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A COMEDY-DRAMA IN ONE ACT

WEIRD IS THE NIGHT

by
FRED ROGERSON



THE DRAMATIC PUBLISHING COMPANY

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(WEIRD IS THE NIGHT)

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WEIRD IS THE NIGHT
A Play in One Act
For Four Women

CHARACTERS

MELISSA BRENT *a romantic young lady*

ALISON BRENT *her younger sister*

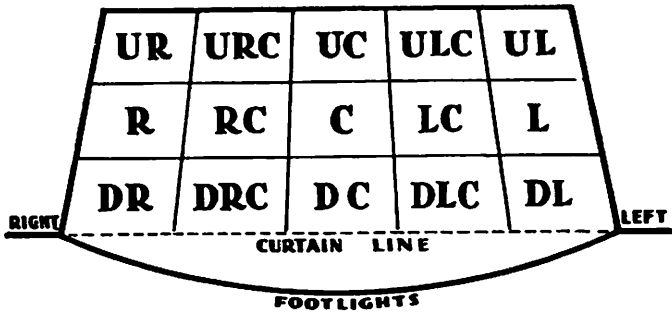
MISS VALENTINE *a spinster*

MRS. DARKWAYS *her housekeeper*

PLACE: *A bed-chamber in an old mansion.*

TIME: *The present.*

CHART OF STAGE POSITIONS



STAGE POSITIONS

Upstage means away from the footlights, *downstage* means toward the footlights, and *right* and *left* are used with reference to the actor as he faces the audience. R means *right*, L means *left*, U means *up*, D means *down*, C means *center*, and these abbreviations are used in combination, as: UR for *up right*, RC for *right center*, DLC for *down left center*, etc. A territory designated on the stage refers to a general area, rather than to a given point.

NOTE: Before starting rehearsals, chalk off your stage or rehearsal space as indicated above in the *Chart of Stage Positions*. Then teach your actors the meanings and positions of these fundamental terms of stage movement by having them walk from one position to another until they are familiar with them. The use of these abbreviated terms in directing the play saves time, speeds up rehearsals, and reduces the amount of explanation the director has to give to his actors.

WEIRD IS THE NIGHT

SCENE: A bedchamber in the home of Miss Valentine. It is lighted by electricity. The rugs, paintwork and wallpaper are comparatively modern; otherwise the furnishings and ornaments are almost all of a period not later than the 1860s. UC is the only door to the room. ULC is a fireplace with fender, fire-irons and an open (and empty) coal-box or scuttle. The mantelpiece above the fireplace is cluttered with bric-a-brac, among which is a plaster figurine, not less than ten inches high, of a rather hefty-looking goddess in classical draperies. UL, in the corner, is a closet, and URC a wardrobe. RC, placed parallel, lengthways, to the front of the stage, is a double bed with an old-fashioned patchwork quilt; a girl's dressing-robe has been thrown carelessly over the foot of the bed. There is a window L with closed curtains. DL is a dressing-table and chair, and DR a wash-hand stand complete with soap, basin, ewer, sponge and towel.)

AT RISE OF CURTAIN: MELISSA, a girl of eighteen, attired in a nightgown that suggests the romantic character of its wearer, is sitting up in the far side of the bed, reading a book. ALISON, some two years younger, is seated at the dressing-table, brushing her hair

vigorously. She is wearing a dressing-gown over her pajamas, and her feet are in bedroom slippers. As she brushes her hair, she counts each stroke deliberately and aloud.)

ALISON. ". . . forty-three, forty-four, forty-five . . ." (While she is counting, MELISSA looks up from her book and regards her aggrievedly.)

MELISSA (interrupting). Alison.

ALISON (pausing in her brushing). Yes?

MELISSA. Must you do that?

ALISON. Do what?

MELISSA. Count aloud.

ALISON. But I always count aloud when I brush my hair; you know that, Melissa.

MELISSA. Of course I know that! You've not been my sister for sixteen years without making me acquainted with your little peculiarities.

ALISON. Peculiarities? What do you mean--little peculiarities? There's nothing peculiar about counting as one brushes one's hair--it's a well-known practice. Eighty firm strokes every night before retiring--it's recommended in all the health-and-beauty books.

MELISSA (bored). Is it really?

ALISON. Stimulates the scalp and promotes a luxuriant growth of healthy hair.

MELISSA. Oh, does it! Well, I'd be much obliged, my sweet, if you'd do your stimulating and promoting in silence. How on earth do you expect me to read while you're babbling away like a talking adding-machine?

ALISON. Sorry! (Resumes brushing her hair, but now without counting.) Interesting book?

MELISSA. Very. One of those gothic-romance things. You know--a lonely house . . . moans

in the night . . . drops of blood on the turret stair. Spine-chilling. The heroine has just found a grisly human skeleton in her grandfather's closet.

ALISON. Found a what?

MELISSA. A human skeleton. A grisly one.

ALISON. What other kinds are there? (Considers.)
In her grandfather's closet?

MELISSA. Yes.

ALISON. Oh, well, she needn't worry! The old man's probably a New York drama critic . . . I hear those people all have skeletons in their closets. (Puts down her brush, rises, and stretches herself, yawning.) Hooooooh, I'm tired!

MELISSA. We've had a tiring day--traveling from Boston.

ALISON. I'm still surprised we found our way here at all. You know, M'liss, if Connecticut was a jigsaw puzzle, this place would be that funny-shaped bit that turns up a week later in the dog's basket. (MELISSA resumes reading. ALISON yawns again.) Where'd you get it? (MELISSA looks up.) The book. Where'd you get it? (Going to sit on the bed.)

MELISSA. Oh, the book! It was in the library downstairs. Aunt Mary said I could choose anything I fancied.

ALISON (momentarily puzzled). Who did? (Suddenly understands.) Oh, Miss Valentine, you mean! And how long, may I ask, have you been calling her Aunt Mary?

MELISSA. Since about an hour ago. She suggested I might like to. That both of us might like to.

ALISON. Oh? Well, I've no particular objection. Except that she isn't our aunt. (Removes one of slippers.) She is, I would remind you, only the

aunt of our new stepmother. Actually, we're about as closely related to her as is the liberal mind to the eternal verities.

MELISSA. Yes. Definitely *a la mode de Bretagns*. But that's one of the complications of having a widower father remarrying--one acquires an entirely new set of ready-made relatives.

ALISON. And all, in our case, perfect strangers to us. (Takes off her other slipper.) I mean, here we are, spending our first night as guests of an old woman that we never saw before today. Put her in a fig leaf, and we wouldn't know her from Eve. (Stretches out her legs and starts twiddling her toes.) We know, admittedly, that she is our new stepmother's aunt, and that she has invited us to her Connecticut home for a few days. But what else?

MELISSA. Well, what else do you want to know? You don't think she's a mass murderer, do you? Or a former gangster's moll?

ALISON. She might be. She could even be the High Priestess of some strange religion, preparing us as human sacrifices to the full moon.

MELISSA. Alison, you get worse! And stop twiddling your toes!

ALISON. Why? What's wrong with twiddling one's toes? Are you aware that twiddling the toes has a far-reaching effect on the entire muscular system of the legs and trunk? Men--boys--girls--do you want a healthy, dynamic, vitally alive body? Good! Take off your shoes and start twiddling!

MELISSA. I'll twiddle your neck around if you don't stop it! Besides, we're talking about Miss Valentine--Aunt Mary, I mean--not your rotten old toes.

ALISON. What do you think of her, then?

MELISSA. I think she's a dear. A sweet old thing.

ALISON (smiling). I guess she is. You didn't think I was serious, did you? But she is nutty, isn't she?

MELISSA. Nutty?

ALISON. As a squirrel's breakfast.

MELISSA. Certainly not! A bit vague, that's all.

ALISON. Hm. Well, have it your own way. (Rises, and puts her slippers under the bed.) What about that other woman, then?

MELISSA. Other woman?

ALISON. The housekeeper or whatever she is. That Mrs. Darkways. Now, there's a sinister character for you!

MELISSA. Nonsense!

ALISON. It's not nonsense at all! That woman could walk straight into one of your gothic romances and take her place as Public Weirdo Number One. I tell you, Melissa, if I get up tomorrow morning and find her washing blood from the turret stair, I'll be off home quicker than a startled bunny rabbit on a ski run.

MELISSA. There isn't a turret stair.

ALISON. No? That's about the only thing that's lacking, then! Has it occurred to you, my love--since we are on the subject of gothic romances--that our present situation has all the required ingredients? Old colonial house fallen into shabbiness and disrepair. Nearest neighbor a quarter of a mile away. Our unknown hostess a vague old lady who--whatever you say--could easily turn out to be crazy. A solitary female servant who acts like something thought up by Daphne du Maurier . . . and on top of all that, there's this room!

MELISSA. This room?

ALISON. This room, sister of mine. Just get an eyeful of it! (Gestures about her.) Sure, it's spotlessly clean and all the bedsheets are fresh and sweet as lavender. What's more, somebody actually re-papered the walls not more than thirty years ago--and put a new rug or two down! But apart from the electric light, there's hardly anything else here you wouldn't have met with in the days of the Civil War! Look at the bed and the dressing-table! And that! (Points to the wash-hand stand.) I don't even know what it's called!

MELISSA. It's called a wash-hand stand.

ALISON. Is it? (Goes to the wash-hand stand and dips exploratory fingers into the water-jug.) Water! (Wipes her hand on her robe.) Are we expected to wash at this? Gosh! (Turns and looks upstage.) And look at that fireplace! (Starts to go over to it.) And that junk on the mantelpiece! (Takes up the statuette of the goddess.) This plaster figure, for instance. What on earth is it? A female wrestler in her nightie?

MELISSA (tucking her book under the pillow and getting out of bed). Shouldn't think so. Meant to be a Greek goddess, I imagine.

ALISON. Then your imagination is better than mine! I'll tell you something, though. . . put her in a tailored suit and rimless glasses, and she'll look for all the world like my math teacher.

MELISSA (going up to her). Miss Waters, you mean? Minnehaha?

ALISON. Yes. Oh, she used to teach you too, didn't she? Well, this lady resembles her like a twin.

MELISSA. Let me see. (Takes the figurine and examines it.) Golly, you're right! The only

difference, Alison, is that Minnehaha has never been broken across the hips and then stuck together again with glue.

ALISON. How do you know she hasn't? Personally, as one who has seen her running for a bus, I prefer to reserve judgment until we meet in the same nudist camp. (Picks up an unidentifiable item of bric-a-bric.) And what in the wide world is this?

MELISSA (replacing the figurine). That? That's an--er. . . . Well, you were suggesting this is a house of mystery. That's one of the mysteries.

ALISON. It must be! (Puts back the object, and starts to come DC.) Anyway--getting back to what we were talking about--you see what I mean, don't you? About this room. To enter this room, Melissa, is to step right back into another age. Look at it! (With a circulatory gesture.) It's a perfect setting for one of those spooky stories you're always reading.

MELISSA (a trifle uneasily). You think so? (Moves back toward the bed.)

ALISON. I do. It only needs an unexplained tapping on the ivied casement----(At this instant a soft tapping sound is heard. The girls both register shock, but MELISSA more strongly than her sister.)

MELISSA. W-w-w . . .

ALISON. What?

MELISSA. W-w-what was that?

ALISON (recovering herself). What do you mean-- what was it? What do you think it was? It was somebody knocking at the door, that's all.

MELISSA. Oh! Oh, the door?

ALISON. Naturally! (The tapping is repeated.) There! You hear? Probably Miss Valentine.

(Calls.) Come in! It's all right!

(Enter UC MISS VALENTINE, an elderly lady, vague and fluttery. Her clothes are several years out of fashion, and her whole appearance is marked by the untidiness frequently encountered in women of her obvious character. She is carrying a saucer and a small milk jug.)

MELISSA (relieved). Aunt Mary!

MISS VALENTINE. Yes. You don't mind my dropping in? I'm not disturbing you?

MELISSA. Not at all. We're both still out of bed--as you can see.

MISS VALENTINE. Yes. Well, I . . . (Breaks off, staring at MELISSA in delighted admiration.) Oh! Oh, my dear! What an extraordinarily pretty nightdress!

MELISSA (pleased). Oh. You like it?

MISS VALENTINE. Like it? I do indeed! And you look lovely in it, Melissa! Perfectly lovely. You remind me--yes, you remind me of the bride in that movie!

ALISON. Movie? Which movie?

MISS VALENTINE. Which movie? Oh . . . oh, I don't recall the title, dear--it was a long time ago. But I do remember it was about a haunted castle.

MELISSA. A haunted castle?

MISS VALENTINE. Yes. And there was this beautiful bride who was murdered on her wedding night.

MELISSA. Murdered?

MISS VALENTINE. That's right. She was in the haunted bedchamber, you see, awaiting her bridegroom, and a claw-like hand stole through the curtains of the bed and strangled her.

MELISSA (putting a hand to her throat). Strangled her?

MISS VALENTINE. Yes.

MELISSA. A claw-like hand?

MISS VALENTINE. A claw-like hand. I can recollect it quite distinctly. Long, curving fingers it had--like talons. Anyway, as I was saying, that poor dear girl wore a nightdress just like yours.

ALISON. You see, Melissa? I told you to stick to pajamas. Wear nighties like that, and you end up getting strangled in haunted castles.

MISS VALENTINE (dreamily). A beautiful film. . . . However, that was not what I came for, was it? Actually . . . now, what did I come for . . . ? Ah, yes! Well--really--I didn't come for anything. It was just that I was on my way to bed, and I thought--well--that I'd look in and see if everything was satisfactory.

MELISSA. Everything's fine, Aunt Mary. Lovely.

ALISON (cordially). Couldn't be better.

MISS VALENTINE (pleased). Oh? Really? I'm so glad you think so! The room--you like the room?

ALISON. Certainly. Why not?

MISS VALENTINE. Oh--nothing! I merely thought you might have preferred something less--old-fashioned.

MELISSA. That's all right, Aunt Mary. Personally, I like its being old-fashioned. More--romantic.

MISS VALENTINE (pleased). Ah! Romantic. Yes, yes, of course--romantic. Girls of your age . . . and it is quite a nice room, isn't it? In spite of . . . (Checks herself.) Well, no matter! Actually, Mrs. Darkways wanted me to put you somewhere else. But, as I told her, there was no other bedroom that was--well--

suitable for preparation. (This has been said apologetically and with some embarrassment. The girls look discreetly sympathetic.) I'm afraid--with the cost of repairs and renovations

. . .
ALISON. Yes. Yes, we quite understand, Miss Valentine. It must be very difficult.

MISS VALENTINE. I ought to sell the house. Yes, I ought to . . . it would be the sensible thing to do. But after two and a half centuries. . . . There have been Valentines here for two and a half centuries, you know. . . .

MELISSA (impressed). Two and a half centuries. All those generations. I think that's wonderful, Aunt Mary.

MISS VALENTINE. Wonderful? Yes. Yes, perhaps. But there's very little money now, I'm afraid. And I'm the last--the very last. . . . (More briskly.) But never mind all that! After all, I get by, my dears--and that's the great thing, isn't it? You're quite sure you like the room?

MELISSA. Of course, Aunt Mary. Haven't we just said so?

MISS VALENTINE. Yes. But, then--then you don't know, do you?

ALISON. Know what?

MISS VALENTINE. Why, about . . . (Checks herself.) But I mustn't bother you with all that! Besides, it's all nonsense. I've lived here all my life--over sixty years--and I've never seen anything, myself.

ALISON. Seen anything?

MISS VALENTINE. As I say, I haven't. And even though it did happen in this very room. . . .

MELISSA. What?

ALISON. What?

MISS VALENTINE (flustered). What?

MELISSA and ALISON (together). What?

MISS VALENTINE. What?

MELISSA. That's what we keep asking you, Aunt Mary . . . what?

MISS VALENTINE (bewildered). What? (MELISSA and ALISON refrain from speech.) How do you mean--what?

ALISON (patiently). You said something had happened in this very room. We were asking you what it was.

MISS VALENTINE. Oh. Oh, I see! Yes. Quite. Yes, I understand now. But you needn't worry about that, my dears. After all, it was a long time ago, wasn't it?

ALISON. What was?

MISS VALENTINE. What happened. But I mustn't keep you from your sleep, must I? I expect you're very tired.

MELISSA. Yes, we are, rather. It's pretty late, Aunt Mary--and we've had an exhausting day.

MISS VALENTINE. To be sure you have. I'll just wish you good night, then. (Hands her jug and saucer to ALISON.) Would you mind? (Turns and starts to kiss MELISSA.) May I, my dear?

MELISSA (smiling). I'd like you to. (MISS VALENTINE kisses MELISSA, and then turns to ALISON somewhat uncertainly.)

ALISON (smiling). Go ahead. (Hands the jug and saucer to MELISSA, and turns back to MISS VALENTINE, indicating her cheek.) Right there--Aunt Mary. (MISS VALENTINE kisses her.)

MISS VALENTINE. Good night, my dears. Both of you. (Starts toward the door.)

MELISSA. Aunt Mary!

MISS VALENTINE (pausing and turning). Yes, Melissa?