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AFTERNOON AT THE SEASIDE

by Agatha Christie

|| SAMUEL FRENCH ||

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CHARACTERS

BOB WHEELER
NOREEN SOMERS
ARTHUR SOMERS
GEORGE CRUM
MRS. CRUM
A MOTHER
A YOUNG MAN
BEACH ATTENDANT
MRS. GUNNER
PERCY GUNNER
THE BEAUTY
INSPECTOR FOLEY

SETTING

The beach at Little-Slippyng-on-Sea, a summer afternoon.

AFTERNOON AT THE SEASIDE was first presented by Peter Saunders at the Duchess Theatre, London on December 20, 1962. The performance was directed by Hubert Gregg, with sets by Peter Rice. The cast was as follows:

BOB WHEELER David Langton
NOREEN SOMERS Betty McDowall
ARTHUR SOMERS Michael Beint
GEORGE CRUM Robert Raglan
MRS. CRUM Mabelle George
A MOTHER Vera Cook
A YOUNG MAN John Quayle
BEACH ATTENDANT John Abineri
MRS GUNNER Margot Boyd
PERCY GUNNER Raymond Bowers
THE BEAUTY Mercy Haystead
INSPECTOR FOLEY Robin May

(The beach. A summer afternoon. Voices are heard offstage singing, "I do like to be beside the seaside," rather out of tune. Three bathing huts can be seen. The name of each hut hangs above the door, they are labelled as follows: Bide-a-Wee, Mon Désir and Ben Nevis. The doors of Mon Désir and Ben Nevis are closed but Bide-a-Wee is open and shows itself full of equipment. In front of it, in two canvas chairs, sit MR. and MRS. CRUM. MR. CRUM is elderly, fat and outwardly submissive to MRS. CRUM, who is fifty-two, loquacious and generally censorious. She is knitting and he is trying to read the local afternoon paper. Behind the huts is a pier walkway leading offstage. Farther down there is also a beach telescope for viewing the bay. In front of each hut is a short set of steps leading down to a beach covered with an assortment of litter, banana skins, empty cigarette cartons, odd bathing towels and a shrimping net. On the beach, MRS. SOMERS and BOB WHEELER are sprawled on the sand in bathing dresses. NOREEN SOMERS is a good-looking, rather blowsy woman of thirty-odd with enormous vivacity. BOB WHEELER is about the same age, a terrific wag and sure to be the life and soul of any gathering. A heap of clothes lay where they have undressed. MR. SOMERS is sitting in a deck chair wearing an overcoat and scarf, with a heavy stick propped by him. He looks grey and tired. NOREEN SOMERS is adorning a large and handsome sand castle with cockle shells. Offstage a small child is heard bawling

at the top of his voice and dogs are barking intermittently. BOB removes a bucket from the top of the sand castle.)

BOB. There you are.

NOREEN. There's a clever boy.

BOB. A fairy castle for the girl of my dreams.

NOREEN. Better not let Arthur hear you.

BOB. He's asleep.

NOREEN. Just as well.

BOB. Girl of my dreams, I love you.

(He takes a sweet from a chocolate box and eats it.)

Honest, I do.

NOREEN. Hey, that was my last soft centre.

(She throws the box on the sand. BOB picks it up and takes it to the bin.)

BOB. Ay, ay. Keep Britain tidy.

(An aeroplane is heard flying overhead, followed by the barking of a dog.)

NOREEN. Any more shells?

(BOB picks up a shell.)

BOB. Here you are, Noreen. Here's a beauty.

(A MOTHER enters on to the beach and calls offstage.)

MOTHER. Ernie! Ernie! Stop it, I say!

(BOB turns to her.)

No, not you. I'm talking to my son. Leave that dog alone
– it'll bite you!

(BOB hands NOREEN the shell.)

NOREEN. Ta, ever so.

(A beach ball bounces on, followed by a YOUNG MAN. He clambers over the group for the ball then exits.)

YOUNG MAN. Sorry. Sorry. Sorry.

MOTHER. Ernie!

BOB. Never a dull moment at the seaside, that's what I always say.

MOTHER. Why don't you go and have a paddle? Look at Bert, he's paddling. Why don't you go and paddle too?

CHILD. (*Offstage.*) Don't wanna paddle – wah!

MOTHER. Bring you to the seaside I do to enjoy yourself and what happens? You bawl your head off.

CHILD. (*Offstage.*) Don't want to – wah!

MOTHER. Well, I'm going to enjoy myself if it's the last thing I do.

CHILD. (*Offstage.*) *Waaah!*

MOTHER. Oh, shut up!

(She makes to exit.)

BOB. Kids, eh?

(She turns and looks at BOB.)

MOTHER. What!!!

(She stalks away.)

NOREEN. First time I went to the seaside I yelled my head off. Said the sea was wet and the sand was dirty. You never enjoy a thing first time you do it.

BOB. That's right. Goes for other things than the seaside, eh Norrie?

NOREEN. Now Bob, steady! You'll shock Arthur here.

(BOB looks at MR. SOMERS, who does not react at all.)

BOB. Couldn't shock old Arthur. Nothing shocks Arthur, does it Artie?

(MR. SOMERS merely smiles in a tired way.

NOREEN takes a bathing cap from her beach bag.)

NOREEN. Oh, well, I'm going in for my second dip. Come on, Bob.

BOB. Too bloomin' cold.

NOREEN. Slacker!

BOB. Women don't feel the cold.

(He eyes her.)

Too well covered.

NOREEN. You give over. *(Rising.)* I'll race you to the jetty.

BOB. Right. On your marks. Get set.

(He runs offstage.)

NOREEN. Hey, you cheated!

(NOREEN runs off after him. MR. SOMERS rises, puts down his newspaper and picks up his stick. He makes his way up the short steps on to the pier then exits along it. MRS. CRUM watches them with disapproval.)

MRS. CRUM. I must say George, that Little-Slippyng isn't what it was.

GEORGE. Little-Slippyng slipping, eh?

MRS. CRUM. Quite a different class of people nowadays. I've a good mind not to come here next year.

GEORGE. Ar...

MRS. CRUM. Talking and screaming and making those very doubtful jokes! Just as though they were alone on the beach.

GEORGE. Needn't listen, my dear.

MRS. CRUM. What did you say?

GEORGE. Said you needn't listen.

MRS. CRUM. *(Sharply.)* Don't talk nonsense, George.

GEORGE. No, my dear.

MRS. CRUM. And that one with all the jokes isn't even her husband. It's the other one she's married to.

GEORGE. How do you know?

(The beach ball comes flying on to the pier, followed quickly by the YOUNG MAN.)

MRS. CRUM. Well, really!

YOUNG MAN. Sorry.

(He retrieves the ball and exits.)

MRS. CRUM. Mothers who can't control their children! Young men and girls with next to nothing on, kicking balls all over the place. No consideration for those who want to sit peacefully and enjoy themselves.

GEORGE. Only young once.

MRS. CRUM. That's a foolish thing to say. Very foolish indeed.

GEORGE. Yes, dear.

MRS. CRUM. We didn't behave like that when we were young.

(She leans over to take wool from the bag at her side.)

And in my mother's day, men and girls bathed from different beaches even.

GEORGE. *(Mumbling.)* That can't have been much fun.

MRS. CRUM. What did you say?

GEORGE. Nothing dear. Nothing at all. Seems there was a burglary here last night.

MRS. CRUM. At Little-Slippyng?

GEORGE. Yes. Lady Beckman.

MRS. CRUM. What, the Lady Beckman that has all those mink coats and the lovely Rollses? Is she down here?

GEORGE. Esplanade Hotel.

MRS. CRUM. What was taken? A mink coat?

GEORGE. No. Emerald necklace.

MRS. CRUM. An...? Oh.

(She resumes knitting.)

Oh well, I dare say she's got half a dozen of those, too. I wonder she even noticed it was gone!

(MR. SOMERS enters on to the pier. He walks down on to the beach and sits in his deck chair.)

GEORGE. Cat burglar they think. Got in through the bathroom window after crawling up a drainpipe while the dancing was going on in the evening.

MRS. CRUM. Serves her right!

*(The **BEACH ATTENDANT**, a very old man in uniform with rheumy eyes and a red nose, enters on to the beach and approaches **MR. SOMERS**.)*

BEACH ATT. Fourpence, please.

*(**MR. SOMERS** is busy reading.)*

Fourpence for the chair.

MR. SOMERS. Oh!

*(He finds a coin. The **BEACH ATTENDANT** takes it then punches a ticket for **MR. SOMERS**.)*

Nice afternoon – quite warm.

*(The **BEACH ATTENDANT** gets change from his money bag and counts it into **MR. SOMERS**' hand.)*

BEACH ATT. Sixpence, shillin', two shillin's. *(Gloomily.)* Too nice an afternoon makes a lot of trouble. You should see the parking lot! Regular mix-up! Some of them cars won't get out for hours.

MR. SOMERS. Isn't there someone to control it?

BEACH ATT. Ah, old Joe, but it's more than one man can manage. Cars coming in a stream ever since lunchtime and parking themselves where they please. Ah, I remember this place when there wasn't more than a couple of dozen on the beach – all residents they were – quiet and well be'aved...

(He breaks off. He looks down the beach then suddenly yells.)

Hey you! Stop throwin' stones, you'll 'it someone!

*(He turns back to **MR. SOMERS**.)*

Boys! Always up to something.

(He looks out to sea then blows his whistle.)

Hey, you – float number twelve – you’ve ’ad your half-hour! Come in!

(He pauses, unable to hear what they are saying.)

Eh?

(He exits down the beach, blowing his whistle.

MRS. CRUM *has her hands to her ears.)*

MRS. CRUM. That whistle.

*(The beach ball bounces on and hits **GEORGE**. The **YOUNG MAN** follows, even more out of breath.)*

YOUNG MAN. Sorry!

*(He retrieves the ball and throws it offstage. An agonised protest is heard offstage from **MRS. GUNNER**.)*

Sorry.

*(The **YOUNG MAN** exits as **MRS. GUNNER** enters on to the beach, brushing sand off herself. She is a possessive old battle-axe. **PERCY**, her son, follows her on. He is a nice but sad young man.)*

MRS. GUNNER. Well, I don’t know what the young are coming to!

(She walks up the steps to Ben Nevis.)

I really don’t! Sand all over me! Now, Percy, open the house.

*(She gives the key to **PERCY**, who opens the hut and takes out **MRS. GUNNER**’s chair.)*

MRS. CRUM. Good afternoon, Mrs Gunner.

MRS. GUNNER. Good afternoon, Mrs. Crum. Good afternoon, Mr. Crum.

*(**GEORGE** raises his hat, still reading. **PERCY** places the chair down.)*

PERCY. Here you are, Mom. Which way would you like it?

MRS. GUNNER. That's very nice, thank you, dear.

(She sits. PERCY brings out his chair and puts it next to hers.)

No, I think I'll have it a bit more round.

(She rises. PERCY moves her chair round a bit and they sit.)

And my knitting.

(PERCY rises. He fetches her knitting and a towel from the hut. He places the towel on his chair then puts the knitting down next to MRS. GUNNER.)

That's it. On the other side.

(PERCY moves the knitting to MRS. GUNNER's other side. He gives her the key then sits. Quite a business is made of it all.)

(Fondly.) He's such a good son to me. Not that I want to keep him always waiting on me. "You must leave me and go and enjoy yourself," I say. We old women must expect to sit back and take second place. He wouldn't go to the pictures last night because he thought I had a bit of a headache.

MRS. CRUM. That's nice. That's very nice. That's what I like to hear.

GEORGE. *Did* you have a headache?

MRS. GUNNER. *(Dignified.)* It passed off.

(She sorts out her knitting.)

GEORGE. I'll bet it did. It was never damned well there in the first place.

(MRS. CRUM glares at GEORGE.)

YOUNG MAN. *(Offstage.)* Percy! Percy! Come on, we've been waiting for you.

(PERCY walks to the edge of the pier and looks off.)

WAIT, THERE'S MORE!

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