

RED HERRINGS

A comic thriller

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CHARACTERS

Madame Lacy Eugenia: 60 or older

Mrs. Gulliver: 60 or older

The Amazing Ira: 60 or older

Sheriff Hollis Buckman: early 30's or older

Sophie: late 20's or older

Eddie: early 30's or older

Madame Lacy's house, Blue Diamond, Nevada
(just outside Las Vegas)

October 9, 1961

Act One

Scene One - Evening

Scene Two - A few minutes later

Scene Three - Immediately following

Act Two

Scene One - The next day, just after noon

Scene Two - A short time later

For Messires Bruhl, Roat and Wyke

ACT ONE
Scene One

The first floor of a large Victorian house in Blue Diamond, a small town outside Las Vegas, October 1961. It is large and gloomy, a bit worn.

The space is split by a large staircase center which leads up and off right.

The parlor is right. Down right is the front door with a small table next to it. There is a bowl on the table. Up right is a bookcase that is a secret door. In the back wall center is a fireplace with a large portrait above the mantel which swings open, revealing a secret space behind it. The eyes can be removed for spying purposes. On the mantel are two candles and a radio. Center is a small, round table with two chairs. The table holds a crystal ball and an incense burner. A chandelier hangs above the table and a small wind chime hangs from the chandelier. There is an invisible wire attached to the wind chime that runs into the wall next to the portrait. Under the table there is a trapdoor.

The dining room is left. A door under the stairs right leads down to the basement. Against the upstage wall center is a large sarcophagus - the "disappearing cabinet" of a magic act - so there is an escape in the back of it and also through the wall behind it. Up left is a swinging door to the kitchen. There are two dining room chairs and a dining table littered with various magic props including a top hat containing a white rabbit puppet and a confetti popper, a juggling club, a set of handcuffs, a cane that with a sword blade in it, a knife with a retractable blade and a ventriloquist dummy named Stumpy. The walls are covered with theatrical posters advertising "Madame Lacy" and "The Amazing Ira and Stumpy."

AT RISE: It is evening. MADAME LACY is holding a seance for MRS. GULLIVER. THEY are sitting at parlor table, MRS. GULLIVER facing out with her back to the fireplace, MADAME LACY sitting to her right. There is soft music playing from the radio, the candles are lit, the lights are low and there is incense burning on the table.

LACY

(In an ethereal voice) We are here to contact the dearly departed spirit of William Buckman. Come to us, William. Your wife Lily is here and longs to speak with you. Won't you manifest yourself, William, William Buckman?

The candles flicker.

MRS. GULLIVER

(Shivering) Ooooh, I feel a draft. Someone's coming through!

LACY

(Ethereal voice) The love she has calls you to her. William Buckman, are you there?

The wind chimes tinkle softly.

MRS. GULLIVER

Is it him, Madame Lacy?

LACY

(Ethereal voice) Give us a sign, William. Let us know it is you here with us now.

The wind chimes tinkle louder.

MRS. GULLIVER

William? It's me, it's Lily. I'm here.

The candles abruptly go out.

MRS. GULLIVER

(A bit frightened) William?

LACY

(Deep voice) Lily? Is that my unfaithful wife Lily?

MRS. GULLIVER

William, how are you?

LACY

(Deep voice) I'm dead, Lily, how do you think I am?

The table lifts a few inches off the floor and slams down.

MRS. GULLIVER

I'm sorry, William, that was insensitive of me.

LACY

(Deep voice) What do you want, Lily?

MRS. GULLIVER

I miss you, dear, your companionship and your warmth...

The table jumps and bangs again, harder.

MRS. GULLIVER

I'm worried about Amos.

LACY

(Deep voice) He's fine, Lily. Every cat gets hair balls.

MRS. GULLIVER

Not Amos the cat, William, Amos my husband. My late husband. My other late husband.

LACY

(Deep voice) You mean that pompous fool you replaced me with?

MRS. GULLIVER

Surely after all this time you don't begrudge me marrying again?

LACY

(Deep voice) Of course I begrudge it! Have you no sense of loyalty?

MRS. GULLIVER

But you were dead! Did you think I would never marry again?

LACY

(Deep voice) Certainly I did! The betrayal when you took him to our bed...

MRS. GULLIVER

But I was still young and you'd been gone 20 years!

LACEY

(Deep voice) A mere blink of the eye in eternity.

MRS. GULLIVER

You may be in eternity, William, but I am not and I had needs.

LACY

(Deep voice) So go on and talk to Amos then, what are you bothering me with your needs for?

MRS. GULLIVER

(With a little laugh) Oh, William - you sound just like you did when you were alive! I don't dare try to contact Amos directly. He's terribly angry.

LACY

(Deep voice) About what?

MRS. GULLIVER

The way he died, of course. Can't you speak to him for me, try to reason with him?

LACY

(Deep voice) I am not an afterlife marriage counselor, Lily.

MRS. GULLIVER

But you can explain things to him face to face...as it were. Tell him that I'm sorry we fought and even though he knows he drove me to it, I now regret that I lost my temper.

LACY

(Deep voice) Why didn't you tell him this yourself before he died?

MRS. GULLIVER

There simply wasn't time. One moment we were arguing at the top of the stairs and the next he'd... slipped.

LACY

(Deep voice) He's dead, Lily, why do you care what he thinks?

MRS. GULLIVER

Because he's been haunting me! I hear strange noises, the lights are going on and off by themselves, doors are opening and closing...my nerves are perfectly shot! Why, yesterday, my favorite china kitten practically flew off the end table and smashed itself to bits. I'm sure Amos pushed it off. He never liked it.

LACY

(Deep voice) Then you must talk to him yourself. If he's angry at you, he's hardly going to listen to me, is he.

MRS. GULLIVER

But you're bigger than he is. Was. You could, I don't know, punch him in the nose if he doesn't leave me alone.

LACY

(Deep voice) It doesn't work that way over here, Lily. He doesn't have a nose and I don't have a fist. You must sort things out for yourself. How is Hollis?

MRS. GULLIVER

Much too busy, poor dear, with this terrible kidnapping. I know you've said you can't help him but I so wish you could. He's head of the investigation, you know. Mr. Farragut doesn't want the FBI involved so he's put Hollis in charge.

LACY

(Deep voice) The old man's afraid of his mob connections coming out if the F.B.I. gets involved, eh?

MRS. GULLIVER

He's being so clever about everything! Do you know, there's a very important clue that's been kept secret - the baby's favorite toy was taken, a little pink elephant.

LACY

(Deep voice) Why is it a secret?

MRS. GULLIVER

It'll be proof he's talking to the real kidnappers if they know about it when they contact him.

LACY

(Deep voice) That's my boy, smart as usual.

MRS. GULLIVER

And then there's the red stain on the ransom note.

LACY

(Deep voice) Blood?

MRS. GULLIVER

Strawberry jam. Another secret clue.

LACY

(Deep voice) He must be close to rescuing the poor child.

MRS. GULLIVER

You'd think so but apparently, so many people like strawberry jam.

LACY

(Deep voice) I'm sure Hollis will solve it soon. Now, if there's nothing else, Lily, I really must go. I'm playing golf with Napoleon at nine.

MRS. GULLIVER

Really?

LACY

(Deep voice) No. Goodbye, Lily.

MRS. GULLIVER

Goodbye, William. Well, I suppose I should talk to Amos. I want to know where he's hidden Grandma Posey's cameo brooch that's gone missing.

Silence.

MRS. GULLIVER

William? Amos? Anyone? Hello?

LACY

(Ethereal voice) Spirits, are you there? Pray, speak with us.

Silence.

MRS. GULLIVER

(Loudly whispering) Did I do something wrong?

LACY

(Irritated) Spirits, we are not finished with you yet. Please make contact!

LACY looks up at the wind chimes.

LACY

You must concentrate harder, Mrs. Gulliver. Shut your eyes tight and picture Amos in your mind because sometimes the spirits...just aren't paying attention!

MRS. GULLIVER shuts her eyes and so does not see LACY tug violently on the invisible wire tied to the wind chimes. The portrait over the fireplace swings open and IRA, who is hiding behind it and holding on to the other end of the wire, almost falls out. IRA has an earpiece in one ear that leads to a transistor radio in his pocket. His other hand holds a peanut butter and jelly sandwich.

IRA manages to catch himself before he topples out and tugs on the wire so hard that the wind chimes fall onto MRS. GULLIVER's head. LACY quickly crosses to the fireplace, pushes the portrait shut and then crosses back to the table to remove the chimes.

LACY

I'm so sorry, Mrs. Gulliver. The spirits seem to be in a contrary mood tonight.

LACY turns up the lights and turns off the music.

MRS. GULLIVER

Oh, don't blame the spirits, Madame Lacy, it's Amos. He's terribly angry with me. I don't know what to do. Perhaps you might intercede on my behalf?

LACY

I don't know if I could do any good.

MRS. GULLIVER

Or I could always try that old gypsy woman over in Barlowe. I hear she's very...

LACY

Mrs. Gulliver! Gypsies are nothing but frauds and con-artists! I wouldn't want you to be taken in by someone like that. Let me see what I can do.

MRS. GULLIVER

Oh, thank you, Madame Lacy. After all these years, I knew I could count on you to watch out for me.

The doorbell rings.

LACY

Excuse me, dear.

LACY crosses to front door and opens it.
MRS. CORNWALLIS is standing there.

MRS. CORNWALLIS

Madame Lacy? I know it's late and I don't have an appointment but I was hoping you could see me nevertheless.

LACY

I'm afraid I'm a bit tired, I've just finished a rather difficult sitting...

MRS. CORNWALLIS

Oh, please? I'll pay double your usual fee. It's extremely important.

MRS. GULLIVER

Don't mind me. I have to be getting the pies ready for the Women's Auxiliary Meeting tomorrow.

MRS. GULLIVER puts some money in the offering bowl.

LACY

Thank you, dear. Same time Friday?

MRS. GULLIVER

As usual. Perhaps Amos will be in better spirits. (SHE realizes what SHE has said and laughs)
Better spirits! Oh, my! (To MRS. CORNWALLIS) Madame Lacy is truly gifted. I'm sure she can help you.

MRS. CORNWALLIS

I do hope so.

MRS. GULLIVER exits. LACY closes the door.

MRS. CORNWALLIS

I'm so sorry to barge in like this but I'm afraid I'm at the end of my rope.

LACY

Well, it is highly irregular...

MRS. CORNWALLIS

Triple your fee, Madame. For just a short reading. Please? I only have a few questions...

LACY

How can I turn away a troubled soul? Would you excuse me for just a moment, Mrs....?

MRS. CORNWALLIS

Cornwallis. Miriam Cornwallis.

LACY

I'll be right with you, Mrs. Cornwallis. Please have a seat.

LACY indicates the chairs and exits through the dining room into the kitchen. A moment later, the eyes in the portrait disappear and real eyes peer out.

MRS. CORNWALLIS enters the parlor, looks around to be sure SHE is alone, then gives a mighty tug at her stockings, pulls them from her rear-end and rearranges her breasts. SHE begins snooping about.

The real eyes disappear from the portrait and the painted eyes return. LACY enters from the kitchen, crossing the dining room and entering the parlor. SHE catches MRS. CORNWALLIS on her hands and knees under the table with her rear-end in the air.

LACY
Mrs. Cornwallis...?

Startled, MRS. CORNWALLIS jumps and bumps her head under the table.

MRS. CORNWALLIS
Oh!

LACY
I didn't mean to startle you. Is something the matter?

MRS. CORNWALLIS
I thought one of my earrings fell under here.

LACY
Are you all right?

MRS. CORNWALLIS
(Getting up) Just a little bump on the head.

LACY
Did you find it?

MRS. CORNWALLIS
Find what?

LACY
Your earring.

MRS. CORNWALLIS
Uh, no, no, I must have lost it outside.

LACY
That's funny. You seem to be wearing both of them.

MRS. CORNWALLIS
(Flustered, feeling her ears) Really? How silly. I could have sworn I felt one fall...

LACY

Shall we begin? Please sit here.

LACY directs MRS. CORNWALLIS to the chair with its back to the fireplace and then sits in her chair.

LACY

Have you ever had a reading before?

MRS. CORNWALLIS

Oh, yes. I'm new to the area but back home, I was a regular client of Mother Rose. She was a great comfort.

LACY

Who is it you wish to contact on the other side?

MRS. CORNWALLIS

My mother, Ida Parks. I had a most upsetting dream about her last night. I'm sure she was trying to warn me about something.

LACY

What happened in this dream?

MRS. CORNWALLIS

Well, uh...I was...giving a dinner party and when I answered the door, I didn't have a stitch on! Then, my old high school English teacher came in and told me I had to take my final exam again!

LACY

And your mother?

MRS. CORNWALLIS

She was in the kitchen, shaking her head at me like she used to when I was a girl and I disappointed her.

LACY

Did she say anything?

MRS. CORNWALLIS

She said, "Be careful! You'll burn the house down." And then she opened the oven and smoke came billowing out and she took out my good serving platter and there was my favorite dolly on it, all burned and melted. What do you think it all means?

LACY

Let us speak to her and find out.

LACY goes into her trance.

LACY

(Ethereal voice) Ida Parks. We wish to contact Ida Parks. Are you there, Ida? Your daughter desires to speak with you. Ida Parks...she's coming through! She says...wait, she says she cannot speak to you because...

MRS. CORNWALLIS

Because?

LACY

(Ethereal voice) Because she is not your mother!

MRS. CORNWALLIS

What?!

LACY

(Ethereal voice) Did you not know this?

MRS. CORNWALLIS

(Uncomfortably) No! No, I didn't!

LACY

(Ethereal voice) Your mother...your real mother...is still alive!

MRS. CORNWALLIS

Oh my! Really?

LACY

(Ethereal voice) Yes, it is very clear.

MRS. CORNWALLIS

How can you be sure?

LACY

(Normal voice) Because I just talked to her, Hollis. You just saw her leave.

MRS. CORNWALLIS

Hollis? Who are you...

LACY

Cut the act, Sheriff. I made you the minute you walked in.

HOLLIS

(In his regular voice, taking off hat, wig and glasses) Oh, I think I had you going there for a while.