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Mrs Meadowsweet

A Play

David Campton

A Samuel French Acting Edition

SAMUEL FRENCH
FOUNDED 1830

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CHARACTERS

Miss Jerrold
Miss Brazenose
Fleur
Alice
Mrs Meadowsweet
Inga

The action takes place in the lounge of a small country guest house in the West Country

Time—the present

During the play the Lights dim to denote passages of time

AUTHOR'S NOTE

Although for the purposes of this script *Respite* is set in the West Country, there is no reason why the action should not take place in any other country district—as long as Mrs Meadowsweet's accent is changed accordingly.

MRS MEADOWSWEET*

The lounge at "Respite", a small country guest house in the West Country

It is late afternoon in summer

The lounge contains several easy chairs (with perhaps a settee) arranged around the room—one at least has its back to the audience. Near the chairs are low tables on which afternoon tea has been served. This is nearly over but tea-things have yet to be cleared from some of the tables. There is an archway to the entrance hall at the rear and french windows opening to the garden at one side

As the CURTAIN *rises, Miss Brazenose, an upright person in late middle age, is gazing through the french windows whilst Miss Jerrold, an older silver-haired lady, smiles happily to herself. For a while neither says anything, then Miss Jerrold starts to make a pronouncement*

Miss Jerrold Tea is . . .

There is a pause until Miss Brazenose realizes she has been spoken to

Miss Brazenose (*at last*) Yes?

Another pause while Miss Jerrold sorts this out

Miss Jerrold Yes?
Miss Brazenose You said "Tea. Is."
Miss Jerrold Did I . . .? I must have been about to say—er . . .
Miss Brazenose Yes?
Miss Jerrold I've forgotten.
Miss Brazenose Something about tea?
Miss Jerrold A passing reflection. (*She thinks*) It appears to have passed.
Miss Brazenose (*trying to work it out*) Tea is—what?

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*N.B. Paragraph 3 on page ii of this Acting Edition regarding photocopying and video-recording should be carefully read.

Miss Jerrold A soothing influence?
Miss Brazenose Is that what you were going to say?
Miss Jerrold I've no idea why. Who needs soothing?
Miss Brazenose The fruit cake was awfully good.
Miss Jerrold After tea one feels so at peace with—with . . .
Miss Brazenose Is *that* what you were going to say?
Miss Jerrold Who knows? At peace with . . .

A distant door is slammed. This is followed by raised and angry voices approaching

Fleur (*off*) If you can't speak without being abusive, you might as well shut up.
Alice (*off*) I only asked where the hell we were.
Fleur (*off*) You ought to know. You were driving.
Alice (*off*) You were supposed to be reading the map.

The speakers pause by the archway. They are Alice Benson, a hard-faced person in her early forties and her younger sister. Fleur, slighter and more accommodating but no less hard-hitting when crossed

Fleur How could I read anything with you swerving all over the place?
Alice I kept swerving because the road bends like that—if a God-forsaken cart track can be called a road.

They observe the room and its occupants

H'm. Ah. Can we eat here?
Miss Jerrold This is *Respite*.
Alice What sort of answer's that?
Fleur We are looking for a place to sleep, too.
Miss Brazenose You'll need to ask Mrs Meadowsweet.
Miss Jerrold But I'm sure there'll be a room. There always is.
Alice One thing at a time. I haven't mentioned a room.
Miss Jerrold Tea's nearly over, but not to worry. Nobody worries here. Would you like to sit by the window? For the scent from the garden, you know. And, of course, one sees so much more from here. I'm Miss Jerrold. And you are?
Alice Benson. Alice. Miss. If we're name swapping, this is my sister. Fleur. Harris. Divorced. Any other titbits you'd like from the data bank?

Fleur You'll have to forgive my sister, Miss Jerrold. She's not always so uncouth. Only when she's trying to embarrass me.
Alice My sister has a talent for rousing the worst in anyone.
Miss Brazenose Don't bicker. Please!
Miss Jerrold Remember they've only just arrived, Miss Brazenose.
Alice Shan't be staying long, either. So if you want to insult me, feel free. I shan't be around to remind you.
Miss Jerrold Can you be so sure?
Alice None surer. I don't know whether it's the place or the people, but something here is giving me the creeps.
Miss Brazenose Everybody at *Respite* is happy. Happy!
Alice I'm not.

Fleur surreptitiously kicks Alice's ankle

(*Gasping, turning to Fleur*) Keep your feet to yourself, dear, or I might break your ankle, kicking back.
Miss Jerrold Mrs Meadowsweet is responsible, of course. A chat with Mrs Meadowsweet can be so reassuring.
Fleur We're on holiday. Just meandering. Taking our chance. We haven't booked anywhere in advance.
Alice Even if we did it wouldn't be right for certain people when we got there.
Fleur Some people find fault with anything.
Alice Meaning me?
Fleur Who else is there as bloody-minded?
Alice Do you want me to tell you?
Miss Brazenose (*vehemently*) Stop it!
Miss Jerrold Why, Miss Brazenose . . .
Miss Brazenose I told you. Fighting upsets me.
Alice Who's fighting?
Miss Brazenose Can't you keep your quarrels to yourself without involving bystanders? I must—I must go to Mrs Meadowsweet. At once.
Miss Jerrold Do that, my dear.
Miss Brazenose Snap. Snarl. Like animals. Disgusting . . .

Miss Brazenose hurries out through the french windows, complaining to herself

Fleur But Miss . . .
Alice Let her go. I'm prepared to skip tea and leave this minute.

Miss Jerrold You're troubled, too, aren't you, Miss Benson?
Alice Me?
Miss Jerrold It shows in little ways. . . . Perhaps I ought to follow Miss Brazenose. These nervous outbursts are so distressing. But if I were you, I'd stay for tea. The scones are very good just now, and the cream cakes are delicious.

Miss Jerrold exits through the french windows

Fleur What must she be thinking of us?
Alice I don't give a damn what any of them think.
Fleur I know you never learned how to behave, but do you want everybody else to know?
Alice If this place turns out to be a disaster, don't blame me. All Devon to choose from and you pick on a Wendy House full of weirdies.
Fleur All right, all right, so you still want to work off your temper. Just give it a rest while I wash and change.

Mrs Meadowsweet, a comfortable person of indeterminate age with a reassuring smile and a strong West Country accent, appears in the archway

Mrs Meadowsweet Terrible dusty these lanes in summer, my dear.
Alice What?

Alice and Fleur, startled, turn to Mrs Meadowsweet

Mrs Meadowsweet You'd like to do something about the dust. There's hot and cold in all rooms.
Fleur Mrs—er—Meadowsweet?
Mrs Meadowsweet Welcome to *Respite* my dears.
Alice How do you expect anybody to find this place? In the middle of nowhere and half a mile from the beaten track.
Mrs Meadowsweet I always say, if you find your way here, you're meant to be here.
Alice What a way to run a business!
Mrs Meadowsweet Or put the other way round, if you weren't meant to be here, you'd never have found us at all.
Fleur We wondered if you . . .
Mrs Meadowsweet There's always a welcome at *Respite*. You'll be wanting a room.
Fleur Yes.

Alice I didn't say "yes". (*She turns abruptly and looks through the windows*)

Fleur I said "yes", Alice. You can please yourself. I'll be staying. Just for tonight.

Mrs Meadowsweet As long as you need, my dear. Stay just as long as you need.

Fleur The cases are in the car.

Mrs Meadowsweet Inga can lend a hand. (*She calls*) Inga . . .! You'll be able to see the gardens from your room, my dear.

Alice turns back

All the rooms are named after flowers. Lavender, Wild Thyme, Musk Rose . . .

Inga appears in the archway. Younger than the others, there is a suggestion of withdrawal in her attitude—yet she seems quite happy

Ah, Inga. I'm putting these ladies in Honeysuckle.

Fleur Coming up, Alice?

Alice You haven't asked yet how much it's going to cost.

Mrs Meadowsweet No more than you can afford, my dear. I promise.

Fleur (*to Inga*) Come on, then.

Mrs Meadowsweet I hope you find Honeysuckle to your liking. Or did you want separate rooms? There's Comfrey next to Honeysuckle.

Fleur One double will do for me and my sister, thank you.

Fleur and Inga exit

Alice All the better to fight you in.

Mrs Meadowsweet Why don't you sit down, my dear? I'll have tea brought in directly.

Alice H'm. (*As a sort of grudging apology*) This has been a hell of a day.

Mrs Meadowsweet I'm listening.

Alice That was an explanation, not a bid for sympathy.

Mrs Meadowsweet Guests come and go with their problems. They do say I'm a good listener.

Alice There's one of 'em out looking for you now.

Mrs Meadowsweet That's usual. But you're here, my dear. And so am I.

Alice I've never been one to pass on troubles.

Mrs Meadowsweet I understand. You'd rather keep them handy. In the middle of the night, when you can't sleep, there's nothing like a thorny problem for passing the time. You had a bad day, you say.

Alice It really blew up over the ploughman's lunch. That wasn't worth quarrelling over. Not even worth remembering.

Mrs Meadowsweet The ploughman's lunch?

Alice (*the memory of it fading*) The—ploughman's lunch.

Mrs Meadowsweet Well, that's better out than in, isn't it? I always say there's nothing in this world as sour as a memory turned wrong. So why not let me have it?

Alice You?

Mrs Meadowsweet I can't just *take* memories, though. Only accept what is offered. Even the false memories, though we won't talk about them, if you don't mind. Not nice at all.

Alice Exactly what does that mean?

Mrs Meadowsweet I'm often surprised at the way folk will cling to something that must be hurting so much. Like the Spartan boy and the fox. Were you told that story at school? How he let the animal eat his heart out rather than complain. So unnecessary. Especially when there's somebody at hand to take away the pain.

Alice Nobody can do that.

Mrs Meadowsweet You haven't given *Respite* a chance yet, my dear. Now what's on your mind?

Alice Nothing.

Mrs Meadowsweet (*wincing*) Botheration. That's not strictly true.

Alice It sounds better than "get lost".

Mrs Meadowsweet You do enjoy scratching at sores, don't you?

Alice What do you think you are? A sort of social worker?

Mrs Meadowsweet I have the gift, my dear. Others may have it, though I never heard of others. But, having it, shouldn't I use it? I can smooth away troubles better than any liniment.

Alice I tell you I'm in no sort of trouble.

Mrs Meadowsweet (*wincing*) A forgiveable lie. I always say trouble is like an aching tooth. You can put up with it for just so long, then out it has to come.

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