

MURDER AT MANDEVILLE MANOR  
(A DÉNOUEMENT IN DORSET)

a comedy  
by  
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## SUMMARY

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.

## SETTING

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

FX Two knocks of a heavy door knocker.  
FX 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.

FX 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 Footsteps cease.  
FX 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 The sound of the library door closing.

FX 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.

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*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.

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*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.

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*Gasps of surprise from all but Burton.*

FX 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.

FX The sound of a drawer being opened.

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*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.

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*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.









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.

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*Burton pauses.*

BURTON                      Hardington Mandeville was murdered by ...

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*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.