

Candidate 1 evidence

Tea With Old Friends

Scene 1

(Pleasant classical music plays as the curtains rise. The music continues as the lights fade up to reveal the well-kept garden of a grand London manor house. It is the year 1912, and this is recognisable by the elegance of the space. The garden is filled with ornate flowerpots and groomed hedges, a nearby brick wall has a white trellis almost overgrown with roses yet still retaining an air of impeccable neatness. Up-stage left are the two French doors of the manor house which lead to the garden's stone patio where an ornate white table and two matching chairs are positioned at centre-stage. The music continues to play in the background as the lady of the house, an elderly woman named Mrs Cecile Walton, dressed in a fashion which confirms she is of considerable wealth, walks onto the stage and approaches the table, looking over the items on it with a smile. She adjusts a lace throw and small vase of flowers to her liking as the maid, Alice, also enters from the French doors. The music slowly fades to silence as she addresses her mistress).

ALICE: Excuse me, ma'am. A Mrs Lanburry is here to see you.

MRS WALTON: Ah yes, right on time. Show her in.

ALICE: As you wish, ma'am.

(The maid bobs her head and exits. Mrs Walton sits in the chair closest to the French doors through which the maid returns a few moments later, accompanied by another elderly woman, Mrs Mildred Lanburry. The maid gestures to the table, bobs to both women, then leaves).

MRS WALTON: *(standing to greet her friend)* Mildred, dear! How fine you look this morning! So glad you could come.

(They kiss each other softly on each cheek in greeting).

MRS LANBURY: Thank you for the invitation! You are well?

MRS WALTON: Quite.

(They both sit at the table. Mrs Lanburry is sitting on the right, opposite Mrs Walton who sits on the left).

MRS WALTON: Tea will be served soon, I assure you.

MRS LANBURY: Lovely. I do so enjoy our little get-togethers.

MRS WALTON: Good for the soul, dear, good for the soul.

MRS LANBURY: *(smiling warmly)* Indeed.

MRS WALTON: *(As if a memory has suddenly returned)* Oh! Pardon my abruptness, but have you heard about The Chesters? Newlywed, it was in this week's advertisements.

MRS LANBURY: I did! Such a sweet couple, and so young too!

MRS WALTON: Long may it last, I say.

(There is a slight pause as Mrs Walton surveys her companion).

MRS WALTON: If you don't mind my asking, I wonder, how long has it been now since your husband left us?

(With an expression of a woman who has come to peace with a loss, Mrs Lanbury withdraws a handkerchief from her handbag, dabs it to her nose, and looks up as she speaks).

MRS LANBURY: It will be a year to the day. May he rest in peace.

(She then folds the handkerchief back into her bag as the maid re-enters with a trolley of tea and refreshments. She swiftly arranges a sugar bowl and tongs, plate of biscuits, tea pot and cups and saucers on the table).

ALICE: Will you be needing anything else, ma'am?

MRS WALTON: That will be all, thank you, Alice.

(The maid bows her head and exits. Mrs Walton begins pouring the tea into the cups, speaking as she does so).

MRS WALTON: Did the police ever get any closer to finding out what happened?

MRS LANBURY: Sorry?

MRS WALTON: Your husband I mean.

MRS LANBURY: Oh. Well, it was all rather strange if you recall. The authorities told me he was poisoned! Poor old Henry. In his tea, can you imagine?

(Mrs Walton holds a sugar cube above Mrs Lanbury's cup).

MRS LANBURY: Two sugars, please, if you don't mind.

(Mrs Walton proceeds to add the sugar).

MRS WALTON: In his tea...How frightening! And no-one saw anything?

MRS LANBURY: No.

(They both take sips of their tea).

MRS LANBURY: I don't see how they could have. There was no-one in the house, all the servants were on holiday that day. Therefore, the police suggested he must have let

someone in. Either that or he did it himself, which hardly seems suitable. And, can you believe, for some time they suspected it was I who had killed my own husband!

(Mrs Walton almost chokes on her tea in surprise).

MRS WALTON: What an awful thing to say! I'm sorry, that must have been very difficult for you.

MRS LANBURY: Indeed. It was *my* tea supply, I suppose. But then I told them as it happened, I was in Brighton at the time, staying with my brother and sister-in-law. Of course, they were then questioned also. So, the police realised there was no way I could have done it, even if I had *wanted* to. Though of course, what could ever drive one to do such a thing?

MRS WALTON: I cannot say. So, they suspect no-one else?

MRS LANBURY: They questioned my staff here and there, but, when there is no lead, what can one possibly do?

MRS WALTON: Hmm, yes. Very nasty business. It is unfortunate things turned out that way. Would you like a biscuit, dear? *(She holds the plate towards Mrs Lanbury).*

MRS LANBURY: I would love one, thank you. Tea is practically incomplete without biscuits. *(Taking a biscuit)* Please let us not talk of such things as my husband's demise. What of you? How is *your* husband?

MRS WALTON: *(Sighing sadly)* I may have been untruthful to you.

MRS LANBURY: Oh?

MRS WALTON: When you questioned my welfare, I told you I was quite alright, but I am not. I am a troubled woman.

MRS LANBURY: What ails you? You are not ill?

MRS WALTON: Ill of the heart it would seem, dear. *(Whispering)* I have reason to believe that Tom has lost interest in me.

MRS LANBURY: *(Leaning in)* Surely not! What causes you to think so?

MRS WALTON: There is...another. A woman.

MRS LANBURY: *(With a gasp)* No! Oh Cecile! I am so sorry. There is no chance you are mistaken?

MRS WALTON: I wish I was.

(Mrs Lanbury tuts and shakes her head. The pair continue sipping their tea).

MRS LANBURY: Remind me, how many years has it been since you were married?

MRS WALTON: More than I care to mention.

MRS LANBURY: I still remember that day, it was a lovely ceremony.

MRS WALTON: *(With a hint of bitterness)* Yes...it was.

MRS LANBURY: We were much younger then.

MRS WALTON: Yes...we were. *(There is a pause. She puts her teacup onto the table and stands angrily. Then, speaking with more bitterness still)* You know, I have given Tom some of the best years of my life! In sickness and in health we promised to care for one another, and I have done so, diligently, have I not?

MRS LANBURY: I have no doubt of it.

(Mrs Walton walks downstage and begins to pace back and forth in annoyance).

MRS WALTON: If it weren't for *me*, he would still be in that ridiculous job of his, earning barely enough money to put *bread* on the table, let alone anything else.

MRS LANBURY: *(Supportively)* Your devotion towards Tom has been admirable.

MRS WALTON: I bought him that tailored suit just last month!

MRS LANBURY: From Savile Row was it not?

MRS WALTON: *(She abruptly stops pacing)* It was! *(A pause. Then sadly)* Have I not been a loyal wife?

MRS LANBURY: *(Sympathetically)* There is no question of that. Sit down, Cecile. Have another biscuit.

(Mrs Lanbury gestures to the chair opposite her. Mrs Walton sits and takes a biscuit from the biscuit plate Mrs Lanbury is holding out to her. There is silence as Mrs Walton eats, and she is clearly deep in thought. She seems to form some decision in her mind before turning back to her companion).

MRS WALTON: Tell me, how long have we been friends?

MRS LANBURY: *(Scouring her memory for the answer)* Oh my...must be...thirty years at least I would guess.

MRS WALTON: And we are such good friends, are we not?

MRS LANBURY: *(Chuckling)* I should hope so!

(Mrs Walton looks around a little as if checking to make sure no-one is nearby. Seeing they are alone, she continues).

MRS WALTON: And you remember it was exactly a year ago today that I offered my help with you and your Henry? Those gambling debts of his had amounted to a quite a substantial sum of money.

MRS LANBURY: Yes, *my* money. I am very grateful to you.

MRS WALTON: Well, I was wondering...if...perhaps...you could assist me in a similar way?

(Mrs Lanbury is slightly startled by the abruptness of the request but quickly disguises this).

MRS LANBURY: *(tracing the rim of her teacup with her finger)* I see. I suppose you have something in mind?

MRS WALTON: I do. And I will need your help as I will be in Scotland.

MRS LANBURY: Of course you will be.

MRS WALTON: *(Spoken with disgust)* I happen to know that Tom is taking this...younger woman out hunting on the estate while I am away.

MRS LANBURY: How devious of him!

MRS WALTON: *(Matter-of-factly)* Oh, it has become quite the regular affair. *(Mockingly impersonating Tom)* "Darling, I'm off to meet the gents at gun-club. I'll be back in time for dinner!" *(Returning to her normal voice).* I mean, really! How foolish does he think I am?

MRS LANBURY: How long has this been going on, this tryst?

MRS WALTON: I suspect a year. On my trips abroad, Tom invites her here rather than the "gun-club." He is good at hunting; it is his chance to show off to...to *her*. He has even taken to keeping an extra rifle in his cabinet out of sheer convenience.

MRS LANBURY: Her own personal gun? That is most unusual for a lady.

MRS WALTON: Yes, but I am certain it belongs to her. Tom never uses that model, I should know, I bought them for him. It sticks out like a sore thumb amongst the others, only he doesn't think I notice such things.

MRS LANBURY: And this is significant?

MRS WALTON: Very. They will hunt for...two hours or so I should think.

(Standing, Mrs Walton slowly moves up-stage left towards the French doors of the house, almost walking through the motions as she describes them).

She will return her rifle to the cabinet and leave. Tom always likes to stay out by himself for an extra hour after that. *(Turning to Mrs Lanbury)* You will come asking for me, and

he will inform you I am not at home. Then, on noticing his attire, you will ask him if you can try your luck.

MRS LANBURY: Me? But I do not know a thing about hunting!

MRS WALTON: *(walking back to the table)* Precisely. Tom loves to boast; he will be more than happy to show you the trade. Walk with me for a moment.

(Mrs Walton gestures for Mrs Lanbury to stand, and the pair link arms. Mrs Walton leads her in the direction of the French doors).

MRS WALTON: When he takes you to the cabinet, be sure to pick up the woman's rifle. Oh! But do not forget to wear your nice lace gloves, dear, they go with everything. That is *extremely* important. *(Turning and walking Mrs Lanbury around the garden a little)* Then he shall lead you out onto the grounds.

(Mrs Lanbury unlinks her arm from her friend's and walks a little on her own, deep in thought).

MRS LANBURY: I believe I follow you. After the hunt, I would not be returning the rifle to the cabinet, am I correct?

MRS WALTON: That is the idea.

(There is a brief silence).

MRS LANBURY: And, during your trip, will your maid be here also?

MRS WALTON: Oh no, I have already arranged that. Alice will be accompanying me to Scotland. She has family there, so when I have no need of her, she can visit them. It will be good for the girl.

MRS LANBURY: How sweet. Well, I must say, you have given this matter much thought, especially where Tom's other woman is involved. *(Returning to her seat)* But I must admit I am not fond of seeing you this way. Are you sure?

MRS WALTON: *(without a moment's hesitation)* I am. And you are the only one I can trust with something of this importance. *(Sitting at the table again)* What say you?

(Mrs Walton stares at her friend, unsure of her reply, perhaps growing a little apprehensive as Mrs Lanbury is quiet for a while).

MRS LANBURY: I say...it is a shame.

MRS WALTON: I beg your pardon?

MRS LANBURY: *(Candidly)* It is a shame hunting is such a dangerous sport. Any mishaps that may befall during such an outing tend to be fatal.

(Mrs Walton smiles subtly).

MRS WALTON: Oh, indeed. In the same tragic way rat poison is *so often* mistaken for sugar. *(Sweetly)* More tea, dear?

(End of scene).