

Nightmare on the Moor

By Roger Hodge

ACT 1 SCENE 1

Time – Early evening on a Friday in April 1950.

The once grand drawing room of an old partly derelict house on the moor. It's fading décor, furniture piled up in a corner, and dust laden ledges cover a grandeur which no longer exists, only one near life sized painting of a beautiful woman still remains hanging precariously on the upstage wall as the last remnant of grander days. Two crossed battle axes are mounted on the rear wall below a spy hole placed high on the wall. There is also a large ingle-nook fireplace, a window reaching almost to the floor with old faded heavy curtains which are drawn across the window, a door from the hall and kitchen and another which leads to the upper floor including the bedrooms via a staircase off. The wall lights are off and there is a standard, or table, lamp also off. On the fourth wall there is a large mirror. The room is poorly lit.

The curtain opens on an empty room. The window opens and the curtain is pushed aside as RONNIE climbs over the low window sill and steps into the room. He looks around inquisitively, opening the doors and looking into the off stage rooms before turning to call out of the window.

RONNIE: It's all clear, nobody's 'ome. Place looks pretty deserted.

JACK: *(Off)* Come on Charlie, Ronnie says it's all clear. *(He climbs in through the window.)*

CHARLIE enters followed by FREDDY who having got one leg over the sill cannot get the other over.

CHARLIE: We're lucky to find this window to get in. Good boy Ronnie. Bit of a struggle to get froo all that overgrown garden. Reminded me of the jungle in Burma during the war. *(Looking around.)* Tut, tut. They 'ave let this place go.

FREDDY: I can't get my leg over.

RONNIE: I'm not surprised at your age.

CHARLIE: What's the matter Freddy, d'you want some 'elp?

FREDDY: Yea, I do. Come on lads I'm not as young as I was.

JACK and RONNIE go to his aid.

FREDDY: Thanks lads.

JACK: *(Looking round.)* Bit of a mess Charlie, must have been deserted for years, looks like it was quite a place once.

CHARLIE: That's what the geezer what told me about it said. He used to work 'ere before the war but when he come back after doing his bit for King and country the place was run down and the owner never turned up. The 'ouse was left to rot.

JACK: Shame, I'd have loved to have cracked the safe in a house like this. Bit of class, good pickings, a job to make you proud of being what you are.

RONNIE: What's got into you Jack, you're a common safe cracker not a literary bloody genius.

JACK: I know what I am Ronnie, I had a good education and a good job before I started working with you, well respected I was

CHARLIE: Not now.

JACK: I hadn't finished Charlie, as I was saying I was well respected, but poor so I decided to join the get rich quick route rather than the respectable route.

FREDDY: What d' you mean?

CHARLIE: Don't you know how he became a safe cracker? I'll tell you. He was working for the Bank of England and had to look after lots of money locked away in big safes with big combinations. One day one of the men he was working with didn't turn up for work and he was the only one who knew the combination. So our Jack tries his hand at rolling the tumblers and guess what, he cracks it. What a result.

RONNIE: Wow, what happened next?

JACK: Well then I was a bit of a security risk so I got moved to another department with less chance of promotion and less cash about, so I figured I might as well leave the bank and become a safe cracker.

CHARLIE: And he's never looked back, have you Jack?

JACK: One of life's little twists, you never know where fate might take you.

RONNIE: Shall I have a scout round boss, see what's what?

CHARLIE: Good idea Ronnie, see what's about.

RONNIE exits s/r.

JACK: Where do you think we should start looking Charlie?

CHARLIE: Dunno, it aint easy when you don't know what you're looking for.

FREDDY: Money in'it? All that what we stole from that big 'ouse when the war started.

JACK: Freddy, we stole lots of stuff, some of it was fenced and turned into cash, but some if it was still silver knives and forks and some gold jewellery, there was a painting or two, Constable's I think.

CHARLIE: Very appropriate, constables, ha ha ha.

JACK: Thank you Charlie, and other valuable bits and pieces too. Quite a stash.

CHARLIE: Yeh. And it was hidden in the 'ouse by the guv'ner. Now he's dead and can't tell us what it is or where it is.

FREDDY: How do we know it's 'ere, we never brought it 'ere? The gov'nor did all that we've only got 'is word for it.

CHARLIE: I did a stretch in Brixton after the war wiv a geezer what worked for the gov'nor at the time we done the job. He said he spied on the gov'nor when he was hiding the loot and planned to nick it 'imself but he got called up by the army and never got the chance to go back for it. After he was demobbed he killed a bloke in a fight and was found guilty of murder so he never did get the chance to go back and get it.

JACK: You don't know he wasn't lying though do you?

CHARLIE: Don't think so, we was sharing the same cell, we was good mates, and he knew he wasn't going to get the chance to get it. He also knew I was on that job.

JACK: No. When did they hang him?

CHARLIE: Two weeks after he told me.

JACK: Probably settling his conscience then.

CHARLIE: Yeh. And he said somthin' else too. He said, very serious like, everything aint always like it seems, he said. (Pause) Yea, that was the last thing he ever said to me, everything ain't always like it seems.

Reflective pause.

JACK: Strange thing to say.

CHARLIE: That's what I thought, couldn't make 'ead nor tail of it.

JACK: We could be here for some days Charlie, shall we get some supplies in?

CHARLIE: Let's see what Ronnie comes back wiv first then we'll go back to the motor and get what we want.

RONNIE: *(Enters s/r.)* There's no one here boss, place is deserted. Why was it we came through this window to get in?

CHARLIE: Jack figured a window would be easier than a locked door.

RONNIE: But he's a safe cracker. Can't he open a front door?

JACK: They're not the same, different union.

RONNIE: Well, the front doors open. It's been open all the time 'coss there aint one, someone's nicked it.

FREDDY: You didn't even look did ya?

JACK: Bloody hell, is nothing safe these days.

CHARLIE: What else did you find?

RONNIE: The place is in a bit of a mess everywhere, like this room really. I think there's a cellar but the door's locked. There's lots of bedrooms upstairs but I didn't find any secret passages.

JACK: That's because they're secret.

RONNIE: Yea, yea, bloody comedian you are. Laugh a minute i'nit.

CHARLIE: How many rooms you reckon?

RONNIE: Twenty I suppose. But some of them was locked, or stuck. Either way I couldn't get in all of 'em.

CHARLIE: Right, well it looks okay to me so we'd better go and get some supplies then, and when we come back we'll come to the front door this time, okay. Off you go Jack.

JACK exits through the window.

FREDDY: Give an 'and chaps. *(He starts to exit through the window.)*

CHARLIE: Come on, I'm 'oldin' ya.

FREDDY exits.

RONNIE: *(In front of the painting.)* Who do you think this is Charlie?

CHARLIE: Mistress of the house I suppose, Lady something of the Manor. I dunno.

RONNIE: Looks like a real toff don't she. She reminds me of someone, but I don't know who, can't quite place her.

CHARLIE: Come on Ronnie, you'll be claiming she's your mum next, or your auntie. *(Exits through window)*

RONNIE: Don't be daft, she's not me mum, she might be me grannie. *(Laughs as he exits through window glancing back at the painting)*

Pause.

There is the sound of voices outside the door to the hall. MRS FORTESCUE-CARRUTHERS enters s/r. A lady of considerable presence who dominates all around her, she is followed by MARGARET who has a back-pack slung over one arm. She is a down-to-earth person with the will to resist MRS FORTESCUE-CARRUTHERS, often addressed as MRS F. They are both dressed for walking, tweeds or similar, with sturdy shoes, mackintoshes and hats. They both survey the room for a moment.

MRS F: Dear me, what a dreadful place.

MARGARET: Hardly the Ritz is it.

MRS F: The Ritz it is most definitely not. When did you go into the Ritz?

MARGARET: *(Ignoring the question)* Must have had something once though, that painting looks aristocratic and you could still see the coat of arms over the front door.

MRS F: Don't be fooled Margaret, this is new money, trade probably, not the real thing.

MARGARET: Is that so bad, it looks pretty old to me.

MRS F: Age has nothing to do with it dear, one can buy history you know, but you can't buy breeding. Where has that Gladys got to? *(Goes to the door, calling)* Gladys, Gladys. Come on girl, what are you doing?

GLADYS enters s/r. She carries two backpacks a suitcase, three sleeping bags, sandwiches and a hamper. She is similarly dressed but a little dishevelled.

GLADYS: Sorry, sorry. I was finding it

MRS F: No excuses Gladys. We must keep up otherwise we'll be letting the side down, won't we. Do you understand?

GLADYS: Yes, but

MRS F: Nothing more to say Gladys, the matter is closed.

MARGARET: It might not be the Ritz but after tracking over the moor it's Shangri-La. I shall be glad to sit and rest for a while.

GLADYS: Shall I put the bags over here?

MRS F: Yes, but do it carefully, and mind the food. And it's too dark in here, see if the lamps are working Gladys.

GLADYS dumps the luggage and tries one of the lamps, it lights.

MRS F: Good, do the rest. And close that window its cold in here.

GLADYS switches on the rest of the lights.

MARGARET: I'll close the window Gladys. *(She closes the window and the curtains.)*

MRS F: Can we find something to sit on? I can't sit on the floor eating, smoked salmon is not that kind of sandwich.

MARGARET: *(Inspecting the furniture)* It all looks a bit tatty to me. *(She takes a chair from the pile.)* How about this one?

MRS F: Oh dear, that's far too dirty, I couldn't sit on that in these tweeds. It'll be alright for Gladys, put it there, and find another.

GLADYS: I'm sure we can find something here. *(Searching through the pile of furniture)*

MARGARET: Here, let me help you Gladys.

GLADYS: Thanks Maggie, they're a bit awkward.

MARGARET: That's not the only thing that's being a bit awkward today. *(Glances towards MRS F)*

GLADYS: Or others days.

They find and set out two more chairs.

GLADYS: This chair isn't too bad, just a bit dusty. We can soon clean it up.

MARGARET: *(Standing in front of the mirror on the fourth wall)* Goodness me, I look a fright, walking might be good for you but it plays havoc with your make-up. *(She takes her hat off and is adjusting her hair)*

MRS F: Interesting painting. Probably bought to make new money look like old money and impress the guests. *(Trying to decipher the signature)* Reynolds, obviously a forgery.

GLADYS: Here we are Mrs F, here's a chair for you, is this all right?

MRS F: That will be fine Gladys. Will you serve the sandwiches now?

GLADYS: Yes, of course. *(She gets the hamper and prepares the food.)*

MARGARET: *(Sitting.)* I think it's going to be quite cold tonight, we're high up here and the wind is picking up.

MRS F: No matter. We'll be as comfy as can be in here.

GLADYS distributes sandwiches and tea from the thermos.

MARGARET: These are excellent sandwiches.

MRS F: They are, I hope you're not eating the smoked salmon ones Margaret, I get them from my local grocer you know at great expense. Mr Roberts is a most obliging man, nothing is too much trouble.

GLADYS, who is eating a smoked salmon sandwich, turns away so she won't be seen.

MARGARET: I'm quite happy with the cheese and ham Mrs F. What's the plan for tomorrow? *(She takes an OS map from her pocket.)*

MRS F: Well, I intend to have a look over the building before we go, so if we plan to leave about one o'clock that should be about right. We can easily reach the next town by nightfall. It will also give you and Gladys a chance to have a little rest. If you're not used to lots of walking it can be tiring.

MARGARET: That's good. I want to take some photographs of the moor and the house too, just as a record of our trip.

MRS F: You could write an account of our travels and put it in the newsletter, the other members will be most interested in our little adventure, and photographs would make it even more interesting.

GLADYS: I'm not sure I'm going to be too happy sleeping here with no front door.

MRS F: I think we can look after ourselves if we have to Gladys. Who is going to be out at night on this isolated part of the moor?

GLADYS: I suppose so.

MRS F: *(To GLADYS.)* Haven't you finished your sandwich yet?

GLADYS: Nearly Mrs. F.

MRS F: Well hurry up. And then you can go and see if there are any suitable bedrooms for us, preferably with keys in the locks, and check for running water. Off you go and be as quick as you can.

(GLADYS exits s/l still eating a sandwich)

MARGARET: *(Studying the map.)* What made you plan a trip passing this house, or was it coincidental?

MRS F: When I was planning the route I intended to travel from West Mockford to Triddlington in one day. But when I realised that Gladys and yourself were not regular walkers I considered it would be too much for you so I looked for a place between the two villages where we could stop. And this is the only place I could find on the route.

MARGARET: Have you been here before?

MRS F: No.

MARGARET: I can't find the house marked on the map.

MRS F: Really. I may not have been here but I did know it was here. It was my husband who told me I had to visit this old house when I got the chance. He said it was much more than it seemed though I cannot for the life of me see what he meant. Although it has deteriorated somewhat.

MARGARET: It's definitely past its best.

MRS F: Walking is more than just a pastime dear, it's also character forming. I have walked all my life and my husband always says that it is the walking that's made me the person I am. He's always encouraging me to go on long walks alone.

MARGARET: I'm not surprised.

MRS F: Not surprised?

MARGARET: No, he was obviously very concerned with your wellbeing.

MRS F: He was, he was. A more astute man I never married. He was certainly more astute than my other husbands.

MARGARET: So you did plan to come here?

MRS F: Not exactly, I took advantage of the situation when it arose.

MARGARET: How many husbands have you had Mrs Fortesque-Carruthers?

MRS F: I've had three husbands. I married my first husband when I was only eighteen, a mere slip of a girl. He was, unfortunately run over by a bus on Clapham Common. Why he was on Clapham Common at all is shrouded in mystery when he should have been in the House at the time.

MARGARET: House?

MRS F: Of Commons dear, The House of Commons, he was an MP. He must have got his commons mixed up somehow. He was a sweet man and I miss him greatly.

MARGARET: That's very sad.

MRS F: Then I met and married a consultant gynaecologist who was very good to me but completely wedded to his profession. He passed away in the middle of a consultation, a house call in Soho apparently, his heart gave out, and sadly I had to bury him too. Finally I married Mr Carruthers to become Fortesque-Carruthers. He was an officer in the guards during the war. He was awarded a bucket full of medals. Apparently his men adored him.

A floorboard creaks.

MARGARET: What was that noise?

MRS F: Probably just the wind on the moor Margaret.

GLADYS enters s/l.

MRS F: Ah, here's Gladys.

GLADYS: This is a very creepy place. There are plenty of rooms, more than enough for one each, but the facilities are a bit mucky. Not been used for some time I expect. The floorboards creek loud enough to wake the dead and some of the doors are locked.

MRS F: But there is somewhere suitable for us to sleep tonight?

GLADYS: Oh yes Mrs Fortesque-Carruthers.

MRS F: Good. You can clear up the food now Gladys and take the baggage to the rooms.

GLADYS: Yes Mrs F.

GLADYS exits with some of the bags s/l.

MARGARET: I'll do the food. *(She starts to clear up)*

MRS F: I shall set my alarm for seven o'clock so we will have time to explore the house before we have to leave.

GLADYS returns and collects more bags then exits s/l.

MARGARET: Right, that's tidy, let's get some sleep. *(She is about to turn the lights off.)*

MRS F: Leave one on Margaret, in case one of us comes down during the night. *(Exits s/l.)*

MARGARET turns off all but one light. As she does so the lights dim. She then exits s/l with the last of the baggage. But the thermos is left on stage.

There is a brief pause. JACK and FREDDY enter s/r, each carrying a crate of beer which they place on the floor. JACK returns to the door to help RONNIE enters carrying further supplies of food which is placed on the floor. FREDDY sits. CHARLIE enters with nothing.

CHARLIE: Good lads, that'll be enough for breakfast won't it.

RONNIE: Here, that's funny. We never left these chairs like that did we?

CHARLIE: I dunno, I never noticed.

JACK: I don't think we did, least ways I didn't move any chairs.

CHARLIE: Did you get that chair out Freddy?

FREDDY: No, it was already 'ere.

RONNIE: I didn't move none either. And this thermos flask, it's still warm. That definitely wasn't 'ere before. Somebody's been here.

CHARLIE: D'you believe in ghosts that like a cup of tea then Ronnie, cos I think we've got one. *(Laughs)*

RONNIE: Don't joke Charlie. Something here aint right.

JACK: You're too jumpy Ronnie. Who would have been in here since we went out? We've only been gone five minutes. We just didn't notice it that's all. Nothing to worry about.

RONNIE: And ano'ver fing. When we got 'ere the lights were off and now this ones on, but we never turned it on. This place is supposed to be derelict, deserted like. So why's the 'lectric still on?

JACK: That is a bit odd Charlie. You sure this place is deserted?

CHARLIE: Well, that's what the man said. It got overlooked with the war an' all that, and there ain't been no-one here since.

FREDDY: The war messed ev'ryfing up, we 'ad big plans for some more jobs but you all got called up. I 'ad to find a proper job, never done that before in my whole life.

RONNIE: What job d'ja get?

FREDDY: Postman. Plenty of chances nickin' stuff in the mail. Did quite well, kept the wolf from the door.

CHARLIE: *(Not too enthusiastic)* Come on let's find a bedroom, hopefully one each.

RONNIE: I'm not leaving this room. I think we should all stay together. I think we should all sleep in here tonight. Tomorrow we can see what's going on here cos something's very odd.

CHARLIE: My, my, you have got the jitters me lad. Alright, we'll stay here. Fancy a game of cards do ya?

JACK: That's a good idea. Set up the table and chairs Ronnie while I get the beers.

RONNIE set the table and chairs while JACK gets the beers and mugs and opener and CHARLIE takes a pack of cards from his pocket. They all sit.

JACK: Is the window closed Ronnie?

RONNIE checks the window.

RONNIE: Yea it's closed alright.

CHARLIE: Right lads, what's it gonna be, stud, brag, poker or goulies? *(He lets out a very loud laugh as they sit round the table)*

As they settle down to their game the face of the painting slides away and the face of MORTIMER appears in its place. The eyes scan the room as the window curtains mysteriously flutter.

Blackout