

MURDER WITH TOMATO SAUCE

By David J. LeMaster

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SYNOPSIS: First came the popular *Did Someone Say Murder?* Now comes a new hysterically funny murder-mystery, as Detective Rathbone invites the world's greatest detectives to dinner and challenges them to solve a murder. But soon the detectives themselves are being murdered, one by one. Join the sinfully wealthy Horace and Hilda Higgenbotham, the pompous Inspector Rupert, the world's youngest detective, the insolent Cynthia Salt, and her classless parents, all of whom must find their way through fake clues, surprises, and the appearance of the highly suspicious *Red Herring*.

CAST OF CHARACTERS

(5 female, 4 male, 9 either; doubling possible, gender flexible)

HOSTESS (f)	(25 lines)
MR. HIGGENBOTHAM (m)	(142 lines)
MRS. HIGGENBOTHAM (f)	(85 lines)
MANAGER (m/f)	a notebook. (63 lines)
*RUPERT (m/f)	(Non-speaking)
JONES (m)	a blowgun. (127 lines)
JUPITER KINGSLEY (m/f)	(146 lines)
BOSTON YARD (m/f)	(98 lines)
MR. SAM SALT (m)	(80 lines)
SYLVIA SALT (f)	(94 lines)
CYNTHIA SALT (f)	(83 lines)
WAITER (m)	(12 lines)
WAITRESS (f)	(10 lines)
RATHBONE (m/f)	(238 lines)
COOK (m/f)	(2 lines)
PERSON WHO DOESN'T BELONG (m/f)	The Red Herring. (11 lines)
MARTINSON (m/f)	(1 line)
POLICEMAN (m/f)	(1 line)

(ALL LINE COUNTS ARE APPROXIMATE)

**NOTE: This character (RUPERT.) does not have any lines, but is essential to the plot line and is therefore included in the total cast count.*

PRODUCTION NOTES

Should the director choose, the waiter and waitress may be combined as one role, and the cook and the person who doesn't belong may also be combined. If needed, the manager and the hostess may be combined as well. The policeman may be doubled with another character.

The first murder (when a person in the audience is killed) may be prearranged by the director. It is suggested that people receive raffle tickets, notes, etc., or the word "murdered" is taped to the bottom (or back) of someone's chair. The manager and wait staff may improvise as they look through the theatre to find the murder victim.

At the end of the first act, if there is no curtain, the director may either black out for all of the "victims" to leave the stage, or the director can have the remaining characters (or set dressers) carry the bodies off one by one as part of the production.

ACT ONE

AT RISE: *A restaurant. The theatre may be transformed to seat diners, etc., so that the show is accompanied by an actual dinner if needed, but dinner theater is not a requirement to produce this show. It is up to the production company to provide the specifics.*

Onstage is a series of tables and chairs representing a restaurant. It may be as elaborate or as simple as the company requires.

A hostess stands stage right. Enter the HIGGENBOTHAMS, a rich and snooty couple. She carries a large purse/bag and wears furs. He is dressed in a suit or a tuxedo.

HOSTESS: Good evening, Horace and Hilda Higgenbotham. How nice to see you.

HIGGENBOTHAM: Likewise, I'm sure. Miss—

HOSTESS: Smith. I'm your hostess.

HIGGENBOTHAM: Ah, yes. Miss Smith.

MRS. HIGGENBOTHAM: Horace, don't be fresh.

HIGGENBOTHAM: Sorry, my dear.

HOSTESS: May I see your invitation?

HIGGENBOTHAM: Of course. *(Presents invitation.)*

HOSTESS: Very good. A table for two tonight?

MRS. HIGGENBOTHAM: Two and a dog.

HOSTESS: I'm afraid you can't have a dog here.

MRS. HIGGENBOTHAM: But I take Missy everywhere. *(Indicates purse, where she has a dog. The dog may be a puppet.)* Isn't that right, my dear, dear little girl. *(Kisses dog. Makes silly sounds, etc.)*

HOSTESS: I'm afraid the board of health won't allow—

HIGGENBOTHAM: Nonsense. I'll buy it.

HOSTESS: The board of health?

HIGGENBOTHAM: Yes. Point out the owner and I'll write him a check.

HOSTESS: I don't think it's for sale.

HIGGENBOTHAM: Nonsense, young lady. Everything is for sale. Now, how much do you want?

MR. SALT: (*Entering.*) Yo, excuse me. Can we get some service here?

MRS. HIGGENBOTHAM: Oh, dear.

HIGGENBOTHAM: A commoner.

MR. SALT: Yeah, yeah, yeah. Whatever. (*To HOSTESS.*) Table for three.

HIGGENBOTHAM: (*To SALT.*) Do you mind? We were here first.

MRS. HIGGENBOTHAM: The nerve of some people.

MR. SALT: Well, hurry up, will ya?

HIGGENBOTHAM: What an embarrassment.

HOSTESS: (*To HIGGENBOTHAMS.*) I'll seat you.

They follow her stage left.

MRS. HIGGENBOTHAM: (*Indicates SALT.*) Please be sure we're as far away from that man as possible.

HOSTESS: Yes, Ma'am.

Enter SYLVIA SALT.

SYLVIA: Are we late?

MR. SALT: I don't think so. There don't seem to be too many people here.

SYLVIA: Doesn't.

MR. SALT: Doesn't what?

SYLVIA: Doesn't seem to be anyone here.

MR. SALT: Yeah, I don't think so, either. Maybe we're early.

SYLVIA: But what about Cynthia?

MR. SALT: I thought she was with you.

SYLVIA: No, I left you together.

MR. SALT: You said, "Go get the seats, and we'll meet you in the restaurant."

SYLVIA: I said, "I'll meet you in the restaurant." Cynthia was supposed to accompany you.

MR. SALT: Look, you dumb broad, I left the girl with you.

SYLVIA starts to slap MR. SALT. HOSTESS returns just in time. She fakes being happy.

HOSTESS: *(Returns.)* Now. Mr. and Mrs. SALT is it?

MR. SALT: Sam Salt, that's right. You want my invitation?

HOSTESS: Yes, please.

MR. SALT: Give it to her, Sylvia.

SYLVIA: *(Exasperated.)* Give what to whom?

MR. SALT: Do I stutter? Give her the invitation.

SYLVIA: I don't have it.

MR. SALT: I gave it to you, babe.

SYLVIA: You most certainly did not.

MR. SALT: Yeah, I did. You got it, babe.

SYLVIA: You have it, dear.

MR. SALT: No, you got it, babe.

SYLVIA: But my dear—

HOSTESS: I'm afraid you can't come in without an invitation.

MR. SALT: *(To HOSTESS.)* Excuse us. *(To SYLVIA.)* Look in your purse.

SYLVIA: It isn't in my purse.

MR. SALT: Yeah, it is.

SYLVIA: *(looks in purse.)* It most certainly isn't. See?

She goes through her purse. There are all kinds of items and gives them to MR. SALT to hold: Lipstick, makeup, lip balm, a mirror, and a mysterious looking item that appears to be a gun. Have fun with this; the more items she takes out, the funnier it will be.

MR. SALT: Come on, we ain't got all day.

SYLVIA: But my dear—

MR. SALT: What else you got in there? Jimmy Hoffa? *(She pulls a salt and pepper shaker from purse. SYLVIA is embarrassed that HOSTESS sees.)* Oops. How did that get in there?

SYLVIA: I know it's here somewhere.

She withdraws a knife, a piece of rope, a candlestick, and a pair of brass knuckles. MR. SALT shrugs.

MR. SALT: *(To HOSTESS.)* Women? She's a walking dollar store, what can I say?

Enter CYNTHIA, a teenager. She has a horrible attitude. She stands, furious, watching her mother go through the purse.

CYNTHIA: Oh, for goodness sake. I've got the stupid invitation, Mother.

MR. SALT: You?

CYNTHIA: *(Gives invitation.)* Yeah, you gave me it to me in the stupid car.

SYLVIA: Where have you been?

CYNTHIA: I had to go to the crapper.

SYLVIA: Cynthia! That is inappropriate language.

CYNTHIA: Whatever.

SYLVIA: We call it the toilet.

MR. SALT: Yeah, yeah. Now, can we sit down and get some grub?

HOSTESS: Right this way.

Leads them to a table on opposite end of stage from THE HIGGENBOTHAMS. MRS. HIGGENBOTHAM's dog barks as they cross the stage.

HIGGENBOTHAM: I say, look at that bunch of hooligans.

MRS. HIGGENBOTHAM: They're certainly out of place here.

HIGGENBOTHAM: Surely they couldn't have been given an invitation? I thought this was a prestigious affair.

MRS. HIGGENBOTHAM: Perhaps they are the ones to be victimized tonight?

HIGGENBOTHAM: Ah, a delightful idea.

Both laugh. The dog barks. MRS. HIGGENBOTHAM reaches into her own bag to feed the dog treats. Enter RUPERT and JONES, who look like a Vaudeville team. RUPERT is tall, thin, and quiet. JONES is short and round. The HOSTESS approaches them.

HOSTESS: Good evening. Do you have your invitations?

JONES: (*Proud.*) Of course. We're Rupert and Jones, the world's famous detect— (*RUPERT elbows JONES.*) What? But she asked us— (*RUPERT elbows JONES.*) Oh, the low profile. Right. (*Changes tone.*) Please, Miss. Just show us to our seats.

HOSTESS: Do you have your invitations?

JONES: Yes, right here. (*Gives them.*)

HOSTESS: Ah, yes, Rupert and Jones, the world's famous detectives.

JONES: I told you she'd know it was us—(*RUPERT elbows JONES.*) Right.

HOSTESS: This way. (*She leads them to seats stage right.*)

CYNTHIA: Mom, this is stupid. I want to go home.

SYLVIA: Sam. Would you please address your daughter?

MR. SALT: Who?

SYLVIA: Cynthia.

MR. SALT: Oh, yeah, yeah. (*Pause.*) What about?

SYLVIA: About her behavior in public.

CYNTHIA: This whole dinner is just stupid. I don't want to sit in this stupid restaurant with these stupid people eating this stupid food.

MR. SALT: Me neither. I saw a Burger Berg across the street. Let's go.

SYLVIA: Would the two of you please sit down and stop embarrassing me?

Enter JUPITER KINGSLEY. HOSTESS approaches.

HOSTESS: Ah, you must be Jupiter Kingsley.

JUPITER: That's right.

HOSTESS: And are you here alone?

JUPITER: No, my friend. . . (*Enter BOSTON YARD, JUPITER's date.*) Ah, this way, Boston.

BOSTON: I thought I saw something in the lobby—

JUPITER: Something?

BOSTON: (*To HOSTESS.*) Does this establishment have secret service men?

HOSTESS: No, I'm afraid we don't.

BOSTON: KGB Agents? FBI? CIA? Undercover operatives?

HOSTESS: Afraid not.

BOSTON: Oh. Well, I suppose I didn't see anything at all. Dinner, then?

HOSTESS: Right this way.

She seats them in the final table, center stage. Enter a waiter and a WAITRESS. The WAITER crosses center.

WAITER: Are we all here?

HOSTESS: All present and accounted for.

WAITER: Ladies and gentlemen. On the menu today are two choices. Spaghetti with meatballs, or vegetarian spaghetti with tomato sauce.

JONES: Vegetarian? (*RUPERT elbows JONES.*)

WAITER: Your choices of drink are water and expensive sparkling water.

HIGGENBOTHAM: Preposterous.

MRS. HIGGENBOTHAM: What kind of a restaurant is this?

WAITER: And your choices of dessert are Hostess Ding Dongs, Twinkies, and Tootsie Rolls.

MR. SALT: How much'd we pay for this?

SYLVIA: One hundred and fifty dollars a person.

MR. SALT: That's it. We're getting our dough back and going for burgers.

WAITER: Anyone for vegetarian spaghetti?

MR. SALT: Yo, buddy. We want a refund.

JONES: Me, too. (*RUPERT elbows him.*)

BOSTON: That does seem a rather ridiculous price for the evening's dinner.

JUPITER: Is there a manager?

WAITRESS: He'll (*She'll.*) be along shortly.

MR. SALT: Well, I want my money back.

BOSTON: Yes. This dinner is certainly not worth the price.

WAITER: You haven't even had your dinner yet.

JUPITER: But what you're charging--

JONES: And what you're claiming you'll serve—(*Enter MANAGER dramatically.*)

MANAGER: Silence!

MR. SALT: (*Pause.*) Who the heck are you?

MANAGER: I am the manager of this establishment and your host for the evening. *(To WAITER and WAITRESS.)* Why are they without food?

WAITRESS: They haven't ordered yet.

MANAGER: Serve them anyway.

WAITRESS: You got it.

Throughout the following the WAITER and WAITRESS serve food to the characters onstage. WAITER dumps a small plate of spaghetti in front of MR. and MRS. HIGGENBOTHAM.

HIGGENBOTHAM: I say, didn't we order dinner for two?

WAITER: That is dinner for two.

HIGGENBOTHAM: For a hundred and fifty dollars?

WAITER: What do you care, you old money bag? You can afford it.

HIGGENBOTHAM: See here!

MRS. HIGGENBOTHAM: Do you have anything for the dog?

WAITER: Afraid not, ma'am.

Pause. She lets the dog eat her side of the spaghetti. HIGGENBOTHAM is furious.

HIGGENBOTHAM: Do you mind if I eat my own dinner first?

MRS. HIGGENBOTHAM: Missy has to have her food. *(To dog.)*
Don't you Missy? Yes, you do. Yes, you do.

WAITRESS brings a plate of spaghetti with one giant meatball to the SALTS.

MR. SALT: Oh, no you don't. We're not eating a thing.

CYNTHIA: Don't be stupid, Dad. The meatball looks delicious.

MR. SALT: I ain't paying a hundred and a half for no meatball.

SYLVIA: Stop being cranky and eat your dinner, dear.

MR. SALT: You call this dinner? *(To WAITRESS.)* Yo, Miss?

WAITRESS: Yes?

MR. SALT: You got any crackers?

WAITRESS: Yes. But they're twenty dollars extra.

MR. SALT: What kind of rip-off is this?

WAITER has dumped another plate of spaghetti in front of RUPERT and JONES.

JONES: Thank you.

WAITER: Want some Parmesan cheese?

JONES: No. (*RUPERT elbows him.*) Yes? (*WAITER puts cheese on spaghetti.*) Rupert, I don't like Parmesan cheese. (*WAITER finishes. RUPERT snatches the spaghetti and begins to eat.*) Wait. Where's mine? (*RUPERT holds out a fork as a weapon to stave off JONES. Later, as RUPERT eats the spaghetti, he uses the napkin liberally to wipe his mouth.*) Oh. Guess I'll just wait, then.

WAITRESS approaches JUPITER and BOSTON with a plate of spaghetti.

BOSTON: Afraid we'll need two plates here. I'm a vegetarian.

WAITRESS: Oh, yes. You've got the vegetarian plate. One for you (*Puts plate of spaghetti in front of JUPITER.*) and one for you (*Puts empty plate in front of BOSTON.*)

BOSTON: What's this?

WAITRESS: Your spaghetti.

BOSTON: But there's nothing here.

WAITRESS: It's vegetarian.

WAITER and WAITRESS walk stage right and stand.

JUPITER: I always wondered how you vegetarians made it without meat.

BOSTON: But it's an empty plate.

JUPITER: Have you tried it?

BOSTON: Of course not.

JUPITER: Then what are you complaining about?

BOSTON struggles with how to try the dinner. He mimes putting a fork to the plate and taking a bite.

JUPITER: How is it?

BOSTON: (*Defeated.*) I've had worse.

MANAGER: (*To HOSTESS.*) Very good. Has everyone been served?

HOSTESS: Yes.

MANAGER: Then we're ready to begin. The list. (*HOSTESS gives it.*) I'd like to welcome you all here this evening. (*Clears throat and looks at list.*) Let's see. First, we have Hilda and Horatio Higgenbotham, retired, formerly of Scotland Yard.

HIGGENBOTHAM: Yes, that's right.

MANAGER: Welcome, sir.

HIGGENBOTHAM: Thank you.

MANAGER: A very impressive career, I must say. Thirty years on the force.

HIGGENBOTHAM: Yes.

MANAGER: Considered one of Britain's top sleuths.

HIGGENBOTHAM: Oh, well. Thank you.

MRS. HIGGENBOTHAM: Oh, Horatio. I'm so proud of you.

MANAGER: And heir to millions.

HIGGENBOTHAM: Actually that's billions. With a "B."

MANAGER: So many billions, in fact, that your critics claim you've purchased your reputation as an investigator, and in actuality you're not particularly bright.

HIGGENBOTHAM: I say, my good man. How dare you.

MANAGER: Well, it's true. And then, there's Hilda. Higgenbotham, the world's most avid reader of cheap mystery novels.

HIGGENBOTHAM: You are?

MANAGER: And a whiz at "Where's Waldo."

HIGGENBOTHAM: Sheer nonsense.

MRS. HIGGENBOTHAM: Well—

HIGGENBOTHAM: You actually play such juvenile games?

MRS. HIGGENBOTHAM: I was state champion last year.

MANAGER: And what's that in your purse, madam?

MRS. HIGGENBOTHAM: (*Tries to hide it.*) What purse?

MANAGER: Please, Madam. You're not fooling anyone.

MRS. HIGGENBOTHAM: Oh. Well, it's—

MANAGER: Missy the Wonderdog. And in an eating establishment. Tsk, tsk, tsk.

MRS. HIGGENBOTHAM: But she's ever so well behaved.

MANAGER: Missy, whose keen sense of smell has uncovered countless clues for Scotland Yard.

HIGGENBOTHAM: It has?

MANAGER: While you, Mr. Higgenbotham, always take credit for finding them.

HIGGENBOTHAM: That's not true. I can explain—

MANAGER: Madam, I do hope you've brought a pooper scooper in case there's an emergency.

She smiles and pulls one out of her purse.

JONES: What else have you got in that bag, madam, a few hundred pounds to pay off the board of health? (*RUPERT elbows JONES.*)

MANAGER: Ah, yes. Our second pair of sleuths, the world famous detectives, Rupert and Jones.

JONES: That's Jones and Rupert—(*RUPERT elbows JONES.*) Well, it should be.

MANAGER: The two of you have personally put more than a hundred criminals behind bars.

JONES: You know our work?

MANAGER: You're a prolific crime-solving team known the world round.

JONES: Yes, well, I—(*RUPERT elbows JONES.*) What???

MANAGER: Ah, yes, and your partner, the great Rupert. Silently watching events unfold around him [*Her*], as Jones blathers on and on about insipid nonsense.

JONES: I beg your pardon!? (*RUPERT elbows JONES.*) Will you cut that out? (*RUPERT elbows JONES. JONES moves his chair away.*)

MANAGER: Your reputation proceeds you, Rupert. Anything to say? (*RUPERT glares.*) Want to disclose how you recently broke open the case of the Transylvanian Schnope Diamond?

JONES: Oh, yes, our most famous case. We were faced with insufferable odds, unbelievable terrors, horrible murderous suspects, and—(*RUPERT scoots chair close to JONES and then elbows JONES.*) Forget it.

MANAGER: And then, our third team, Jupiter Kingsley and his (*her.*) sidekick, Boston Yard.

BOSTON: Sidekick? See here, I'm the brains of this team—

JUPITER: Quiet, Boston.

BOSTON: But I—

JUPITER: Quiet, Boston.

BOSTON: You can't—

JUPITER: Quiet, Boston.

BOSTON: But—

JUPITER: Quiet, Boston.

BOSTON: Right.

MANAGER: A pair of internationally famous sleuths who solve crimes the old fashioned way. With police sketches and fingerprints.

BOSTON: Actually, we've graduated to computer analysis and DNA testing. I went back to school and we purchased a lab—

JUPITER: Quiet, Boston.

BOSTON: But he—

JUPITER: Quiet, Boston.

BOSTON: But you—

JUPITER: Quiet, Boston.

BOSTON: But—

JUPITER: Quiet, Boston.

BOSTON: Oh, balderdash.

MANAGER: Graduated to the twenty-first century, have you, Kingsley?

JUPITER: Armed with DNA technology, I can solve any crime, anywhere.

MANAGER: Perhaps. We shall see, won't we?

BOSTON: He—(*Looks at JUPITER.*) Quiet, Boston.

MRS. HIGGENBOTHAM: There's entirely too little respect for partnership here, don't you think?

HIGGENBOTHAM: Quiet, dear.

MRS. HIGGENBOTHAM: (*Furious.*) What?

HIGGENBOTHAM: Well, it worked for them.

MRS. HIGGENBOTHAM: Quiet yourself, you spineless guttersnipe.

HIGGENBOTHAM: Right you are, dear.

MR. SALT: Yo, wait a sec. Uh, excuse me?

MANAGER: Ah, you must be Mr. Salt.

MR. SALT: Sam Salt, that's me.

MANAGER: Head mechanic for Salt Auto Body and Repair Shop, and occasional Amway salesman.

MR. SALT: Speaking of which, I've got a tie that would look awful nice with that outfit—

MANAGER: And Mrs. Sylvia Salt, Girl Scout leader and soprano in the Calvary Baptist Church Choir.

SYLVIA: Mezzo, Soprano.

MANAGER: And part-time clerk at Macy's.

MR. SALT: Yeah, yeah, yeah. So you got the scoop on everybody. La-ti-da. So, why's everybody a cop or a detective or something except us?

MANAGER: Oh, are they, Mr. Salt?

MR. SALT: Yeah. I don't even like watching mysteries on TV.

SYLVIA: Me, neither. I much prefer reality shows.

MR. SALT: Or a good sports update—

MANAGER: Two common nobodies.

MR. SALT: Who you calling common—

MANAGER: We've forgotten the Salts' —extraordinarily intelligent, genius daughter, the super-sleuth, Cynthia Salt.

CYNTHIA: I so knew you were about to say that.

SYLVIA: Cynthia?

MANAGER: Cynthia Salt, a thirteen-year-old with an attitude, who secretly, and without her parents' knowledge, has been promoted to full detective within the New York Police Department.

SYLVIA: But my dear?! You don't even have a social security card.

CYNTHIA: Don't worry about it, Ma.

MANAGER: The most heralded child mind in the United States. Who personally solved over two hundred and fifty unsolved crimes last year.

JONES: Great galloping gobbledygook. That rivals even us!
(*RUPERT elbows JONES.*)

MANAGER: Mensa member. Chess champion.

CYNTHIA: This is so stupid.

MANAGER: And complete malcontent. Called by "The Detective Times" the single rudest, most childish, and most socially disruptive detective in the entire world.

CYNTHIA: I'm so over this place. (*To mother.*) Can we leave now?

MR. SALT: Hold it, hold it! If my daughter's a detective with the NYPD, then where's she taking her paychecks?

CYNTHIA: Oh, dad, you are such a nerd. I put them in a Swiss bank account that will pay for my college fund. Duh.

SYLVIA: Is that legal?

CYNTHIA: Does it matter?

MANAGER: Enough of all this. You all received your invitations to be here tonight for a reason. One of you is the second greatest detective in the world.

HIGGENBOTHAM: Second?

MANAGER: You heard me.

JUPITER: That's impossible. I am the *single* greatest detective in the world.

RUPERT shoves JONES.

JONES: Oh! I am the—that is. *We* are the greatest.

BOSTON: Nonsense. Everyone knows the team of Kingsley and Yard is the greatest.

HIGGENBOTHAM: Hilda and I were decorated by the Queen herself.

JUPITER: And I was awarded a medal for bravery by Congress.

BOSTON: Me, too.

JUPITER: Quiet, Boston.

CYNTHIA: You're all a bunch of losers. I'm the greatest who's ever lived.

All erupt in argument. The MANAGER whistles to stop them.

MANAGER: I'm afraid you're all wrong. None of you is the greatest.

JUPITER: Then who is?

MANAGER: *(Pause. Diabolically.)* I think you know.

MRS. HIGGENBOTHAM: You can't mean—

JONES: Surely it's not—

MANAGER: It is.

HIGGENBOTHAM: *(Shocked.)* You don't mean—Rathbone?

MANAGER: I do.

JUPITER: I thought he was dead!

MANAGER: Not dead. Still very, very much alive.

BOSTON: He's unspeakable.

HIGGENBOTHAM: Inconvertible.

JUPITER: Unethical.

CYNTHIA: Pathetic. Rathbone was arrested and placed in the loony bin for committing and then solving his own murders. What a loser.

MANAGER: Indeed, my dear. But tonight, Rathbone has gathered you all here for an evening of mystery, death and dismemberment.

MRS. HIGGENBOTHAM: What do you mean—he gathered us?

HIGGENBOTHAM: He's not behind bars?

MANAGER: Not any more.

HIGGENBOTHAM: Then where is he?

Spotlight on audience. RATHBONE has been sitting among them.

RATHBONE: Right here. Watching the herd of you simpletons make complete and utter fools of yourselves.

HIGGENBOTHAM: Rathbone, you misguided evil genius. I should have known.

BOSTON: But how did you escape the asylum?

RATHBONE: I was released for good behavior.

JUPITER: We'll see about that.

RATHBONE: Oh, it's true. Besides. It's amazing what infantile doctors and moronic guards they have there— especially when they're dealing with the single greatest mind in the world.

JUPITER: Mad as a hatter.

HIGGENBOTHAM: *(Indicates audience.)* But who are all those people around you?

RATHBONE: A paid audience. All here to see this impressive gathering of detectives at work.

MR. SALT: *(Rises, to address audience.)* Uh. Listen. If any of you need a good deal on a transmission or a brake check—

MANAGER: *(Demanding.)* Will you be quiet?

JONES: *(To RUPERT.)* Let's get out of here.

RATHBONE: Not so fast! I've invited you here for a reason.

JUPITER: And what is that, you deranged maniac?

RATHBONE: I challenge you to solve a crime.

MRS. HIGGENBOTHAM: There's been no crime here.

MR. SALT: Unless you count charging a hundred and fifty buckaroos for a plate of spaghetti.

RATHBONE: Would you sit down?

MR. SALT: But I—

RATHBONE: Sit down!

MR. SALT: Can I at least hand out my business cards?

RATHBONE and MANAGER make threatening gestures.

MR. SALT: I'm sitting. I'm sitting. *(Pause.)* What a stiff. *(Sits.)*

RATHBONE: Where was I?

HIGGENBOTHAM: Explaining your evil and nefarious plot.

RATHBONE: Ah, yes. My newly acquired criminal reputation precedes me. Tonight there will be a most heinous and gruesome murder.

JUPITER: You're insane.

RATHBONE: So they tell me.

MRS. HIGGENBOTHAM: That's it. We're leaving.

RATHBONE: Nobody leaves this restaurant! Lock the doors!

MANAGER: The doors are locked.

RATHBONE: Bolt the windows!

MANAGER: The windows are bolted.

RATHBONE: You're all trapped. Trapped in my ingenious, yet evil lair.

SYLVIA: You can't keep us in here. *(To SALT.)* Do something, Sam.

MR. SALT: Yeah, uh. Look, you.

RATHBONE: Sit down, you silly little man.

MR. SALT: *(Guarded.)* Yeah, okay.

SYLVIA: Sam!

MR. SALT: Well, he just said he was gonna kill somebody—

JONES: You can't commit murder in broad daylight and get away with it.

RATHBONE: Me? Goodness no, not me. I'm not killing anyone.

JONES: Thank heavens.

RATHBONE: One of the employees will do it.

WAITER: Want us to all come out now?

RATHBONE: Yes, please.

WAITER: Come on, fellas.

Enter WAITER, WAITRESS, COOK, and MYSTERIOUS STRANGE PERSON WHO SHOULDN'T BE THERE. The mysterious person has bloody clothing and looks like a killer.

RATHBONE: Here we are. Yes, yes. Good. Now, detectives. You've got a group of suspects.

JONES: This is absurd.

RATHBONE: Is it, Jones? Is it absurd if I tell you that a murder was committed only moments ago, and the killer is standing among these employees of the restaurant?

JUPITER: What murder?

RATHBONE: What murder, indeed. *(Points to audience.)* Ask them.

JUPITER: The people you invited to watch us?

RATHBONE: Exactly. *(To Manager.)* If you please.

MANAGER: Not at all. Ladies, and gentlemen, we're sorry to inform you that one of you has just been killed. Houselights? *(House lights come up.)* So that we may do this in the most efficient and humane way possible, we've given a death notice to one of you completely at random. Would you please look under your seats at the piece of paper that is glued to the bottom? If you have the words, "you're dead," would you please stand up? *(See notes at beginning of play. This section calls for improvisation. The MANAGER may go by suggested improvisation in the front of the script.)* Ah, there we are. That gentleman [*lady*] in the back.

RATHBONE: Very good. You, sir [*madam,*] are dead.

JONES: See here!

JUPITER: You can't just kill someone at random!

RATHBONE: *(Takes out gun or knife. To the audience member.)* Would you mind moving away from all those people? We don't want blood getting on everyone else.

JONES: You can't just kill people!?

RATHBONE: But that's what murder is. You know. Killing. Blood and gore. They're murdered. They're dead.

BOSTON: But if you kill him, then we'll all know you did it. We won't have to solve anything.

RATHBONE: That's why I'm not actually doing it. *(Gives weapon to MANAGER.)*

MANAGER: Take him in the back, fellas.

The WAITER, WAITRESS, COOK, manager and PERSON WHO ISN'T SUPPOSED TO BE THERE take the audience member away. Pause.

JUPITER: You know, I had the distinct feeling that last fellow wasn't supposed to be here.

JONES: Oh, yes. Me, too. *(RUPERT elbows JONES.)* Ow! Would you stop that? *(RUPERT elbows JONES.)* I said, cut that out. It's my turn to be heard. You never let me speak. You never let me do anything! *(RUPERT elbows JONES.)* I've got a good mind to give you a left hook, you no good—*(RUPERT elbows JONES.)* That's it, I'll—*(RUPERT suddenly gasps and falls over, dead.)* Come on, you coward. I haven't even touched you yet. *(Tries to pick up RUPERT's head. RUPERT falls back. Gasp.)* What the devil is going on here?

HIGGENBOTHAM: He appears to have fainted.

JUPITER: *(Rushes to table.)* Wait a moment. Let me see him. *(Examines RUPERT.)* Great heavens. He's dead.

JONES: Dead? But how? I didn't touch him—

RATHBONE: *(Applauding.)* Oh, jolly good! Jolly good.

BOSTON: Are you mad?

RATHBONE: While all of you idiots were distracted with the audience ploy, my murderer killed his first victim!

SYLVIA: You invited us here to have someone kill—us?

RATHBONE: Unless you can solve who's doing it? In a word, yes!

HIGGENBOTHAM: This is outrageous!

RATHBONE: Quite.

JUPITER: It's illegal.

RATHBONE: Oh, most definitely.

JONES: It's insane!

RATHBONE: Oh, undeniably. I've been sitting in the nuthouse for months thinking up the most diabolical scheme of my entire life. A crime so extravagant, not even I could solve it! Well, I could solve it, of course. I can solve anything. But certainly not one of you fatuous philistines!

MR. SALT: Hold it! My wife and I don't even belong in this circus.

SYLVIA: That's right. We aren't anything like the rest of these detective freaks.

RATHBONE: Precisely why you're the next two scheduled murder victims.

MR. SALT: WHAT?

JUPITER: He's just trying to scare you.

RATHBONE: Am I?

MR. SALT: We gotta get out of here.

MRS. HIGGENBOTHAM: This must cease immediately.

A scream offstage.

RATHBONE: Oh, very good. Sounds like a murder has been committed. Bring out the victim! *(Enter the suspects and the audience member. The audience member has been "killed." This may be done according to the needs of the company—anything from a costume over the person's clothes to fake blood to a simple sign reading "murder victim" to white makeup will do.)* Ah, delightful!

WAITRESS: *(Reading a script.)* Oh, oh. We found this body backstage.

COOK: In the kitchen.

PERSON WHO DOESN'T: It was in the storage closet.

MANAGER: Behind the refrigerator.

WAITRESS: Oh, oh, oh, oh, oh. This poor murdered man *[woman]*.

BOSTON: Wait just a moment. That person isn't really dead!

RATHBONE: Really? How perceptive of you.

JUPITER: What kind of idiocy is this?

JONES: Why, if that person isn't dead, then perhaps Rupert isn't dead either!

JONES joyously shoves RUPERT, who falls dead onto the ground.

JUPITER: No, I'm afraid he's quite dead.

JONES: Drat.

RATHBONE: You fools! Don't you see?

MRS. HIGGENBOTHAM: See what?

RATHBONE: That audience member isn't dead at all!

BOSTON: Is there an echo in here? I already said—

JUPITER: Quiet, Boston.

BOSTON: But—

JUPITER: (*As if he's discovered it.*) Then the audience member's death is just a ruse.

RATHBONE: Precisely!

JUPITER: Created to keep our attention while the murderer commits another murder.

RATHBONE: I knew I invited you here for a reason! Good show, old chap.

JUPITER: Thank you. (*Pause.*) But if there's another murder—

JONES: And we're all watching you—

A planted actor in the audience suddenly leaps to his/her feet and acts out a violent death scene. He dies. Pause

JUPITER: Yes. Well, that one seemed quite real.

HIGGENBOTHAM rushes to audience member, takes pulse, listens to heart, etc.

HIGGENBOTHAM: Quite dead, I'm afraid.

JONES: Egad!

MR. SALT: (*Pointing to person in audience nearby dead audience member.*) He did it! He did it! That guy over there! He killed him! The guy next to him! He did it! He did it! He did it! He did it!

MRS. HIGGENBOTHAM: Good heavens, how crass.

BOSTON: (*To SALT.*) I thought you weren't a detective.

MR. SALT: I'm not.

BOSTON: Then how do you know this man committed murder?

MR. SALT: Because he was sitting closest to the guy that died!

RATHBONE: Oh, just sit down, you amateur used car salesman.

MR. SALT: Hey, I—

RATHBONE: (*To WAITER and WAITRESS.*) Take that body out of here.

JUPITER: Not so fast. (*Examines body.*) I see no bullet wound.

HIGGENBOTHAM: You idiot. That's because there was no gunshot.

Cheesy gunshot effect offstage.

HIGGENBOTHAM: Oh. I suppose there was.

JONES: One moment there, Kingsley. How did you know the victim was shot?

JUPITER: Because of this note pinned to his shirt.

BOSTON: (*Rushes to body.*) A clue!

MRS. HIGGENBOTHAM: Not so fast. Let someone else examine that to make sure.

JUPITER: Very well.

BOSTON: But Kingsley—

JUPITER: Quiet, Boston.

MR. HIGGENBOTHAM approaches the body. HE looks at it closely.

HIGGENBOTHAM: Hmm. Yes. I see no bullet mark on the body anywhere.

MRS. HIGGENBOTHAM: And the note? What does it say?

JUPITER: It says “gun shot.”

MRS. HIGGENBOTHAM: I was asking Horace.

HIGGENBOTHAM: Yes, he’s quite right. It says “gunshot.”

JUPITER: Thank you.

BOSTON: But wait. The note appears to be folded in half!

JUPITER: How could I be so blind?

RATHBONE: Egad, what a group of simpletons!

HIGGENBOTHAM: (*Grabs note and unfolds it.*) It reads: “The next murder will be by gunshot.”

BOSTON: Next murder?

RATHBONE: Exactly. And not that murder.

JONES: Assuming it was a murder at all.

HIGGENBOTHAM: Of course it was. I examined the body myself. (*Feels neck.*) You see, no pulse.

JUPITER: (*Looks closely.*) There’s no pulse, eh? That’s because the murder victim is wearing a prosthetic on his neck.

HIGGENBOTHAM: Impossible!

RATHBONE: No, quite possible. You see, that victim is only an actor. Thank you, Mr. [*Mrs.*] Martinson. (*The murder victim gets*

up, takes a bow. RATHBONE slips him money.) Actors will do anything for money.

MARTINSON: Thanks, Mr. Rathbone.

RATHBONE: You are free to join the others.

Martinson climbs on stage and joins the lineup of suspects.

JONES: Wait one moment here. If the murder victim in the audience was fake—

RATHBONE: A diversion.

JONES: And the next victim is by killed by gunshot—

RATHBONE: Yes? Yes?

JONES: Then the gunshot we just heard. . .

HIGGENBOTHAM: Great Scott! Everyone check yourself to make sure you're all right!

They all frantically examine themselves. Suddenly, SYLVIA cries out.

SYLVIA: Oh! Samuel!

Everyone whirls. SAM SALT has been shot and no one realized it. If possible, we see a little blood on the shirt. Otherwise, he appears quite dead.

HIGGENBOTHAM: Well, would you look at that?

SYLVIA: Samuel! Samuel! Oh, Samuel! How could they kill you, Samuel?

She cries hysterically—and not very convincingly. Everyone watches. CYNTHIA rolls her eyes.

MRS. HIGGENBOTHAM: How ghastly.

RATHBONE: You idiots! Did I not tell you I set up a diversion so you wouldn't see the actual murder? What a bunch of morons! (*Dancing about and singing.*) I'm smarter than you are! I'm smarter than you are!

JONES: I say we rush this madman and get it over with.

HIGGENBOTHAM: Here, here.

They start toward him. RATHBONE makes a dramatic, threatening gesture.

RATHBONE: Wait!!! *(Pause.)* Would you dare to rush me now—and miss your chance at the reward money?

Pause. All take a collective moment.

JONES: Did you say—money?

RATHBONE: Yes, money, my fine forensic friend. Five million dollars to be exact. To be deposited into a Swiss bank account with your name, no questions asked at the end of the evening. *(Pause.)* To whoever is left—alive!

A collective gasp. Pause.

JUPITER: I suppose that I could stand to be in a spot of danger for five million.

BOSTON: Oh, yes, yes indeed.

JUPITER: Quiet, Boston.

BOSTON: Oh, stuff it, Kingsley.

HIGGENBOTHAM: Well, I can't be paid off. I'm completely beyond reproach. Hilda and I have more money than most major countries.

RATHBONE: And more debt than all of them combined.

HIGGENBOTHAM: What was that?

RATHBONE: You're completely broke, Higgenbotham. You inherited billions from your family name and lost it all on bad investments, poor business decisions, and a dot-com company.

MRS. HIGGENBOTHAM: Oh, Horatio. Say it's not true.

HIGGENBOTHAM: I'm afraid so, dear.

MRS. HIGGENBOTHAM: Is that why you sold the mansion, the yacht, and our six states you'd purchased wholesale?

HIGGENBOTHAM: Yes, my dear. I had a serious cash flow problem.

MRS. HIGGENBOTHAM: Oh, bother.

RATHBONE: Enough of this! You're all greedy pigs who think you're geniuses, and I'm going to show all of you up—or kill all of you first.

JONES: You'll never get away with this.

CYNTHIA: Nobody's gotten away with anything.

All whirl. She's standing next to her father's body.

MRS. HIGGENBOTHAM: Oh, you poor dear. Losing your father, you must be mollified. Here, Missy the Wonderdog will give you comfort—

CYNTHIA: Keep that mangy mutt to yourself.

MRS. HIGGENBOTHAM: I beg your pardon?

CYNTHIA: That uncouth old blabbermouth wasn't my father. He was my mother's fifth husband. My father was a golfer in Canada.

SYLVIA: Sit down, Cynthia.

CYNTHIA: No, Mother. I won't play your stupid game anymore. She brought Sam here so he'd be murdered.

JUPITER: Sweet mother of mercy!

SYLVIA: She's lying! I didn't do it.

RATHBONE: Didn't you? You didn't find it the least bizarre that your invitation read, "Murder Party. Your husband is on the victim's list. Reward possible?"

SYLVIA: I thought it was a joke.

MRS. HIGGENBOTHAM: So that means she's the murderer?

HIGGENBOTHAM: No, dear.

MRS. HIGGENBOTHAM: I'm confused.

HIGGENBOTHAM: Just play along. We'll get to the bottom of things sooner or later.

RATHBONE: So, Cynthia Salt. I've left you a plethora of clues in the murder of your father.

CYNTHIA: My mother's husband.

RATHBONE: Mother's husband, right. Who did it and how?

JONES: It's quite obvious who did it. Any fool can see that man over there doesn't belong here.

COOK: Who, me?

JONES: No, him. *(Points out man who obviously doesn't belong.)*
That person over there.

HIGGENBOTHAM: (*Shocked.*) Why, you're right.

MRS. HIGGENBOTHAM: Is that blood all over his clothes?

HIGGENBOTHAM: It is! I didn't even notice before.

JUPITER: And in his pocket.

BOSTON: He's got a gun!

All gasp. RATHBONE rolls eyes.

RATHBONE: Oh, for heaven's sakes, you ninnies don't suspect him, do you?

HIGGENBOTHAM: Of course we do. He's got bloody clothing. A suspect look. A pistol.

RATHBONE: Egad, what simpletons. I'll play along. (*To PERSON WHO DOESN'T BELONG.*) All right, you. You're under arrest.

PERSON WHO DOESN'T: Me, sir?

RATHBONE: You, sir. Tell us your name.

PERSON WHO DOESN'T: Uh. Red.

JONES: Red? How very strange. What an inappropriate name.

BOSTON: He doesn't even have red hair.

RATHBONE: Well, you sniveling idiots? Can you guess why he's named Red and doesn't have red hair?

BOSTON: Yes! Yes, I—(*Pause.*) No. No, I can't.

RATHBONE: Must I do all of your work for you? (*To PERSON WHO DOESN'T BELONG.*) What's your last name, sir?

PERSON WHO DOESN'T: Herring.

HIGGENBOTHAM: (*Slowly dawns on him.*) Red. . . Herring? Oh, ghastly pun, sir. Simply ghastly.

RATHBONE: Thank you.

JUPITER: (*Confused.*) So, he didn't do it?

RATHBONE: Doubtful. After all, a red herring is—

JONES: Put there to throw you off.

BOSTON: So you'll suspect someone who isn't really the criminal.

RATHBONE: Blimey.

BOSTON: Then, who committed the murder?

RATHBONE: Will you stop asking me that? You're supposed to tell me!! Why do you think I brought you here, you dunderheads, for a spaghetti dinner?

BOSTON: I've been meaning to ask you about that—

RATHBONE: Put me away in an asylum for staging my own murders, will you? I only did it because no one—no one in the world—could out-sleuth me! I became so dreadfully tired of chasing after two-bit criminals, people who couldn't commit a perfect crime if they were given a traceless weapon and step-by-step instructions. So, I've brought you here to challenge me, you stuck-up ninnies, you forensic oddballs, you dithering dolts, you periwig-pated fellows, you tumultuous turkeys, you amateurish armchair puzzle solvers. You couldn't solve the *New York Times* Crossword with a Dictionary and a bucket of answers!

JONES: What do you mean by all this?

RATHBONE: Tis Miching Malicho. Means mischief.

HIGGENBOTHAM: (*Realization.*) Hamlet.

RATHBONE: Egad! At last I've found someone literate.

JUPITER: What does Hamlet have to do with this?

HIGGENBOTHAM: At the performance before the king. The players play the king's murder of his own brother, and when asked what it means—

JONES: Hamlet answers, "Tis Miching Malicho. Means mischief."

HIGGENBOTHAM: The world's most meaningless literary line.

RATHBONE: I hated my English teacher for forcing me to read such inane nonsense. "Miching Malicho" indeed. I decided one day I'd make it mean something in the real world.

MRS. HIGGENBOTHAM: But what are they playing before the king?

HIGGENBOTHAM: A recurrence of the king's murder.

MRS. HIGGENBOTHAM: How?

HIGGENBOTHAM: Someone poured poison in the king's ear.

RATHBONE: Bingo! You're a genius!

JONES: Then you're saying the murders are all poisons?

All eyes on RATHBONE, who pauses for a long moment.

RATHBONE: Maybe.

JUPITER: Then the poison could only have come from one place—

JONES: The food!

CYNTHIA: Yeah, like Mom's husband—

SYLVIA: Call him Dad, sweetheart.

CYNTHIA: Mom's husband is the only one who ate at our table.

JONES: And Rupert kept me from having a bite at all.

BOSTON: Yes, yes! And Kingsley. You ate everything at our table as well. Remember—I'm vegetarian.

JUPITER: Oh, bugger.

BOSTON: This is magnificent! If Kingsley here collapses and dies, we know the murderer is using poison!

HIGGENBOTHAM: But Mr. Salt was shot.

JONES: Not necessarily.

JUPITER: What about the blood on his shirt?

SYLVIA: Actually—that was tomato sauce. See? *(She shows the stain.)*

BOSTON: Then he wasn't shot at all?

HIGGENBOTHAM: *(Crosses to body.)* Is there a bullet wound?

MRS. HIGGENBOTHAM: But why would the killer leave a note saying the next murder would be by gunshot?

BOSTON: I say, Kingsley. How are you feeling?

JUPITER: Very well, thank you.

BOSTON: Not a bit queasy or sick?

JUPITER: No.

BOSTON: Not the least bit faint?

JUPITER: Not at all.

BOSTON: Sure?

JUPITER: Quite.

BOSTON: Bother. I suppose we're going down the wrong track again.

HIGGENBOTHAM: Unless—

ALL: Yes?

HIGGENBOTHAM: Unless Red Herring isn't a red herring at all!

RATHBONE: Oh, jolly good! Someone finally takes note.

HIGGENBOTHAM: Everything Rathbone's done so far has been led us off track. Perhaps having a red herring named Red Herring is another ruse.

MRS. HIGGENBOTHAM: Oh, very nice, dear.

HIGGENBOTHAM: Thank you.

RATHBONE: But if I intended to do that, wouldn't I give you a clue?

JONES: What kind of clue?

RATHBONE: Something evil and deliciously sinister. Such as, pip, pip, killing someone you completely don't expect!

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