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SF PERUSALS

TIPTOE THROUGH THE TOMBSTONES

A Comedy Thriller

by Norman Robbins

SAMUEL FRENCH

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AUTHOR'S NOTE

Since the publication of *A Tomb with a View* in 1978, I've had constant requests from theatre groups and audiences around the world to write a sequel. Flattering as this is, I never seemed able to come up with a suitable plot...hardly surprising as most of the characters in the original were dead by the time the final curtain fell. I toyed briefly with a prequel, but finally, after a twenty year lapse, I offer this follow-up to the Tomb family saga.

Just a brief word of advice. As in *A Tomb with a View*, what the audience sees is not always what it appears to be. The character of Vernon, for instance, though outwardly a stereotype homosexual, turns out to be something completely different from the audience's original perception. The eventual reaction to his true identity should be felt throughout the auditorium. Almost all the characters, in fact, should be played on the verge of caricature, though with great sincerity, and I'd like to stress again that the play is a spoof. A gentle homage to the kind of comedy thriller that dominated the repertory scene when I was a young actor in the fifties. Hopefully, however, it will present an intriguing mystery too.

One small production point. It would be wise to engage the ASM (or someone of a similar build to the Clown) to don the costume for the "quick change" parts of the script. It saves the actor from having a heart attack during performances.

Norman Robbins

CHARACTERS

VERNON PREWITT
EDNA HONEYWILL
ZOE MAPLETON
MORTIMER CRAYLE
OCTAVIA TOMB
HENRIETTA TOMB
AUGUSTUS TOMB
ATHENE TOMB
LARRY LEWISS
FABIA TOMB

The action of the play takes place in the library of Monument House, the decaying Gothic home of the late Tomb family, some fifty miles from London.

for
Elaine McClure
Undisputed ruler of the other Marsh

ACT I

Scene One

The library of Monument House. A Friday evening in November.

The room is dominated by an immense black walnut fireplace in the centre of the rear wall. Outsize vases rest on the outer edges of the mantel. Above the mantel, a thick gold frame holds a terrifying portrait of the late Septimus Tomb; gaunt, wrinkled, almost bald, with the bloodshot eyes of a raving lunatic. The eyes appear to follow whoever is in the room. A heavily carved wooden fender protects against sparks from the log fire, and huge firedogs of brass with attendant implements are in position. A thick hearthrug is in front of the fender. Massive empty bookcases, their dusty shelves protected by fine mesh doors, are built into the walls on either side of the fireplace. The one on the left, however, conceals a secret door that opens on a pivot into the room. The wall right is dominated by great french windows. Thick velvet drapes hang from a matching pelmet, and coffee-coloured net curtains obscure a view of overgrown shrubs outside. Meshed, empty bookcases fill the wall space on either side of the windows. Below the windows, and slightly into the room, a small octagonal table is set. On it stand several cut glass decanters containing brightly coloured liquids and a collection of glasses and goblets. Beside the table is a comfortable leather wing chair on a swivel or easy glide castors. In the opposite wall are massive Gothic doors of black walnut, each door having a large brass knob. These double doors form the only obvious

entrance into the room. When they are open, a glimpse of the wide hall can be seen. Up stage of the doors is an old-fashioned roll-top desk. The top is open and a collection of quill pens, inkwell, papers, etc. can be seen. Over the desk is another empty, meshed bookcase. An outdated internal telephone is fixed to the wall down stage of this. Down stage of the doors, meshed, empty bookcases fill the remaining space. Opposite the drinks table is a matching one. A family Bible, a massive, leather tooled tome in faded brown and gold, rests on the top of it. Just up stage of the doors, and a few feet into the room, is a leather-topped library table with a chair behind it. This is angled towards the drinks table. Opposite this, and angled towards the other small table is an Edwardian chaise-longue. The room is thickly carpeted. Wall lights provide an alternative to the central chandelier. Switches for both are by the doors. Cobwebs are festooned all over.

When the curtain rises, the room is in darkness, the only light being a faint haze from outside the french windows.

After a moment, the doors open and light from the hall spills into the room. **VERNON PREWITT** *fumbles for the light switches and flicks them on. He is apparently a stereotype homosexual from a Sixties television sitcom. Limp wristed, mincing gait and over-emphasised facial expressions, and wearing a frilly apron over powder blue chinos, loose yellow sweatshirt and a loosely knotted chiffon scarf around his neck. His hands are encased in pink rubber cleaning gloves and he carries a plastic cleaning box containing a feather duster, cloths, spray polishes and a kitchen roll. He views the room with distaste and sniffs.*

VERNON *(pulling a face)* Oh, my gawd. Smells like somebody's *died* in here. *(He brushes cobwebs out of his face, deposits the cleaning box on the library table and crosses to the windows)* Let's have a bit of air in the place. *(He turns the key and struggles to open them. Irritated)* Oh, come on

you dozy mare. *(He flings the windows open with a gasp of triumph, takes a deep breath and almost chokes. He quickly closes them again, and reels back into the room. He gasps)* Oh, my God. *(He clutches at his throat)* It's like a whore's drawers. *(Anguished)* Ohhhhhhhh. *(He grabs a canister of air freshener from the cleaning things and sprays it heavily around before cautiously sniffing the air again)* Oh, that's better. *(He puts the canister down and gazes around the room distastefully)* Look at the state of it. All the old world charm of the average reclamation centre. *(He sighs)* The things I do to keep body and soul together. *(He picks up the feather duster)*

EDNA *(offstage)* Vernon? Are you there, Vernon?

VERNON *(calling)* In here, darlin'. Exterminating the tarantulas. *(He wafts the duster at the cobwebs)*

EDNA HONEYWILL *appears in the doorway. She is a dim-looking girl of eighteen with frizzy hair and thick round spectacles that make her look like a startled owl. She is dressed in an old-fashioned maid's costume that is obviously several sizes too large for her, black stockings and thick sensible shoes.*

Gawd, look at the size of 'em. You could put a saddle on that one and ride it to market. *(He flicks the duster)* Go on. Shoo.

EDNA *(displaying her dress)* Is this all right, do you think? It feels awfully baggy up here. *(She indicates her bust)*

VERNON Well, you know what they say, luvvie. What Nature's forgotten, just stuff with cotton. *(He eyes her up and down)* Mind you—you'd need a bolster down there to make that look as if it fit you. Haven't you got anything else?

EDNA It's what Mr Crayle left for me. *(Plaintively)* I *told* him I was size eight.

VERNON Oh, darlin'. He's so senile, that one, he probably thought you meant your *shoe* size. *(Kindly)* If I'd known it was going to be a costume do, I could have lent you that *divine* little

number I wore in *La Cage aux Folles.* Black *moiré* silk, with a cinch waist and loads of white frilly petticoats. *(He glances at her thoughtfully)* Mind you…you haven't got the legs, have you? The "Courier" said mine looked as though I'd borrowed 'em from Cyd Charisse.

EDNA *(blankly)* Who?

VERNON Charisse, dear. Cyd *Charisse. (Dreamily)* Oooh, she had legs up to her armpits, did Cyd.

EDNA *(helpfully)* I've heard of Sid *James.*

VERNON *(rolling his eyes and muttering to himself)* Some people have got *no* sense of propriety. *(To her)* Anyway…what are you doing trying frocks on? I thought you were making the beds and things.

EDNA I have done. *And* I've put the roast in and peeled the veg. But it's no use doing anything else till everybody's here, is it?

VERNON Well, if you're standing around doing nothing, you can give me a hand in here. The dust's so thick, the spiders are having to run around on stilts. Run the vacuum over the curtains and see if you can clean 'em up a bit, but for Gawd's sake don't open the window. The smell out there's enough to choke you. Talk about your life flashing before your eyes. I was up to twenty-seven before I got it shut again. *(He fusses around, dusting)*

EDNA *(wrinkling her nose)* It's full of smells, this place. There was one in the *kitchen.* Under the floorboards. I had to use *bottles* of disinfectant to get rid of it.

VERNON *(dusting the bookcases)* Probably the drains, dear. You know what these old houses are like. *(Primly)* If you ask me, it hasn't had a good fettling since Dick's days. *(He lashes at the bookcase)* Ugh, get out, you brute. *(He shakes the duster distastefully)*

EDNA *(puzzled)* Who's Dick?

VERNON *(patiently) King* Dick, luvvie. *(He clarifies)* Richard the Third.

EDNA *(awed)* Was this *his* house, then?

VERNON *(wincing)* No, dear. It's an expression. It means nobody's touched it for ages. *(To himself)* And I know just how it feels. *(To her)* Look. Are you *going* to help me, or are you just going to stand there all night and watch?

EDNA *(uneasily)* I don't want to get the dress dirty. I'm supposed to make a good impression, and they'll be here any time now.

VERNON *(pouting)* Well, I'll tell you this much for nothing, dear. It's the last time *I* put myself out for the flaming agency. I'm an actress, I am, not a domestic help.

EDNA *(meekly)* But it is an emergency, Vernon. And you *were* out of work.

VERNON *(acidly)* I was resting, dear. Resting. *Ordinary* people are "out of work". *Professionals* "rest". Besides—I turned down a walk-on in *Emmerdale* for this. *(He glances out of the window and shrieks)* Oh, my God. Look at that. *(He waggles the feather duster at the window)*

EDNA *(startled)* What?

VERNON *Fog*, dear. *Fog*. It's coming down the drive like the Severn Bore. *(Disgustedly)* Well, that's charming, that is. Absolutely *charming*. If they get stuck in this lot, they're not going to be here till midnight. And then what's going to happen?

EDNA *(glancing at her watch)* It's only ten to seven.

VERNON And the last train to Basildon goes at half past eight. What am I going to do if they tell me to *walk* to the village? *(Petulantly)* Oooh, I hate the countryside. Who in their right mind'd want to live *here*? It's miles away from civilization and smack in the middle of a stinking *swamp*.

ZOE MAPLETON *enters in time to hear his last words. She is a hard-looking woman in her thirties, dressed in skirt and long sleeved blouse. She carries a notepad and pen.*

ZOE *(matter-of-factly)* It's not a swamp, Mr Prewitt, it's a marsh. And the type of people who live in Monument House, are those who value their privacy. Now do you have any more questions, or can we expect you to complete the work you were engaged for *before* our guests arrive?

VERNON *makes a moue, then quickly resumes his dusting.*

(to **EDNA**) I should check the oven, if I were you, Edna. The roast smells as though it might need looking at.

EDNA *begins to exit.*

And Edna. Try to do something with the uniform. We *do* want to make a good impression, don't we?

EDNA *(breathlessly)* Yes, miss.

EDNA *drops a quick curtsy and exits.*

ZOE *looks at* **VERNON***'s back, runs a fingertip over the tabletop, then examines it.*

ZOE You won't forget to polish the furniture, will you, Mr Prewitt? I could write my name in the dust on this tabletop. *(She turns to exit)*

VERNON Yes, miss. *(He turns back to his dusting)* Snotty cow.

ZOE *(turning)* Did you say something, Mr Prewitt?

VERNON *(flustered)* I said... I'll do it now. *(He moves quickly to the table and grabs the polish and duster)*

ZOE And by the way...you *did* clean the brasswork on the main door?

VERNON *(forcing a smile)* I thought I'd leave that till *last*, Mrs Mapleton.

ZOE I see. Personally, I'd prefer to have it done *now*. Before anyone else sees it. First impressions are *so* important, don't you think?

VERNON *(pursing his lips and glowering)* Yes, Mrs Mapleton. I'll get right on to it. *(He puts down the spray polish and picks up a tin of brass cleaner, muttering)* I'll see if I can find a "Welcome" mat to put down, as well, shall I?

VERNON *exits huffily as* **MORTIMER CRAYLE** *enters the room.* **CRAYLE** *is a small man in his late seventies, gimlet eyed, and wearing a badly made hairpiece that fails to match his real colouring. He is dressed in a morning suit that would not have looked out of place in the nineteen thirties, and carries a slim grey folder in one hand.*

CRAYLE *(seeing* **ZOE**) Ah, Zoe, my dear. I was wondering where you'd got to. Is everything all right?

ZOE *(coolly)* Is there any reason why it shouldn't be?

CRAYLE No, no. Of course not. *(He moves behind her towards the drinks table)* There's very little *you'd* leave to chance, is there? I sometimes envy that devious mind of yours. *(He puts the folder down and selects a decanter)*

ZOE Coming from you, that's the joke of the century. You're so damned crooked, you have to screw your socks on.

CRAYLE *(pouring a drink)* Crooked or not, my dear, without me you wouldn't stand a chance of pulling this off, so why don't we settle our differences and behave like reasonable human beings, eh?

ZOE *(icily)* Since when did *you* start doing impersonations? *(Her composure breaking)* My God, Crayle, you've got a nerve. I'm the one who found that ledger and realized what it was. If it hadn't been for me, you'd have been doing twenty years for embezzlement by now. *(She sneers)* Penworthy, Venner and Crayle. Trusted Family Solicitors. *(She snorts)* Hah. When I think of the salary I got for practically running the

place, and the amounts you three were skimming off clients accounts, I could *choke*.

CRAYLE *(lifting his glass to drink)* Perhaps—

ZOE *(snapping)* Nothing. If Judge Donnington hadn't availed himself of "certain services" back in nineteen eighty-two, and *that* old monster *(she indicates the portrait of Septimus)* hadn't recorded exactly what those services were—you'd have been done for, wouldn't you? *(Bitterly)* You can thank your lucky stars that respectability commands a very high price. *(She moves downstage left)*

CRAYLE (*sagely)* How true, my dear. How very true. As my late partner Mr Penworthy used to say—one of the most comforting things in life is the absolute knowledge that most great people are indebted to their past crimes for their present fortunes. *(He moves to the fireplace, puts down his glass, strikes a match and applies it to the fire)* But whilst admitting the truth of what you say, at the time of your discovery you were still working for the firm—and under *my* instruction. *(He picks up his glass again)* That being the case, I fail to see why we should not *both* benefit from this very fortuitous event. *(He stands with his back to the fire)*

ZOE And what if something goes *wrong*?

CRAYLE *(raising an eyebrow)* Wrong? What could possibly go wrong? They arrive, we dispose of them, and the rest is plain sailing. *(He sips his drink)*

ZOE *(tightly)* I still don't like it. It's an added complication. How could they possibly have found out what we were doing? They don't even know the account book exists.

CRAYLE *(smiling thinly)* Never underestimate the Tombs, my dear. Insane they may be, but believe *me*, they know *everything*. And unless we eliminate them quickly, there is *no chance whatsoever* of putting the contents of that book to good use.

ZOE *(shaking her head; amused)* They really scare you, don't they?

CRAYLE *(drily)* Alive, yes. For over four hundred years, they've dealt in the business of paid assassination… *(He moves down to the wing chair)* and never, in all that time, has the least breath of suspicion been directed against them. You *could* say they're unique. Perfect murder machines. Their crimes undetectable. Methods infallible. And efficiency— *(He shrugs)* unbeatable. *(He sits down)*

ZOE Then how come most of them were killed off in this place?

CRAYLE *(frowning)* Yes. I'll never understand that. It's a total mystery.

ZOE Well in *my* opinion, they got exactly what they deserved. And for what it's worth, if they *were* still around, *you* wouldn't be sitting there dribbling into your whisky. You'd be stitching mailbags, or whatever it is they do these days.

CRAYLE *(amused)* You're a hard woman, Zoe. *(He sips at his drink)*

ZOE I've good cause. *(She glances at her notepad)* I'd better check the bedrooms. *(She moves towards the door)*

CRAYLE *(musing)* You know… In some ways you remind me of Monica Tomb.

ZOE *halts and gives him an incredulous look.*

Oh—we only met a few times. The odd occasions I deputised for Penworthy during his illnesses. But all the same… *(His voice trails away into silence)*

ZOE *What?*

CRAYLE It's hard to believe that even *she* fell victim. One wonders at times if…? Well—as you know—her body was never found. *(He smiles wistfully)* I was very fond of Monica, and I flatter myself she returned the feeling.

ZOE Really? I thought she was into nymphomania—not necrophilia.

CRAYLE *gives her a vitriolic glare.*

Did it never occur to you that *she* could have finished them all off? It did to me. Despite the results of that pathetic excuse for an inquiry.

CRAYLE *(firmly)* Not for one moment. No. Despite her past record, Monica Tomb was quite innocent of *that* particular crime.

ZOE And what makes you so sure about that?

CRAYLE If she *had* been the killer, there would never have *been* an inquiry. The bodies would have vanished as though they'd never existed, not been scattered about the house as they were. This whole estate is one vast charnel. The marsh alone could contain an army... *(Amused)* and probably *does.* But no amount of draining will ever persuade *that* to give up its secrets. That's why Monument House is the perfect place to bring down the curtain on the Tomb Dynasty. Once we've disposed of these final few, the world will be our oyster. *(He beams)*

ZOE *(icily)* Just don't try to double-cross me, Crayle, or you'll regret it for the rest of your life. I want every penny of my share. Understand? Every single penny.

ZOE *exits.*

CRAYLE *(gazing after her)* Don't worry, my dear. You'll get everything you deserve. I can personally guarantee it. *(He chuckles mirthlessly and sips his drink, then reaching around, he takes the folder from the table and looks at it thoughtfully)* Oh, what a tangled web we weave, when first we practise to deceive. *(Putting his glass down on the table, he opens the folder, takes out a thin sheaf of typewritten papers and peruses them in satisfaction)* Septimus... Lucien... Dora... Emily... Marcus... Oliver... Monica... All deceased.

(He beams) And now for the final few. *(He chuckles)* The final few.

VERNON *enters huffily with his polish and duster.*

VERNON Right. Well that's that done. She can see her rotten face in the brasswork, and I hope it gives her a heart attack. *(He sees* **CRAYLE** *and reacts)* Oh. *(He winces)* Sorry, Mr Crayle. I didn't realize you were still here. *(He drops the duster and polish into the cleaning box and picks it up quickly)* I'll do the room next door, shall I? I can finish off in here later. *(He turns to exit)*

CRAYLE *(sharply)* Mr Prewitt...

VERNON *stops dead in his tracks. As he does so, there is a hammering at the main door, off.*

VERNON *(relieved)* Oh...sounds like your visitors have arrived. *(Helpfully)* Would you like *me* to get it?

CRAYLE *(hastily)* No. No. *(He stuffs the papers back into the folder)* We won't keep you any longer. Just collect your things and be on your way.

VERNON *(surprised)* But what about the cleaning? I've still got next door to do, and I haven't finished in here, yet.

CRAYLE No matter. I'll ask the girl to finish off.

VERNON *(flustered)* But—

CRAYLE Don't worry. You'll receive your full salary. Goodbye, Mr Prewitt. And thank you for your assistance.

VERNON *(nonplussed)* Oh. *(He shrugs)* Well. I'll get my things, then.

Before he can move, **EDNA** *enters.*

EDNA *(announcing)* Miss Octavia Tomb, sir.

She drops an awkward curtsy and steps aside to allow **OCTAVIA TOMB** *to enter.* **OCTAVIA** *is in her sixties,*

aristocratic, gaunt, deathly pale, and her iron grey hair is scraped back into a bun into which two large steel pins are embedded, reminiscent of Widow Twankey in Aladdin. She wears steel-rimmed spectacles, but her eyes miss nothing. She is dressed in black chiffon, with jet beads and accessories.

CRAYLE *(beaming)* My dear Miss Tomb. *(He extends his hand and moves towards her)* Mortimer Crayle. The Family Solicitor.

OCTAVIA *(quickly holding up her hand to silence him)* Hush. Hush.

He stops dead in his tracks.

(cocking her head as though listening) I need to hear them.

VERNON *and* **EDNA** *exchange glances.*

CRAYLE *(frowning)* Hear them?

OCTAVIA The voices, Mr Crayle. The voices of those who perished within these walls. *(Almost whispering)* Can't you hear them? Crying out to us. *(Dramatically)* For *vengeance.*

VERNON *and* **EDNA** *exchange glances again.*

VERNON *(hastily)* Well—I'd better be going then. *(He moves towards the door)*

OCTAVIA *(imperiously)* Wait.

VERNON *comes to a halt.*

(turning to face him) And who are you?

VERNON *(with false brightness)* Oh, nobody important. Just the cleaner.

OCTAVIA *(eyes narrowing)* The *cleaner*. *(She moves closer to him)* Ah, yes. There's something there. In your *aura*. Something—familiar...elusive...*tantalising*. *(She closes her*

eyes and takes a deep dramatic breath) What is it? *(With great emphasis)* What is it?

VERNON *(nervously)* "Obsession" ... With just a splash of "Kouros".

OCTAVIA *(eyes snapping open) Blood.* I see *blood* on this man's hands.

Everyone looks at **VERNON***'s hands.*

VERNON *(hastily)* Oh, no. No. These are just cleaning gloves. They're pink, you see. *Pink. (He shows them)* I couldn't get Marigolds.

OCTAVIA *(sucking in a breath)* A *reading.* I *must* do a reading. *(To* **EDNA**) Quickly. My travelling bag. Bring me the Tarot cards.

EDNA *gapes at her.*

CRAYLE *(interrupting)* I'm afraid there's no time, Miss Tomb. Mr Prewitt is about to leave.

VERNON *(hastily)* Yes. I've got a train to catch. To Basildon. But it was *lovely* meeting you. *(He edges to the door)* Have a nice weekend.

VERNON *exits quickly, leaving* **OCTAVIA** *staring after him.*

CRAYLE *(oozing charm)* May I...offer you a drink, Miss Tomb? A little sherry, perhaps?

There is no response.

(insistently) Miss Tomb?

She looks at him strangely.

Sherry?

OCTAVIA *(snapping out of her trance)* No, thank you. I never touch alcohol. It blurs the vibrations. *(More firmly)* A little herb tea, I think. *(She sits on the* chaise*)*

EDNA *(apologetically)* Oh, I don't think we've got any of *that,* miss. Not that I know of.

CRAYLE Perhaps a quick check, my dear? *(He motions her to leave)*

EDNA *gives a nervous smile and exits.*

(to **OCTAVIA***; anxiously)* You—er—arrived *alone,* Miss Tomb. Were the others not on the train?

OCTAVIA *(staring at him)* Train, Mr Crayle? I have not travelled by train since nineteen sixty-seven. I find them inconvenient, dirty, expensive, unreliable—and extremely hazardous to one's health.

CRAYLE Hazardous?

OCTAVIA Most definitely. Whilst journeying with a companion a number of years ago, he fell through an unlatched door on the nine fifty-two from Paddington. I shall never forget that experience as long as I live. *(She shudders at the memory)*

CRAYLE *(sympathetically)* I can well believe it. To see someone die before your very eyes.

OCTAVIA Die? He didn't *die.* He suffered nothing more serious than minor cuts and bruising. Had it not been for an unexpected embolism three days later, we might well have had to return the fee. *(She shakes her head)* No, Mr Crayle, I shall never place my trust in railways again. These days my dear little Porsche nine hundred eleven is sufficient to get me around.

CRAYLE You—er—still carry on the family "tradition", Miss Tomb? *(He sits)*

OCTAVIA Naturally. Though I must say much of the pleasure has gone. *(Bitterly)* Finesse is no longer appreciated. All

clients require these days is instant gratification. *(Firmly)* In my opinion, there are far too many *amateurs* intruding on the scene.

CRAYLE *(smiling)* You're perfectly right, of course. But even amateurs have their moments. Particularly when following the examples of *masters.*

OCTAVIA *(coldly)* I hope I live to see the day when an amateur rises to *Tomb* standards, Mr Crayle.

CRAYLE *(smiling)* Perhaps you will, Miss Tomb. Perhaps you will.

VERNON *enters, tight-lipped, and now wearing a blouson, matching wide-brimmed hat and a long mohair scarf. He is carrying a shoulder bag.*

VERNON *(heavily)* Excuse *me,* but could somebody tell me where the taxi's parked? I've been wandering around outside for the last five minutes and that fog's playing *havoc* with my bronchials.

CRAYLE *(rising)* It appears that Miss Tomb drove herself here, Mr Prewitt, and the taxi bringing the others has not yet arrived. Perhaps you'd care to wait in the hall whilst we finish our conversation?

EDNA *enters with a scrap of paper.*

EDNA *(breathlessly)* I've found some herbs, miss. Which would you like? *(She looks at the paper and reads)* There's Bryony and Tansy, Hellebore and Celandine, Larkspur and Rowan, Foxglove and Hemlock, or Belladonna and Monkshood. *(She remembers)* Oh. And there's a little bit of Lapsang Souchong, whatever *that* is, but it smells a bit funny to me, so I wouldn't recommend it.

OCTAVIA *(after a momentary pause)* Perhaps a glass of water will suffice.

EDNA *(bobbing)* Yes, miss. *(She turns to exit)*

CRAYLE *(suddenly)* Oh, Edna. Did you bring up the wines I suggested?

EDNA *(uneasily)* You mean—the ones from down there? In the cellar?

CRAYLE Yes.

EDNA *(hanging her head in shame)* It's ever so creepy, Mr Crayle. Most of the light bulbs have gone and there's all those rusty suits of armour leaning against the walls. I'm scared there might be a man inside one of 'em.

VERNON *(aside)* She should be so lucky.

CRAYLE *(reasonably)* But we can't serve dinner without wine—now can we?

EDNA *(blinking back tears)* No, Mr Crayle.

CRAYLE So what are we going to do?

VERNON *(taking* **EDNA***'s arm)* Come on, darlin'. *I'll* go with you. I've got nothing better to do for the next few minutes anyway, and I've had *plenty* of experience in groping round in dark places.

VERNON *and* **EDNA** *exit.*

(offstage) I hope there's no rats down there. I can't stand rats.

OCTAVIA *(gazing after them thoughtfully)* There's something *strange* about that man. His aura disturbs the spirits.

CRAYLE *(lightly)* Oh, I'm sure there's some mistake, Miss Tomb. He's merely a *cleaner.* Once he leaves Monument House, you'll never hear of him again.

OCTAVIA *(firmly)* The spirits are never wrong, Mr Crayle. *(Thoughtfully)* Perhaps I'd better make *certain.* Fortunately I am always prepared for emergencies. *(She extracts one of her steel hair-pins and gazes at it lovingly)* You see? So slender. So delicate. So sharp. And so very, very, *(she makes a violent stabbing motion)* useful. *(She smiles insanely)*

There is a hammering at the main door.

CRAYLE *(rising hastily)* That must be the others. Excuse me.

CRAYLE *hurries out.*

OCTAVIA *replaces the pin in her hair, and smooths her dress.*

(offstage) Come in. Come in. Such a terrible evening.

There is a babbling of voices from the hall.

(offstage) How nice to meet you again. It's been a long time. Let me take your coats. Thank you. Thank you. Miss Octavia's arrived already. She's waiting in the library. Go straight through. I'll be with you in a moment.

HENRIETTA TOMB *enters the room. She is a stout woman in her mid-fifties, wearing heavy tweeds, cashmere sweater, pearls, sensible shoes and a permanent scowl.*

OCTAVIA *(primly)* Good evening, Henrietta.

HENRIETTA *(sneering)* I should have known *you'd* arrive first. Bad news always did travel fast.

OCTAVIA I do live somewhat *closer*, my dear. It must have been much more tiring for *you*. Your skin's even greyer than usual. *(Sweetly)* Why don't you sit down? I'm sure there's *something* strong enough to support you.

HENRIETTA At least I've got *flesh* on my bones. To look at you, anyone would think we were in the middle of a famine.

OCTAVIA And to look at *you*, dear, they'd think *you* were the cause of it.

HENRIETTA *(sourly)* Go boil your head. *(She crosses to the drinks table)* Is any of this safe, or is it all Dora's? *(She picks up a decanter)*

OCTAVIA *(primly)* I really couldn't say. Unlike *some* members of this family, I am not an alcoholic.

HENRIETTA *(throwing her a sour glance, then unstoppering the decanter and sniffing)* Smells all right to me.

OCTAVIA In that case, it's probably poisoned. Dora was *very* predictable.

As **HENRIETTA** *replaces the stopper,* **AUGUSTUS TOMB** *enters the room, followed by his sister* **ATHENE. AUGUSTUS** *is a bearded and pompous individual in his mid-fifties, wearing a monocle, Norfolk jacket, knickerbockers and leggings. He speaks in loud, booming tones.* **ATHENE** *is a few years older, fluttery and highly strung, dressed in grey chiffon with pink accessories.*

AUGUSTUS *(curtly)* Good evening, Octavia.

OCTAVIA *(equally frosty)* Augustus. Athene.

ATHENE *(happily)* Oh, isn't it wonderful, Tavie? To be here in the family home again. *(She gazes around)* Such lovely, lovely memories.

HENRIETTA *(glowering)* Speak for yourself, pea-brain. *(She picks up* **CRAYLE***'s folder and looks at it curiously)*

ATHENE *(surprised)* But I do, Henrietta. I *do*. *(Fondly)* It was here…in this very room…where Dora and I were sitting when Aunt Minerva fell down stairs and broke her neck. *(Dreamily)* I'll never forget her scream. It was *wonderful.* I'm sure she had perfect pitch.

HENRIETTA *pulls out a few papers and glances at them.*

AUGUSTUS *(irritated)* For Heaven's sake, Athene. It's a good job Fabia hasn't arrived yet. The woman *was* her mother, you know.

ATHENE *(reasonably)* But she was only an outsider, Augustus. It wasn't as if she were *real* family. *(Petulantly)* And besides… the trip-wire wasn't *meant* for her. Monica had left it there for Emily. She'd no right to go falling over it. It spoiled the weekend for everybody.

HENRIETTA *(drily)* Not to mention *her*. *(She continues to peruse the papers)*

AUGUSTUS *(firmly)* All the same, we shall not refer to Aunt Minerva whilst Fabia is present. Is that understood?

ATHENE *(meekly)* Yes, Augustus.

OCTAVIA *(cutting in)* You're quite sure she *will* be joining us?

AUGUSTUS *(grandly)* Of course I am. Why shouldn't she?

OCTAVIA *(caustically)* She hasn't exactly kept in touch since Minerva died, has she? None of us have seen her in years.

AUGUSTUS That's precisely why she'll come. *(Proudly)* We are the *last* of the Tombs. And if the family business is to continue—which it must—everyone has to play their part. This ridiculous enmity between us will cease. We shall work for the common cause—that of upholding the Tomb tradition. Is that clearly understood?

HENRIETTA *(replacing the papers and putting the folder down again)* If you think I'm going to start holding hands with Mystic Meg, there, *(she indicates* **OCTAVIA**) you've got another think coming. I work on my *own*, I do. Always have done and always will. *(She moves to the wing chair and sits)*

AUGUSTUS *(firmly)* You'll do as you're told, Henrietta. The family's reputation is far more important than the feelings of the individual. If *I* say we work together, we *do* so. All five of us.

ATHENE *(quickly)* Six, Augustus. *Six.*

Everyone stares at her.

(defensively) We mustn't forget Aunt Vesta.

AUGUSTUS *(shocked)* Vesta.

HENRIETTA *(stunned)* Vesta.

OCTAVIA *(rising and trembling with fury)* How dare you mention that woman's name in *my* presence!

ATHENE She's still one of the family.

OCTAVIA *(weakly)* Oh, my God. *(She staggers to the drinks table, shakily lifts the first decanter and pours a drink)*

HENRIETTA *(to* **ATHENE***)* You really *have* flipped your lid, haven't you?

AUGUSTUS *(taking a firm grip on himself)* We do not mention that name in polite company, Athene.

ATHENE *(defiantly)* Well I *like* her. She taught me to play roulette.

HENRIETTA Pity it wasn't the *Russian* version. Listen, dimwits, as far as *we're* concerned, she doesn't exist. Never did and never will.

ATHENE But she does. She does. And if we don't ask *her* to join us, who's going to carry on the business when *we're* all gone?

AUGUSTUS *(snapping)* Don't be ridiculous, Athene. She'll be dead long before we are.

ATHENE *She* may be, yes. But what about her family?

HENRIETTA *(blankly)* Family? *(She glances at* **AUGUSTUS** *and* **OCTAVIA** *in question)*

OCTAVIA *is now clutching an empty glass.*

ATHENE Her little *boy... (She frowns)* or was it a girl? Oh, dear, I *wish* I could remember.

HENRIETTA *(gaping)* Vesta had a *baby*?

OCTAVIA *(moaning softly)* Oh, my God. *(She quickly pours another drink)*

AUGUSTUS *(shaken)* It's impossible. I don't believe it. I *won't* believe it. *(Firmly)* How do you know this?

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