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Strangers in the House

A Mysterious Comedy in Three Acts

By Victor Lucas



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PRODUCTION NOTES

If a wheelchair is not readily obtainable, the wheels and handle from a child's push-chair or perambulator can be utilised to convert an ordinary kitchen chair into a wheelchair suitable to the purposes of the play.

The old clothes worn by ARABELLA when masquerading as the Guy should be as ragged as possible, with straw protruding from the front of the jacket and from under the wide-brimmed slouch hat, so that the effect upon audiences of her unexpected sneeze will be really startling.

The "Thing" is a simple box-shaped object, placed on a small table and somewhat higher than a television set. It need be adorned only by a dial and a few knobs or it can be further embellished with red and green electric bulbs which light up when the "Thing" is switched on. It should be possible, with a very little inventive ingenuity, to give it a most amusing and intriguing face-like appearance . . . indeed almost a robot personality of its own. An old tea chest, a little luminous paint, a few coloured bulbs should give the right result.

The off-stage fireworks in Act 3 should be as noisy as possible. In the interests of safety as well as simplicity, blank cartridges will provide the best effect.

The effect of the bonfire offstage just before the final curtain is best contrived by using an ordinary 1,000 watt flood fitted with a flame-coloured gelatine (5A) with patches of No. 6 Red stuck on here and there. A few strips of canvas about two feet long and $1\frac{1}{2}$ inches wide are tacked to a short length of wood and suspended over the flood so that the strips hang down just in front of it. Move the strips to and fro and at the same time increase and decrease the light from the flood on the dimmer. The flickering effect on the walls of the room will provide an attractive picture as the curtain falls.

Pace is important to the play. MRS. BENBOW bowls all before her by the ripeness of her personality, though without, be it noted, losing her dignity or descending to mere aggressiveness. MRS. JONES is quite a gay, jolly woman and her husband conceals his absent-mindedness beneath a brisk manner.

Both PENNY and CYRIL are high-spirited young people; and JOHN CUNNINGHAM, despite the quietness of his charm, is a man of the world. A ponderous approach, slowness in delivering lines or picking up cues would handicap the play and are to be avoided at all costs. The PENNY and JOHN scenes can, of course, be taken at a slower pace than the rest of the play but should always be followed by an increase in tempo. This particularly applies after MR. JONES' entrance in Act Three, from which point there must be a general quickening of the pace and a feeling of mounting excitement right through to the end of the play, so that one revelation follows another in quick succession.

The cupboard door must have a handle on the outside which can be turned and rattled by CYRIL from within. Sundry old coats should be hanging inside the cupboard so that CYRIL is concealed when the door is opened.

The bolt on the main door must be a good solid metal one. The cigarette case used by CYRIL must be of the type which closes with an audible snap. Use a hanging chime for the grandfather clock, and the whistle from a whistling kettle for the percolator.

During the first interval tack gauze on the outside of the windows to give an appearance of fog but remove it during the second interval.

THE FURNITURE

There is a fairly large rectangular table L.C. and a small round one in front of the fireplace. Three chairs are set around the larger table.

Two armchairs, one above and one below the fire, at an angle.

A tall standard lamp behind the upstage armchair.

Radio above the fireplace.

Writing desk and chair U.L.

Sideboard above the kitchen door.

The "Thing" stands against the back wall, right of the archway.

A barometer hangs on the wall between the archway and the cupboard.

At the angle of the stairs is a heavy curtain and a fuse box visible to the audience.

In the hall, a telephone on a small table and also a coat stand.

The light switch is right of the cupboard.

WARDROBE

MRS. BENBOW Smart tailored costume. Pyjamas, dressing-gown, slippers.

MRS. JONES Bright woollen dress.

PENNY Skirt and trim sweater. Attractive pyjamas, dressing-gown, slippers.

ARABELLA As the Guy Fawkes; man's ragged clothing, black slouch hat, old grey woollen gloves and socks. (*No shoes*). Guy Fawkes mask. As herself; blue jeans and shapeless jumper beneath not very good coat. Ankle socks and pumps.

MISS FAIRFAX Glamorous and very smart costume. Spare pair of PENNY's pyjamas and dressing-gown.

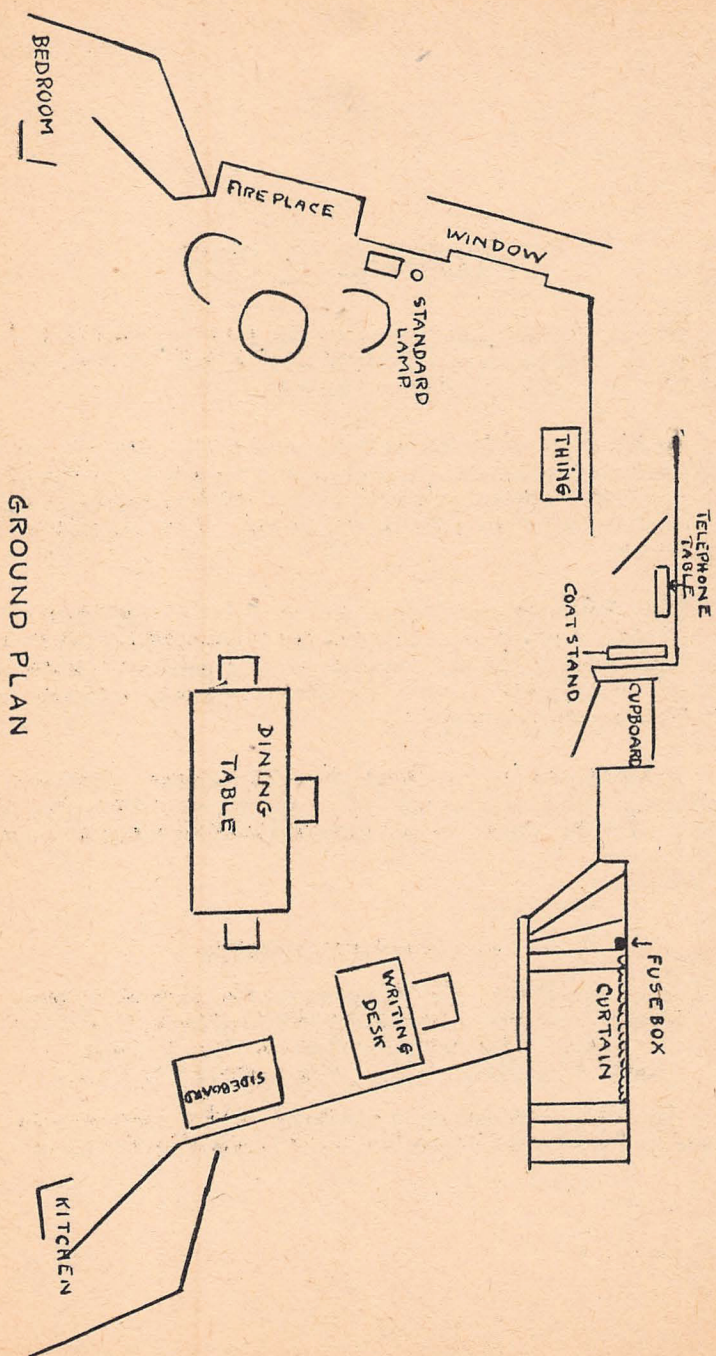
MISS CHAMBERS Dark raincoat, black nylons, black gloves.

MR. JONES Lounge suit. Slippers.

CYRIL Lounge suit. Slippers. Flamboyant dressing-gown.

JOHN Well-cut grey flannels. Tweed jacket. Spare pair of Mr. Jones' pyjamas.

Outdoor coats, hats and gloves are worn by all characters at the appropriate times.



GROUND PLAN

CHARACTERS
(in the order of their appearance)

MRS. BENBOW

MRS. JONES

MR. JONES

PENNY JONES

CYRIL JONES

MISS CHAMBERS

MISS FAIRFAX

JOHN CUNNINGHAM

ARABELLA BUNTER-CUTTS

THE SCENE: The pleasantly furnished living-room of a suburban house. Down right is a door leading to CYRIL's bedroom. Above this the fireplace and then tall windows which open on to the garden. In the Back Wall, right of centre, is an archway which leads to the hall and to the main door. Left of centre is a large cupboard. Left of this the staircase. Down left is a door to the kitchen.

Production notes, a stage plan, a property list, a wardrobe plot and details of the furniture are in the book of the play.

Strangers in the House

ACT ONE

(When the curtain rises it is early evening on a Saturday in November. There is a cosy glow from the wall-brackets, the standard lamp and the fire. Gay music is playing softly on the radio. The general atmosphere is one of comfort and warmth.)

MRS. BENBOW is in the armchair above the fire, smoking a cheroot and reading a book. She is a distinguished-looking woman in her early fifties. MRS. JONES, a pleasant motherly woman sits at the writing desk, chewing the end of her pen thoughtfully. Seized with sudden inspiration, she starts to write. MR. JONES, a retired Civil Servant, sits in the other armchair, completely engrossed with sundry pieces of wire and metal spread on the small table before him. His manner is absent-minded but at times deceptively brisk. He is wearing bedroom slippers. PENNY JONES, their daughter, comes quickly down the stairs, humming gaily. She wears an attractive dressing gown and carries several small bottles of nail varnish. In her last year as a teenager, she is a delightful person with great charm and a horse-tail hair style.)

PENNY Good evening Mrs. Benbow. *(She places the bottles on the large table.)*

MRS. BENBOW *(without looking up)* Good evening, Penny.

PENNY What are you reading? Something interesting?

MRS. BENBOW El Akram yah Mookroosh.

PENNY Pardon? *(She crosses to her.)*

MRS. BENBOW It's "The Cocktail Party" translated into Arabic.

PENNY *(peering over the back of the armchair)* Goodness! I think you're ever so clever to be able to read all those wiggles and squiggles.

(She hurries blithely up the stairs on the end of her line and cannons into CYRIL JONES coming down in a state of agitation.)

CYRIL is an amiable though somewhat fatuous young man. He descends the stairs in a hurry, performing a difficult feat by putting on his jacket and at the same time holding a handkerchief to his chin. He, too, is wearing slippers.)

CYRIL *(in distress)* Where's the sticking plaster! Has anyone seen the surgical spirit?

MRS. JONES Cyril! *(She rises and moves to the sideboard)* I'll get the first-aid box. What have you been doing to yourself!

CYRIL I'm scarred for life. It would happen tonight of all nights.

STRANGERS IN THE HOUSE

- This is the last time I borrow Father's cut-throat.
- MRS. JONES (*moving to him with a small first-aid box from the side-board cupboard*) Sit down and let me see what you've done.
- CYRIL (*taking the box from her*) Thank you, Mother. It's all right. Don't fuss. I can manage.
- (*He exits up the stairs and once again cannons into PENNY who is coming down. PENNY carries a newspaper which she spreads on the table.*)
- MRS. JONES Hurry up, Reg. We must get ready to go soon.
- MR. JONES (*without looking up*) Yes . . . all right dear.
- PENNY Are you going out too, Mother?
- MRS. JONES (*crossing back to the writing desk and sitting*) Your father and I are having dinner with Mrs. Bunter-Cutts.
- MRS. BENBOW (*looking up suddenly*) Bunter-Cutts? Bunter-Cutts? Who is this Mrs. Bunter-Cutts?
- MRS. JONES She's the President of the League.
- MRS. BENBOW Which League?
- MRS. JONES The West Wimbledon Women's League of Self-Sufficiency.
- MRS. BENBOW (*putting aside her book*) Tell me about this West Women's Wimbledon Whatever-it-was.
- MRS. JONES It's a sort of club really. We organise outings and discussion groups and hold monthly meetings. Last month we had Richard Fulton from "Mrs. Dale's Diary" as our guest of honour. Such a charming man. Mrs. Bunter-Cutts is hoping to get Jonathan Gabriel next time.
- PENNY (*interested*) Is she really! That *would* be something!
- MRS. BENBOW Who's he?
- MRS. JONES He writes every week in "Woman's Own."
- PENNY (*staring into space*) I wonder what he looks like?
- MRS. JONES I don't know. I don't think they've ever published a photograph of him.
- PENNY He writes such lovely stories. (*She proceeds to paint her nails*) I'm sure he's tall and smouldering. Rather like Valentine Dyall.
- MRS. BENBOW Nonsense. He's probably a decrepit old roué with eyes like oysters. I can just see him . . .
- (*CYRIL enters briskly down the stairs. He is straightening his tie, humming a tune and smoking a cigarette.*)
- . . . chain smoking as he ogles typists in Lower Regent Street.
- CYRIL Talking about me?
- MRS. JONES We were discussing Jonathan Gabriel.
- CYRIL Never heard of him.
- PENNY Oh Cyril, you must have done! He's famous! He writes all the Millicent books.
- CYRIL What are *they*?
- PENNY "Millicent Goes to School" . . . "Millicent and Tony" . . . "Millicent the Girl" . . .

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MRS. JONES "Millicent the Wife" . . . "Millicent the Woman"
. . . "Millicent the Mother" . . .

(*There is a brief pause while they search their memories.*)

PENNY "Millicent's Gay Adventure" . . .

CYRIL (*brightening*) Ah! That sounds more my type of book!

PENNY (*picking up a novel with a gay cover from the sideboard*) I've got one of his from the library now.

CYRIL (*taking it from her and moving away U.R.*) "Love Among The Scented Blossoms" . . Any pictures?

PENNY Oh, he's a wonderful writer!

CYRIL (*reading from inside the front cover*) "Jonathan Gabriel impales the heart of woman on the sharp thorns of his passionate insight."

(*He chortles irreverently. PENNY snatches the book back from him.*)

PENNY (*with dignity*) You couldn't be expected to understand.

CYRIL (*looking over MRS. BENBOW's shoulder at the book she is reading*) And what's Mrs. Benbow reading? Imbibing the wisdom of the East, eh Mrs. Benbow? You'll be taking up Yogi one of these days.

(*To PENNY as he crosses above the table to D.L.*)

I'll bet Jonathan Gabriel's a woman really. Real name Wilhelmina Twitch. (*He exits D.L.*)

MRS. BENBOW It so happens I practised Yogi for many years when I lived in a cave in the Atlas Mountains.

(*During the following dialogue MRS. JONES is sitting at the writing desk U.L., alternately writing and thinking hard.*)

PENNY That's in North Africa isn't it?

MRS. BENBOW I'm surprised to find you so knowledgeable in matters geographical.

PENNY It comes from working in a travel agency. You do get to know the world, even if it is only at second hand. Venice . . . Pernambuco . . . The Marquesas Islands . . . One day I want to see all those places. One day I will.

MRS. BENBOW (*observing her shrewdly*) I had no idea you were such a romantic.

PENNY (*coming back to the suburbs and busying herself with her nail varnish*) What on earth were you doing in North Africa?

(*CYRIL enters D.L. and crosses rapidly behind the table to the stairs.*)

MRS. BENBOW Observing the habits of the natives. Through Yogi I attained to the fourth of the seven planes of dynamic insight. But I gave it up on returning to England.

CYRIL (*pausing on the stairs*) Oh? Why?

MRS. BENBOW (*turning in her chair to address the remark to CYRIL*) I found the contemplation of my navel an overrated pastime, unsuited to the English climate.

CYRIL Oh. (*He exits up the stairs.*)

STRANGERS IN THE HOUSE

MRS. BENBOW Though still of course a convenient mental relaxation in the London Tube during the Rush Hour.

MRS. JONES How does this sound? "Use SPLOSHO and you soon will find your dishes sparkling and your cares behind."
(*Doubtfully*) Not quite right is it?

(*CYRIL enters down the stairs and crosses to his room D.R.*)

PENNY I think Flaming June is just as seductive as Bleeding Heart. (*She extends a hand to CYRIL as he passes*) What do you think Cyril?

CYRIL Don't ask me. Ugh! They look like vampire's talons.
(*He exits D.R.*)

MRS. JONES Personally I never use SPLOSHO for washing up. I did try it once but it took the skin off my hands and turned the knives and forks green.

MRS. BENBOW May I ask then, why you are extolling its virtues in rhyme?

MRS. JONES It's a competition, Mrs. Benbow. Find a rhyme and win five hundred pounds. Second prize—free admission for life to the Battersea Fun Fair and Pleasure Gardens."

MRS. BENBOW Good Grief!

MRS. JONES "A Thousand Consolation prizes of Giant Monster packets of SPLOSHO." Here's another one I've thought up.

(*CYRIL enters D.R. with a pair of shoes in his hand and crosses towards the kitchen door D.L.*)

"SPLOSHO'S the stuff for doing your chores. It washes down walls . . .

CYRIL (*pausing at the door D.L. for a moment*) And burns holes in the floors. (*He exits D.L.*)

MRS. BENBOW How long have you been doing these competitions Mrs. Jones?

MRS. JONES (*sighing*) Nearly twenty years.

PENNY And you've never won a thing. You must have spent pounds and pounds on stamps alone. Surely there are easier ways of tempting fortune.

(*CYRIL enters D.L. with shoes, shoe-cleaning materials and a newspaper which he spreads on the table (left end).*)

What with your competitions and Father's inventions . . . Hey, steady on there!

MRS. JONES Cyril! I do wish you'd clean your shoes in the kitchen. I'm tired of telling you!

CYRIL That's all right Mother. I shan't be a minute. Penny's the one who's cluttering up the table. (*He pushes her bottles further along, knocking over some which are fortunately corked.*)

PENNY Mind my Flaming June!

CYRIL (*reading from the newspaper*) "A box of fireworks with a fuse attached has been discovered beneath the Speaker's Chair in the House of Commons. This threat to explode the seat of Government . . ."

STRANGERS IN THE HOUSE

(MRS. BENBOW rises suddenly. CYRIL stops and looks up.)

MRS. BENBOW I must go. (She exits up the stairs.)

MRS. JONES (doubtfully) "SPLOSHO splashes well your dishes answers all your washing-up wishes."

CYRIL (polishing) I can't think why somebody didn't blow it up years ago.

MR. JONES (without looking up) What's that, son?

CYRIL The seat of Government.

MRS. JONES (his thoughts elsewhere) I don't know. You'd better ask your mother. She knows where everything's kept in this house. I don't.

PENNY There. That ought to do for Mr. Prendergast.

MRS. JONES Penny, dear. How many girls has Mr. Prendergast working for him?

PENNY Well, there's Hilda and Miss Hibbert at the enquiry desk, there's young Janet who does the post and staves off the office boy and makes the tea . . . and then there's me in the private office.

MRS. JONES (doubtfully) With Mr. Prendergast.

PENNY What's on your mind, Mother?

MRS. JONES Didn't you tell me Mr. Prendergast was married?

PENNY That's right. He's separated from his wife though. He says she didn't understand him. I bet she did. It isn't difficult to understand Mr. Prendergast.

MRS. JONES You mustn't mind my asking, dear, but what exactly are his motives in taking you out tonight?

PENNY (amused) His motives? Oh, Mother, you are naive. (She rises.)

MRS. JONES Your father and I are concerned for you, dear. We don't want you to come to any harm.

PENNY (hugging her) Darling . . . what sheltered lives girls lived in your young days.

MRS. JONES Did we? Ah well, that's what we like you to think anyway.

(Offstage, a Grandfather Clock chimes five times with unnatural rapidity.)

(CYRIL, meanwhile, crosses quickly to the mantelpiece and picks up his wrist-watch. On putting it to his ear he finds that it has stopped.)

CYRIL (as the last stroke dies away) Anybody got the right time?

PENNY (glancing at her watch) Nearly ten to seven.

CYRIL (strapping on his watch and adjusting it) I do wish you hadn't mended all the clocks, Father. They were all right until you overhauled their pinwheels.

PENNY Can't they ever be put right again?

MR. JONES I've tried shortening the swing . . .

(Offstage a single chime from the Grandfather Clock.)

. . . but the trouble seems to lie with the ratchet.

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(Offstage a belated double chime.)

CYRIL It's impossible to tell the time in this house nowadays with the clocks chiming all the wrong hours. *(He parts the hanging curtains at the window U.R. and peers out into the night.)*

MRS. JONES This sounds a nice one. First prize a week-end with Wilfred Pickles.

PENNY What's this? More SPLOSHO?

MRS. JONES No, this is for the best suggestion for what to do with BIKIWIX Breakfast Flakes.

(CRYIL taps the barometer.)

PENNY You're not trying to tell the time by that now are you? What's the matter with Cyril? Why are you on hot bricks?

CYRIL Never you mind.

(He sits left of the table and resumes polishing his shoes. MRS. BENBOW comes down the stairs. She now wears a coat and a hat.)

MRS. BENBOW *(majestically, as she moves to the street door)*

"Ah, would some power the giftie gie us

To see ourselves as others see us . . ."

(She exits to the accompaniment of blank looks from PENNY and CYRIL.)

(MR. and MRS. JONES, quite engrossed, have taken no notice.)

PENNY Father, who exactly is Mrs. Benbow?

MR. JONES Mrs. Benbow? How do you mean?

PENNY She's been here three months and she's just as much an enigma now as she was on the day she arrived.

CYRIL Did you know she was going to be a permanent fixture when you first brought her home to supper?

MR. JONES *(mildly)* No. I merely wished to enjoy her conversation at greater length than was possible on a park bench. She's an interesting talker. Her views are usually worth listening to.

CYRIL And so Mother invites her to stay the night . . .

PENNY And then she offers to put her up for the week . . .

CYRIL And she's been here ever since.

PENNY She can talk all right. When she wants to. But it seems to me that of late she's been behaving very oddly. Has she said anything about leaving?

MRS. JONES *(suddenly)* No, she hasn't. And I don't intend to ask her. She may be a little eccentric at times but she's a very nice woman. We have the room and since she insists on paying handsomely for her keep she's very welcome to stay as long as she likes.

CYRIL Does she still spend all her time in the Reading Room of the British Museum?

MRS. JONES I believe so.

PENNY *(aghast)* Whatever does she go there for?

MRS. JONES I understand she's engaged on some form of research.

CYRIL She's gathering material for a book. She told me all about it one night.

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