SUNDAY TEA WITH DESIRÉE

By Billy St. John

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STORY OF THE PLAY

A sunny afternoon...the lawn of a country estate... Desirée and her guests gather for tea. Though their conversation is witty and sophisticated, one senses that underneath all the frivolity, something is wrong...very wrong...but what? What subjects has the new maid been instructed to avoid? What is implied in the guest's covert glances to one another? Why does Desirée's daughter, who is away at boarding school, write for permission to visit friends over the holidays rather than return home? It is not until the last few minutes of the play that the audience learns the truth behind the charade that is being played out on-stage, a revelation that will haunt them long after the curtain is lowered.

SETTING

Bright sunlight falls on the well-tended lawn of a country estate. The play can be staged against stage curtains, or an attractive backdrop can be used. Lattice archways entwined with foliage can be set at the SL and SR exits. CS is a settee with a low table DS of it. A matching chair is SL of and below the settee, facing in. A small table is DS of it. Another small table and two chairs are SL. The furniture can be wicker, or perhaps wrought iron—something suitable for the out-of-doors. Regardless, it is white.

CAST OF CHARACTERS
(2 M, 6 W.)

FREDRIK - 50s, wealthy, a gentleman.
ERICA - 20s, a maid, pretty, concerned about her new position.
DESIRÉE - Mid-40s, attractive, poised but at times confused. She is a former actress, and has an actresses' flair until she becomes confused, but then quickly recovers it.
ANNE - Late teens or early 20s, girlish and given to giggles.
PETRA - Late teens or early 20s, Anne's maid but more like a friend.
CHARLOTTE - 30s, very sophisticated in bearing, yet with a droll wit.
MADAME ARMFELDT - 70s or older, a Grande Dame, has an imperious nature which demands the attention of a room and a caustic tongue.
HENRIK - 20s, nice looking, has a serious demeanor, that becomes boyish around Anne.

TIME: Summer, late 1800s or early 1900s.
PLACE: The garden of a country estate.
SOUND EFFECTS: Classical music, birds singing.

PRODUCTION NOTES

Should a wheelchair of the period be difficult to obtain, Madame can enter using a walking stick with an ornate handle, supported by Henrik. In this case, a chair that matches Anne's will be placed opposite hers SR and below the settee. A small table will be DS of it like the one below Anne's. If Madame uses a cane, two line changes will be needed: (1) Change "can move about on wheels" to "can move about with a cane", (2) Instead of saying Mother Nature "should have supplied us with wheels" she will say "should have given us three legs instead of two."

PROPS

DESIRÉE: Basket of freshly cut flowers, white gloves, garden snips.
ANNE: Parasol.
CHARLOTTE: Parasol.
ERICA: Vase of fresh flowers, tea cart, expensive tea service, cups, saucers, spoons, napkins, plates of finger sandwiches and petit fours.

COSTUMING

When the actors enter, we will assume by their clothing and hair styles that it is the turn of the century. The ladies will wear beautiful summer dresses and hats of the period, and long hair swept up on their heads. Anne and Charlotte will carry parasols. The maids will wear suitable, more simple ankle-length dresses. Erica will also wear a bibbed apron to mid-shin, and a maid's cap. Their long hair is worn down.

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(AT RISE: A lyrical selection of CLASSICAL MUSIC plays before the show begins. It fades as the stage LIGHTS come up and is out completely a few beats after they are full. After the music fades out, there is the pleasant sound of BIRDS SINGING which will eventually fade out as well after the scene has begun.)

FREDRIK: *(Off SR.)* On pleasant summer Sundays such as today...*(HE enters SR with ERICA. Fredrik is a distinguished looking middle-aged man dressed in suit. He might have a mustache and goatee.)...*my wife prefers to entertain our guests here on the lawn. Marie will have the refreshments prepared and placed on the tea cart, ready for you to serve.

ERICA: Yes, sir.

FREDRIK: You aren't apt to be drawn into the conversation, of course, but if you are addressed, just be sure to avoid mention of the subjects I cautioned you about.

ERICA: Yes, sir. I understand.

FREDRIK: I'm sure you will do fine.

ERICA: Oh, I'll try, sir. I'll be most careful. I need the work, and—

(SHE is interrupted by DESIRÉE'S voice from off SL.)

DESIRÉE: I'm over here, Fredrik, dear. *(SHE enters SL. She is a very attractive woman in a stunning dress and wide-brimmed hat. She is carrying a basket of freshly cut flowers. She is wearing simple white gloves and carries a pair of garden snips. She crosses to THEM.)* I've gathered some flowers from the garden. They'll add a nice touch for the tea party, don't you think?

FREDRIK: They're lovely. *(HE takes the basket from HER.)* We'll have Erica tell the cook to arrange them into a nice bouquet to place on the table. *(Giving them to ERICA.)* If you will...?

DESIRÉE: *(Places the snips on the stems of the flowers in the basket, then removes her gloves and adds them to the basket.)* Erica...Thank you, Erica. I'll try very hard to remember your name. Please don't be insulted if I don't recall it right away...my memory isn't what it used to be.

ERICA: Oh, that's all right, ma'am.

DESIRÉE: I used to be an actress, you know. That was before I retired from the stage to reside here in the country where I can take care of my darling Fredrik.

FREDRIK: The theatre's loss is my gain.

DESIRÉE: How sweet of you to say so, dearest. *(Back to ERICA.)* So you see...Erica...I fear I may have simply used up my ability to memorize. In my heyday my repertoire was filled with many wonderful roles: Medea, Jocasta, Mr. Shaw's Major Barbara—

FREDRIK: And all the leading ladies of the major musicals. *(To ERICA.)* My wife has a lovely singing voice.

DESIRÉE: "Had." I fear my voice, like my memory, has been eroded by time.

FREDRIK: Nonsense. You'll sing again, Desirée, you'll see. *(To ERICA.)* If you'll take those...to Marie...? Our guests should be arriving momentarily.

ERICA: Yes, sir.

FREDRIK: Be kind enough to show them out here.

ERICA: Yes, sir. *(SHE bobs a curtsey.)* Ma'am...*(SHE bobs another curtsey to HER, then exits SR.)*

DESIRÉE: *(Crossing SR past FREDRIK a few steps as SHE watches ERICA exit.)* A sweet girl, and pretty. She reminds me of our daughter. I do hope she proves to be suitable. While Frederika is away at school, this girl would be such a pleasant reminder of her. It would be almost like having her home again. *(Turning back to FREDRIK.)* Don't you agree?

FREDRIK: Perhaps. Erica — her name is Erica.

DESIRÉE: Erica...Yes, I'll remember that.

FREDRIK: It wouldn't do for you to call her Frederika.

DESIRÉE: Of course not. If I should, you will tell me...?

FREDRIK: I'll remind you it's "Erica."

End of Freeview

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