

# Sudden Death At Thornbury Manor

*by*

**Chris Lewis & Carol Hutton**

**(Customer Taster)**

# Sudden Death At Thornbury Manor

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*A murder mystery delivered as a Radio Play  
followed by audience interrogation of the cast  
before the murderer is finally revealed.*

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# Sudden Death At Thornbury Manor

## Overview

Sudden Death At Thornbury Manor is a Murder Mystery designed to be presented as a radio play by 12 actors (including two playing the roles of Radio Sound Engineers - producing the sound effects - and a newsreader/continuity announcer who acts as master of ceremonies). The company act formal scenes, then mingling with the audience in order to be interrogated.

Because this is designed for a dinner theatre event, rather than a “serious” murder mystery game, the script is not structured to give a single definitive solution. Instead, there are four possible murderers - the company needs to pick one of the four as the guilty party each time the event is run!

## About this pack

This pack should provide everything you need to produce your very own murder mystery event.

This pack is intended to be used in a form of dinner theatre where the audience are seated around tables. The cast play the main script as a radio play (with sound effects created live). The cast then mingle with the audience for “interrogation”.

### ***This (Taster) document includes:***

**General Staging Notes** on how best to plan and stage your Murder Mystery event.

#### **Overview of the Characters**

An extract from **The Script** up to the point of the murder.

An example of one of the detailed **Character Back Stories**

### ***The full pack also includes:***

The announcer’s script for introducing the **Audience Interrogation**

The announcer’s script for the **Denouement**

Detailed **Character Back Stories** on each character.

A description of how to create the Radio **Sound Effects**

A diagram of Thornbury Manor (so that all the actors have the same plan in mind!)

A diagram of the stage as Radio Studio.

**Writers Notes** giving the background to the original production.

Accompanying files contain materials which might be useful to prompt some audiences:-

**Cast List**

**Possible Motives**

**Possible Lines of Questioning**

**Solution Sheets** for collecting audience solutions in the case of a competitive event

You can feel free to customise the details of the scenario. (It was originally performed in Thornbury - see the writers’ notes - and all the names of local businesses are genuine to that area. Feel free to replace them - and change “Thornbury Manor” to somewhere (fictitious and) local if you so wish.)

## *General Staging Notes*

**Note that you need to purchase a performance licence from the Murder Mysteries page of the Lazy Bee Scripts web site.**

### **Preparation**

Initial preparation can be done by distributing the character briefs, and the script then running a first rehearsal in which the actors have to guess the identity of the murderer. (It's fun! Why not?)

After that, the cast need to learn the dialogue, develop character and get comfortable with the (improvised) interrogation.

Consider:-

- Developing more detailed "background briefs" for each character, elaborating background, but not changing any of the plot points. This allows the actors to accommodate more irrelevant questions from the audience!
- Developing "get-out strategies" so that an irrelevant line of audience questioning can be curtailed. (This can, for example, be direct "that has no bearing on the case", jokey "I couldn't possibly answer that without my lawyer present" or via an interruption which introduces a new line of questioning from the character brief.)
- Giving "seed questions" to the audience - see the audience pack.

Decide on how and when the murderer will be chosen (given that there are four potentially guilty parties).

Decide whether the event will be competitive or not. Consider:-

- Non-competitive events (a show of hands for each of the suspects before the solution is declared).
- Competitive events - collection of "solution sheets" from the audience, backstage judgement of the best (and worst) solutions and draw from a hat in the case of a tie before declaring the solution and declaring the winner.

Time and effort will need to go into preparing the sound effects.

**Open the event with the news-reader and the scripted dialogue.**

### **Pre-Interrogation**

Make sure that the murderer has been chosen! (For non-competitive events, it is suggested that there is a show of audience hands for each of the suspects and that the *least* favoured suspect is chosen as the murderer!)

### **Interrogation**

Open the interrogation to the audience. Depending on the size of the event, this can either be done in front of the whole audience, or by the cast members circulating amongst the audience. (The latter is assumed elsewhere in the notes, with each suspect processing from table to table and the newscaster ringing a bell at the end of the allotted time for each table.)

### **Accusations**

For competitive events, distribute the "solution sheets" on which each member of the audience should be asked to write down who they think is the murderer, and why. The solutions should be collected, read and graded by the cast (whilst the audience is eating and drinking!)

For non-competitive events, take a show of hands for who the audience *now* thinks is guilty.

### **Denouement**

Newsreader reads out the chosen solution.

For competitive events, there may be an option to read out some of the (more bizarre) audience solutions! Declare the winner and award a prize to the best solution! (And possibly a prize for the worst.)

***As a broad guide your event should run as follows:***

***Option 1 - Non-competitive***

**(Times Based on the Original Production)**

- 7:00pm Informal welcome and pre-dinner drinks. Background music: 1950's hits. Stage open and sound engineers check equipment, etc. Cast drift on and off.
- 7:30pm Big Ben chimes 6 o'clock. Newsreader reads news from 1954 (see script) and introduces scripted play.
- 8:40pm Newsreader appears on stage for Pre-Interrogation sequence
- 8:45pm Supper served. Audience pack materials distributed.
- 8:55pm Interrogation: Cast members (except the murdered victim!) mingle with seated audience. Cast in 1954 character costume to help audience remember who was who. All cast members (except murderer) answer questions truthfully. Only murderer is allowed to lie.
- 9:30pm Cast re-assemble on stage and Newsreader takes the second vote.
- 9:35pm Newsreader provides murderer's true identity (see script later).

***Option 2 - Competitive***

**(Times Based on the Original Production)**

- 7:00pm Informal welcome and pre-dinner drinks. Background music: 1950's hits. Stage open and sound engineers check equipment, etc. Cast drift on and off.
- 7:30pm Big Ben chimes 6 o'clock. Newsreader reads news from 1954 (see script) and introduces play. Scripted play.
- 8:40pm Newsreader appears on stage for Pre-Interrogation sequence
- 8:45pm First course served. Audience pack materials distributed.
- 8:55pm Interrogation: Cast members (except the murdered victim!) mingle with seated audience. Cast in 1954 character costume to help audience remember who was who. All cast members (except murderer) answer questions truthfully. Only murderer is allowed to lie.
- 9:30pm Solution Sheets distributed for audience to complete
- 9:35pm Solution Sheets collected. Next course served.
- 9:50pm Cast re-assemble on stage for Dénouement sequence and prize giving.

## ***Characters***

**BBC Newsreader**

**Chief Sound Engineer**

**Assistant Sound Engineer**

### ***Cast of the play:-***

**Caroline Maltravers** - Lady of the house – wife of Richard – mother to Alice & Rebecca

**Richard Maltravers** - Entrepreneur – husband of Caroline – father to Alice & Rebecca

**Alice Maltravers** - Doctor's Receptionist and daughter. Currently lives with her parents

**Rebecca Maltravers** - Second-born daughter. Artist and painter, currently living in St Ives

**John Cruickshank** - Point-to-Point Trainer & Jockey – boyfriend of Alice Maltravers

**Susan Taylor** - Housekeeper (and nanny to children when young)

**Mary Wells** - Maid

**Alan Smith** - Gardener/groom/odd-job man/chauffeur

**Harold Williams** - Doctor

**Time: *November 1954***

# Sudden Death At Thornbury Manor

## *Newsreader's Introduction*

(Newsreader dressed in evening suit. Sat at desk behind 1950's microphone. Red light and sign saying "On Air" visible behind Newsreader)

## (SFX: Chimes of Big Ben Striking 6)

**Newsreader:** Good evening. This is the BBC Home Service. Here is the six o'clock news read by *[Name]*

In Egypt today, after a brief and bloodless power struggle, Gamal Abdel Nasser replaced President Mohammed as head of state. President Nasser has stated that he intends to create a non-aligned socialist state occupying a position of leadership in the Arab and Muslim world. It is reported that President Nasser has received a supply of weapons from an Iron Curtain country, namely Czechoslovakia. Israel has expressed discord and is petitioning the Western allies to impound the shipment of weapons before it reaches Egypt.

A series of bomb attacks were launched by terrorists and guerrillas against important buildings in Algiers yesterday. There were many casualties, with over a hundred people dead and many more receiving injuries requiring hospitalisation. French ministers are meeting tonight in Paris to review the situation. It is believed that an organisation, known as the Front de Liberation Nationale, was responsible for planting the bombs. As yet, no statements have been received from this group outlining its aims and objectives.

An inquest today will be held into the death of Alan Turing, reader in Mathematics at Manchester University, who was found dead in bed at his home in Wilmslow, Cheshire. He was forty-one years old. Dr. Turing was one of the pioneers of the electronic calculation machine in this country. One of his machines had solved a problem in higher mathematics, which had been a puzzle since the eighteenth century.

A home office report on law-breaking in Britain yesterday showed that motor-cyclists, car and other mechanically propelled vehicle drivers were responsible for more than half of all offences committed throughout England and Wales. The Home Office said that new measures would be introduced to limit the rising number of motoring offences. These would include the use of uniform officers to monitor the speed of traffic in built-up areas, as well as special Police Car units that would be used specifically to enforce motoring laws.

The Meteorological Office has published the following forecast for tomorrow, *[Insert day of week]*. Scotland, Northern Ireland and Northern England will experience rain showers during the morning followed by a cloudy day. There will be varying amounts of sunshine, particularly in the East of the region. The maximum temperature will be forty-three degrees and the minimum thirty-four degrees. Central, Southern and South West England will be dry with some sunshine. Showers may break out towards the evening. The maximum temperature will be forty-seven degrees, the minimum temperature will be thirty-six degrees.

May I remind our listeners that should a major incident should occur, the studio assistants and technicians will direct them to the fire exit doors. The exit doors are located *[as per venue]*.

Please may I also remind our listeners to switch off any telephones without wires that they may have about their persons.

Our next programme, Sudden Death At Thornbury Manor by *[group name]* follows shortly.

(Newsreader exits; cast assemble on stage; first two characters walk up to microphones; chief sound engineer gives thumbs up)

## *Scene 1 - The Study*

(Sound technicians sat at “control desk” stage left. Reel-to-reel tape recorders, record players, flashing lights in cabinet that looks “electrical”. Sign “On Air” with red light. Props for sound effects on floor around desk. Centre stage are 4 old fashioned microphones with BBC written on them. A suspended sign above these reads “On Air” with red light clearly visible.)

(SFX: Phone rings)

**Caroline:** Thank-you Doctor, for telephoning me. I’m glad Mother didn’t suffer. One always thinks about situations such as this, but one never considers it could happen... Yes... Yes... I do hope an inquest will not be required – I do so dislike the idea of discussing dear Mother’s health and medical problems in the presence of complete strangers. Please telephone my husband when you have acquired the necessary papers. Would you also telephone me with details of a recommended undertaker in Tavistock. Thank-you. Good-bye

(SFX: Replaces phone)

(SFX: Door opens and closes)

**Richard:** Caroline darling, you look upset. Has something terrible happened?

**Caroline:** Mummy’s passed away.

**Richard:** Oh my God. That was terribly sudden, wasn’t it. The old girl was only here, what, a few weeks ago and was as bright as a button. Heart?

**Caroline:** The Doctor believes so. Oh Richard, why now?

**Richard:** The Lord moves in mysterious ways, or so they say. Can I get you a drink? You look frightfully pale. Why don’t you sit down? Brandy?

**Caroline:** Please – but just a small one.

(SFX: sound of brandy bottle being opened & poured into glasses)

**Caroline:** I must tell the children. They will be awfully upset I just know it. Thank-you.

**Richard:** I think I’ll join you.

**Caroline:** (Not really listening) Poor Mummy. She was so looking forward to her holiday in Egypt. Although, I note from the news that that confounded man Nasser is threatening to do something to the Suez Canal.

**Richard:** He wants to nationalise it. (Pause) Darling, I presume that your Mother’s will is unchanged – you’re still the sole beneficiary? Your father really did know how to invest money. Who would believe that a regional bank manager could amass such a fortune. A few hundred thousand I should think.

**Caroline:** (Still not listening) Perhaps it was for the best then?

**Richard:** What, her heart attack?

**Caroline:** I would have had the devil’s own job to dissuade her from going to Egypt if it does blow up. She was always very stubborn. Daddy always had to side with me whenever we disagreed – she could never see my point of view.

**Richard:** She never changed.

**Caroline:** The times I was reduced to tears by her haughty attitude. “I have spoken, Caroline. That is the end of the matter”. Still, I never thought it would happen like this. (Pause) Well, this certainly changes things!

**Richard:** Is Charles Peters still your mother’s solicitor? (Joking) At his age he’s probably as near to death as most of his clients!

**Caroline:** Don’t be ghastly, Richard. Yes he is. I shall arrange to see him tomorrow. I remember that when Daddy died, Mr Peters was a rock.

**Richard:** It can’t be tomorrow – the bank wants to discuss some minor details about the company’s accounts.

**Caroline:** Oh, yes?

**Richard:** Bloody bankers. They never speak to you when things are rolling along but, as soon as there is a hint of falling profits or whatever, they act all high and mighty and summons you to an audience. They think they’re Royalty.

**Caroline:** So?

**Richard:** With something as important as your Mother's estate, you will need my advice.

**Caroline:** I am capable of making decisions without your help, thank-you. I'm not a child; neither am I losing my faculties or going gaga. I tell people the bruises are caused by my clumsiness – nothing else.

**Richard:** I just thought with such a large sum that your mother has left us, we need to be terribly careful how we choose to invest it.

**Caroline:** We?

**Richard:** Look, darling, you know what the confounded situation is – these days there are fewer and fewer opportunities to exploit and things have been getting awfully tight – but I'm sure you know that – we agreed to take things for better or for worse, for richer or poorer.

**Caroline:** Precisely. I shall speak with Charles Peters tomorrow. **(Pause)** Should I cancel dinner tonight? Whilst Mummy and I didn't always see eye-to-eye, one should always try to do the decent thing.

**Richard:** Of course, darling.

**Caroline:** Do you think Alice and Rebecca will understand?

**Richard:** I'm sure they will.

**Caroline:** I know Alice want's to tell us something terribly important tonight – she has been like a cat on a hot tin roof all this week – dropping hints about “good news” and “a change of circumstance”. I'm sure its something to do with that young man of hers. A nice boy, despite the desperately unfortunate start to his life.

**Richard:** You mean she's got engaged? Good heavens! John Cruickshank's not my idea of a future son-in-law. Alice can do better than that.

**Caroline:** They are in love - you can't do better than that.

**Richard:** Love won't keep her in the style to which she has become accustomed.

**Caroline:** At least they will have love.

**Richard:** Pardon?

**Caroline:** Perhaps I will go ahead with dinner - I will give the children the ghastly news about mummy later today. Some flowers, I think, will cheer me up. I'll tell Smithy that I need him and the car tomorrow - you can get Hawkins' to take you in his taxi to Bristol.

**(SFX: Door opens and closes)**

<Snip. Further scenes follow!>

## Character Backgrounds

### Alan Smith – Age 60

Born 1894, Middlesbrough. His father was an unskilled labourer in the shipyards and died in 1906 when he fell from scaffolding during the construction of a ship. Alan's mother was forced to take in washing to supplement what little income they had. A sickly woman she had several periods of severe illness, cumulating in her death in 1912. Alan left school at 11 and had various menial jobs until he joined Great Northern Railway 1910 as a knocker-upper (he went round to the houses of engine drivers' who were due on shift and woke them up).

Following the death of his Mother, Alan went to live with his Aunt near Exeter, being somewhat insecure and slightly immature. He met a local girl the same year and they had their one and only child, Alex (b. 1912). He joined the Great Western Railway as a porter. He volunteered to go to war in 1915. He was seriously wounded in the leg during the Battle of the Somme, eventually being invalided-out in 1918. He returned GWR as a porter but found that he couldn't carry the loads he had done before he was wounded. He left railway service to become a gardener for the Rt Hon Tasker-Varndell in 1922, having met the gentleman whilst a porter at Exmouth railway station. He quickly settled down in his new occupation and became a knowledgeable gardener and ostler. His son, Alex, was also taken on as a gardener's lad in 1928. Alan's wife died in 1930 following a complicated pregnancy. He became a father figure to Caroline during her visits to her grandparents' house. He initially encouraged his son to take an interest in Caroline, if only to take his mind of his mother's recent death.

Alan became aware of a close relationship developing between Alex and Caroline, but found himself unwilling to stop it. When Mrs Tasker-Varndell discovered the relationship in late summer, 1931, Alan persuaded his son to join the army, an arrangement he came to with Mr Tasker-Varndell. When Alex returned on leave prior to going to Iraq, Alan tried to stop Alex and Caroline from meeting, but to no avail. When Alex was killed at the end of May 1932, Alan was distraught. He quickly learned that Caroline was pregnant and that she was to marry Richard Maltravers. There were rumours amongst the staff that Alex was the father, but Alan dismissed them.

Then in June 1932 Alan was sacked. He was very distraught about the death of his son and became depressed. When he was dismissed, Alan was not given any references by the Tasker-Varndells, thus forcing him to take whatever work (mainly menial) he could find. After a succession of jobs, he found himself in Bristol. Eventually his drinking became worse and by 1938 he was living rough in the Bristol dock-lands. During the war he found occasional employment, but was unable to sustain a job longer than a few months before he was sacked for being drunk.

When the war ended he tried to make a go of his life again. By 1947 he was sober enough to qualify for a place within the Salvation Army hostel in Bristol. It was during this time that he applied to Charitable Trust for help (being persuaded by the Salvation Army hostel captain). The chair of this committee was Caroline Maltravers. She recognised him immediately and offered him a job as the gardener at Thornbury Manor. Caroline used her wit and guile to convince Richard Maltravers of the need to take on a gardener/ostler. When he first arrived, he thought he recognised Susan Taylor, but could not place her. Besides being the gardener and groom to King, the Maltravers' horse, Alan was also asked to drive Richard Maltravers' car as chauffeur/minder when Richard went to see various business contacts, some of whom were very unsavoury. Alan quickly realised that all was not as it appeared with regard to the business dealings of Richard Maltravers. Despite it being over 20 years since the death of his son, Alan still dwells on what might have been.