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SF PERUSALS

CURTAIN UP ON MURDER

A Thriller

by Bettine Manktelow

SAMUEL FRENCH

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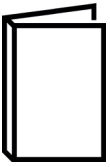

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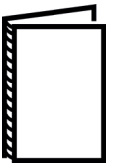

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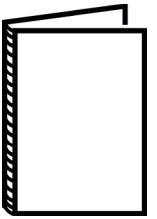

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ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Bettine Manktelow was born Bettine Stratton in Gillingham in Kent, and is the middle daughter of three. She became stage-struck at an early age andworked in a repertory company at Chatham Theatre Royal at the age of sixteen as an assistant stage-manager, learning stage craft from the bottom up and graduating to acting parts. This early career lasted four years until family commitments forced her to give up the hard graft and dubious glamour of show business for domestic life. She had been bitten by the bug, however, and couldn't give up the theatre completely, taking part in amateur dramatics whenever possible. This interest culminated while living in Singapore with the chance to have her own play presented. This was her first play and purporting to be a kitchen-sink drama was greeted by the ex-pat audience as a hoot. Bettine realised she had an unwitting flair for comedy! This first reception did not deter her, however, and she continued to write until she was able to produce a full-length play for a drama group in Ramsgate, Kent.

This play, *They Call It Murder*, was written with particular actors in mind with very few men, as most drama groups had a shortage of male actors. *They Call It Murder* was subsequently taken up by a professional company and was then accepted for publication by Samuel French, proving to be popular with amateur dramatic groups both in the UK and abroad wherever English is the first language. Encouraged by this success, Bettine went on to write three more plays which were all published: *Death Walked In*, *Couples* and *Branwell*. The latter being particularly popular amongst groups as a festival production. There followed a lull in Bettine's writing after this as she began to take up a theatrical career again – but this time front of house rather than backstage – working as publicity officer or marketing officer for several different provincial theatres.

It was only after retiring to Deal that Bettine began to write plays again for a local drama group. *Curtain Up on Murder*, which was inspired by the sight of the Deal pier, was staged in Deal and became an even greater favourite amongst amateurs than her first play. This was followed by *Curtain Call* and *Proscenophobia*, completing a trilogy of plays about the theatre. After this she formed her own dramatic society and with them staged *Murder*

Weekend, *The White Cliffs* and *Charity Begins…*, all of which were published. *Spygame* and *Hotel Mystère* followed. Although Bettine has now disbanded her drama group, she still tries to stage a play once a year and the next one is to be *Murder By Default*. Bettine's first novel *No Time for Tears* is available on Amazon and on Kindle. The sequel to this story *The Gossamer Thread* is also available on Amazon and on Kindle.

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CURTAIN UP ON MURDER

First produced by the Guild Players at the Kilshawe Theatre, Deal, Kent on the 23 April 1998, with the following cast:

LINDA	Elaine Fitzsimmons
GINNY	Charlotte Skinner
SANDRA	Mary Swift
HARRY	Peter Ryder
ALEX	Andrew Slade
SYLVIA	Josephine Carnell
MARTIN	Christopher Sewell
MOPPET	Stephanie Walmsley

Directed by Bettine Walters
Produced by Christine Eyden

CHARACTERS

LINDA, attractive, smart, capable; twenty-eight
GINNY, naïve, prim, rather gauche; eighteen
SANDRA, earnest, bright, confident; twenty
HARRY, caretaker, a bit dim and gossipy; elderly
ALEX, attractive, conceited, self-interested; twenty-eight
SYLVIA, attractive, impractical, a daydreamer; thirty-five
MARTIN, super-confident, full of himself, but with charm; forty or more
MOPPET, messy, untidy, sweet, likeable; fifty-ish

The action of the play takes place on the stage of a small theatre at the end of a pier

Time – the present

SYNOPSIS OF SCENES

ACT I		
	Scene One	Shortly after seven p.m.
	Scene Two	Several hours later
ACT II		
	Scene One	A few minutes later
	Scene Two	Half an hour later
ACT III		
	Scene One	Twenty minutes later
	Scene Two	Early morning

ACT I

Scene One

The stage of a small theatre with an incomplete living room set on it. Shortly after seven p.m.

There are some french windows centre and two flats downstage right and downstage left. There is furniture dotted about with a settee roughly centre and an armchair left, an upright chair downstage left and several little tables, two of which are behind the settee, one behind the armchair.

Before the curtain rises, we hear seagull and surf sounds, which fade as the scene progresses.

When the curtain rises, a working light is on.

After a moment **LINDA** *enters right, looks around her warily, comes to the front of the stage and looks out over the auditorium.*

Then she exits left.

We hear the voices of **SANDRA** *and* **GINNY** *offstage right.*

SANDRA *(offstage)* There must be someone here, or the light wouldn't be on.

GINNY *(offstage)* It is spooky, isn't it?

SANDRA *and* **GINNY** *enter from the wings right.* **SANDRA** *is about twenty, earnest and untidy, dressed casually.*

GINNY *is eighteen, much neater, rather prim, but also dressed casually.*

SANDRA So here it is. This is where we rehearse. I always come in a bit early to set things up. I'm doing the props. They'll be ever so pleased if you help me, I know.

GINNY *(doubtfully)* Is it difficult – doing the props?

SANDRA Oh, no, not at all. You just put things where they're supposed to be.

GINNY But how do you know where they're supposed to be?

SANDRA *(patiently)* It says so in the script.

GINNY *(still unsure)* Oh.

HARRY *(offstage left)* Who's there?

SANDRA Us – we're coming to rehearse.

HARRY *appears from the wings left, a bit out of breath. He is grey-haired and cadaverous.*

HARRY Hang on a minute.

SANDRA We're rehearsing here tonight. Where's Wally? He knows about it.

HARRY Oh, Wally – he was taken bad. They sent me in instead. I knew the amateurs was coming. I opened up for you and I was messing about under the stage, clearing up, while I waited. It's a bit of a mess.

SANDRA *(to* **GINNY***)* That's the scenic store. *(To* **HARRY***)* There's tons of room, isn't there?

HARRY I was thinking how lucky you was. Not all amateurs have a nice theatre like this at the end of a pier, and somewhere to store everything. Very lucky!

SANDRA Yes, we are lucky. Could you put the lights on, please? That's what Wally does for us, before he goes home. Then he comes back later to lock up.

HARRY Yes, yes, I'll do the lights.

HARRY *exits right.*

GINNY I'd love to look under the stage and see the scenery and everything.

SANDRA All right, we'll go down there. We've got time before the others arrive. But during rehearsal I shall have to go on the book.

GINNY What do you mean?

SANDRA Prompt, of course. Don't you know anything?

GINNY Not much, I'm afraid.

The stage lights come on.

HARRY *(calling out, offstage)* How's that? Is that enough for you?

Different coloured lights flash on and off during the following.

Ambers? Blues? Pinks? What do you want?

SANDRA Just anything. We're only rehearsing.

HARRY OK.

The lights settle down to a warm overall glow.

GINNY Heavens, there's such a lot to learn.

SANDRA Oh, it's easy – once you get used to it.

GINNY How many plays have you done?

SANDRA *(proudly)* Two. *(She sets the stage during the following, moving the settee centre right and the armchair downstage left)* I only had a small part in the first one, a cockney maid, but in the last one I had three scenes. I was ever so nervous, but I really enjoyed it.

GINNY All I've ever done was at school. Do you think they'll let me have a part?

SANDRA Of course they will. Why not? There's nothing to it, really, as long as you learn your lines and don't fall over the furniture. Alex and Sylvia are ever so good. They always play the leads. I've learned a lot just watching them. They're so good, you see.

HARRY *enters.*

HARRY There's something I 'ave to tell you. I can't come back and lock up, can't be done, so I'm putting the lock on the front door and you can go out the back. That'll lock itself.

SANDRA I expect that'll be all right. I'll tell Martin – he's the director.

HARRY Can't come back, you see, can't be done. I'm only helping out, after all.

SANDRA I'm sure it'll be all right.

HARRY But if I was you I wouldn't stay late, there's a storm brewing.

SANDRA How do you know?

HARRY I can smell it. Now then, I'll just go and close that trap door.

SANDRA Ginny wanted to have a look under the stage. Is that all right? She's new, you see. This is her first time.

HARRY Come on, then, but be careful. You have to be very careful backstage. There's so many things can go wrong, wires to trip you up, flats can fall on you, so many things...

HARRY *and the girls exit left, the girls chattering excitedly.*

(offstage) Be careful, mind that wire, mind that flat, now then, look where you're going.

There is a bang and the girls can be heard giggling.

Now then, what did I tell you?

For a moment all is quiet, then **ALEX TRACEY** *enters right. He is an attractive, arrogant young man of twenty-eight, dressed casually for rehearsal and carrying his script.*

ALEX Anyone there? *(He peers into the wings left, then throws himself disconsolately on to the settee and begins to read his script)*

SYLVIA *enters through the auditorium and comes up on to the stage. She is a good-looking woman, dressed casually for rehearsal but exuding glamour from head to toe. She is thirty-five, very self-assured, vain, confident and flirtatious. She carries a script.*

SYLVIA Hi!

ALEX *(getting up, pleased)* Oh, good, I'm glad you're here first. Is Martin with you?

SYLVIA *(taking off her coat and tidying her hair)* He's gone to fetch Moppet. We drove past her house and clean forgot about her. We were arguing, you see. So he dropped me off and went back. He said if you were here we could go over our lines.

ALEX *(grabbing her)* I can think of better things to do.

SYLVIA *(wriggling free)* Do stop it, darling! You really are indiscreet. You don't know who will come in.

ALEX There's no one else here.

SYLVIA But there could be. *(She moves away from him)* Do you know Act Three?

ALEX I think so.

SYLVIA Perhaps we should go over that scene just before you murder me.

ALEX I don't want to murder you. *(He moves towards* **SYLVIA***)* The last thing I want to do is murder you.

SYLVIA *(crossly, avoiding* **ALEX**) That sort of remark is silly. If anyone heard you—

ALEX They'd think I was joking.

SYLVIA Not the way *you* said it. *(She thumbs through her script, then demonstrates the following as she describes it)* Now then, I'm about centre, and you're over there by the piano – or what should be the piano – and you back me over to the settee where I collapse and then you put your hands around my throat. Be very gentle, won't you, darling, I have a very sensitive little throat.

ALEX What were you arguing about?

SYLVIA What?

ALEX You and Martin: you said you were arguing. That's how you came to forget to pick up Moppet. What was it about?

SYLVIA Oh, nothing: just married couple's bickering. Nothing special.

ALEX Not about me?

SYLVIA *(scornfully)* Of course not. He doesn't know about you.

ALEX I don't know whether to be glad or sorry.

SYLVIA Don't be idiotic. Now then, let's start. *(She consults her script)* From "You're a damned liar", half-way down the page.

ALEX I must speak to you.

SYLVIA *(puzzled)* That isn't in the script.

ALEX I know. Sylvia – I must speak to you.

SYLVIA *(sighing)* All right, but if Martin comes in, remember where we are...

They sit on the settee, side by side.

ALEX *(abruptly)* I've been offered a job in West Kirby.

SYLVIA Where?

ALEX West Kirby. It's near Liverpool.

SYLVIA Are you going to take it?

ALEX Only if you'll come with me.

SYLVIA Come with you?

ALEX Of course. It's a great opportunity, running an arts centre, but I need you to come with me. I just know I could amount to something with you behind me.

SYLVIA *(gently)* Darling – you're being absurd!

ALEX *(hurt)* Why do you say that? Don't you think I could amount to anything?

SYLVIA *(rising and moving downstage)* That's not what I meant. Try to understand. Our relationship, it wasn't meant to last. I thought you understood that.

ALEX *(surprised)* I thought you cared.

SYLVIA I do care, darling, but not enough to give up everything.

ALEX *(moving to* **SYLVIA***)* What will you give up? Only material things. I can give you all those – eventually.

SYLVIA It's that eventually, darling, that worries me.

ALEX You don't love Martin, you can't do. Anyway, he's too old for you.

SYLVIA And you're too young for me.

ALEX Of course I'm not. We've got so much in common, you know we have.

SYLVIA We have now – I'm thinking about ten or twenty years' time.

ALEX It doesn't matter. What does age matter?

SYLVIA I said that when I married Martin.

ALEX Well!

SYLVIA Doesn't it speak for itself? I needed more than he could give me.

ALEX More of what?

SYLVIA Just more.

ALEX So you found me.

SYLVIA I like to think we found one another.

ALEX But only as a temporary measure.

SYLVIA I'm afraid so. *(She moves to* **ALEX***)* Oh, Alex, darling, try to understand. An affair is one thing, it's fun and exciting, but by its very nature it isn't meant to last. Marriage can become so – well, mundane. You would probably get just as boring as Martin after a few years. I don't see the point in swapping one boring husband for another.

ALEX I promise you I would never bore you.

SYLVIA You couldn't promise that – you don't know. *(Petulantly)* Besides I won't want to live in Liverpool.

ALEX It's outside Liverpool.

SYLVIA I don't care. It's up North, and I've never lived up North. I'd feel like a foreigner.

ALEX That's silly. You'd have me.

SYLVIA I'm not sure I want you – not permanently, anyway. Oh, do be sensible, Alex. I thought we had it all worked out. You've got Linda and I've got Martin; they're our stability, our background. We have one another for pleasure, it's a perfect arrangement.

ALEX I've told you before about Linda. We just share a flat. It isn't a great romance. If I wasn't there she'd find someone else. Linda is a career girl.

SYLVIA *(airily)* I always wanted to be a career girl, but I couldn't make my mind up about a career.

ALEX Your genius is in being, not doing. It was with most women.

SYLVIA *(witheringly)* I realise just how young you are when you say things like that!

ALEX Don't keep on about age. It couldn't matter less to me.

SYLVIA But it matters to me.

ALEX *is hurt and baffled. They stand looking at one another in silence.*

We hear **GINNY** *and* **SANDRA** *saying the following words off stage.* **ALEX** *and* **SYLVIA** *break apart,* **ALEX** *to the left and* **SYLVIA** *to the right.*

GINNY *(offstage)* That was fun. I've never seen such things.

SANDRA *(offstage)* The glitter from the panto stuff is all over my jeans – look!

GINNY *and* **SANDRA** *enter.*

GINNY And I'm covered in cobwebs... Oh, I hate spiders. There must be spiders.

SANDRA And rats!

They both squeal in delighted horror.

(seeing the others) Oh, hallo, I didn't know you were here. We've been under the stage.

SYLVIA *(sitting on the settee)* We were going over our lines.

SANDRA This is my friend, Ginny. She wants to join and she's coming to help me tonight. Martin won't mind if she helps backstage, will he?

SYLVIA Of course not.

SANDRA Ginny, this is Sylvia and Alex. Alex always plays the male leads and Sylvia is married to the director.

SYLVIA So that's why I play the female leads!

SANDRA Oh, I didn't mean that.

GINNY Could I wash my hands? I feel ever so grubby.

SANDRA Yes, yes, I'll show you.

GINNY *and* **SANDRA** *exit right.*

ALEX *(moving to right)* Now then, where were we?

SYLVIA Just starting Act Three.

ALEX That's not what I meant.

HARRY *enters from left.*

HARRY I've tidied up under the stage and put the trapdoor down.

ALEX Who are you?

HARRY I'm caretaking while Wally is off.

ALEX Oh.

HARRY I can't come back and lock up; I told those girls. Can't be done. So I'll padlock the front and you'll have to go out the back. It'll lock itself.

ALEX All right.

HARRY But if you take my advice you won't stay late. There's a storm brewing.

SYLVIA How can you tell?

HARRY I can smell it, been a fisherman all me life. The sea's black and the gulls are flying inland, sure sign there'll be bad weather.

ALEX We never rehearse past nine-thirty if we can help it.

SYLVIA Then we stampede to the pub.

HARRY Good idea! That's where I'm going, but I'm up early tomorrow so I can't get back to lock up. You'll be all right. Just swing the master switch. All the lights will go out at once.

ALEX Yes, we know. Thanks all the same.

HARRY What's the show?

ALEX "Dead on Time". *(Pause)* It's a thriller.

HARRY Any good, is it?

ALEX No.

SYLVIA Oh, it isn't bad. I've got a good part, anyway, until I get murdered, but that isn't until Act Three.

HARRY I love a good murder, don't you? Don't go to the theatre much, but when I do I love to see a murder. Sweeney Todd – now, that was a great old Victorian melodrama. *(He rubs his hands together)* "I'll soon polish you off, sir. Yes, I'll polish you off." *(He leers grotesquely)*

ALEX It might be fun to do something like that.

SYLVIA Have you done any acting then?

HARRY Used to once. Got fed up with it. Takes up too much time. Now I go fishing instead. At least at the end of it I've got something to eat.

SYLVIA *(politely)* Quite right. How sensible!

HARRY Don't forget then, throw the master switch and out the back door. All right? I'm off now.

ALEX Don't worry about us – cheerio!

HARRY *exits through the auditorium.*

SYLVIA What an odd bloke! We'd better get on. We haven't done a thing yet. That girl hasn't set the stage. *(She brings out the two small tables from behind the settee and places them to the right and left of the settee)* If we want to leave sharp on time we really should get a move on.

ALEX Sylvia—

ALEX *takes* **SYLVIA** *in his arms.*

SYLVIA *(resisting* **ALEX***, moving left)* I'm sorry – I know you think I've let you down. But I never meant it to be this serious.

ALEX Neither did I – but it happened.

SYLVIA I just want things to go on the way they were.

ALEX But nothing ever does. Everything changes.

SYLVIA *(lightly, brushing him off)* Everything changes. Everything remains the same.

ALEX *(exasperated)* What do you mean?

SYLVIA I suppose the trouble is I want to have my cake and eat it. I've never understood why one shouldn't, have you?

ALEX What?

SYLVIA *(winsomely)* Why shouldn't one have their cake and eat it?

ALEX Oh, Sylvia!

ALEX *takes hold of* **SYLVIA** *and moves to kiss her. They hear the voices of* **MARTIN BLAKE** *and* **MOPPET**, *off and quickly separate,* **ALEX** *right and* **SYLVIA** *remaining left.*

MARTIN *and* **MOPPET** *enter from front of house.* **MARTIN** *is an egotist and loves to be in charge, in short a typical director. He is sharp, bombastic, superficially tough and supercilious.* **MOPPET** *is middle-aged and messy, with a sweet, vague, but rather silly nature. She carries a copious bag with her knitting, her script, her cigarettes and matches.*

MARTIN *(approaching the stage and climbing up the steps)* God, what a night, it's blowing a gale out there! It nearly blew us away just walking along the pier.

MOPPET Yes, I had to hang on to Martin like mad. I was quite scared!

ALEX Not scared of Martin, surely.

ALEX *helps* **MOPPET** *on to the stage.*

MOPPET No, scared he'd let go of me.

MARTIN As if I would! Met an old boy at the door, who insisted on locking us in. Says we can go out the back way.

SYLVIA Yes, that's right, he's standing in for Wally who is off sick.

MOPPET Weird old thing. Kept telling us there was going to be a storm. I don't care. I love storms.

SYLVIA Yes, he told us that – something about the seagulls flying backwards! Real old fisherman's jargon!

MARTIN We'd better get straight on. *(He looks round)* Is Sandra here? We must have someone on the book. *(He takes the small table from behind the armchair and sets it upstage left of the armchair)*

SYLVIA She's brought a new member, her friend. They're washing their hands.

MOPPET What on earth for?

SYLVIA I suppose they were dirty.

MOPPET *(settling herself down on the chair downstage right and bringing out her knitting)* I'm not on at the beginning, so I can get on with my jumper.

SYLVIA That interminable knitting. Don't you ever get fed up with it?

MOPPET Oh yes, all the time. But it's such good therapy. Takes my mind off wanting a cigarette.

MARTIN Sorry, Moppet, but I want to go from your entrance.

MOPPET Oh why?

MARTIN *(patiently)* Because it needs a lot of polish. The scene with Alex and Sylvia is all right.

ALEX Oh, thanks.

MARTIN Sylvia knows that scene perfectly. I've heard her reciting the lines in the bath and you *can* over-rehearse. I don't want her to get stale.

ALEX Yes, but *I* need the rehearsal.

MARTIN You can rehearse that bit, the two of you any time. I want to do Moppet's scene. Where is that girl?

MARTIN *exits right.*

MOPPET *busily scans her knitting pattern.* **ALEX** *moves closer to* **SYLVIA.**

ALEX Why doesn't he want us to do our scene?

SYLVIA *(with a warning look at* **MOPPET***)* He said – we can do it on our own.

ALEX I don't like the way he said it.

SYLVIA *(crossly)* Oh, for God's sake—!

MARTIN *enters with* **SANDRA** *and* **GINNY.**

MARTIN Here they are!

SANDRA Sorry, Martin, I was just showing Ginny round. She's a new member and she wants to help me backstage. Is that all right?

MARTIN Of course. *(He forces a smile)* Have you had any experience?

GINNY *(alarmed)* What of?

SANDRA Theatrical experience, he means.

GINNY *(relieved)* Oh no, only at school. I was in She Stoops To Conquer.

MARTIN That doesn't count. School! Never mind, you'll learn. Now, get on the book, Sandra, and we'll start.

SANDRA *exits left, followed by* **GINNY.**

You're on the settee, Sylvia, Alex standing over you, and Moppet outside the french windows. You know that old boy talking about a storm made me think a bit of thunder

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