

The Keys

Adapted by Burton Bumgarner

from the tale by W.W. Jacobs

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PUBLISHED BY

ELDRIDGE PUBLISHING COMPANY

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Story of the Play

“The Keys” is an adaptation of an early twentieth-century short story by British writer W.W. Jacobs called “In the Library.” A wife demands that her husband leave the house unless he can get help for his gambling problem. He murders her with a paring knife and tries to hide her body from the maid. While he's still frantically searching for his wife's car keys to dump her body, a burglar breaks into the house. Thinking fast, the husband tries to cover up the murder by framing the burglar. The husband calls the police and while waiting for them, scuffles in the darkness with the burglar and plants the knife on him. But things are not as they seem, especially when the lost keys are found in the ironic ending. (This one-act is excerpted from the full-length play, "All Hallows' Eve.")

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CAST OF CHARACTERS

(4 m, 2 w)

James Burleigh: A man who married for money.

Taylor Burleigh: James' wife.

Hannah: The maid.

Frank: A burglar.

O'Brien: A New York City policeman.

Malloy: O'Brien's partner.

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PRODUCTION NOTES

The setting is a New York brownstone in 1960. Burleigh's struggle with the burglar takes place in darkness and should sound like a fight, with yelling and objects falling and crashing. The darker the stage can be during the struggles the more effective the scenes will be.

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(During the blackout a DOOR CHIME is heard. (AT RISE: Lights up on DSL apron. HANNAH is talking with OFFICERS O'BRIEN and MALLOY.)

O'BRIEN: We just wanted you to be aware of the situation, Miss.

MALLOY: Yeah. Ten break-ins in the past two months. He likes this part of town.

HANNAH: Oh, dear. What am I supposed to do?

O'BRIEN: Just warn the owners.

MALLOY: The guy's Milquetoast. He won't break in a house if he thinks somebody's home.

(Blackout. A clock CHIMES seven times. Lights up. JAMES is seated in the chair reading the Wall Street Journal and sipping coffee. On the coffee table is a cutting board with pears and cheese, and a knife. A telephone is on an end table. TAYLOR, his wife, is standing at the window, looking outside. She turns to look at James. She is tense and agitated.)

JAMES: *(From behind the paper.)* Utilities are up. So are commodities. Good time for a little more investment.

TAYLOR: I don't think you've heard a word I said.

JAMES: If we sell the manufacturing stock I believe we can do quite well by reinvesting in utilities. It's a bit risky, of course.

TAYLOR: James? Will you listen to me?

JAMES: Of course, almost any investment involves risk. Wouldn't you say so, dear?

TAYLOR: This is driving me crazy!

(HANNAH enters with a fresh pot of coffee. JAMES and TAYLOR are suddenly silent. Hannah crosses to the coffee table, replaces the pot, and looks suspiciously at her employers.)

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HANNAH: Did I do something wrong?

TAYLOR / JAMES: No.

JAMES: That was a delicious dinner, Hannah. Veal scaloppini, wasn't it?

HANNAH: No, sir. It was roast beef.

JAMES: Oh. I suppose it's a compliment to have your roast beef mistaken for veal scaloppini. Wouldn't you say?

HANNAH: I wouldn't know, sir.

JAMES: Tell us, Hannah. Who was at the door just now?

HANNAH: A couple of policemen.

JAMES: Were they here to arrest you?

HANNAH: No, sir. They say there's a burglar working this part of town.

JAMES: A burglar?

HANNAH: Coming into people's homes when he thinks they're not at home and stealing their jewelry.

JAMES: Well, that's an interesting bit of news. Isn't it, dear? A burglar working this part of town?

TAYLOR: (*Annoyed.*) What do you want, Hannah?

HANNAH: Just bringing in the fresh coffee. I know how Mr. Burleigh wants the coffee to be fresh. (*TAYLOR and JAMES watch HANNAH.*) I guess I'll go change the linens.

TAYLOR: That's a good idea, Hannah. You go change the linens. (*HANNAH exits.*) They've only been changed about four times this week.

JAMES: So, tell me, dear. What do you think about utilities?

TAYLOR: (*Crossing to JAMES, SHE yanks the paper from his hands.*) I don't care a thing about utilities and neither should you!

JAMES: Lots of money in utilities.

TAYLOR: Have you not heard anything I've said for the past thirty minutes?

JAMES: (*Carving a pear with the knife.*) A slice of pear, dear? Royal Riviera. They grow in Oregon. I've always wondered why they're called Riviera if they grow in Oregon. Not much of a Riviera out there. But these are wonderful pears. And they were shipped all the way to New York.

End of Freeview

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