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TELL-TALE MURDER

A Play in Three Acts

by

PHILIP WEATHERS

SAMUEL



FRENCH

LONDON

NEW YORK

TORONTO

SYDNEY

HOLLYWOOD

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TELL-TALE MURDER

Presented by Linnit and Dunfee Ltd at the Grand Theatre, Blackpool, on the 22nd December 1952, with the following cast of characters:

JANE MANNION 50	<i>Freda Jackson</i>
BENTLEY RICHMOND 60	<i>D. A. Clarke-Smith</i>
ELLEN OLD 80 ¹⁵⁰	<i>Susan Richards</i>
DAVID MANNION 26	<i>Joss Ackland</i>
MAUREEN RICHMOND 24	<i>Heather Stannard</i>
VANESSA MANNION	<i>Janet Reid</i>
RICHARD MANNION	<i>Richard Caldicott</i>
HOWELL	<i>Thomas Heathcote</i>

SYNOPSIS OF SCENES

The action of the play passes in the living-room of "Porthenis", Jane Mannion's house on the Cornish coast

ACT I

SCENE 1 An evening in September

SCENE 2 After supper, the same evening

ACT II

The following evening about 9 o'clock

ACT III

SCENE 1 Midday, the following day

SCENE 2 Evening, the following Friday

Time—the present

PRODUCTION NOTES

The casting of "Jane Mannion" presents difficulties, but providing she is the right actress, a woman between thirty and forty is probably most suitable for the part. For the first flash-back she can under-dress to a certain extent, and the removal of her grey wig and the reddening of her lips should be sufficient to give the impression that though young, she is tired and harassed. For the second flash-back she has considerably more time to make the more important changes of make-up. But a quick-change room is necessary either on the rostrum of the staircase, or near to it.

Howell's difficult change, and that only because of time, is after the second flash-back, when he will need help in putting on his chauffeur's jacket. If necessary he can be speaking his lines as he does this. If he wants to grey his hair, and providing his colouring is fairish, the powder will not show in the second flash-back, owing to the dimness of the lighting.

In order not to reveal too much too soon, it is preferable that the cast list on the programme should not be in order of appearance, nor should it state relationships.

ACT I

SCENE I

SCENE—*The living-room of "Porthenis", Jane Mannion's house on the Cornish coast. An evening in September.*

The room is Elizabethan. It has a most definite personality, but no charm, and no "lived-in" quality. At night, with the lamps throwing pools of light, and the corners shadowy, it has a foreboding atmosphere. Across the corner up L, an oriel window forms a large bay, the centre portion consisting of french windows leading to the garden, with a view of the moor, the cliff edge and the sea beyond. A door down L leads to other parts of the house. A staircase, RC of the back wall, runs up and off R. There is a large cupboard built in under the stairs. The staircase is of carved black oak, its walls fully panelled to match; the bluish-grey stone walls of the rest of the room have a deep, more plainly carved dado of the same wood. The floor is of large flagstones. The furniture is mainly Elizabethan. The wall R has a recess in which stands a dresser. There are two circular tables, four carved oak armchairs, a pouffe, and a chest high enough to be used as a table. A grandfather clock and a large gong on a stand are above and below the window respectively. A wall mirror hangs above the gong. At night, the room is lit by oil-lamps, one on the chest, one on the table up L.C. and one on the table C.

(See the Ground Plan at the end of the play)

When the CURTAIN rises, JANE MANNION is sitting C, sewing. The oil-lamp on the table C is fully turned up, but the other lamps though lit, are very low, so that Jane is in a pool of light. The windows, and the window curtains are open, and the upstage part of the room is lit and coloured by a fine sunset. JANE is a Cornishwoman, somewhere around fifty years old, a fine, upstanding woman, still handsome, but her face, though scarcely lined, has something closed and secretive about it, and her manner is in keeping with her face. She is aloof, apparently completely self-controlled, and poised, and speaks without a trace of Cornish accent. She is used to complete command in her very small world. Her dresses, though not necessarily old-fashioned, are made so that they almost touch the ground, and she wears sombre colours. Her iron-grey hair is well-dressed, with a heavy plait over her head from ear to ear, which tends to increase her height. For a time she continues intent on her fine sewing, then she hears the buzzing of a bluebottle flying about the room. She looks up, annoyed, and with an occasional quick movement of the head, follows the bluebottle's flight. When it gets nearer to her a strained look comes to her face as slowly it settles on the large rug in the centre of the stage. She watches it, fascinated, as apparently it crawls

across the rug from L to R. Her hand slowly goes out to the fly swatter on the table C and closes on the handle. Before she can lift it, the blue-bottle buzzes off the floor on to the table C. Carefully she lifts the swatter, holds it poised for a moment, then swiftly swats and kills the insect, the noise sharply breaking the tense silence. She puts down the swatter and her sewing, rises, picks up the bluebottle, moves swiftly to the french windows and throws it out. ELLEN, the housekeeper, enters down L, carrying a tray with four sherry glasses. She crosses towards the chest. ELLEN is small and very old, nearly eighty. Her face is brown and heavily wrinkled, her knitted eyebrows overhang her black, beady eyes, so that she has to peer upwards to see who she is talking to, but her hair has not turned white. Except when she is alone with Jane, she is watchful and guarded, another secretive Cornishwoman. Although she is physically active for her age, her mind lapses at times into senility, she inclines to chuckle in a mirthless way, and mutter between her toothless jaws. She has a Cornish accent.

JANE. Flies again.

ELLEN (pausing LC; with a low chuckle) You'll never get rid of 'em—not now.

JANE. I hate them.

(ELLEN moves towards the chest)

(She moves to Ellen) Let me look at those glasses.

ELLEN (grumblingly) They're clean enough.

JANE (picking up the glasses and looking at them in the light of the lamp) You've been getting careless lately.

(ELLEN grunts)

Did you put clean towels in the bedroom?

ELLEN. Yes.

JANE. And the soap?

ELLEN (impatiently) Yes, yes.

JANE (indicating the glasses) They're all right. (She picks up a book from the table C and puts it in the cupboard)

ELLEN (putting the tray on the chest) Of course they are, I've got a new polishing cloth at last.

JANE. Is the chauffeur's bed aired?

ELLEN. Chauffeur's! It's bad enough to have a visitor, without him bringing a chauffeur. (She turns to go)

JANE. Is the bed aired?

ELLEN (pausing up C) No—no, I forgot.

JANE. Then do it now.

ELLEN (turning to the stairs) Fuss, fuss, fuss.

JANE. And, Ellen.

(ELLEN pauses on the first stair)

(She moves to R of Ellen) I don't want you about when this man

Bentley Richmond comes. You must be ill. Keep to your room.

ELLEN (*coming off the stair; rebelliously*) Why should I? I like to know what's doing. You always push me out of the way when strangers come.

JANE. Your memory's going.

ELLEN. I remember years ago well enough. (*Plaintively*) It's "now" I forget.

JANE. And you say silly things.

ELLEN (*looking evilly at her*) Some people I know'd be interested to hear 'em.

JANE (*with a hint of blackmail*) Bentley Richmond's a lawyer, Ellen.

(*ELLEN almost spits in her dislike of lawyers*)

So when you've seen to that bed, get to your room and stay there.

(*ELLEN, muttering, starts up the stairs*)

(*She moves below the table c, picks up her sewing and faces Ellen*) It's time David was down.

ELLEN. I'll tell him.

JANE. He forgets everything when he's busy writing.

ELLEN. He hasn't done much writing *this* day. (*She goes up the stairs*)

(*DAVID MANNION enters quickly down the stairs, almost banging into Ellen. He is a tall, good-looking young man of twenty-six, dark, but in other ways completely unlike his mother. He has been to a public school and a university, and follows his father's profession as a novelist*)

(*To David*) Oh, there you are.

(*ELLEN, muttering, exits up the stairs*)

DAVID (*pausing and looking after Ellen*) Really, you know—(*he moves LC*) Ellen's getting worse every day. Why don't you . . . ?

JANE. Get rid of her?

DAVID. No, no. But pension her off.

JANE (*sitting in the chair c*) Ellen's been a good servant to me, David. While she wants to stay, she can stay.

DAVID. Well, I suppose I can always put her in my next novel, but it'll have to be a "whodunnit".

JANE (*reproachfully*) David!

DAVID (*embarrassed*) Oh, sorry, Mother. (*He moves to the windows*) I can't think what's happened to Maureen. She should have been here an hour ago.

JANE (*sewing*) D'you expect doctors to be punctual? Especially lady doctors.

DAVID (*moving down LC*) But dammit all, this is a special occa-

sion. Her old man'll be here any minute. I'm nervous enough about meeting him as it is—if she's not here it'll be hell.

JANE. I don't see why.

DAVID (*crossing to RC*) Well, you know how it is—want to make a good impression, and all that. Rather wish you hadn't asked him to stay here now. The pub in the village isn't bad.

JANE. I wanted him to get to know us.

DAVID. You're a queer woman. I'll never understand you.

JANE. Won't you, David?

DAVID. You've shown pretty plainly you don't want me to marry Maureen, yet here you are, doing all you can to entertain her father.

JANE. You tell me he's a famous man in his own country. I haven't known any famous men.

DAVID. If you *will* shut yourself up here for years, you can't expect to.

JANE. What else *could* I do?

DAVID. You could have packed up and gone ages ago.

JANE. Run away?

DAVID. But how can you *stand* it here?

JANE. I've learnt to.

DAVID (*moving above the chair RC*) Well, I haven't. The life we're living here's impossible. All this suspicion—this—this *ostracism*—I tell you it's getting on my nerves. Wherever I go—mutter, mutter, mutter—whisper, whisper, whisper. It's—it's . . .

JANE (*her voice hard*) It's Cornwall.

DAVID. And that's precisely why I'm off to South Africa.

JANE. But why do you have to go to *South Africa*?

DAVID (*moving to R of the table C*) Because I must think of the *future*. My capital's limited—

JANE. Then . . .

DAVID. —my books don't bring in much, and my influence here in England's *nil*. Out there, there's an opening for a publisher . . .

JANE. But you're not a publisher.

DAVID. It's what I want to be. I'll have to start in a small way, of course, but Bentley Richmond can pull strings—get the right people interested in me.

JANE. Can't he do that here?

DAVID. Not to the same extent. And in any case, Maureen wants to go.

JANE. Ah!

DAVID. Well, it's natural, isn't it? Wanting to be near her father?

JANE. And you *don't* want to be near your mother.

DAVID (*moving above the chair RC*) There's no need to put it like that.

JANE. Isn't there?

DAVID. I just don't intend to stay in this house—or in Cornwall.

JANE. And I do.

DAVID (*moving down RC*) But it isn't a practical proposition (*More reasonably*) Look, Mother, I've been going through some figures upstairs. (*He takes a sheet of paper from his pocket and sits in the chair RC*) Mr Richmond's bound to ask me about my financial position, and I've worked it out. In addition to five thousand pounds to cover my education, father left about fifteen thousand pounds in securities, and this house, didn't he?

JANE. Yes.

DAVID. He left you the use of it all . . .

JANE (*bitterly*) Providing I didn't marry again.

DAVID. Yes—until I married. Then I come into three-quarters of it, and you have the remaining quarter.

JANE (*stopping sewing*) How can I live on that? It's ridiculous!

DAVID. Then surely you must see *why* we must sell this house.

JANE. I won't sell.

DAVID. But . . .

JANE. Don't you understand, David? It's my home. I've lived here for nearly thirty years.

DAVID. We've got to face facts.

JANE. But that's just what you're *not* doing. You'll never sell this house, because no-one'll buy it. (*She resumes sewing*) It's too big—too far away from anywhere—it needs thousands of pounds to put it in repair. It simply isn't *worth* anything.

DAVID (*rising*) Well, we'll soon find *that* out. (*He moves up R*) I'll put a surveyor in.

JANE (*after a short pause*) A surveyor!

DAVID (*indicating the walls up R*) He can test all the fabric—(*he looks at the ceiling*) look at the roof—and . . . (*he looks at the floor*)

JANE (*interrupting*) No, David.

DAVID (*moving above the table C*) Why not?

JANE. Until you marry, this house is mine, David, and I won't have strangers in it. You know that already.

DAVID (*moving LC*) What you mean is you won't do anything to help sell it.

JANE. No, I won't. When you've turned me out . . .

DAVID. I'm not turning you out.

JANE. What are you doing then?

DAVID (*moving down LC*) I'm trying to make you see reason.

JANE. Don't my wishes mean anything to you?

DAVID. Of course they do.

JANE. Then why don't you let me live on here, even after you're married.

DAVID. Because it'd be better if you got away.

JANE. No.

DAVID. Better for Vanessa, too. This is no place for her to live. Take her where she'll meet girls of her own age—somewhere she can be trained to earn her own living.

JANE. I don't want her to earn her living. I want to stay here, and I want her to stay with me.

(Off stage the front door bell jangles rustily)

DAVID. That'll be Bentley Richmond. We'll have to talk about this later.

JANE. I've nothing more to say.

DAVID. But . . .

JANE. Hadn't you better let the great man in?

(DAVID looks at Jane a moment then exits down L. JANE betrays slight nervous apprehension, rises, moves to the lamp up RC, turns it up, then moves above the table C. She pauses at the sound of David's voice, and listens forebodingly to the offstage conversation)

DAVID *(off)* It's too bad of Maureen, but it must be something important that's kept her.

BENTLEY *(off)* Well, I've waited a year—another hour or so won't make much difference.

DAVID *(off)* Let me take your coat.

BENTLEY *(off)* Thank you.

(JANE picks up the lamp from the table C and puts it on the dresser R)

DAVID *(off)* Come and meet mother.

(JANE moves below the table C.)

BENTLEY RICHMOND enters down L. followed by DAVID.

Bentley is a fine-looking man of about sixty, extremely intelligent, with a sensitive face and clear-cut features; eyes which can be kindly or piercing; a musical, well-modulated voice and an almost Edwardian courtesy of manner. He is dressed in a dark double-breasted suit which has been made to suit his personality as well as his figure, and he wears a stock. He crosses to JANE, who without moving from her position, holds out her hand to him. DAVID closes the door)

JANE *(gracious in an Edwardian way)* Welcome to "Porthenis", Mr Richmond.

BENTLEY *(holding her hand in both his without shaking it)* Thank you, ma'am. It's a pleasure I've looked forward to for some time.

(DAVID crosses to the chest and pours three glasses of sherry)

JANE. An unexpected pleasure for me. South Africa's so far away, and you're a busy man I'm told.

BENTLEY. A busy man who's going to have a few day's rest.

JANE. We must see that you do. Though I'm afraid our chairs could be more comfortable. Which do you prefer?

BENTLEY *(crossing to the chair RC)* This'll do for me, ma'am.

(JANE sits in the chair C. BENTLEY sits in the chair RC)

DAVID. A glass of sherry, sir?

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