



THE CAT AND THE CANARY

by John Willard; adapted by Valerie Goodwin

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The Cat and the Canary

CHARACTERS

Mr Crosby the lawyer

Mrs Dietweiller the housekeeper

Fred

Charley

Aunt Susan

Cousin Cicely

Joyce

Wally

Hendricks the asylum guard

Various boat men and reporters

ACT ONE

Swamp sounds- frogs, whooping birds, splashes. Crickets, insects.

Lawyer jumps ashore from a canoe (offstage)- sound of paddling.

Crosby: Pick me up in two hours.

Boatman: Sorry senor- no boats in the darkness. In the morning we return.

Crosby: What? Wait-

Boatman: Goodbye senor. I hope to see you in the morning. *(chuckle)*

Crosby: You- but-! *(looks around and turns up collar)* Good god, having to spend the night here ! How Cyrus stood it I'll never know.

(Massive splash)

What was that? Good lord- a huge alligator.

(crosses to door and knocks in a panic. Longish wait and door creaks open- no one there)

Mrs D: *(appears)* So- you have come at last.

Crosby: Oh- Mrs Deitweiller? How long have you been here?

Mrs D: I have always been here. I was born in this house.

Crosby: I meant- but surely you did not remain here, alone, all these years?

Mrs D: Not alone.

Crosby: But- there are no staff here with you are there?

Mrs D: No. No staff.

Crosby: Well- who do you mean then?

Mrs D: I am not lonely.

(pause.Lights flicker.)

Crosby: What was that?

Mrs D: Sometimes they get into the machinery.

Crosby: What does?

Mrs D: (*ignores this*)Where are the rest of the relatives? They did not travel in your boat?

Crosby: I hoped they were here already.

Mrs D: I hear them coming now.

Crosby listens.

Crosby: I hear nothing.

Mrs D: I hear many things that others do not.

Lights up on stage right, where rest of relatives are picking their way to the door.

Aunt Susan: Yes, second cousins twice removed. My great Aunt Maude had ten children. She was- what's the word?

Fred: Prolific?

Cicely: Unlucky?

Susan: Anyway Cyrus absolutely doted on me, so – well, it's not exactly a foregone conclusion, but the reading of the will tonight might be a bit of a disappointment for some.

Cicely: I'm just looking forward to meeting Wally Campbell. I did n't even know he was a relative of mine before I got the letter inviting us all here! I'm just a ball of nerves!

Susan: Bag.

Cic: Pardon?

Fred: Well- I think we're here. Quite a walk from the landing stage- I think our boatman was in a hurry to get back.

Susan: My goodness- ten years have really left their mark. The swamp has reclaimed the land, and the damp has rotted the house- I wouldn't have known it. Watch out for that step- the wood has completely disintegrated.

Cic: 29.

Susan: Eh?

Cic: Alligators. I've seen 29 since we left the boatyard.

(Fred knocks on the door. They wait)

Fred: Who's that? Oh- it's you, Charlie.

(Charlie approaches from stage left)

Charlie: Aunt Susan! And is this little Cicely? Hello Fred.

Fred turns away pointedly.

Fred: Why doesn't someone open up and let us in?

Door opens suddenly.

Mrs D: So, four more of you. Only two to come now. Enter.

They exchange looks and pass her uneasily.

Aunt Susan: So Mrs Deitweiller- you're still here? What on earth have you been doing for the last ten years? Not maintenance anyway!

Mrs D: I have been following the wishes of Mr Cyrus.

Cicely: But- he's dead! (*nervous giggle*)

Susan: Hush Cicely. Of course he is!

Mrs D: Yes, ten years to the very night- almost to the very moment.

Chords of music. Wally in a huge coat and tiny hat picks his way from the boat.

Wally: I hope you didn't mind me waffling on – it takes my mind off the malaria bugs. Oh- he's gone. Well- this is going to be some evening. What was that? Oh- just an alligator. (*shouts*)Handbags! I guess that told him.

Knocks on door.

Better not knock too hard- my fist'd go right through this pulp.

Mrs D: Welcome . Only one more now is awaited. Then- we can begin.

Wally: Hey everyone! How about this- a real melodrama huh? It's got everything- the slightly kooky cousin, two handsome rivals, the crusty old Aunt-

Susan: DO you mind?? Your misplaced humour is most unwelcome.

Wally: Right down to the clock that stopped when he breathed his last.

Cic: Oh no! Really?

Mrs D: You must have the 'Sight', Mr Campbell. You have spirits all around you.

Wally: Could you put some in a glass with some ice?

Fred: Put a sock in it Campbell.

Wally: Where's the leading lady? The beautiful young heiress?

Crosby: What do you mean? Was it you who opened the sealed envelopes? Oh- excuse me, of course it could n't have been.

Susan: What envelopes? Don't tell me the will has been tampered with?

Crosby: I should n't have alarmed you- after all, it is of no consequence. I have brought additional copies with me from the safe in New Orleans, but the ones locked up here have indeed been opened, but not altered.

Cic: Somebody already knows...??

(at that moment enter the beautiful and brightly charming Joyce)

Joyce: Good evening everybody- sorry I'm so late! I had to pay the boatman double as it's so dark. Hello Aunt Susan, Cicely. Fred! How are you? And Wally here too..

Wally: Gee- I think I'd remember you. Have we met?

Joyce: You surely remember pulling my pigtails and calling me twerp?

Wally: What a brute I was! Luckily we've both improved with age.

Charlie: Hello Joyce.

Joyce: Oh- Charlie. How do you do.

Charlie: Very formal , aren't we?

(she withdraws from him coldly)

Joyce: I'm so sorry for keeping you waiting, Mr Crosby.

Crosby: Quite alright Miss Norman- after all, we can't begin till the stroke of midnight.

Wally: Midnight huh? Who wrote this stuff? I'll lay two to one Joyce is the heiress.

Charlie: That's quite enough of your thoughtless –

Fred: And I suppose you'd propose marriage in the next instant, huh Campbell?

Charlie: Or YOU would, Fred.

Fred: Pity you've lost your chance, Charlie.

Wally: Boys, boys! Can't you see your bickering is upsetting the lady?

Susan: Come on now- take your seats. We're all tired and overwrought. This house and this situation are enough to set anyone's nerves on edge.

Wally: It sure is playing hell with me- how about that drink Mrs D?

Mrs D stiffens and the lights flicker- then a sound of chimes is heard.

Mrs D: Midnight. According to the wishes of Cyrus Norman, his will must now be read.

Wally: *(to Joyce)* Just like him to be awkward- the old buzzard was so twisted they had to screw him into the ground.

Crosby *(opens envelopes)* The last will and testament of Cyrus Abraham Norman. I, Cyrus Norman, being of sound mind, and witnessed by my faithful lawyer and my respected housekeeper Mrs Irene Dietweiller, do hereby bequeath all my estates, properties and assets to whichever of my relatives bears the surname 'Norman'.

Reaction; all gasp and look at Joyce. They are about to speak when Crosby silences them:

If they are however certified insane or decease before the end of one month from the reading of this will, the legacy shall pass to the person named in the second sealed envelope.

Fred: *(Jumping up)* Crosby- you must see that the will is nothing more or less than an invitation to murder- to do away with Joyce, or drive her mad! Whoever was named in that second envelope-

Crosby: SEALED envelope.

Susan: Except you told us it had been opened. So someone knows.

Mrs D: You know whose name was in that second envelope Mr Crosby, as you drew up the will.

Crosby: Of course.

Wally: Shouldn't we congratulating Joyce? As for me – I never expected to inherit anything- apart from hayfever.

(everyone looks at him stonily apart from Joyce and Cic.)

How about drinks all round Mrs D?

Lights flicker and chimes again.

Wally: Somebody should pay their electricity bill.

Mrs D: Seven chimes. Only seven will live.

Cic: Eh? Whatever d'you mean? *(whimpers)*

Mrs D: The chimes never lie. Unlike the living. And now Miss Norman- I shall hand over the keys. The house is now yours.

Joyce: Oh- but, Mrs Dietweiller- I hope you'll stay on and look after the house for me- won't you?

Mrs D *(inclines her head)* As you wish. And now- a meal is prepared. Or perhaps you would rather retire to your rooms.

Susan: Our rooms? I for one do not intend to spend another moment in this ghastly house.

Fred: No one's leaving I'm afraid. Did n't you hear the boatman? 'No more ride for you tonight'.

Cic: And one of us dead before morning! *(she whimpers and holds her nose)*

Wally: What's with the nose holding? Gonna sneeze?

Cic: Oh- it's how I stop myself screaming. *(funny laugh)* I guess it does seem kinda kooky at that.

Wally: Don't mind us- you go right ahead. You're gonna seem Normal after a night here with the Marx brothers.

Huge gong sounds. Wally jumps into Cicely's arms. Then shamefacedly gets down, as Mrs D Announces:

Mrs D: Dinner is served.

Wally: Lucky for me you're a strong gal. Care to show me that nose gag?

They all go into the dining room. ie to another area with a table and chairs set up; could be stage left. Candelabra and dim lighting. Picture behind them of Cyrus, with eye holes.

Wally: Hey look- the Old Loony in person. Notice the family resemblance?

Susan: Extraordinary to think the same blood flows in all our veins.

Wally: Ye-e-es. Gruesome, isn't it?

Cic: Don't you feel like- he's watching us?

Joyce: Those eyes. I could have sworn...

Susan: *(laugh)* What a strange fancy my dear! Don't say the place is starting to get to you.

Fred: None of that Aunt Susan. We all know what you're trying to imply.

Charlie: Let's all try to celebrate shall we? I propose a toast. To- Joyce. The new owner of the Norman fortune.

Susan: And the necklace. If it ever comes to light.

Cic: Ooo a mystery! Who stole it?

Wally: Don't look at me- I just got here.

Joyce: A necklace Aunt Susan? Tell us more.

Susan: We..e..ll. I don't know much. Cyrus had a necklace made, with the last part of his dwindling inheritance, with emeralds and diamonds. Then, shortly before his death, it went missing. Some say he didn't trust banks, so he hid it somewhere in these grounds, or in this house. He never told anyone where it went. And now his secret is buried with him. I thought the truth might be revealed in his will, but seemingly not. Mr Crosby? Do you know anything?

Crosby: Only what you yourself have said, Mrs Waverly.

Cic: I have the weirdest feeling-

BANG- sound of a huge gun going off outside. They all rush to the window.

Fred: Great Scott what in the heck was that?

Charlie: Let me see- Oh- a policeman?

Crosby: A uniform of some kind- but not a policeman.

Cic: Oh-oh- oh- *(holds her nose)*

Wally: I think someone had better hold my nose too.