

Madam's Been Murdered, Tea Will Be Late

By Pat Cook

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Story of the Play

Have you ever wanted to stay in an old, drafty English Manor with a serial murderer and a ghost running loose in the dark? Who hasn't? Houndstooth Manor simply abounds with atmosphere. "We're lousy with it," Epsworth, the butler, intones as he casts a suspicious eye over the paying guests, wondering who is next to be murdered.

Will it be the retired pompous Major Armbrewster, who's always going on about how he stopped some uprising "with just a few well chosen words and a flame thrower." Or maybe the honeymooning American couple who know more than they'd like you to believe. Or maybe the former school teacher, Matilda Trent, who's recovering from a nervous condition brought on when some of her students nailed her up in a keg. If hilarious dialogue, outrageous characters and a plot with more twists than a London road map is your cup of tea, you'll love this romp.

CAST OF CHARACTERS

(7 M, 6 W)

***MADGE:** Crabby chambermaid.

EPSWORTH: The epitome of the English butler, the backbone of Houndstooth Manor.

MAJ. ARMBREWSTER: An old campaigner, a stodgy and pompous curmudgeon.

***JAGMASTER:** A scraggly fisherman. *(See Thorndyke)*

LADY FENSTER: A dotty woman, around 50, the soul of the upper crust.

BOBBY TOTTER: Her cocky nephew, late 20's.

MATILDA TRENT: A bookish woman in her 30's, very ominous.

KATIE BALFOUR: A manhunter in her late 20's, rather seductive.

MARK JACOBS: A pushy American, knows it all, in his 30's.

TRISHA JACOBS: Mark's ditzy wife, also in her 30's.

MacDONALD: The gardener, a bit rustic.

***DR. THORNDYKE:** A typical English physician, in his 40's.
(See Jagmaster)

INSPECTOR MILO: The penultimate Scotland Yard detective.

***ELZBETH:** Overweight, talkative cook.

***NOTE:** Only one actor plays the roles of Jagmaster and Thorndyke. It is optional, however, to double the roles of Madge and Elzbeth.

Time: The present.

Place: Houndstooth Manor.

Synopsis

Act I - Sc. 1: Late one morning in spring.

Sc. 2: Several hours later.

Sc. 3: Two hours later.

Act II - Sc. 1: That evening.

Prop List

Feather duster for Madge
Tray of dishes for Epsworth
Newspaper, preferably British, for Major
Large, heavy sack for Jagmaster
Guest register on desk
4 suitcases
Eye glasses for Matilda
Wine decanter and glasses on mantle
Magazine for Matilda
Note pad and pen for Milo
Legal document for Mark
Dish towel for Elzbeth
Several candles, matches in desk drawers and offstage
Noose around Major's neck

ACT II

Raincoat for Epsworth and Milo
Matilda's glasses on mantle
Meat cleaver for Monk
Flashlight for Monk
2 swords over fireplace
Flashlight and gun for Milo
Piece of rope for Monk
A bill of currency for Milo

NOTE: In the action of the play, a "ghost monk" shows up, three of them, in fact. These can be represented with the usual monks robes and hoods. However, gloves and masks should also be utilized to help disguise the wearers.

SOUND EFFECTS

Organ chords, horses galloping, thunderstorm and rain, footsteps, door opening. (*A special sound effects tape is available from the publisher. Call 1-800-HI-STAGE.*)

SETTING

This little English mystery takes place in the sitting room/lobby of Houndstooth Manor, a very British household which has just been turned into an inn. The room is chocked full of furniture, paintings, crossed swords and other knickknacks prevalent in the best Old Country traditions.

There are three doors utilized in this floorplan. The first, or entry way, is a large wooden door, located SR. The second doorway is located USC and leads into the kitchen. The third door leads into the den and is situated SL. Also, a large ornate staircase is located on the US wall, just SR of the kitchen door. A large overstuffed sofa, which all but dominates the room, rests almost CS and has a matching chair next to it. Another, smaller chair is located near the fireplace, which resides on the DL wall. A writing desk sits near the SR wall with accompanying chair. A telephone and guest registry sit on the desk. The rest of the room is rounded out with other accouterments, such as a standing hat rack, occasional tables, plants and chairs. Obviously fallen on hard times, the room has about it the attitude of its tenants - upper crusty but reluctantly obliging.

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Scene 1

(AT RISE: Late one morning in spring. MADGE is dusting the writing desk and shaking her head. EPSWORTH enters down the stairs, carrying a tray of dishes. MAJOR ARMBREWSTER is sitting in the fireplace chair, asleep with a newspaper over his face.)

MADGE: *(Mumbling to HERSELF.)* Well, it's come to this and make no mistake. Down to taking care of the whole whatever and me up to me britches in chores, like a lorry horse. If m'lady can't make ends come together, then maybe it's time for her to take a long once-over in the looking glass. Wages, she donno, but when it comes to running down the dust beetles...

(EPSWORTH stops on his way to the kitchen and turns, interrupting MADGE'S soliloquy.)

EPSWORTH: Madge, stop that. *(HE nods once to make his point.)*

MADGE: Oh, excuse me, Mr. High-and-Mighty. I wasn't aware I was in the presence of royalty. *(SHE waves her duster in his face, scattering dust all over HIM.)* Don't you come in 'ere and read me the bleeding rancid, I know my place. I've a right to speak to myself in any tone I likes.

EPSWORTH: *(Trying to duck.)* What, in heaven's name, do you think you're doing?

MADGE: Dusting. *(SHE flicks the duster once to make her point.)*

EPSWORTH: You're doing an excellent job. I think you've covered everything. *(HE sneers and looks around.)*

MADGE: And just what's THAT supposed to mean, Mr. Butler-With-his-Nose-in-Everybody's-Business?

EPSWORTH: Well, I could be entirely mistaken, but isn't the idea to remove the dust from the premises, not redistribute it? Oh,

I can always tell where you've been by the trail of pollen and bacteria you leave in your wake. Just as I can tell where you HAVEN'T been by its spotless innocence, not knowing enough to fear your cloudlike arrival. I realize that, in your zeal to preserve the status quo, you have a knack for restoring not only the antiques but the original filth that came with them. However...

MADGE: And yer job is that of a butler so shouldn't you be butling?

EPSWORTH: Butling? I'll begin butling when you start maiding.

MADGE: There's no such word as "maiding."

EPSWORTH: (*"Now you've got it!"*) Ahhhh! Now, that we've increased your vocabulary skills by one hundred percent, shall we go on about our work? (*MADGE starts to speak.*) Don't interrupt while I'm talking.

MADGE: Don't talk while I'm interrupting.

EPSWORTH: You know, you ALMOST make sense. You have that unerring quality. You seem to almost come to the point and then shy away from it, mangling your way along like some great hog caught in quicksand.

MADGE: Well, I ain't treated any better than one, that's the God's honest truth.

EPSWORTH: Oh, I'm sorry, did we change subjects again? Yes, I can tell by the way my ears just popped. Besides, you mustn't wake up the Major.

MADGE: Only three things wake up that old bag of yarns. The call for breakfast, the call for luncheon and tea. Look at 'im. Lying there like so much wet laundry, reliving all his old campaigns like previews down at the cinema. Ready, at the drop of a yawn, to wake up and regale any and all unsuspecting souls of how he fought off the savage natives with nothing but his bare hands and a squeegee.

EPSWORTH: He's been decorated, you know.

MADGE: I don't care if he's been vacated, remodeled and given a new coat o' paint!

EPSWORTH: Quiet!

MAJOR: *(Stirs in HIS chair, mutters.)* For the legion and all that sort of thing... Six of us... Against a hoard of barbarians... Charge, I shouted... Charge, but did they listen? Foolish blighters...I shot them all... *(HE dozes again.)*

MADGE: *(Leans in to EPSWORTH.)* And they let that man carry a gun?

EPSWORTH: *(Glares at HER.)* Yes. I wish I knew where he put it.

MADGE: I don't see no medals on your chest, Herr Captain.

EPSWORTH: Probably because you dusted it.

MADGE: When's the rest of the payin' clientele supposed to arrive?

EPSWORTH: I believe Master Totter is due at any moment. Never you mind, he shall arrive anon.

MADGE: He joined a convent?

(LADY FENSTER yells from up the stairs.)

FENSTER: Epsworth? Where are you, Epsworth? I've been ringing for hours!

MADGE: *(Goading EPSWORTH.)* There goes the old factory whistle again. Says she's been ringing for you for hours.

EPSWORTH: Yes. I must remind her that we don't have a bell.

MADGE: Makes you wonder, don' it, what she's been pulling on?

EPSWORTH: Oh, we have a bell pull ... just no bell attached to it.

MADGE: And what, she asked knowingly, happened to it?

EPSWORTH: *(Trailing off.)* Well, I ... sort of ... took it off and... buried it.

(There is a KNOCK at the front door.)

MADGE: Oh, hark, dearie! A chance to show yer stuff. You get to jump off yer high horse and answer the door, the pinnacle of yer profession. Go on. Illustrate that talent for which you was hired.

EPSWORTH: *(Hands the tray to HER.)* Here, Madge. See if you can manage to carry this to the kitchen. *(SHE takes the tray.)*

MADGE: *(Moves to the kitchen.)* Yes, yer pompousness, I shall make like the fawn-like domestic, silent as the tomb. *(SHE exits into the kitchen.)*

EPSWORTH: *(Crosses to the door.)* Hopefully, she'll find that out in first person. *(HE opens the door.)* Yeessss?

(JAGMASTER enters, carrying a large sack over his shoulder.)

JAGMASTER: Morning, Guv. Caught a hull full before the tide. Dragged my ever blessed up to yer knocker and am arrived with the briney booty in tow. *(HE drops the bag on the floor.)*

EPSWORTH: Jagmaster, I wish you'd speak some known language.

JAGMASTER: Give 'er the once over, not a skinny nor bonehead amonkst 'em. Plenty a' white fer the larder with enough to last a blue norther on holiday.

(EPSWORTH waves HIM to stop speaking and then talks to him in broad, simple terms.)

EPSWORTH: Wait. You. You...have...fish?

JAGMASTER: Din' I as much as pipe 'em aboard, all fanfare and bristol fashion? And you gape at me mug as like I was awash in mermaids, beckoning you with sirens song, to the barnacle graveyard. Puts a salt up a mast, if you catch my tide.

(EPSWORTH stares at HIM for a medium pause.)

EPSWORTH: You ... have ... fish?

JAGMASTER: Aye, me landlubber, a king's kettle to the brim.

(EPSWORTH opens the bag and looks in. He immediately jerks his head back as if smelling some foul odor. He quickly recloses

the bag.)

EPSWORTH: Oh, saints be praised! Look, you seagoing sot, when I placed an order for fish I assumed you would deliver fresh fish.

JAGMASTER: Fish has a fishes smell.

EPSWORTH: Fishes smell I understand. These present an odor reminiscent of a three-week old egg salad sandwich left on a burnt mattress behind a Chinese restaurant.

(JAGMASTER moves up next to HIM and looks in the bag.)

JAGMASTER: 'Ere, give me the catch so's I can take in the updraft.

(JAGMASTER sticks his head in the bag. Now that he's next to EPSWORTH, it becomes apparent to Epsworth that the odor is coming from Jagmaster. Epsworth sniffs Jagmaster's pea coat.)

EPSWORTH: My mistake. Take these into the kitchen and then run away as fast as you can. Down wind, of course.

JAGMASTER: *(Hoists the bag over HIS shoulder again.)* Give a man the fisheye regarding his making his bread on the foam. *(HE moves to the kitchen door.)*

EPSWORTH: We'll contact you if we need any further deliveries.

JAGMASTER: You can pipe me at the House of Wo Fat.

EPSWORTH: Your in-laws, I assume?

JAGMASTER: Belay that. It's a Chinese restaurant. I sleeps on a burnt mattress in the back alley when I be in dry dock. *(HE exits into the kitchen.)*

EPSWORTH: *(Dryly.)* I'm sure his mother would be proud, if she hadn't been hanged.

FENSTER: *(Offstage.)* Epsworth? I'm waiting!

EPSWORTH: Just answering the door! *(Under HIS breath.)* You old crocodile.

(Suddenly, the MAJOR jostles himself awake.)

MAJOR: I say! *(HE sniffs the air.)* Moby Dick go through here?

EPSWORTH: *(Crosses to HIM.)* It's nothing, Major. Don't rouse yourself. PLEASE, don't rouse yourself.

MAJOR: *(Rises.)* Can't help it. *(HE taps his nose.)* Keen olfactory system, you know. Once tipped my regiment off as to an impending attack by the dreaded Juju natives. *(HE takes a position as if ready for an ambush.)* Tried to sneak in just before dawn, as I recall, but my bloodhound sniffer gave their position away.

EPSWORTH: You smelled them coming?

MAJOR: Saved the whole company. Thank the Holy Grace I had my wits about me. *(HE grabs EPSWORTH by the neck.)* Clever devils. Their next attack they covered themselves in ragweed. Of course, my sneezing saved us that time. Reminds me of the time when Old Puffy and I fought off a squad of the horrific Polla-Polla tribe. Averted a near catastrophe with nothing but a few well chosen words and a flame thrower. There we were ...

EPSWORTH: Isn't it time for your morning constitutional?

MAJOR: Hm? Oh. *(HE blusters.)* Quite. *(HE crosses to the front door.)* Stout fellow. I shall return in time for mess.

EPSWORTH: *(Glumly.)* Yes. We're having a mess of fish.

MAJOR: I smelled as much. Cheeri-bye. *(HE exits out the front door.)*

(LADY FENSTER enters down the stairs.)

EPSWORTH: Why couldn't he have run into a gang of cannibals?

FENSTER: Epsworth? Did you not hear me calling you?

EPSWORTH: *(Rushes to HER.)* Here, madam.

FENSTER: *(Sniffs the air.)* Oh, dear. *(SHE tries to wave the odor away.)* Did somebody shoot a dolphin in here?

EPSWORTH: Fish man was here, m'lady.

FENSTER: Oh, my. In future have him send in the catch of the day through the post.

EPSWORTH: I don't think the postal authority allows shrimp to travel first class, madam.

FENSTER: Well, you can inquire, can't you?

EPSWORTH: Yes, mum. I shall request them to forward any crustaceans they have lying about.

FENSTER: Have the other guests arrived yet?

EPSWORTH: *(Crosses to the desk.)* Master Robert Totter should be arriving shortly. *(HE picks up the registry.)* Then later, Mark and Trisha Jacobs. You remember? The honeymooning Americans?

FENSTER: *(Distaste.)* Yes. Oh, well, hands across the sea and all that.

EPSWORTH: And then a Miss Matilda Trent. A retired school teacher.

FENSTER: She's a bit young, I understand. To be retired, I mean.

EPSWORTH: Coming here for her nerves, I see. Something to do with an episode of graduating students nailing her up in a keg.

FENSTER: Yes, horrible. They fed her through the bunghole for three days I hear. We best not give her a small room.

EPSWORTH: Yes, mum. Oh, I have instructed the staff as to their polite conversation. I made sure they all understood not to bring up Sir Jeffrey.

(Suddenly, a loud ORGAN CHORD rings through the room. EPSWORTH looks upward.)

FENSTER: Very good, Epsworth. Mustn't have anyone mentioning him in public. Wouldn't do to have our resident guests know we have a resident ghost. *(Another loud ORGAN CHORD sounds. Both FENSTER and EPSWORTH look up.)*

EPSWORTH: Madam, about the organ music...

FENSTER: Oh, I MUST tell sister Mary not to play her instrument during the visitors' stay.

EPSWORTH: At least, since we've moved it into her rooms, it's not as deafening.

FENSTER: Yes, very good. Odd, though.

EPSWORTH: Odd, m'lady?

FENSTER: Yes. I find it a bit strange that she always knows when we are speaking of Sir Jeffrey.

(The ORGAN CHORDS again.)

EPSWORTH: Yeeesss. Odd.

FENSTER: *(Moves to the stairs.)* I shall attend to the matter at once. Do be a good chap and call me when Bobby arrives.

EPSWORTH: Master Totter shall be shown to your chamber upon his arrival.

FENSTER: My nephew's had a bit of a rough go lately, being implicated in that nasty murder last week.

EPSWORTH: Well, he WAS standing over a corpse, laughing hysterically and holding a pair of pruning shears.

FENSTER: WELL ... you can SEE how something like that would depress him.

EPSWORTH: *(Dryly.)* Poor lad.

FENSTER: Now, I shall make sure sister Mary knows that mum's the word regarding Sir ... *(An ORGAN CHORD interrupts HER. She yells up the stairs.)* I didn't say his name that time! *(SHE exits up the stairs.)*

(A KNOCK at the front door draws EPSWORTH'S attention. He moves to the door and opens it.)

EPSWORTH: Yes?

(MARK and TRISHA JACOBS enter. He is carrying two suitcases.)

MARK: Ah, you must be Jeeves, the butler, right?

EPSWORTH: Epsworth, sir.