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Murder Weapon

A thriller

Brian Clemens

Samuel French — London
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CHARACTERS

Jessica Bligh, Chief Constable, late 40s
Inspector Fremont, male, around 45 or 50
Constable Walters (male)
Charley Mirren, about 50, looks older
Hugo, around 35
Diane, about 30
Paul, well over 40

The roles of Constable Walters and Paul may be played by the same actor

SYNOPSIS OF SCENES

The action of the play takes place in the conservatory of Dysart Hall

ACT I
SCENE 1 About 11.30 p.m. on a Saturday
SCENE 2 10 p.m., the same Saturday
SCENE 3 Midnight, the same Saturday
SCENE 4 Some time later, Sunday morning

ACT II
SCENE 1 Sunday, about 3 p.m.
SCENE 2 Later that night

Time — the present

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(See also page ii)

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Other plays by Brian Clemens
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Anybody for Murder? (with Dennis Spooner)
The Devil at Midnight
The Edge of Darkness
Holmes and the Ripper
Inside Job (or Murderous Liaisons)
Shock!
A Sting in the Tale (with Dennis Spooner)
Strictly Murder
Without Trace (or Murder Hunt)
Will You Still Love Me in the Morning? (with Dennis Spooner)

This play is dedicated to my dear friends,
Raymond and the lovely Wendy

ACT I

The conservatory of Dysart Hall. About 11.30 p.m. on a Saturday

This was once a proper conservatory in the Victorian manner, but transformed into an area more suitable for today's modern living — without losing the essential "garden" atmosphere. French doors lead out to a terrace and the grounds and gardens beyond: near to them are "hi-tech" shelves bearing some hi-fi equipment and a shelf containing some printed plays. There is a low, rug-covered sofa and, most important of all, a chair. This chair could be one of the hanging type, like a womb-like egg, or a high-backed swivel chair — either way, it must be able to turn on its own axis and be of such dimensions that, if one were seated in it, legs tucked up and facing away from the audience, it would appear to be empty. (NOTE: If staging permits, this could be the chair behind the desk)

Elsewhere is a small, good quality desk, with a suitable chair behind it. There is a door nearby. There is also a small, iron-work table; on the table is a telephone, a tray of drinks and glasses and a bagged pistol in a clear plastic bag. To one side of the area there was once an "eyesore" of old plumbing, heating pipes, etc., but these have now been virtually blotted from sight by a clever designer who has erected a kind of lattice screen way above head height. There is nothing anachronistic about the screen which is covered with artificial flowers, plants, and possibly the use of floral printed paper. Behind this screen there is enough space to hide. On the opposite side to the screen is a door that leads through to the rest of the large house that is Dysart Hall

The french doors are wide open, and standing near to them is Jessica Bligh. She is in her late 40s, but is still a handsome woman with a good figure. At this time she wears a fashionable trouser suit (or, if preferred, bearing in mind she has some vigorous action to carry out later, a dress). Her hair is longish and lustrous — there is no way anything masculine about her

Bligh moves to pull the doors closed, then turns and moves to the table and picks up the bagged pistol — clearly seen through the clear plastic bag as Bligh turns it over in her hands, examining it

Inspector Fremont enters through the house door. Fremont is around 45 or 50; he is hard, world-wise, and a touch weary too. He is a very good copper indeed, but he has seen it all, and doesn't much like any of it. He wears a shabby top coat over equally well-worn clothes — he could do with a haircut and probably a drink as well, and when he speaks it is clear that his education probably ended at the local comprehensive

Bligh Well, Inspector, what do you think?

Fremont I think it's gone past eleven-thirty, and time we were home, ma'am.

Bligh That's it? You have no other comment?

Fremont Like what?

Bligh We-ll. This is the first time I have actually attended a murder investigation, but ——

Fremont Just plain murder, ma'am. There's nothing to investigate, is there? Body's on its way to the morgue (*he jerks his thumb towards the house door*) ... we've got our man. And ... (*he glances at his watch*) if I'm lucky I could be tucked up in bed by twelve.

Bligh I'm disappointed in you, Inspector. A policeman of your experience. We have a unique opportunity here.

Fremont Opportunity?

Bligh Yes. Here we are at the scene of the crime, a crime that took place less than an hour ago. A hot trail — piping hot. Shouldn't we take advantage of that? Investigate, interrogate, before it cools off? Isn't that how it's done? Isn't that "the form", Inspector?

Fremont sighs, then takes the bagged gun from Bligh

Fremont Under normal circumstances. But look, ma'am, .22 pistol. Three chambers fired, and three bullets in the victim. And once ballistics get hold of this ——

Bligh (*interjecting*) I've no doubt that it is the murder weapon.

Fremont Then that's it, isn't it, ma'am? You saw who was holding it — damn near caught him in the act — then add to that his statement ——

Bligh (*interjecting*) That wasn't a statement, it was a garbled outburst.

Fremont Nevertheless, he more or less confessed ——

Bligh It was gobbledegook.

Fremont What else do you expect? The man's bloody barmy!

Bligh I think we should have him in again, Inspector.

Fremont For what? His prints are all over his gun — got to be ... and don't forget his previous record — he's done it before — and the same *modus operandi*, with a gun. And if that's not enough, there YOU are,

ma'am, practically an eyewitness. It's the most open and shut case I've ever had to deal with.

Bligh I still think we should question him again. Properly.

Fremont For God's sake, ma'am, it's getting on for midnight ...

Bligh Are you anticipating turning into a pumpkin, Inspector?

Fremont stares at her

Let's have him in again.

Fremont By the book is it, ma'am? The military way?

Bligh If you like, yes.

Fremont Very well. (*He consults his watch, and then moves to the house door*) Constable Walters!

Uniformed Constable Walters appears in the doorway

Walters Inspector?

Fremont Let's have the prisoner.

Walters Right, Inspector.

Walters exits

Bligh now moves to scuff a foot where the body once lay, then touches the swing chair, sets it turning around on its axis so that we see it clearly

Walters ushers in Charley — then exits

Charley is about 50, but looks much older, a man with an air of despair about him. He is a "loser" from way back, a man imbued with an anxiety, a fear and a blind respect for authority. His hands are cuffed in front of him, and when he speaks he has a faint, quite pleasant trace of Irish accent, but along the way has picked up some cockney vernacular. We shall find that, occasionally, when under stress, Charley puts a hand to his brow or temples as though to soothe a chronic headache

Bligh Charles ... Mirren?

Fremont Charley. Everyone calls him Charley.

Bligh Sit down, Charley. And let's have those cuffs off.

Fremont reacts to this

Fremont If you're doing this by the book ——

Bligh The book — humanely interpreted. Now let's have them off or is he a black belt in karate?

Fremont unlocks the cuffs. Charley sits down, rubbing his wrists. Bligh produces a small voice recorder and switches it on

Bligh Now, Charley, I shall be recording this interview. I want you to tell me, in your own words, exactly what happened here tonight.
Charley If I can remember.
Bligh Do you know who I am?
Charley No.
Bligh I am the new Chief Constable of this county. Jessica Bligh.
Fremont Bligh. You know, like the captain of the *Bounty*?
Bligh Except I am ex-army not navy. I think you already know Inspector Fremont.
Fremont Course you bloody do. Was me who arrested you last time, wasn't it? Ten years ago. I was just Constable then.

Bligh reacts

(*Seeing Bligh's face*) Oh, sorry, ma'am.
Bligh Well, Charley, it looks as though you have committed murder here tonight.
Fremont Looks?! Oh, sorry, ma'am.
Bligh Right. Your name is —— ?
Charley (*looking at Fremont*) You know who I am.
Fremont She wants it all official — army fashion — *proper*. Tell her your name, Charley. Your full name.
Charley Charley. Charles Henry Mirren.
Bligh And your present address?
Charley I've got a room over the pub.
Fremont Which pub, Charley?
Charley Well, YOU know ...
Fremont The name and the street.
Charley Oh. *Rose and Crown*. Church Street.
Bligh Your occupation?
Fremont Well, that's easy. Burglar. Petty thief. That's when he's not killing people!

Bligh gives Fremont a hard look

Bligh What do you do for a living?
Charley Well, I ... I haven't got a job at the moment. But I'm looking. But before ... I did a bit of building work, and window cleaning.
Fremont Handy that, wasn't it, Charley? For casing the job? Peering in people's windows — sussing out what they had worth nicking?

Bligh Inspector Fremont, I would prefer that you remain silent during this interview, unless you have something relevant to add.
Fremont (*snapping to attention*) Yes, ma'am!
Bligh Charles Mirren — Charley — it is true, is it not, that you shot and killed a man here tonight?

Charley, under growing stress now, looks at her haplessly

I'll repeat the question. Is it not a fact that tonight you ——
Charley (*overriding*) No, it isn't going to work. I wasn't supposed to be caught here ... you'll make the connection now, you will. Put two and two together ... you'll find out about me and George ——

Bligh and Fremont are astonished by the outburst

Fremont George? Who's George?
Charley I've got to tell the truth I have. The whole truth ——
Bligh And what is the truth?
Charley I didn't kill him. I didn't kill no one.

Bligh and Fremont exchange a look

Fremont (*accusingly at Bligh*) Oh, that's bloody dandy that is. Few minutes ago — gobbledegook or not — we had a nice verbal "cough" — a confession to be built upon ... and now he's taking it all back!
Bligh Is that correct? Are you now saying you did NOT commit a murder here tonight?
Charley I couldn't kill anyone.
Bligh Dammit, man, I saw you with the gun in your hand!
Charley I didn't kill him.
Bligh Then why the devil did you say you did?
Charley It was for George. I was trying to protect George ... I wasn't supposed to be caught ...

Bligh, her consternation growing, looks at the cynical Fremont

Bligh (*to Charley*) You don't deny that you broke in here tonight?
Charley No. I mean yes. You see, I didn't break in exactly. The door was open.
Bligh Very well, you entered these premises furtively and uninvited with intent to commit a felony.
Charley No ... You see, I was going to ——
Bligh (*overriding*) You came through that door, carrying a gun. This gun!

Charley No.
Bligh For pity's sake, man ——
Charley (*overriding*) I didn't bring the gun. That was already here. In that drawer.

Fremont, who has so far been abdicating from the proceedings, becomes alert and looks at Bligh

Fremont Did you know they kept a gun?
Bligh No. (*To Charley*) So, you started to ransack the place and you came across the gun.
Charley No, I didn't come across it. I knew it was there. I didn't ransack nothing ——
Fremont Knew the gun was there, did you, Charley? That's what you came for, was it? A handy tool to go along with the crowbar and picklocks?
Charley No.
Fremont You came here to steal the gun and whatever else you could lay your hands on. Then suddenly you were disturbed, the door opened and a man stood there — and there YOU are, Charley, with a gun in your hand, and no compunction about using it. I mean you're an old hand with guns, aren't you, Charley ...? So you shot him.
Charley No ——
Fremont (*overriding*) You shot him three times. He caught you stealing and you killed him.
Charley No, it wasn't like that. I didn't come here thieving, that wasn't in my mind at all!

Bligh and Fremont exchange a puzzled look

Bligh Then why did you come here, Charley? If it wasn't to steal, then why?

Charley looks from one to the other helplessly

Are you saying that you came here with intent to murder!?
Charley In a way. Yes.
Fremont Now, that's more like it — and about wraps it up, ma'am.
Bligh Nonsense!
Fremont But you heard him ——
Bligh (*overriding*) If the shooting wasn't done in a blind panic, if he came here with deliberate intent, then why? What possible motive could he have had?

Fremont Perhaps somebody paid him to do it. Is that why you killed him, Charley?
Charley I didn't kill him. I couldn't kill anyone.
Fremont Come on, Charley, this is Inspector Fremont you're talking to. You *couldn't*?!
Charley I ... I thought about doing it. I'll admit that. Even went so far as to say I'd do it. But I didn't.
Fremont You were here. You were seen.
Charley It's all a mistake. If you'll just listen — let me have my say.
Bligh I want you to have your say, Charley. I want you to tell me everything that happened, everything you can remember — in chronological order.

Charley regards her blankly. Fremont sighs and consults his watch

Fremont She means from the beginning. So let's have it, Charley. And make it quick.
Charley It was ... six weeks ago they let me out.
Fremont (*consulting his notebook*) Six weeks and two days.
Charley Was it? It's all mixed up in my mind ... A letter! Yes, that's it, they gave me a letter to ... someone.
Fremont Addressed to Doctor Blake. From the prison authorities, it was part of the parole stipulation that Charley "undertook to receive psychiatric treatment". Though what this doctor stuff has to do with what happened here tonight I don't know.
Bligh Well, if we give him a chance, he'll tell us. Won't you, Charley?
Charley I ... I dunno, it's all mixed up ... I forget things.
Bligh No need to rush it ... take it easy. Let's start with the exact date you visited Doctor Blake?
Charley I don't remember ... Pride Street! Yes, that means something ... but I don't know what.
Fremont Twenty-eight Pride Street is where Doctor Blake is situated.
Charley There was a big brass plate outside! Wasn't there? Told you it's all mixed up.
Fremont Twenty-third of June you were due there. Your appointment was for twelve-thirty.
Charley I got there early! Yes, it's coming back to me now ... no it isn't. It's no good.
Bligh Perhaps if we can pretend? It may help jog your memory ... I imagine Doctor Blake had a desk, didn't he?
Charley Yes.
Bligh (*moving to the desk in the room*) Like this one?
Charley A bit ... no, not really ...

Bligh A desk is a desk, Charley ... just try to imagine it ... on that day ... Concentrate ...

As she talks she moves to the light switches and turns off the main lights so that only the desk and the immediate area is lit. Her voice becomes soft and caressing

Think back, Charley ... you came to the door, knocked and ...

Charley I didn't have to knock. The door was already open ... I just pushed it wider and went in ...

Bligh And what? A receptionist sitting there?

Charley No, there was nobody ... but there were papers scattered about like someone had left in a hurry ...

Bligh So then what happened ...? Take it step by step, Charley.

During this Fremont has reacted with exasperation — turning to astonishment when Bligh's method seems to work

Charley There was another door facing me, that was open too, so I went in ...

Charley now enters the light of "the office" — starting to live out his story

Bligh Was that when you met Doctor Blake for the first time?

Charley No. That office was empty too — but then he came in through the side door.

The door (to the rest of the house) opens and Hugo enters, his face hidden by the open book he is studying, which is in fact a desk diary. Hugo is around 35. Stocky, well built, darkly handsome, with (hopefully) a full head of hair — wearing a dark suit, and, from time to time, thick-rimmed spectacles, he looks almost a stereotype of a psychiatrist

He didn't see me at first.

Note: this to be conceived so that Charley is first standing then sitting in a chair at the end of the desk, rather than across from it, else he will have his back to us all the time!

Hugo lifts his head from the book, reacting to Charley

Hugo Who the devil are you?

Charley Doctor Blake?

Hugo Well, what do you think? Says "Doctor Blake" on the door, doesn't it? (*He pats the desk*) Doctor Blake's desk. His chair. And me sitting in it. Don't I look like a psychiatrist? Ah, just a moment ... (*With a flourish, he puts on the spectacles*) That better? Now who are you?

Charley Charley Mirren, sir.

He produces an official envelope and extends it to Hugo, who merely regards it

I'm not supposed to be here until twelve-thirty, but I'm early. I'm sorry. Very sorry.

Hugo Mirren?

Charley Yessir.

Hugo puts the diary down and starts to run a finger down it

Hugo "C" for Charley?

Charley Yessir.

Hugo Aha. "C. Mirren." Says it right here. Twelve-thirty. "C. Mirren". So I suppose I shall just have to see Mirren, eh? You'd better tell me what it's all about.

Charley It's all in there, sir. (*He again extends the envelope*) I just got out of prison, sir.

Hugo Did you now? That IS interesting. (*He finally takes the envelope, opens it, and scans the contents*) Been a bad boy, have we? And what have you been up to, eh? A bit of flashing? Petty theft? Poking horses' eyes out? Good God!

He reacts to the official papers, looking from them to Charley and back again, with a new appraisal

Fascinating. Utterly fascinating.

Now his manner starts to undergo a subtle change. Gone is the banter, to be replaced with an attitude more fitted to a brilliant psychiatrist

You'd better sit down, Charley. You don't mind if I call you Charley? No couch I'm afraid. Couches are apparently out this year. Anyway, they smack of cliché don't you think?

Charley, a bit bewildered, sits in the chair obliquely facing the desk

I've dealt with the common criminal before of course. Yes. But you, Charley, you are a most uncommon criminal.

Charley (*vaguely reassured*) They said you'd be able to help me, sir.

Hugo I shall certainly try. I'd offer you some tea, but my receptionist ... well, you know how staff are these days? No, perhaps you don't. Locked away, what was it ...? (*He consults his papers*) Ten years. A long time, Charley.

Charley It seemed longer.

Hugo I'll just bet it did. Said with subjectivity, Charley. Straight from the horse's mouth, eh? The real McCoy! This is a new experience for me, one to be savoured! Here I am, sitting across the desk from — *able to stretch out and touch* — a real live murderer. A cold-blooded multi-killer. You'll forgive me if I say that you don't much look the part, Charley. No, you look very ... ineffectual ... hard to believe that you have committed murder.

Charley As a matter of fact, sir ——

Hugo (*overriding*) Now don't tell me you were innocent, Charley. I'd hate to have you disappoint me.

Charley Disappoint ...?

Hugo We are going to be very close, Charley. I feel it. So don't you go letting me down ... Now then, what was it like to kill another human being, Charley? How did it feel? Elation? Drained of all aggression — a catharsis? Oh, this is such fun! Or did it just leave you feeling cold and empty? A real live murderer!

Charley But, sir, I didn't ——

Hugo Oh, but you did. Not only did you do it, but you made a full confession afterwards. It says here, clearly in black and white; you confessed to murdering your wife and two children. A boy of six, the girl barely eighteen months ...

Charley No, sir ...

Hugo *With a shotgun!* You *blasted* them away! What a terrible thing to do, Charley! But you must tell me all about it at first hand. Every tiny detail.

Charley Please, please. (*He buries his head in his hands*) They said you'd help me.

Hugo regards him

Hugo (*more gently*) All right, Charley. Charley? Pull yourself together now.

Charley I'm sorry, sir. Very sorry.

Hugo We have to do these things you know. We psychiatrists. Shock can be a therapy too. Stop snivelling now.

Charley Yes, sir. Sorry, sir.
Hugo Don't worry, I won't attack you like that again. No more shocks, eh? We'll just talk. Quietly. And you can tell me all you know. Share your experience with me.
Charley I'll try, sir.
Hugo I know you will. (*Very gently*) Now — why did you do it?
Charley I ... I don't know, sir.
Hugo Oh, come now, *you know*. Somewhere in your subconscious ...
Charley I'm sorry, very sorry.
Hugo For pity's sake stop saying you're sorry all the time! (*More gently*) I want to be your friend, Charley. And I want you to trust me. Do you understand?
Charley I think so, sir.
Hugo Now let's get some background. Some essential detail ... to help me understand your motivations, eh? And once I've understood them, I can interpret them — and thereby lies a cure. It says here that you might have been paroled last January. But you weren't. Why not?
Charley (*muttering*) I stole some stuff ...
Hugo What was that, Charley? Speak up, please.
Charley I stole some stuff from the prison shop.
Hugo What did you steal? Money? Cigarettes?
Charley Chocolate.
Hugo Eh?
Charley Chocolate bars.

Hugo is becoming more and more the stereotyped psychiatrist, twiddling his glasses, peering closely at Charley, sitting back, linking his fingers, etc.

But I made a full confession. To the trusty, AND to Father Syson.
Hugo Very strong on confessions, aren't you, Charley?
Charley But I never mentioned George!
Hugo George?
Charley Not even to Father Syson. I know it's a sin not to tell the whole truth, but I never told them about George.
Hugo Who ... is George?
Charley My cell mate.
Hugo I see. And why would you have mentioned George in connection to the chocolate bars?
Charley Because they were for him. I stole them for him.
Hugo He made you steal them?
Charley No, no, of course not. George was my friend,
Hugo You shared a cell together and he was your friend. What kind of friend?

Charley He *listened* to me. Not like the others, *he* didn't think I was crazy. He listened and ... and we talked. And played cards, and when his wife brought him something, he'd always share with me. Always.
Hugo How does this link up with the chocolate bars?
Charley George and me had a row. Over nothing important — over which book was his and which was mine. He said he was going to put in for a transfer.

Hugo regards him blankly

A transfer. Request to move out of my cell ... *our* cell — and go somewhere else. I couldn't let him do that! George was my friend, I *depended on him*. D'you see?
Hugo Charley, I may be a bit dense ... but the chocolate bars?
Charley They were for George. Potty for chocolate he was. So I thought ... if I got him some chocolate ...
Hugo You could bribe him to stay.
Charley I'd patch up the quarrel. And I did too. Never a cross word after that.
Hugo Nevertheless something compelled you to confess to the crime ...
Charley I dunno why, but I had to. Funny — I've got so many big things locked away inside of me, but I had to go and confess to that small one.

Hugo regards him happily

Hugo You're a real character, Charley, do you know that? Now then, tell me about "George" — this man you became so dependent upon. What kind of man is he?
Charley He's a bit younger than me, but much brighter — educated is George.
Hugo Aha, the subjugation of the lesser intellect by a superior one.
Charley Sir?
Hugo Your George, the clever fella with a sweet tooth — and your best friend in prison, eh?
Charley Yessir.
Hugo Understandable. Proximity of two people denied the comforts and excitements of the outside world. Is he still in the nick?

Charley looks shifty; he touches his brow

Hugo Well, is he?
Charley No, sir. He was ... released three months ago.

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