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SF PERUSALS

Samuel French Acting Edition

The Stranger

by Agatha Christie

SAMUEL FRENCH

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ISBN 978-0-573-03108-3

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For Production Enquiries

United Kingdom and World
Excluding North America
licensing@concordtheatricals.co.uk
020-7054-7200

United States and Canada
Info@concordtheatricals.com
1-866-979-0447

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CHARACTERS

DORIS WEST
MRS. HUGGINS
ENID BRADSHAW
GERALD STRANGE
DICK LANE
MRS. BIRCH

NOTES ON CASTING

Doris West or Mrs. Huggins may double with Mrs. Birch.
Minimum number of performers: 5.

SETTING

ACT I

A flat in Kensington.

ACT II

The living room of a cottage in the country.

ACT III

Same as Act II.

TIME

ACT I

A morning in spring.

ACT II

An afternoon three months later.

ACT III

The same evening.

ACT I

(A flat in Kensington. A morning in spring. A pleasant, rather cheaply furnished sitting room with chairs, a writing desk, and a bookcase. There is a door that leads to the hall, another that leads to the bedrooms and another that leads to the dining room and kitchen. **DORIS WEST***, a nondescript girl of twenty-eight, is sitting at the desk. She tears up a sheet of paper and throws it in a waste paper basket.* **MRS. HUGGINS***, a middle-aged woman, is polishing.)*

DORIS. Get me another waste paper basket, will you, Mrs. Huggins? This one is full up.

MRS. HUGGINS. Yes, Miss.

(She takes the waste paper basket.)

And shall I bring you a cup of tea, Miss? The kettle is on and it is just eleven o'clock.

DORIS. Eleven o'clock? Already!

MRS. HUGGINS. Eleven it is, Miss.

(She exits into the kitchen. **DORIS** *looks around the room.)*

DORIS. The way one keeps things is really idiotic.

(She sighs as though admonishing herself.)

There, get on with what you are doing. Don't be an idiot.

*(***MRS. HUGGINS** *enters with a tray of tea.)*

MRS. HUGGINS. Here you are, Miss.

(She looks around the room.)

MRS. HUGGINS. Well, everything is about finished now.

DORIS. *(Sighing.)* Yes.

MRS. HUGGINS. Ah, you're right, Miss. It doesn't look near as nice as it did with all your pretty things about. But there, it is good enough for tenants. Some of the things you hear. Why, you would hardly believe –

DORIS. *(Distantly.)* Really?

MRS. HUGGINS. Such deceit and wickedness! Going away without paying up! Well, that you are on the look out for, but a lady as I did for, very particular she was too, as to who she let to – no children or dogs – well, would you believe it, she let to as nice spoken a lady as you could imagine and went away to the Riviera and when she came back, the flat was empty – empty, Miss! Carted off all the furniture in a van she had and sold it.

DORIS. Well, I hope we shan't strike a tenant like that.

MRS. HUGGINS. You never know, Miss.

(She pauses.)

What I mean to say is, you can't tell – not by looks and not by references.

DORIS. Well, let's try and look at the bright side, Mrs. Huggins.

MRS. HUGGINS. As I always do, Miss. Well known I am for it. Ah, they say – Mrs. Huggins is always one to make the best of things. What I say is, there's always a silver lining to every cloud. And so I've told Huggins many a time when he's had a disappointment over what won the 3:30. And I will say, Miss, that it's my belief that horses are very artful. You never know what they're going to do till they've done it – so to speak. And men is much the same. To see the way these young girls go about believing every word a man says to them, it makes my heart bleed for them – fairly bleed.

*(***DORIS** *is absorbed in a letter.)*

DORIS. Um – yes – yes, of course.

MRS. HUGGINS. Ah, well, they soon find out what's what and get resigned to it, so to speak. I hope now, as Miss Enid's young gentleman won't be too much of a disappointment to her. From his photograph on her dressing table he looks a nice, quiet gentleman – the steady sort. But then, for all his quiet look, he may be a secret drinker or something like that.

DORIS. *(Smiling.)* Mr. Lane doesn't drink, Mrs. Huggins.

MRS. HUGGINS. That's just the kind of thing you can't be sure about, Miss – begging your pardon. Gentlemen who come back from foreign parts like Mr. Lane, well, they do acquire the habit, there's no denying it. And foreign wives as often as not! Ah! There's a lot of wickedness goes on in the tropics. I've known as quiet and steady a young gentleman as you could imagine – a total abstainer when he went out – come back and not be able to leave the whisky alone. If I were you, Miss, I'd prepare Miss Enid. She's a nice young lady and I wouldn't like her to get too much of a shock.

DORIS. All right. I'll tell her that a bloated dipsomaniac may roll in.

MRS. HUGGINS. It's a long time since she's seen him.

DORIS. Three years since he was last home.

MRS. HUGGINS. Dear, dear, and them engaged seven years. It reminds one of the Bible, it does. A real romance, I call it. Them two, waiting faithfully for each other all those years. Ah, Miss, I do hope and pray, as she mayn't be disappointed in him.

DORIS. Well, at any rate, she knows something about him after all these years. Seven years is a good long time.

MRS. HUGGINS. Seven years or seventy – you never know with a man. Men is always men.

DORIS. Oh, come Mrs. Huggins. I hope it won't be as bad as all that. After all, if you don't know what a man is like after seven or eight years, when will you know?

MRS. HUGGINS. Never! Secretive, that's what men are – and artful. You never know what they are thinking and planning until they are in their graves.

DORIS. *(Slyly.)* Dear me, is Huggins…?

MRS. HUGGINS. Oh, Huggins! I made it clear to Huggins that I'd stand no nonsense!

DORIS. I see.

MRS. HUGGINS. Miss Enid will be wise to do the same. Put your foot down at the start. It's the only way. But there, Miss Enid is a gentle creature.

(She collects the tea things and exits into the kitchen. **DORIS** *speaks softly to herself.)*

DORIS. She's one in a hundred. One in a hundred.

*(***MRS. HUGGINS** *re-enters with a duster.)*

MRS. HUGGINS. Ah, it's a sad time for you, Miss, as we all know.

DORIS. Yes. I shall miss Enid terribly.

MRS. HUGGINS. Four years you've shared this flat and I really and truly do believe that you've never once had, what I should call, a proper dust up.

DORIS. No, we've never quarrelled. That's pretty good, isn't it, Mrs. Huggins?

MRS. HUGGINS. It's all right for two ladies, Miss. Husband and wife is different. A good row clears the air, that's what I always say. Go for each other at the start and maybe you'll have a peaceful old age. Why, the first year me and Huggins were married he didn't rightly know whether he was on his head or his heels.

DORIS. Does he know now?

MRS. HUGGINS. He's learnt as I won't be trifled with.

DORIS. Mrs. Huggins, I believe you bully poor Huggins unmercifully.

MRS. HUGGINS. Well, it's got to be one way or the other. I've seen to it as he doesn't bully me. And he's nothing to complain of – clean as a new pin I keep things – and his meals hot and tasty. But be firm with a man you must be. And so I'd advise Miss Enid, if she wouldn't think it impertinence.

DORIS. According to you, Mrs. Huggins, married life is a perpetual battle.

MRS. HUGGINS. And so it is, Miss. With one party always defeated. And what I say is this: take care as you're the winning party from the start! As I say, Miss Enid's a gentle creature and it's my fear as she may start wrong.

DORIS. She is a gentle creature.

MRS. HUGGINS. And yet though, for all that, she's secretive. You never know what she's really thinking or feeling. Why, look at her this morning! Here's her young gentleman coming home after all these years – and them going to get married at once – and her, as calm and ordinary as you please. Not even excited looking.

DORIS. What do you expect her to do? Dance about and sing?

MRS. HUGGINS. I know she's one to hide her feelings – and of course, there are them as takes their pleasures sadly. And sad is what she looked this morning in my opinion.

DORIS. *(Thoughtfully.)* So, you thought she looked sad, too.

MRS. HUGGINS. Well, she's probably right. As I say, you never know with marriage.

DORIS. She did look sad – and I want her so much to be happy. Oh, she must be happy!

MRS. HUGGINS. There's no real happiness this side of the grave, they say.

DORIS. I wish I were sure –

(She breaks off anxiously. Taking a pile of letters, she exits to the bedrooms. **MRS. HUGGINS** *sings* in a tuneless voice whilst dusting.)*

MRS. HUGGINS.

THOUGH I SAY NOT WHAT I MAY NOT LET YOU HEAR,

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STILL THE TUM TI TUM TI TUM TI TUM TI LOVE ME, DEAR.

(The front door is heard.)

FOR I AM A DUTIFUL WIFE,
TUM TI TUM TI TUM TI TUM TI TUM TI,
IT BRINGS YOU BUT TROUBLE AND DANGER,
TO LISTEN TO LOVE FROM A STRANGER.

*(***ENID BRADSHAW** *enters from the hall. She carries flowers. She is a rather pretty girl of twenty-eight.)*

ENID. Don't you do it, Mrs. Huggins.

MRS. HUGGINS. What, Miss?

ENID. Listen to 'Love From A Stranger.'

MRS. HUGGINS. It's a song, Miss, from *The Merry Widow*.

ENID. But you're not a merry widow. Think of Huggins.

MRS. HUGGINS. You will have your joke, Miss. Ah well, there's a lot of truth in that song. Listening to 'Love From A Stranger' has ruined many a poor young girl's life.

*(***ENID** *unties the flowers.)*

ENID. Get me the tall glass and the round bowl, will you, Mrs. Huggins?

MRS. HUGGINS. Yes, Miss.

(She exits to the kitchen. **DORIS** *enters from the bedrooms.)*

DORIS. Hullo! You back? Oh, those flowers are rather lovely!

ENID. Yes, aren't they? What time is it?

DORIS. About a quarter past eleven.

*(***MRS. HUGGINS** *enters with the vases.)*

What time will Dick get here?

ENID. About half past twelve, I should think. Thank you, Mrs. Huggins.

DORIS. You are not going to meet his train?

ENID. *(Shortly.)* No.

*(***MRS. HUGGINS** *returns to the kitchen.)*

DORIS. You must be feeling awfully excited.

*(***ENID** *does not answer.* **DORIS** *watches her with interest as she arranges the flowers.)*

ENID. There, I think that looks all right.

DORIS. Awfully nice.

ENID. How have you got on?

DORIS. I've just finished.

(She pulls out the drawers of the desk.)

All clear. I've just been enlivened by the cheery conversation of Mrs. Huggins.

ENID. Always the little ray of sunshine, I suppose?

DORIS. Oh, yes! She suggested that Dick had a foreign wife! That he drank! And that – anyway, you never knew.

*(***ENID** *smiles.)*

Oh and by the way, she strongly advises you to put your foot down from the start – marriage being a battle.

ENID. *(Bitterly.)* I don't think my marriage is likely to be a battle.

DORIS. No. Dick's the sort of person one would feel awfully safe with.

ENID. Devastatingly so.

DORIS. Well, that's awfully satisfactory. I mean, I'm awfully fond of you, old girl. I wouldn't like you to take any risks.

ENID. I'm not taking any risk.

(She looks round the room.)

It doesn't look as attractive with the things put away, but it's still a very nice flat and ought to let easily.

DORIS. Did you go to the agents?

ENID. Yes. They seemed to think it would let quite easily.

DORIS. We're not asking very much for it but I think that's wise. If you ask too much, it frightens people away and they won't even come and look at it.

ENID. You're sure that you want to let it?

DORIS. Yes. I couldn't go on living here alone just at once. In six months or so it will be different.

ENID. I'm sorry, Doris.

DORIS. That's all right. Of course, I want you to be happy. I'm not a dog in the manger. I'm so awfully glad to think of you being happy after all these years of toiling and moiling in that old office.

ENID. I know. It's marvellous to feel free.

DORIS. Very thoughtful of your old cousin Jane to pop off when she did and leave you that five thousand.

ENID. And there are people who say money doesn't matter! Think of having £250 a year of my very own.

DORIS. I suppose without it, you and Dick couldn't have got married.

ENID. Oh yes, I think we could. But it will make a difference. We shan't have to pinch and scrape now.

DORIS. Enid, dear, I am so excited – about your getting married, I mean.

ENID. Why? There's nothing to get excited about.

*(***DORIS** *stares at her.)*

DORIS. How queer you are.

ENID. No, I'm not.

DORIS. You are. I should have thought you'd have been all excited with Dick coming home after all these years. It's so romantic.

ENID. Is it romantic?

(She pauses.)

Or is it damnable?

DORIS. Enid!

*(***ENID** *exits hurriedly to the bedrooms.* **DORIS** *stares after her as* **MRS. HUGGINS** *enters busily from the kitchen.)*

MRS. HUGGINS. I think I've finished now, Miss. Unless Miss Enid would like a nice cup of tea? The kettle's still on.

DORIS. No, I don't think she wants any tea.

MRS. HUGGINS. Shall I ask her, Miss?

DORIS. No, I shouldn't bother her. She seems rather upset.

MRS. HUGGINS. Oh… Still waters run deep, as they say. All right, Miss, I'll clear up in the kitchen and pop on my things and be off.

(She exits to the kitchen. **DORIS** *looks anxiously towards the bedrooms.* **ENID** *enters.)*

ENID. Cheer up, Doris. Don't look so gloomy. I was only joking.

DORIS. Were you?

ENID. Of course. I'm really quite the excited young bride-to-be, with a correctly palpitating heart.

DORIS. Oh, Enid dear, don't. Not with me.

(A pause. They look at each other.)

ENID. I don't know what's the matter. I can't understand myself.

DORIS. You're unhappy?

ENID. No, it's not that I'm unhappy exactly. But it's all so dull.

DORIS. Dull?

ENID. Yes, dull. Dick and I are fond of each other, and we've known each other for years, and we are well suited – but there isn't anything more! It's such a very tepid romance.

*(***DORIS** *looks at her in dismay.)*

When I came in, old Mother Huggins was bent double singing in that awful voice of hers about love from a stranger – and I realised that I wish Dick was a stranger.

DORIS. A stranger?

ENID. Yes. I wished that he wasn't dear old Dick, whom I knew so well. I wanted him to be strange and exciting and full of unknown possibilities.

DORIS. *(Shocked.)* Oh dear!

ENID. Don't worry. I'm sure lots of girls feel like this, but they marry and settle down and live happily ever afterwards.

DORIS. I feel you'll be so safe with Dick.

ENID. *(Drily.)* You're saying the wrong thing, Doris. At the moment I don't feel I want to be safe. Life's been so deadly monotonous. Day after day, year after year. Getting up in the morning, having to be in time at the office – the neat efficient secretary. Yes Mr. Cohen, no Mr. Cohen, certainly Mr. Cohen. Going out to lunch, rushing back. Girls in buses, reading novels – beastly, trashy stuff most of it. Yes – but exciting! Excitement, that's what we are all starved of. Day after day and nothing ever happens. Something exciting, thrilling, dangerous, absorbing. Oh, I want to live – to live before I am grey and old and dead!

DORIS. You've got Dick.

ENID. Yes, Dick.

DORIS. But look here, Enid. You – you do love Dick?

ENID. *(Frowning.)* Do I? Have I ever loved Dick or did I just think that he would do? It's an ugly thought, but it might be true. My only chance of romance, so I took it.

(The telephone rings. **DORIS** *answers it.)*

DORIS. Yes... Yes, speaking... Oh! Yes I think so – just a minute.

(She covers the phone.)

Someone wants to see the flat – a Mr. Strange. He would like to come along now, if it is convenient.

ENID. That'll be all right. If you'll go out and get the things we want for lunch, I'll stay here.

*(***DORIS** *returns to the telephone.)*

DORIS. That will be quite convenient, thank you.

(She hangs up and looks at her watch.)

What's the time? Oh, good, it's not a quarter to twelve yet. Heaps of time –

(She makes to exit but hesitates.)

Enid –

ENID. It's all right. The storm is over. Nerves, darling. Just nerves. You go along.

*(***DORIS** *exits to the bedrooms.* **ENID** *looks in the mirror over the fireplace, speaking to her reflection.)*

You are a damned fool.

(She goes to the bookcase and removes a volume. **DORIS** *enters from the bedrooms ready to go out.)*

DORIS. I don't suppose I shall be very long. Now mind, Enid, I shall expect you to have let the flat to this Mr. Strange by the time I come back.

ENID. I'll do my best. He shan't escape from me easily, I promise you.

*(***DORIS** *laughs and exits to the hall. The front door is heard.* **ENID** *opens the book.* **MRS. HUGGINS** *enters from the kitchen.)*

MRS HUGGINS. I'm just going to pop round the corner for them cushions from the cleaners, Miss. Sure there's nothing else you want? You ought to have had a cup of tea, Miss Enid.

ENID. No thanks, Mrs. Huggins.

MRS. HUGGINS. Ah, you're not like me, Miss. If I miss my cup of tea at eleven, something seems wrong with the whole day. Though as far as that goes, there never is a day that goes quite right, is there, Miss?

ENID. Oh, I hope there is sometimes.

(She looks down at the book.)

I suppose you've never read the *Arabian Nights*, Mrs. Huggins?

MRS. HUGGINS. Now, I do remember something about it, Miss. "Sinbad the Sailor" and the "Old Man of the Sea," which I have often said to Huggins, as he is mine. Ah, there's no need to go to outlandish parts to have an Old Man of the Sea round your neck – as many a working woman can tell you.

ENID. Would you like to go to 'outlandish parts,' as you call them, Mrs. Huggins?

MRS. HUGGINS. Well, Miss, Margate's my fancy but I don't say as I wouldn't fancy a trip to Boulogne. My married sister went last year. Everyone talking French and the porters in blue blouses, most interesting she said it was. But would you believe it, Miss, she couldn't really get a good cup of tea there!

ENID. Tea is an obsession with you, Mrs. Huggins. I'd like to go East.

(She turns the pages thoughtfully.)

Wouldn't it be exciting Mrs. Huggins, if your life depended upon being able to invent a good story.

MRS. HUGGINS. How do you mean, Miss?

ENID. Like Scheherazade here. She was about to have her head cut off but she invented such a marvellous tale, that she was reprieved from day to day because the Caliph wanted to hear the end of it. What an odd thing it would be if one's life depended upon one's power of invention. I'm sure I couldn't think of a thing.

MRS. HUGGINS. I expect you could, Miss. It's wonderful what you can do if life or death depends upon it. Why, my sister Mary that weighs fourteen stone, why she went over a high gate as easy as a bird because there was a bull chasing her. How she did it, she said afterwards, she never knew.

(The doorbell is heard.)

Ah, there's the bell.

ENID. That'll be Mr. Strange I expect.

MRS. HUGGINS. Do you want me to stay, Miss?

ENID. No, I'll show him over myself.

MRS. HUGGINS. Very good, Miss.

(She exits to the hall. Voices are heard outside then **MRS. HUGGINS** *opens the door and shows in* **GERALD STRANGE**. **GERALD** *is an attractive man of about thirty-eight. He looks like a man who has lived an outdoor life. He has rather a diffident, boyish manner, which endears him to women. There is nothing bold or flashy about him. He holds an estate agent's card in his hand.* **MRS. HUGGINS** *exits to the hall.)*

GERALD. I – er – came to see over the flat.

ENID. Oh, yes. Well, this is the sitting room.

GERALD. Oh – er – yes.

(He displays the awkwardness of a man house hunting. **ENID** *takes possession of him in a maternal fashion.)*

Awfully nice. Quite cosy.

ENID. Through here is the dining room.

(She opens the door. He looks in.)

GERALD. Oh, yes.

ENID. Then through here are the bedrooms.

(They exit briefly to the bedrooms then re-enter.)

There – now you've seen everything.

(She indicates a chair.)

How long did you want it for?

GERALD. Oh, any time.

ENID. That seems rather vague.

GERALD. How long did you want to let it for?

ENID. Six months.

GERALD. Oh, that would do.

ENID. Do you want plate and linen?

GERALD. Plate and linen?

ENID. Yes.

GERALD. Well, I suppose I need plates to eat off – but I could buy them.

ENID. *(Smiling.)* No, no, I mean silver. Knives, forks, and spoons?

GERALD. Oh, yes please.

ENID. And linen? Sheets and pillow cases?

GERALD. Oh, rather.

(A pause.)

(Disarmingly.) I say, I must seem a complete ass, but you see I've never taken a flat before.

ENID. Oh?

GERALD. No. I left this country when I was nineteen. I went to South Africa first and then to Canada. For the last ten years I've lived in a wooden shack miles from anywhere. So, you see, you've got to forgive me if I'm not very – well – civilised.

ENID. It's rather nice not to be civilised. There's too much civilisation.

GERALD. Most women don't think so.

ENID. Don't they?

GERALD. No, women like living soft. They like cushions and things. They hate adventure or roughing it.

ENID. I don't think that's true. Most women don't get the chance of adventures.

GERALD. If they had the chance they'd turn it down.

ENID. No, they wouldn't.

GERALD. Well, more of them would.

(He looks around.)

You know this is a jolly little place. It's got a nice homely feeling to it. Do you live here all alone?

ENID. No. I share it with a friend. She's out just now.

GERALD. Have you had it long?

WAIT, THERE'S MORE!

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SF **PERUSALS**