MURDER AT BEDFORD MANOR

MYSTERY SOLVER

Original Story
by Claudia Busto

Assemble the puzzle, read the story booklet, search for clues and solve the crime at Bedford Manor.
Mrs. Kensington handed her light blue brocaded shawl to Whistler. She audibly gasped as she eyed Bedford Manor. The honey-colored stone house was always breathtaking. Rambling in size, it had an enormous secluded landscaped garden area with simply gorgeous views of the surrounding woodlands. Mrs. Aldington always specially enhanced it for her weekly Friday tea, which usually took place in her stately drawing room. This time, though, she had absolutely outdone herself, having had her butler, Whistler, and the other household servants set up the party in her yard.

French doors opened from the mansion to the bricked terrace above the sunken garden, which boasted Mrs. Aldington's prize bluebells, hydrangeas, and hardy fuchsias. Atop folding tea tables covered with snowy linens, there was a vast selection of triangle-cut dainty finger sandwiches, lemon curd, smoked salmon, mushroom shallot tartlettes, and strawberry preserves. A separate dessert table held miniature berry tarts, petit fours, cinnamon scones topped with clotted cream, and silver teapots that undoubtedly contained the finest tea from Ceylon that Bedford Manor always served.

As Whistler handed Mrs. Kensington a delicate bone china teacup, she was greeted by Mrs. Aldington, who looked resplendent in a long cornflower blue gown, straw hat, white gloves, and dangling pearl necklace.

"Mrs. Kensington!" Mrs. Aldington cried. "Hasn't this day turned out to be just divine? And here I thought when I woke up and felt the cool morning air that I'd be resigned to holding tea in that ghastly drawing room again."

"Oh, Mrs. Aldington, it all looks heavenly," Mrs. Kensington gushed. "You've just surpassed yourself, and how utterly marvelous that the sun has shown up!"

"Have you met Hannah Milton-Thurman yet? She is the granddaughter of Lord Milton," Mrs. Aldington said, introducing the two ladies. "Mrs. Kensington is quite the art connoisseur herself."

"Oh?" Hannah inquired. "Then you must know about my late grandfather's painting that Mrs. Aldington owns."

Of course Mrs. Kensington knew about it - nearly everyone in town did. Entitled "The Velvet Jewels," it was a priceless oil painting in a gilt frame that was an Aldington family heirloom. The picture featured Mr. Aldington's grandmother clad in a stark black dress and dazzling diamond and sapphire necklace on a velvet cord. It had been local talent Lord Milton's last work before his unfortunate death from polio.

Even more valuable than the painting were the famed jewels from the picture. They had vanished from Bedford Manor months earlier and the crime was never solved. It had been quite the town scandal and Mrs. Aldington had been especially heartbroken, since her husband had died shortly thereafter. The subject of much speculation, some thought that the jewels had possibly been buried with Mr. Aldington.

The portrait had become Mrs. Aldington's dearest possession and was displayed prominently in the manor's drawing room. Many a Friday tea conversation had centered on the artwork.

"I've been trying most unsuccessfully to buy 'The Velvet Jewels,'" Hannah confided to Mrs. Kensington. "But Mrs. Aldington refuses to part with it," she said, shaking her blonde head in dismay as they watched their hostess welcome the other guests.

"It's a delightful piece," Mrs. Kensington agreed. "But Mrs. Aldington just absolutely cherishes it."

"I know, as do I," Hannah confessed. "It would mean so much to me to have my darling grandfather's last work. Oh, there is that insipid Beatrice," she sniffed, looking over at the statuesque woman arriving in a pink dress and minc stole.

Beatrice was Mrs. Aldington's last remaining blood relative. While she and Mrs. Aldington had never previously gotten along, since Mr. Aldington's passing, Beatrice had become more than kind to her sister-in-law. They had been keeping each other's company quite often as of late, and were frequently seen strolling down Herefordshire Avenue together, perusing the shops or having brunch.

Mrs. Kensington did not much care for Beatrice either, having met her at a prior tea. But as she did not wish to air her feelings to a stranger, she politely excused herself and went to greet her former neighbor, Mrs. Liverpool, who was chatting with Mrs. Aldington.

"Lydia Liverpool!" Mrs. Kensington called. "I had no idea you were coming today. This is quite the treat."

Lydia had recently moved two towns over. She and Mrs. Aldington were old chums from their garden club. It had come to pass a few fortnights ago that Whistler and Lydia had been conducting a surreptitious love affair. Many of the society ladies had been appalled and Mrs. Kensington was determined to greet
her acquaintance with nonchalance and so was especially effusive in her salutation.

A servant dressed in a black suit approached and handed them each a new teacup. He lingered slightly, gazing at Lydia, and Mrs. Aldington scowled. “That will be enough, Keegan,” she said coldly, and the servant walked off.

Mrs. Aldington frowned. “That is Whistler’s cousin. You know how I do so adore my dear W.,” she stated, smiling faintly at Lydia. “He governs my household and keeps everything running in tip-top ship-shape. Keegan, however, is of another breed entirely. He is often off gambling nights, or engaging in other questionable activities. Why, he repeatedly sleeps later than I do! I quite suspect that he is not entirely trustworthy. In fact, W. himself mentioned to me that he thinks he has been stealing from the house. He said he was not entirely sure though and begged me to keep Keegan on until he discovered the truth. They are cousins, after all.”

“Well,” she said. “That is enough discourse. I do not want anything to get in the way of today’s splendid weather and gathering. Shall we sit and enjoy the warm day?”

Lydia and Mrs. Kensington nodded in agreement and sat themselves down at one of the walnut tables, next to Emma Haddington and Sarah Watson, Lydia and Mrs. Aldington’s fellow garden club members.

Mrs. Kensington groaned silently, bracing herself for their usual discussion of planting marigolds versus poppies. Sometimes these parties could be so dreadfully dull, but of course one had to put in an appearance.

As the debate was starting, however, there was a deafening crash from somewhere inside the manor that echoed throughout the garden. The curious party-goers rushed from the sun-filled terrace through the French doors and into the house.

Mrs. Kensington could not have ever imagined the horrifying sight that awaited them in the drawing room, and shrieked in her most blood-curdling fashion.

“The Velvet Jewels” had been partially and roughly cut out of the frame, with a corner left sticking up. Whistler lay motionless underneath, his dark hair matted to his head, beads of perspiration on his white shirt and his arms close to his side. It appeared that he had been brutally stabbed.

Keegan and the other servants scuttled in from all parts of the house and collectively drew in their breath at what they saw. The panicked guests began animatedly jabbering and milling about wildly.

Mrs. Aldington clapped her hands and began to speak, her voice quavering and her usually smooth face wizened in pain as she announced, “Everyone, please! I am not sure what is going on, but I am determined to figure it out. Please bear with me for a moment.”

Anne Halesworth stepped forward. “I am summoning my husband to come at once and figure this out,” she said firmly, a lone tear on her cheek that she brushed aside.

Mrs. Kensington raised her dark eyebrows. Anne’s husband was Inspector Halesworth, the prominent detective. He was known throughout all of Cheltenham for his superior ability to solve crimes ranging from the theft of Elsa Trumpy’s jersey cow to the recent fatal boating accident that befell Cordelia Teeter’s sister visiting from Wales. Formerly one of Scotland Yard’s finest, he was one of the town’s most respected and important men.

Since retirement from the Yard, he seldom appeared at many functions, preferring instead to spend his days sipping sherry and perusing the many rare books that the Halesworth family library contained. About the only matter that roused the reclusive detective from his reading was a genuine, bona fide mystery; there was nothing he found more pleasurable.

Anne walked off with Keegan to contact her husband while the ladies tried to soothe the distressed Mrs. Aldington. She pulled a crisp white handkerchief from her bosom, dabbing at her overflowing eyes.

“I do not comprehend what is going on here,” she muttered. “My W., my party, it is all just too much for me,” and she swayed dangerously on her feet.

“Do not just stand there,” Beatrice shrieked at one of the help. “Kindly get her some water!” and the servant scurried off.

Beatrice moved to comfort her sister-in-law, patting her head. “There, there,” she murmured.

The other women sat quietly in the room, holding each other’s hands as they awaited Inspector Halesworth’s arrival.

If anybody wanted to leave, no one suggested it. Perhaps they knew, Mrs. Kensington thought, that they would have met with an eagle-eyed glare from Beatrice, who stared at anyone who so much as budged in place. Determined to
take control of the situation, she insisted on tending to Mrs. Aldington’s every need, and repeatedly stated how stunned she was about Whistler.

For her part, Mrs. Kensington noted, Lydia Liverpool appeared relatively calm, considering her lover had just been killed. Actually, all the ladies had become astonishingly reserved after the initial alarm had worn off. Everyone seemed more at ease, even almost animated, as though being part of a real live murder was a once in a lifetime occurrence to be thrilled about!

What was probably only a thirty-minute respite waiting for the detective felt like hours. When he finally arrived at Bedford Manor, Inspector Halesworth was welcomed breathlessly by the ladies as though he was a famous actor. As usual, he looked the part of a typical investigator. Wearing a tweed suit in chocolate tones, horn-rimmed glasses and carrying his russet-colored tin supply box, he was his standard gruff self. He nodded curtly to the women and quickly bussed his wife on the cheek.

Surveying the scene in the drawing room, he took a monocle and large magnifying glass out of his kit. Amidst Whistler’s corpse on the ground, he saw diminutive paint chips, remnants of the gilt frame and a piece of torn canvas. He chuckled to himself and then asked to speak to each guest in the garden privately, requesting sternly that nobody leave the grounds.

He started with the distraught hostess first. At this point, the yard had become unbearably humid, and Mrs. Aldington felt rather faint as she quietly responded to his question of who would possibly want Whistler dead.

Sighing, she said, “I adore my W. He was popular with all the ladies too, for they thought he was the best butler in Cheltenham. He did simply everything for me and was absolutely invaluable.”

She hesitated and then continued, “It should be mentioned that his cousin, Keegan, also works for me, although the ways that he has disappointed me lately have been innumerable. He gambled regularly and Whistler even believed that he was possibly stealing from the house.”

“Also,” she faltered, “Lydia Liverpool had been seeing Whistler romantically lately, much to the chagrin of the other women in town.”

Here Inspector Halesworth arched one bushy brow, but made no comment, instead asking about the significance of The Velvet Jewels and wondering why it had been targeted. Mrs. Aldington began to whimper, mentioning that Lord Milton had painted it, but that for her, its value was mainly sentimental.

“It is an Aldington family heirloom and therefore reminds me of my late husband,” she tearfully informed Inspector Halesworth.

“I am certain that you already know that the actual jewels from the painting disappeared months ago, and so the picture is all I have left. When my husband was on his deathbed, he wrote me a last love letter, which he gave to his sister to bring to me. In it, he told me to ‘always look to the painting’ if financial times ever got to be tough, but I would never sell it. Even though Hannah Milton-Thurman, Lord Milton’s granddaughter who is here today, has been offering me a pretty penny for it.”

“It is funny,” she said, sadly. “I wish he had written more. His letter ended so abruptly, but...” her voice trailed off.

“Very well,” Inspector Halesworth said brusquely, patting her roughly on the shoulder. “I am so sorry about the loss of your trusted friend. I shall now speak with the others, beginning with Keegan and the servants.”

He rapidly fired queries at the help, asking Keegan about his gambling problems and the fact that Whistler had suspected he’d been stealing, which Keegan vehemently denied.

Inspector Halesworth then grilled all the partygoers, starting with Lydia, who, Mrs. Kensington noticed, was squirming, and she guessed that the inspector was probing into her relationship with Whistler. Hannah also shifted uncomfortably as he fired questions at her, her hazel eyes darting from side to side anxiously. Most of the other guests, however, Mrs. Kensington observed, chatted away gaily to the detective. Again she got the sense that they were excited about being part of such a salacious incident. Ridiculous, she thought, like they were in the middle of a whodunit play or mystery story. Beatrice appeared especially calm and collected, drawing her fur shawl tighter around her tall frame as she answered him. Mrs. Kensington herself replied to his inquiries honestly, chastening herself for being slightly disappointed that he was not the least bit interested in her. She hoped she was not getting caught up in everyone else’s nonsense too.

When he was done, he fairly shouted, “Can I have your attention, please!”

Mrs. Kensington could not believe his next words. She knew his reputation as a fierce bloodhound, but now she was witnessing it first hand as he stated:

“I know who murdered Whistler and why!”
Everyone was stunned at the speed of his puzzle-solving, and turned to face him.

Pulling a long, cherry wood pipe out of his tool box, he looked intensely at each guest in turn, puffing away.

Inspector Halesworth knows who did it and what the motive was...

Do you?

Turn the page for the Solution
The Solution

Inspector Halesworth gazed intently at the nervous servants and ladies. Mrs. Kensington was so edgy that she felt weak, but at least she knew that she was not the killer!

"It was almost easy, really," the detective mused aloud, as though speaking to himself. "At first, I was thrown off by you, Lydia Liverpool," he said, glancing at her.

She looked at the ground, embarrassed, as he continued, "You would have been an ideal person. After all, what is more important to today's society woman than one's appearance and reputation? Although you undoubtedly cared for Whistler, it would not have been implausible for you to murder him... if you blamed him for the gossip that was spreading around town."

"I didn't kill Whistler," Lydia protested. "I would never kill anyone."

Inspector Halesworth held up one of his oversized hands. "I know," he affirmed. "Neither did Keegan, whom I also suspected. I still think, my boy," he said, as he clapped the hunched servant on a black-clad shoulder, "that you have been robbing the house. Whistler would not have gone to Mrs. Aldington about his own cousin unless he had probable cause to think so. But a thief does not make a murderer make."

Keegan hung his head sheepishly as he admitted to Mrs. Aldington to having stolen the occasional trinket to pay off his gambling debts. She waved her lily white hands aside. "Fine, fine. But I just want to hear who killed Whistler," she announced firmly.

"I am getting to that," the inspector said. "But not without mentioning one more person who has also been exonerated from my suspicions, Hannah Milton-Thurman. What better reason than wanting your late grandfather's last artwork that you had been trying unsuccessfully to buy? It would have been a perfect motive, and while you were trying to pilfer the picture, Whistler saw you, and you swiftly stabbed him. I realized, however, that it was someone else who was observed by Whistler trying to steal "The Velvet Jewels" and killed him-you!" he declared, pointing a meaty finger at Beatrice.

The shocked guests whirled to look at her as she scoffed, "Don't be ridiculous, Inspector Halesworth! Really, what kind of sick joke is this?"

The detective shook his head. "It was so obvious from the start," he said, "but to be on the safe side, I figured I'd interview everyone, so as not to come to a false conclusion. Also, while I knew it was you, Beatrice, I initially could think of no motive for you."

"This is insane," she protested, and turned to Mrs. Aldington. "Surely you don't think..."

Mrs. Aldington looked at Inspector Halesworth. "I'd like to hear what else you have to say."

He continued, "Very well, then. Beatrice, you were on my mind from the start. Every other lady is clearly feeling the heat, but you are wearing a fur stole. Could it be to cover up this?" and he pulled her wrap off, revealing a quarter-shaped bloodstain.

"Oh, good heavens!" Mrs. Kensington exclaimed.

Beatrice looked mortified, and tried to stammer an excuse, but she was trapped. The inspector went on, "I noticed paint chips and pieces of the frame on the ground near Whistler. Whoever was the thief clearly did not care if the picture was destroyed at all. Therefore, it could not have been Hannah, the granddaughter, or Keegan, the thief looking to resell it. The connection of the painting led me to rule out Lydia. None of the other guests had motives that I could see, and the shawl made Beatrice look dubious instantly."

Here he paused for a second before delivering his final blow. "Because of the torn canvas and the corner of the painting that was sticking up, I figured that the killer knew something lay between the two. An intimate note, penned by a dying Mr. Aldington to his wife, mentioned to 'always look to the painting in times of financial need,' which Mrs. Aldington figured meant the portrait itself. But her husband had hidden the missing jewels inside the canvas, which he had mentioned on the letter's last page. She never got to see that part, because Beatrice had intercepted the note first, and concocted a plan to slash the canvas and salvage the precious jewels for herself. When Whistler saw her in the act, she stabbed him. Only the last living Aldington blood relative, with access to the note and all Mrs. Aldington's belongings, as well as full knowledge of the jewels, could have been guilty. Out with them, Beatrice."

Beatrice heaved a loud sigh, knowing she had to comply. Leading the astonished crowd to a small stone barn on the property, she showed them the diamond and sapphire velvet cord necklace from the painting, in all its stunning splendor. She had stashed the jewels there until she could retrieve them after the party's end.

Inspector Halesworth led the guilty, sobbing Beatrice away to thunderous applause from the sawed guests.

In a completely uncharacteristic move, the usually introverted detective turned around and winked at the ladies. "I always get my man," he said.