

MANIAC MANOR

By Don S. Lowry

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CAST OF CHARACTERS

(Four Men, Eight Women)

- ALEX** Young, brave, female detective. Part owner of the Fearless Detective Agency. *(141 lines)*
- TABBY** Alex's saucy, usually presumptuous partner. *(78 lines)*
- EGOR** Ominous butler. *(17 lines)*
- MRS. BUFFINGTON** Addepleted widow. *(22 lines)*
- EMILY** One of Mrs. Buffington's three nieces. Beware, she sleepwalks. *(18 lines)*
- CAMILLE** A sharp-tongued niece. *(11 lines)*
- JEROME** Camille's husband. *(14 lines)*
- SELENA** A greedy niece. *(4 lines)*
- BASIL** Selena's husband. *(10 lines)*
- HILDA** Mrs. Buffington's clairvoyant cook. *(13 lines)*
- GERTIE** Paranoid maid. *(8 lines)*
- MARK** The Buffington gardener and chauffeur. *(26 lines)*

TIME: This afternoon.

PLACE: The Buffington Manor.

ACT ONE

Setting:

The living room of the Buffington Manor. Furnished as much as possible in the style of a once opulent home that is now decaying. There is an aura of foreboding and decadence. The paintings on the walls are somber and virtually monochromatic. There is no television or telephone. Left exit leads to the foyer and the front door. Right exit leads to other parts of the mansion. All characters enter and exit from the right, except as noted.

At Rise:

Door chimes are heard. The sinister butler, EGOR, enters. He wears a long black frock. His back is bent and his hair is unkempt. He holds his left hand flat against his right chest; his right arm is always outstretched before him. He drags his right foot as he lumbers across the stage and exits left. There is the sound of a squeaky door opening. The off stage speeches are amplified, if necessary.

EGOR: *(Off stage, in a dull monotone.)* Good evening.

ALEX: *(Off stage.)* I'm Alexis Scott and this is my associate Tabitha Ross. We're from the Fearless Detective Agency. Mrs. Buffington is expecting us

EGOR: *(Off stage.)* You may enter.

EGOR, ALEX, and TABBY enter from left. Both girls have shoulder bags.

EGOR: Walk this way. *(He lumbers center stage.)*

TABBY shrugs, then mimics EGOR'S gait, complete with left hand on chest and right hand outstretched. When SHE has taken a few steps, ALEX grabs her arm and stops her.

ALEX: *(Irritated.)* What are you doing?

TABBY: *(Innocently.)* He said to walk the way he does!

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EGOR stops stage center and turns to ALEX and TABBY.

EGOR: Wait here. I shall announce you. *(He lumbers off.)*

ALEX: That guy's a regular Prince Charming.

TABBY: *(Gazing around the large room.)* Wow! This place is monstrous! You could put your entire apartment in this room and have enough space left for all the guys I've ever dated!

ALEX: Both of them?

TABBY: Sure!

ALEX: Look, Tabby, we need this job so don't do anything stupid, all right? Just keep your mouth shut and do what I say.

TABBY: *(Pouting.)* Sometimes I think you don't have any faith in me.

ALEX: *(Matter of factly.)* I don't.

TABBY: Well, just remember, if I hadn't invested five thousand dollars, we wouldn't have a detective business! And one more thing, I am an equal partner!

ALEX: *(Shakes her head sadly.)* How can I forget?

EMILY runs on. SHE has a frenzied look on her face and she's obviously panic-stricken. SHE rushes up to ALEX.

EMILY: *(Hysterically.)* They're trying to kill me!

ALEX: Who's trying to kill you?

EMILY: They are! And they will kill you, too! Neither of you will leave this house alive! *(SHE looks around wildly, then races off.)*

TABBY: How rude! She didn't even introduce herself!

ALEX: She was terrified! Look, Tabby, we're on to something here. Don't trust anyone and don't eat or drink anything! If somebody offers you a drink, just say, "I'm not thirsty."

EGOR lumbers on.

EGOR: Mrs. Buffington will be with you shortly. Would either of you ladies like something to drink?

ALEX: No!

TABBY: I'm not thirsty.

EGOR: A nice cool lemonade?

TABBY: Sure!

ALEX pulls TABBY off to the left.

ALEX: No lemonade! It could be poisoned!

TABBY: Oh yeah.

ALEX and TABBY turn their attention to EGOR.

TABBY: I changed my mind. No lemonade for me.

EGOR: Some iced tea, perhaps?

TABBY: Sure!

ALEX: *(Pulling TABBY farther to the right.)* No iced tea!

You're not thirsty.

TABBY: *(To EGOR.)* No thanks. I'm not thirsty. Have you got a Pepsi?

ALEX: Tabby!

EGOR: A Pepsi - yes. I shall get it for you straight away. *(He laughs evilly, then exits.)*

TABBY: I like that guy. Eager to please.

ALEX: You want to drink a poisoned Pepsi? Fine. Drink a poisoned Pepsi.

TABBY: Okay.

HILDA, the cook, creeps on. SHE looks like a ghoul.

HILDA: Beware of the **evil** one! Death comes in three's and soon to thee.

ALEX: Not soon enough. *(Glares at TABBY.)* Who are you?

HILDA: I am Hilda, the cook. Later I shall prepare – your last meal! *(SHE cackles maniacally and exits.)*

TABBY: Can I make a request?

ALEX: Tabby!

MRS. BUFFINGTON enters. SHE is a scatterbrained airhead.

MRS. BUFFINGTON: Welcome to Buffington Manor. I believe I am Mrs. Buffington. Where is Alex Scott?

ALEX: I'm Alex Scott.

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MRS. BUFFINGTON: (*Peering at ALEX through her glasses.*)

You? I was under the impression Alex Scott was a man.

You're not a man, are you?

ALEX: No, Mrs. Buffington, I'm not a man. My name's Alexis, but everyone calls me Alex.

MRS. BUFFINGTON: Oh dear. Not a man. Isn't that interesting?

ALEX: I can handle the job as well as any man.

TABBY: That's right! I'll vouch for her! Now if I could just get her to vouch for me.

MRS. BUFFINGTON: Well, you're here. You may as well stay. You understand, of course. I want you to find out who murdered my husband. The police don't have a clue. Have you seen my knitting needles?

ALEX: Knitting needles? No. Who would benefit from his death?

MRS. BUFFINGTON: Whose death? I thought we were looking for my knitting needles.

ALEX: No, Mrs. Buffington. Your husband's murderer.

MRS. BUFFINGTON: I'm quite certain someone broke into the house in the middle of the night and stole my knitting needles!

TABBY: Ah hah! The masked knitting needle thief has struck again!

ALEX: Can we please get back to your husband's murder?

MRS. BUFFINGTON: Well, certainly! That's why you're here, isn't it?

ALEX: (*Patiently.*) Yes, Mrs. Buffington. Who would benefit from your husband's death?

MRS. BUFFINGTON: Just about everyone, except for you two, of course. Our three nieces, two of whom are married. The bulk of the estate will be divided among them. The four servants will receive much smaller amounts. Maximillian, of course, receives nothing.

ALEX: Who's Maximillian?

MRS. BUFFINGTON: Our goldfish. He became vicious a few weeks ago and my husband cut him out of his will.

TABBY: Hey! There's our motive!

ALEX scowls at TABBY and TABBY smiles sweetly.

ALEX: What about you, Mrs. Buffington? Are you included in his will?

MRS. BUFFINGTON: Oh dear no. I have my own fortune.

ALEX: What's your husband's estate worth?

MRS. BUFFINGTON: Oh, I'd say twenty million dollars and some change.

TABBY: Now **that's** a motive for murder! Why, even I would - Never mind.

ALEX: How many people are living here now?

MRS. BUFFINGTON: As far as I know, my three nieces, two nephews by marriage, four servants, and myself.

ALEX: Ten people. And were all ten here when your husband was murdered?

MRS. BUFFINGTON: Yes. Have you seen my African violets? Remind me to show them to you one day next year.

ALEX: Just after we got here, a slender young girl ran up to us and said someone was trying to kill her.

MRS. BUFFINGTON: That would have been Emily, one of my nieces. She isn't well, I'm afraid, poor dear.

TABBY: You mean she's bonkers? Loony? Off her rocker?

MRS. BUFFINGTON: Oh no! None of those things! Worse! She's crazy as a bedbug.

TABBY: She must fit right in here.

ALEX: I read the police reports before we came. The police seem to think the killer may have been an intruder. I'm not going to rule out that possibility, but we still need to talk to everyone.

MRS. BUFFINGTON: I'll have Egor summon them.

ALEX: Egor?

MRS. BUFFINGTON: Our butler.

ALEX: Oh yeah - Mr. Personality. Egor's a very appropriate name for him.

MRS. BUFFINGTON: He's very sweet when you get to know him. The problem is, no one ever gets to know him.

ALEX: What's your theory about your husband's murder?

MRS. BUFFINGTON: Only that after he was murdered, he appeared to be quite dead. But that's only my opinion.

TABBY: Hmm. There's a clue there somewhere.

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EGOR enters carrying a tray with a glass of Pepsi.

EGOR: Your drink, miss. *(EGOR hands the glass to TABBY with a particularly evil laugh. ALEX snatches the glass from TABBY.)*

MRS. BUFFINGTON: Egor, summon the others. The detectives would like to interview them. And when you've done that, water my African violets.

EGOR: You don't have any African violets, ma'am.

MRS. BUFFINGTON: Then you needn't bother watering them. Why must I tell you everything? *(She exits in a huff.)*

TABBY: *(To EGOR.)* She's kinda loony, isn't she?

EGOR: Yes, I am the only normal person in this house.

ALEX: Now I know we're in trouble!

EGOR: Drink your Pepsi, miss. It will make you feel – restful and peaceful.

ALEX: As in rest in peace?

Just as ALEX is putting the glass on an end table, a piercing SCREAM is heard.

ALEX: Someone screamed!

HILDA waddles on, cackles crazily, then exits.

EGOR: I will fetch the others now.

ALEX: But what about that scream?

EGOR: *(With a sinister laugh.)* Perhaps there will be one less person to question. *(HE exits, laughing.)*

TABBY: Call it female intuition or just a crazy hunch, but I have a feeling something's not quite right in this house.

ALEX: *(Sourly.)* Brilliant deduction.

TABBY: Should we investigate?

ALEX: This house is too big, it would take us hours to search through every room. We'd better stay here and talk to the others. We'll find out soon enough if someone else was murdered.

TABBY: Well, that's one good thing.

ALEX: What's that?

TABBY: We know it wasn't either one of us who was murdered.
Not yet anyway.

EMILY runs on again.

EMILY: They tried to kill me!

ALEX: Then it was you who screamed. Who tried to kill you?

EMILY: I don't know! It was dark in the hallway! Someone tried to strangle me, but I got away! What am I going to do?

ALEX: Stay here with us. We won't let anyone hurt you.

Tabby, keep your Mace handy!

TABBY: What Mace?

ALEX: I told you to put a can of Mace in your bag!

TABBY: Hey, I was responsible for backing out the car, you should have grabbed the Mace.

EMILY: We're all going to die! I just know it!

The two nieces, SELENA and CAMILLE, enter with their husbands, BASIL and JEROME. EMILY immediately goes to the sofa where SHE sits with her head lowered.

CAMILLE: (*Imperiously.*) You two young ladies are the detectives? How very amusing!

BASIL: Let's get this inquisition over and done with! I'm sure I must have more important things to do!

ALEX: Did any of you hear Emily scream a couple of minutes ago?

SELENA, CAMILLE, BASIL and JEROME ad-lib, "No!" "I didn't!" "A scream?" etc.

ALEX: Emily -

SELENA: (*Interrupting.*) Our beloved sister -

ALEX: - said someone tried to strangle her.

CAMILLE: And obviously failed. How very unfortunate.

ALEX: But not for her. All right, let's get on with it. Please identify yourselves and tell me what you know about Mr. Buffington's murder.

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BASIL: Jerome should talk first. After all, he witnessed the murder.

ALEX: You saw the killer?

TABBY: Case solved!

JEROME: I had just stepped out of my room. The hallway was dark, but I was able to see someone standing just outside Mr. Buffington's room. Whoever it was opened the door and fired two shots into the room. Then the person tossed the gun into the room and ran down the back stairs.

ALEX: Can you identify the killer?

JEROME: No, it was too dark.

TABBY: Case not solved!

ALEX: Could you tell if it was a man or a woman?

JEROME: No, it was one of them though.

TABBY: That gets Maximillian off the hook.

CAMILLE: There were definitely two shots. The police found two shell castings inside Mr. Buffington's room - and the gun. I believe they called it an automatic.

ALEX: And no fingerprints, naturally. (*To JEROME.*) And you said he was standing in the hallway when he shot into the room?

JEROME: That is correct.

ALEX: Okay, gang, tell me something about yourself in fifty words or less.

JEROME: Three weeks ago I married Camille. Until that time I had been a professor of English at the state university. Just after the killer ran away, Selena and Basil came out of their room and into the hall. Even though it was dark, I could tell it was them.

CAMILLE: I can vouch for everything Jerome said. We were together in our room and when he stepped into the hall he was never out of my sight. And by the way, I'm the eldest of my two sisters.

BASIL: Selena and I have been married for five years. I own a computer software business. Selena and I were in our room when we heard the shot. We ran out of the room and saw Jerome standing near the door to his room.

SELENA: So you see, we didn't kill Uncle Mortimer.

ALEX: You may be right. You're free to go. Please tell the butler to send in the servants, one by one.

BASIL: I think you're wasting your time. We all know Emily is guilty.

ALEX: What makes you so sure?

JEROME: She had a nervous breakdown last year and Mr. Buffington wanted to have her committed. Emily never forgave him, and she is, after all, a Jekyll and Hyde sleepwalker.

ALEX: (*Thoughtfully.*) Uh huh . . . thank you, Jerome.

SELENA: I hope, for your sake, you don't find out the hard way.

SELENA, BASIL, CAMILLE, and JEROME exit. ALEX goes to EMILY.

ALEX: Where were you when Mr. Buffington was murdered?

EMILY: (*Tearfully.*) I don't know. I don't know! I think I was asleep. But I can't be certain . . .

HILDA enters, looking as menacing as usual.

HILDA: You wanted to see me . . . one last time?

ALEX: What do you mean, "One last time?"

HILDA: (*Cackling.*) You and your little friend will both die at the stroke of midnight!

TABBY: If we're going to die at midnight, I have something to say.

ALEX: What?

TABBY screams shrilly.

ALEX: Is that all?

TABBY: Yes.

ALEX: (*Sarcastically.*) Thank you for sharing that with us.

TABBY: You're welcome.

ALEX: (*To HILDA.*) Where were you when Mr. Buffington was murdered?

HILDA: Lurking in the shadows. (*SHE cackles maniacally.*)

ALEX: What do you know about the murder?

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HILDA: Everything.

TABBY: Let me slap her around a little, Alex. I'll get the truth out of her!

HILDA: Touch me and I'll kill you!

TABBY: Oh, well, in that case -

ALEX: Do me a favor, Tabby. (*Motions for TABBY to "cut it out."*)

ALEX: Do you know how to use a gun, Hilda?

HILDA: (*Cackling.*) Oh yes! Very well! Would you like a demonstration?

ALEX: That won't be necessary. Who do you think killed Mr. Buffington?

HILDA: I know who killed him! Oh, indeed I do!

ALEX: Why don't you tell us?

HILDA: (*Pointing at Emily.*) She did it! She's loony! She sleepwalks all the time, oh, she did it all right.

EMILY: I didn't kill him! At least, I don't think I did.

ALEX: (*To HILDA.*) Okay, you can go. Send in one of the other servants.

HILDA: It's such a pity you two young ladies must die. Such a terrible pity! (*SHE cackles maniacally and exits.*)

TABBY: If she isn't the killer, she'll do until one comes along!

GERTIE, the maid, enters. SHE is very defensive and more than slightly paranoid.

GERTIE: Ask your questions quickly, please.

ALEX: Who are you?

GERTIE: I'm Gertie, the maid. And I don't know anything about anything.

ALEX: Where were you when the murder took place?

GERTIE: I was in the back room ironing.

ALEX: By the back stairs?

GERTIE: Yes. By the back stairs.

ALEX: Did you hear or see anyone on the stairs just after the shot was fired?

GERTIE: I had my radio turned up. I heard nothing. I saw nothing.

ALEX: I suppose you could have run up the stairs, shot Mr. Buffington, then ran back downstairs as though nothing had happened.

GERTIE: *(Darkly.)* I suppose I could have.

ALEX: Did you?

GERTIE: No. If you want to find the killer, talk to the sleepwalker. I think we're finished here.

SHE exits quickly.

TABBY: I think I've got the case solved. The butler did it. The butler always does it.

ALEX: Unless he's faking his limp, I don't think he could have run down the stairs, do you?

TABBY: All right, then Gertie did it. Or Hilda. No, I bet it was one of the nieces . . . maybe it was Mrs. Buffington. I've narrowed it down for you.

ALEX: Yeah, great. I don't know what I'd do without you, but I'd sure like to find out.

MARK, the handsome young chauffeur and gardener enters.

MARK: You wanted to see me? I'm Mark Sloan, the Buffington's chauffeur and gardener.

TABBY: Hey! It looks like we get to talk to a normal person after all. *(To MARK.)* Hi! I'm Tabitha, but you can call be Tabby. In fact, you can call me anytime, day or night.

MARK: *(Laughing good-naturedly.)* That's the best offer I've had all year!

ALEX: I have some questions for you.

MARK: And I have one for you. What's the difference between roast beef and pea soup?

TABBY: I give up!

MARK: Anyone can roast beef.

TABBY: I don't get it.

ALEX: Enough, enough. Where were you when Mr. Buffington was shot?

MARK: In the garage working on one of the cars.

ALEX: Anyone see you?

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TABBY: Oh, stop, Alex! Anyone can see Mark isn't a murderer! But I'll bet he's a great lover!

MARK: Why do gorillas have big noses?

TABBY: Tell us!

MARK: Because they have big fingers.

TABBY: I don't get it.

ALEX: (*Becoming frustrated.*) So you were nowhere near Mr. Buffington's room when he was murdered?

MARK: No. Where do you find a dog with no legs?

TABBY: Where?

MARK: Right where you left him.

TABBY: I got it! I got it!

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