Murder for Dummies

A comedy-mystery

By Pat Cook

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Dedication

With a grateful tip of the old thinking cap to James Thurber

STORY OF THE PLAY

"So you want to commit a murder." This is the first line in a book purchased by Myron Bernhart. And here's a guy who knows his books since he's collected some rare ones and proud of it. That is until his nagging wife, Marge, decides to sell them. He tries to reason with her but is argued down, not only by her but the Civic Arts League, her cronies who, of course, meet constantly at their house. When all else fails, Myron realizes it's time to take drastic action and plans it all out. Of course, his imagination tends to wander a bit--from German psychiatrists to CSI investigators to hard-boiled 1940s-type detectives. So he sets up the perfect murder. His wife is home alone, he has an airtight alibi, and he prepares his victim a "special" glass of tea. Everything is working, just like the book said. Marge takes the glass of tea, sits on the couch and quietly brings the glass up to her lips…when the doorbell rings. From here on it seems as if everybody shows up! Marge's women's club, a rare book collector, Myron's buddy Jack, and, worst of all, Marge's domineering sister! And in the midst of all the confusion the wrong person drinks the "special" tea…and dies! What follows is a parade of policemen, blackmailers, and in-laws as Myron wonders just what went wrong. And you will, too, in this fast-paced comedy-mystery where nothing seems to go right, even when you go by the book. Of course, that's when the title of the book is "Murder for Dummies."

A NOTE ABOUT THE PLAY

During the course of this play passages are quoted from "The Legend of Sleepy Hollow" by Washington Irving and "The Catbird Seat" by James Thurber.

CAST OF CHARACTERS

(6 m, 10 w, much doubling possible)

(In order of appearance.)

MARGE BERNHART: Critical wife of Myron, mid-30s.
OPALINE PACKER: Penny-pinching club lady, 40-ish.
JOBETH WALLENFORD: Always hungry club member, 45.
DEWITT GUNDLECHUK: Hypochondriac, in her 40s.
MYRON BERNHART: Meek bookkeeper, mid-30s.
JACK HAVISHAM: Marge's brother & partying pal of Myron.
PSYCHIATRIST: Stereotypical German doctor.
CSI AGENT: Clinical lady scientist.
HELGA "SIS" HEINDORFF: Marge's overbearing sister, 45.
DETECTIVE: Typical 40s-style gumshoe.
DINAH MUMFRED: Antique book collector.
OFFICER BURKETT: Uniformed policewoman, all business.
LT. TINKERTON: Burkett's boss, a soft-spoken officer.
SERENA BROWN: Blackmailing book seller.
MADISON MONROE: On-the-spot lady reporter.
PETE BOLIVAR: Laid-back neighbor.

Also from offstage:
VOICE-OVER: The book voice.
VOICE-OVER: TV announcer's voice.

DOUBLING: *There are numerous opportunities for doubling. The role of Jobeth in Act I can be doubled with Officer Burkett or Serena or Madison in Act II. Pete can be played by Jack. The roles of the Psychiatrist, Detective, and CSI Agent are almost cameos and can be played by other cast members or even by local celebrities.*

SFX

Doorbell, thunder and lightning, loud shuddering snore, car doors closing, arguing men, gunfire, cell phone ringing

SETTING

Time: the present.

The setting for our little intrigue is the living room of the house belonging to Marge and Myron Bernhart. The room, like the house itself, is what some would charitably call cozy while Marge herself terms it as cramped. There are three doors utilized in the floor plan. The first, or front, door is located SR. The second door, located USC, leads to the kitchen while the third door, located SL, leads to the bedrooms. There are two connected and curtained windows on the SR wall.

The furniture consists of the usual assortment: a floral couch, located DS, with a matching high back chair on its SR arm. A coffee table resides in front of the couch. There is a dinette set, with four matching chairs in the USL corner of the room. Behind the dinette on the US wall is a china cabinet, chocked full of knickknacks. There is also a large, overflowing bookcase on the US wall, just SR of the kitchen door. There is a writing desk and chair on the SR wall, just DS of the windows. A lamp and telephone rest on the desk with a wastebasket DS of the desk.

DSR and DSL are two other areas which, when lit, represent Myron's imagination as he visualizes crucial events or, if you like, other facets of his persona.

ACT I
Scene 1

(AT RISE: As the play opens Marge is hosting her usual group of friends around the dinette table. All the ladies are sipping iced tea and chatting loudly. DEWITT is seated in the US chair and is flanked by OPALINE and JOBETH. MARGE is standing behind DEWITT, holding court as usual.)

MARGE: …so anyway, as I always say, you have to take charge in any situation.
DEWITT: Yes, Marge, but how do you make them understand?
OPALINE: Oh, they can always tell.
DEWITT: How?
OPALINE: By the tone in your voice.
JOBETH: *(Indicating OPALINE.)* Opaline's right. You want them to pay attention, just say something like you mean it. *(Leans back in her chair.)* Sometimes you have to be cruel to be kind.
MARGE: Exactly. As I always say, you have to be cruel to be kind.
JOBETH: I just said that.
MARGE: Oh. Yes, but I always said it first.
JOBETH: Not today.
MARGE: Oh, Jobeth, don't be that way. I KNOW I always said it…SOMEtime!
JOBETH: *(An aside.)* I must remember that. *(To the OTHERS.)* I thought we were having sandwiches today?
MARGE: We ARE. *(Yells at the kitchen door.)* SANDWICHES!
OPALINE: The main thing is to let them know who's boss. And it should be made known from the very beginning.
MARGE: It's up to us to take care of them, and if that means we have to be stern, then so be it. *(Yells again.)* SANDWICHES!

(MYRON, wearing an apron and carrying a tray of sandwiches, enters through the kitchen door.)

MYRON: *(Meekly.)* Coming, dear.
MARGE: And about time. What took you so long?

(MYRON places the sandwiches on the dinette table where the LADIES all rush to grab one and start eating.)

MYRON: Sorry, dear, but we were out of chicken so I had to substitute turkey instead. *(To the LADIES.)* And I really didn't have enough turkey to go around, you know, for all of you, because I thought I had more chicken so I had to run next door to borrow–
MARGE: *(Long suffering.)* Yes, yes, no need to read the Constitution to us.
MYRON: *(To himself.)* Hey, she asked and then when I try to explain she just cuts me off. But if I DIDN'T explain, then she'd REALLY get mad and–
MARGE: And stop talking to yourself. If there's ANYthing I cannot stand it's somebody who talks to himself!
MYRON: Sorry, dear. *(To the LADIES.)* I do hope I didn't interrupt anything. I know how much you ladies of the Civic Arts League look forward to your meetings. So, don't mind me, you just go ahead as if I'm not here.
MARGE: Don't we always?
DEWITT: I always make sure to praise mine when he's being very good- positive reinforcement and all that.
OPALINE: Well, that's all well and good, Dewitt, but you have to careful not to spoil them.
JOBETH: What about when they want to go out?
MARGE: Just make sure to keep them on a schedule. That way they'll know WHEN it's time to go out and to come back.
DEWITT: And praise them when they do.
OPALINE: But how do you stop them from scratching? Mine scratches ALL the time.
JOBETH: Oh dear.
MARGE: Well, there are SO many things you can do about that.
JOBETH: I know, but you really can't punish them for that, can you?

End of Freeview

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