

Mail Order Groom

SETTING: *The drawing room of the Radcliffe Estate, London England. A lavish staircase ascends to one side. The front door is at one end, and, at the other end, an offstage exit leading to the kitchen. An open casket is at center, adorned with flowers. We see the beautiful Jennifer Radcliffe, lying in peace. A decanter of wine sits on a small table downstage.*

AT RISE: *We hear organ music playing—a rather lively rendition of Nearer My God to Thee. After a moment, the music stops. Godbey enters from the kitchen, obviously upset, wiping his forehead. Godbey is the elderly and frail head butler, the epitome of British servitude, proper and impeccably dressed, all in black. Madam Radcliffe descends the staircase. A wealthy British capitalist, she has an air of pomposity about her. She is used to getting things her way, which is precisely what drove her first three husbands to early graves.*

Radcliffe

Ah, there you are Godbey, everything all set for the reception tonight?

Godbey *(Sighing)*

I certainly hope so, madam. Though I must admit, I've had a bit of a confrontation with the organist just now. I only felt that his particular rendition of the music was too....self-indulgent, shall we say? Oh, I did my best to encourage him to use a bit more discretion, to play at a tempo and style more conducive to a funeral setting.....but....well, he absolutely wouldn't hear of it!

Radcliffe

That's the trouble with you, Godbey. You have no grit! No fortitude! Why, if you were any kind of a man at all, you wouldn't have been working for me all these 27 years without so much as a single raise in pay!

Godbey

(Hanging his head in shame)

I'm sorry, madam. That was terribly thoughtless of me.

Radcliffe

By the way, Godbey... the reception is to begin at seven o'clock, promptly upon our return from the services. I won't tolerate any delays—no dilly dallying. Anyone arriving late for the services is to be turned away—forcibly removed, if necessary! I'll not have anyone making a mockery of my daughter's funeral by showing up at whatever time happens to suit his convenience.

(Doorbell)

Radcliffe

Ah, that would be the minister. He will be going to the chapel with me, in the Rolls.

(Starting up the stairs)

Please take care of the social amenities for me, will you, Godbey?

Godbey

(Starting for the front door as Radcliffe exits)

I always do, madam.

(Godbey opens the front door and instantly, Jonathan Cates enters. He is a handsome, sharply dressed young man. He bolts past Godbey, to a spot in Center of the room. He stand there for a moment, taking it all in, and then, Spotting the carafe of wine, heads toward it with all deliberate speed. He pours Himself a drink, much to Godbey's bewilderment.)

Godbey

Good afternoon. Won't you.....please come in?

Cates

Ah, thank you very much, my good man. I hope you don't mind if I indulge bit in your refreshments, here, but I think it's best that I do something to help calm my nerves for this afternoon, you know.

Godbey

That's quite understandable...uh, considering the circumstances, sir. I was rather distraught myself, when I learned of Jennifer's condition.

Cates *(Melodramatically)*

What?!? Don't tell me she's....ill?!

Godbey *(Bewildered)*

She...isn't anymore, sir.

Cates

Well, I am relieved to hear that. Just how bad was it?

Godbey

Bad enough. She's.....dead.

(Pause)

Cates

Did you say....dead?

Godbey

Quite dead.

Cates

Are you sure?

Godbey

Come again.

Cates

Well, I mean...she wouldn't just be... oh, I don't know....sleeping, or something?

Godbey *(Considering the possibility)*

Mmmmm.....no. No, not after nearly a week. We began to get rather suspicious after the fourth day when she still wasn't breathing.

Cates *(Angrily)*

And has anyone bothered to check on her condition the meantime?

Godbey

Well you needn't take my word for it.

(Gesturing toward the coffin)

You can see for herself, she's quite dead.

(Cates whirls around and spots the casket. He crosses to it, checks her pulse. Growing frantic, he searches for any sign of life, then pounds on

her chest in a futile effort to restore life. That being done, he straightens up, crosses toward Godbey, throwing up his arms, almost chuckling, it seems)

Cates

Well, I must give credit where credit is due. You have rendered a most accurate assessment of her true condition.

(Shaking GODBEY'S limp hand)

Please accept my humble apologies. You are right.

Godbey

I say, I don't actually believe that you *are* the minister.

Cates

Ah, see there? Right again! A most remarkable man!

Godbey *(Blushing)*

Well, that's really very kind of you, but...

Cates

(Slapping Godbey on the back)

Ah, think nothing of it. Think nothing of it! No. You see, you've quite correctly stumbled upon the fact that I am not a man of the cloth—though why you would have made that peculiar assumption is beyond me—but what you fail to realize, for some odd reason, is my true purpose for being here.

Godbey

Which is?

Cates *(Grandly)*

To enter into the bonds of holy matrimony.

Godbey

I beg your pardon?

Cates

Yes, you see, Jennifer and I are to be married later on this afternoon.

(A long pause, as Godbey slowly looks over at Jennifer lying in the casket)

Godbey

I . . . hardly think that's likely, sir.

Cates

You don't believe me?

Godbey

Well, it's just that . . . she's never mentioned anything of the sort.

Cates (*Gesturing toward the casket*)

Well, in consideration of her present condition, that's not at all surprising, now, is it!?

Godbey

But . . . sir! You can't be serious!

Cates

I most certainly am! I rented this suit this morning from a highly respectable fashion designer, expressly for the purpose of holy matrimony. How could I ever face them again if I were forced to take back the suit too early? Mmmm? What would I say? That my bride-to-be didn't hold out long enough to exchange vows of eternal devotion with her beloved? Why, I'd be the laughing stock of Piccadilly Circus! I'll not have them bandying about my name in an unflattering and haphazard fashion.

(Crossing to the casket and tossing off the flowers)

Now be a good sport about it and help me out with the body. We'll be arriving late at the chapel as it is.

(Cates attempts to wheel the casket out when Godbey, for the first time in his life, exerts himself by practically throwing himself on the casket)

Godbey

If you mean to say that you would actually consider proceeding with your plans, in spite of this tragic turn of events, then you, sir, are a verifiable lunatic, and I'm going to have to ask you to leave at once!

Cates (*Struggling to move the casket*)

I'm trying to leave, but you're standing in my way!

Godbey

Yes, I know, sir, but after all—this is a matter of life and death...and quite frankly, to intermingle the two can hardly be considered proper etiquette—even in the lower echelons of society!

(Cates and Godbey struggle with the casket, going around and around in a frantic circle)

Cates

You bumbling fool! Get out of my way!

Godbey *(Clinging to the casket for dear life)*

I'd die first!

Cates *(Stops, smiling mischievously)*

Do you mean that?

Godbey *(Growing fearful)*

Well, I.....I.....

Cates

That's really quite touching. It's a rare occasion when a man would lay down his life for a cause that's ... utterly lacking in any real significance whatsoever.

(Taking out a pistol and aiming it at GODBEY)

...but....if that's what you wish, I can certainly arrange it.

Godbey

Please, sir! I really must insist that you put that gun away at once. That can be a very dangerous weapon!

Cates

Oh, come now, come now! Don't exaggerate! Statistics show that only an infinitesimally small percentage of the population actually are assaulted with a deadly weapon!

Godbey *(In tears)*

Thank you. That's most encouraging!

Cates

Why, the chances of you getting your head blown to pieces and splattered all over these Victorian furnishings, are, uh....

(Taking out his phone, doing some quick computations)