A MURDERED MYSTERY

By Karl Garner

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A MURDERED MYSTERY

By KARL GARNER

CAST OF CHARACTERS
(In Order of Speaking)

JOHN.........................butler and narrator 71
STEVE ......................the victim 16
JENNIFER......................Steve’s business partner 24
LYDIA ........................Steve’s current fiancée 29
BETTY ..........................Steve’s ex-fiancée 30
PRESTON......................Lydia’s friend 22

SETTING

Time: Present.
Place: A living room.
A MURDERED MYSTERY

The stage is dark. SOUND EFFECT: SINGLE GUNSHOT, followed almost immediately by another FOUR GUNSHOTS, then A BODY FALLING. Four sets of footsteps are heard, all running OFF. LIGHTS UP. JOHN, dressed in formal butler attire and holding a gun, stands over STEVE’S body. JOHN walks about the room trying to think of what to do next. After a bit, he notices the AUDIENCE.

JOHN: Oh. Hi, there. I’m sure you’re wondering what’s going on. I can assure you it’s not as it first appears. I know… a butler, a gun, a body lying on the floor... You may have even heard gunshots earlier. Yes. He was murdered, but it was someone else who shot him. Perhaps I should better explain. You see, while the course of events ended here only moments ago, they began hours before. Others had all been called here by Mr. Walters. This is his house. By the way, that’s Mr. Walters over there. (Points to STEVE.) This is rather complex. I think it would be best if I just take you back and let you see the course of events yourself. I could never do the story justice in my own words. Imagine it’s now earlier this evening. And as I said, others had all been called to meet with Mr. Walters and— Oh, dear. Mr. Walters. (To STEVE.) Mr. Walters. Steve. You need to get up.

STEVE: (From the floor, whispers.) I’m supposed to be dead.

JOHN: (No longer using his “butler” accent.) I know, but these people came to see a story unfold, and we can’t very well show the events of how you were murdered with you lying in the middle of the floor, dead.

STEVE: But I’ve been shot.

JOHN: No. See, it’s earlier now. You won’t be shot for some time yet.

STEVE: Do you think it’ll be okay? They won’t be upset if a dead man suddenly stands up and walks away?

JOHN: They’ll understand. They came to see a story, not to watch you lie on the floor. Go ahead and get up.

STEVE: (Stands.) I wasn’t really prepared for this. I was expecting to be dead.

JOHN: I know. But it’s for the best.

STEVE: What do I do now?

JOHN: To start, just wait in the other room.

STEVE: I sure hope you know what you’re doing. (EXITS.)

JOHN: So do I. (Back to AUDIENCE in his “butler” accent. [NOTE: Throughout the play, JOHN will shift between his normal voice and the accent he uses when in character. The OTHER ACTORS may not...]}
Well, as I was saying, several people had all been called here by Mr. Walters. (BETTY, JENNIFER, LYDIA, and PRESTON ENTER as JOHN introduces them.) This is Betty Duprie, an old flame of Mr. Walters. She still intends to marry him, but not for the right reasons. And here is Jennifer Jones, Mr. Walters’s business partner. Lydia Comfree, Mr. Walters’s current fiancée. He loves her, and she loves his money. And finally there’s Preston Lavender, Lydia’s friend. Enough said. So there you have it. You’ve met everyone. And with that, I give you, the murder of Steven Walters. (Steps aside.)

JENNIFER: How should I know why we’re here?
LYDIA: You’re his business partner.
JENNIFER: And you’re his fiancée.
BETTY: Would you two quit your bickering?!
LYDIA: And I certainly don’t know why you’re here.
BETTY: Because I was the future Mrs. Walters long before you ever came into the picture.
LYDIA: “Was” is the key word there.
PRESTON: Ladies. Ladies, please.
BETTY: Must you bring him everywhere?
PRESTON: I was invited just like you.
BETTY: Yeah, I bet you were.
JOHN: (Aside.) As you may have gathered, these folks don’t exactly get along. They never have. To be quite honest, they’re not the easiest of people to get along with.
BETTY: Who’s he talking to?
JENNIFER: I don’t know.
BETTY: Who are you talking to?
JOHN: The audience.
LYDIA: That’s just great. Go ahead and spoil the illusion.
JOHN: I’m simply trying to—
BETTY: You’re ruining the story.
JOHN: I’m just—
LYDIA: You’ve broken our pace.
JOHN: I’m acting as the narrator, just as I’m supposed to.
PRESTON: And I suppose next you’ll be telling them how it ends.
JOHN: They know how it ends.
OTHERS: What?!
JOHN: They know how it ends.
JENNIFER: Then what’s the point? This is supposed to be a mystery. How much mystery can there be when they know how it ends?

JOHN: While it’s true they know how it ends, they don’t know who did it. Only that it was done.

PRESTON: Isn’t that a big part of the mystery?

JOHN: It can be. But in this case, the real mystery is who, not how.

BETTY: And they don’t mind knowing the end up front?

JOHN: They’re still here, aren’t they?

JENNIFER: That guy in the third row has shifted in his seat three times already.

PRESTON: I think they’re about to bolt.

JOHN: They won’t bolt if you guys stick to the script and keep the story moving ahead.

LYDIA: So it’s our fault now?

JOHN: Let’s just get back to the story, okay? Thank you. (Aside.) As I was saying, there is no great love shared amongst any of these folks. To put it most bluntly, they hate each other. But in that hate is the one common thread that brings them here today. As much as they may despise each other, they all hate Steven Walters even more.

BETTY: I’m still not so sure about you talking to the audience like that. I just don’t understand it.

JOHN: It’s been done for thousands of years. It’s called an aside.

PRESTON: A what?

JOHN: An aside. Theoretically, when I’m speaking to the audience, you aren’t supposed to hear me.

LYDIA: That’s silly. We’re right here. How can we help but hear you?

JOHN: You don’t understand. Of course you can hear me, but, you’re supposed to go on as though you can’t. The aside is an opportunity for me, as the narrator, to speak with the audience. It’s almost as though I’m having a personal conversation with each member of the audience. (OTHERS stand there with their mouths open.) Shakespeare used asides all the time. (It still isn’t sinking in.) It’s like the chorus in the ancient Greek plays.

BETTY: But this isn’t a musical.

JOHN: Just because there’s a chorus doesn’t mean it’s a musical.

LYDIA: Then why would they have a chorus?

JOHN: That’s what I’m trying to explain.

JENNIFER: Then get on with it, we’ve got a story to tell here.

JOHN: Right. The story. Where were we?
PRESTON: You were about to explain the purpose of the chorus to us. (STEVE ENTERS.)

JOHN: I meant this story. Remember? The murder and all?

BETTY: I, for one, don’t feel like I can continue until you explain this chorus business and that aside thing you keep pulling.

STEVE: I’ll have to second that one.

JOHN: What are you doing here?

STEVE: I wanted to hear what you were talking about.

JOHN: Oh, good heavens. What about the audience?

LYDIA: They’ve already paid their money. How do they know this isn’t the story they came to see, anyway?

JOHN: Because we already told them it was a murder mystery.

LYDIA: Oh, yeah. But I want to know what the chorus is for if it’s not for singing.

JOHN: (Aside.) Folks, please bear with us for a moment. I promise you this won’t take but a minute, and we’ll get right back to our story. Thank you.

OTHERS: (Aside.) Yes, thank you. (Gather around JOHN like a class attentively listening to the teacher as he continues.)

JOHN: As I said earlier, as the narrator, I will often speak to the audience as the story unfolds, much like the Greeks did in their plays thousands of years ago. But there, they most often used what is known as a chorus.

BETTY: But they didn’t sing?

JOHN: They may have in some cases, but they didn’t have to. You see, it wasn’t the delivery that was important. It was the message.

PRESTON: What was the message?

JOHN: It would depend on the story. What’s important to understand now, and how this relates to the asides you’ve witnessed today, is why the chorus was there in the first place.

JENNIFER: Well, why were they there?

JOHN: First and foremost, to help the story move forward.

LYDIA: Why not just let the characters tell the story through dialogue?

JOHN: They probably could, but when a story is very complex, it would take hour after hour of dialogue just to set the stage for the events about to happen. But if someone, or a group of people, a chorus, were to fill in some of the background and detail as the story goes along, the audience gets all the facts, and then the most important parts of the story can be played out on the stage through dialogue.

BETTY: I don’t get it.

End of script sample.
PRODUCTION NOTES

PROPERTIES
Five stage pistols (JOHN, BETTY, PRESTON, JENNIFER, LYDIA)

SOUND EFFECTS
Gunshots, body falling.

COSTUMING
BETTY, PRESTON, JENNIFER, LYDIA, and STEVE are finely dressed for a private dinner party.
JOHN is dressed as a butler.
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