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SF PERUSALS

BLACK COFFEE

by Agatha Christie

SAMUEL FRENCH

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www.samuelfrench.com
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Black Coffee at the Embassy Theatre, London, on December 8, 1930. The Director was André van Gyseghem. The cast was as follows:

TREDWELL ..... Walter Tennyson
LUCIA AMORY ..... Joyce Bland
MISS CAROLINE AMORY ..... Josephine Middleton
RICHARD AMORY ..... Lawrence Hardman
BARBARA AMORY ..... Judy Menteath
EDWARD RAYNOR ..... André van Gyseghem
DR. CARELLI ..... Donald Wolfit
SIR CLAUD AMORY ..... Wallace Evennett
HERCULE POIROT ..... Francis L. Sullivan
CAPTAIN ARTHUR HASTINGS OBE ..... John Boxer
DR. GRAHAM ..... Frank Follows
INSPECTOR JAPP ..... Richard Fisher
JOHNSON ..... George F. Wiggins

CHARACTERS

TREDWELL
LUCIA AMORY
MISS CAROLINE AMORY
RICHARD AMORY
BARBARA AMORY
EDWARD RAYNOR
DR. CARELLI
SIR CLAUD AMORY
HERCULE POIROT
CAPTAIN ARTHUR HASTINGS O.B.E.
DR. GRAHAM
INSPECTOR JAPP
JOHNSON

NOTES ON CASTING

RAYNOR may double with **DR. GRAHAM**.
TREDWELL may double with **JOHNSON**.
SIR CLAUDE may double with **INSPECTOR JAPP**.
Minimum number of performers: 10.

SETTING & TIME

The action of the play takes place in the library of Sir Claud Amory's house at Abbot's Cleve, about twenty-five miles from London.

ACT I
8:30 p.m.

ACT II
The following morning.

ACT III
Fifteen minutes later.

ACT I

(The library at Abbot's Cleve, Sir Claud Amory's house, about twenty-five miles from London. The time is 8:30 in the evening. There are doors leading to the hall, dining room and Sir Claud's study. There are also French windows that open on to the garden. There is a fireplace with a bell push next to it. On the mantelpiece there is an old-fashioned clock and some ornaments, including a vase of tapers. The furniture consists of a desk with a telephone on it, a tall bookcase with a tin box on top, a cabinet with a gramophone and records, and a settee and coffee table. Dominating the room is a large book table with an armchair and two chairs round it. The table is littered with books and has a plant in a brass pot on it. The furniture is old-fashioned but of no particular period. The room is empty and in darkness. After a few moments the door to the dining room opens and **TREDWELL** *enters, speaking off.)*

TREDWELL. Sir Claud. Very good, Sir Claud.

(The faint hum of voices is heard until he closes the door behind him. He switches on the lights, moves to the desk and lifts the telephone receiver.)

Market Cleve four-three... Four Three... Yes, please... Is that Jackson's garage? ...I'm speaking from Sir Claud Amory's, Abbot's Cleve. Will you send a taxi to the station to meet the eight-fifty from London? Two

gentlemen for Abbot's Cleve will be coming by it... Yes, that's right. The eight-fifty. Two gentlemen... What? ...

(He replaces the receiver. **LUCIA** *enters from the dining room, the faint hum of voices is heard again. She is a beautiful woman of about twenty-five, half-Italian but speaks English perfectly. She carries a handbag.* **TREDWELL** *exits.* **AUNT CAROLINE** *is heard calling from the dining room.)*

AUNT CAROLINE. *(Offstage.)* Lucia – Lucia – where are you?

*(***AUNT CAROLINE** *enters, closing the door behind her. She is an elderly lady of the old school, a little fussy but kind.)*

There, my dear, you sit down here.

(She leads **LUCIA** *to the settee and seats her.)*

You'll be all right in a minute or two.

LUCIA. It's passing already. I just felt faint, that's all. How ridiculous of me. I've never done such a thing before. Please go back, Aunt Caroline. I shall be quite all right here.

AUNT CAROLINE. You've not looked well, dear, all the evening.

LUCIA. Haven't I?

AUNT CAROLINE. No indeed. Perhaps you've caught a little chill. Our English summers are rather treacherous, you know. Not like the hot suns of Italy. So delightful, I always think.

LUCIA. Italy...

AUNT CAROLINE. I know, my child, you must miss your own country sadly.

LUCIA. *(Energetically.)* Never!

AUNT CAROLINE. *(Surprised.)* Eh?

LUCIA. Never! Never! I hate Italy. I always hated it. It is like Heaven to be here in England with all you kind people.

AUNT CAROLINE. It's really very sweet of you to say that, my dear. I'm sure we've all tried to make you feel happy and at home, but it would be only natural for you to feel homesick sometimes. And then, with no mother...

*(***LUCIA** *closes her eyes.)*

LUCIA. Please – please – do not speak of my mother.

AUNT CAROLINE. Of course not. I didn't mean to upset you. Shall I get you some smelling salts?

LUCIA. No, thank you.

AUNT CAROLINE. I've got some very nice ones, coloured pink and in the most charming little bottle. And very pungent. Sal ammoniac, you know – or is it spirits of salts? I never can remember. But it's not the one you clean the bath with.

*(***LUCIA** *smiles gently but does not reply.)*

Yes, I think it must be a sudden chill. You were looking the picture of health this morning. Perhaps it was the excitement of seeing this Italian friend of yours, Dr. Carelli?

*(***RICHARD** *enters from the dining room. Voices are heard off. He is the ordinary type of good-looking Englishman.)*

He turned up so suddenly, didn't he? It must have given you quite a shock.

*(***LUCIA** *leans back, closing her eyes.)*

Oh, my dear, are you coming over faint again?

*(***RICHARD** *closes the door and turns to* **AUNT CAROLINE**.*)*

RICHARD. Do go and finish your dinner, Aunt Caroline. Lucia will be all right with me.

AUNT CAROLINE. *(Hesitantly.)* Well perhaps I'd better. Claud does so hate any disturbance. And with a guest here. Oh –

(She turns to **LUCIA**.*)*

AUNT CAROLINE. – As I was just saying, what a very strange thing it was that Dr. Carelli should turn up in the way he did with no idea that you were living in this part of the world. It must have been a great surprise to you, my dear?

LUCIA. It was.

AUNT CAROLINE. *(Laughing.)* The world is such a very small place! Your friend is a very good-looking man, Lucia.

LUCIA. Do you think so?

AUNT CAROLINE. Foreign looking of course, but distinctly handsome. He speaks English very well.

LUCIA. Yes.

AUNT CAROLINE. And you had absolutely no idea that he was in this part of the world?

LUCIA. None whatever.

RICHARD. It must have been a delightful surprise.

*(***LUCIA** *looks up at him quickly.)*

AUNT CAROLINE. *(Beaming.)* Yes indeed. Did you know him well in Italy, my dear? Was he a great friend of yours?

LUCIA. *(Bitterly.)* He was never a friend.

AUNT CAROLINE. I see – just an acquaintance. I often think foreigners are inclined to be a little pushing. I don't mean you, dear, of course. You're half English.

(She looks at **RICHARD**.*)*

In fact, quite English now, eh, Richard?

*(***RICHARD** *does not respond, but opens the door to the dining room. Voices are heard off.)*

Well…if you're sure I can't do anything more…

RICHARD. No, no.

*(***AUNT CAROLINE** *exits. He shuts the door with a sigh of relief.)*

I thought she'd never go. Natter, natter, natter.

LUCIA. But she is so kind, Richard.

RICHARD. Oh, of course.

(There is a constrained silence.)

Sure there's nothing I can get you?

LUCIA. Nothing really, thank you Richard. Do go back to the dining room.

RICHARD. No, I'll stay with you.

LUCIA. But I'd rather be alone.

(There is a pause.)

RICHARD. Cushions all right?

(He moves behind the settee.)

Would you like another one under your head?

LUCIA. I am quite comfortable as I am. It would be nice to have some air, though. Could you open the window?

*(***RICHARD** *moves to the french windows and fumbles with the catch.)*

RICHARD. Damn! The governor's locked it with one of those patent catches of his. You can't open it without the key.

LUCIA. Oh well, it doesn't matter.

RICHARD. Wonderful fellow the governor. Always inventing something.

LUCIA. Yes. He must have made a lot of money out of his inventions.

RICHARD. *(Gloomily.)* Pots of it. But it isn't the money that appeals to him. They're all the same these scientists, always on the track of something utterly impracticable that can be of no earthly interest to anyone outside themselves. Bombarding the atom!

LUCIA. But all the same, he is a great man, your father.

RICHARD. I suppose he's one of the leading scientists of the day. *(Irritably.)* But he can't see any point of view except his own. He's treated me damned badly.

LUCIA. He keeps you here – a prisoner. *(Angrily.)* Why did he make you give up the army and come to live here?

RICHARD. He thought I could help him in his work, I suppose. He ought to have known I should be no earthly use to him in that way. Haven't got the brains. My God, Lucia, it makes one feel pretty desperate sometimes. There he is rolling in money, and he spends every penny on those damned experiments of his.

LUCIA. *(Bitterly.)* Money! Everything comes round to that. Money!

RICHARD. I'm like a fly tied up in a spider's web. Helpless.

LUCIA. Oh, Richard, so am I.

(There is a pause.)

And I want to get out. I want to get out…

(She rises suddenly and moves to him.)

(Frantically.) Richard, for God's sake, before it's too late, take me away!

RICHARD. Away where?

LUCIA. Anywhere – anywhere in the world! But away from this house! I'm afraid, Richard, I tell you I'm afraid. There are shadows –

(She looks to the dining room door.)

– shadows everywhere.

RICHARD. How can we go away without money? *(Bitterly.)* A man's not much good to a woman without money, is he, Lucia? Is he?

LUCIA. Why do you say that? What do you mean?

*(***RICHARD** *continues to look at her in silence.)*

What's the matter with you tonight, Richard? You're different…

RICHARD. Am I?

LUCIA. Yes – what is it?

RICHARD. Well – nothing.

*(***LUCIA** *puts a hand to his cheek.)*

LUCIA. Richard – my dear…

(He turns away.)

Richard…

RICHARD. Do you think I'm quite a fool? Do you think I didn't see this old friend of yours slip a note into your hand tonight?

LUCIA. You thought…

(He interrupts her fiercely.)

RICHARD. Why did you come out from dinner? You weren't feeling faint. That was all a pretence. You wanted to be alone to read your precious note. You couldn't wait. You were nearly mad with impatience because you couldn't get rid of us, first Aunt Caroline, then me.

LUCIA. Richard, you're mad. Oh, it's absurd, you can't think I care for Carelli? My dear – my dear – it's you, nobody but you.

RICHARD. What is in that note?

LUCIA. Nothing – nothing at all.

RICHARD. Then show it to me.

LUCIA. I – I can't. I've destroyed it.

RICHARD. No, you haven't. Show it to me.

LUCIA. Richard, can't you trust me!

RICHARD. I could take it from you by force. I've half a mind…

(He advances a step towards her but stops.)

No, I suppose there are some things one can't do, but by God, I'll have it out with Carelli.

(He turns to leave. **LUCIA** *catches his arm.)*

LUCIA. *(Fearfully.)* No, Richard, you mustn't, you mustn't. Don't do that, I beg you, don't do that.

RICHARD. You're afraid for your lover?

LUCIA. *(Fiercely.)* He's not my lover.

RICHARD. Perhaps he isn't – yet. Perhaps he…

(Voices are heard off. They break apart. **AUNT CAROLINE** *and* **BARBARA** *enter from the dining room.* **BARBARA** *is an extremely modern young woman of twenty-one. She carries a handbag.)*

BARBARA. Hello, Lucia, are you all right now?

*(***LUCIA** *forces a smile.)*

LUCIA. Yes, thank you, darling.

BARBARA. Not broken any glad tidings to Richard?

(She nudges her playfully.)

AUNT CAROLINE. Barbara!

BARBARA. Well, accidents will happen.

AUNT CAROLINE. I cannot think what girls are coming to! They know everything. They say everything.

*(***RICHARD** *exits to the dining room. He closes the door and the voices die away.)*

BARBARA. I think the Victorians were too marvellous. Fancy believing that babies were found under gooseberry bushes! I think it's sweet.

*(***AUNT CAROLINE** *silences her with a disapproving look then turns to* **LUCIA**.*)*

AUNT CAROLINE. My poor child, I'm really very worried about you.

*(***LUCIA** *suddenly breaks down.)*

LUCIA. You are all so good to me – so good and kind. No one was ever kind to me until I came here. It's been wonderful.

AUNT CAROLINE. There, there, my dear, I know what you mean – living abroad all your life – most unsuitable for a young girl…

*(***AUNT CAROLINE** *takes her to the settee. They sit.)*

Although the dear Italian lakes are so delightful in the early spring. Don't cry, my dear.

BARBARA. I think she needs a good stiff drink. This is an awful house, years behind the times. You never see the ghost of a cocktail in it. A Satan's Whisker would pull Lucia round in no time.

*(***AUNT CAROLINE** *looks at her in horror.)*

AUNT CAROLINE. Barbara, what is a Satan's Whisker?

BARBARA. Equal parts of brandy and crème de menthe, and don't forget the red pepper.

AUNT CAROLINE. I disapprove of these alcoholic stimulants. My dear father always said…

BARBARA. I don't know what he said, but everyone knows that dear old Great-Uncle Algernon was a three-bottle man.

AUNT CAROLINE. Gentlemen are different.

BARBARA. They got away with it all right in those days.

(She produces a small mirror and lipstick from her handbag.)

Well, how do we look? Oh, my God!

(She applies lipstick vigorously.)

AUNT CAROLINE. Really Babs, I do wish you wouldn't put quite so much of that red stuff on your lips. It's such a very bright colour.

BARBARA. Seven and six.

AUNT CAROLINE. I beg pardon…?

BARBARA. Kiss proof!

AUNT CAROLINE. I know, of course, that lips are apt to chap if one has been out in a high wind, and that a little grease is advisable, lanolin, for instance.

BARBARA. My dear Aunt Caroline, take it from me, a girl simply can't have too much red on her lips. She never knows how much she's going to lose in the taxi coming home.

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