

MURDER MOST FOWL by Simon Tytherleigh

DRAMATIS PERSONAE

Narrator
Gaston de Crouesty-Goussette
Bertil Le Plan-Coeur
Lawyer
Mudgeon, the butler
Sir Toby Gussett
Audrey Gussett
Crispin Gussett
Frank
Vinny
Aunt Bertha Gussett
Matilda
Hilda
Imogen le Plan-Coeur
Policeman
Aunt Agatha Gussett
Chorus of ancestors

ACT 1

Intro

NARRATOR: Our play is a terrible story about a doomed family. It begins nearly a thousand years ago, when French noblemen accompanied William, Duke of Normandy on a short booze cruise across the Channel and never went home again.

Gaston de Crouesty- Goussette and his great friend, Bertil le Plan- Coeur fought bravely against King Harald and his somewhat hung-over troops.

Mime of Gaston and Bertil fighting with Anglo-Saxons. 'Harald' gets an arrow in his eye and peels off to die. Gaston and Bertil congratulate each other, triumphant. All very coarse acting- style.

The victorious companions liked the look of England, and the look of English girls even more. They had heard of a fabled land of riches and bold knights far out in the West, so made their way across the country.

Clippety – clop etc.

As lovers, being French, they of course had no equal, though Bertil proved to be the

more fertile of the two. Although there are a handful of Fitz-Gussetts scattered across England, it is well known that Dorset is full of Plan-Coeurs.

Finally, they reached God's own country, a quiet wooded valley not far from the M5, and put down their swords to become English gentlemen. Bertil grew rich and prosperous, and built himself a large manor house up on the moor, while Gaston struggled. Then Bertil died suddenly. Gaston mourned the loss of his friend, the blow softened only by inheriting his land and manor... and wife and children. There was a dark rumour, never substantiated, that he had in fact murdered his friend....

The Crouesty-Gousettes have lived in Plan-Coeurs Hall ever since. Lady Agatha Gussett was the last of the line, and had no direct heir. Small wonder, then, that the other members of the family took such an interest in her health and well-being.

One afternoon a dreadful accident occurred. Lady Agatha was an inventor and gadget enthusiast, and on that fateful day was experimenting with the latest prototype of her electric mangle. Somehow she must have caught her sleeve in it, and thus met her end. The invention was not a commercial success.

Her maid witnessed the tragedy, and ran off never to be seen again, but Mudgeon the butler remained, ever the faithful servant.

SCENE 1

Two burglars enter Warily from the back of the hall. Torches.

FRANK: This is it.

VINNY: What is, Dad?

FRANK: This...great big spooky manor house, Vinny. This is where she lived.

VINNY: Oh.

FRANK: All we've got to do is nick the painting.

VINNY: Is that all?

FRANK: Yeah, leave everything else.

VINNY: Can't we do a little, er.... independent business? I've brought me sack!

FRANK: No, absolutely not. That is not in the terms and conditions of the agreement. You just do as you're told. Alright? We are professionals you and me – upstanding members of the Devon branch of NUMPTI.

VINNY: NUMPTI?! What's that, then?

FRANK: The National Union for Moral Pilferers and Thieves with....err

VINNY: Idiots?

FRANK: In your case, yes. Now shut up and let's get on.

VINNY: Alright, Dad.What's it look like, this painting?

FRANK: Well, it's a geezer....err... holding a chicken. That's what I was told, anyways. We'll recognise it, bound to. Can't miss it.

VINNY: OK.

FRANK: Shh, someone's coming. Hide!

They conceal themselves.

SCENE 2

SONG: Aunt Agatha's Family.

The door creaks noisily. Enter the family in dribs and drabs. Mudgeon greets them lugubriously. A dusty old hall, covered in cobwebs, with portraits around the walls. Some of them are reminiscent of the great masters – Munch's Scream, Gainsborough, Picasso, Dali etc. Some have living faces in them. One or two have real arms coming out. This is the musical CHORUS, looking down on the family.

At the end of the song, one of the CHORUS says 'They're coming' 'Shhh!' and they all take up their static positions.

Above the huge fireplace there is a Self-Portrait by Rembrandt, clutching a chicken painted in a rather obviously clashing style...

AUDREY: By rights it should all go to me, Crispin.

CRISPIN: Rubbish! As nephew, I have the better claim. You're only a second cousin, Audrey.

AUDREY: Maybe. But I'm older than you. Anyway, what do you think it's worth, this old pile?

CRISPIN: Well, it's gone to rack and ruin that's for sure. Plonkers Hall used to be worth a couple of million at least. Did you know it's supposed to be haunted?

AUDREY: Really? Hardly surprising, I suppose. It's so creepy. Feels like you're being watched all the time.

CRISPIN: Oh yes, the ghosts of the old Norman knights, clanking around. God knows how Aunt Agatha survived here. No wonder she was such a fruitcake. Riddled with death-watch beetle...

AUDREY: Ooh, how unpleasant!

CRISPIN: No, the house.... Can't be worth much now... But there's plenty of family portraits, they must be worth a bob or two. And the family silver...

AUDREY: Surely you don't want all this?

CRISPIN: Want? ...I need it... urgently. My investments went down in the crash, then there's the maintenance and alimony. Do you know how much it costs to keep a pony these days? And that's another thing, I've had a damn poor run on the gee-gees lately. I'd do anything just now to get my hands on some money.

AUDREY: You could always try working...

CRISPIN: What? Oh, come off it. I don't mind admitting it, I was born with a silver spoon in my mouth...

AUDREY: More like a whole canteen of cutlery!

CRISPIN: You know, for an Earth Mother you can be really cutting sometimes. Oh, look who's

here!

AUDREY: Oh no, I thought he wasn't coming..... Uncle Toby! How lovely to see you! What brings you here?... oh, silly question. I suppose the lawyers have got to have their day. And we can't wait to hear who will inherit her fortune, can we, Crispin?

UNCLE TOBY: Fortune, my arse! The mean old cow frittered it all away. Never spent a penny on the family seat, kept it all to herself, and now there's probably just a pile of bloody debts.

AUDREY: Never speak ill of the dead....

UNCLE TOBY: Bugger that. Even if she was my sister...She can rot in hell for all I care. She was so mean to me... you know, she never stopped reminding me of the time she caught me prancing round in her underwear. I was only ten!.... If there's anything left after the greedy lawyers, I'll just have my share and then be damned.

AUDREY: Well, there's still a lot of family portraits....

UNCLE TOBY: Worthless junk, (*aside*) all except for that one, if it is a genuine Rembrandt.

CRISPIN: I think you'll find it's all going to me as her nephew and heir..... And unlike her own brother at least I cared for her.

UNCLE TOBY: Call that caring? Sucked up to her, more like, you little leech!

CRISPIN: Pipe down now, Uncle. It's been a terrible week for all of us...

UNCLE TOBY: No, glad she's gone! Oh God, it's the three witches....

BERTHA, MATILDA and HILDA: Good day, everyone.

UNCLE T: That's put a curse on the place, for sure, then.

AUDREY: They are entitled to be here, as part of the family.

UNCLE T: Family! Hah! Nest of bloody vipers, more like. Sooner out of it the better. Families are just endless embarrassment and interminable God-awful get-togethers. I need a drink.

CRISPIN: Welcome, Great Aunt Bertha. Matilda, Hilda. It was a fine funeral, wasn't it?

AUNT BERTHA: What are we doing here? Has someone died?

MATILDA: Yes, Mother. It's Cousin Agatha, you remember? We went to her funeral last Thursday?

AUNT BERTHA: Yes, I am rather. Fetch me a large sherry! Mudgeon....

MUDGEON: Certainly, Madam.

MATILDA: Sorry, she's getting worse, although sometimes I think she puts it on.

AUNT BERTHA: What are they putting on? Is it a play?

MATILDA: No, Mother, it's just the lawyer reading the will. Hilda, can you help me?

They sit AUNT BERTHA down, ready for the LAWYER to start. IMOGEN arrives,

IMOGEN: Sorry I'm late, everyone.

CRISPIN: Oh Hello, Imogen! How nice to see you, although I thought it was only close relatives...
(*Kiss, kiss*) You're looking absolutely gorgeous. Good trip over?

IMOGEN: It's not that far from Dorset, you know, even for a Plan-Coeur. Lovely to see you too, Crispin. Still making disastrous investments?

CRISPIN: Umm....

IMOGEN: And Audrey. No luck with finding a man yet?

AUDREY: Errr...not really....

IMOGEN: Hardly surprising, is it? I mean, look at you. How are the yurts and lentilburgers these days?

CRISPIN: Still building bridges, Imogen? It was civil engineering, wasn't it?

IMOGEN: More demolition these days. Lots of job satisfaction.

AUDREY: Yes, you'd be good at that.

IMOGEN: So sad about Agatha. She was such good fun. I used to love coming here. You know the only thing I'd really like to remember her by is that picture up there, with the beautifully painted hen.

Everyone looks....

SONG: Money, Money, Money.

CRISPIN: Oh, I think we're about to begin.

They take their seats.

LAWYER: Good afternoon, Ladies and Gentlemen, my sincere condolences to you all. We are gathered here to establish the beneficiaries to the will of the late Lady Agatha Gussett. Now, it is unfortunately somewhat complicated, as it has been subject to many codicils... Ah, here we are: (*going through the codicils*) Everything goes to Crispin, everything goes to Imogen, equal shares to all, contents of underwear drawer to Toby, everything to Hilda and Matilda, everything to Audrey, and at last.... everything to the Battery Hen Rescue and Rehab Centre. *Pause. Gasp.* But there was a final codicil, signed on the very day of her death, and I am now confident that her last wishes, which it has to be said are somewhat unusual, are as follows:

Only those members of the family who stay in this house tonight will be entitled to a share in her estate. Furthermore, and notwithstanding the heretoforementioned, etcetera, etcetera... (*clears*)

throat) all will be required to take part in a séance, to be held this evening.

UNCLE TOBY: Absolutely preposterous! Trust the daft old bat to pull a stunt like this. She probably booby-trapped the house before she died.....

CRISPIN: Oh, do shut up, Uncle!

UNCLE TOBY: Well, I'm having none of it. Just give me my share and I'll be off.... and I don't want the bloody underwear, thank you.

LAWYER: I am afraid that will not be possible, Sir Toby. The only definite provision in the will is for Mudgeon, her butler. She bequeaths him, without lien or restraint or subject to any taxation the sum of one hundred pounds

MUDGEON: Bloody hell, for a lifetime's service....

LAWYER:and the portrait over the fireplace. *He starts to put his papers away.*

MUDGEON: *(pleased)* Oh!

IMOGEN: Oh...

UNCLE TOBY: *(aside)* It's an outrage! That should be mine, if anything is.

HILDA *(whispering to Matilda)*: What's so special about the portrait?

MATILDA: It's supposed to be a Rembrandt. 'Self portrait with chicken'.... from his late period. I don't think anyone else knows that, so keep it quiet.

AUNT BERTHA: Did you say chicken for tea? My favourite!

H & M: Shh!

MATILDA: You can tell it's genuine by the way the eyes follow you round the room.

HILDA: But he's looking over there!

MATILDA: No, the chicken's!

HILDA: Oh!

LAWYER: That is all. Ladies and Gentlemen. I must be away before dark, so please excuse me. I shall see you tomorrow, those of you who wish to remain beneficiaries, that is. Good day. *He leaves, followed by Imogen, Toby and Audrey in search of a drink. Crispin stays, fingering the pieces on the mantelpiece and shelves. He pockets one or two.*

HILDA: Mudgeon, is there room for everyone to stay?

MUDGEON: Oh yes, Miss. The West Wing has been shut for years, on account of the ...ahem...goings-on, but there are plenty of bedrooms available there.

HILDA: What goings-on?

MUDGEON: The ghosts, Miss?

MATILDA: Ghosts?!

MUDGEON: Yes.

HILDA: What sort of ghosts?

MUDGEON: They say that the spirits of Gaston de Crouesty Gousette and Bertil Le Plan Coeur walk the corridors at night.

MATILDA: Have you seen them, Mudgeon?

MUDGEON: No, Miss. I sleep in the Annexe. They are too noisy for me. The only person who could abide them was Lady Agatha herself. It is rumoured that a single glance from them could kill. Anything else? Drinks will be served dreckly.

MATILDA: Oh, how exciting! No, no...thank you, and please go easy on the sherry.... Hilda....?

MUDGEON goes and fetches a drinks tray. He serves to all. One of the portraits grabs a glass as he passes.

HILDA: What is it?

MATILDA: Listen, it's obvious isn't it?

HILDA: What is?

MATILDA: Well, Aunt Agatha had some sort of crazy plan to scare everyone away with the ghosts.

HILDA: I bet they don't even exist.

MATILDA: Or just the rumour of the ghosts. That would be enough..... So... if we want to get that inheritance, what about.... helping it along a bit?

Pause. HILDA nods, then....

HILDA: What do you mean?

MATILDA: Come with me... *They exit. They return immediately to fetch the abandoned BERTHA, who has been gazing around and wishing for more sherry. AUDREY enters.*

AUDREY: Crispin!

CRISPIN: What?

AUDREY: It's a complete disaster! It's not what I wanted at all.

CRISPIN: Well, I wasn't banking on the crazy will, either. I don't know why she didn't just leave it

all to me. I'm the closest.

AUDREY: God, it's all me, me, me, isn't it? Look, it's obvious the money should be divided between the two of us. Toby would only drink it away, and as for Bertha and the twins, I don't think they're short of a penny.

CRISPIN: I thought New Age hippies didn't care about material things?

AUDREY: Look, I might have dropped out, but that doesn't make me exempt from tax!... And besides, the holiday yurts haven't been quite the hit I hoped for.

CRISPIN: Hardly surprising, in Basingstoke.

AUDREY: At least I try!

CRISPIN: Well, all we've got to do now is submit to Aunt Agatha's silly games for a night, and then...Aha! That's just it..... We've got to get rid of the others.

AUDREY: What do you mean?

CRISPIN: Well, if we're going to split the inheritance, the others will have to be done away with!

AUDREY: What?! (*as if he's suggesting murder...*)

CRISPIN: We'll scare them out of the house! Pretend to be ghosts....?

AUDREY: Oh I see! Just for a moment, I thought..... Oh, don't be ridiculous. I've got a much better idea.... Did you hear Toby's reaction when that chicken painting was mentioned?

CRISPIN: No, but I saw the twins whispering and pointing at it. God, it's dreadful!

AUDREY: Never mind what it looks like, it's a masterpiece! By Rembrandt. Look, it's even got his signature on it.

CRISPIN: Could have fooled me.

AUDREY: Almost anything could fool you, Crispin.

CRISPIN: What?... Is that actually how you spell 'Rembrandt'?

AUDREY: Never mind. Here's my idea. That painting is probably the only thing in the house worth any real money, and that even includes those knick-knacks you've just been pocketing.

CRISPIN: Only souvenirs....

AUDREY: Listen! It's very simple. We just steal the painting tonight. If anyone sees us, we pretend we're the ghosts and scare them off. Then everyone gets a share of the crumbling hall...

CRISPIN: ... a share of nothing....

AUDREY: ...but you and I get the real prize. Just think....millions of pounds, in our hands tonight!

CRISPIN: Oh, I like it....Ok, but couldn't you have done it yourself? Why are you letting me in on this?

AUDREY: Because I'm not selfish like you, Crispin.

SONG – *Greatest Night of My Life.*

They exit.

SCENE 3

FRANK: Did you hear that?

VINNY: What?

FRANK: They're only going to be staying the whole bloody night, that's what!

VINNY: Oh, well, that's very nice for them.

FRANK: Yes, but not for us. It complicates things.

VINNY: Well, they've probably all had quite a tiring journey.

FRANK: Look, I'm not interested in their bloody travel arrangements....

VINNY: Just trying to be professional, Dad.

FRANK: Well, shut up and listen. We'll have to wait until they've all gone to bed, then we'll nip in and liberate the daub.

VINNY: Oh...and what about the picture, then?

FRANK: Yeah, that's what I mean! Oh Gawd... look in the trade we call a painting a daub, because the painter daubs the paint onto the painting... OK? Geddit, Vinny?

VINNY: Umm, well why didn't you just call it a 'painting', then, Frank?

FRANK: Oh, give me strength! And we've hours to wait...
They fold out their camping stools and settle down.

FRANK: Did you bring your SuDoku?

VINNY: Yeah, and Mum made some sandwiches. They're in here with the jemmy and the flask.
Rummages around.

FRANK: OK. And we'll just keep an eye out, until it's all clear.

VINNY: Oh, no.

FRANK: What, now?

VINNY: They've got a bit squashed.... and Mum's gone and made hummous and salad again. I asked her not to. Why can't we have pork pies like proper criminals?

SONG – You've gotta nick a painting or two....

VINNY: Dad....?

FRANK: Just shut up, will you! I'm trying to concentrate.

SCENE 4 – CHORUS

The stage is empty. The CHORUS open their 'windows' and lean out of their paintings.

PICASSO: Bloody cheek? Calling us worthless junk. Did you hear them...?

SCREAM: They're going to dump us, I told you! Probably put us all on a bonfire...

MOANER: Don't know what the modern generation is coming to. All they're interested in is money.

PEARL: We've got to do something! We can't just sit here!

They all look at each other.

SCREAM: Aaagh!

PEARL: That would scare them alright.

SCREAM: It's just my wretched toothache....

MOANER: In my day honour counted for something. Family honour.

PICASSO: Society's gone to the dogs, if you ask me. No morals anymore.

PEARL: All they want to do is steal that painting. I say we've got to stick together!

PICASSO: Quite right.

MOANER: Won't be any use. They just ignore us...

PICASSO: Oh, do stop moaning, Moaner!

SCREAM: Anyway, the only ones who can do any proper scaring are Gaston and Bertil.

PEARL: Right, we'll get them onto it. We've got to take a stand!

MOANER: I don't think I could stand up. Sitting like this for four hundred years doesn't half ache.

PICASSO: You should try pulling a face like mine!

SCREAM: Waaagh!

BLACKOUT

SCENE 5

The family are just finishing dinner. MUDGEON is clearing the table.

AUNT BERTHA:.... oh, yes, it was lovely. We were entertained so well. Agatha got to dance with all the officers, and she looked radiant, so beautiful..... But I got the big prize and had a waltz with... oh, umm, what's his name now, the one with the moustache?

UNCLE T: Hitler.

AUNT BERTHA: That's right. Herr Hitler... He was such a gentleman, absolutely charming, although he couldn't dance for toffee. But he had kind eyes. He was much misunderstood, you know. Oh, what fun we had back then.....

UNCLE T: Dear God....

AUNT BERTHA: Neither of us cared much for that Goebbels chappie, though. Weaselly little man, wandering hands and a creepy leer.....

UNCLE T: Oh, someone shut her up, for God's sake.....

AUNT BERTHA: But Mussolini, what a charmer he was. And a delicious tea, I must say....for an Italian. Tea is so reassuring, isn't it?

CRISPIN: Right, well, thank you Aunt Bertha for your reminiscences ...now for the séance.

AUNT BERTHA: Did someone say séance? Oh how delightful, perhaps we can conjure them up! I never did thank him for that dance....

CRISPIN: Or perhaps not... Now, I have to say that at far as I am concerned, this is only to fulfil the requirements of the will. It's all hocus-pocus in my opinion.

AUDREY: I agree.

UNCLE T: I really couldn't care less. Another whisky, Mudgeon.

MUDGEON: Certainly, Sir. *Mudgeon goes.*

CRISPIN: Does anyone think there is any point to this séance?

HILDA and MATILDA: Oh yes! We'll do it!

AUNT BERTHA: Well, only if we can ask about Herr Hitler. I wonder what became of him?

IMOGEN: I dunno, Agatha wanted us to hold a seance, so let's just give it a go.

The table is cleared. All take their seats. Mudgeon returns with the whisky. TOBY downs it in one, and gestures for another. MUDGEON goes again.

HILDA: Right..... So here we are. Everyone place their hands on the table and close their eyes. Mudgeon, would you turn the lights down, please?

SONG: There's something happening here

All place their hands on the table expectantly. The lights dim. Silence.

AUDREY: Is that it?

HILDA: No, no, give it some time. Close your eyes..... *Pause*..... Is there anyone there? *Pause*...

AUNT AGATHA (*off, spookily*): Yes!

UNCLE T: Well, that's a start. Surprise, surprise...

MATILDA: Shh.

AUNT BERTHA: Are you Herr Hit.....

MATILDA: Oh, do shut up, Mother! Who are you?

Silence. Mudgeon returns with the whisky. The glass tinkles. All gasp in surprise, except Toby, who is bored by the whole thing.

HILDA: Are you Aunt Agatha?

AUNT AGATHA: Yes!

UNCLE T: How very convenient!

MATILDA: Wow!

HILDA: Do you have a message?

AUNT AGATHA: Yes!

MATILDA: What is it?

Pause

AUNT AGATHA: You will die!

Gasp.

MATILDA: Oh no!

UNCLE T: Oh, how very original!

CRISPIN: Who?....Who will die?

AUNT AGATHA: The Guilty!

IMOGEN: Guilty of what?

AUNT AGATHA: MURDER!

All gasp in astonishment. Even the CHORUS.

ALL: MURDER????!!!

IMOGEN: Whose murder?

AUNT AGATHA: Mine!

AUDREY: Oh my God!

CRISPIN: When? When will they die?

AUNT AGATHA: Tonight!

MATILDA: Tonight?!

AUNT BERTHA: What's happening tonight? Is there going to be a dance?

HILDA: No, it's alright, Mother. It's nothing. Someone's going to die.

AUNT BERTHA: Oh, goody. I do love a party!

UNCLE T: Enough of this bloody charade! Who's behind all this? Is it you? *To Crispin.*

CRISPIN: No! It's none of us. We've all got our hands still on the table.

HILDA: It was her real ghost. I could feel it going all cold when she spoke.

UNCLE T: I knew it. It's just like her other wretched tricks. One of you is in on this nonsense! Who is it? *(He goes and checks behind the door)*..... Well, as far as I'm concerned, you can all go to Hell!

IMOGEN: What does this mean? Did one of us murder Aunt Agatha? I can't believe it. She died in an accident.... didn't she?

AUNT BERTHA: Oh, is it one of those murder mystery weekends? What fun!

UNCLE T: And you can stop looking at me like that! I didn't murder her! What would I have stood to gain? Alright, I loathed her, like the good siblings we were, but murder...? It's hardly worth the pittance any of us are likely to get from her estate, to spend the night being taunted and humiliated by bloody Agatha from beyond the grave....

AUDREY: But weren't you the first one to find her?

UNCLE T: Yes, but that doesn't make me guilty. I was drunk, not murderous.....*They all stare*..... Besides, three of us were there that day. And Mudgeon.... We were arguing about her wretched will, then we all left, and she and the maid must have started fiddling around trying to get the bloody mangle machine to work. Suddenly the motor starts whirring loudly, and there's a scream. Mudgeon

and I arrive at the same moment, to find her body all flattened and squeezed dry, and the maid doing a runner across the lawn.

MUDGEON: Indeed, she was... somewhat extruded, Sir.

AUNT BERTHA: (*pointing at UNCLE T.*) Oh, it's definitely him. He looks terribly guilty! Have I won?

HILDA: Quiet, Mother!

UNCLE T: Look, we told the Police all this at the time. They've been searching for the maid. If anyone's guilty of murder, it's probably her.

IMOGEN: Except she isn't here tonight. And the murderer apparently is...

UNCLE T: According to some prank of a séance! Do you really believe all that nonsense?

IMOGEN: It seems to have spooked you!

UNCLE T: I'm not putting up with this any longer. Mudgeon, will you call me a taxi?

MUDGEON: Certainly, Sir Toby.

He goes to dial. There is a phone on the wall upstage.

MUDGEON: (*returning*) I'm sorry sir, but we appear not to have a line.

UNCLE T: Well, who's got a mobile phone, then? ... *Several proffer theirs.*

UNCLE T: What's the taxi number?

MUDGEON: Unfortunately there is no coverage here, sir.

UNCLE T: Oh, for God's sakes, it's like the bloody dark ages.... Will someone give me a lift down to the station, then?

AUDREY: I will. Come on. I won't be gone long.

CRISPIN: Are you sure this is a good idea? I mean, if he is the murderer.....

AUDREY: We'll see.....One down...

MUDGEON: Take care, Miss Audrey. There is a terrible eerie fog swirling round the moor tonight. *Audrey and Uncle T exit.*

IMOGEN: I think it's time for bed.

AUNT BERTHA: I seem to have lost the plot. Can someone tell me what's going on?

SCENE 6

*We hear the distant sound of a car trying to start, but failing.
FRANK and VINNY appear, then hide as soon as the sisters enter.
HILDA and MATILDA are conspiring.*

MATILDA: Right, so that's all agreed. We wait till midnight, otherwise the others might still be up.

HILDA: But if they're already in bed, then how....?

MATILDA: Easy, we make lots of noise, y'know clanking and thuds and all that sort of thing.

HILDA: OK....But what if there really is a murderer in the house?

MATILDA: Oh come on, it's just Aunt Agatha having a laugh at our expense. We'll use the suits of armour in the hallway. If we can scare everyone out of the house, then they won't qualify for the inheritance. And we'll have swords in case we meet the murderer...

SONG – After Midnight.

They giggle. Exeunt. AUDREY and UNCLE T return. MUDGEON appears.

UNCLE T: I don't ruddy believe it! Effectively cut off. In this day and age, I ask you!

MUDGEON: Very sorry, Sir Toby.

AUDREY: It must be the damp that's preventing the car from starting, It's never happened before. You can hardly blame Aunt Agatha for the weather.

UNCLE T: It's like pea-bloody-soup out there.

MUDGEON: The fog can sometimes linger for days. Walking is not a good idea, especially in the dark. The paths are very indistinct, and one can easily blunder into a bog. People have been sucked down never to be seen again.... Only last year....

UNCLE T: Yes, thank you, Mudgeon. Looks like I have no choice. I'll take another whisky in the Library. I reckon I know who did it.

MUDGEON: Very good, Sir.

SONG – Stuck in the middle with you

AUDREY: Good night then, I'm off to bed. Sweet dreams.

UNCLE T: Very funny.

*They all exit. MUDGEON returns with a tray with whisky on it. He looks at the clock as he passes. Suddenly the clock starts to tick again. MUDGEON returns, and looks at the clock, puzzled.
AUNT AGATHA, in a nightie, flits in and moves the hands to midnight. The clock strikes twelve.*

SCENE 7

By torchlight. VINNY gives FRANK a leg up onto the stage.

FRANK: Did you hear that?

VINNY: Wot?

FRANK: We won't even be able to get away from the house tonight. Once we've got the dau...painting we'll have to lie low.

VINNY: Did you bring a Li-lo, then, Dad?

FRANK: Oh, never mind. Let's get on. Fetch the stepladder over 'ere. *Indicates picture above fireplace.*

VINNY: *(setting it up very noisily)* Righty – ho. *The chicken vanishes.*

FRANK: Shh, quiet, We don't want to go waking them up, now do we?

VINNY: Sorry, Dad.Hang on, this isn't the one with the chicken.

FRANK: Yeah it is. I saw it just now.

VINNY: Look....

FRANK: Oh! Well, shift the ladder, then. I'll give you a hand....

They shift the ladder to the new picture with the chicken in it. The chicken then vanishes again and goes to the opposite side of the stage.

FRANK: Oh bloody hell! What's going on?

VINNY: It's over there now.

FRANK: C'mon, quick. Keep up.

They start racing round the stage trying to keep up with the chicken, bumping into each other. The figures of 2 knights step onto the stage. FRANK and VINNY stumble backwards into them.

VINNY: Oh my God, it's a ghost! Two ofthem.....

FRANK: Oh, that's good, very good! Hah, hah! Very convincing.... Well done, ladies.

The ghosts depart without saying a word.

VINNY: Dad, did we just see a couple of real live ghosts?

FRANK: Nah, don't worry about it, son. You see plenty of ghosties in our line of business. It's just those two girls having a laugh. Bit odd, though. They didn't even ask what we were doing here. Oh well. Now where's that bloomin' chicken? Better be quick, just in case they come back.

They get on with chasing the chicken from picture to picture.

The sisters, dressed badly as 2 knights, appear. FRANK and VINNY bump into them as before.

FRANK: Oh, back again? What is it this time?

The sisters clank their armour and rattle their swords.

HILDA and MATILDA: Wooooowww!

FRANK: Shhh! Keep it down, you'll wake everyone.

HILDA: That's the whole point.

VINNY: Dad, it spoke!

FRANK: What?

VINNY: Sounded like a woman.

HILDA: Woooww! Oh, it's no good, Matilda, it's just not scary enough.

MATILDA: *(ghostly voice)* And who are you?

FRANK: Oh, good evening. We're err....

VINNY: Loss adjusters.

FRANK: Yeah, loss adjusters. Here for the probate...umm.

MATILDA: Oh really? So why are you working so late at night?

FRANK: Well, I could probably ask you the same thing...

MATILDA: Don't joke with me. This sword is sharper than you think....

FRANK: Well. Ummm..

VINNY: Well, it's the best time of day to get a ...err... proper valuation. Of the pictures, ...daubs we call them in the profession. You see, daubs are..err... very affected by sunlight... it can be very, umm... misleading.

HILDA: Oh, yes? So why have you got a bag labelled SWAG?

FRANK: Oh well, that's obvious. My lad here has got a terrible dose of the err... swaggers, and he has to carry his medicine around with him. It's highly infectious, so I wouldn't come too close. Oh.... I think I might be going down with too now. Ooh...*(staggers around a bit)* stand right back..... Leg it, son!

They make a dash for it.

Just by the door:

FRANK: Quick thinking, lad, although I'm not sure they bought the whole story....

MATILDA: Burglars! They must have been after the Rembrandt.

HILDA: Just as well we had the swords, then. Doesn't look like we're very convincing as ghosts, though.

MATILDA: I dunno. We scared them off. Obviously someone else knows about the picture. Hang on, I've got a great idea....I think we ought to steal it.... then blame the burglars!

The 2 knights enter silently and stand behind HILDA and MATILDA.

HILDA: Brr, it's come over very cold all of a sudden. Can you sense something?

MATILDA: We can come back in the dead of night. They've even left their stepladder. I'll just hide it away...

HILDA: It's like a strange presence, something here but... not quite all there.

They get paced round the stage, not seeing the real ghosts until.....

H & M: Waaaah!!!

HILDA: Don't look at them, Matilda. Their looks can kill! Aaggh!

They rush off clanking as fast as the costumes will allow. The ghosts high-five each other. Chorus doors open, as the paintings congratulate the knights.

CHORUS SONG – Knights in White Satin.

SCENE 8

Lots of crashing and clanking around. CRISPIN, IMOGEN rush out in their pyjamas. MUDGEON appears.

CRISPIN: What the hell's going on?

IMOGEN: What a racket!

The sisters come rushing in, still in their armour, wailing.

H & M: Waaahhhhh!!!

IMOGEN: What on earth? What are you doing?

H: It's a gh.....gh....

IMOGEN: Why are you dressed as....? Oh, I see.....

AUNT BERTHA enters, dressed up in elaborate panto nightgear. Complete with eye mask etc. Maybe smeared with face cream. Cucumber slices on eyes, etc... Looks ghastly.

Everyone wails at the sight of her.

MATILDA: Oh, it's you, Mother. You won't believe....

AUNT BERTHA: What is this? Are you all having a fancy dress party? Can I join in?

HILDA: No, Mother. It's a ghost?

AUNT BERTHA: No, no, I can't possibly be the host.

HILDA: A GHOST! We've seen a real ghost!

MATILDA: Two of them! And the paintings....

HILDA: And some burglars.

AUNT BERTHA: I know, some of them are so dashing. Some of the loveliest men I knew were criminals.

Suddenly there is a louder crash, more like an explosion, and a scream. UNCLE TOBY staggers onstage, wearing ladies' underwear over his clothes and pierced through by vegetables. He collapses, dead, downstage. From his back stick out carrots and parsnips, sweetcorn and a cucumber.

ALL now scream. MUDGEON arrives, notes the scene, then exits. AUDREY rushes on, unnoticed by the others.

AUDREY: Oh my God!

IMOGEN: Is he dead?

CRISPIN: What's going on?

AUNT BERTHA: I knew it, he was the murderer. I had this game sorted from the beginning. That was terrific, Toby! Well done! (*Claps her hands*) So enjoyable! And a lovely costume! You can get up now... *He doesn't stir.*

AUNT BERTHA: Oh do come along, they're waiting to start the party. There'll be lots of dancing, and Herr Hitler will be there...
He still doesn't stir. MUDGEON returns with a sheet.

AUNT BERTHA: Oh..... Is he drunk?

AUDREY: No, Aunt Bertha. He's dead.... He's been skewered by frozen vegetables....

IMOGEN: Oh no! It must be....

CRISPIN: What?

IMOGEN..... Well, Agatha was working on a new kitchen gadget just before she died. She called it her 'Blumenthal Liquid Nitrogen Kebab Maker'. She hadn't quite perfected it, and it must have gone into overdrive.... oh, what a dreadful way to go...

AUNT BERTHA: Oh dear! And Toby always hated vegetables.

MUDGEON: It'll make a mess of the carpet. (*Sighs*)

MATILDA: Mudgeon, we saw some burglars....

HILDA: ...and ghosts!

MUDGEON: That'll be one and the same. This time of night the house is full of spirits. No doubt Sir Toby will be joining them. He's got enough inside him, after all.

SONG - DELILAH

AUDREY: What shall we do, Mudgeon? Shouldn't we ring the Police?

MUDGEON: Ladies and Gentlemen, I am sorry to say that the telephone lines have not yet been restored, so it might be best for you to try to get some sleep before we summon the Police in the morning.

CRISPIN: Well, I suppose Aunt Agatha's murderer has been found, then...

BERTHA: Can I have my cocoa now?

MUDGEON kneels and places the sheet over the corpse.

MUDGEON: Hmm. ...That's rather odd....

BLACKOUT

ACT 2

SCENE 1 . *It is now dead of night. The body has gone, but the pictures remain.*

We see a figure (IMOGEN in a onesie) bring on the stepladder, take down the chicken picture, and leave the frame empty. The figure removes the stepladder. The figure is just going off when the 2 knights come on and try to do their spooking, but instead they are terrified of her and run off.

Two more figures come on. They are CRISPIN and AUDREY. They climb up the ladder, only to see that the painting has already gone. They each have to check... They leave.

Then two more come on. It is HILDA and MATILDA. They get the stepladder, and go to remove the picture. It has gone.

HILDA: It's gone!

MATILDA: What?

HILDA: The painting! Someone's stolen it.

MATILDA: Are you sure?

HILDA: Yes...look!

MATILDA: Bloody thieves! Nothing's safe these days....

They go off disconsolately.

SONG – Aunt Agatha's Family reprise.

SCENE 2

Breakfast. No one is eating except for AUNT BERTHA, who is tucking it away. IMOGEN has brought her overnight bag down with her.

AUNT BERTHA: Delicious kedgerree, Mudgeon.

MUDGEON: Thank you, Ma'am. Ladies and Gentlemen, I must inform you that last night's fog has now dispersed and the telephone lines appear to be functioning again. I have spoken with the local constabulary, and an officer will be along presently.

AUNT BERTHA: Oh, Mudgeon, you play your part so very well.

MUDGEON: Thank you, Ma'am. Kippers, anyone? A little more devilled kidney?

Everyone else looks poorly slept and grumpy. They sip coffee and look bilious.

AUNT BERTHA: Well, I must say I slept like a top, after that lovely game. And I suppose we are coming to the denouement , now. What joy!

HILDA and Matilda enter, distraught.

HILDA: The painting....

MATILDA: It's gone!

CRISPIN: What?

HILDA: Someone stole it in the night.

MATILDA: We told you there were burglars in the house. And now it's gone.

IMOGEN: Oh no, burgled as well. On top of everything.

SONG – It's my painting and I'll cry if I want to

The LAWYER enters.

LAWYER: Good morning, all. I trust you have spent a pleasant night.

AUNT BERTHA: Yes, thank you. So kind of Agatha to lay it all on.

CRISPIN: Oh for goodness sakes, it was terrible. Uncle Toby died in the night – another accident with those blasted inventions.

LAWYER: Dear me, my sincere condolences. Ah, well, another estate to process.... a lawyer's work is never done...

AUNT BERTHA: ... and never underpaid.

CRISPIN: What have you come to tell us, anyway?

LAWYER: I am merely following instructions, Sir..... Consequent upon an extraordinary visitation this morning at my offices, I am to inform you all that Lady Agatha did not, in fact, die in the accident with the electric mangle.

General surprise.

AUDREY: What?

CRISPIN: You're joking!

IMOGEN: If she didn't die, then who did? Was it the maid, then?

CRISPIN: And if she didn't die, what on earth are we all doing here, respecting the clauses in that damned will, a fake will no less...a horrible night and a bloody waste of time? Oh God, this had better be good.

AUNT AGATHA and a POLICEMAN enter.

AUNT AGATHA: It is.

ALL: Aunt Agatha!

HILDA and MATILDA: Ohhh! Another ghost!

AUNT BERTHA: Bless me, what a shock. Now those kippers will be repeating on me all day.... Oh, good morning, Agatha!

AUNT AGATHA: No ghost, I assure you. Yes, it is I, hale and hearty and alive-o. Good morning. This is Sergeant Jones from the local Police.

AUNT BERTHA: Oh, I was expecting Hercule Poirot at least, not PC Plod! Are you going to tell us what's going on? It's all very strange. I think Toby's been dressing up again....

AUNT AGATHA: Allow me to explain. I knew one of you was out to kill me for my money, because the 'accident' with the mangle was no such thing.

CRISPIN: What do you mean?

SONG – Wuthering Heights

AUNT AGATHA: The mangle is activated remotely, for safety. Someone crept into the house and threw the switch just as I was using the machine.

POLICEMAN: (*mumbling Cornishly*) Madam, are you accusing one of the people here of murder...?

MUDGEON: Sorry, Ma'am. He's from down country...Jamaica Inn. He says are you accusing one of the people here of murder?

AUNT AGATHA: Just be patient, Sergeant. I will come to that presently. The events of last night were designed to reveal the would-be murderer....

IMOGEN: Hold on, don't you mean actual murderer? We haven't even sorted out the death of your maid, or perhaps the servants don't count?

AUNT AGATHA: A little pointed, Imogen. As I was saying.... I knew one of you was out to get me, so I created a little deception. It was indeed the maid who went through the mangle and was crushed beyond recognition....

AUNT BERTHA: Oh, how positively ghastly! Jolly good so far, isn't it?

AUDREY: How can you be so heartless?

AUNT AGATHA: Perhaps because she didn't have a heart, either. And she was getting ideas above her station.

IMOGEN: I rest my case. You're a monster!....

AUNT AGATHA: No, she was one of my finest creations. Such a shame to see all that work squashed in a moment...

AUDREY: You mean...??

AUNT AGATHA: Oh yes, she was only a robot but I loved her. Years of work... All I needed to do to make it look convincing was squirt a little tomato sauce around, don her cap and apron and ensure I was spotted by Mudgeon and Toby at the far end of the lawn.

CRISPIN: Good Lord!

AUNT BERTHA: Mudgeon, do you have any Rennies? I seem to have come over a little queer...
MUDGEON fetches a packet on a tray.

AUNT AGATHA: After that, I decided to find out who the would-be murderer was by putting you all to a little test. Because whoever it was thought they had actually killed me.

HILDA: We all thought you'd been killed!

MATILDA: *Nudging her sister.* Just not deliberately.

LAWYER: Lady Agatha drew up a further codicil at my offices that very day. But I always assumed it was done just before the accident...

AUNT AGATHA: Of course, I never intended that my brother should end up dead, and that is most regrettable. Still, he did have a final rummage through my underwear drawer...

AUDREY: Oh, really....

MATILDA: But wasn't he the guilty one? He was the last to see you. And he died, just as you predicted... Oh, does that mean you murdered him?

HILDA: Don't be silly, the séance was all a fake...

MATILDA: Well, you thought it was real enough.... *They bicker.*

AUNT AGATHA: I should have realised that the murderer would use the same method again.

MUDGEON: Ma'am, I knew something was wrong, when I saw that the frozen veg was sticking into his back, so he couldn't have turned the machine on by himself.

AUNT AGATHA: I suppose it was just too tempting for the murderer to take the opportunity to place the blame elsewhere. On poor Toby. And at the same time reduce the number of people sharing my inheritance.

HILDA: So who was it?

AUNT AGATHA: Both Crispin and Audrey had been at the house that day, arguing fiercely over who should get the lot. I could see the desperation in their eyes. Greed does terrible things to one's moral fibre. Then I realised....of course...

MATILDA: What...??

AUNT AGATHA: Crispin, you had the strongest motive to do away with me. You are effectively bankrupt, sinking under your gambling debts. What wouldn't a pitiful specimen like you do to get

himself out of trouble??

CRISPIN: But.....!

AUNT AGATHA: But you didn't know how the Liquid Nitrogen Kebab Maker functioned..... Only Audrey knew that!.....

AUDREY: NO!!!

AUNT AGATHA: Oh yes, it was you! Just as desperate, broke and broken-hearted. You always resented other people's success. Inside you were twisted with rage and self-pity.

AUDREY: No, this is all wrong. You're nearly as crazy as Aunt Bertha. You're imagining it all.. How could I possibly do such a thing?

AUNT AGATHA: You might have killed him in the car, if it had started, but you spotted a much better way to lay the blame on Toby, and get off scot-free.

AUDREY: She's completely delusional. This is ridiculous!

AUNT AGATHA: I have witnesses.....

FRANK and VINNY enter, brought in by Mudgeon.

AUNT AGATHA: Look what we found – a couple of thieves conveniently lurking in the house. Tell them.

FRANK: Well, me and Vinny were down in the kitchen, having a little late-night snack...

VINNY: ... on account of having to wait until you had all gone to bed.

FRANK: ...and we saw Sir Toby come in. He was dressed a little strangely, and singing to himself. He was fixing a sandwich by the fridge, when that woman.... *They both point at AUDREY.*

POLICEMAN: *(mumbling incomprehensibly again)* Are you certain that was the woman you saw?

MUDGEON: Was that her?

VINNY and FRANK: Oh yes.

VINNY: ...she crept in and hid behind this enormous contraption. She then opened the lid of it, it was all hissing and the room went very cold, but I don't think Sir Toby heard it, and pulled the lever. Suddenly all these daggers came flying out, and he staggers off, groaning.

FRANK: She legged it as fast as she could upstairs.... and that was it. Put me right off me salami and mustard wrap.

POLICEMAN: *(mumbling again, we can only make out the names.)* Audrey Gussett, I am arresting you for the murder of Sir Toby Gussett and the attempted murder of Lady Agatha.

MUDGEON: You're nicked.

POLICEMAN: (*mumbling*) Anything you say may be taken down in writing and used as evidence in court.

MUDGEON: Anything you say may be taken down in writing.

AUDREY: Oh, bollocks! *She is handcuffed.*

POLICEMAN: Hrrr.

MUDGEON: Well, perhaps not that.

POLICEMAN: (*mumbling again as before*) And may I ask you gentlemen.... what were you doing in the kitchen during the night?

MUDGEON: What were you doing here.

VINNY: Ah well, we came to nick the err,...daub. Umm, painting.

POLICEMAN: Hrr.

AUNT AGATHA: Oh yes, I nearly forgot the painting. 'Self portrait with chicken' It seems most of you, and the criminal underworld, were aware it was a genuine Rembrandt, one of his greatest masterpieces.....

VINNY: But....

FRANK: Quiet, son. Don't forget we are professionals. It's a fair cop, Sergeant. You've got us bang to rights.

POLICEMAN: (*mumbling*) Right, you two as well. Come on. Down the station, on the double.

VINNY: I think that means we're being arrested as well.

LAWYER: *Following them out.* Miss Audrey, and err, thieves...perhaps I could just give you my card....?

Policeman, Audrey and Frank and Vinny exeunt, followed by the LAWYER.

SONG – Oh what a fright

SCENE 3 - continuous

AUNT AGATHA: And I know that you were all trying to steal the painting. How could you? Guests in my own house, supposedly grieving for me. Truly greed is a terrible affliction.

AUNT BERTHA: Sorry, dear, but the breakfast was superb. Shame to waste it.

AUNT AGATHA: Go on, off you go, all of you. I've had enough of this horrible family... None of you care two hoots about me, that's abundantly clear.

CRISPIN: But what about the picture?

AUNT AGATHA: It won't do you any good, you know.

CRISPIN: It bloody would, if I had it! *He exits.*

AUNT BERTHA: Show's over, girls! Didn't Toby do well? You know, I never guess the murderer. It's been a lovely weekend. Thank you so much, Agatha. *Burps* Oops, pardon me. Can we do it again sometime?

HILDA: Come on, Mother.

HILDA, MATILDA, and AUNT BERTHA leave. Only IMOGEN lingers, and MUDGEON. MUDGEON brings AUNT AGATHA a cup of tea.

SCENE 4 - continuous

AUNT AGATHA: *relaxing at last* Ahhh!

IMOGEN: Agatha, there is a little problem.

AUNT AGATHA: Oh, really, is there, my dear? Still here? I thought we had tied up all the loose ends.

IMOGEN: Not quite. You see, you know it was one of us.

AUNT AGATHA: What was?

IMOGEN: Who stole the painting.

AUNT AGATHA: Of course I do.

IMOGEN: And you will alert the Police, who will track our every move until they catch the thief. How much did you say the painting was worth?

AUNT AGATHA: I didn't....oh, several, maybe tens of millions, I expect. The chicken is remarkable.

IMOGEN: It's just that you would hunt us down until you had got the picture back, and I couldn't bear that. Imagine having to give up all those millions and go to prison. *Pause. IMOGEN opens her overnight bag.*

AUNT AGATHA: It was you wasn't it?..... So what are you going to do?

IMOGEN: *grabbing AGATHA and MUDGEON and plonking them down on a chair, tying them up as she speaks*

I'm going to stop you... and at the same time, I'm going to put right something that has been wrong all these years. Oh yes... you might have forgotten that I am a Plan-coeur by birth. My great ancestor Bertil was murdered by Gaston, who stole everything he had.

AUNT AGATHA: Oh, you don't want to believe all those old stories.....Romantic twaddle! I am

sure they're just made up to give the family a bit of ancestral colour, never a bad thing....

IMOGEN: In the name of Bertil le Plan-coeur I take revenge! Once a Plan-coeur, always a Plan-coeur!

AUNT AGATHA: Oh dear! 'Game of Thrones' has such a lot to answer for....

IMOGEN places a big bundle of sticks of dynamite on the table, lights it and leaves with the painting.

IMOGEN: Goodbye to the Gussetts! *Exit.*

Pause

AUNT AGATHA: Turning out to be quite a morning!

MUDGEON: Indeed, Ma'am.

AUNT AGATHA: Never did like her very much. A bit too earnest.

They wait. The dynamite fizzes.....

AUNT AGATHA: Nothing like going out with a bang....

MUDGEON: No, Ma'am.

AUNT AGATHA: I think you can drop the Ma'am now....

Suddenly FRANK and VINNY appear.

FRANK: Sorry about that, Lady A. Spot of bother getting away from the filth.

Vinny extinguishes the dynamite by stamping on the fuse. FRANK releases the captives.

AUNT AGATHA: I must say, you left it a little close, but at least you are here now. Thank you.

FRANK: Oh yes. All sorted, m'lady.

VINNY: Here it is. *Produces the painting.*

FRANK: Safe and sound. We replaced it with the fake just as you asked.

AUNT AGATHA: Wonderful, it's such a treasure. *Takes the painting.*

VINNY: Chicken's a bit odd, though. Got a funny squint.

AUNT AGATHA: That's the glint of a multi-millionaire... Ha, ha. Well I am most grateful to you. But there is one final little task.

FRANK: Oh, what's that?

AUNT AGATHA: Well, this worthless old pile is insured up to the hilt, and it would be such a shame to waste Imogen's dynamite. Besides, Mudgeon and I have a plane to catch, so if you wouldn't mind?

FRANK: Certainly. A pleasure doing business with you. If you need any future assistance, please don't hesitate to call us.

AUNT AGATHA: Goodbye. Come along, Aloysius.

SONG – Leaving on a jet plane

MUDGEON chuckles to himself as they depart.

SCENE 5

We see IMOGEN running off clutching the fake painting. Suddenly the two knights jump out and rattle their armour at her. She is scared and turns and runs in the opposite direction. The other CHORUS surround her, and take her back to the Hall, where they hold her tight. The two knights clasp each others' hand, clearly friends.

SCENE 6 Coda

VINNY: Dad, what does that 'I' stand for in NUMPTI?

FRANK: 'Integrity', son... integrity.

He lights the fuse and they leave.

BLACKOUT

We see the fizzing fuse, then...

EXPLOSION.....!

THE END

FINALE – We have survived!