

Audition Piece #2 - Mrs Drudge

THE REAL INSPECTOR HOUND / 2791

Moon
Birdboot
Simon

[BIRDBOOT hands over a few colour slides and a battery-powered viewer which MOON holds up to his eyes as he speaks.]

Yes . . . yes . . . lovely . . . awfully sound. It has scale, it has colour, it is, in the best sense of the word, electric. Large as it is, it is a small masterpiece—I would go so far as to say—kinetic⁸ without being pop, and having said that, I think it must be said that here we have a review that adds a new dimension to the critical scene. I urge you to make haste to the Theatre Royal, for this is the stuff of life itself. [Handing back the slides, morosely.] All I ever got was "Unforgettable" on the posters for . . . What was it?

BIRDBOOT Oh—yes—I know. . . Was that you? I thought it was Higgs.

[The phone rings. MRS DRUDGE seems to have been waiting for it do so and for the last few seconds has been dusting it with an intense concentration. She snatches it up.]

MRS DRUDGE [Into phone.] Hello, the drawing-room of Lady Muldoon's country residence one morning in early spring? . . . Hello!—the draw—Who? Who did you wish to speak to? I'm afraid there is no one of that name here, this is all very mysterious and I'm sure it's leading up to something, I hope nothing is amiss for we, that is Lady Muldoon and her houseguests, are here cut off from the world, including Magnus, the wheelchair-ridden half-brother of her ladyship's husband Lord Albert Muldoon who ten years ago went out for a walk on the cliffs and was never seen again—and all alone, for they had no children.

MOON Derivative,⁹ of course.

BIRDBOOT But quite sound.

MRS DRUDGE Should a stranger enter our midst, which I very much doubt, I will tell him you called. Good-bye.

[She puts down the phone and catches sight of the previously seen suspicious character who has now entered again, more suspiciously than ever, through the french windows. He senses her stare, freezes, and straightens up.]

SIMON Ah!—hello there! I'm Simon Gascoyne, I hope you don't mind, the door was open so I wandered in. I'm a friend of Lady Muldoon, the lady of the house, having made her acquaintance through a mutual friend, Felicity Cunningham, shortly after moving into this neighbourhood just the other day.

MRS DRUDGE I'm Mrs Drudge. I don't live in but I pop in on my bicycle when the weather allows to help in the running of charming though somewhat isolated Muldoon Manor. Judging by the time [she glances at the clock] you did well to get here before high water cut us off for all practical purposes from the outside world.

SIMON I took the short cut over the cliffs and followed one of the old smugglers' paths through the treacherous swamps that surround this strangely inaccessible house.

MRS DRUDGE Yes, many visitors have remarked on the topographical quirk in the local strata whereby there are no roads leading from the Manor, though there are ways of getting to it, weather allowing.

8. In motion.

9. I.e., of such other plays as Agatha Christie's *The Mousetrap*.

SIMON Yes, well I must say it's a lovely day so far.

MRS DRUDGE Ah, but now that the cuckoo-beard is in bud there'll be fog before the sun hits Foster's Ridge.

SIMON I say, it's wonderful how you country people really know weather.

MRS DRUDGE [*Suspiciously.*] Know whether what?

SIMON [*Glancing out of the window.*] Yes, it does seem to be coming on a bit foggy.

MRS DRUDGE The fog is very treacherous around here—it rolls off the sea without warning, shrouding the cliffs in a deadly mantle of blind man's buff.¹

SIMON Yes, I've heard it said.

MRS DRUDGE I've known whole week-ends when Muldoon Manor, as this lovely old Queen Anne² House is called, might as well have been floating on the pack ice for all the good it would have done phoning the police. It was on such a week-end as this that Lord Muldoon who had lately brought his beautiful bride back to the home of his ancestors, walked out of this house ten years ago, and his body was never found.

SIMON Yes, indeed, poor Cynthia.

MRS DRUDGE His name was Albert.

SIMON Yes indeed, poor Albert. But tell me, is Lady Muldoon about?

MRS DRUDGE I believe she is playing tennis on the lawn with Felicity Cunningham.

SIMON [*Startled.*] Felicity Cunningham?

MRS DRUDGE A mutual friend, I believe you said. A happy chance. I will tell them you are here.

SIMON Well, I can't really stay as a matter of fact—please don't disturb them—I really should be off.

MRS DRUDGE They would be very disappointed. It is some time since we have had a four for pontoon bridge³ at the Manor, and I don't play cards myself.

SIMON There is another guest, then?

MRS DRUDGE Major Magnus, the crippled half-brother of Lord Muldoon who turned up out of the blue from Canada just the other day, completes the house-party.

[*MRS DRUDGE leaves on this, SIMON is undecided.*]

MOON [*Ruminating quietly.*] I think I must be waiting for Higgs to die.

BIRDBOOT What?

MOON Half afraid that I will vanish when he does.

[*The phone rings. SIMON picks it up.*]

SIMON Hello?

MOON I wonder if it's the same for Puckeridge?

BIRDBOOT AND SIMON [*Together.*] Who?

MOON Third string.

BIRDBOOT Your stand-in?

MOON Does he wait for Higgs and I to write each other's obituary—does he dream—?

1. A game in which a blindfolded person has to catch and identify others not blindfolded.

2. Built in the reign of Queen Anne (1702–14), or in the architectural style of that period.

3. Pontoon (otherwise *vingt-et-un*) and bridge are two quite different card games. A pontoon bridge, crossing a river, is supported by a line of barges, rafts, or hollow metal cylinders.