

The Figgy Pudding Play



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CHARACTERS

PRUDENCE (PRUDY) THICKPENNY, a young kitchen maid

IDA FARTHINGALE, an older kitchen maid

ALBERT DUCKWORTH, a middle-aged butler

TIME

1890, the day before Christmas

PLACE

London, England: a courthouse and the kitchen of Sir Thomas Hardwick's estate.

(In a London courthouse, PRUDENCE THICKPENNY, dressed in a long black dress with a white cap and apron, speaks directly to the audience as if they were collectively seated on the judge's bench.)

PRUDENCE

I'm Prudence, your honor, a kitchen maid at Lord Hardwick's estate. I confess it's my fault, but before you pass judgement, I need to explain: The trouble started the day before Christmas while we were makin' the sauce for the plum puddin'. I was busy stirrin' the brandy butter in a bowl while Ida was standin' behind me which gives me the shivers if you know what I mean. Albert calls me moody Prudy but I'm not. I'm good natured, always smilin' which makes folks think I'm soft in the head, but like I said, the trouble started in the kitchen with Ida standin' behind me.

(The lighting alters as IDA FARTHINGALE appears in the past, peering over PRUDENCE'S shoulder as she stirs the sauce in a bowl.)

IDA

Perfection Prudy! That's what they want and expect, the same old recipe year after year but by the time it's served, they're so schnockered you could hand 'em their slippers and they'd shovel 'em in!

(ALBERT DUCKWORTH enters dressed in his butler's uniform, clasping a sheet of paper.)

ALBERT

Pardon me, but her Ladyship has made a special request: (*reading*) Please instruct the entire staff of servers, cooks, and kitchen maids that when it's time to serve the dessert course, they all enter the dining room singing "The Figgy Pudding Song."

IDA

What gall! I'm paid to cook, not sing! And my voice ain't what it was, though I once sang in the church choir. Of course, I was only a young lass at the time, though I suppose I could practice.

PRUDENCE

Well, I don't mind singin', but will I have to sing while carryin' the puddin'?

IDA

What?! You can't sing and carry puddin' at the same time?! Well, no need to fret, you won't be carrying the puddin'; Albert has that honor.

ALBERT

That's right. You'll be carrying the plates and Ida carries the brandy decanter.

PRUDENCE

But when I'm nervous, my hands get slick with sweat and I don't want to drop the plates.

IDA

Then don't or you'll ruin the entire presentation.

ALBERT

And be dismissed and sent packing!

IDA

You can wear the oven mitts and still get a good grip on the plates. Just be sure to take deep breaths, and like I said, they've already had too much to drink so they won't notice you. The staff here is expected to be efficient but invisible. I've been here a dozen years and I'll wager they don't know my name.

PRUDENCE

At they must know Albert's name.

ALBERT

Indeed they do, but that's all they'll ever know!

PRUDENCE

It sounds like you don't like 'em much.

ALBERT

I find them to be selfish, shiftless, and miserly, so no, I don't like them much.

IDA

(whispering) Shush, Albert, the walls have ears!

PRUDENCE

I'm afraid that even with the oven mitts, I'd never be able to hold the plates and sing, and it's not that I'm all thumbs; it's that I don't know "The Figgy Puddin' song."

IDA

Of course you do! You know "We Wish You a Merry Christmas" don't you?

PRUDENCE

Yes.

IDA

It's just a verse of the same tune, like this:

Oh, bring us some figgy pudding

Oh, bring us some figgy pudding...

(ALBERT joins in.)

IDA

Oh, bring us some figgy pudding

And bring it on now!

ALBERT

Oh, bring us some figgy pudding

And bring it on now!

IDA

So, Prudy, do you think you can manage that?

PRUDENCE

Yes, I...I think so.

IDA

So go on now, let's hear you.

(IDA starts the song and PRUDENCE joins her, then takes over singing with an exceptionally clear soprano voice.)

IDA

Oh, bring us some figgy pudding...

IDA

Oh, bring us some figgy pudding...

PRUDENCE

Oh, bring us some figgy pudding...

PRUDENCE

Oh, bring us some figgy pudding,

And bring it on noooowwww!

(PRUDENCE extends the last note to operatic heights as IDA and ALBERT stand agape.)

IDA

My god, girl, you sing like an angel!

ALBERT

She'll be fine.

IDA

Fine?! She'll blow the roof off their heads!

ALBERT

Just remember to march behind me with the plates and lay one at each place setting.

IDA

And never forget: serve from the left, remove from the right. It's easy to remember 'cause that's how we read words the on a page -- from left to right.

PRUDENCE

Oh, I...I'm afraid I can't read.

IDA

Ah, that's a pity. *(to Albert)* She sings like she belongs on the stage, and yet she can't read a word.

ALBERT

But we can assume she knows her left from her right.

PRUDENCE

Of course, I'm not totally ignorant. As a matter of fact, I know all my letters thanks to my brother, Walter, but he left home before teaching me to read whole words. The trouble is there's nine of us, and pa said I'm of more use in service than at home.

IDA

Well, from no on each day I'll teach you a new word. Today's word is plum, that's P-L-U-M!

PRUDENCE

P-L-U-M.

IDA

Tomorrow's word will be pudding! I'll write them down on a sheet of paper and keep adding to the list and soon you'll be reading and writing like the best of the bards. If you don't know what bards are, they're poets. That P-O-E-T-S.

PRUDENCE

P-O-E-T-S.

ALBERT

So Ida, do you plan to open a school in your free time?

IDA

What free time?! The answer is no, but it ain't right that the girl can't read a recipe. With a voice like hers, she should be singin' from a songbook!

ALBERT

In the meantime, Prudence, could you please fetch a bottle of brandy from the cellar. It's a dark brown bottle with the word cognac on the label. That's C-O-G-N-A-C.

PRUDENCE

Yes, sir, I know my bottles.

(PRUDENCE departs as IDA faces the audience/judge.)

IDA

Well, your honor it's like I told Albert when Prudence went to fetch the brandy. (*turning to Albert*) Now, Albert, there's something you should know if you don't already: Cyril has his eyes on Prudy. He's always gawkin' at her and when he's in his cups, he's starts strokin' her arm and swattin' her backside, and it ain't right. It ain't respectful.

ALBERT

I'm not blind, but it's not our place to correct his lordship's son. He's a grown man after all; he should know better.

IDA

He's the devil, a real hellion, and wait till he hears her sing! He'll want to ravage her on the spot.

ALBERT

It's not her voice he's after.

IDA

I know that! I'm just sayin' it might make her seem even more attractive. Cyril's always liked a good singalong.

ALBERT

I suspect he'll treat Prudy like he has the other girls.

IDA

Girls he's ravaged and ruined for life without so much as a slap on the wrist when they wind up like Hannah Jones and Harriet Wiggins. It was before your time here, but they left in disgrace. Well, all I can say is if he lays a hand on Prudy again in my presence, he'll get a good smack on the head!

ALBERT

You're all talk, Ida; though I admit there's something mean about the man -- that awful temper like he's itching for a fight.

IDA

And treatin' the help like dogs! Come to think of it, he treats his hounds better, lettin' 'em prowl and piss in the house, and makin' us clean up the mess!

(PRUDENCE returns with the brandy bottle looking disheveled and hiding her tears.)

PRUDENCE

Here's the brandy. It's the last bottle, but it's near empty.

IDA

It looks like someone's been tipplin' and it ain't me.

ALBERT

Don't look at me; I'm strictly an ale man.

PRUDENCE

(she sniffs) I've never had a drop of brandy in my life.

IDA

Well, it's nothin' to cry about.

ALBERT

We can't light up the pudding without some spirits. *(to Prudence)* Now go back to the cellar and bring up the whiskey. They'll be too crocked to notice the difference.

PRUDENCE

No, I...I can't! I'll never go down there again!

(IDA suddenly notice PRUDENCE'S disheveled state.)

IDA

Oh, my dear, oh, Prudy, love, what happened? Your dress, it's...

PRUDENCE

Ruined! The buttons ripped right off! He pushed me against the wall then put his paws on my breasts, then pulled up my skirt up and...

IDA

Oh, my poor dear girl. *(to Albert)* Didn't I tell you?! No woman's safe in this house!

PRUDENCE

I tried to scream but he put his hand over my mouth. He said if I breathed a word, he'd take the sharpest knife in the kitchen and cut out my tongue so I'd never sing again.

IDA

The fiend, the bloody bastard!

ALBERT

Are you saying he had his way with you...?

IDA

Of course that's what she's sayin'!

PRUDENCE

No, I ran off before he finished the deed, but he's had at me before.

IDA

Oh no...

PRUDENCE

Oh, yes! And god forgive me, every time he touched me, I...I just wanted to die.

IDA

Hah! He's the one who should die, and I know just how we'll do it!

ALBERT

Do what...?!

PRUDENCE

How...?

IDA

Ratsbane in the sauce -- tomorrow when we serve the plum puddin'. Cyril always asks for a little extra sauce on his slice so I'll bring it out in a separate bowl.

PRUDENCE

Oh, no, Ida, you can't say such things. It's an ungodly sin, and besides, won't Cyril taste the difference?

IDA

Hah! By then he'll have swilled his fill and the sauce won't kill him. I'll only add a pinch -- just enough to make his belly ache so he'll take to his bed and leave you in peace.

ALBERT

I can't believe my ears! What you're suggesting is vile, wicked. If anyone suspects, you'll be taken to the docks and hung -- and don't expect me to defend you!

IDA

It won't come to that 'cause no one will suspect. For all anyone knows, Cyril developed a resistance to the currants in the pudding. Besides, everyone knows Cyril's a sot who we've all seen staggerin' from the table -- only this time he won't just be tipsy.

ALBERT

My god woman, listen to yourself! You sound determined to poison the man, but what if you do away with him altogether?

IDA

Don't I wish...

ALBERT

Ida!

IDA

Oh, admit it, Albert, life here would be much nicer if he weren't around, but I'm a god fearin' woman, and don't mean to kill the man -- only put a limber in his timber.

PRUDENCE

I pray the Lord forgives me, but I think it's a grand plan! Truth be told, I want him gone and don't mind sayin' it.

ALBERT

Well, don't say it! And don't think plans can't go awry! What if the wrong guest gets the tainted sauce?

IDA

What guests? The kitchen staff were told the original party of twelve came down to ten, then seven, and now it's just the Coxon widow and her witless sons and Cyril and his mum. Of course they all had their excuses, everything from gout to symptoms of croup, cholera, and the pox. If anyone does make an appearance, then we'll all keep an eye out to be sure the sauce goes where it's intended. The ratsbane will be in the small green bowl, (*to Prudence*) and ratsbane is spelled A-R-S-E-N-I-C.

PRUDENCE

A-R-S-E-N-I-C.

(Now ALBERT addresses the judge/audience as IDA and PRUDENCE hum “The Figgy Pudding Song”)

ALBERT

Well, your honor, on Christmas day we all entered the dining room singing “The Figgy Pudding Song” just as madam requested. I cut and served as I always do, setting a fat slice onto Master Cyril’s plate to which I added a spoonful of the brandy butter sauce. As expected, he wolfed it down and wanted another slice with more sauce followed by yet another. At first he gave no indication that anything tasted off. In fact, he was his usual vulgar, belching self for half an hour at least. Then suddenly he spat up the contents of his belly; then his head hit the table and he slid to the floor. After one last belch, he stopped breathing, and that was the end of him -- dead as a doorknob!

PRUDENCE

Oh, your honor, I nearly fainted when I ran out of the kitchen and saw he’d spewed up his supper and fell, and god-forgive-me, I confess I wasn’t sorry to think I’d never have to feel his paws on my privates again. But I knew it was my fault; I poisoned the sauce!

IDA

I’m guilty, your honor; I poisoned the sauce!

ALBERT

I’m at fault, your honor, since I knew that the sauce was tainted though that didn’t stop me from serving it.

IDA

It’s true that Prudence added a pinch, but I added another, and strange as it may seem, I actually felt a pang of pity for Cyril.

ALBERT

But here’s the fluke of fate, your honor: It turns out the doctor was a good Christian teetotaler who never approved of Cyril. He said he had a bilious liver and his depraved ways of living were bound to cause a failure of his heart and lungs. So you see, Prudence and Ida might not have been blamed -- if only they hadn’t blamed themselves!

IDA

I’m no doctor, your honor, but I also blame the whiskey as much as the sauce. We all knew that Cyril was helping himself to the stock in the cellar. I think that’s what tipped him over the edge. It was just too much for what was left of his heart, but Prudy was beside herself weepin’ and wailin’ away.

PRUDENCE

I'm to blame, your honor, and I don't care what your verdict is! I've been feelin' out of sorts lately and I'm afraid I may be with child -- Cyril's child! And if that's true then I'd rather die even though I'm finally learnin' to read and write, and being praised for the lovely singin' voice God gave me. All I'm sayin' is put me in the docks and have done with me. I don't give a tuppence one way or another!

IDA

Have pity your honor.

ALBERT

Have mercy, your honor.

IDA

Forgive and forget, your honor -- in the spirit of Christmas.

ALBERT

The poor girl was defiled and deflowered, and now has to carry a bastard child. Is that not punishment enough?

IDA

Let us go, your honor, and we'll promise to take good care of Prudence and her babe. In fact, I'll bake you the best plum pudding you've ever tasted and we'll come to your house on Christmas Day and sing to your guests. Everyone knows you have a grand festive frolic with all the swells of the city invited. But I've heard that you don't have a carolin' sing-a-long 'cause you and her ladyship are tone deaf, but we're not! *(to Albert and Prudence)* So let's give his lordship a taste, shall we?

IDA

*Oh, bring us some figgy pudding
Oh, bring us some figgy pudding...*

(ALBERT and PRUDENCE join in.)

IDA

*Oh, bring us some figgy pudding
And bring it on now!*

ALBERT

*Oh,, bring us some figgy pudding
And bring it on now!*

END OF PLAY

