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Death By Design

A Comedy with Murder

by Rob Urbinati

A SAMUEL FRENCH ACTING EDITION

**SAMUEL
FRENCH**
FOUNDED 1830

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DEATH BY DESIGN was originally commissioned and developed by Houston Family Arts Center; Bob Clark, Executive Director, Teri Clark, Artistic Director. It premiered at HFAC in September, 2011; Executive Producers, Mario and Lisa Garza, directed by Lisa Garza

DEATH BY DESIGN was originally produced by Houston Family Arts Center, Houston, Texas (Bob Clark, Executive Director; Teri Clark, Artistic Director; Mario Garza, Producing Director) September 9 – 25, 2011 under the direction of Lisa Garza. The Assistant Director was Elaine Edstrom. Set design was by Benjamin Mason, with lighting design by John Baker. The Costume Designer was Lindsay Burns, and the Sound Designer was Jonathan Melcher. The Stage Manager was Brendis O'Sullivan. The cast was as follows:

BRIDGIT Kathy Drum
JACK Matt Elliott
EDWARD BENNETT Patrick Barton
SOREL BENNETT Stephanie Morris
WALTER PEARCE J. Blanchard
ERIC Joshua Clark
VICTORIA VAN ROTH Hannah McKinney
ALICE Chaney Moore

DEATH BY DESIGN was subsequently produced by Good Theater, Portland, Maine (Brian P. Allen, Executive and Artistic Director; Stephen Underwood, President) January 30 – February 24, 2013 under the direction of Brian P. Allen. Set design was by Craig Robinson, with lighting design by Iain Odlin. The Costume Designer was Justin Cote, and the Sound Designer was Stephen Underwood. The Stage Manager was Michael Lynch. The cast was as follows:

BRIDGIT Susan Reilly
JACK Benjamin Row
EDWARD BENNETT Rob Cameron
SOREL BENNETT Abigail Killeen
WALTER PEARCE Paul Haley
ERIC Matthew Delamater
VICTORIA VAN ROTH Janice Gardner
ALICE Kat Moraros

CHARACTERS

BRIDGIT – the Maid. Irish. Crabby. Warm-hearted. Fifties.

JACK – the Chauffer. Cockney. Charming. Clever. Twenties.

EDWARD BENNETT – the Playwright. Urbane. Vain. Thirties/Forties.

SOREL BENNETT – the Actress. Glamorous. Daffy. Thirties/Forties.

WALTER PEARCE – the Politician. Stiff. Conservative. Thirties/Forties.

ERIC – the Radical. Emphatic. Fiery. Twenties.

VICTORIA VAN ROTH – the Bohemian. Intense. Artistic. Any age.

ALICE – the Visitor. Sweet. Shy. Twenties.

SETTING

The action of the play takes place in the at living room of the Bennett's house at Cookham.

TIME

1932.

AUTHOR'S NOTES

Although *Death by Design* is essentially a comedy, the “murder-mystery” aspects of the play need to be carefully articulated in the production. All of the characters (except Walter, the victim) should be viable suspects, and their behavior should reflect their motives, what they attempt to do to Walter in Act One, and how these evolve over the course of Bridgit's investigation in Act Two. Eric and Bridgit are the only characters who know they are not guilty, and thus, are suspicious of each other and everyone else. Each of the other characters, once they are cleared, also becomes suspicious of the other characters. All of the characters have a motive, however ridiculous, for wanting Walter dead, and these are set up in Act One:

MOTIVES TO KILL WALTER PEARCE:

EDWARD BENNETT – Walter is having an affair with his wife. Also, Edward's career is faltering, so what does he have to lose?

SOREL BENNETT – Walter has insulted her, and proved a disagreeable guest.

VICTORIA VAN ROTH – Jack tells her when he picks her up at the train station that Walter accidentally killed his mother. She's in love with Jack, and a bit unhinged.

ALICE – She knows what Walter did to Jack's mother, and she's aware of JACK's hatred toward WALTER. She wants to do something to win back JACK's affection.

JACK – WALTER accidentally killed his mother, and JACK has been harboring a hatred for him ever since.

ERIC – WALTER stands for everything ERIC is against, politically.

BRIDGIT – WALTER is an annoying guest. And she's been eager to solve a crime.

The actions in the extended "pantomime sequence" near the end of Act One should not be seen by the audience. The area around the sofa, where Walter is "sleeping," should be dark. In this scene, the audience should see who is entering and from where, these characters' actions on the perimeters of the room, and where they exit. But it's useful for the director and actors to know what these characters are doing to Walter during this sequence. Some of this information is discussed in Act Two, but much of it is not.

ACTIONS DURING THE PANTOMIME SEQUENCE (AND ASSORTED CLUES AND RED HERRINGS):

Edward Bennett pours sleeping draught into the bottle of scotch near the top of Act One, in an effort to put either Walter or Sorel to sleep. He's upset with his wife, knowing that she's planned a rendezvous to annoy him, and the sleeping draught is his attempt to thwart her plan. At the end of Act One, on his way downstairs to check if Walter has drunk the scotch, he sees Eric in the living room, and waits until he leaves. Then, in the pantomime sequence, he approaches Walter, and is not sure if he's dead or asleep (per his discussion about chloral with Bridgit in Act One). In Act Two, when Bridgit proves that Alice missed when she attempted to shoot Walter, Edward assumes that he must be guilty, until Bridgit clears him of this charge. Also, please note that Edward peeks into the room when Jack and Bridgit are talking at the top of Act One, and thus has information about their conversation which he will reveal in Act Two (and use in his play). But he waits to enter, so he can "taint" the scotch.

Annoyed with Walter, Sorel Bennett attempts to make him nauseous by serving him poisonous greens, which she picked to tease Edward into thinking she plans to kill him. In the pantomime sequence, she checks to see if Walter has eaten the salad. (Bridgit has swapped out the poisonous greens, so the salad poses no danger, which Sorel doesn't know) Once Alice is cleared, Sorel thinks she may be guilty, until Bridgit clears her of the charge. On another topic, Sorel knows as soon as Victoria calls from the station that she's come to Cookham to see Jack, but this is their secret.

In the pantomime sequence, Eric comes upstairs to retrieve the Gertrude Lawrence picture book he noticed earlier. He checks to be sure Walter is asleep to save himself from embarrassment, then takes the book and hurries back down to the root cellar. Edward sees this from the stairs,

which he will point out in Act Two. Eric has made no attempt on Walter's life, thus, he knows he is not guilty, although he has a secret he wants to keep.

Bridgit enters the room during the pantomime sequence to check on Walter. She checks his pulse and realizes that he is alive and sleeping, and examines his empty glass of scotch, from the bottle she saw Edward taint. She also notices marks around Walter's neck, so she's aware that something more sinister has been perpetrated. After the shot is fired, she reenters the room, and notices the hole in the wall made by the bullet (although this should not be "over-revealed" to the audience). So throughout Act Two, Bridgit knows Walter is alive, but in a deep sleep caused by the sleeping drought. She also recognizes that various attempts have been made on his life, and seeks to discover who perpetrated each of them, for her own amusement. The audience should consider the possibility that Bridgit is the murderer. Also, please note the moment in Act Two where Bridgit cuts the telephone wire with her back to the audience. She does this so she can solve the attempted murder herself, but the audience shouldn't see her cut the wire.

Victoria attempts to strangle Walter with her scarf, and believes she has done so throughout Act Two. When she sees how perceptive BRIDGIT is, she panics and starts to drink. She never learns that her effort has failed, as she passes out drunk.

Alice comes to Cookham to shoot Walter Pearce (with his own gun), in a desperate attempt to win back Jack's affection, which she feels she is losing. She is convinced she is the murderer until Bridgit proves that she missed her target because she wasn't wearing her spectacles, at which point, Alice is suspicious of everyone.

Jack believes that he strangled Walter with his bare hands, killing him. Bridgit knows that Walter is alive, but during Act Two, she (successfully) tries to discover why Alice and Jack would attempt to murder Walter. This is something that Jack never told her.

(Scene: The living room of the country home of Edward and Sorel Bennett. It is very messy. The room is decorated with comfortable furniture including a sofa with pillows, a small end table with a drawer, a few chairs and lamps, and a carpet. The front door is downstage right. French windows are upstage, leading to a garden. A staircase upstage left ascends to the bedrooms, and Edward's study. There is a service door beneath the stairway leading to the kitchen, and to the root cellar. Paintings, a mirror, and a clock adorn the walls. Also in the room are a bookcase, a gramophone, a closet or hat rack, and a bar trolley with liquor, glasses, and an ice bucket.)

*(At rise, **BRIDGIT** is angrily picking up the mess. **JACK** enters from the front door in his chauffeur's uniform. He has a solid build, and moves with a brisk, cheerful bounce.)*

JACK. *(sneaks up behind her and gives her a hug)* ARGHH!

BRIDGIT. Scared me half to death, Jack! Where've you been?

JACK. Wipin' down the Bentley. It's splashed all over with mud. What ya mutterin' to yerself?

BRIDGIT. The missus ought t' give me fair warnin' when she's comin'! Thinks she can pop in and out anytime she pleases, she does.

JACK. *(Flops down on the sofa and relaxes. With no bitterness:)*
'At's the way the world is designed, luv – the rich in their proper place, tellin' me and you what to do.

BRIDGIT. The larder's empty and there's no time t' go t' the village. I've yet t' buy me Tittle Tattle, even.

JACK. They've 'ad another row, they 'ave – a real whopper.

BRIDGIT. Then it won't be long till himself shows up, too.
Lager, lad?

JACK. Thank you kindly.

(BRIDGIT exits to the kitchen. JACK speaks louder so she can hear.)

The skies opened up when me and Mrs. Bennett was motorin' 'ere. 'Ad to pull over and put up the canopy till it cleared.

(BRIDGIT reenters with a glass of lager.)

Where's Mrs. B now?

BRIDGIT. In the garden, if you please – assuming the role of landed gentry. Depend on it, she's up to something this week-end.

JACK. Like clockwork, whenever she gets a poor notice in the Daily Mail –

BRIDGIT. – I best prepare for a performance here in Cookham.

JACK. Newspaper didn't take kindly to Mr. Bennett's writin' neither. Nasty business. So they tussled. *(acts out the fight)* 'E was 'ollerin' like a madman, and she lammed into 'im – whack! – right 'cross the kisser. Then 'e tosses 'er to the floor. She crawls on her knees, grabs an Oriental vase and 'urls it smack at 'is 'ead. Tiny pieces flyin' everywhere.

BRIDGIT. Those vases cost a pretty penny. They should throw pickle jars at each other.

JACK. Then she's out the door, sayin' she quit the show. Never comin' back.

BRIDGIT. That old trick?

JACK. The fight was a good deal livelier than the play.

BRIDGIT. Attendin' the theatre, are ya lad?

JACK. Front row of the stalls. But I got the elbow from the bloke beside me when I started in snorin'. Society women sippin' cocktails make me drowsy.

BRIDGIT. Get enough of that on the job, we do. If I ever attend the theatre –

JACK. Come to town, and I'll ask Mr. B for two tickets.

BRIDGIT. Me mum saw a play once, with a lass fallin' over a cliff. That's something I'd like to see!

JACK. Even before the dust settled, I was readyin' up the Bentley. Damn that downpour. Got me work cut out, alright. She needs to be all shiny when I take 'er for a spin tonight.

BRIDGIT. (*playfully*) And what kind o' sinful thing has yourself got planned?

JACK. This fine evenin' I'll be goin' down to 'Igh Street with a lovely young lass who shall remain nameless.

BRIDGIT. Clara, the redhead.

JACK. I swear, Bridgit – you got the keenest mind in Cook'am.

BRIDGIT. T'ain't nothin'. Last time you come down, I spied a long red hair on ya collar. Here 'tis. (*She opens the drawer and pulls out a long strand of red hair.*) You can do better than her, Jack.

JACK. Randy old 'en – you want me all to yourself.

BRIDGIT. Lookatcha lyin' about. You lack the steam to be keepin' up with the likes of me.

JACK. I'm saltin' it away for tonight.

BRIDGIT. Watch out for these modern women. (*looks around*) Now where's me ball of yarn?

JACK. If I can hide me lady in town from me bird in Cook'am, and keep all of 'em from learnin' about me lass in Kent, I should manage to keep this loaf of bread on me shoulders.

BRIDGIT. Pace yourself, lad. Too many lasses – that's askin' for trouble.

(*JACK jumps up, puts his arms around BRIDGIT's waist and lifts her in the air.*)

JACK. You're the only one I want.

BRIDGIT. (*squeals and giggles*) Devil! Put me down!

JACK. Squealin' like a lass of sixteen, you are!

(*JACK puts BRIDGIT down.*)

BRIDGIT. If you're so keen on liftin' things, why don't you hoist the sofa? Me ball o' yarn must've rolled under.

JACK. 'Ere you go.

(With no effort, JACK lifts and end of the sofa with one arm, revealing a mess beneath. BRIDGIT retrieves her yarn.)

BRIDGIT. A woman up in the air isn't proper, Jack. Someone might see me knickers.

JACK. No one 'ere but you and me, and I seen your knickers plenty.

BRIDGIT. Pokin' through me dresser drawers, are ya?

JACK. Billowin' on the clothesline like sails on a clipper ship.

BRIDGIT. *(lightly)* Don't be bold, Jack. Now get yourself back to work while I make this place fit for the livin'.

JACK. Come sit by me.

BRIDGIT. That's enough foolishness. We don't want Mrs. B seein' the two of us here loafin'.

JACK. She's so scatty she'd walk right by.

(BRIDGIT returns the strand of hair and pulls a muffler from a drawer in the end table. She sits next to JACK as EDWARD peeks in the front door, unseen for a few moments, then closes the door.)

BRIDGIT. I hoped t' finish knittin' the muffler this week-end. Not very likely.

JACK. You're like a mum to me, Bridgit.

BRIDGIT. A good lad, you are. None of these ruffians toolin' round High Street.

JACK. Since the poor dear passed on when I was just a boy, I've never 'ad no one do for me what a mum does.

BRIDGIT. How did she go so young?

JACK. Tis a sorrowful tale.

BRIDGIT. *(noticing he looks sad)* Ay, lad, another time. You without a mum, and me with no kids t' call me own – who else have I got for t' be knittin' a muffler?

JACK. For me, is it?

BRIDGIT. D'ya fancy the color, Jack?

JACK. Matches me eyes.

BRIDGIT. Of course it does. Away on with you, lad! And hop it!

(JACK kisses BRIDGIT on the cheek, and heads out the front door. BRIDGIT puts the muffler away and hurries into the kitchen, leaving the door ajar. It's quiet a moment, then EDWARD opens the front door and enters surreptitiously. He has a bandage on his forehead, and his hair is slicked back. He is carrying newspapers. BRIDGIT peeks in as he heads to the bar trolley, takes a small vial out of his jacket pocket, and dumps the contents into the bottle of scotch. He hangs his jacket and hat. He sits and opens The Daily Mail to the crossword, and takes a pencil out of the drawer. After a few moments, BRIDGIT enters.)

EDWARD. Ah, Bridgit. Good afternoon.

BRIDGIT. Welcome, Mr. B.

EDWARD. Your timing is impeccable. What is a five-letter word for "tranquility?" Third letter "a."

BRIDGIT. *(instantly)* Death.

EDWARD. Death, you say. You're in a sour mood.

BRIDGIT. The missus arrives without notice. Now you're here, and there's no tellin' who else'll be turnin' up. I won't have any tranquility till I'm dead and gone. Only in death will I find P – E – A – C – E.

EDWARD. *(writing in the word)* Ah, most kind. Sorry to have upset your schedule, Bridgit. I had an irresistible urge for country air.

BRIDGIT. The country air'd be outside, sir. Had another spat, have ya?

EDWARD. Guilty as charged.

BRIDGIT. Bandage gave it away.

EDWARD. In a normal marriage, one might wonder if I had fallen.

BRIDGIT. If ya don't mind me sayin', t'aint nothin' normal
'bout you and Mrs. B. Use up all your vases that way.
Have to put your flowers in soup tins.

EDWARD. Whither the mistress of the manor? Hiding in her
boudoir, weeping tears of regret?

BRIDGIT. Prancin' about in the garden, sir.

EDWARD. Wearing one of her preposterous hats, I presume.

BRIDGIT. Looks like a pillow what's losin' its stuffin'.

EDWARD. I'm certain her hat is very fashionable, Bridgit.
Sorel Bennett is always *a la mode*.

BRIDGIT. More's the pity. It's big as a tent.

EDWARD. To shield her from the sun's rays. She's obsessed
with preserving her youth. Last month, before
rehearsals began, she injected monkey glands.

BRIDGIT. You're jokin'!

EDWARD. With Mrs. Bennett, there is never a need to joke.
She traffics in self-parody.

BRIDGIT. I told her t' pick some greens for salad. Put her
t' work, I did.

EDWARD. A fresh salad before dinner would be superb,
Bridgit.

BRIDGIT. Not before dinner, sir – that is dinner. It's all we
have – and a tin of sardines.

EDWARD. (*to appease her*) Salad and sardines sounds a poem,
Bridgit – an absolute poem.

BRIDGIT. Flattery won't cut any ice with me, sir.

EDWARD. (*suddenly anxious*) I trust the bar trolley is fully
stocked?

BRIDGIT. What do I look like – a maid?

EDWARD. (*confused a beat, then*) You do, rather. Have I been
suffering under a misconception?

BRIDGIT. (*heads to the bar trolley and picks up the bottle into
which he emptied the vial*) I'm not one to grouse, sir,
but the furniture needs dustin' and the floors need
sweepin' and the silver needs polishin'. And I've yet to
read this week's *Tittle Tattle*!

EDWARD. Don't fidget, Bridgit. I promise we will have a peaceful week-end, unless Sorel launches into one of her venomous attacks on my writing, in which case, I shall murder her with an axe.

BRIDGIT. Do it outside. Axes make an awful mess. A fortnight ago, in –

EDWARD. A peace offering. (*hands her a copy of The Tittle Tattle*) Picked it up at Maidenhead when I changed trains.

BRIDGIT. Me *Tittle Tattle!* Much obliged, Mr. B. Imagine what kinds of horror might've happened without me knowledge. (*She plops down on the couch, and digs into the paper, flipping the pages.*)

EDWARD. I'm sure the editors would be delighted to learn that your patronage is so – fanatical.

BRIDGIT. Can't miss an issue, sir – what with all these wives and husbands and mistresses and lovers and bits on the side nowadays shootin' and poisonin' and stabbin' and stranglin' each other.

EDWARD. I was unaware that parlors across London were strewn with the bodies of thwarted paramours. The only men and women I've seen on parlor floors are dead drunk.

BRIDGIT. Who said London? All this is happenin' right here in the village.

EDWARD. In Cookham? That must reduce the population considerably.

BRIDGIT. (*with relish*) Just yesterday, a wife done her husband in with a carvin' knife through the back at dinner. Dead as mutton, he was.

EDWARD. Before or after dessert?

BRIDGIT. After, sir.

EDWARD. Well, that shows some courtesy, at least. But it does seem a bit untidy. I'm certain it quite ruined his jacket.

BRIDGIT. And soiled the carpet. These wives don't bother to think when they set to skewerin' their husbands that

the carpets'll be bloody all over and the maids have to clean up the mess.

EDWARD. Bridgit, you have my absolute assurance that I shall never attempt to eliminate my wife in any way that would increase your labor.

BRIDGIT. Both Mrs. B and I will be grateful.

EDWARD. And I shall do my utmost to encourage Sorel, whatever homicidal design she may pursue, to keep the carpet foremost in her considerations.

BRIDGIT. Much obliged, sir.

EDWARD. Personally, I feel that poison would be more orderly, and equally effective.

BRIDGIT. Very neat, poison is.

EDWARD. What's the most difficult poison to detect? Your talk of murder has aroused my curiosity.

BRIDGIT. There's aconitine, arsenic, chloral, cyanide, morphine, prussic acid, and strychnine.

EDWARD. (*anxiously*) I believe my sleeping draught contains chloral. Could it prove fatal?

BRIDGIT. One would have to consume an awful lot of it. Most times, it just knocks ya flat for a few hours.

EDWARD. Bridgit, I must say your expertise in these matters is impressive – if a bit unnerving.

BRIDGIT. I could discover whodunit quicker than any of ya posh police – includin' Inspector Benson.

EDWARD. Is that the chap who barged in when Sorel threw herself down the stairs?

BRIDGIT. I believe you gave her a wee push, sir – that's the reason she rang him up.

EDWARD. That was insufficient cause for her to summon the constabulary.

BRIDGIT. Coppers don't know a thing 'bout human nature, sir. They make up their mind who's the guilty party, and the real evil-doers toddle off easy as ya please. My motto – assume the worst in everyone.

(**JACK** enters.)

EDWARD. Your complete lack of faith in human decency is astonishing, Bridgit. I've been sentimentalizing the rustic characters I write.

JACK. (*eagerly*) Put *me* in play, sir!

BRIDGIT. I've been in service longer.

JACK. (*playfully*) Lollin' about, readin' your gory stories. 'Twould tarnish the working class if Mr. B put the likes of you on stage.

EDWARD. I'm afraid I am entirely to blame. I have been assailing Bridgit with inquiries.

BRIDGIT. I'm off. There'll be more time for me Tittle Tattle tonight, with a hot toddy!

(*She exits.*)

JACK. Afternoon, Mr. B.

EDWARD. Are you surprised to see me?

JACK. We've trod this path before, sir. (*re: bandage*) Looks like she fetched you a good one.

EDWARD. I wondered why everyone at Paddington Station was staring at me with moist, sympathetic eyes.

JACK. Mrs. B has a mighty arm, I'll give 'er that.

EDWARD. Did you notice any wounds on her?

JACK. No, but she complained of a few blacks and blues.

EDWARD. (*petulant*) My injuries are always glaringly conspicuous, whilst hers are neatly concealed beneath her wardrobe. It's not fair, I tell you.

JACK. If you like, Mr. B, I can teach you 'ow to duck.

EDWARD. That is most kind, Jack. I acquired no practical knowledge whatsoever at the Royal Academy of Dramatic Arts. My training in phonetics left me ill-equipped for the perils of married life. I should've taken the seminar in unarmed combat.

JACK. You tossed 'er to the floor in one quick move, sir. Fine throw, that was.

EDWARD. I must acknowledge that the satisfaction I once derived from hurling Mrs. Bennett to the carpet has

subsided over time. (*wistfully*) I suspect it's that way with all marriages.

JACK. Precisely why I'm a bachelor, Mr. B, and shall remain so all me days.

EDWARD. Jack, have you ever struck a woman?

JACK. Not a once, sir. On me 'onor.

EDWARD. You don't say. I assumed that in the heat of argument, servants knocked each other about like cricket balls.

JACK. I admire the ladies, Mr. B. Wouldn't biff 'em if me life depended on it.

EDWARD. Truth be told, Sorel is the only woman I've ever assaulted – and only when she strikes me first.

JACK. Admirable, sir. And to your credit, you usually wind up the worse for wear.

EDWARD. Jack, what if the right woman happens by?

JACK. (*confused*) Do ya mean, would I stike 'er?

EDWARD. Would you marry her.

JACK. The right women 'appen by on a regular basis, Mr. B – in town, 'ere in Cook'am, and back 'ome in Kent.

EDWARD. You should have joined the Navy, and expanded your harem.

JACK. Don't take much to water, sir – it shrinks me willy.

EDWARD. The ideal woman is out there for you somewhere, my boy – unless the popular songs have it entirely wrong.

JACK. Beg pardon, Mr. B, but when I see the way you and Mrs. B carry on, any desire I might 'arbor for wedlock is squashed like a gnat.

EDWARD. Don't be slack, Jack – or you'll end a lonely bachelor.

JACK. Keep the ladies smilin', that's the ticket.

(*JACK exits out the front door, as SOREL enters through the French windows, grandly. She is wearing*

an enormous hat with feathers, and carrying a basket of what looks like weeds. She poses as a "country maiden" for EDWARD's benefit, but he doesn't turn to look. She places a record on the gramophone – a waltz instrumental, then heads to a mirror on the wall.)

EDWARD. Sorel, darling, what is an eight letter word for "murder?" Final letter "e."

SOREL. *(instantly)* Marriage.

EDWARD. I believe the editor prefers a synonym – not motivation.

SOREL. I offered a synonym.

EDWARD. Do you intend to murder me? Are you planning a *(as he writes in the word)* hom-i-cide?

SOREL. *(removes the hat)* Time will tell, dear. The week-end has only begun.

EDWARD. It appears a few pigeons have roosted in your bonnet.

SOREL. Is it your intention this afternoon to hurl insults at me like javelins?

EDWARD. Did you choose that lethal metaphor deliberately?

SOREL. Entirely subconscious, darling – but you know what Dr. Freud says.

EDWARD. I was unaware that you were remotely familiar with anything Viennese, apart from the waltz.

SOREL. *(She turns and looks at EDWARD directly, with deep romantic longing:)* We danced to this tune on the Isle of Capri, do you recall?

EDWARD. Would you be so kind as to have this dance with me now?

SOREL. Oh, darling! *(They dance, blissfully content for a few moments, then:)* I suppose I shan't go anywhere without you pursuing me like a demented hound.

(They space their lines around the music, taking time to dance and dip between.)

EDWARD. Did you think I would remain in our flat amidst a pile of shattered glass?

SOREL. You flung me to the ground, darling. That was uncharitable.

EDWARD. It was no excuse for you to launch a vase – especially the Ming.

SOREL. You are heartless.

EDWARD. And we are Ming-less. It was spiteful of you, Sorel.

SOREL. Spiteful, that's rich. I'm crawling about on my hands and knees, and you ask if I would like a cocktail.

EDWARD. An exceedingly generous offer given that my face was beginning to swell.

SOREL. The so-called "Ming" belonged to your first wife. It was a cheap imitation, and has been irritating me for years.

EDWARD. You are my first wife, as I have oft reminded you. But very likely not my last.

SOREL. What could I have done to inspire such venom?

EDWARD. Your snoring is particularly oppressive.

SOREL. That bandage is quite dashing.

EDWARD. Before we retire for the night, might I have a look-see at your black and blues?

(The record starts to skip.)

SOREL. *(re: the skipping record)* I believe that fate is trying to tell us something, Edward.

EDWARD. I find fate quite impertinent, actually – always interjecting its views gratuitously, in the vaguest of terms.

(SOREL picks up her basket and sifts through. EDWARD yanks the needle off the record.)

SOREL. Our song is ended. The time has come for us to go our several ways.

EDWARD. But we're Siamese Twins. Bosom buddies. Juno's swans. Two peas in a pod...

SOREL. (*interrupting*) You may cling to those tedious idioms when I tell you my news.

EDWARD. Who is it this time?

SOREL. I have invited Walter Pearce for the week-end. You must return to London at once.

EDWARD. You impudent cat. Invite anyone you like – a missionary, or an American for all I care – but I will not permit a politician inside my home.

SOREL. I had not expected you to put in an appearance or I wouldn't have asked him.

EDWARD. You desperately wanted me to follow you here, Sorel – admit it.

SOREL. Can I help if I am irresistible to those in the halls of government?

EDWARD. – where they denounce immorality the week long and totter off to their mistresses come week-end.

SOREL. I am not Walter's mistress, of yet. And he is not a mere politician, darling – he's a diplomatist. I intend to travel the world with him, wearing extravagant hats.

EDWARD. In fact, Mr. Pearce was recently elected, along with many other like-minded charlatans, on a platform dedicated to eliminating decadent behavior entirely.

SOREL. Entirely? That should keep him quite occupied.

EDWARD. They despise people like us, Sorel.

SOREL. Walter Pearce adores me.

EDWARD. (*enraged*) He adores the characters I have written for you – my Daphne, my Beryl, my Ariadne...

SOREL. (*interrupting*) He wants to save me from you!

(*SOREL picks up a vase and prepares to hurl it at*

EDWARD, who raises his fists as JACK enters. They resume their composure.)

EDWARD. We mustn't quarrel, Sorel. It will set a bad example for the servants.

JACK. Afternoon, Mrs. B. Done some gardenin'?

SOREL. Yes, Jack, but I am unable to determine which of these greens are edible, and which I might use to poison Mr. Bennett.

JACK. Still at it, eh?

(**BRIDGIT** *enters from the kitchen.*)

BRIDGIT. G'day, Mrs. B. Brung in some provisions, have ya?

SOREL. Bridgit, these greens were at the outer edges of the garden. Do you recognize them?

BRIDGIT. (*peering in the basket*) There's baneberry, black nightingale, foxglove, hemlock, spurges, thornapple and (*suspiciously*) yew.

SOREL. (*apprehensively*) Me?

BRIDGIT. Yew – from the Yew tree. It's poison. They're all poison.

EDWARD. Bridgit, I am flabbergasted. Not only are you able to identify each weed, but once again, you've alphabetized your list.

SOREL. (*overacting*) This is a catastrophe! Whatever will we do for salad?

BRIDGIT. (*pulling out a few leafs of lettuce*) Here's a wee bit of lettuce.

JACK. And there's always a tin of sardines in the larder.

EDWARD. Mr. Pearce will have to find other ways to satisfy his appetites.

JACK. Walter Pearce?

BRIDGIT. What's this?

SOREL. I've asked a friend for the week-end, Bridgit. He should be arriving at the station any moment.

BRIDGIT. Is that so? And what will he be eatin', pray?

SOREL. You'll have to cobble something together with the lettuce and sardines. Not to worry – he's certain to be so utterly mesmerized by my aura he will hardly notice the menu.

EDWARD. He can sleep in the Caligula room.

BRIDGIT. We don't have a Caligula room.

SOREL. We do now, apparently – and I’m certain we’ve not heard the last of it.

BRIDGIT. There isn’t food enough to be gettin’ us through the week-end. Mr. Pearce will starve!

SOREL. He will very likely bring chocolates.

EDWARD. Beware, Sorel – your Act Two costume has begun to split at the seams.

JACK. (*dispirited*) Must I take the Bentley back out into the mud?

EDWARD. (*for SOREL’s benefit*) Jack, would you do away with Mr. Pearce on the way back from the station, to spare me the effort?

SOREL. (*for EDWARD’s benefit*) Bridgit, would you be sure to toss some of these greens into Mr. Bennett’s dinner salad?

BRIDGIT. (*grabs the basket from SOREL*) What’s goin’ on here?

JACK. There’s a plot afoot, that’s for certain.

SOREL. A murder mystery.

EDWARD. I detest those plays. They require the audience to scour every phrase and turn of event for clues.

BRIDGIT. (*threateningly*) We’re not expectin’ anyone else, are we?

SOREL. This is the entire cast, Bridgit.

JACK. A murder mystery needs a few more suspects, don’t it?

BRIDGIT. Not this one!

(*She stomps off, with the basket.*)

JACK. Off I go, into the muck and mire.

(*He exits reluctantly.*)

SOREL. (*It’s quiet a few moments, then:*) I believe we have offended the servants.

EDWARD. Walter Pearce, of all people. Sorel, how could you?

SOREL. Truth be told, I’m not quite sure whom I’ve invited. There were throngs of clamoring gentlemen at the first night reception, proffering their cards.

EDWARD. So you shuffled the deck, and summoned whoever was on top?

SOREL. Don't be acid, dear. Must I suffer because the *Daily Mail* detested your latest endeavor?

EDWARD. They didn't care much for your particular brand of caterwauling either.

SOREL. (*enraged*) What am I to do when you've written such a hollow character but to fill her out!?

EDWARD. There is nothing hollow about Daphne, and no need to bellow the entire third act!

SOREL. Daphne is another in an interminable line of world-weary society women, laughing gaily while she nibbles caviar and sips cocktails. Talking of which – fetch me a drink, darling.

(**EDWARD** heads to the bar trolley. He considers whether to use the scotch into which he emptied the vial, decides against it, and prepares cocktails for **SOREL** and himself. During the above:)

SOREL. I feel stifled, Edward – asphyxiated. My life is a bore. The same friends, the same cars, the same estates – the same gowns, the same jewels, the same sables – the same dinners, the same cafes, the same parties – the same photographers, the same stylists, the same masseuses – the same injections, the same high-colonics –

EDWARD. (*interrupting*) That's quite enough.

(**EDWARD** hands her a drink.)

Cheers.

SOREL. All that, I can tolerate. But I beg you, Edward – not the same role.

EDWARD. The women I have written for you are vastly different creations. It's your interpretations that are ploddingly, monotonously the same.

SOREL. I cannot go on this way. I shan't return to the Garrick.

EDWARD. My dear, you will be at the Garrick Monday next when the curtain rises on *Daphne's Delight*, or your youthful and determined understudy will assume the role, which is incidentally more suited to an actress of her range and proportions.

SOREL. All of my most devoted friends insist that I have maintained the figure of a maiden.

EDWARD. A maiden aunt. Face facts, darling. The curtain has closed on our days as Bright Young Things.

SOREL. My public will not stand for an understudy!

EDWARD. If you make this habitual threat once more this week-end, I shall ask Gertrude Lawrence to replace you in the role.

SOREL. (*with disgust*) Gertrude Lawrence is a third-rate hack who has had a tremendous amount of luck.

EDWARD. The *Daily Mail* feels otherwise. "Miss Lawrence confirms beyond doubt that she is the reigning queen of the London stage. She possesses an incandescent charisma that hurls the entire audience into immediate, abject slavery."

SOREL. How dare you memorize that quotation! I am an *artiste*, Edward. I long to perform the great roles!

EDWARD. Which roles, exactly?

SOREL. I'm not entirely sure, but I've heard so much about them. Something classical – or biblical even, where I die in the end.

EDWARD. Need I remind you that your tongue becomes extremely agitated with period dialogue?

SOREL. That is a lie. You saw my Mirabell in the provinces.

EDWARD. It was Millimant and you were horrid. You sounded like a fishmonger.

SOREL. You mean fishwife (*catches herself*) – and I most certainly did not.

EDWARD. You mustn't impugn me for your limitations.

SOREL. And you mustn't subject me to yours. The time has come to extend the parameters of my talents.

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