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# EDITH IN THE DARK

by Philip Meeks

|| SAMUEL FRENCH ||

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*For Dale Meeks (1974-2023)*



Edith in the Dark was originally commissioned by Harrogate Theatre and its first production took place in Harrogate Studio Theatre in December 2013 with the following cast and creative team:

Edith Nesbit    **Blue Merrick**  
Mr. Guasto    **Scott Ellis**  
Bidly Thricefold    **Janet Amsden**  
Director    **Keith Hukin**  
Designer    **Alex Swarbrick**  
Sound Designer    **Gerrard Fletcher**

It was then revived in March 2015 at Harrogate Theatre in association with Reform Theatre with the following cast and creative team:

Edith Nesbit    **Blue Merrick**  
Mr. Guasto    **Patrick Neyman**  
Bidly Thricefold    **Nicky Goldie**  
Director    **Keith Hukin**  
Designer    **Alex Swarbrick**  
Lighting Designer    **Arnim Friess**  
Sound Designer    **Gerrard Fletcher**

An abridged version of the play was presented at the Edinburgh Fringe Festival in August 2015 (Momentum Venues) with the following cast and creative team:

Edith Nesbit    **Blue Merrick**  
Mr. Guasto    **Scott Ellis**  
Bidly Thricefold    **Rebecca Mahon**  
Director    **Keith Hukin**  
Designer    **Alex Swarbrick**  
Sound Designer    **Gerrard Fletcher**

## **NOTES ON THE STAGING**

The setting and costume should be kept as simple as possible. The transformations in the play from role to role should be done through performance alone. No change of costume is required and props unless stated in the text should be kept to a minimum. The strength of the production is in the hands of the actors, supplemented by strong support from sound and lighting.

## **SETTING**

Christmas eve 1909.

We're in one of the cluttered attic rooms of the large town house Edith Nesbit shares with her husband and strange family.

The staging should be simple. Props found in the attic can be employed but the character transformations should be done without costume changes. The horrors employed in the stories should be reacted to rather than seen, music and lighting being used to crank up the tension.

When we meet E Nesbit her most accomplished tales for children have been published and celebrated, though many still believe her to be a man. She has endured years of marriage to the philandering Hubert Bland, but hasn't been without extra marital dalliances of her own. She's also very recently buried her young son.

## CHARACTERS

**EDITH NESBIT** – In her forties, Edith is astute and brilliant but unhappy. She's quick witted and has an eye for a younger man. She's a very modern woman for the era in which she lives. But almost everything she does is a diversion from her own personal heartbreak and secrets.

**MR. GUASTO** – Tall, strident and handsome in his late twenties. He arrives uninvited but when he helps Edith with an ailing guest gets more than he bargained for. He's a huge fan of Edith's work, but since he has a terrible fear of the grave, is not expecting the night that lies ahead of him.

**BIDDY THRICEFOLD** – Mid fifties or above. Bidy is a terrible housekeeper and rather too fond of her own home-made spiced punch. She loves Edith and despite the banter the feeling is mutual. She's more of a companion than a servant, and although the part has been written for an older actor could be played by someone the same age as Edith. The character supplies a lot of the humour in the early part of the play but has a terrible secret of her own that she finally finds a way to share.

All three actors also play the roles featured in the stories within the play regardless of gender or age.

# ACT ONE

## Scene One

*Christmas Eve 1909.*

*Music – God Rest Ye Merry Gentlemen if the play is being presented near Christmas. If not and the festive aspect of the story is to be played down, something equally as eerie...*

*We find EDITH and GUASTO in EDITH's attic writing room. A festive gathering is taking place below in the main body of the house. We hear bursts of music and muffled laughter.*

**MR GUASTO** *is looking at a vase filled with dead lilies. There are several on display in the room.*  
**EDITH** *notices him...*

**EDITH** I don't like to throw them away. I won't. It's important to keep them close. For me at least. It drives everyone else to distraction, so I hide them up here. With me. For a while longer at least. Until they're little more than frail paper. Until they turn to dust at the touch.

If it were up to Mrs Thricefold of course, we'd only ever have permanent botanicals in the house. She claims they're all the rage in Paris. Dearest Biddy. Where would I be without her? She hails from the far flung North. Yorkshire. I very much doubt she even knows where Paris is.

The thing is, she can't be bothered to replace fresh flowers. And her displays are woeful. I caught her massacring the Amaryllis before our guests arrived. And they don't come cheap. When she'd finished they looked like they'd been trampled underfoot during a Boer offensive. But she tries.

**GUASTO** *smiles. Takes in the rest of the room.*

They remind me of love, you see. Being in love and everything that word means. They should us all. It's why we have them in our homes. We give them to those we cherish. Love. Because love can never last. And we need to be reminded ...What we adore will eventually... sooner or later... be taken... die.

Sorry. I'm making you blush. But you mustn't. Death and love are perfectly natural topics for conversation. And we'll all certainly encounter one of them first hand at some stage in our lives. And spend some considerable time in pursuit of the other... What? You don't strike me as the sort of young man who'd be rendered speechless when confronted by a member of the fairer sex happy to talk freely about emotion. You'll find I'm a very modern woman Mr... sorry it's gone.

**GUASTO** Guasto.

**EDITH** You don't sound especially French to me.

**GUASTO** I come from an old family. Our line began in Italy.

**EDITH** Foreigners. Such little grace.

**GUASTO** I'm as English as you are...

**EDITH** There you go again. We do not constantly correct people in polite society. Everyone's allowed to be wrong. So. Italian heritage. That's the reason for the simmering darkness to your eyes.

**GUASTO.** I didn't mean to offend Madam Bland...

**EDITH** I prefer to be called by my pen name. Nesbit. Edith Nesbit. Miss if you must, but I'd rather you'd not. And never Madam or Mrs. I wish there was a term to describe a woman, who neither likes to feel like someone's chattel or overlooked and past her best.

**GUASTO** I should see how she is...

**EDITH** Perhaps there will be. One day.

**GUASTO** The young woman...?

**EDITH** Guasto? I did study rudimentary Italiana... (*tries to recall the name's meaning*) Guasto...

**GUASTO** Miss Nesbit?

**EDITH** She's sleeping quite soundly.

**GUASTO** The fall she almost took. It could have been nasty.

**EDITH** But thankfully you caught her. Quite magnificently. So strong...

**GUASTO** I feel responsible for her.

**EDITH** Well you're not. We'll send a boy to her parents... The Carrick's you said?

**GUASTO** They died unfortunately. In terrible circumstances.

*Beat.*

**EDITH** Such a nuisance.

**GUASTO** Truly awful...

**EDITH** You know the family?

**GUASTO** No...

**EDITH** You clearly had a lengthy conversation to be aware of such an intimate tragedy.

**GUASTO** Not really. Miss Carrick was listening to one of the carols. *Silent Night*. It was clearly upsetting her.

**EDITH** Odious little tune.

**GUASTO** She told me about her misfortune almost as soon as we started speaking. I imagine losing loved ones makes Christmas a taxing celebration.

*Pause.*

**EDITH** I had wondered who would let a young girl attend our affair alone.

**GUASTO** Then her fever struck...

**EDITH.** What that girl is suffering from is a case of bad corsetry. Too tight by far. This miserable season brings out the worst in people. And in girls like her, that means giddiness Mr Guasto. Giddiness. Despite her own private sorrows, she'll have still wanted to impress. Look her best. For the likes of you I dare say. To catch the eye of someone so... Well she wouldn't be able to resist the temptation. I saw her you know. I observed. She was clawing at her clutch bag a little too eagerly...

**GUASTO** She seems a fragile thing. Delicate.

**EDITH** She came a cropper due to her own reckless abandon. Well she can stay here until the morning. Then we will find out whoever her legal guardian may be, and I will personally give him a piece of my mind that will ruin his Christmas.

**GUASTO** That's very charitable of you.

*Chimes from somewhere.*

**EDITH** Our guests will be leaving soon. His guests. Every year I suffer this ritual. Hubert insists. He feels it's a socialist's duty to be happy and when is man meant to be happier than at this time of the year. So Thricefold concocts one of her ghastly spiced punches. Hubert drinks too much of it. We have dreary carols. Mince pies that are barely edible. And I get bored. I do. Truly and inconsolably bored.

**GUASTO** The party seemed like a jolly enough affair to me...

**EDITH** Forced. I loathe jollity at the best of times. There's something far more honest and safe about melancholy.

The young girl should think herself very lucky. She had a timely escape. And not just from getting her skull cracked on our stairs.

**GUASTO** In what other way?

**EDITH** Hubert's monocle was at full tilt in her direction. Almost by the time he'd finished his first jar of punch. I was watching him and that's how I began watching her. He had "set his sights" shall we say. Oh yes. He likes to spread himself about. Always has. I find it hugely amusing. But I'm making you blush again.

*EDITH gets closer to her companion.*

Have you heard the term "sauce for the goose" Mr Guasto? And no. It's not something Thricefold will be ladling from a tureen in a few hours hence.

**GUASTO** I'm really not sure...

**EDITH** You're not exactly here by chance are you? Up here with me. (*pause*) Although I pay scant attention to my husband's gatherings, I know for certain the name Guasto wasn't on our invitation list.

**GUASTO** Well...

**EDITH** I've already said. I'm a very modern woman.

**GUASTO** And I'm a huge fan.

*Pause.*

**EDITH** Christ! One of them. Might have known.

**GUASTO** You must hear it all the time...

EDITH I make a point of avoiding fans like one might avoid a dose of *Poe's Red Death*.

GUASTO I had an ailing sister. We didn't hold out much hope for her to begin with, to be honest. But I swear what helped her survive her malady were my readings. *The Railway Children? The Phoenix and the Carpet...?*

EDITH Well... there we go... always a pleasure to know I've helped a child live.

GUASTO I adored the stories too. They're enchanting. Although when I first read them...

EDITH You thought the E stood for Edgar or Eugene...

GUASTO How did you know...?

EDITH That is something I may have heard once or twice before...

GUASTO It's a miracle to be here.

EDITH Well it's meant to be the season for them...

GUASTO I've taken rooms on Wicklow Lane two streets...

EDITH I'm well aware of the geography of my home town...

GUASTO My landlady has all your books. First editions housed in grand glass cabinets.

EDITH Maybe she'd like a few more...

*EDITH knocks a pile of books to the ground in frustration.*

GUASTO We started talking about you, Mrs Fairthought and I, and when she said you actually lived so very close, well...

EDITH You decided to trespass.

GUASTO No...

EDITH What else would you call it?

**GUASTO** Well not in a way that would mean any harm.

**EDITH** My feelings for my husband may at times teeter slightly over the brink of loathing but he will still defend me. You may have read of his assault on HG Wells. Punched him in Paddington. Without a qualm.

**GUASTO** I am here only because of my fascination with you. I'm not going to harm you.

**EDITH** Of course Wells had dishonoured our daughter at the time. And I've been tempted to strike the swine myself. He will persist on calling me Evelyn. "Dear Evelyn" ...Makes me sound like someone's grandmother. But I always manage to restrain myself. Bland's temper often makes him look ridiculous. It used to charm me. He blames the smallpox. Which he's had twice. Men like to blame anything but themselves. Are you like that?

**GUASTO** I assure you. I am entirely honourable.

**EDITH** Being *entirely* honourable is dull Mr Guasto. And potentially disappointing.

*Pause.*

So tell me how you come to be here. What subterfuge did you employ?

**GUASTO** I'm here, I suppose, because you smiled in my direction.

**EDITH** I'm sure I'd remember you.

**GUASTO** The party was beginning and only a handful of your guests were gathered in the hallway. I was on my way home and saw the chance to slide in unseen with the carollers. So I took it. Couldn't resist. Just a glimpse of you, I said to myself, and then I'd slip away again. Like I'd never been here. Then came your smile. It reassured me so I decided to stay a while longer.

Next thing I knew I was talking to the young lady who was alone and a little lost... and... you know the rest

*Pause.*

EDITH So what do you want?

GUASTO Only the chance to express my admiration for your words. The wonderful worlds you have created. My gratitude.

EDITH Well you've achieved that.

*EDITH tugs at a velvet chord. She's ringing for Thricefold.*

GUASTO And so much more. I never dreamt I'd get to see your writing room too. The space where you create.

EDITH And where I hide. Though often they are the same thing. Thricefold will be on her way. She'll see you out.

*He glances towards the other room.*

GUASTO I'd rather not leave. Not yet.

EDITH You're still bleating on about your precious girl?

GUASTO I'm concerned. It's a gentleman's prerogative...

EDITH If her condition worsens, which it won't, we shall send for medical assistance. We are not stupid people. There's even a few doctors downstairs who could well be sober by dawn. Dr Watkins frequently awakens under the pianola on Christmas morning. Although he was struck off when Victoria had pigtails. Ancient. Maybe this Christmas morning he won't wake up at all and he'll still be under the wretched pianola come New Year. Nobody plays it.

*EDITH laughs.*

GUASTO You seem to find death amusing.

**EDITH** Of course. It's by far the greatest joke of the lot.  
Don't you think?

**GUASTO** Please. I wish to sit here and keep a silent vigil...  
that is all I ask...

*Pause.*

**EDITH** You do want something else. Don't you?

*Pause.*

**GUASTO** Now you come to ask yes. Yes I do. But I hardly  
dare...

*Shades of EDITH the temptress return.*

**EDITH** Go on.

*Pause.*

**GUASTO** A reading.

**EDITH** But of course!

**GUASTO** A paragraph. Less. A few lines. Any portion,  
however meagre, of your well-honed words will suffice.

**EDITH** I should have bloody well known...

**GUASTO** It'd be an experience I'd treasure...

*EDITH is struck by an idea.*

**EDITH** Fine. I hate it when men begin to beg. It's always  
ungainly. I will do as you ask. You shall have your  
reading.

**GUASTO** This is such a tremendous honour...

*The lights flicker. GUASTO is startled.*

**EDITH** You're the nervous type? The lighting does that the  
further you climb up this rickety old house. Especially

when the lamps are ablaze in every room below, like tonight.

**GUASTO** May I request a favourite sequence?

**EDITH** Let me guess. *Five Children and It...*

**GUASTO** No... I'm unnerved by the creature they find. The eponymous it.

**EDITH** That's the point.

**GUASTO** I choose *The Railway Children...*?

**EDITH** (*in*) I won't be reading from one of my tales for children. Not tonight. If truth be told I can't abide them at the moment. I really can't. So if you want your reading it's on my terms.

**GUASTO** *is mildly taken aback.*

**GUASTO** That would be more than acceptable...

**EDITH** Are you sure? The reading will be from my early works. My first stories. They're not for the faint hearted. I find myself turning back to them more and more these days. The new century was meant to bring with it so much hope. But it's only succeeded in rekindling my acquaintance with darkness and foreboding. Which I will admit is proving to be strangely comforting at times. But mostly Mr Guasto it is deeply unsettling. There are worrying times ahead. I can feel it.

**GUASTO** I'm not sure I understand...

**EDITH** The intent of these tales is to terrify. You want to hear me read? Well the price you'll pay is feeling the chill to the very marrow of your bones Mr Guasto.

**GUASTO** Ghost stories?

**EDITH** *has found a large book.*

**EDITH** I leave the ghost stories to others with slighter flair and more prosaic imaginative skills. Take silly Professor James for instance. Who's scared of a billowing sheet, a few old relics or an off tune whistle? Mind, I'm sure they served his purposes. Inspired many of his fey young male students to leap a quiver into his waiting arms. But they're tame and trite. Mine aren't.

*A wind howls outside as the lights flicker again.*

So are you prepared to have a sleepless night?

**GUASTO** I don't imagine I have any say in the matter.

**EDITH** Shall I begin to read?

**GUASTO** I will admit one thing... I do have a fear of the grave.

**EDITH** Then my stories will serve a valuable purpose. Think of them as bite sized dress rehearsals for your own impending demise.

**GUASTO** Perhaps it would be best if we forgot my request...

**EDITH** You aren't going to let me down...?

**GUASTO** These stories can't really be suitable for Christmas?

**EDITH** Oh but they are. In the days before the New Year dawns and the old wanes and weakens, humanity is exceptionally vulnerable to all manner of evil spirit. Did your mother teach you anything?

Reading tales of the supernatural preferably out loud and in a room where the shadows are deep helps mere mortals prepare for the worst. We need to keep our wits sharp and our senses attuned. Be aware of what might be behind us, beyond our imagination and just out of sight. Listen for half heard strange whispers, the creaks and groans hitherto unheard in your abode, loud noises and the sudden arrival of strangers.

*Very loud bang as BIDDY THRICEFOLD bursts into the room. EDITH and GUASTO react. BIDDY holds a tray with two cups.*

Thricefold!

**BIDDY** What? You called for me. I was already on my way up, as it happens. I was worried about that young lass. I saw her eyes glaze over from across the hallway. Like she saw something dreadful. Then down she went.

**EDITH** Miss Carrick is sleeping.

**BIDDY** Carrick she's called eh? Carrick?

*BIDDY sits and starts drinking from one of the cups.*

**EDITH** As thrilled as I always am Biddy, to see you make yourself as comfortable as you please...

**BIDDY** Season's cheers Mistress! All the very best. You want me to check on her?

**EDITH** Miss Carrick is not the first girl to faint underneath the mistletoe and she won't be the last.

**BIDDY** Carrick? You know for a moment before she went, she reminded me of someone. Trick of the light.

*Takes another drink.*

**EDITH** Or the spiced punch.

**BIDDY** Look at me forgetting meself.

**EDITH** For a change.

**BIDDY** This was meant for the poor lass. This other one's for you dear. I hate to think of you missing all the fun downstairs. You and your big heart. Your charitable ways.

**EDITH** I've been planning some fun of my own Biddy.

**BIDDY** You have?

**EDITH** What do you think to tales of the uncanny?

**BIDDY** Oooh I love them. A good murder always tickles me fancy. And as for spirits... whether they're to inebriate or send shivers down the spine, I relish them both. Well you get to my age and nothing scares you more than real life. And the thrills are few and far between of any description. I've had encounters of me own you know... You said she was called Miss Carrick?

**EDITH** Would you care to join me Biddy whilst I read a few tales to disturb.

**BIDDY** Would I not!

**EDITH** These are penned by my own fair hand. And I should warn you, they're brutal.

**BIDDY** You're a clever lass. You are. And I could do with a rest. And I should be here anyway, shouldn't I? In case missy through there wakes up.

**EDITH** Then turn the gaslight low.

***BIDDY** goes to do as she's told. Notices the vases of dead flowers.*

**BIDDY** I threw these dead things...

**EDITH** You did.

*Pause.*

**BIDDY** Oh Edith love... Why do you insist on keeping them...

**EDITH** You'll leave them be.

**BIDDY** It's not healthy. How many times...

**EDITH** Are you asking to be banished to your basement?

**BIDDY** As you wish. But you know me. I won't hold my tongue if I think my words will help.

**EDITH** Biddy!

**BIDDY** *continues to turn down the gas lights.*  
**EDITH** *turns to* **GUASTO**.

Now. Join me in the dark.

**BIDDY** Hold your horses Mistress. Don't start 'till I'm settled. I must say Mr Thricefold wouldn't approve of me indulging in this sort of an entertainment. And on a Holy Night too. He'll be spinning in his grave. I don't know where this grave of is, of course. But for pities sake, the wicked blighter must be under the sod by now.

*Indicates the other cup.* **EDITH** *shakes her head not wanting it.*

Don't mind if I do then.

**BIDDY** *slurps it back.* *Midnight starts to strike.*

**EDITH** If we're ready?

**BIDDY** *and* **GUASTO** *nod.* **BIDDY** *chuckles.* **GUASTO** *is unsettled.* *The lighting hones in on* **EDITH** *holding her book open.* *Carol of the Bells begins to play.*

Perfect timing. The most dangerous witching hour of the year chimes. It's Christmas morning. And so we begin our tales of sheer malice with hideous happenings, twisted monsters, cruel villains, death and destruction. All crammed to the edge of the page with blood and guts and unhappy endings. Edith Nesbit's *Tales of Terror*.

## Scene Two

**EDITH** John Charrington's Wedding...

*EDITH begins by reading from her book.*

No one ever thought that May Foster would marry John Charrington; but he thought differently. He asked her to marry him before he went up to work in Oxford. She laughed and refused him. He asked her next time he was home. Again she laughed and tossed back her blond hair. The third time he asked she laughed even harder. She said it was becoming a confirmed habit. Although she secretly admired him. And what was not to admire. He was young but worldly wise, dark haired and in possession of noble features, mysteriously good looking.

*She holds her hand out to John who joins her.*

He was so very full of life and hope, and had prospects so bright they glistened even in the dead of night. John lived by a golden rule. When he wanted something he was resolutely determined to get it.

*She takes GUASTO's hand and places it on the open page he takes the book and becomes John Charrington. This will be repeated each time a new story starts...*

**GUASTO** John was a man of independent means. Left alone in the world having lost his family suddenly as a child. A terrible accident in which he alone survived. He valued every second of his existence and despite having humble beginnings and simple schooling became self-educated, well versed in the ways of the

world and a firmly established a fine career. But he was now ready to settle down and continue his family line.

*He starts speaking as John.*

May will be mine. As all who know me are aware... things which John Charrington intend should happen, have a way of happening!

So finally my dearest May did me the honour. She agreed damn it. She said yes to me.

*EDITH plays the unnamed Best Man, narrator of the tale.*

**EDITH** Well get me a one way ticket to the end of Nowhere! Charrington how did you do it? *(to audience)* May Foster, sweetheart of our little hamlet, was renowned for being the prettiest girl in a twenty mile radius. We had all set our sights on her. *(darkly)* Some of us had even taken this one step further...

**GUASTO** I have the devil's luck as well you know dear friend. And, as I'm sure you also know, the devil... charming fellow... always looks after his own.

*BIDDY has become the old retainer Cobbs...*

**BIDDY** The way I hears it you had to ask for her pretty little dimpled mitt in marriage more than once.

**GUASTO** But glance at her wry smile next time she passes by, Cobbs you bitter old dog? She's blissfully happy. She wanted me all along. Only her deliciously feisty pride held her back.

**BIDDY** Blight on your turnip sack. I prey you'll be snarked by a rat catcher's gimple.

**GUASTO** You are the rat catcher in these parts Cobbs.