: 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.

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. **(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 GUEST LIST (FROM 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.

(READING)

'To the first (that must be you Marcus)
A title yes but fear the worst'

Oh dear!

'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? **(Muses)**

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. (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. INTIMATE MOMENT

THE DOORBELL GOES

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.

Briony: You know Mummy, it's a strange coincidence, but there is an Arnold Rowbottom who won our college prize for English in 1979. Couldn't have been the same one, I suppose.

Nigel: Heaven forbid. Can you imagine a world peopled by Arnold Rowbottoms?
(Mimics) "Can I get a drink for you Sir Marcus, or would you prefer me to act as your doormat?" **(Laughs)**. Now Briony, have you been involved in much drama at college yet?

Briony: A fair amount. I've been working backstage on 'The Real Inspector Hound'.

Cynthia: Backstage? I'm just amazed you're not acting yourself dear.

Briony: Well, that's just it Mother. I'm not acting because I want to broaden my horizons. There's an opportunity to take a year out and work in rep, except that Daddy's said no of course.

Cynthia: Typical, I'm afraid, Briony. You know your father.

Briony: Yes Mother, a mean small-minded bigot. Oh Mother, I do hate him! Sometimes he makes me so angry, I could kill him! Uncle Nigel, why don't you marry Mummy? There's still time, you know.

Cynthia: But sadly dear, not the opportunity.

Briony: But why don't you make the opportunity?

Cynthia: Don't be silly dear. Now, goodness me, nearly time for 'Dukes and Duchesses', my favourite radio serial. I'll take the opportunity while Marcus is out. He's furious every time he hears any of it. Unrealistic he says. Too damned realistic for comfort if you ask me. Especially the overbearing Duke Marcus character.

Nigel: Isn't Arnold a fan?

Cynthia: That's half the problem of course. Arnold will be working somewhere in the house, listening to the radio, guffawing away like mad. Marcus can hear him, gets in a mood, and well, you don't need me to tell you what Marcus is like when he gets in a mood. It's uncanny, though.

Briony: What's that Mother?

Cynthia: Arnold seems to have an uncanny knack of forecasting what will happen in the next episode. Almost as if he had seen the script beforehand. **(Muses)** And you know something? I'm certain half the reason he laughs out loud the way he does is to irritate Marcus. Somehow it's a way of taking revenge.

Nigel: As long as he doesn't do anything more serious. **(Looks at the time)** Oh my goodness, look at the time. What will the Chief Whip say? I'll be back tomorrow evening. **(Looks at Cynthia)** Unless I can make it sooner.

Briony: Wait a moment, Uncle Nigel. Mummy, about tomorrow evening. Do you think you could arrange it so that...

Cynthia: Don't tell me dear. You want the burglar alarm switched off so that Stephen Goodridge can do his usual climbing trick and spend a few 'precious moments'.

Briony: Mummy, I'd be so grateful. You know Father hates him. If he found out....

Cynthia: Yes, of course dear, I understand. And what time will you want it switched off on this occasion?

Briony: Well, if the pub closes at 10.30....How about 10.40?

Cynthia: Consider it done my dear. The things I do for you.

Briony: Oh Mummy, you are wonderful. **(Hugs Cynthia)**

Nigel: Yes, I agree. And so are you, Briony dear. **(Kisses both).** **(To Cynthia)** Bye darling.
(To Briony) Bye sweetheart.

Briony: Bye.

Cynthia: Bye.

NIGEL EXITS OUTSIDE

Cynthia: Would you like a drink Briony dear?

Briony: What a good idea Mummy.

BELL GOES

Cynthia: That'll be Marcus and Arnold back again. I hope everything is all right for tomorrow's 'murder mystery' arrangement. I'd better forget the idea of listening to 'Dukes and Duchesses' now. I'll catch the repeat on Sunday.

CYNTHIA GOES TO THE DOOR

Marcus: **(Offstage)** Hello dear.

BELL GOES AGAIN

Cynthia: **(Goes to the door)** There you are, you two. Oh! I see you've brought Dear Caroline with you. Welcome dear. Would you like a drink?

ENTER MARCUS, CAROLINE AND ARNOLD FROM OUTSIDE

Caroline: Love one, Cynthia.

CYNTHIA GOES TO POUR CAROLINE A DRINK

Marcus: I suppose Nigel, damn him, has been at the whisky again. And what about your poor husband? I don't count I suppose. **(Notices his daughter)** Briony darling, you're here. Lovely to see you, dear. You haven't got that wretched Goodridge with you have you? 'The Proletarian Poet' – he wants to get out and...

Briony: Daddy!

Cynthia: Anyway, Caroline is going to help us sort out tomorrow.

Arnold: And Miss Briony, a little something for you. The taxi driver said that it fell out of one of your cases. **(Hands her a letter)**

BRIONY LOOKS AT IT, SHOCKED

Briony: Thank you very much Arnold. How thoughtful you are. **(Pauses)**

Cynthia: (Embarrassed) Oh it is cold today, isn't it Caroline?

Caroline: I was just saying that to Marcus as we drove up.

Arnold: (Smiles and speaks to himself) And what do they say about the weather? It never rains but it pours. I'm sure you would agree Miss Briony...Miss Briony.

BRIONY IS STILL IN A STATE OF SHOCK, BUT IS WOKEN FROM HER DAZE BY THE MENTION OF HER NAME

Briony: Oh yes, quite. I'm sorry Arnold, what did you say?

PAUSE

Caroline: Now then, let me tell you about the plans for tomorrow. Well Cynthia, Briony, I don't know how to put this...it is all rather embarrassing, you see. Well, you know how the Major has been under so much strain recently, and he has been a stalwart...I don't know why, but there has been whole host of problems with so many of the group and well, we're not paid of course and...

Marcus: Oh, for goodness sake, woman. Do spit it out. You can't get the actors because the local am dram group has taken umbrage at their squire's high-handed manner, and so you're going to ask us to do the play for you, reading from scripts. Well, before anyone volunteers me I'll volunteer myself to play the part of the local squire, murdered for his wealth. Shouldn't be too hard.

Cynthia: All correct of course, dear. Except that you're not going to die.

Marcus: For as much as you'd care, Cynthia.

Cynthia: (Embarrassed) I think I'd better go and help Briony unpack. Come along dear. Arnold, can you give us a hand upstairs with the cases?

Arnold: As you wish, m'lady

BRIONY, ARNOLD AND CYNTHIA EXIT INTO THE HOUSE

SILENCE

Marcus: I don't know why, but every time Cynthia and I are together these days it seems to result in an argument.

Caroline: Don't be so self-pitying Marcus. You were the one who chose to marry Cynthia. You were the one who put respectability first and now you have everything you complain because life is empty. Well bad luck! What am I left with? A name for being an oddity, a female Chief Inspector in the police force. Yes Marcus, I'm a success in the public world. But I've worked hard for it, and with not a scrap of support from you.

Marcus: Caroline, sweetheart. Oh my God, how many times have we been through this? Yes, I loved you. **(Pleadingly)** I still love you, you know that.

Caroline: Yes Marcus, I know that. But I also know that you have never loved me as much as you have loved yourself, your position and the fawning admiration of those about you. **(Said with venom.)**

SILENCE

Marcus: (Puts glass down) Thank you Caroline. Help yourself to another drink before you go. It's about time I gave my daughter some of my attention.

EXIT MARCUS TO THE HOUSE. CAROLINE LEFT ALONE ON STAGE

SHE TAKES OUT A KEY

Caroline: Detective by profession, detective by inclination, Sir Marcus Hetherington-Smyth. A little bit of key-copying never did go amiss, even in the worst of murder mysteries.

USES THE KEY TO OPEN A BOX

Caroline: Now, Sir Marcus, what does your secret box have to offer? **(Takes out some papers)** Bills, even some love letters. Oh I remember that one! And what have we here? A redrafted will. **(Reads)** Oh my, my. So that's what he intends...and I thought...the dirty old dog.

ENTER ARNOLD FROM THE HOUSE (WITH BOOK AND KEY) HE LOOKS AT HER FOR A FEW SECONDS. SHE DOES NOT SEE HIM AND PUTS THE WILL AWAY, LOCKING THE BOX. SHE TAKES UP HER DRINK AGAIN

Arnold: Can I help Miss Shepherd?

Caroline: (Looking flustered) What? Er, oh no... thank you Arnold. I must go upstairs. Goodbye. **(Exits to the house in a hurry)**

Arnold: What a wily old bird you are Miss Shepherd, to be sure. But, don't forget, what's good for the goose is good for the gander. **(Takes out key, looks at it and smiles)**

ARNOLD WALKS OVER TO THE BOOKCASE AND REPLACES A BOOK, SOMEWHAT FURTIVELY

Arnold: (To himself) Yes, your ladyship, 'To serve you all my days'. But also to serve myself. **(Smiles to himself)** I look forward to reading all about you in 'The News of the World'.

ARNOLD EXITS TO THE HOUSE