Acting Edition

Any Body for Tea?

by C.B. Gilford

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SAMUEL FRENCH

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STORY OF THE PLAY

Detective Dennis O'Finn, investigating the death of an elderly lady, discovers that he is the motive for the murder. Six sweet but balmy spinsters are all in love with their bachelor neighbor, the handsome fortyish O'Finn. To get him to visit them, they stage a homicide. To keep him around, another one must be arranged. Based on the successful three-acter, BULL IN A CHINA SHOP, this charming chiller is a top contest play.

CAST

CAPTAIN WILLIAMS

DENNIS O'FINN

MISS HILDEGARDE

MISS BIRDIE

MISS AMANTHA

MISS LUCY

MISS NETTIE

MISS ELIZABETH

KRAMER

Any Body for Tea?

SCENE: Action on the forestage is in the office of Captain Williams of the Metropolitan Police Force. The full stage is the Victorian house of Hildegarde Hodge, a boarding house for elderly spinsters.

The house and the stage are black. Then suddenly a light shows, a small light, in a goose-neck lamp sitting on a very small desk at Downstage Right, on the apron of the stage. By its illumination we see that the act curtain is down. Behind the desk sits a portly man in a plain business suit, CAPTAIN WILLIAMS *of the Metropolitan Police Force. Standing before the desk is* DENNIS O'FINN, *a well-built man of forty, wearing an Irish smile, and plain, not too well-pressed clothes. His hat is in his hand. The light of the lamp shines downward, focused on a stack of papers on the desk, and not revealing too much of either of the men's faces.*

WILLIAMS. (*Irritably*) O'Finn, what do you want? Don't you realize it's midnight?

O'FINN. I know it is, Captain Williams, but I saw the light on in your office here and I thought it'd be all right. . . .

WILLIAMS. Well, what is it? I'm a busy man.

O'FINN. It's my request for transfer, sir.

WILLIAMS. Oh yes, that silly business. (*Digs out paper from the stack and reads excerpts from it aloud*) Dennis Patrick O'Finn . . . age forty . . . bachelor . . . twelve years in uniform on the beat . . . seven years Homicide Division . . . present rank, Detective First Class . . . requests transfer to Arson Squad . . . (*Looks up*) O'Finn, do you even know what the Arson Squad does?

O'FINN. It investigates fires, sir.

WILLIAMS. Good. (*Reading again*) Reasons for request

. . . personal. (*Looks up again*) Would you explain that, O'Finn?

O'FINN. It's private personal, captain.

WILLIAMS. (*Leans back and studies* O'FINN) O'Finn, you've seven years experience in Homicide. You're no Sherlock Holmes, but you seem to have the luck of the Irish, so you've done a good job. We don't need anybody in Arson, so why should I transfer you?

O'FINN. Please, Captain. It's a matter of life and death.

WILLIAMS. Explain.

O'FINN. Do I have to?

WILLIAMS. If you want the transfer.

O'FINN. (*Takes a moment to decide*) Captain, will you keep this confidential?

WILLIAMS. Of course I will.

O'FINN. Word of honor?

WILLIAMS. Word of honor.

O'FINN. Well then, Captain, it was like this. There was this house, you see. 909 Sycamore. A house about a hundred years old. But it's right straight across the street from the apartment building where I live. And it being nice weather, I left the window and the shade up when I was shaving. Now in this house there were six old spinster ladies . . .

(*During the above speech, the curtain has risen slowly and silently, and now, at* O'FINN'S *last sentence, the stage lights come up. We see the tableau of the six ladies,* MISS HILDEGARDE, *the landlady,* MISS BIRDIE, MISS AMANTHA, MISS LUCY, MISS NETTIE *and* MISS ELIZABETH. *They are inhabiting an old-fashioned parlor which features a sofa, several chairs, a tea table, and some spinsterish knickknacks, such as a canary in a cage. Downstage left is a window, or a suggestion of a window. Up left is the doorway to the front hall. Up right is the doorway to the kitchen. The tableau consists of* ELIZABETH, *standing on a chair, looking out the window through a pair of binoculars, and the others clustered around her.*)

O'FINN. Peeping Toms, that's what they were, Captain.

(O'FINN *freezes and stays that way through the ensuing scene. The ladies spring into action.*)

AMANTHA. Elizabeth, what's he doing now?

ELIZABETH. He's in his undershirt.

BIRDIE. Can you see the strawberry mark on his shoulder?

ELIZABETH. Clear as day. Oh, it's a beautiful strawberry mark.

BIRDIE. (*Tugging at* ELIZABETH's *skirt*) I want to see for myself.

ELIZABETH. He has such big muscles. Oh, do you know what he's doing now?

NETTIE. What?

LUCY. Tell us.

ELIZABETH. Calisthenics!

AMANTHA. What kind?

ELIZABETH. With big dumbbells. He's swinging them up . . . and down . . . and out . . . and back (*She gestures with her free arm*).

NETTIE. Oh, I can just picture him.

ELIZABETH. He's stopped for a minute now. He's inhaling. Oh, you should see his chest.

BIRDIE. (*Squealing with delight and tugging again*) I want to see it with my own eyes.

ELIZABETH. (*Fighting against the tugging*) He's squaring his shoulders. Oh, his shoulders . . . they're so broad.

AMANTHA. Don't torture us, Elizabeth.

ELIZABETH. Now he's flexing his biceps. (*Bending her free arm*) They're swelling up . . . and up . . . and up . . .

LUCY. (*Putting her fingers in her ears*) Oh, stop it! I can't stand it any more.

HILDEGARDE. (*Tugging at* ELIZABETH's *skirt*) Give me those binoculars.

AMANTHA. (*Tugging too*) We should all have a turn.

(*They all start tugging at* ELIZABETH's *skirt and reaching for the binoculars.*)

BIRDIE. They're my binoculars.

WAIT, THERE'S MORE!

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