

Mildred / Dorothy / Bunting

MILDRED is sitting by the fire. She is in her late fifties and is the moderately wealthy owner of the house. MILDRED's niece, DOROTHY, is sitting on the settee reading a magazine. She is in her late twenties and plainly dressed. She acts as companion and housekeeper to MILDRED.

MILDRED Are you absolutely sure that the dinner will be ready, Dorothy?

DOROTHY (*wearily*) Of course. I've been in the kitchen burning it for most of the day.

MILDRED (*not convinced*) It's so rarely that I have people for dinner these days.

DOROTHY (*quietly to herself*) I thought you'd prefer mutton actually.

MILDRED Pardon, dear?

DOROTHY Sorry?

MILDRED Sorry, I thought you spoke. (*warming her hands at the fire*) Would you close the curtains, dear. It seems to get so cold in here.

DOROTHY (*slamming her magazine down*) Absolutely . . . I'd love to. Nothing better to do.

As DOROTHY crosses to the window, MILDRED picks up the carved elephant from the hearth and throws it into the fire. DOROTHY notices and runs to the fire.

Aunty! That's the elephant!

DOROTHY pulls the elephant from the fire and examines it.

MILDRED Oh dear, how careless of me. Is it damaged?

DOROTHY A little scorched down one side but I think it'll survive. You ought to start wearing your spectacles, then we wouldn't have these little accidents, would we?

DOROTHY places the elephant back on the hearth, moves to the window and closes the curtains.

MILDRED No, I couldn't possibly . . . they make me look old. I know I am getting old but at least without the spectacles I can't see that I am. Colonel Craddock gave me the elephant you know. A present from India.

DOROTHY (*returning to MILDRED*) They're meant to be unlucky when they have their trunks raised. That one was nearly very unlucky. There aren't any logs left. I'll send Bunting in . . . if I can find him.

MILDRED What do you mean, dear?

DOROTHY He gives me the shivers. Creeping around the place . . . lurking in dark corners. I never know where he's going to leap out from next!

MILDRED Don't exaggerate, Dorothy. Bunting never leaps . . . he's not capable of it.

DOROTHY Well, he definitely lurks. I can't understand why you keep him on, he's hopeless!

DOROTHY exits to the hall. MILDRED does not realise that DOROTHY has left and continues talking.

MILDRED Bunting? Why, I couldn't possibly let him go . . . he's practically an institution here. Oh, it's going to be marvellous having a house full of guests again . . . like the old days. It must be nearly two years since we were all together in Paris. Do you remember that holiday? Happy days.

As MILDRED continues, BUNTING enters slowly from the hall. He is in his sixties and is dressed as a traditional butler. He wears white gloves. He moves menacingly towards MILDRED, carrying a log in one hand and a raised axe in the other hand.

I'm so looking forward to seeing the Colonel again. And Pierre. Such a charming young man . . . he made me feel years younger. Perhaps it was just the Paris air. (*Shivering*) Do hurry up and fetch Bunting, dear.

BUNTING is now alongside though slightly behind MILDRED. His speech is slow and measured.

BUNTING (*loud and without warning*) Logs, Ma'am

MILDRED (*with a shriek, startled*) Oh, Bunting! I do wish you'd announce yourself at the door. And put that axe down . . . you look like a mad man.

BUNTING (*sarcastically*) I can't chop logs without it, Ma'am. I am not an exponent of the martial arts.

MILDRED (*controlling her anger*) But there's no need to bring it in here. Put a log on the fire and leave the rest by the side.

BUNTING I only brought the one, Ma'am. It was rather heavy.

MILDRED (*sighing*) Really, Bunting. I don't know why I bother!

BUNTING I didn't realise you did, Ma'am.

MILDRED scowls at BUNTING who remains impassive.

Will there be anything else, Ma'am?

MILDRED I expect that the guests will be arriving shortly. I suggest that you station yourself by the front door so they don't have to wait for ten minutes.

BUNTING By the front door, Ma'am. As you like.

BUNTING turns and moves slowly to the hall door.

MILDRED And we'll be wanting sherry when they've all arrived.

BUNTING Sherry, Ma'am. As you like. (*Turning at the door.*) Will that be the best sherry, Ma'am, or the cooking?

MILDRED (*standing*) Really, Bunting, the best of course!

BUNTING I only ask, Ma'am, because there's very little of the best left. Half a bottle.

MILDRED What! But we only recently re-stocked!

BUNTING You must have drunk it, Ma'am.

MILDRED What! What did you say Bunting?

BUNTING I said you must have drunk it, Ma'am.

MILDRED (*angrily*) Now look here, Bunting . . . I think it's time you were reminded of your position in this house!

BUNTING I know my position, Ma'am, I'm in the lounge at the present time.

MILDRED Bunting, will you please stop answering back!

BUNTING I'll try to curb my naturally exuberant nature, Ma'am. Will that be all?

MILDRED Yes it will. Re-order more sherry next week.

BUNTING Very good, Ma'am . . . as you like.

BUNTING exits slowly to the hall, turning left as he exits. He leaves the door open.

Pratt / Thomkins / Charles / Joan

They all start to leave with the exception of PRATT, THOMKINS and CHARLES.

MARGARET This is ridiculous. Don't leave the house indeed. I shall be reporting you, Sergeant.

JOAN Would anyone care for a pot of tea? I do so find that it helps to calm the nerves.

They exit, leaving PRATT, THOMKINS and CHARLES.

CHARLES Wondered if I could have a word, old boy? Somewhat confidential . . . delicate matter and all that.

PRATT Yes?

CHARLES Bit tricky. Wouldn't want my wife to get wind.

PRATT I see. She has a history?

CHARLES What of?

PRATT Wind.

CHARLES No, old boy. You've missed the point. Can I rely on your discretion?

PRATT Naturally, Colonel. Anything you say will go no further than my ears.

CHARLES (*uncomfortable*) I do know a bit about the will. Mildred said that she was leaving me five thousand pounds.

PRATT I don't think that amount need concern us.

CHARLES Bit more to it, old boy. If I happen to survive Dorothy, her share of the estate is to pass to me. Bit unlikely but . . .

THOMKINS That would be a great deal, sir. Why leave it to you?

CHARLES Well, that's the delicate part. Hmn . . . we were close friends

THOMKINS But she must have had many friends.

PRATT is becoming agitated that THOMKINS is taking over.

CHARLES Some, yes. Thing is . . . over the years . . . we had a very close friendship. Hmn . . . a liaison.

THOMKINS An affair, sir!

CHARLES Well I wouldn't go that far . . . more of a . . . it was a . . . hmn . . . yes.

THOMKINS And how long has this . . .

PRATT Do you mind, Thompson!

CHARLES Close on thirty years. Died down a bit over recent years of course. Hate the wife to find out. Wouldn't want to upset the old apple cart, if you take my meaning.

PRATT I see no reason why she should. We're all men of the world, Colonel.

CHARLES Dashed grateful. All of this sets a chap's head spinning. Think that's everything though . . . made a clean breast. Any objection if I take a turn around the garden?

PRATT There's no need for us to take turns, Colonel . . . I have pressing matters here.

CHARLES (*puzzled by PRATT's response*) Good show. Glad we understand each other.

CHARLES goes to the hall door. As he opens it, JOAN falls in from the hall.

Miss Maple!

THOMKINS We'll deal with this, sir.

CHARLES Never seen such a thing! Can't a chap have privacy.

CHARLES exits, leaving JOAN looking sheepish. THOMKINS moves to her.

THOMKINS I hope you weren't doing what I thought, Miss Maple.

PRATT is bored and moves to the desk. He picks up an ornament to examine it.

JOAN Why, certainly not, Constable. I was just returning to retrieve my knitting. I seem to have mislaid it. (*she sees the knitting on the armchair*) Ah . . . there.

JOAN retrieves the knitting and moves back to the hall door.

Would either of you care for a teacake?

THOMKINS I wouldn't say no, Miss Maple. Very kind of you.

JOAN And I expect the Inspector would like one as well. I won't be a moment.

JOAN exits. PRATT moves to replace the ornament but suddenly finds it to be in several pieces. He is surprised by THOMKINS approaching him and thrusts the pieces into his pocket.

THOMKINS What do you think so far, sir?

PRATT I don't know. It's a tricky one, Thompson.

THOMKINS Thomkins, sir.

PRATT So many suspects . . . and not a corrugated alibi (*he pronounces it as aleebi*) between them. The woman who just left . . . the so called Miss Marbles . . . she worries me. Why is she so keen to be known as Missus Jones?

THOMKINS Actually, her name's Miss Maple, sir.

PRATT Really! Or is that just another alias? By her own confession she's murdered before.

THOMKINS No, sir . . . I think she just solves them.

PRATT *(not listening)* and Colonel Haddock. Very fishy. Does he know more than he's saying?

THOMKINS I doubt it, sir. Anyway, if he was guilty, why tell us so much in the first place?

PRATT Easy. As soon as he saw me he realised he'd have to come clean. He's used to dealing with trained men. He recognised my ruthless relentless streak and knew that I'd leave no stone unturned in the pursuit of justice.

THOMKINS *(trying to keep a straight face)* I see, sir.

PRATT Strange that he should mention this Mildred woman. We'll need to check . . . see where she fits in to all this.

THOMKINS She's dead, sir . . . she was murdered.

PRATT Another one! My God, Thompson, it makes you shudder to think how far some people will go. You know, I've got a gut feeling, Dorothy Foxtrot's our man.

THOMKINS Woman, sir.

PRATT What?

THOMKINS Dorothy Foxtrot's our woman, sir.

PRATT Ah . . . I wondered how long it would take before you came around to my way of thinking.

THOMKINS That's not exactly what I meant, sir. You see, you said . . .

PRATT glowers at him.

It doesn't matter, sir . . . but I do think there may still be one or two stones left to turn, sir.

PRATT Are you trying to be funny, Thompson?

THOMKINS *(innocent)* No, sir.

PRATT Good, it doesn't suit you.

JOAN enters carrying a plate of teacakes liberally spread with jam.

JOAN I have your teacakes. I do so hope you like strawberry jam . . . it's rather my favourite.

THOMKINS Thank you Miss Maple. Very kind I'm sure.

THOMKINS is about to take a piece of teacake.

PRATT Not while you're on duty, Thompson!

THOMKINS Pardon, sir?

PRATT We've got an image to maintain, man. If you want something to do, fetch me the gun. It's in my car.

THOMKINS is about to exit to the hall.

Oh . . . and do something with this.

PRATT takes the ornament from his pocket and gives it to THOMKINS, who looks in surprise before exiting. PRATT notices JOAN watching him.

Important evidence . . . can't leave it lying around. When Thompson comes back, I'd like to try a little experiment.

PRATT casually reaches out and takes a piece of teacake.

See if we can jog your memory, Miss Marbles.

PRATT takes a large bite from the teacake, leaving jam on the end of his nose.

JOAN That may be helpful. You know, I feel very uneasy. At this stage I usually have a little inkling.

PRATT Really? Well, don't let me keep you, madam . . . down the hall on the left I believe.

JOAN *(giving PRATT an exasperated sideways glance before continuing)* I must say that I'm absolutely delighted that you've eliminated me from your enquiries, Inspector.

PRATT I wouldn't say that, Miss Marbles . . . or should I call you Missus Jones? I discount and illuminate no one.

JOAN Well in that case you really must be more careful, Inspector. If I were a deranged killer I could just have eliminated you.

PRATT *(smiling smugly)* I think not. I'm a highly trained fighting machine.

JOAN But I've come across so many cases of poisoning . . . a most unpleasant death. I do find it such an underhand method.

PRATT laughs casually, then glances at the remains of the teacake in his hand with a look of horror. As JOAN turns to sit in the chair by the fire, he quickly looks around for somewhere to dispose of the teacake. Seeing nowhere, he thrusts it into his coat pocket. THOMKINS enters carrying a revolver.

PRATT Ah, Thompson, about time.

PRATT takes the gun from THOMKINS. THOMKINS looks at the jam on PRATT's nose suspiciously. Throughout the next speech PRATT holds the gun uncomfortably, occasionally wiping the gun and his hand on his coat, as he realises that his hand is sticky from the jam.

I intend to try an old and trusted technique to see if Miss Marbles can remember or recall anything else about the event . . . a reconstitution. You be Missus Bigshot, Thompson . . . (importantly) I'll be the killer.

Margaret / Charles

Two hours later. CHARLES, DOROTHY and PIERRE are sitting, CHARLES is snoring softly. MARGARET is agitated, pacing back and forth by the window.

MARGARET This is absolutely absurd. What's the point of keeping us cooped up here!

PIERRE I expect the Inspector will 'ave more questions for us on 'is return.

MARGARET Questions! That idiot wouldn't know a sensible question if one fell out of the sky and landed in his mouth!

PIERRE With that I 'ave to agree.

MARGARET Why don't you say something, Charles?

MARGARET glances at CHARLES and notices that he is asleep. She moves behind him.

(hissing) Charles!

CHARLES merely grunts and continues to snore.

(shouting) Charles!

CHARLES awakes with a start.

CHARLES *(half asleep)* What! . . . Form line . . . prepare to fire. *(waking fully)* What's happened?

MARGARET Nothing has happened . . . that's the whole point.

CHARLES *(mopping his forehead)* Must have nodded off. Damned tricky moment there . . . surrounded . . . Regiment of French butlers. Very odd.

MARGARET *(resuming her pacing)* Why don't you do something about it?

CHARLES Nothing much I could do . . . hopeless situation. Defenceless . . .

MARGARET To get us out of here! Two hours we've been waiting and nothing!

CHARLES Expect somebody will turn up eventually. Due process and all that.

MARGARET *(staring at DOROTHY)* It's not as if we don't know who did it.

DOROTHY *(miserable)* I didn't. Why won't anybody believe me.

MARGARET Come along, Charles, you're going to make a phone call.

CHARLES Am I? Who to?

MARGARET The police . . . someone in authority. They can't hold us here like this.

CHARLES Think they probably can, actually.

MARGARET Charles, I'm not arguing! We'll use the phone upstairs . . . in private.

MARGARET moves to the hall door. CHARLES does not move.

Charles!

CHARLES All right, coming, old girl.

CHARLES rises.

MARGARET And stop calling me old girl!

CHARLES Oh, right . . . sorry, old girl.

MARGARET and CHARLES exit to the hall. PIERRE stands, a smug expression on his face.

Pierre / Elizabeth / Dorothy

MARGARET and CHARLES exit to the hall. PIERRE stands, a smug expression on his face.

PIERRE Well, Dorothy, it seems as though your little scheme 'as come unglued.

DOROTHY What scheme?

PIERRE To kill your Aunt and 'ave 'er money. The police suspect you.

DOROTHY (*cold*) But they can't prove anything.

PIERRE But I can give them all the evidence they need to 'ang you. I was passing by the top of the stair . . . I saw you fire the shot.

DOROTHY That's not true!

PIERRE It matters little. They will believe me. I will tell them I did not come forward earlier because I was fond of you . . . but, now I realise my duty.

DOROTHY (*standing*) But why, Pierre?

PIERRE You 'ave caused me much misery. Your accusation about the paintings. (*pause*) Of course, we could per'aps come to an arrangement.

DOROTHY But I wasn't serious about the paintings . . . I wouldn't have taken all the money. Just enough to reimburse my Aunt. I wanted to frighten you . . . but I didn't want you to go to prison.

PIERRE Silence, Dorothy, your motives are not important. You are a wealthy woman now. What I ask is simple. You give me twenty thousand pounds and ignore the matter of the paintings. In return, I will forget what I saw. It is as easy as that.

DOROTHY Really that simple?

PIERRE (*confident*) But of course . . . I knew you would listen to reason.

DOROTHY Fine. (*approaching PIERRE to confront him*) Now it's time for you to listen to me. I was wrong about you, Pierre. I should have gone straight to the police instead of playing games. When they get back, I'll tell them everything.

PIERRE (*shocked*) But, Dorothy . . . I will be forced to tell them what I saw.

DOROTHY And why should they believe you . . . a cheap con-man! You're pathetic.

DOROTHY spins on her heels and exits to the hall. PIERRE is devastated. He walks slowly to look at the paintings.

PIERRE (*in a very English accent*) Damn . . .

PIERRE does not notice ELIZABETH as she enters from the hall.

Damn and blast.

ELIZABETH That sounded very English, Pierre!

PIERRE turns, shocked. He relaxes when he sees it is ELIZABETH.

PIERRE *(keeping the English accent)* It was about to get extremely Anglo-Saxon. And will you stop using that ridiculous accent . . . it frightened me to death.

ELIZABETH *(in a broad Cockney accent)* It gets to be an 'abbit. Did it work then?

PIERRE What do you think! She's going to tell the police everything.

ELIZABETH You bleedin' blew it!

PIERRE I did everything you said. We're going to have to get out of here fast.

ELIZABETH What good would that do? They'd get us before we'd got five mile. I told you before . . . there's only one way out.

PIERRE We can't kill her!

ELIZABETH Why not . . . interferin' bitch! You weren't bothered about Bagshot.

PIERRE Missus Bagshot was different!

ELIZABETH Why? You goin' soft? Do you fancy 'er or somethin'?

PIERRE Of course not.

ELIZABETH She's the only thing standin' in our way. If she spills the beans we're finished. We got things perfect . . . I find the rich old fools, you relieve 'em of their money . . . why spoil all that?

PIERRE I don't know. I need time to think.

ELIZABETH We 'aven't got time to think!

JOAN's voice is heard in the hall.

Joan / Elizabeth / Pierre / Bunting / Charles / Margaret

JOAN's voice is heard in the hall.

JOAN (off) Perhaps you'd care to join us for afternoon tea later, Missus Craddock.

JOAN enters from the hall. As she enters, PIERRE and ELIZABETH revert immediately to their false accents.

ELIZABETH It's just so ghastly, Pierre. How could anyone do that to such a kind old lady. Ah, miss Maple . . . we were just talking about poor Missus Bagshot.

JOAN Quite tragic, my dear. Such a sad loss. I partly blame myself . . . I seem to bring such misfortune.

JOAN sits by the fire.

Do sit down. I do so love a cosy chat.

ELIZABETH I'm terribly sorry, Miss Maple, but you will have to excuse us. We were about to take a walk in the grounds. It's so claustrophobic being kept in here . . . quite ghastly.

JOAN A walk? What a good idea. Would you mind very much if I joined you?

ELIZABETH (*seeing no way out*) No . . . of course not, delighted.

JOAN I'm afraid that I don't walk as briskly as I used to, but the countryside is so pleasant at this time of year. My nephew often escorts me . . . (*rather caustically*) . . . when he has the time.

ELIZABETH How marvellous. Oh . . .

ELIZABETH suddenly holds her forehead delicately and sways slightly.

JOAN Are you unwell, my dear?

PIERRE moves to support ELIZABETH.

ELIZABETH Thank you, Pierre. Just a slight fainting fit. I have them often.

PIERRE helps ELIZABETH into a chair.

It will pass in a moment. Then perhaps Pierre might help me to my room.

PIERRE It would be my pleasure.

BUNTING suddenly bursts into the room from the hall. He has been drinking heavily and walks unsteadily, waving a brandy bottle from which he takes occasional drinks. His speech is slurred.

BUNTING (*waving*) Hello everyone. What are you doing?

JOAN Why, Mister Bunting, I do believe you've been drinking!

BUNTING I've had a drop. (*Staggering to JOAN and waving the bottle in her face*) Do you want a swig?

JOAN I don't believe so. Most kind. I really think that perhaps you should sit down.

BUNTING Don't want to . . . I'm celebrating. It's the happiest day of my life.

JOAN Oh, I don't think you mean that, Mister Bunting.

BUNTING Yes I do. I'm celebrating because . . . because . . . (*confronting JOAN with a puzzled expression*) Why am I celebrating?

JOAN I really don't know, Mister Bunting.

BUNTING That's funny . . . neither do I.

BUNTING staggers away from JOAN, to the centre of the room. He smiles inanely at ELIZABETH, who looks away in disgust. He points at her.

She's stuck up, she is.

He notices PIERRE and attempts to focus on him before staggering up to him.

Hallo, Frenchie . . . do you want a drink?

PIERRE (*distasteful*) Non.

BUNTING (*imitating PIERRE*) Non . . . oui . . . non.

BUNTING finds this hilarious and staggers away, muttering to himself.

Oui . . . non . . . oui . . . non. (*with sudden inspiration*) I'm rich. She's deaded and I'm rich. That's what I'm celebrating.

MARGARET and CHARLES enter from the hall.

MARGARET There he is, Charles . . . disgusting.

BUNTING (*waving happily at MARGARET*) Hello . . . I'm rich.

MARGARET Get him out of here, Charles, before he breaks something.

CHARLES Do my best. Come on, old boy.

BUNTING staggers up to CHARLES, face to face, breathing heavily on him.

BUNTING I don't like you.

CHARLES (*sniffing*) Good God . . . that's Napoleon Brandy . . . recognise it anywhere.

MARGARET Does it matter!

CHARLES Course it matters . . . damned waste. Come on, man, can you walk?

BUNTING Course I can walk . . . I can walk anywhere I want.

BUNTING tries to walk along an imaginary straight line. It's path takes him directly to the settee, which he starts to climb. CHARLES drags him off and

towards the hall door. MARGARET takes BUNTING's other arm and they lead him away. BUNTING's legs keep collapsing beneath him.

CHARLES Bad form, man. Never seen anything like it!

MARGARET We'll take him to his room, Charles . . . out of the way.

As they exit, JOAN rises and moves away into the dining room.