

Rollen / Textausschnitt

MURDER AT PITLOCHRY HOUSE

a whodunnit in four acts

by

Peter De Geesewell

first night: 21st September 1985
revised and enlarged 2001 and 2016



Copyright © Peter R. Füg, Höhenweg 14, CH-4133 Pratteln, Switzerland 1985 / 2001 / 2016
Title picture by Tamara Pirini Casadei (2016)

**All the world's a stage,
And all the men and women merely players;
They have their exits and their entrances,
And one man in his time plays many parts ...**

Jacques in: As You Like It (Act II, Scene VII)

William Shakespeare

(1564 – 1616)

The persons of the play (in order of appearance)

7 female / 8 male

- corpse** Richard Murdoch, 12th Earl of Pitlochry. He has died in a riding accident.
- Hetty** Mrs Hetty Shroud, the undertaker's wife. She took over her husband's firm after his highly lamented death.
- Eleanor** Lady Eleanor Murdoch, Lord Richard's widow, a nice elderly lady.
- David** David Somerset, an unsuccessful young businessman, who has just married Lord Richard's daughter and is madly in love with her.
- Charles** Charles, an old and faithful butler.
- Sarah** Sarah Simpson, a young chambermaid.
- Moira** Lady Moira Somerset, Lord Richard and Lady Eleanor's daughter. She is David Somerset's wife now. She is a very kind but not a very strong young woman.
- Rupert** Rupert Murdoch, Lord Richard's eldest son and heir to the title.
- Stella** Lady Stella Murdoch, his wife, a woman who knows exactly what she wants.
- Price** Leslie Price, the Murdochs' solicitor.
- vicar** Reverend Joshua Winter, the minister of the Pitlochry Parish.
- doctor** Doctor Lydia Poole, the family doctor.
- Steel** Constable Anthony Steel, a member of the local Tayside Police Force.
- Blake** Superintendent Steven Blake, a detective from Edinburgh's Special Branch.

The story takes place during three days of the year 1926 at Pitlochry House, the Manor of the Earls of Pitlochry, County Tayside, Scotland.

ACT ONE

Scene 1

A large, old Victorian sitting-room, furnished with a fireplace, a sofa, two armchairs and a table with four chairs. It is laid for three persons. Near the door there is a small table with a telephone on it. There are some family portraits on the wall in heavy gold frames and a big ornamental family tree. A window goes out into the garden.

In the background there is an ironing-board with an iron on it.

In the foreground, very prominent, there is a screen. You can see some movement behind it and hear somebody humming "Edelweiss" from "The Sound of Music". Somebody is obviously working behind the screen. It is Mrs Hetty Shroud whom we only catch a glimpse or two of.

After a while she comes out from behind the screen and removes it. It has hidden a coffin. The coffin is open, so you can see the white face of the body when the screen is removed.

She looks at her work very critically from all sides.

Hetty Even Norman couldn't have laid you out more distinguishedly! A real work of art. *(she is looking up piously)* Well, Norman, what do you say? *(she seems to listen for a moment)* What's that, Norman? You're not happy with it? *(she listens again)* I see, yes, of course. The edelweiss is missing. *(she takes an edelweiss out of her handbag and puts it on the body)* There you are. That's better, isn't it? Now, what next? *(she takes out a little notebook and flips through it for a moment)* Ah yes, prepare the chapel for tomorrow's service. Fine.

(Lady Eleanor, Earl Richard's widow, enters, using a stick. She is dressed all in mourning and has got a white handkerchief to her face. As she enters, Hetty steps back respectfully.)

Lady Eleanor does not see her as her eyes are only on Lord Richard. She kneels down next to the coffin and caresses his hair.)

Eleanor Oh my love, my dearest Richard, sun of my life, my Edelweiss – why have you left me? *(she breaks down sobbing and uses her handkerchief extensively. Then she sees the edelweiss and breaks down again.)* She's even put an edelweiss on your breast!

Hetty There, there, Lady Eleanor, don't you cry. I just know how you are feeling. Haven't I lost my husband, too? Do you like the edelweiss?

Eleanor Oh yes, it's such a personal touch. It was one of my names for him. The Edelweiss – looking down from the mountains on me – and now looking down from heaven! *(she sobs)*

Hetty Shall I play it for you, Mylady?

Eleanor Yes, please.

(As Hetty is walking over to the grand piano the corpse is getting out of the coffin and putting on a shroud. He walks behind Eleanor and puts his hands on her shoulder when Hetty starts playing and singing.)

Hetty "Edelweiss, Edelweiss, every morning you greet me.
Small and white, clean and bright
You look happy to meet me ..."

Eleanor *(She sobs painfully)* Please stop, it's too much for me.
(The corpse takes his hands off her)
It's as if I felt his hands on my shoulder, but not warm as in life. It was the icy cold of death.
What am I going to do now? How can I go on living without you? Why haven't you taken me with you?

corpse Patience, my dear. You'll be with me sooner than you think – and I'll be waiting for you at the Pearly Gates.
Now be tough – and give me a glorious funeral, worthy of an Earl of Pitlochry.

Hetty Lady Eleanor, why don't we go to the chapel together? It's almost ready.

*(After a last look at the coffin they leave. The corpse goes to the family tree and crosses out his name. Then he takes off his shroud and climbs back into the coffin.
A moment later David enters and looks around the room to see whether he is alone. Then he goes to the coffin and has a look at the corpse)*

David Hello, old man. I haven't expected to see you so soon - and so dead! Falling off a horse – what a stupid way to go - but what a nice surprise for your heirs!

(While David is talking to the corpse, Charles, the butler, silently enters, carrying a tray.)

Charles Err, good morning, sir.

David *(he turns around startled, but recovers quickly)* You gave me a fright, Charles, slithering in like a snake. Can't you give us some warning when you enter?
(he flops into one of the armchairs)
Well, let's have some tea, then.

Charles I'm sorry, sir. I didn't want to disturb your good-byes to Lord Richard. *(he pauses)*
About the tea, sir. I'm afraid, you'll have to wait for a couple of moments, sir. It's the tradition of this house to wait until Mylord and Mylady are present.

David *(pointing to the coffin)* Well, Mylord **is** present, isn't he? All right, bring me the paper instead.

Charles Yes, sir. *(He rings a bell. Sarah, the chambermaid, enters carrying a copy of The Times on a silver tray. Seeing David she drops a curtsy)*

Sarah Good morning, sir. Here's the paper, Charles.

(She leaves with another curtsy. Charles takes the paper to the ironing-board and starts ironing it)

David What a beauty! Who **is** she? She wasn't here yet when Moira and I went on our honeymoon, was she?

Charles That's right, sir. She's Sarah, the new chambermaid. Lady Eleanor hired her about two months ago, after Hilary had given notice.
(He hands him the paper) There you are, sir.

David Thank you very much, Charles. Freshly ironed even the worst news becomes more digestible, doesn't it?

Charles If you say so, sir.

(Charles folds up the ironing-board and leaves with it. David starts reading the paper. After a moment the door opens again and Lady Eleanor, leaning on her daughter Moira and her stick, enters. David gets up and helps Lady Eleanor and Moira to their seats at the table.)

David Good evening, Mylady, err, Mother. *(He kisses her rather formally)*
Good evening, darling. *(He kisses Moira, then he rings the bell and sits down)*
How was your walk, Lady Eleanor, err Mother?

Moira Oh David, dear, you must really learn to call Mother "Mother"! We've been married for such a long time now...

David Yes, love - for exactly seventy-seven days!

(Charles and Sarah enter and serve tea. Then they leave)

Eleanor Well, children, I'm awfully sorry. It must have been such a terrible shock for you - and in the middle of your honeymoon.
I wish my dear Richard had lived to see your children.

Moira Don't think of that, Mother, you really mustn't tire yourself!

Eleanor You're a good girl, Moira. And I'm so glad you're back in time for the funeral tomorrow. Oh, by the way, thank you for that lovely postcard from the Taj Mahal.
There's still an awful lot to be done this evening. Our vicar, Reverend Joshua Winter, should be here any moment, and so should Mr Price, my solicitor.

Moira What about the funeral invitations and the obituaries in the papers?

Eleanor Mr Price has arranged everything.

Moira And when will Rupert and Stella arrive?

(A distant bell goes)

David Definitely before the will is opened.

Moira David, don't talk about my brother like this.

David I'm not talking about **him**, dear - I'm talking about **her**.

Eleanor They've promised to be here this afternoon.

(Charles enters)

Charles Your eldest son, Mylady. Lord Rupert Murdoch, the new Earl of Pitlochry.

(Rupert and Stella enter. David takes his newspaper and goes on reading demonstratively)

Rupert Hello Mother! *(He kisses her)*

Eleanor Hello Rupert!

Rupert Moira, my dear sister! *(He kisses her with affection)*
What a sad interruption of your honeymoon!

Moira Oh Rupert, let's not talk about this! I'm happy we've got back in time for the funeral

Rupert Evening, David.

David *(He looks up from his paper for a moment)* Hi Rupert, old man.

Stella *(quite overpowering)* Oh Mother, how are you? We're so sorry we couldn't come earlier, but Rupert had that **important** meeting in London and I...

Eleanor That's alright, Stella.

Stella Moira, darling. You look great! How was India?

Moira Thank you, Stella. I'm glad you two are here.

Stella *(rather frostily)* David.

David *(He doesn't even look up)* Ah, it's you. *(He folds up his paper)* Excuse me, please. Business is waiting.

(He stands up and leaves)

Moira David,... ?

Rupert Still his old charming self, I see.

Stella I don't understand how you could marry such a tactless and selfish moron.
(she takes out a cigarette, puts it into a cigarette holder and wants to light it with her lighter. When Rupert shakes his head she puts the lighter away but keeps the unlit cigarette in her hand)
Business! What a joke. His only business is spending **your** money!

Moira Stella, please. I do love him!

Stella Yeah, - and isn't this amazing?

Eleanor Don't quarrel, children. David's a nice young man - but I must agree with Stella. He really hasn't got any manners whatsoever. Still, he is family now, I'm afraid. Just like you, Stella. So I **do** want you to accept him as your brother-in-law.

(A distant bell rings)

Rupert Of course, Mother. Stella didn't want to...

Moira Oh yes, she did! She's never liked David and she always tries to provoke him. And now she's upset Mother.

(Charles enters)

Charles Mylady, your solicitor is here to see you!

Eleanor *(half crying)* I can't talk to him at the moment. Rupert, would you...?

Rupert Yes, of course, Mother.

Moira I'll go with you, Mother.

(They leave)

Scene 2

(Charles enters, followed by Mr Price, who is carrying a small suitcase)

Charles Mr Price, sir.

Rupert Good evening, Mr Price.

Price Good evening, Mylord. My sincerest condolences. I'm so sorry for your loss. Lady Stella, how are you?

Stella Thank you, Mr Price. Sit down, please. Anything to eat or drink?

Price Oh yes, please. A nice cup of tea would be welcome. And perhaps an egg?

Charles Just a moment, sir.

(Charles leaves)

Rupert Mother will be here any minute. She isn't feeling too well.

Price Of course, I understand. It must have come as such a shock for the good Lady Eleanor. Lord Richard was such a good rider. But – at his age...

Stella While we are waiting, perhaps you could tell us about Lord Richard's will?

Rupert Stella, please!

(Charles enters with a cup and an egg on a tray)

Charles There you are, sir.

(He pours the tea and leaves)

Rupert Now, Mr Price, can you tell me exactly how Father died?

Price Well, it was an accident, a tragic accident. Very tragic indeed! Lord Richard was on his usual early morning ride. While he was cantering along some hedges suddenly a grouse fluttered out and frightened his horse. He fell off and crushed his head. Bang! *(He cracks his egg with a spoon)*

Oh, it was a terrible sight. As you know he never wore a helmet and so his skull was wide open and ... *(he slurps the contents of his egg)*

Stella Dreadful! Now, Mr Price, about the will... Lord Richard was very wealthy and Rupert's his oldest son. The second son, Andrew, died two years ago in India. So there is only Moira left - and she's just a woman. So there must be

quite a lot of money for us.

Price Oh, yes, indeed! There must be millions of pounds - and they all go to Lady Eleanor. But your husband will inherit the title, of course. He's the 13th Earl of Pitlochry now.

Stella *(she gets up furiously, walks over to the coffin and addresses the body with venom)*
You spiteful old monster! How could you do that! You knew exactly that we need the money.

Rupert *(he gets up, too)* Stella, **do** shut up!

Stella I won't accept it! I'm going to fight for my rights.

(She runs out)

Rupert *(he follows her)* Stella, don't be stupid!

Price *(he gets up to have a look at the corpse, then he lightly touches the deceased's cheeks)*
You were right, Mylord. You really knew your family. Just what you said: "They'll be at each other's throat before I'm even cold."
So much for nobility. Disgusting. Yuck!

(He returns to his seat. A distant bell goes)

Scene 3

(All at once the lights go out)

Price Good heavens, what's the matter?

(There is a loud banging outside and a cry, then there is a moment's silence. After that there are several shouts)

Rupert Turn on the lights.

David Get out of my way, you fool.

Stella What's happened?

Moira Help, I can't see anything.

Stella Where are the lights?

David Damn', damn', damn'! What bloody fool has switched off the lights?

Rupert Charles, fetch some candles!

Moira Mother, where are you?

Price *(He strikes a match. Two people come in)* Who's that? What's happened?

David A fuse must have blown.

Rupert Is that you, David? *(He strikes a match)*
Where's Charles? Can't he bring us some candles?
(Charles enters with a candle-stick)

Charles Here I am, Mylord.

Stella *(coming in behind Charles)* What's happened, Charles?

Charles A power failure, I imagine. The whole house is in the dark.
(Sarah enters with another candle-stick)

Sarah Here's some more light.

Moira *(coming in behind her)* Has anyone seen Mother? *(Another person follows her in)*
Ah, here she is.

vicar I'm afraid, it's only me, Reverend Joshua Winter. Nobody's answered the door, so I've taken the liberty to come in... How absolutely romantic to use only candle-light. Lord Richard would have loved it.

David Romantic! My ass! The electricity has broken down.

Moira Mind your language, darling.

Charles I'll go and see what I can do about it. Sarah, come along. You can hold the candles.
(He puts his candle-stick on the table and they leave. A moment later the lights go on)

David That's better - even if it isn't as romantic.

Sarah *(outside)* Yiiii, help !
(Everybody runs to the door and looks out)

Charles *(from outside)* Could someone give me a hand, please?

David *(leaves the room)* I'm coming.
(Charles and David carry Lady Eleanor in and lay her on the sofa. Sarah follows them in. The candles on her candle-stick are not burning anymore)

vicar God bless her poor soul! *(He makes the sign of the cross)*

Moira Mother, Mother! - Speak to me, Mother! *(She takes her hand)*
What's wrong with her? - She isn't ...?

Stella *(brutally)* Yes, dead as a dodo.

Moira *(starts weeping)* Oh Mother, Mother...!

Rupert She must have fallen down the stairs in the darkness - and broken her neck.

Price Shouldn't we call the police, Mylord? Perhaps she hasn't just fallen on her own.

Stella What do you mean?

Price There are some pushy people around here. I can't help thinking that some of them aren't too sad about Lady Eleanor's demise.

Stella How dare you!

David Why are you getting angry? He hasn't even mentioned your name, Stella!

Hetty *(peeping in shyly)* Hello there! Excuse me please. Could I have a word with Lady Eleanor? I've got some last questions about the flowers in the chapel. It looks simply gorgeous - even if I say so myself. A real pleasure to enjoy one's last moments there.

Stella Lady Eleanor won't be able to appreciate it, I'm afraid. She's just had a fatal accident.

Hetty Oh my sainted aunt. *(turning her eyes upwards)* Have you ever had anything like this, Norman? A second body to be laid out. Glory be to our Lord! The horoscope was right. This **is** my lucky day. *(She rubs her hands and spits into them.)*
Let's start work, then.
(She takes out her measuring tape, the notebook and a pencil. Then she starts measuring the body mumbling numbers and taking notes)

vicar Let us pray, brothers and sisters in Christ. *(they all kneel down)*
For the immortal souls of Lady Eleanor and her late husband Lord Richard.
(Lord Richard's corpse climbs out of the coffin, puts on his shroud and walks over to Lady Eleanor. He helps her up and puts a shroud on her, too.)

corpse Welcome my love – united for eternity now. Just look at these fools, hypocrites and sinners! We've given them everything – and as a thank you they've bloody murdered you!
But it's not over yet. Just you wait and see.
(he walks over to the family tree and strikes out her name)

vicar Father in heaven, Thou hast called these two souls into Thy heavenly kingdom. May they live in eternal peace and happiness. Amen.

all Amen! *(they stand up again)*

vicar There'll be two funerals tomorrow morning - and now I'm hungry. Isn't there any chocolate pudding left?

C U R T A I N