## MURDER AT MANDEVILLE MANOR (A DÉNOUEMENT IN DORSET)

a comedy by Brian Huggett

Brian Huggett 12, Chapel Road Swanmore Southampton Hampshire SO32 2QA

Telephone: +44 (0)7507 638655 Email: brian@huggett.info

## <u>SUMMARY</u>

The county of Dorset contains many towns that rejoice in names which could equally well belong to characters from a period drama.

This play releases some of these characters from their geographical solitude and brings them together in the library of a Dorset country house to engage in the dénouement of a classic whodunnit.

## **CHARACTERS**

Mrs Margaret Marsh	Cook and housekeeper at Mandeville Manor.
Mr Burton Bradstock	Private detective and house guest of Lord Hardington Mandeville.
Mr Blandford Forum	The nephew of Lord Hardington Mandeville and fiancé of Miss Minterne Magna.
The Reverend Winterborne Monkton	The local vicar.
Miss Minterne Magna	The fiancée of Mr Blandford Forum.
<u>SETTING</u>	

The library of a manor house in Dorset in the 1930s.

FX FX	Two knocks of a heavy door knocker. The sound of a large front door opening.
MARGARET	Hello, Winterborne. Come in.
WINTERBORNE	Thank you, Margaret.
FX	The sound of a large front door closing.
MARGARET	It's almost noon. We should go straight to the library. Blandford Forum and Minterne Magna are already there with that private detective friend of Lord Mandeville, Burton Bradstock.
<u>FX</u>	The sound of footsteps commence as Margaret Marsh and The Reverend Winterborne Monkton walk to the library.
WINTERBORNE	How are you, today, Margaret, after everything that's happened?
MARGARET	I'm well, thank you, Winterborne, although it seems strange not having Lord Mandeville to wait upon.
WINTERBORNE	What do you know about this urgent meeting that we're about to attend?
MARGARET	Mr Bradstock, asked that everyone join him in the library at midday. It's bound to be about Lord Mandeville's death.
WINTERBORNE	I'm not clear who it was that asked Mr Bradstock to become involved.
MARGARET	He just took it upon himself. I think that's what these private detectives do.
WINTERBORNE	Stick their noses into other people's business, you mean.
FX FX	Footsteps cease. The sound of the library door opening.

BURTON	Ah, Reverend Monkton, Mrs Marsh, thank you for joining us. As you can see, Lord Mandeville's nephew and his fiancée are already here, so we are all present. Do sit down.
FX FX	The sound of the library door closing. The sound of Burton knocking on a table to gain everyone's attention.
BURTON	Thank you for joining me here today. We have all been deeply shocked by the violent and untimely death, yesterday afternoon, of Lord Hardington Mandeville.
	Burton pauses.
BURTON	Or perhaps I should say that we have all been shocked, bar one.
BLANDFORD	What are you implying, Bradstock?
BURTON	I'm saying, Mr Forum, that during my long career as a private detective, I have seen many dead bodies, and thus I can assert, without question, that Lord Mandeville was murdered.
	Gasps of surprise from all but Burton.
WINTERBORNE	Chief Inspector Sutton Waldron called at my vicarage yesterday evening, after he'd left here. He told me of his certainty that Lord Mandeville's death was a suicide.
BURTON	He said the same to me, Reverend Monkton. It is therefore fortunate that I – with all due modesty, the greatest detective in England – was here at Mandeville Manor yesterday afternoon when the tragedy occurred. The police, invaluable though they can be in matters such as the direction of traffic or the investigation of bicycle thefts, are unused to conducting enquiries that relate to murder in a country house.
BLANDFORD	What evidence do you have, Bradstock, to support your theory that my uncle was murdered?

BURTON	Chief Inspector Waldron made a remarkably cursory examination of the crime scene, Mr Forum. As a result, he failed to identify three key pieces of evidence that I subsequently noted. The first was that Hardington Mandeville had been speaking on the telephone at the time of his death. The receiver was still clenched in his hand when I examined the body.
	Gasps of surprise from all but Burton.
BURTON	The second matter was the absence of the weapon that caused his death, which still remains undiscovered.
	Gasps of surprise from all but Burton.
BURTON	And the third clue that his death was not suicide was that Lord Mandeville had been shot in the back, from the garden, through the glass of the dining room window.
	Gasps of surprise from all but Burton.
<u>FX</u>	The sound of a thud as Minterne Magna collapses to the floor.
BLANDFORD	My poor, darling Minty has fainted. Mrs Marsh, do you have any smelling salts to revive her?
MARGARET	Yes, there are some here in this drawer.
<u>FX</u>	The sound of a drawer being opened.
	Pause.
MARGARET	Can you hear me, Miss Magna? Take a deep breath.
BLANDFORD	Oh, Minty, Minty, speak to us.
MINTERNE	Ooh, ooh, what happened?
MARGARET	You passed out, Miss Magna.
BLANDFORD	It must have been the shock of Bradstock's dreadful revelations.

MINTERNE	I think it was more likely due to that erratic breathing we'd all adopted. I felt more light- headed after his every sentence.
BLANDFORD	Sit back here beside me, darling, and let Bradstock continue with his speculations.
WINTERBORNE	What did you mean, Mr Bradstock, when you said that not all of us have been shocked by Lord Mandeville's death?
BURTON	I made that comment, Reverend Monkton, because I believe Hardington Mandeville's killer to be someone who is currently in this room.
	Gasps of surprise from all but Burton.
MINTERNE	Can everybody please stop doing that?
WINTERBORNE BLANDFORD MARGARET	Sorry.
BURTON	The murderer selected a perfect time to strike. Everyone who was here yesterday, except me, had a motive for wanting Lord Mandeville dead. Such a plethora of motives and opportunities may have concealed the killer's true identity, had the police suspected foul play.
MARGARET	I don't understand. Why would any of us have wished to harm Lord Mandeville?
BURTON	As you have asked that question, Mrs Marsh, perhaps I might start with your good self. You are employed as Lord Mandeville's cook and housekeeper. Last year, you had an adulterous relationship with Lord Mandeville's butler, Tarrant Rushton. Lord Mandeville had threatened to reveal this to your husband, Mr Caundle Marsh.
MARGARET	How did you know that? It's none of your business.
BURTON	A detective never reveals his sources, Mrs Marsh, but it is my business if it led to murder.

- MARGARET It's true that the master made such a threat. He was angry because I'd rejected his own advances. Despite that, I didn't kill him.
- MINTERNE And I, for one, believe her. Dear Margaret is not capable of murder.
- BURTON Well, perhaps Mrs Marsh could explain, therefore, why I observed her and the Reverend Monkton examining Lord Mandeville's revolver in the summerhouse, yesterday afternoon. I saw them while I was walking in the garden, just thirty minutes before the dreadful event. Furthermore, I believe that revolver to have been the murder weapon.
- WINTERBORNE Mrs Marsh just happened to be cleaning the revolver in the summerhouse. I simply dropped by to enquire whether she would be attending the morning service on Sunday.
- MARGARET If I might explain about the revolver, Mr Bradstock, Lord Mandeville's butler, Tarrant Rushton, disappeared without explanation two days ago. He'd taken all his belongings, so we assumed that he chose to leave permanently for his own reasons. Tarrant had always cleaned the master's guns, and Lord Mandeville asked me to assume that duty until a new butler had been appointed. The light is much better in the summerhouse for ensuring that metal is properly polished. When I'd finished with the revolver, I put the weapon back in its usual place, in the drawer over there, next to where the Reverend is now sitting.
- WINTERBORNE If that revolver was the murder weapon, then anyone could have taken it from this drawer.
- BURTON It is true that the revolver leads us no closer to the killer, because each of you knew where it was kept.
- WINTERBORNE Please come to the point, Mr Bradstock.

- BURTON In the fullness of time, Reverend. I am still at the stage of examining motives and opportunities. On the subject of which: you, the Reverend Winterborne Monkton, had your own reasons for wishing Lord Mandeville dead.
- WINTERBORNE Nonsense.
- BURTON I understand that the estate gamekeeper, West Mudford, had apprehended your churchwarden, the Scotsman, Fifehead Magdalen, on the night of the last full moon. Mr Magdalen had been poaching game on the Mandeville estate with the intention of selling it to that well known scoundrel, Sixpenny Handley.
- WINTERBORNE I do not watch my churchwarden every moment of the day, Mr Bradstock. I know nothing of this.
- BURTON On the contrary, Reverend Monkton, I believe that you are very well acquainted with this matter, because Fifehead had been sharing his profits with you. West Mudford had informed Hardington Mandeville of these facts, and Lord Mandeville had intended to report your behaviour to Bishop Milton Abbas.
- WINTERBORNE Damn you, Bradstock. But even if what you say is true, I certainly didn't kill him.
- BURTON I'm inclined to believe you, Reverend, because when Lord Mandeville confronted you, you revealed to him your knowledge of his illegitimate son, Stoke Wake, the presumed child of Dowlish and Ebbesborne Wake. You had learned that Stoke was actually the child of Dowlish Wake and Lord Mandeville. You, therefore, blackmailed Lord Mandeville into retaining your services and also into vastly increasing you remuneration.
- WINTERBORNE How did you discover that, Bradstock? Anyway, this is all irrelevant to Lord Mandeville's death. For God's sake get to the point. Who do you accuse of your, so called, murder?

- BURTON I will reveal the culprit in due course, Reverend Monkton. Please be patient as I must first explain all my reasoning in forensic detail. If I may continue, I spoke to Melcombe Bingham, Lord Mandeville's solicitor, on the telephone this morning. Hardington Mandeville was on the point of changing his Will to make Stoke Wake his sole beneficiary. Lord Mandeville was, in fact, on the telephone to Melcombe Bingham regarding this matter at the moment he was shot.
- WINTERBORNE Had I known about Lord Mandeville's intentions, I would still have had no reason to kill him. After all, we had reached an agreement.
- BURTON It is true, Reverend, that your collaboration with Fifehead Magdalen had ceased to be a motive for murder. There was still, however, the matter of the church accounts. During Hardington Mandeville's telephone conversation, he also discussed with Melcombe Bingham an audit of the Mandeville estate to establish its full value. That audit, Reverend Monkton, would have exposed the irregularities in the church accounts as a result of the funds that you have been systematically embezzling these past fifteen years. Bishop Milton Abbas would undoubtedly have discovered your deceit.
- WINTERBORNE Really Bradstock, this is too much.
- MINTERNE So you think, Mr Bradstock, that the murderer was either the Reverend Winterborne Monkton or Mrs Margaret Marsh.
- BURTON Or, perhaps, Mr Blandford Forum.
- BLANDFORD Surely you can't think I'm involved in this, and, anyway, I had no idea about Stoke Wake or my uncle's intentions regarding his Will.

BURTON	But can we believe you, Mr Forum? Had
	Hardington Mandeville made Stoke Wake his
	sole beneficiary, you would no longer have
	been heir to the Mandeville fortune. You also
	knew that your uncle was no longer prepared to
	cover your gambling debts. Those debts, in
	themselves, would have ruined you without the
	promise of your inheritance.

- BLANDFORD You can't prove any of this, Bradstock.
- MINTERNE You said when you began to address us, Mr Bradstock, that we all had a motive to kill Lord Mandeville.
- BURTON I would not wish to omit you, Miss Magna. Particularly as I suspect the reason for your earlier episode of fainting was neither shock nor erratic breathing, but light-headedness following consumption of cocaine.
- MINTERNE Absurd.
- BURTON Not so absurd, Miss Magna. Your brother, Fontmell Magna, imports illegal narcotics, a business in which you assist him. Lord Mandeville had learned of this from his own supplier of such substances, Brian T. Spuddle. His Lordship was attempting to blackmail you and Fontmell, was he not?
- MINTERNE I'm finding your speculations extremely tiresome, Mr Bradstock. Will you please come to your conclusion?
- BURTON Let us not get ahead of ourselves, Miss Magna. We private detectives have a prescribed format for elucidating these matters. I have now reached the moment to summarise the suspects and motives: I have established that Mrs Marsh would have wished to silence Hardington Mandeville to save her marriage. The Reverend Winterborne Monkton would have hoped to conceal his theft of church funds, and Mr Blandford Forum would have wanted to protect, and hasten, his inheritance. In addition, Hardington Mandeville was attempting to blackmail Miss Minterne Magna

	and her brother, Fontmell. Thus, every one of you had a motive to kill him. I will shortly explain the sequence of events that immediately preceded the killing. Before that, however, I can finally reveal the killer.
	Burton pauses.
BURTON	Hardington Mandeville was murdered by
	Burton pauses.
FX	The sound of a revolver being fired.
BURTON	Ahh
FX	The sound of a thud as Burton Bradstock collapses to the floor.
WINTERBORNE	Miss Magna, why did you just shoot Burton Bradstock?
MINTERNE	He'd discovered too much. We obviously had to kill him.
BLANDFORD	But damn it, Minty, you could have waited until he'd finished talking. Now we won't know who he'd concluded to be the killer. I had a wager with Winterborne on that.
MINTERNE	Sorry, but Burton Bradstock was just so pompous and tedious that I couldn't bear another moment of it.
BLANDFORD	Now we'll never find out if Bradstock had deduced that it was Minty who'd been standing outside the dining room window and overheard the first part of Hardington Mandeville's telephone call.
MARGARET	Or if he'd reasoned that Miss Magna must have beckoned Winterborne and me to join her from the summerhouse.

- WINTERBORNE Or if he'd finally concluded that Margaret had shot Lord Mandeville, as we had all planned, while an opportunity had arisen and Bradstock had been elsewhere.
- MINTERNE OK, OK chaps. I'm really sorry about that. It doesn't really matter, though, as I don't think Burton Bradstock was a very good detective.
- WINTERBORNE I agree with Miss Magna about Bradstock. After all, he didn't seem to suspect that Margaret and I are lovers, or that I strangled Tarrant Rushton because he'd found out about Margaret and me, told Lord Mandeville and planned to tell both Bishop Milton Abbas and Caundle Marsh.
- MARGARET A matter of no further interest to Caundle as I poisoned him two days ago.
- MINTERNE To be charitable to Burton Bradstock, the fact that Margaret had packed and moved Tarrant Rushton's belongings may have misled him.
- BLANDFORD Anyway, the important thing is that I'll inherit the Mandeville fortune and marry Minty. Margaret and Winterborne can now get married too. We needn't worry about the missing church funds. There will be more than enough money for all of us.
- MARGARET What are we going to do with Bradstock's body?
- BLANDFORD We could take him to the old barn for the moment. Winterborne and I put Caundle Marsh and Tarrant Rushton in there two days ago. We piled them with the bodies of Dowlish, Ebbesborne and Stoke Wake.
- WINTERBORNE Fifehead Magdalen hid the body of West Mudford in the old barn too.
- MARGARET I'll telephone my brother, Chief Inspector Waldron. He'll declare all the deaths as suicides. Sutton was pretty annoyed, I can tell you, when Mr Bradstock treated him like an idiot for concluding that Lord Mandeville had killed himself. Still, Sutton can retire now on the

	money Fontmell and Miss Magna have paid him for turning a blind eye to the Dorset cocaine trade.
WINTERBORNE	I'll visit Melbury Bubb, our gravedigger, on my way back to the vicarage, and also talk to Fifehead Magdalen about making practical arrangements for all the funerals.
FX	Sound of Champagne cork popping.
BLANDFORD	I think this calls for a splash of bubbly.
MINTERNE	And maybe a few sniffs of cocaine.
FX	Sound of glasses being filled.
BLANDFORD	You know, the thing I don't understand is why Burton Bradstock decided to expose our criminal activities to just the four of us in the library of an isolated manor house with no backup. What did he expect us to do, confess and quietly wait to be arrested?
WINTERBORNE	That's always been the weakness of a dénouement in a country house library. I'm surprised that Poirot survived for as long as he did.
	Laughter from all.
FX	The sound of glasses clinking.
All	Cheers.
END.	