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Prepare to Meet Thy Tomb

A play

Norman Robbins

Samuel French — London
www.samuelfrench-london.co.uk



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CHARACTERS

Drusilla Tomb
Hecuba Tomb
Sir Beverley Comstock
Phillipa Collins
Daphne Summers
Anthony Strickland
Quentin Danesworth
Robert Sandbrooke
Miranda Torrence
Cicely Venner

SYNOPSIS OF SCENES

The action of the play takes place in the Garden Room of Monument House Hotel and Alternative Health Farm, some fifty miles from London

ACT I

SCENE 1 Late Saturday afternoon in February
SCENE 2 The same. An hour later

ACT II

SCENE 1 The same. Half-an-hour later
SCENE 2 The same. An hour later

Time: the present

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(See also page ii)

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AUTHOR'S NOTE

Prepare to Meet Thy Tomb completes the trilogy of plays dealing with the murderous Tomb family's activities. Each is self sufficient, with no knowledge needed of the other scripts, but obviously, if already acquainted with them, the audience's enjoyment will be enhanced. It was written in response to many requests for further adventures of the Tombs, as the combination of a baffling murder mystery and over-the-top characters seemed to appeal to all age brackets, world wide. However, as one can only go so far with a theme without familiarity breeding boredom, this offering brings down the final curtain on the Monument House brand of homicidal mayhem.

As before, the more skilled the performers and director, the more the watchers will enjoy themselves. Characters are pure stock, giving performers wonderful opportunities for truly bizarre characterization, whilst laughs and chills are present in equal amounts. Forget political correctness. Here is a family that play together and slay together. Gun, knife, poison, fatal injection; anything goes when the fog comes rolling in and there's much more hidden beneath the surrounding marsh than ever Mother Nature intended. Enter the house at your peril.

Norman Robbins

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The Late Mrs Early
Nightmare
Prescription for Murder
Pull the Other One
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Tiptoe Through the Tombstones
Tomb With a View
Wedding of the Year

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| Ali Baba and the Forty Thieves | The Old Woman Who Lived in a Shoe |
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| Cinderella | Red Riding Hood |
| Dick Whittington | Sing a Song of Sixpence |
| The Dragon of Wantley | The Sleeping Beauty |
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| Hickory Dickory Dock | The White Cat |
| Humpty Dumpty | The Wonderful Story of Mother Goose |
| Jack and Jill | |

For
Hannah and Sanjay Thapan

ACT I

SCENE 1

The Garden Room of Monument House and Alternative Health Farm. A late Saturday afternoon in February

The room is dominated by an immense black walnut fireplace in the C of the rear wall. Outsize vases rest on the outer edges of the mantle. Above the mantle, a thick gold frame surrounds a badly executed painting of a very old woman, with staring eyes and thin lipped mouth which is set in a ferocious scowl. A heavily carved wooden fender protects against sparks from the log fire, and huge fire-dogs of brass with attendant implements are in position. A thick hearthrug is in front of the fender. Massive, meshed but empty, bookcases are built into the walls at each side of the fireplace. The one on the L, however, conceals a secret door that opens L, into the room. The wall R, is dominated by enormous french windows. Thick velvet drapes hang from matching pelmets, and coffee-coloured net curtains obscure a view of overgrown shrubs outside. US of the windows, a drinks table is set against the wall. On this, a decorative table lamp, several decanters, an old-fashioned soda syphon and a tray of glasses can be seen. Below the table is a comfortable winged armchair. DS of the windows is an antique-looking cabinet, on this, another lamp, a bowl of snowdrops, and assorted knick-knacks. 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 a wide hall can be seen. US of the doors is an old fashioned writing desk. On it are a collection of pens, a desk blotter and a bottle of ink. Writing paper, envelopes, etc., are in the drawers. An outdated internal telephone is fixed to the wall DS of this. DS of the doors, and opposite the cabinet R, is a matching one. On this, is a display of unusual looking dried flowers in bizarre shades. A huge settee occupies the C of the room, and this is angled slightly to face DL. Behind it, a narrow table stands. The room is thickly carpeted. Wall lights provide an alternative to the central chandelier. Switches for both are by the doors

When the CURTAIN rises, the room is empty, but the lights are on and the doors are open

After a moment, Drusilla Tomb, a pale-faced girl of nineteen, enters, carrying a thick old fashioned diary, which she is reading avidly. She wears a skirt, blouse, and nondescript cardigan. In the pocket of this, she has a mobile phone

Moving behind the settee, she turns DS, slows to a halt just below the L arm of the wing chair , and remains standing

Hecuba *(off)* Drusilla? *(Insistently)* Drusilla?

There is no reaction from Drusilla who remains engrossed

Where are you, dear?

Hecuba Tomb scurries into the room. She is a small, fussy woman in her sixties, with improbably blue hair twisted into a large bun, with several ornamental hair pins sticking out of it, making her look like Widow Twankey in Aladdin. She wears a bright, floral dress which does not suit her; and sensible flat shoes

Oh, there you are. *(Moving behind the settee)* You might have answered. For all the notice anyone takes of me, I could have stayed in Cheltenham. I am family, you know, and deserve some recognition.

Drusilla continues reading, unaware

(Bitterly) Not that it seems to matter these days. The only ones having fun are you and Postumus. All I'm good for is cooking and cleaning and keeping the books straight. *(Forcefully)* Drusilla.

Drusilla glances round in surprise

(Heavily) I'm trying to speak to you. *(Noticing the diary)* What's that you're reading?

Drusilla Aunt Dora's diary.

Hecuba *(shocked)* Drusilla. You've no *right*. That's a private document.

Drusilla *(amused)* Hardly. She's been dead for over a year.

Hecuba *(primly)* That's no excuse. Well brought up young ladies do *not* read other people's diaries.

Drusilla This one does. And it's absolutely fascinating. Did you know an ounce of baking chocolate can kill a ten pound dog? Especially if it's unsweetened. The chocolate, that is... not the dog.

Hecuba *(scornfully)* Don't be ridiculous.

Drusilla (*shrugging*) That's what she says *here*. (*Displaying the diary*) And if *she* didn't know, then who did? (*Sitting in the wing chair*) If you ask me, that's why she scared the family so much. She was deadlier than the rest of us put together. (*She returns to her reading*)

Hecuba (*shocked*) Drusilla. That's a *very* un-Christian remark. We've *all* done our best to uphold the family tradition — even outsiders like myself. How you can make such horrible aspersions... (*Her words trail away, then suddenly rallying*) And what about Grandmother *Vesta*? You're not suggesting *she* didn't...

Drusilla (*looking up*) Gran was a *specialist*, Aunt Hecuba. She'd forgotten more about disposals than we'll ever *know*. And I'm *not* casting aspersions. You've only to look in the Family Records book to see how right I am. Aunt Dora wiped out more people than the plague. (*Dreamily*) Oh, I *wish* I'd known her.

Hecuba (*sniffily*) Well I *did*. And believe me, she was nothing *special*. (*Moving L*) In my opinion, her cousin Athene was *far* superior.

Drusilla (*curiously*) How would *you* know? You never even met her.

Hecuba (*moving down L of the settee*) Perhaps not. But your grandmother told me about her. (*Fondly*) Such a clever lady, Athene Tomb. Her poison-tipped hairpins were a stroke of genius. I even wear them myself as a kind of homage. (*Touching them gingerly*) You should be *ashamed* of yourself, letting her die like that. (*Firmly*) If I'd been here —

Drusilla (*sharply*) You'd have ended up dead like the rest of them. (*Relenting*) It wasn't a picnic, you know. If it hadn't been for Posti, I'd be down in the marsh as well.

Hecuba (*huffily*) All the same... There was no excuse for being taken in by an amateur. (*Proudly*) The Tombs are *professional* killers. (*Bitterly*) There ought to be a *law* against the general public dabbling in things they know nothing about. No wonder business is bad. We've not had a client in *weeks*. (*She sits on the settee*)

Drusilla (*mildly*) It's a quiet time of year.

Hecuba (*tartly*) There was no such thing when Septimus ran the business. Everyone worked round the *clock* to fulfil contracts. (*Scornfully*) Two years later and the house is turned into an Alternative Health Farm — whatever *that* is — and only three of the family are left. Three. Out of *fifteen*. (*Her face creases in anguish*)

Drusilla (*gently*) That's not *my* fault, Aunt Hecuba. Six of them were killed before anyone realized what was going on — or *five* if you don't count Aunt Monica. We've still no idea what happened to *her*. And as for the others... If it hadn't been for Posti, there'd have been even *less* of us to carry on the business.

Hecuba (*huffily*) And if I'd been included in your grandmother's plans

instead of being totally ignored, as usual, we'd most likely have avoided *any* deaths — apart from the ones who *deserved* it. (*Scornfully*) But oh, no. I was only her son's *second* wife. Good for nothing but book-keeping and making sure everyone's meals were on time. (*Sharply*) Well I *have* killed before, you know. I'm not a *novice*. You've no *idea* how many people I've disposed of over the years, but does anyone recognize that? Oh, no. I'm just poor old Heckie — the general dogsbody.

Drusilla (*soothingly*) No, you're *not*, Heckie. You know you're not... We couldn't have managed without you during Gran's last weeks.

Hecuba (*petulantly*) That's not what *she* thought. You wouldn't *believe* how badly she treated me, sometimes. (*Stiffly*) I knew she never *liked* me, of course. Just look at that bouquet on my wedding day. It was pure *luck* your Aunt Fabia picked it up before I did. (*She rises as though to leave*)

Drusilla (*mildly*) I'm sure it was only a *joke*.

Hecuba (*bitterly*) It didn't make me laugh. It took six of your uncles to hold her down when the convulsions started.

Drusilla (*pointedly*) She didn't die, though, did she?

Hecuba No. But it took weeks for that awful rash to fade. And all her hair fell out. (*Hurting*) No... I was never a favourite of Vesta Tomb. (*Glaring at the portrait above the mantle*) As far as she was concerned, I'd no place in the family business.

Drusilla Hecuba...

Hecuba (*slightly louder*) And now she's gone, you're treating me exactly the same. You didn't even discuss the changes to this place with me (*waving her arm distractedly*) before going ahead with them. (*Bitterly*) If Septimus were alive today, he'd be turning in his grave. This was his library. And look at it now. Hardly a bookcase left, and as for the décor —

Drusilla (*patiently*) We've got to move with the times, Heckie. Twenty years ago, the world and his wife didn't have mobile phones and computers, etc. When the family disposed of someone, no-one suspected a thing. Most of Aunt Dora's poisons were so far off the scale it never crossed anyone's mind that the deaths were anything but natural. And as for Uncle Lucien —

Hecuba (*tartly*) There's little in the history of the Tomb family I'm unaware of, Drusilla. I can recite their achievements in my sleep. As my book on the subject will shortly prove.

Drusilla (*surprised*) Book?

Hecuba (*primly*) It was my surprise for your Grandmother's hundredth birthday. I foolishly thought it might change her attitude toward me. But now that that problem's resolved itself, it'll have to suffice as a

simple testament to a unique English family.

Drusilla (*alarmed*) You can't publish a book about us.

Hecuba (*coldly*) Do give me some credit, Drusilla. Now Vesta's gone——

There is a heavy pounding at the main door, off L

(*Startled*) Who's that? (*She gazes off into the Hall*)

Drusilla (*puzzled*) How should I know? We're not expecting anyone, are we?

Hecuba Not that I know of. (*Remembering*) Unless it's Miss Venner.

Drusilla (*frowning*) And what would she want here?

Hecuba She is the family solicitor.

Drusilla (*correcting her*) Not any more. The minute Gran moved in here, she severed all connections with Penworthy, Venner and Crayle. If it hadn't been for them, none of the family would have died.

Hecuba (*firmly*) Well I like her. And in my opinion, Vesta was quite unfair. They'd handled our business for two hundred years and poor Cicely was devastated when Vesta made those awful allegations.

Drusilla (*grimly*) Not half as much as we were. Between the other two, they'd wiped out most of the family.

The knocking comes again

You'd better answer it. But if it is Cicely Venner, you can send her away again P.D.Q.

Hecuba (*huffily*) I'll do no such thing, Drusilla. In case you've forgotten, I still own a third of Tomb Enterprises, and if I wish to invite my friends inside, I most certainly shall.

Hecuba sweeps out

Drusilla sighs heavily and returns to her reading

There is a short silence then Hecuba's voice is heard

Hecuba (*off; grandly*) May I help you?

Sir Beverley (*off; harshly*) Never mind the pleasantries. Where is she?

Drusilla looks up with a frown

Hecuba (*off*) I beg your pardon.

Sir Beverley (*off*) The old bag you work for.

Hecuba (*off, alarmed*) No. You can't. Come back. (*Calling shrilly*)
Drusilla. Drusilla.

Drusilla stands

Sir Beverley Comstock angrily enters the room. He is an aggressive north-country born man in his sixties, expensively dressed in a dark suit and overcoat

Sir Beverley (*glancing around swiftly then focusing on Drusilla*) So where's she hiding herself?

Drusilla (*calmly*) I'm sorry?

Hecuba appears in the doorway looking flushed

Sir Beverley (*acidly*) Your double-crossing grandmother, by the look of it. Athene bloody Tomb.

Hecuba (*startled*) Athene? (*Her hand flies to her throat*)

Sir Beverley (*ignoring her*) We've something to discuss, me and her, and I don't want any excuses. If she's not here in two minutes flat, it's the last mistake she'll ever make.

Drusilla (*calmly*) And do you have a name, Mr...?

Sir Beverley (*coldly*) Comstock. Sir Beverley Comstock.

Hecuba (*startled*) Not *the* Sir Beverley Comstock?

He glances at her, sourly

Drusilla (*cutting in*) And why, exactly, are you looking for Aunt Athene?

Sir Beverley (*sharply*) That's none of your concern. Just tell her I'm here and I'm not very happy about it. (*He sniffs suspiciously and glances round*)

Drusilla (*moving DR and dropping the diary onto the armchair*) That might be a problem. She's no longer with us, you see.

Sir Beverley Then where is she?

Hecuba (*moving into the room*) With the rest of the family, of course. Down in the —

Drusilla (*turning swiftly to face him*) South of France.

Hecuba looks surprised

(*Smiling easily*) And won't be back for some time. (*Brightly*) But we're fully qualified to deal with problems during her absence. (*To*

Hecuba) Aren't we, Heckie?

Sir Beverley (*harshly*) The only problem I have is half a million pounds paid out and nothing to show for it. (*He sniffs again*)

Drusilla (*calmly*) Then if you'd care to sit down, (*indicating the settee*) I'll do my best to help.

Sir Beverley (*rudely*) I'm looking for the organ grinder. Not her bloody monkey.

Hecuba looks outraged

Drusilla (*unfazed*) I may be only her "monkey", Sir Beverley, but I think you'll find I'm quite capable of fulfilling any of Aunt Athene's commitments. Please. (*She indicates the settee again*)

Sir Beverley glowers at her for a moment, then moves around and sits

May I offer you a drink?

Sir Beverley (*scowling*) I'm teetotal.

Hecuba (*spitefully sweet*) A nice cup of herbal tea, then? I've a lovely Oleander leaf...

Drusilla (*warningly*) Hecuba.

Hecuba glowers at her

(*To Sir Beverley*) So. About your agreement with Aunt Athene? (*She sits in the armchair and puts the diary on the arm R*)

Sir Beverley (*harshly*) My agreement was that in exchange for half a million pounds, Comstock Enterprises would find a certain thorn in its side had been extracted without any fuss, and disposed of safely.

Drusilla (*frowning*) Could you perhaps be a little more specific?

Sir Beverley (*flatly*) I could. But you'll get nothing more till I know exactly who you two are and what this place is.

Drusilla Of course. I'm sorry. I should have introduced myself. Drusilla Tomb... Joint owner of the Monument House complex, with Aunt Hecuba, (*indicating her*) and my half-brother, Postumus.

Sir Beverley (*scowling*) Who?

Drusilla Postumus. Most of the family have early Roman forenames. It's something of a tradition. (*She smiles*)

Hecuba (*proudly*) We're descendants of the Borgias, you see? Direct descendants.

Drusilla glowers at her

(Defiantly) Even if it's only by marriage.

Sir Beverley *(ignoring her)* So where's he, then?

Drusilla Out on a job, I'm afraid. And may not be back for some time.

Sir Beverley *(sourly)* And what's with this place? Hotel and Alternative Health Farm?

Drusilla *(smiling)* Basically, the family home. We've lived here since fourteen ninety-five. Though the present building's much later. Seventeen eighty-one, I believe.

Hecuba *(chipping in)* Built by Sebastian Hassock, the famous architect.

Sir Beverley *(unimpressed)* Never heard of him.

Hecuba *(gushingly)* An absolute genius. And Monument House was his finest achievement. He was so proud of it, the family decided he should stay here as a permanent guest.

Sir Beverley *(grunting)* I bet that thrilled him. *(He sniffs the air distastefully)*

Hecuba The records didn't say — but he's behind the pantry wall in the kitchen. *(She realizes what she has said and covers her mouth)*

Sir Beverley *(distractedly)* What the hell's that smell? Is there summat wrong with your drains?

Drusilla It's the marsh, I'm afraid. We don't notice it ourselves.

Sir Beverley *(sarcastically)* Hardly a selling point for a bloody Health Farm. It's enough to set off an asthma attack.

Drusilla *(innocently)* Do you have asthma, Sir Beverley?

Sir Beverley *(sharply)* What's it to do with you?

Drusilla We could offer assistance if you'd any need for it. Uncle Lucien was a chemist and our own dispensary's just down the corridor.

Sir Beverley *(sourly)* I'll stick to Harley Street, if you don't mind.

Drusilla Then back to your problem, Sir Beverley...

Sir Beverley *(gazing at her thoughtfully, then coming to a decision; deliberately)* I may be wealthy, Miss Tomb, but I don't throw money round like water. When I pay for a job, I want it done with no messing about. You don't get where I am today by tolerating incompetence.

Drusilla nods, but is silent

In November last year, I paid half a million pounds to ensure Comstock Enterprises wouldn't be taken over by a jumped up computer company with eyes bigger than its belly. Since that day, there's not been a bloody word, and the shareholders are seriously considering an offer that'll cost me billions. What I want to know — and quickly — is how long I have to wait to have something done?

Drusilla *(picking up the diary and rising)* Why don't you stay for dinner, Sir Beverley? I'll make a few enquiries and have an answer for

you within the hour. (*Hesitating*) There's just one thing, though.

Sir Beverley (*scowling*) Yes?

Drusilla (*curious*) How did you make contact with Aunt Athene?

Sir Beverley (*flatly*) We're long-time customers, of course. Company's been using the Tomb family's services for the past eighty years or so. Last time was just before Septimus died, and if you don't mind my saying so, ladies, I'm not too impressed with the present set-up.

Hecuba bridles

When he were alive, disposals were taken care of before the ink on the contract had time to dry. We'd no need to waste time chasing round the countryside looking for assurances.

Drusilla And how did you find the house? We've never disclosed its locality to clients.

Sir Beverley (*smirking*) There's a big difference between me and my late father. I'm not in the habit of handing large sums of money to any Tom, Dick and Harriet who think they can pull the wool over my eyes. When Athene Tomb left Comstock Tower last November, I had her followed.

Hecuba (*shocked*) Of all the deceitful...

Sir Beverley (*ignoring her*) One of my detectives joined her on the Norwich train and saw her leaving it a few miles from here — at Hag's Hollow.

Hecuba (*petulantly*) Haslow. It's pronounced Haslow.

Sir Beverley (*still ignoring her*) So jumping out after her, he text'd me to say where he was and assure me she'd not be out of his sight for a second.

Drusilla (*mildly*) I see.

Sir Beverley (*sourly*) But apparently, he weren't as sharp as he thought he were. He vanished completely and hasn't been heard of since. (*He stares at her*)

Drusilla (*frowning*) You don't think we'd anything to do with it?

Sir Beverley (*drily*) I did consider the matter. I don't like coincidences. But deciding to give you benefit of the doubt, I sent another one along to pick up the trail. It took a few days, but this time, he came up with the goods. (*In a satisfied manner*) Monument House.

Hecuba (*bitterly*) You should congratulate him.

Sir Beverley (*scowling*) There's nothing I'd like better. But it so happens, he's gone missing, too.

Drusilla and Hecuba exchange looks

As Lady Bracknell might have said. To lose one detective may be regarded as a misfortune; to lose two, is pretty damned suspicious.

Drusilla (*easily*) Well, they're nothing to do with us, Sir Beverley. But if you knew where we were, why has it taken so long to contact us?

Sir Beverley (*sarcastically*) It may come as a shock, Miss Tomb, but I do have a company to run. (*Harshly*) And these past few months I've been round the world twice trying to save it. The agreement was, by the time I got back, there'd be nothing more to worry about. Yet what do I find? The nominee's still breathing down my neck, I'm half a million out of pocket, and in six days time I look like being a bloody has-been. Does that answer your question? (*He gives a spluttering cough*)

Drusilla Just leave it to me, Sir Beverley. The Tombs have always honoured their agreements. I'll have a word with Posti, and it'll all be taken care of before the weekend.

Sir Beverley (*glowering*) It had better be. Because if I go down, I'll make damned sure that you lot'll go down with me. I've enough up here (*tapping his temple*) to put you away for good. (*He coughs again and fumbles in his pocket for his inhaler*)

Hecuba looks venomous as he doses himself

Drusilla (*calmly*) As I said... I'll speak to Posti.

Hecuba (*frowning*) But we don't know where he is.

Drusilla (*soothingly*) I have his mobile number. Just find a room for Sir Beverley and see he has everything he needs. (*To Sir Beverley*) I presume you'd like to freshen up before dinner?

Sir Beverley (*rising and replacing his inhaler*) You'd better let Strickland know. He's out in the car.

Drusilla Strickland???

Sir Beverley (*dismissively*) My new PA, Chauffeur's off sick, so he drove me here. Bit of a wimp, but he's got his uses.

Drusilla I'll let him know, myself. (*To Hecuba*) Aunt Hecuba?

Hecuba (*to Sir Beverley; glowering*) I'll put you in the Hemlock Room. It overlooks the Marsh.

Hecuba moves huffily out of the room followed by Sir Beverley

Drusilla drops the diary on the table behind the settee. She takes a mobile phone out of her cardigan pocket and turns away from the door punching out a number

Drusilla (*lowering her voice*) Posti. You need to get back here.

We may have a problem... Where are you? ... (*Incredulously*) Where? ... Since when? (*Amused*) Then what's going on? I thought you were going to ... (*Frowning*) I see. So how do you want me to play it?... (*Nodding at what is being said*) Heckie? Oh, being a pain as usual. Thinks we're not giving her a chance to prove her worth ... (*Smiling*) You have to be joking. We couldn't risk turning her loose. We'd be finished in no time. But don't worry. I'll have a word with her. Make sure she —

Phillipa (*off L; calling*) Yoo-hoo? Is anybody there?

Drusilla spins to face the door; startled

Reception? (*Brightly*) Ting-a-ling-a-li-ing?

Drusilla (*calling*) Coming. (*Into the phone*) I'll speak to you later. (*She ends the conversation and thrusts the phone into her pocket*)

Phillipa Collins appears in the doorway. She is in her forties, slightly bossy and gushing in manner. She is flamboyantly dressed for travelling and appears rather flustered

Phillipa (*crossing to Drusilla*) Oh, thank goodness we spotted your sign. Well, Daphne did. I was too busy trying to keep the car on the road. It's years since we ran into fog and it wasn't even forecast. (*Holding out her hand*) Phillipa Collins. The novelist.

Drusilla (*blankly*) Collins?

Phillipa (*hastily*) Oh, we don't have reservations, so if you can't fit us in we can go elsewhere. (*Earnestly*) But we'd feel so much safer if you can manage it. I'm sure you've got excellent security. (*Lowering her voice*) We've had a fright, you see.

Daphne Summers appears in the doorway behind her. She is in her late fifties. Small, plain, short sighted and of a nervous disposition, she is warmly wrapped against the cold

Drusilla I'm sorry...

Daphne (*plaintively*) I said they wouldn't have room, Phillipa. I said they wouldn't. We'd better call the police.

Phillipa (*turning to her*) And make fools of ourselves if it isn't him?

Daphne (*crossing to her; protesting*) But he followed us, Phillipa. All the way from Latchingdon.

Phillipa (*reassuringly*) It could have been coincidence. No-one said he had a car, did they?

Daphne (*worried*) But he has to have. How else could he leave the

bodies?

Drusilla (*blankly*) Bodies?

Daphne Of all the women he's strangled.

Drusilla (*baffled*) I'm sorry. I don't know what you're talking about.

Daphne The man in the papers. The Norfolk Strangler.

Phillipa You must have heard of him. You're living right on his doorstep.

Drusilla (*carefully*) We're a bit remote — as you've noticed. We don't have newspaper delivery.

Daphne (*voice rising*) But you must have television. It's been on the news for weeks. Nine poor women. All strangled and left at the side of the road.

Drusilla (*pretending concern*) How awful. But as I said, we're a little out of touch with the outside world. It's been months since we last had visitors.

Phillipa (*sympathetically*) Oh. Business not too good, then?

Drusilla (*realizing*) Oh. No. No. (*Improvising*) That's what's been keeping us busy. We're in the middle of conversion and we're not quite ready for opening, yet. Perhaps by the end of next month. (*She smiles*)

Phillipa (*dismayed*) So you can't accommodate us?

Drusilla (*with fake regret*) I'm afraid not. (*Helpfully*) But I'm sure you'll find Bed and Breakfast in Haslow. It's only a few miles down the road.

Daphne (*anxiously*) But what if he's still outside? Waiting for us.

Phillipa (*putting on a brave face*) Not very likely, Daffs. (*Attempting to reason*) I mean... we don't even know he was the Strangler, do we? We could have been letting imagination run riot. (*Brightly*) And even if it was him, we must have lost him in the fog. He couldn't have seen us turn in here. Whoever he was, he'll be miles away by now.

Anthony Strickland appears in the doorway. He is in his late twenties, on the timid side and his round, horn-rimmed spectacles give him an owlsh appearance. He wears a dark suit

Anthony (*hesitantly*) Excuse me.

Phillipa and Daphne give little shrieks and turn to see him

(*Weakly*) I'm looking for Sir Beverley.

Drusilla (*recovering herself*) Mr — Strickland, is it?

Anthony (*relieved*) That's right. Sir Beverley's PA. There's an urgent call for him on the car phone. But the signal's playing up. I keep

losing it.

Drusilla (*grimacing*) It is a bit of a dead spot. We even have problems with the landline. But if you'll wait here, I'll get him for you. If he's quick, he might just be lucky. (*Moving to the door, then remembering the two women and turning back*) Best of luck in the village.

Drusilla exits

Anthony (*apologetically*) Sorry if I startled you. There was no-one on the desk.

Phillipa (*embarrassed*) We thought you were the Norfolk Strangler.

Daphne (*faintly*) He's been following us ever since we left the tea-room.

Anthony looks at them oddly

Phillipa She means we think he's been following us. He's certainly been behind us for the last half-hour. Couldn't shake him off no matter which way we turned. She was quite worried, (*to her*) weren't you, Daffs?

Daphne (*nodding*) He was trying to make us stop. Flashing his lights and tooting his horn like a maniac. It was quite frightening. He was so close at one point we could even see his face.

Phillipa Heaven knows what he was screaming about, but I wasn't pulling up to find out. As soon as we ran into fog, I turned down the first side road and straight into this place when Daphne spotted the sign.

Anthony (*moving to behind the settee*) Have you called the police?

Phillipa (*shaking her head*) I think we're safe, now. And it might have been simply road rage. You know how some men are? Can't bear to see a woman behind the wheel. Especially if she's driving a Rolls-Royce Phantom. Must threaten their masculinity, or something. Still... there's no harm done. And we don't want any unpleasantness spoiling things. All we need's a little rest and recreation.

Daphne To re-charge her batteries. (*Proudly*) Phillipa's a writer, you see. Really gory murder mysteries.

Phillipa (*trying to silence her*) Daphne.

Anthony (*interested*) Oh. (*To Phillipa*) Are you famous, then?

Phillipa (*embarrassed*) I wouldn't say famous.

Daphne (*protesting*) But you are, Phillipa. You've written dozens of books. (*To Anthony*) She outsells Caro French and Ermyntude Ash.

Anthony looks blank

Phillipa (*acidly*) Hardly a recommendation, dear. Ash is dead, and the last I heard of French, she'd been remaindered at Glasgow airport. (*To Anthony*) It was supposed to be a secret. As far as my publishers know, I'm out in Africa, researching my next book. If they hear I'm in Norfolk, they'll be wanting me for signings and God-knows what else. Please don't let on you've seen me here.

Anthony (*hastily*) Of course not. I wouldn't dream of it. (*Awkwardly*) But should I ask for your autograph?

Phillipa (*drily*) I don't think that'd impress anyone, dear. (*Brightly*) But how about a signed copy of "The Seventh Glass Dagger"? If you'd like to come back to the car with us, I'll give you a copy.

Anthony That's very kind of you, but I'm not much of a reader. Haven't the time, really. (*Bashfully*) Looking after Sir Beverley.

Phillipa Keeps you on your toes, does he? Still... all work and no play, you know. (*To Daphne*) Come on, Daffs. Better be off before the fog gets any thicker. The last thing we want is to end up in a boggy ditch, smack in the middle of nowhere.

Anthony Going far, are you?

Phillipa Haven't a clue. We've not booked in anywhere, so we're free agents. We'll just press on till we find somewhere with a couple of spare rooms.

Anthony Then why not stay here? It is an hotel. (*Glancing round*) Sort of.

Phillipa Not open yet. According to the girl.

Daphne Not till next month. (*Sniffing unhappily*) And they must get their drains seen to.

Anthony (*protesting*) But there must be some rooms ready. And it is getting worse out there. You can't see your hand in front of you. I was going to mention it to Sir Beverley. If his meeting doesn't end soon, we'll have to stay ourselves. He won't want to travel in this.

Phillipa (*glancing round the room*) I don't know. It's a bit on the creepy side. Not what we expected when we spotted the sign.

Anthony (*wryly*) Yes. It is a bit Gothic looking. But it's probably steeped in history. If only walls could speak, eh?

Quentin Danesworth enters the room like a tornado. He is an effeminate man in his late sixties, portly, but expensively and flamboyantly dressed, with expressive features and given to over-elaborate gestures

Quentin (*gushingly*) Oh, but they can, dear boy. They most certainly can. And I'm just the person who can tell you what they're saying. (*Simpering*) Quentin Danesworth, at your service. (*He gives a*

theatrical bow)

Daphne (*surprised*) Not the television man? Danesworth's Domiciles?

Quentin (*happily*) One and the same, dear lady. One and the same. You're a fan, of course? Isn't everyone? The most successful historical show on television today, and all my own idea. (*Gazing around the room in delight*) But this, (*waving his arms*) this... will send the ratings rocketing... (*Ecstatically*) The lost house of Sebastian Hassock. And I'm the one who found it. (*Preening, then remembering*) You do give permission to film here, of course? With substantial remuneration to cover any inconvenience. (*He beams coyly*)

Phillipa (*hastily*) I'm afraid you've made a mistake.

Quentin (*sharply*) Oh, I never make mistakes, dear lady. The name of Danesworth is a by-word for accuracy, reliability and tenacity. Without question, the house was built by Sebastian Hassock in, or around seventeen eighty-one and I have the papers to prove it.

Anthony Papers?

Quentin Oh, yes. For many years, I've researched all Hassock's buildings, demolished or otherwise. (*Moving down L*) Every diary, every scrap of paper referring to his achievements is now in my possession (*proudly*) and I can truthfully say that no man alive knows more about his work than I do. (*Preening*) But of course, like myself, he had his little secrets. (*Simpering*) After designing and building the Great Abattoir in Butcher's Row, he drew up plans for a massive country house, complete with secret passages, hidden rooms and its own private vaults. A house such as England had never seen before. (*With great drama*) But shortly afterwards, he and his plans vanished without trace and the location of his final masterpiece was lost to human ken. (*He strikes a tragic pose*)

Phillipa So what makes you think it was this one?

Quentin (*pityingly*) My dear lady. Just look at it. The plasterwork. The design. The layout. It simply screams of Hassock. It's the most exciting find of the century.

Anthony (*looking round*) I can't see any secret passages.

Daphne Or hidden rooms.

Quentin (*chuckling*) But they're there, my darlings, and that's the beauty of Hassock's design. You could hide an army within these seemingly solid walls. (*He sits on the settee*)

Phillipa (*overwhelmed*) Fancy. (*Pulling herself together*) Well...it's been nice meeting you, Mr Danesworth, but we'd better be off. Come along, Daphne. (*She moves towards the door*)

Quentin (*startled*) But what about my programme?

Phillipa We'll look forward to seeing it.

Phillipa exits, followed by Daphne

Quentin (*rising in agitation*) Wait. Wait. (*He moves as though to follow them*)

Anthony You don't have to worry. They're not the owners. They're just a couple who've lost their way.

Quentin (*turning back; annoyed*) You mean I've wasted my time on a pair of nobodies?

Anthony (*helpfully*) One of them's a writer.

Quentin (*peevish*) Writer. Shmitter. (*Suddenly aghast*) Oh, my God. I've just told them why I'm here. If the news gets out before I've done the programme, the place'll be crawling with paparazzi.

Phillipa and Daphne hurry back into the room

Phillipa (*gasping*) He's here. He's here. Getting out of his car. (*She attempts to hide behind Anthony*)

Daphne (*in a panic*) The Norfolk Strangler. (*She joins her*)

Quentin (*putting his hands to his cheeks in horror*) Oh, my God.

Robert (*off*) Is anybody there? Hallo?

Phillipa, Daphne and Quentin begin to scream hysterically

Robert Sandbrooke appears in the doorway. He is in his late thirties, wearing a tweed jacket with a mobile phone in the pocket, polo-neck sweater and designer jeans. He stares at them in bewilderment

Anthony (*snatching up the soda syphon*) One step closer and I'll ... (*desperately*) squirt it. (*He takes aim*)

Robert (*incredulously*) Are you lot barmy?

The trio stop screaming

All I want's my laptop back.

Phillipa (*blankly*) Laptop?

Robert (*tightly*) You picked up mine by mistake. In the café. Yours is in the back of my car. I've been following you for miles.

Daphne (*weakly*) You mean...you're not the Norfolk Strangler?

Robert looks puzzled

(*Hopefully*) You're not going to kill us?

Robert (*baffled*) Do I look like I'm going to kill anyone? I want my

laptop back, that's all. So if you wouldn't mind... I'd like to collect what I came for and carry on with my honeymoon.

Quentin (*surprised*) Honeymoon? You're on your honeymoon?

Robert (*glaring at him*) Some of us are still normal, believe it or not.

Quentin (*offended*) Oooh. Excuse me for breathing. (*He sits on the settee again*)

Robert (*to Phillipa*) My laptop?

Phillipa (*flustered*) I'll get it for you now. I'm terribly sorry. I'd no idea.

Daphne (*suspiciously*) How do we know he's telling the truth? How do we know you got the wrong laptop? It could be the way he tricked the others.

Robert (*irritated*) What others?

Daphne (*fearfully*) The ones you killed and left in the lay-byes.

Robert (*tiredly*) For crying out loud... (*Firmly*) I'm Robert Sandbrooke, doing Norfolk for the first time in my life, and trying to begin my honeymoon.

Miranda Torrence enters. She is in her early forties, a stunning artificial blonde with a pneumatic figure who slinks around like a panther stalking its prey. Unfortunately her IQ seems very much in question. She wears a skin tight, low cut black dress beneath a long fake-fur coat

Miranda (*in a "little girl" voice*) Is something wrong, Bobby?

The trio gape at her

Robert (*sighing*) Miranda. I told you to stay out of sight.

Miranda (*pouting*) But it's cold out there. And besides... I like the look of this place. Why can't we stay here instead of going to Norwich?

Robert (*peevd*) Because we've a suite booked at the Royal, in case you'd forgotten.

Miranda But this looks much more interesting.

Phillipa (*recovering herself*) I'm afraid you're out of luck, Mrs... Sandbrooke. It's not open yet. The nearest place is Halso, or something. About seven miles away.

Miranda (*plaintively*) But they wouldn't turn us away on a night like this. It's our wedding night. I'm sure they'd find room for us.

Daphne (*bridling*) Why should they? They've not given us any choice. And we were here first.

Anthony (*hastily*) I'm sure there'd be room for everyone if it came to it. (*Replacing the syphon*) I mean... the place must be full of beds,

open or not.

Robert (*firmly*) We'll take our chances with the fog. And besides...it smells like an open drain in here. (*To Phillipa*) Now if you wouldn't mind?

Phillipa (*remembering*) Oh, yes. Yes. Of course.

Miranda gives a pathetic and obviously false cough and clutches at her throat

Robert (*concerned*) What is it?

Miranda (*weakly*) My throat. It's hurting. It must be the fog. (*She coughs again*)

Robert (*worried*) Oh, my God. (*Hurrying to her*) I'll call a doctor. (*He gets his mobile phone out*)

Miranda (*hastily*) No, no, darling. I'll just sit next to this gentleman (*indicating Quentin*) till I'm feeling better. (*Pathetically*) I don't want to make a fuss.

Robert (*guiding her round the back of the settee*) I told you to stay in the car. I said I wouldn't be long.

Miranda (*weakly*) But I couldn't bear you being out of my sight. Not today of all days. (*She sits on the L of the settee*)

Quentin winces and edges away from her

Phillipa (*unconvinced*) Perhaps a glass of water might help?

Robert (*scornfully*) Miranda drinks nothing but champagne. She has to take care of her voice.

Anthony (*interested*) Oh. (*To her*) Are you a singer, then?

Robert (*glaring at him*) Do you watch television, Mr whatever your name is?

Anthony (*taken aback*) Haven't the time, really. Sir Beverley keeps me busy.

Robert (*pityingly*) Then it may have escaped your notice that my wife is Miranda Torrence. The actress.

No-one reacts to this

(*Pointedly*) She does the voice for "Purple-Green Pony" in Pansy's Magic Turnip Field.

Miranda attempts to look modest

Phillipa (*blankly*) Purple-Green Pony????

Anthony No wonder she's a little hoarse. (*He titters*)

Robert glares at him and he falls silent

Hecuba enters

Hecuba We'll be dining in fifteen min— (*realizing there are others in the room*) Who are you? (*Anxiously*) What are you doing here?

Phillipa (*soothingly*) We were looking for accommodation. But apparently you're not open yet.

Hecuba (*suspiciously*) Who said so? Who told you that?

Daphne The girl who was in here when we arrived.

Hecuba (*sharply*) Then you've no right to stay when you've not been invited. This is my home and I won't have it over-run by strangers.

Robert (*harshly*) Well, don't worry on our account. I'll just collect my property and we'll be leaving. Come on, Miranda.

Miranda rises and turns towards Hecuba who takes a shocked step backwards and clutches at her throat. Miranda looks puzzled

Anthony (*frowning*) Is something wrong?

Hecuba (*recovering herself*) No...no. It's just for a moment I thought... she was someone else. (*Firmly*) Now please leave. All of you.

All but Anthony prepare to leave

Quentin (*rising*) If I might have a moment, Mrs Tomb? It's about your beautiful house.

Hecuba (*blankly*) House?

Quentin (*turning on the charm*) You are, of course, aware this magnificent building was designed and built by the great Sebastian Hassock in —

Hecuba (*cutting in*) Seventeen eighty-one.

Quentin (*beaming*) Precisely. And until today, not a...(*realizing*) You do know?

Hecuba (*tartly*) Why shouldn't I? (*Firmly*) I know more about this house than anyone alive.

Quentin (*smirking*) Without wishing to be rude, Mrs Tomb, I sincerely doubt that. I've spent the last forty years of my life studying Hassock's designs and know every nook and cranny of his unique buildings. The secret rooms, hidden passages...

Hecuba (*faintly*) Passages?

Quentin Behind every wall. (*Archly*) You did know about them, didn't

you?

Hecuba (*recovering herself*) No, I didn't. And neither do you. If there were anything like that in this house, we'd have known about it long ago. It's been in the family since the day it was built.

Quentin (*smugly*) Then allow me to demonstrate. (*He scuttles round the settee and up to the bookcase L of the fireplace, fingers searching a section of its frame*)

Hecuba (*alarmed*) What are you doing?

The bookcase pivots revealing a darkened recess. The others react in amazement and Hecuba is frozen to the spot

Quentin (*triumphantly*) Voilà. (*He gestures at the opening and takes a bow*)

Phillipa Oh, my goodness.

Anthony (*gaping*) A priest's hole.

Quentin (*beaming*) Not at all, dear boy. It's much, much more than that. From this opening you can reach any part of the house without a soul seeing or hearing you. Would you care to explore with me?

Anthony (*doubtfully*) It's a bit on the dark side.

Quentin (*pulling out his key ring to which a small torch is attached*) Which is why I always carry a light. (*Brandishing it*) Though I've certainly done my share of groping in the dark, if you'll excuse the expression. (*Smirking*) Shall I lead?

Quentin vanishes into the opening

Anthony looks at Hecuba who has not moved. Seeing no reaction, he cautiously enters the passageway and vanishes from sight

Phillipa begins to follow him

Daphne (*grabbing at Phillipa in alarm*) No, Phillipa.

Phillipa (*excitedly*) Don't be a wuss, Daffy. (*Pulling free*) I can use this in a book. Come on.

Phillipa exits into the passage and vanishes

(*Off*) Wait for us.

Reluctantly Daphne follows and vanishes

Miranda Bobby?

Robert (*firmly*) You must be joking.

Miranda (*pouting*) But I've never been in a secret passage before.

Robert I don't like confined spaces. Especially dark ones.

Miranda I'll hold your hand. (*She flutters her lashes at him*)

Robert (*reluctantly*) Well, not too far, then.

They enter the passage and vanish

Hecuba remains motionless, staring at the opening

Drusilla enters and takes in the scene

Drusilla (*puzzled*) What's happened? Why's the bookcase open?

Hecuba (*dazedly*) I couldn't stop him. He knew where it was.

Drusilla Who did? What are you talking about?

Hecuba (*wildly*) The man. He opened the bookcase and showed them all.

Drusilla (*impatiently*) All who? For goodness sake talk sense.

Hecuba The room. It was full of strangers when I came in. They've all gone into the passage with him.

Drusilla Oh, my God. (*Staring at it*) Where did they come from?

Hecuba I don't know. I was in the kitchen. (*Suddenly*) But Posti ——

Drusilla (*cutting in*) ——'s got other things on his mind, at present. (*Moving down L*) We'll deal with this ourselves.

Hecuba So what are we going to do?

Drusilla (*firmly*) Exactly what the family's always done. Make quite sure that none of them leaves here alive.

Hecuba gives a delighted smile

Black-out

SCENE 2

An hour later. The room is as before but the secret panel is closed. After a moment, Phillipa enters, followed by Daphne. Both are minus their outdoor clothing and carry their handbags

Phillipa Well it's not exactly the Savoy, but the meal wasn't bad. For a Health Farm.

Daphne And we don't have to worry about finding rooms for the night, do we? We couldn't have carried on. Not with the fog the way it is. It's thicker than ever.

Phillipa (*moving behind the wing chair to peer out of the windows*)

The thing is, what are we going to do for the next few hours? It's too early for bed, and I don't fancy sitting around watching the love-birds billing and cooing. (*Turning away with a frown*) Where are they, by the way? There wasn't a sign of them at dinner.

Daphne Perhaps they had room service?

Phillipa (*unconvinced*) Hmm. (*Looking at the bookcase*) We could take another look behind that, I suppose. See where it does lead.

Daphne (*unhappily*) I'd rather we didn't, Phillipa. You heard what Mrs Tomb said?

Phillipa (*looking at her askance*) That it might be dangerous? (*Grunting scornfully*) Looked safe as houses to me. Bit dusty, but that was it. We could have explored for ages if you hadn't screamed like that and made him drop his torch. I thought you were being murdered. (*She sits in the wing chair*)

Daphne (*defensively*) Something touched me.

Phillipa (*drily*) Probably a spider-web. But if he sues you for a new torch bulb, don't come crying to me.

Daphne (*moving down and sitting on the settee*) We could play cards. I've a pack in my suitcase.

Phillipa I'm not in the mood for "Old Maid", Daff. I want to be doing something. (*Brightening*) If I made a few notes, I could use it as a setting, couldn't I?

Daphne (*frowning*) What?

Phillipa (*impatiently*) This place. It'd be perfect for my next book. (*With relish*) Swirling fog. Secret passages. Bodies left, right and centre.

Daphne (*pained*) Phillipa. You're supposed to be on holiday.

Phillipa (*acidly*) Yes. In Darkest Africa. Why did I let you drag me here? It's about as much fun as haemorrhoids. (*She puts her handbag beside her*)

Daphne (*protesting*) It wasn't my idea. I suggested Cornwall. You were the one who decided on Norfolk.

Phillipa (*firmly*) Then you should have talked me out of it. (*Relenting*) Still...if I can work something up about this place, it could be a blessing in disguise. (*Thoughtfully*) Do you think the old girl'd make a good killer? I could see her dishing out poisoned Chianti, couldn't you?

Daphne (*disapprovingly*) She's not at all like a killer. (*Fondly*) She reminds me of my grandmother.

Phillipa (*brightly*) Exactly. And that's why she'd be perfect. Who'd suspect a dotty old woman of bumping people off? (*Glancing round*) Get me something to write on, will you? I've got an idea. (*She fumbles in her handbag*)

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