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Ashes

Mad professor develops a deadly liquid, only to be stopped by his own creation. Adapted from the short story by H. P. Lovecraft. . .

by Kathy Applebee

Characters

PRAGUE, *Bruce's friend*

MALCOLM BRUCE, *lab assistant*

PROFESSOR ARTHUR VAN

ALLISTER, *a chemist*

MARJORIE PURDY, *Van Allister's secretary and lab assistant*

SARAH, *a maid*

TIME: *Early 1920's.*

SETTINGS: *Dark backgrounds and interiors of two labs, as seen in the boxes of Zoom or other video conferencing platform.*

SCENE 1

AT RISE: *Dark backgrounds for boxes in which PRAGUE and BRUCE appear.*

PRAGUE: Hello, Bruce. Haven't seen you in a dog's age. Come in. (*BRUCE twirls his hat between nervous fin-*

gers, glances furtively around the room.) What's the matter, old man? You look as if you'd seen a ghost.

BRUCE: I don't feel quite myself tonight.

PRAGUE: You don't look it, either! You're usually a man of steady nerves. What's wrong? (*BRUCE sits but shifts uneasily in his chair.*)

BRUCE: Prague, I've just been through the most devilish, gruesome experience that ever befell a man. I don't know whether I dare tell it or not, for fear you'll think I've gone crazy—and I wouldn't blame you if you did! But it's true, every word of it!

PRAGUE: You know I love the bizarre and the dangerous, so tell me.

BRUCE: Have you heard of Professor Van Allister?

PRAGUE: You don't mean Arthur Van Allister?

BRUCE: The same! Then you know him?

PRAGUE: I should say so! Known him for years. Ever since he resigned as professor of chemistry at the college, so he could have more time for his experiments. Why, I even helped him choose the plans for that sound-proof laboratory of his, on the top floor of his home. Then he got so busy with his confounded experiments he couldn't find time to be chummy!

BRUCE: About four months ago, I began working as the Professor's assistant. He had a young lady doing his secretarial work—a Miss Marjorie. She was one of these strict-attention-to-business types, and as good-looking as she was efficient.

PRAGUE (*Joking*): It's not the least bit bizarre you noticed a good-looking girl. (*Noticing BRUCE seems more upset, he stops and speaks seriously and softly.*) Go on.

BRUCE: She helped Van Allister in his laboratory as well as devising experiments of her own. Indeed, she spent nearly all her spare time with us in the laboratory.

PRAGUE: I suppose you became close friends, working together.

BRUCE: Yes, I not only began to depend on her to help me in difficult experiments when the Professor was busy but I never could seem to stump her. That girl took to chemistry as a duck takes to water!

PRAGUE: Not many women are perfectly content to fuss around smelly bottles and sticky messes.

BRUCE: I know. I quite admired her and with the professor so busy with his new pet project, so busy that he frequently skipped meals, and so secretive, we had much time for this

friendship to ripen into more.

PRAGUE (*Comprehending*): Ah! A romance. But tell me more about the project that so consumed the professor.

PRAGUE (*Squirming and shaky*): Ah, now we come to it.

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SCENE 2

AT RISE: *Two screens, divided into an inner and outer lab. The outer lab has a doorway right and door leading to the inner lab left. In the foreground is a desk with a phone, Venus flytrap and some papers. A clothes tree stands in one corner with a woman's coat and hat on one side, a man's on the other side. Background of miscellaneous lab equipment and book shelves create the impression of a combination lab/office. MARJORIE, in chair, and BRUCE, standing and leaning against desk, appear here.*

Inner lab has a chair up left, a curtain and second chair up center, a table down center and background screen has miscellaneous lab equipment background to create the impression of a better equipped lab. PROFESSOR appears here.

PROFESSOR: I have portioned the laboratory to make a separate workroom for myself. (*Proud, almost haughty*) My next series of experiments, if successful, will bring me everlasting fame.

MARJORIE (*Enthused*): How exciting, Professor. What is the nature of this project?

PROFESSOR: No. No, I will not even confide in the two of you. Not until I am ready.

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SCENE 3

The two labs with door open between them. Smoked-glass aquarium on table.

PROFESSOR (*Calling excitedly from inner lab*): You may come into my workshop and bring that Dionaea. (*MARJORIE and BRUCE enter inner lab with flytrap.*) I have finally achieved success! (*Holds up a small bottle containing a colorless liquid*) What I have here will rank as the greatest chemical discovery ever known. I am going to prove its efficacy on living matter right before your eyes. (*PROFESSOR puts the flytrap into a small, smoked glass box, closes the cover and uses a funnel to pour the liquid into the box.*) Now to prove whether my weeks of effort have resulted in success or failure! (*Opens lid to box. MARJORIE gasps and BRUCE rubs his eyes in disbelief.*)

MARJORIE (*Astonished*): The flytrap is gone. There's nothing but a pile of soft, white ashes left! (*PROFESSOR crosses his arms, on his face an expression of supreme satisfaction, ghoulish glee and madness.*)

PROFESSOR: Bruce—and you, too, Miss Purdy—it has been your privilege to witness the first successful trial of a preparation that will revolutionize the world. It will instantaneously reduce to a fine ash anything with which it comes into contact, except smoked glass!

MARJORIE (*Horried*): But why....?

PROFESSOR: An army equipped with glass bombs filled with my compound could annihilate the world! Wood, metal, stone, brick—everything—swept away before them; leaving no more trace than that carnivorous did—just a pile of soft, white ashes!

(*Lost in his own terrible thoughts*) Ashes to ashes and dust to dust. (*Suddenly remembering BRUCE and MARJORIE with a start, brusquely waving them away*) That will be all. (*As PROFESSOR transfers ash into a small smoked glass container, MARJORIE and BRUCE exit, closing the door behind them.*)

MARJORIE (*In a stage whisper*) It's. . . it's horrible! (*They embrace as BRUCE tries to comfort her.*)

BRUCE: Yes, but let's not speak further of it here. We'll give our notices as soon as we can, move up the wedding, and get far away from this place. (*MARJORIE nods, steps away, smooths her clothes.*)

MARJORIE: Yes, let's. The sooner the better. (*Sits at her desk*)

BRUCE: I need to step out to get something to complete my experiment. Will you be all right here alone?

MARJORIE (*Composing herself*): Yes. Yes, I'll be fine.

BRUCE: I won't be long. (*Exits taking his coat and hat. MARJORIE starts shuffling through the papers on the desk. She jumps when PROFESSOR enters. He holds two empty bottles.*)

PROFESSOR (*Curtly*): Where is Bruce?

MARJORIE: He stepped out. He needed something for his experiment. He said he won't be long.

PROFESSOR (*Impatient*): I can't wait on his return. See to it the box from the city morgue is brought in post haste.

MARJORIE: Which box?

PROFESSOR: The one just now delivered, glass, about the size of a coffin. Then take these two bottles to the butcher's to be filled with fresh blood. (*MARJORIE hesitates and takes a half step back.*)

MARJORIE: F-fresh. . . blood?

PROFESSOR (*Irritated and short-tempered*): Is there something wrong with your hearing? (*PROFESSOR steps closer to her and shoves the bottles into her hands.*) Fresh blood. Then return here post haste. I don't want it clotting while you dilly-dally.

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SCENE 4

MARJORIE's lab coat is on the back of her chair. Table in inner lab is moved to down stage left. On it sits the glass container with the flytrap's ashes. The smoked glass "coffin" is down center. A woman's hat and coat have been transferred to a chair up left. Curtain covers chair up center. BRUCE enters outer lab with SARAH trailing.

SARAH: No sir, I don't know where she is.

BRUCE (*Concerned*): Her hat and coat are gone. Did you see her leave?

SARAH: No sir.

BRUCE (*More concerned*): And she didn't leave a message for me?

SARAH: No sir.

BRUCE: What about the professor?

SARAH: He's been locked away in there (*Gesturing with a hand at inner lab*) Didn't even want his lunch. (*BRUCE waves her away. SARAH exits. BRUCE paces anxiously, pounds on door between labs, rattles the door-knob, and listens at inner door.*)

BRUCE: Drat that man's soundproof lab. (*Checks his watch. Phone on MARJORIE's desk rings. BRUCE pounces to answer it.*) Hello! (*Pause*) What? (*Pause*) No, she isn't here. (*Pause, frustrated and anxious*) Try later. (*Hangs up phone, almost slamming it down. Runs his hand through his hair nervously, shudders involuntarily, pounds at the door, paces*)

PROFESSOR (*Opening door between labs*): Bruce! You are finally back! I need you in here. Close the door behind you. (*BRUCE enters and notices with a start the woman's coat and hat. Realization and horror flash over his face.*)

BRUCE: The hat and coat—they belong to Marjorie! (*BRUCE moves past PROFESSOR to hat and coat. PROFESSOR seizes him from behind and begins to drag him over to the coffin. They are locked in a desperate life and death struggle. BRUCE grasps the jar of the flytrap's ashes. With one, last, superhuman effort, BRUCE crashes it into PROFESSOR's skull. PROFESSOR stumbles and falls into coffin. BRUCE stands dazed, then horrified at what he has done. He paces, and then stops suddenly as he hears something. He goes to curtain, flings it back. MARJORIE is gagged and tied to a chair. BRUCE rushes to ungag and untie her.*) My darling! What? How?

MARJORIE: The Professor had that large glass box delivered, then he summoned me into his inner lab. I thought he was going to send me on some errand and took my hat and coat with me to save time. Without warning, he attacked me from behind, overpowered me with ether, and tied me hand and foot to this chair. (*When she is freed, they embrace.*)

BRUCE: How terrible.

MARJORIE (*Shuddering*): He made me watch as he reduced a corpse to ashes before my very eyes, and put the ashes in a glass jar. Then he mixed even more of his horrible liquid to filling that glass thing almost to the brim.

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SCENE 5

Inner lab is darkened to indicate MARJORIE remembering these events.

PROFESSOR: One thing remains. I must perform the experiment upon a human being! What a privilege it will be for the one who sacrificed his life in such a manner, for such a cause.

MARJORIE (*Pleading for her life*): No, please, don't.

PROFESSOR: No, of course not. Mr. Malcolm Bruce will have that honor. You are to be my witness only.

MARJORIE (*Screaming, running to door, trying and failing to open it*): Help! Help! Someone help me!

PROFESSOR (*Chuckling*): Come now, Miss Purdy. Surely, you remember this lab has been completely sound-proofed. But since we may have to wait some time for your fiancé to return, perhaps a bit of ether will calm you down. (*Pours a liquid from a metal container onto a rag and places it over MARJORIE's mouth. Her struggles lessen and then cease as she becomes unconscious. He lowers her into chair by the curtain*)

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SCENE 6

Inner lab, full lights to indicate present.

MARJORIE: Next, I opened my eyes to find myself here—with you, Malcolm. (*Hoarse, nervous whisper*) Where—where is the Professor? (*BRUCE silently leads her to the coffin. MARJORIE shudders seeing it up close. Taking up a handful of the soft, white ashes, BRUCE lets them sift slowly through his fingers. Lights out*)

THE END

PRODUCTION NOTES

Ashes

CHARACTERS: 3 male, 2 female.

PLAYING TIME: 15 minutes.

SETTINGS: Darkened rooms, inner and outer laboratories.

COSTUMES: 1920's conservative dress. Professor, Marjorie and Bruce in lab coats, hat and coat for both Marjorie and Bruce, maid's outfit for Sarah, Prague in street clothes. **OPTIONAL**: Masks and face shields.

PROPERTIES: Phone, rope, gag, rag, Venus flytrap (stuffed or real), white "ashes" (instant snow powder works well for this), two quart-sized bottles (for blood), four smoky glass beakers

of different sizes, funnel, small smoky glass container (fish tank with lid and layers of plastic wrap inside to render it opaque and smoky-looking), and dish (to catch liquid poured in), "coffin" (large cardboard box with sides cut away and replaced by layers of plastic wrap to render it opaque and smoky-looking). Coffin contains a larger amount of "ashes" and container to catch the liquid. The upstage side of "coffin" should be cut away and braced.

SOUND EFFECTS: Phone.