

TEA AND ARSENIC

by Craig Sodaro



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SYNOPSIS: Maggie imagines a quiet spring break at her aunt's bed and breakfast while doing a bit of genealogical research. However, she's in for a rude surprise when just after she arrives, a man claiming to be a tax collector is poisoned. Unfortunately, there is no shortage of suspects: Barney Cook and his wife Babs look like they just breezed in from a show in Las Vegas; Isadora McCullvey dances through life, literally; and Jerry Parks claims he's a student. But each seems to be hiding something. Even the investigating police superintendent and his right-hand man, the Inspector, seem shady. When a ghostly figure gets into the action, Maggie's aunt, Miss Crump, and her best friend, Mrs. Fern, are sure it's the hand of that old witch hunter, Cotton Crump. Even though things start to go bump in the night, Maggie doesn't buy the idea that her ancestor has come back to life. Before long, Maggie and her best friend, June, realize they'd better figure out who wanted the tax collector dead - before someone else takes a sip of tea laced generously with arsenic.

CAST OF CHARACTERS*(6 females, 6 males)*

MRS. FERN (f)..... Sixties, white hair, helpful and kind, but quite frank.
(189 lines)

MISS CRUMP (f)..... Sixties and white hair also. She's the owner of the Splinters and is devoted to her ancestry. Often naïve, but has her clever moments. *(263 lines)*

BARNEY COOK (m)..... Thirties, suave and sophisticated. Dresses to a tee and hands out complements like candy. *(55 lines)*

BABS COOK (f).....	Thirties, Barney's wife. She's got little of his tact or class. She's a flashy dresser and goes with whatever side's winning. (36 lines)
ISADORA MCCULLVEY (f).....	Late twenties, loves to dance. She wears flowing dresses and is barefoot. On stage she is almost always dancing with determination. (50 lines)
MAGGIE (f).....	Twenty, a college student who's daring but tends to jump to conclusions. (249 lines)
JUNE (f).....	Twenty, Maggie's friend from college. She's fearful but has a lot more common sense than her friend at times. (183 lines)
MORAN (m).....	Twenties, a crafty, short-tempered mob member. (35 lines)
MURPHY (m).....	Twenties and up, Moran's partner. (25 lines)
JERRY PARKS (m).....	Twenty, a college student devoted to his projects and books, somewhat socially inept. (79 lines)
MUCKLEY (m)	Thirties and up, an inept, tactless policeman. (107 lines)
SUPERINTENDENT (m).....	Thirties and up, a bizarre policeman who dresses like a peacock, uses elaborate words and never really seems to make sense. (87 lines)

SYNOPSIS OF SCENES

All action takes place in the parlor of the Splinters.

ACT ONE

SCENE 1An April morning.

SCENE 2A short time later.

SCENE 3Ten o'clock that night.

ACT TWO

SCENE 1The following morning.

SCENE 2Ten-thirty that night.

SETTING

The entire action takes place in the parlor of an old New England mansion called the Splinters. There are two entrances, one left and one right. These can be doors, arches, or wing entrances. Couch flanked by two small tables and chairs at center. Screen up left set so audience can see slightly behind it, but characters on stage can't. Bookcase with clock on top of it sits up right. There is a desk down left with a telephone. Decorations should suggest an old house which, although well-preserved, has fallen on hard times. The dominating feature of the room is a large portrait of Cotton Crump hanging up center. He was the founding father of the family, a severe Puritan leader whose eyes reflect a harsh existence. He glares down at the stage, watching everything that happens.

SOUND EFFECTS AND LIGHTING

- ☐ Lights flash on cue, blackouts
- ☐ Crash
- ☐ Knocking
- ☐ Clock chiming (various times)
- ☐ Thunder

COSTUME NOTES

Modern, everyday dress for all characters unless specified below.

COOK – Flashy white suit, white fedora hat, red tie. He also needs a full-length black hooded robe. He can use a mask to cover his face and gloves to cover his hands.

BABS – Slinky dress(es) with a feather boa.

ISADORA – Long, flowing dress; she's always barefoot.

SUPER – Black suit, black fedora, white tie and white flower. He can also have a black trenchcoat.

MUCKLEY – Same as Super, but use a red tie and red flower.

PROPS

- ☐ Crossword puzzles (in book or from newspaper)
- ☐ Feather duster
- ☐ Wad of money
- ☐ Cash box
- ☐ Suitcase
- ☐ Sandwich
- ☐ Tray holding decanter and two wine glasses
- ☐ Bag of potato chips
- ☐ Large school books
- ☐ Notebook and pencil
- ☐ Police badge
- ☐ Vial
- ☐ Gun
- ☐ Handkerchief
- ☐ Walking stick
- ☐ Note
- ☐ Letter
- ☐ Two mugs of tea
- ☐ Apron
- ☐ Magazine(s)
- ☐ "Printing plates" - the size of dollar bills, can be cardboard painted black

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- ☐ Pencil and paper
- ☐ Two frying pans
- ☐ Suitcase full of Babs's clothing
- ☐ Garters
- ☐ Two guns
- ☐ Stick shift from car (use a wooden dowel topped with a small Styrofoam ball, painted black, the ball marked like a stick shift)

ACT ONE, SCENE 1

AT RISE: *The parlor, late morning. MRS. FERN sits completing a crossword puzzle. MISS CRUMP bustles on left with feather duster. She dusts and straightens up with unusual fury, not noticing MRS. FERN until she begins to dust her as if she were a piece of furniture.*

FERN: Crump! Crump! What are you doing?

CRUMP: Oh, why, Mrs. Fern, what on earth?!

FERN: I am not a piece of furniture!

CRUMP: Sorry! I just didn't notice you.

FERN: Obviously. Now, give me a four letter word for Chihuahua.

CRUMP: What?

FERN: That doesn't fit!

CRUMP: It wasn't meant to, Mrs. Fern. I've got too many things to do and here you sit asking me for a four letter word for Chihuahua.

FERN: What do you have to do that's so important?

CRUMP: Dust every room, vacuum, make sure all the food's ready -

FERN: Crump! It's only your niece who's coming, not the Queen of England!

CRUMP: I wish it were just the Queen! This is the daughter of my sister who thinks that our entire enterprise here at the Splinters is the most degrading thing to happen to the Crump family since Cotton Crump's oldest son opened that distillery in Kentucky!

FERN: *(Rising.)* Now don't get all worked up about it, Crump! Your niece Maggie will love it here and if she doesn't . . . well . . . she can just take the bus back to Boston . . . or Kentucky.

CRUMP: *(Calming down.)* I suppose you're right. She's a level-headed college student. She wants to soak up all our local history.

FERN: She might get water logged at the Splinters!

CRUMP: I know! The Splinters is dripping with history . . . ever since Cotton Crump laid the first stone. It might as well be a national monument. Did I tell you that Nathaniel Hawthorne actually spent the night here?

FERN: At least a dozen times.

CRUMP: No, only once. He slept in the room where Mr. and Mrs. Cook are staying.

FERN: Maybe we ought to charge them a bit more. After all, they're sleeping in a historical monument.

CRUMP: Oh, I couldn't do that!

FERN: Why not? How many other people can say they're sleeping in the same room as Nathaniel Hawthorne.

CRUMP: Well, now, maybe you have a point there.

FERN: (*Laughing.*) Oh, Crump! I think you're serious! Tell me, what time is Maggie arriving?

CRUMP: (*Suddenly busy again.*) Oh, any minute! The bus must be in already and they're getting a taxi from downtown.

FERN: (*Writing.*) I've got it! Tiny!

CRUMP: What's tiny?

FERN: Chihuahuas! (*Setting her crossword aside.*) Well, it certainly will be nice to see a new face around here.

CRUMP: I hope you mean that because they'll be here for their entire spring break.

FERN: They?

CRUMP: Yes, Maggie's bringing a friend to help her do her research. They're going to go over everything in the house . . . all the old papers, scrapbooks, everything!

FERN: Then she'd better bring her entire school! It'll take years to go through everything!

MR. and MRS. COOK enter left. He is dressed in a flashy white suit and red tie and twirls a white hat on his finger. She is equally flashy in a slinky dress topped with a feather boa.

COOK: Why, if it isn't our two golden goodies! How are you today, girls?

CRUMP: (*Flattered.*) Oh, why, hello, Mr. Cook! And Mrs. Cook, how lovely you look today!

BABS: Thanks! I bought this little number down at Gloria's Secrets. Like it?

CRUMP: Simply beautiful! They always have such . . . bright . . . things down there.

BABS: Oh, you shop there, too?

CRUMP: (*Embarrassed.*) Oh, goodness, no! I just look in the windows.

BABS: Well, you can borrow this any time you want.

FERN: I'm afraid it's not Crump's . . . color.

COOK: (*Pulling out a wad of money.*) Say, girls, maybe this month you can go down to Gloria's Secrets and buy yourself a little something. I'm raising our rent!

FERN: (*Looking to CRUMP, surprised.*) Oh, my . . . we . . .

COOK: (*Dismissing her protest.*) We're just so happy here we want to do justice to you fine ladies. Not a word of protest, please!

CRUMP: Well, my goodness, you must have heard us talking a minute ago.

FERN: Yes! We were saying we ought to charge a bit more because you're staying in the very room where Nathaniel Hawthorne spent a night.

BABS: Like, was he one of the Beatles?

COOK: (*A killer look to BABS.*) Yeah, the drummer! Now, ladies, that's an excellent reason to raise the rent. Here's our regular rent plus an extra twenty. (*Handing money to MRS. FERN.*)

CRUMP: You're too generous!

COOK: Look, we want to keep you two girls happy. And besides, how many newlyweds can say they're living in the same room what's his name stayed in. Right, Babs? (*He hugs BABS.*)

BABS: (*Trying to sound enthused.*) Oh, yeah, Barney. It's a peach of a place.

FERN: Well, since you're giving us so much more money, why don't you let us give you a larger room. You could have one overlooking the garden.

COOK: (*Too quickly.*) No! Oh, no! The one we've got is just fine.

BABS: Yeah . . . it suits us to a "T".

CRUMP: But it's so small and you have that oversized closet . . .

COOK: We love the closet! We couldn't get along without it.

BABS: Yeah . . . we got a lot of stuff tied up in it.

CRUMP: Well, thank you very much, Mr. Cook.

FERN: Oh, yes! This will come in most handy.

COOK: Our pleasure. (*He turns to go, but stops and turns back.*) Say, you ladies wouldn't happen to have change for a fifty, would you?

CRUMP: Oh, I think so!

She goes to desk, opens drawer and takes out small cash box, which she opens.

COOK: I just got paid and they give us such big bills. You know how hard it is to crack a fifty?

FERN: Not really.

COOK: Take my word for it, then, it's tough.

CRUMP: (*Exchanging money with COOK.*) Here you are. My, what a crisp bill, Mr. Cook! I just love new money!

COOK: (*Laughing.*) Well I'll see if I can't find some more for you. Ladies? (*He exits right.*)

CRUMP: Bye bye!

FERN: My, they are something, aren't they?

CRUMP: (*Blissfully.*) You couldn't ask for finer lodgers. So prompt with the rent!

FERN: I know. They're so prompt sometimes I think they pay twice a month instead of once.

ISADORA MCCULLVEY dances on left. She wears a flowing dress and is barefooted. Her hair is like a bush atop her head, her movements dramatic.

ISADORA: Ah! My public!

CRUMP: Why, Miss McCullvey . . . how are you this morning?

ISADORA: Marvelous! Exhilarated! I've been practicing since five.

FERN: You must be tired! Come, sit down.

ISADORA: Tired? Dancing doesn't make me tired! I find it invigorating! Would you care to see a bit of my newest creation?

CRUMP: (*Hesitant.*) Oh, why . . .

ISADORA: I call it Flea and Frog Symphony for Feet! (*She dances about, talking breathlessly as she does so.*) It's the story of the eternal struggle between the insect and its adversary, the wicked frog! The insect takes small, light steps and flutters about in innocence. The frog is heavy with guilt. Deep . . . somber . . . cruel!

CRUMP: (*Shaking her head.*) Oh, yes . . . somber . . . cruel.

FERN: You certainly have your steps down, Miss McCullvey.

Loud knock off right.

FERN: There's somebody at the door!

CRUMP and FERN: (*Both moving right.*) I'll get it!

CRUMP: It's my niece!

CRUMP races off right. FERN turns back to a still-dancing ISADORA.

ISADORA: Why is she running off?

FERN: Lucky, I guess. Actually, her niece is here.

ISADORA: She left my performance because of a niece? Why . . . there isn't any dedication to the arts any more! There's no more love of beauty and perfection! (*She stops dancing.*) Is there at least some peanut butter in the cupboard?

FERN: Oh, yes, there's plenty. And there's bread in the breadbox.

ISADORA: Thank you! I'll just dance my way to a sandwich! (*She dances off stage left.*)

FERN: Just don't trip on that door jam!

Loud crash off left. CRUMP leads MAGGIE and JUNE on right. Both girls are casually dressed and each carries a suitcase.

CRUMP: Here we are, Mrs. Fern!

MAGGIE: (*Extending her hand.*) Hi, I'm Maggie and this is my friend, June.

JUNE: (*Also extending her hand.*) I'm happy to meet you!

FERN: It's so nice having both of you! I've been looking forward to meeting you, Maggie!

CRUMP: We're putting you in a room overlooking the garden. Such a lovely view - even if it is just a bit weedy.

FERN: We haven't had too much time to get down and dirty out there with all the rain we've had.

MAGGIE: That's okay! Anything green and bushy sounds great to us! We've been in the city too long.

JUNE: Really! It's so good to see something that isn't gray.

MAGGIE: The town is really a very pretty place.

CRUMP: *(At the portrait.)* That's probably why great great great great grandfather Cotton Crump chose this spot for the Splinters.

MAGGIE: *(Looking at portrait with distaste.)* That, I take it is my ancestor, Cotton Crump?

FERN: In all his glory!

MAGGIE: A real barrel of laughs, wasn't he?

JUNE: Not my idea of Santa Claus.

CRUMP: Oh, but girls, he had to be stern!

FERN: Such a harsh existence those people led. Imagine what they were up against! What was there to smile about?

JUNE: Well, Maggie's not exactly a chip off the old block.

FERN: Glad to hear it!

CRUMP: Tell me about your mother, Maggie

They all sit down.

MAGGIE: Complaining, as usual . . . but she couldn't be better, really.

CRUMP: Good! She was quite upset, you know, when we first began to take in lodgers.

MAGGIE: Mother never did understand the first thing about economics.

CRUMP: *(Apologizing.)* We really didn't want to take lodgers, but we had to because there just wasn't enough money for upkeep on this old place. Your mother told me to sell it and come live with you . . . but I couldn't just sell the Splinters.

FERN: This has worked out beautifully for both of us.

CRUMP: Oh, indeed it has . . . and it's been very . . . educational taking lodgers in. We have some wonderful people staying with us.

ISADORA enters left eating a sandwich and dancing at the same time.

FERN: Miss McCullvey, meet Maggie, Miss Crump's niece and her friend June.

ISADORA: *(Still dancing.)* I am so charmed! I am Isadora McCullvey . . . the finest entrepreneur of modern dance within a radius of fifty miles! *(She stops dancing suddenly.)* My latest composition is Flea and Frog Symphony for Feet. Shall I continue?

MAGGIE: *(Tentatively.)* Why, of course . . .

FERN: *(Saving the situation.)* Oh, Miss McCullvey . . . I believe I hear your telephone ringing downstairs. Perhaps it's Carnegie Hall!

ISADORA: *(Delightly, dancing off right.)* I mustn't keep them waiting! I'll fly on the wings of the wind! So nice to meet you!

She dances off right followed by a crash.

CRUMP: We're most tolerant of Miss McCullvey. She did so want to be a great dancer, but so far, things haven't worked out for her.

MAGGIE: Well, with her talent, it's easy to see why.

CRUMP: Aren't you sweet to say so, dear.

JUNE: It's nice of you to let her dance around the living room.

FERN: Oh, she doesn't do that too often. Just on her way to the kitchen.

CRUMP: She does most of her serious work downstairs in her room.

FERN: We put her down there so no one would hear her thumping about.

MAGGIE: Good thinking! Who else do you have living here?

CRUMP: Oh, we have a pleasant couple, the Cooks. I don't know what they do or anything, but they're very nice and always pay their rent on time. And would you believe it? They even raised their own rent.

FERN: This morning they gave us an extra twenty dollars because they like their room so much.

CRUMP: *(Proudly.)* They have the room where Nathaniel Hawthorne spent the night.

JUNE: (*Impressed.*) Hawthorne? The Hawthorne . . . slept here?

CRUMP: Under this very roof! He may have sat right where you're sitting!

JUNE: (*Nervously.*) There's no . . . headless horseman hiding around here, is there?

FERN: Only on the bookshelf!

CRUMP: Now across the hall from Miss McCullvey we've got a young man named Jerry Parks. He's a student like you . . . but he's rather quiet and always seems to be reading a book, so I'm afraid we don't know much about him, either.

FERN: It took him two days to get up enough courage to come in and ask for a room. He'd come by every day and look at our rooms-to-let sign and then he'd go away and come back later. Finally Crump asked him to come in and somehow he got up enough courage to accept.

MAGGIE: That's not a good way to do business, Aunt Ella! He could have been a stalker or something.

CRUMP: Well, this way is a whole lot better than having him standing out there staring at the house all the time.

FERN: Oh, he's a nice boy and is so wrapped up in his studies I don't think he knows anybody else is around.

JUNE: Gosh . . . he must be terribly shy.

MAGGIE: Or maybe he's got something to hide. Maybe he's a criminal from South America who has to keep his identity a secret.

CRUMP: Oh, no, Maggie! He doesn't even have an accent.

MAGGIE: Don't be too sure about the shy ones, Aunt Ella.

JUNE: Yeah . . . Maggie'll bring him out of his shell.

CRUMP: He could use some socializing I think. It'll do him good to have you girls around here.

MAGGIE: Well, we're anxious to get started digging up the family dirt!

FERN: Oh, there's tons of it.

CRUMP: We've a roomful of diaries, letters, scrapbooks, cookbooks, and trunks filled with who knows what!

MAGGIE: I hope there are lots of juicy tidbits. I'd like a few skeletons in the closet to give my family history report some punch!

FERN: Maybe you can ask Cotton Crump himself for a few stories!

JUNE: That's not funny!

CRUMP: But they say he wanders around this place at night . . . through hidden passageways and even out in the open. But we've never seen him, have we, Mrs. Fern?

FERN: Never even found a secret passageway.

CRUMP: We just hear a few odd noises at night . . . gongs . . . bangs . . . rattles.

JUNE: (*Frightened.*) You mean . . . things really do go bump in the night here?

FERN: You might say . . . but personally I just think we need a new refrigerator.

CRUMP: Maybe so . . . but if you do run into Cotton Crump, June, don't worry. He was a very little man and despite his mean look, if you bark loud enough, I'm sure he'll go away.

MAGGIE: (*To JUNE.*) Yeah . . . he's not your type.

JUNE: For once I'm glad.

FERN: Let's take you up to your room.

MAGGIE: That bus ride was pretty long.

CRUMP: Well, I'm sure there won't be any excitement around here, so you'll get all the rest you need!

ALL exit left. After a moment MORAN and MURPHY enter right, slinking about.

MURPHY: You sure this is the place, Moran?

MORAN: (*Looking at a slip of paper.*) This is it . . . 1213 Splinters Road.

MURPHY: Where'd you get the address?

During the next dialogue, they search about the room looking under the couch cushions, in drawers, and so on.

MORAN: Harry the Butcher had it on his person when we found his dead corpse. Somebody in this place must have bumped him off because he was getting too close to finding out who's running the dirty operation. He traced 'em all the way here . . . but then they got 'em.

MURPHY: (*Nervously.*) Well, maybe we ought to come back some other time.

MORAN: You nuts? Boss wants to find out who's behind the operation. It's set up here all right! This place is built for it!

MURPHY: How are we supposed to find out anything?

MORAN: We just act respectable-like . . . and get an excuse to case the place. . . you know, find out where it's stashed.

MURPHY: How are we gonna do that?

MORAN: You just watch the master at work.

MURPHY: Okay, Moran . . . but I don't like it here. Not one bit. Hey, Moran . . . can I ask a dumb question?

MORAN: Go ahead. You've been asking enough of 'em already.

MURPHY: What are we looking for?

MORAN: You Klutz! You're looking for -

ISADORA dances on right.

ISADORA: Ah, gentlemen!

MORAN: Hey! Watch the feet, girlie!

ISADORA: I thought I heard strange voices up here. You must be Mr. Acres and Mr. Tell from Carnegie Hall!

MORAN: Who and who?

ISADORA: You're here to see me dance! How lucky you are to have found me in! I'm usually out, but today is special because I just finished creating my Flea and Frog Symphony for Feet.

MORAN: Look, Twinkle Toes -

ISADORA: (*Waving him off.*) I shall give you a few steps to show you the type of thing I do best. Of course the actual performance will have to wait until we're on stage at the Hall.

ISADORA dances about wildly, frightening the two men.

MORAN: Hey, lady!

MURPHY: What is this, Moran? A dance studio?

MORAN: I don't know!

MURPHY: If I wanted dance lessons I'd have gone to Arthur Murray!

MORAN: (*To ISADORA.*) Hey, Twinkle Toes! Cut it out!

ISADORA stops instantly.

ISADORA: There! Did you notice the innocent movements of the insect compared with the strengthly movements of the frog?

MURPHY: Strengthy?

ISADORA: Marvelous word, isn't it? I just made it up. Perhaps when I stop dancing I'll invent a new dictionary!

MURPHY: Let's get out of here, Moran!

MORAN Relax! (*To ISADORA.*) You the owner of this place, Flying Feet?

ISADORA: Owner? I own nothing but my talents!

MORAN: Yeah, well, we want to see the owners.

ISADORA: You mean you'd rather see Miss Crump and Mrs. Fern? They can't dance a step between the two of them!

MORAN: (*Short-tempered.*) We'll take our chances! We got business with 'em!

ISADORA: (*Sadly.*) But you said you were from Carnegie Hall. Why would you have business with them?

MORAN: You were the one who said we were from Carnegie Hall. We ain't. We just want to see the owners.

ISADORA: You're not from the Hall? You're not Mr. Acre and Mr. Tell?

MORAN: I'm Mr. Moran and this is Mr. Murphy. We're . . . ah . . . tax assessors. Why don't you dance off, Twinkle Toes, and hustle those owners in here.

ISADORA: Taxes! How revolting! I want no part of you! (*She races off left.*)

MURPHY: You handled that real nice, Moran.

MORAN: Yeah . . . I thought it went off perfect, considering she's nuts!

MURPHY: We really gonna be tax whatchamacallits?

MORAN: You got any better way to get a chance to look into every nook and cranny of this place?

MURPHY: No, but what do we gotta do?

MORAN: You don't do a thing, Murphy. Just sit and nod once in a while. I'll do all the talking. I got assessed one time and I know how they do it.

MURPHY: Real smart, Moran! But what are we looking for?

CRUMP and FERN enter left. They look bewildered.

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CRUMP: Hello, there . . . Miss McCullvey said that there were some men from the tax office here.

MORAN: Yeah. I'm Moran and this here's Murphy. We're (*with great importance.*) assessors.

FERN: Oh, dear.

MORAN: We're here to make an assessment.

CRUMP: But we've already been assessed, haven't we Mrs. Fern?

FERN: Indeed, yes! I thought that's what that man came for several months ago.

CRUMP: Yes, I remember . . . we received our tax bill and paid it. Three hundred eighteen dollars and twelve cents.

MORAN: Well, we want to check up and make sure there ain't no mistakes in that bill. See . . . we found that our former assessor made some mistakes and people ended up paying more than they should have. We might be able to get you gals a refund.

CRUMP: Why, how nice of you!

FERN: Yes! It's good to see such honesty displayed these days! I knew you were honest men when I first laid eyes on you. Why don't you sit down.

MORAN grins triumphantly at MURPHY as both sit with MRS. FERN.

CRUMP: I'll get some of our famous dandelion wine. We make it ourselves!

MORAN: Well, don't go to no trouble. We want to get this over quick as we can.

CRUMP: It's no trouble at all! (*She hurries off left.*)

FERN: We follow an old recipe we've had in the family for years. It's to die for!

MORAN: Look, lady . . . we don't got a whole lot of time.

FERN: Perfect! We only give it one glass at a time. It's a bit strong, you see.

MORAN: Yeah? Well, we'll just drink a short snort apiece.

FERN: Now, tell me . . . if you're from the tax office, where's your briefcase? You tax men always seem to be lugging around large packs of papers.

MORAN: (*Covering.*) Well, we're trying to . . . cut out as much paperwork as possible. So we keep little notebooks like this. (*He pulls out a tiny notebook.*) See here? It's got everything we need.

MURPHY: And it don't get lost.

FERN: You must be very efficient!

CRUMP enters left.

CRUMP: Oh, gentlemen, how about some nice homemade cookies with your wine?

MORAN: Skip the cookies! We got work to do.

CRUMP: Just baked this morning!

MORAN: We just ate. Now hurry up with the wine so we can case the joint! I mean . . . complete our assessment.

CRUMP: (*Flustered.*) Yes, all right . . . I'll hurry! (*She exits left.*)

MORAN: So, who owns this place?

FERN: Miss Crump owns the Splinters. It's her ancestral home. Been in the family since it was built by Cotton Crump in the late sixteen hundreds.

MURPHY: (*Indicating portrait.*) That him?

FERN: Yes.

MORAN: Looks like a mean son of a gun!

FERN: Oh, he was a very important puritanical leader.

MURPHY: Wouldn't want to cross his path.

FERN: (*Laughing.*) I don't think he'll hurt you now, Mr. Murphy. He's been dead three centuries.

MORAN: You just live here with Miss Crump?

FERN: Yes. We became friends on a cruise we took. A booklovers' cruise. That was right after my husband Freddie passed away. Crump asked me if I had any family or anything, and when I said no, she asked me to come here and live with her to help her take care of the house - it's so big and all. We began to take in lodgers a year or so ago because there just wasn't enough money for upkeep and all.

MORAN: (*Looking around.*) It is pretty old. When'd you say it was built?

CRUMP enters left carrying tray set with two glasses and a decanter. She sets tray on desk.

CRUMP: It was completed July 12, 1680. That's according to Cotton Crump's diary. *(She pours wine into glasses.)*

MORAN: Kept a diary, did he?

CRUMP: Yes! Fascinating thing! He filled it with sermons on righteousness and so forth. He was convinced that any evil would be paid for . . . and that those who are wicked would face . . . well, all sorts of problems!

MORAN: *(Squirming uncomfortably.)* That so?

CRUMP: Yes! Here you are! *(She hands MORAN and MURPHY each a glass of wine. They all turn to look at the portrait. Nervously, MORAN drinks his glass down.)* Don't you get that feeling by looking at his picture? Don't you think he's looking down on us now, making certain that everything is correct in this house? I'm sure that if any one of us were wicked at heart, he wouldn't hesitate for a moment to rise up from the picture and send whoever it was crashing to the floor in repentance! *(MORAN gags and falls to floor.)* Why, Mr. Moran, what a sense of humor you have!

MURPHY: He don't got a sense of humor! *(MURPHY bends over MORAN.)* Hey, Moran! Moran! *(After a slight pause.)* He's dead!

FERN: *(Shocked.)* Dead!

CRUMP: *(Frightened.)* Dead? Oh, I'm sure Cotton Crump . . . well, he didn't really . . . oh, dear!

MURPHY: This is serious!

FERN: Yes! I'll call the police and an ambulance.

MURPHY: *(Nervously.)* No! Don't do that! I'll call for you. You two sit down and be calm. *(MURPHY moves to phone and dials. Into phone, quietly so the women don't hear him.)* Boss? This is Murphy! You're right I'm scared! Moran just kicked the bucket! He drank some wine and that was it. Somebody got to him! I don't know . . . just a couple of dizzy old dames. Send a car over right away! Yeah! *(He hangs up. To FERN and CRUMP.)* Ambulance is on the way.

FERN: Oh, this is dreadful!

CRUMP: Perfectly shocking! Poor Mr. Moran . . . just like that! I once had an aunt who went like that at a family reunion. Of course it was convenient because everyone was there for the funeral.

MURPHY: (*Frightened.*) I'm waiting outside! This place gives me the creeps!

FERN: Why don't you take your wine with you. It'll soothe your nerves.

MURPHY: I don't want any of that poison!

MURPHY races off right.

CRUMP: You don't suppose it was the wine, do you?

FERN: No one's ever died from it yet!

CRUMP picks up MORAN'S glass

CRUMP: It does have a pungent smell to it.

FERN: (*Sniffing it.*) Oh! Very bitter . . . sour . . . almost like -

CRUMP: I just can't believe it!

FERN: Dear, dear, Crump! The police will be coming and they'll think . . . I mean . . . if there was something in the wine, why they'll think we poisoned that poor man!

CRUMP: Oh, I hadn't thought of that! But then we're just jumping to conclusions. He must have had an attack of some kind.

FERN: I hope it wasn't the wine! They're likely to send us both to prison!

MAGGIE and JUNE enter left.

MAGGIE: (*Cheerfully.*) Who's getting locked up?

CRUMP: I'm afraid there's been an accident, girls.

JUNE: (*Noticing the body.*) Oh, my gosh!

MAGGIE: What happened to him?

JUNE: (*Terrified.*) Is . . . is . . . he . . .

FERN: Quite dead!

CRUMP: Afraid so!

JUNE: Oh, Maggie! He's . . . he's . . . oh!

MAGGIE: What happened to him?

CRUMP: Why I'd just brought in some dandelion wine and given him some and I was describing Cotton Crump and he just fell over onto the floor.

JUNE: (*Pointing to the portrait.*) I didn't like him from the start!

MAGGIE: June, stop it! We have to keep our heads. Aunt Ella, who is he?

CRUMP: A Mr. Moran from the tax assessor's office.

MAGGIE: A tax man?

FERN: Yes, and his associate seems to think there was poison in Mr. Moran's wine.

MAGGIE: You mean he was murdered?

JUNE: A murder? We haven't been here ten minutes and there's a murder! You said there wouldn't be any excitement!

MAGGIE: (*To FERN and CRUMP.*) June gets excited about everything!

JUNE: But this is . . . murder!

CRUMP: Perhaps you'd like a little dandelion wine to settle your nerves, June.

JUNE: (*Terrified.*) Wine? No!

MAGGIE: (*Covering.*) I don't think that would be a good idea, Aunt Ella.

FERN: Well, just sit down, then. That nice Mr. Murphy called the police and they're on their way.

No one sits.

MAGGIE: Where is this Mr. Murphy anyhow?

CRUMP: Waiting outside.

FERN: He was terribly upset.

CRUMP: Oh, Maggie! This is all such a terrible shock. And your just having arrived! I could cry!

MAGGIE puts her arm around CRUMP as JERRY PARKS enters right carrying a bag of potato chips and several large books. He halts when he sees everyone.

PARKS: What . . . what's going on?

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FERN: Oh, Mr. Parks! The most dreadful thing's happened.

CRUMP: A tax man was just . . . just murdered.

PARKS: I've heard of worse things.

JUNE: But he's right there!

PARKS sees MORAN for the first time.

PARKS: What's he doing here?

CRUMP: That's where he was murdered.

PARKS: Looks like somebody's in trouble then.

FERN: His partner thinks it was the wine.

PARKS: He does look like he went suddenly. *(He picks up wine glass and sniffs.)* Yes, definitely full of poison. The smell is unmistakable. *(To FERN and CRUMP.)* Why'd you kill him?

CRUMP: We didn't do it!

FERN: Why should we have?

PARKS: Was he raising your taxes?

MAGGIE: *(Angrily.)* My aunt certainly wouldn't go around murdering tax men!

PARKS: *(Shrugging.)* Well, I hope they find who did it. It's a crime, you know.

MAGGIE: *(Slyly.)* Well, listen, Mr. Parks, how come you're so sure there's poison in the glass?

PARKS: We studied poisons extensively in my course on toxic chemistry.

MAGGIE: *(Unimpressed.)* Oh, so you're an expert.

PARKS: I didn't say that. I just said there's poison in that glass. Who are you, anyway?

CRUMP: Oh, I'm sorry, Mr. Parks. This is my niece Maggie and her friend June. They just arrived from Boston. They go to school there.

MAGGIE: But we don't study chemistry, unfortunately.

PARKS: Too bad. Well, I hope you find out who killed him. I've got to have some lunch myself.

PARKS exits left.

FERN: *(To MAGGIE.)* He'll warm up once you get to know him.

MAGGIE: Warm up to freezing!

CRUMP: Oh, this is one of his good days. I thought he was very chatty.

MAGGIE: Murder must bring out the best in him!

CRUMP: I hope not! I just can't imagine who would want this poor man out of the way.

MAGGIE: Maybe you don't know your lodgers as well as you think.

CRUMP: Oh, Maggie, don't be silly. It wasn't one of our lodgers!

MAGGIE: How do you know? Unless . . .

JUNE: Unless what?

MAGGIE: His partner!

FERN: Mr. Murphy? But he was so nice! Very interested in the house and all.

MAGGIE: He went outside?

CRUMP: Yes, he was very upset.

MAGGIE: Or he just wanted to get away! *(She runs off right.)*

JUNE: Maggie! Don't leave me here! *(She runs off right.)*

CRUMP: Oh, Mrs. Fern, I think we might have a big problem on our hands.

FERN: A murder! *(Nervously.)* Shall we . . . take the wine glasses and decanter and bury them?

CRUMP: That wouldn't be right, Mrs. Fern.

FERN: I suppose not. They'd nail us for sure then.

CRUMP: I think we should just face the music and dance.

FERN: Let's leave the dancing to Miss McCullvey.

MAGGIE and JUNE enter right.

MAGGIE: You know the tax man's partner?

CRUMP: Was he out there crying?

MAGGIE: He's gone!

FERN: Maybe he was around the corner or something.

MAGGIE: He's nowhere in sight.

CRUMP: Oh, dear!

MAGGIE: It seems there's more to this than meets the eye.

JUNE: At least the police are here. They just pulled up.

MAGGIE: I never realized you had such an underfunded police department.

FERN: What do you mean?

MAGGIE: They pulled up in a '78 Cadillac convertible!

Strong knocks off right as the curtain falls.

ACT ONE, SCENE 2

AT RISE: *The same. MORAN'S body has been removed. CRUMP and FERN sit nervously.*

FERN: Oh, Crump, it's such a relief having that poor man out of here.

CRUMP: I was just thinking the same thing. Thank goodness it's over with.

SUPERINTENDENT enters right. He is dressed in black - black suit, trenchcoat, hat. He wears a white tie and a white flower in his lapel.

SUPER: I don't think we can exactly say it's over with, ladies. Somebody bumped off Moran and we're gonna have to find out who did it, right?

FERN: *(Overzealously.)* Absolutely!

CRUMP: Yes! We want to do everything we can to help clear all this up.

SUPER: Glad to see you're willing to cooperate with our little operation. Now I got Detective Muckley with me and I'm putting him in charge of this here investigation . . . seeing as I got more pressing business to attend to myself. *(Calling left.)* Muckley! Get in here! *(To CRUMP and FERN.)* He's new on the job, but he knows his stuff. I hope.

MUCKLEY enters right. He is dressed like the SUPER, but wears a red flower and tie. He's very nervous.

MUCKLEY: Right here, boss!

SUPER: Superintendent, Muckley! Don't forget that. These ladies were just telling me how they're gonna cooperate with us on this . . . case.

MUCKLEY: This case. Yes, that will help.

CRUMP: We wouldn't want to do anything but help.

FERN: Imagine that poor man just dropping over like that!

SUPER: That's how it happened?

CRUMP: He took a sip of wine and . . . poof! He fell over.

SUPER: Muckley, make a note of that!

MUCKLEY pulls out tiny notebook and scribbles. SUPER snaps his fingers and MUCKLEY pulls chair behind SUPER, who sits.

SUPER: Ahhh! That's better!

CRUMP: *(Nervously.)* Superintendent Jones? May I ask you a small question?

SUPER: Can't think of a reason why not.

MUCKLEY: You want me to write this down, Boss?

SUPER: Superintendent!

CRUMP: Why did an old pick up come to take poor Mr. Moran away just now?

SUPER: Why, ah*(Thinking.)* . . . ah, yes . . . okay! It's part of our city cutbacks. When some guy kicks the bucket and there ain't no immediate family around, the city sends whatever vehicle they got in the lot. And it sure didn't matter to Moran, right, Muckley?
(He chuckles.)

CRUMP: It seems a bit . . . peculiar.

SUPER: You want higher taxes just so he could ride around in a limo?

FERN: I suppose not, but that man was here to see whether or not we've been overtaxed already.

SUPER: Ain't it a shame!

CRUMP: Yes, he was so nice.

SUPER: But somebody must have not liked him a whole lot. They stiffed him right here! Got any ideas who?

CRUMP: I don't think so!

FERN: How could we? We didn't have anything to do with it!

SUPER: Yeah? And why not?

CRUMP: Well, we never saw Mr. Moran before in our lives.

FERN: He and Mr. Murphy were total strangers.

SUPER: We can check on that. *(He snaps his fingers. MUCKLEY writes furiously.)*

CRUMP: Oh, it's the truth. Besides, why would we hurt him if he's here about giving us a tax refund?

SUPER: Maybe there was something you didn't want him to find out. His visit was a surprise, wasn't it?

CRUMP: Don't tax assessors always come unannounced? We don't have anything to hide, Superintendent.

FERN: Certainly not! This is all a horrible mistake!

The ladies begin to cry and pat one another on the back. SUPER rises.

SUPER: All right! All right! Turn off the waterworks! I get very cross when I see tears!

CRUMP: *(Calming down.)* Oh, we're very sorry. We wouldn't want to make you cross.

SUPER: Muckley, I'm gonna leave you in charge.

MUCKLEY: Me?

SUPER: That's right. And you're gonna do a good job, right?

MUCKLEY: Right, Boss!

SUPER: It's Superintendent Jones, Muckley!

MUCKLEY: Right, Boss!

SUPER: (*Angrily.*) Superintendent!

MUCKLEY: Right, Boss - I mean Superintendent!

SUPER: (*Calming down, patting MUCKLEY on head.*) Now, Detective Muckley . . . you are to stay on these here premises for as long as it takes to locate and get the bum or bums who wasted Moran. You don't let anybody out of this place 'til that creep is found and brought to me . . . personally!

MUCKLEY: Right, Superintendent Smith.

SUPER: Jones!

MUCKLEY: Right, Boss! Superintendent!

SUPER: (*To FERN and CRUMP.*) So, you got a bunch of people living here?

CRUMP: Yes, the Splinters is a boarding house.

SUPER: Then you're all boarded up for a while. I'm putting a couple of guards out front who'll see nobody gets out. You folks do what Muckley here says and everything will be just peachy . . . except for the guilty party. That clear?

CRUMP: Yes!

FERN: Perfectly!

SUPER: Good! Now I'm going back to the office. Detective Muckley, you know how to reach me.

MUCKLEY: Right!

SUPER: You find the killer, Muckley, and there's a bonus in this for you.

MUCKLEY: (*Pleased.*) Really?

SUPER: Yeah! It won't be your last case.

MUCKLEY: (*Nervously.*) I see.

SUPER: I'm glad you see. Remember, Muckley, there's a pretty view from the bottom of the river if you mess up . . . and I can make sure you see it wearing a pair of cement boots.

MUCKLEY: Right, Boss!

SUPER: (*Exasperated.*) For the last time!

MUCKLEY: Su . . . per . . . in . . . ten . . . dent!

SUPER: (*Patting MUCKLEY'S face.*) That's better. (*To CRUMP and FERN.*) Now, ladies . . . do what you're told and nobody gets hurt.

CRUMP: (*Quickly.*) Right, Boss!

FERN: Superintendent! She meant Superintendent!

SUPER: (*Glancing at MUCKLEY.*) Call me when you're ready to make an arrest.

SUPER exits right. MUCKLEY visibly relaxes once SUPER is gone.

FERN: He's certainly a very unusual policeman.

CRUMP: His manner of investigation is a bit . . . hands off.

FERN: What was all that about cement boots, Detective?

MUCKLEY: Inside joke, Ma'am.

CRUMP: He sounded most upsetting to me!

FERN: Well, what do we do now, Detective Muckley?

MUCKLEY: You have to answer some questions.

FERN: That sounds like a good idea. Where do we begin?

MUCKLEY: Where were you two when this . . . crime took place?

FERN: Well, I was sitting here . . . talking with Mr. Moran and Mr. Murphy.

CRUMP: By the way, Detective, have you found Mr. Murphy yet?

MUCKLEY: Still looking for him!

CRUMP: I hope you find him and calm him down. He was so upset.

MUCKLEY: Oh, it's just a matter of time before we nab him. Now where were you, Miss Crump?

CRUMP: I was standing looking at Cotton Crump's picture. I'd just brought in the wine for Mr. Moran and Mr. Murphy and had given them each a glass.

MUCKLEY: Where'd the wine come from?

CRUMP: From the same decanter we've used for years.

MUCKLEY: Maybe I oughta take a look at it.

CRUMP: It's right out in the kitchen. I'll go get it. (*She exits left.*)

MUCKLEY: You said neither of you two knew this Moran?

FERN: We'd never seen him before. Another tax man came last fall and he was alone. Very tall with a briefcase. He didn't say much and just walked around playing with his calculator.

MUCKLEY: That so?

FERN: Yes. We offered him some wine, but he refused because he was working. I thought he was just unfriendly.

CRUMP enters left holding decanter and glass.

CRUMP: Here it is, and here's the glass poor Mr. Moran drank from. Perhaps you'd like a taste? It's homemade!

MUCKLEY: *(Holding up his hand quickly.)* No! I'm not too thirsty!

CRUMP: *(Disappointed.)* Oh, that's too bad. Maybe later.

FERN: I'm afraid nobody's going to like our wine after this, Crump.

CRUMP: I think you're right. We'll have to go back to jellies.

MUCKLEY: *(Sniffing decanter.)* This doesn't smell funny. *(He runs his finger around the rim, tastes it.)* Doesn't taste funny, either.

CRUMP: *(Insulted.)* I hope not! It's an old family recipe. Originally it was created for medicinal purposes.

FERN: Then other uses were . . . developed.

MUCKLEY: Wasn't exactly medicinal for Moran, was it? *(He picks up glass.)* And you said this was his glass? *(CRUMP nods. MUCKLEY sniffs glass.)* Yuck! This stinks! He must have been awfully nice to drink something that smells this bad.

CRUMP: How chivalrous of him!

MUCKLEY: So we know one thing - the poison was in the glass, not the decanter.

PARKS enters right.

PARKS: The poison was in the glass before the wine was poured.

MUCKLEY: I was about to say the same thing myself.

PARKS: A good strong dose of potassium cyanide with a side of arsenic.

MUCKLEY: You took the words right out of my mouth.

PARKS: Instantaneous death!

MUCKLEY: Couldn't have been quicker. You wouldn't, by any chance, have bumped off Moran, would you?

PARKS: Sorry, I can't help you there.

CRUMP: Oh, Detective Muckley, this is Mr. Parks, one of our boarders.

MUCKLEY: I see. Well, Mr. Parks, I'm under orders from Superintendent Smith -

FERN: Jones.

MUCKLEY: Right! Superintendent Jones to keep you all in the house here 'til this is cleared up.

PARKS: (*Not surprised.*) Excellent idea. I have enough studying to keep me busy while you're . . . doing whatever you'll be doing.

MUCKLEY: Nice of you to cooperate, Mr. Parks. So . . . where were you when this crime was committed?

PARKS: I was around the corner at the grocery store buying some potato chips.

CRUMP: That's right, Detective. I remember Mr. Parks came in with a bag of potato chips in one hand.

FERN: And his books in the other.

PARKS: I'm a student, you see. I eat junk and study.

MUCKLEY: That's it?

PARKS: 'Til I graduate. And if you don't have any other questions . . . (*He moves right.*)

MUCKLEY: Hold on! Did you know Moran?

PARKS: Never saw him before in my life. But honestly, Detective, nobody's going to admit they knew him, will they?

MUCKLEY: (*Scratching his head.*) You got a point there.

PARKS: Well, I've got some experiments to work on.

MUCKLEY: What kind of experiments?

PARKS: Chemical experiments.

MUCKLEY: Oh, yeah? You do a lot of experiments?

PARKS: Only the ones I have to. Right now I'm into anesthetics and toxics.

MUCKLEY: Toxics! Don't that mean -

PARKS: Poisons? It certainly does. If you need me, I'll be down in my room. (*He exits right.*)

FERN: He's such a smart young man, studying all the time.

MUCKLEY: Nobody's above suspicion, Ma'am. Now who else you got living here?

CRUMP: Well, there's my niece and her friend, but they just came this morning. They're on spring break.

MUCKLEY: I want to talk to 'em.

CRUMP: But they really couldn't have had anything to do with this crime! They just got here!

MUCKLEY: Call 'em down. They might have seen or heard something they don't even know is important.

CRUMP: They say that on television all the time! *(She moves left and calls.)* Maggie! June! Could you come down here for a second? *(To MUCKLEY.)* They're students in Boston. Maggie's come here to do a report on the Crump family for a history class she's taking.

MAGGIE and JUNE enter left.

MAGGIE: Yes, Aunt Ella?

CRUMP: Oh, Maggie, dear, this is Detective Muckley and he would like to ask you a few questions about . . . what happened.

MAGGIE: Sure.

JUNE: *(Incredulously.)* You're a detective?

MUCKLEY: Yeah! Detective Muckley at your service. Now, where were you two when Moran got hit?

MAGGIE: Got hit?

MUCKLEY: Yeah! You know . . . bumped off?

MAGGIE: Well, we were upstairs unpacking. We'd just arrived.

JUNE: So we don't know anything about anything.

MUCKLEY: I'll be the judge of that. Now you came downstairs, I take it, after Moran hit the floor.

MAGGIE: That's right. We came in and there was this man on the floor and Aunt Ella and Mrs. Fern were standing here.

MUCKLEY: Either of you know the deceased?

JUNE: People I know don't get murdered!

MAGGIE: Cool it, June! *(To MUCKLEY.)* No . . . we didn't know him. Excuse me, Detective Muckley, but are you really a policeman?

MUCKLEY: *(Offended.)* Yeah! I am a one hundred percent bone fide cop! And I got a badge to prove it! *(He whips out badge and flashes it quickly in front of them.)*

MAGGIE: *(Not convinced.)* I guess you're a detective all right.

MUCKLEY: Glad you see it that way.

MAGGIE: Do you have any other questions?

MUCKLEY: *(Thinking.)* Not right now. But don't leave town. I mean, you're not leaving town 'til this is cleared up.

MAGGIE: May we get back to work?

MUCKLEY: Work? What kind of work?

MAGGIE: We're researching. (*To CRUMP.*) And Aunt Ella, you wouldn't believe what you've got around this house! You can't imagine all the things hiding under your very nose!

MAGGIE and JUNE exit left.

CRUMP: Oh, we just have to get this cleared up as quickly as possible. I want my niece to have a nice visit, not like this.

MUCKLEY: I'm doing the best I can, lady! It's not easy, you know! What do I got to go on? You went out to get some wine. The poison was in the glass not the jug. He drank it and croaked. And nobody knew the guy in the first place!

FERN: Rather slim evidence, isn't that what you say, Detective?

MUCKLEY: It certainly is! But, wait a minute! If your jug was clean . . . and the glass had poison in it . . . then who could have put the junk in the glasses if it wasn't you, Miss Crump?

CRUMP: (*Nervously.*) Oh, dear! That does present a problem! It must have been put in the glasses before I poured the wine, but I never left those glasses or the decanter . . .

FERN: Yes, you did, Crump! You came in and asked us if we wanted some cookies!

CRUMP: (*Relieved.*) So I did!

FERN: Somebody could have put poison in the glasses while you were in here.

CRUMP: It was only a minute.

MUCKLEY: That's all it takes. Somebody must have recognized Moran and Murphy and wanted them out of the way! Probably somebody in your house! Now, where are the rest of your lodgers?

CRUMP: I'm not sure.

MUCKLEY: I want to see them all.

FERN: Why don't we show you to your room, first, Detective. Then we can roust them up for you.

CRUMP: Good idea!

MUCKLEY: Yeah . . . I'd like to case the place anyway.

FERN and CRUMP lead MUCKLEY off right. MAGGIE and JUNE enter left.

JUNE: Hey, Maggie? How come we don't tell that detective about the secret passageway we found?

MAGGIE: I don't trust him.

JUNE: He's got a badge.

MAGGIE: He flashed it so fast it could have been a Captain Marvel button for all we know.

JUNE: Maybe you're right.

MAGGIE: That passageway could be important. It runs all the way from the attic down to the basement. The killer could have used it when he escaped. And I just can't convince myself to tell Detective Muckley about it. He could be an impostor!

JUNE: Yeah! Like that guy at the university who taught a whole semester before they found out he was a waiter with a talent for doing impersonations.

MAGGIE: I even took his class!

JUNE: Really?

MAGGIE: I hated the guy!

JUNE: Well, I would, too, if I found out he was a fake.

MAGGIE: That's not it! He gave me a "D"! Yeah . . . we sure were a bunch of suckers . . . and I think we're going to be a couple of suckers here if we don't watch out.

JUNE: What do you mean?

MAGGIE: Something's fishy about this whole thing. I have a feeling everybody here is taking Aunt Ella and Mrs. Fern for a ride.

JUNE: You're telling me! But what can we do?

MAGGIE: *(Thinking.)* I don't know. There's got to be a clue here somewhere. That Mr. Moran wasn't killed because he was a tax assessor. There's something else.

JUNE: But what?

MAGGIE: Maybe he could have recognized one of the boarders as a criminal in hiding!

JUNE: That could be.

MAGGIE: Maybe he knew something valuable was hidden in this house and someone didn't want him to find it.

JUNE: That could be, too!

MAGGIE: Maybe he was a criminal himself and he had doublecrossed his partner.

JUNE: Even that could be!

MAGGIE: (*Disappointedly.*) Anything could be.

JUNE: So let's just leave it to the police.

MAGGIE: I told you! I don't trust Muckley!

JUNE: What if he's a real cop? He'll be plenty mad if you do anything to mess up his case.

MAGGIE: (*Conceding.*) You're right. But we've got to help in someway. Aunt Ella and Mrs. Fern are dear old ladies and it's not fair that they should have to go through all this. The publicity alone could put their house under if we don't help.

JUNE: So what can we do?

MAGGIE: We can snoop. We've already found the secret passageway. Who knows what else we'll find!

ISADORA bursts into the room, right.

ISADORA: Help! Murder! Police!

MAGGIE: Miss McCullvey, what's wrong?

ISADORA: Someone tried to kill me!

JUNE: What?

ISADORA: I found this in my peanut butter! (*She holds up small vial.*)

JUNE: What is it?

ISADORA: I believe it's poison!

MAGGIE: But who'd want to -

ISADORA: (*Dramatically.*) In a career like mine one makes enemies, young lady! Certainly it can't be a fan . . . but it could be a Russian ballerina I beat out for the part of Juliet once. Or was it the lead in Swan Lake?

MUCKLEY, CRUMP, and FERN enter left.

MUCKLEY: What's all the yelling about?

ISADORA: Who wants to know?

MUCKLEY: Detective Muckley wants to know!

CRUMP: Miss McCullvey, are you all right?

ISADORA: Yes, now! I was in the kitchen making a peanut butter sandwich when I discovered this in my Peter Pan!

She holds up vial. MUCKLEY grabs it.

MUCKLEY: Let me see this!

PARKS enters right.

PARKS: Potassium cyanide mixed with a touch of arsenic, no doubt.

MUCKLEY: Ah . . . yeah . . . no doubt whatever.

CRUMP: The same thing used to kill poor Mr. Moran!

MUCKLEY: Right. After pouring the poison in the glasses, the killer must have hidden the vial in the peanut butter.

ISADORA: Why couldn't he have stuck it in the yogurt?

MUCKLEY: *(To ISADORA.)* I take it you're a boarder here?

ISADORA: I certainly am! I am Isadora McCullvey! I do interpretive modern dance. My latest composition is the Frog and Flea Symphony for Feet. But I've just begun to work on A Slaying at the Splinters . . . a new dance depicting the tragic events of the last hour.

MUCKLEY: Not wasting any time, are you?

ISADORA: I strike while the iron's hot!

MUCKLEY: Any idea who would have put the poison in the Peter Pan?

ISADORA: Of course not! But everyone here knows of my passion for peanut butter! Such a passion that it almost served as my death warrant!

PARKS: The killer probably just stuck the vial in the first thing handy.

MUCKLEY: Yeah . . . so this definitely ties in with Moran's untimely demise. Somebody here is guilty now of not only killing Moran, but trying to bump off Dancing Dora here.

ISADORA: *(Insulted.)* Why you - !

ISADORA turns to exit right.

MUCKLEY: Hold it, sister! I'm gonna do anything I have to to get to the bottom of all this. Everybody understand? *(MUCKLEY pulls*

out a gun that he polishes with a handkerchief.) Good . . . so we're all gonna have a nice little chat. Have a seat. (No one sits. MUCKLEY clicks his gun. All sit immediately.) That's better. We'll get to be good friends . . . all of us except for the bum who wasted poor Moran. I got a little something special in store for him!

The curtain falls.

ACT ONE, SCENE 3

AT RISE: *The same, about ten o'clock that night. MAGGIE and JUNE enter right excitedly.*

MAGGIE: I knew we'd find something!

JUNE: I still don't know what you thought was such an amazing find!

MAGGIE: Don't you see?

JUNE: No, I don't! We started up in the attic and worked our way down the secret passageway. We didn't find anything in the attic but old papers and trunks and clothes, right?

MAGGIE: Right.

JUNE: Then we went to the next floor down and found that big closet off the secret passageway. *(BABS enters left. She is unseen by the girls and hides behind screen listening to their conversation.)* And inside the closet we found an old printing press and trunks that were locked.

MAGGIE: Go on.

JUNE: We came down to this floor and I don't think we found anything in the kitchen, right?

MAGGIE: But you're getting warmer.

JUNE: We went downstairs to the basement.

MAGGIE: Hotter and hotter!

BABS sneaks out from behind screen and off left.

JUNE: Just another closet off the passageway.

MAGGIE: *(Exasperated.)* What was in the closet.

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JUNE: It looked at little like a laboratory.

MAGGIE: June! Can't you see the forest through the trees? Or maybe I should say the laboratory through the test tubes? A secret laboratory in a secret passageway?

JUNE: It was just in a closet.

MAGGIE: Jerry Parks's closet! He's got a set-up in there that makes Frankenstein's laboratory look like a toy chemistry set.

JUNE: (*It dawns on her.*) So you think . . . that makes Jerry Parks the killer.

MAGGIE: Look at it this way. Who knew Moran was poisoned? Who knows the most about poisons? Who knew that the poison was put in the glasses while Aunt Ella was in here? Who knew what the vial in the peanut butter contained?

JUNE: (*Sarcastically.*) I'll get the noose! Look, Maggie . . . we still don't have the faintest idea why Jerry Parks would kill Moran.

MAGGIE: Just give me time and I'll find out.

JUNE: You know what I really think, counselor? You think Jerry Parks is the killer because you don't like him.

MAGGIE: That's ridiculous!

JUNE: Yeah, it is! It's not that you don't like him. It's that you *do* like him! And he doesn't even look at you!

MAGGIE: (*Angrily.*) He doesn't look at anyone! All he knows is chemistry and books.

JUNE: You're just saying all this because you're mad at him. Admit it!

MAGGIE: It's not true! I'm being as objective as possible, and he's the logical one. Aunt Ella probably doesn't know what he's doing down there! He could be making bombs!

JUNE: So what are you going to do about all this?

MAGGIE: I don't know.

JUNE: Why not be courageous and ask him if you're so sure.

MAGGIE: (*Seriously.*) That's a great idea!

JUNE: I was only kidding, Maggie.

MAGGIE: I'm not! I'll lay a verbal trap . . . just to let him know that I know.

JUNE: Why not tell Detective Muckley?

MAGGIE: Because he doesn't know his hand from his ear about finding a killer. Our little chat before lunch showed how inept he is at asking the right questions.

JUNE: You're right there. He asked me the same question eight times.

MAGGIE: And you gave eight different answers.

JUNE: And he wrote them all down!

MUCKLEY, COOK, and BABS enter left.

COOK: Like I was telling you, Detective . . . we were away for the whole day. Got back just a few minutes ago. You can imagine our . . . surprise at finding guards around this old dump.

BABS: Yeah . . . it was so terrible hearing about the killing. Right here in this room! I got goosebumps all over just thinking about it! A girl just isn't safe no more.

COOK: *(Gallantly.)* You're safe with me, schnookums.

MUCKLEY: You're all safe now. We got the place guarded day and night. So you don't got anything more you can add to this here statement?

COOK: Sorry we can't be of more help. We spent the whole day visiting Babs's poor invalid mother.

BABS: Poor Mama, flat on her back!

MUCKLEY: Looks like another dead end.

MAGGIE: Any way we can help, Detective Muckley?

COOK: My, my, and who are you two little beauties?

MAGGIE: I'm Maggie and this is June. We're here visiting my aunt, Miss Crump.

COOK: Well, I'm Barney . . . *(He kisses MAGGIE'S hand suavely.)*

BABS: And I'm Babs, his wife! *(She glances menacingly towards COOK.)*

COOK: *(Fumbling.)* Yes . . . well, your aunt never mentioned houseguests.

BABS: You're not staying long, are you?

MAGGIE: Just through spring break.

MUCKLEY: Or until this case is solved.

MAGGIE: I don't think it'll take that long to solve this crime.

MUCKLEY: Oh, yeah? I ain't got a single lead!

MAGGIE: Maybe you're not looking in the right places. C'mon, June . . . let's get back to our research.

JUNE: Yeah! Back to the salt mines!

MAGGIE and JUNE exit right.

COOK: Seem like nice girls.

BABS: They aren't your type, Barney!

MUCKLEY: Look, you two . . . keep yourselves available. I gotta find out what she meant about all the right places. *(He exits right.)*

BABS: What a creep!

COOK: He's not your type, Babs.

BABS: Can it, Barney! There's something I gotta tell you!

CRUMP and FERN enter left.

CRUMP: Oh, why, Mr. and Mrs. Cook, you got back!

COOK: Hi, girls! We had a long day and missed you every minute.

FERN: Did you hear about our excitement?

COOK: Did we hear! The cop met us at the door and started asking questions galore!

CRUMP: We're so sorry for all that. It's been a terrible day.

BABS: I guess so. It's not every day some guy gets bumped off in your living room.

COOK: He was really poisoned?

FERN: Somebody slipped it into his glass of wine while Crump was out of the kitchen.

CRUMP: The killer must have known just when to come in. He must have been watching!

COOK: You never can be too careful!

BABS: Not with all the nuts running around these days!

CRUMP: But the police think it was somebody who lives here!

COOK: Surely you two are above suspicion.

CRUMP: I don't know . . . it was our wine and that Mr. Moran came to see us.

COOK: Two sweet dears like yourselves? What can that Detective be thinking?

FERN: They suspect everybody! Even you!

COOK: But we weren't even here.

CRUMP: How is your mother, Mrs. Cook?

BABS: The same.

FERN: The next time we'll have to send a fruit basket.

COOK: She'd love that. She's the fruity type.

BABS: Barney, I wanna go up now. I got a splitting headache.

COOK: Poor Babsie! Night, ladies.

CRUMP: Night!

COOK: If you need any help during the night, just give a little scream! *(He exits left.)*

CRUMP: A little scream!

FERN: Oh, he was just joking, wasn't he?

CRUMP: Such goings on at the Splinters! *(To portrait.)* Cotton Crump, you must be turning over in your grave!

FERN: Isn't there anything we can do?

CRUMP: I don't know what . . . but perhaps . . . yes, perhaps we could lay some kind of trap!

FERN: You've been reading too many detective stories, Crump.

CRUMP: I suppose you're right. But then . . . our reputation is at stake! Suppose Detective Muckley doesn't find anything and the case goes cold! We'll be stuck with an empty house because nobody will want to live where an unsolved murder was committed.

FERN: Oh, dear, I hadn't thought of it like that.

CRUMP: We'd have to sell and I'd have to go live with Maggie's mother and I'd never hear the end of it.

FERN: And what would I do?

CRUMP: No, Mrs. Fern, it's up to us! We need to flush out this killer.

FERN: Flush him out?

CRUMP: Just like I've seen it done on television. We announce that we know who the killer is.

FERN: But we don't know who it is!

CRUMP: The killer doesn't know that!

FERN: It sounds very dangerous, Crump. If the killer thinks we really know, he'll try to get rid of us.

CRUMP: Exactly! We're the bait, you see.

FERN: *(Touching her neck.)* I never have liked fishing, Crump.

CRUMP: Now, what if we were . . . yes! We'll send a note to everyone in the house. An unsigned note.

FERN: An unsigned note? So the killer won't know who it's from?

CRUMP: Exactly. It'll keep him off guard. We'll just say . . .
(*Reading the note in her mind.*) We know you slew Mr. Moran in cold blood. But our silence can be bought!

FERN: That sounds like blackmail!

CRUMP: (*With some relish.*) I know! We'll put the notes in the mailboxes in the morning before breakfast.

FERN: Who'll we send them to?

CRUMP: We're off the list, don't you think?

FERN: (*Almost insulted.*) I should hope so!

CRUMP: And I don't think Maggie or June should be included.

MAGGIE and JUNE enter right.

MAGGIE: Included in what?

CRUMP: Oh, why . . . Maggie . . . are you still up?

MAGGIE: Research is a twenty-four seven job sometimes. What are you two up to?

CRUMP: (*Looking at FERN.*) We were just drawing up a list for . . . for . . .

FERN: Early breakfast. I'm sure you girls won't be up very early, will you?

JUNE: I don't think so.

CRUMP: Good! You deserve to sleep in. But, my! It's late for us, Mrs. Fern!

FERN: I'm soooooo tired! (*She yawns.*) Night, girls!

CRUMP: Make sure your door is locked.

MAGGIE: We'll put a chair under the doorknob.

CRUMP and FERN exit left.

JUNE: Boy, they were acting awfully funny!

MAGGIE: Yeah! I wonder what they're up to!

JUNE: I have a sneaking suspicion everybody in this house is up to something!

MAGGIE: Well, we sure are. Jerry Parks should be here in a few minutes!

JUNE: If he's coming!

MAGGIE: You put the note under his door, didn't you?

JUNE: Yeah. And you still believe he's the killer?

MAGGIE: I do! There's a little voice inside me saying "Jerry Parks is the killer!"

JUNE: I got a little voice inside me saying "Maggie's crazy"! What if he tries something . . . desperate.

MAGGIE: That's why you're here.

JUNE: What?

MAGGIE: You're going to protect me!

JUNE: How? I'm no Jackie Chan!

MAGGIE: Simple! You stand behind this screen. *(She goes to screen. From behind it she pulls out a large walking stick.)* And you'll protect me with this - Cotton Crump's walking stick. Solid oak. If Jerry Parks tries anything, just hit him with this.

JUNE: Hit him?

MAGGIE: On the head.

JUNE: *(Laughing.)* You'll never get a date with him after that!

MAGGIE: *(Angrily.)* I don't want a date with him! I want him behind bars.

JUNE: I don't like this at all. My knees are shaking like blades of grass in a hurricane!

MAGGIE: Don't be so poetic, Longfellow, and get behind that screen. He'll be here in a second! *(She hands JUNE the stick.)* And don't forget this.

JUNE grips it like a baseball bat and gives a couple of good swings.

JUNE: I could hit a homer with this thing!

MAGGIE: Quit playing Sammy Sosa and get behind the screen!

JUNE hides behind screen.

JUNE: I hope he hurries up! It's dark back here. I might fall asleep.

MAGGIE: Shhhhhh!

MAGGIE sits in chair not facing screen. Back of chair faces left entrance. She picks up magazine and leafs through it. Clock chimes ten. JUNE peeks out from behind screen in time to see black robed, hooded figure wearing mask enter left. It slinks to MAGGIE'S chair. JUNE, seeing figure, becomes silently hysterical, pointing to figure and jumping up and down. Figure reaches MAGGIE with hands out ready to choke her. JUNE suddenly faints with a thud. Figure dives from view behind upstage side of MAGGIE'S chair while MAGGIE rises and turns immediately downstage racing to JUNE.

MAGGIE: June! June! What happened! Wake up!

As MAGGIE lifts JUNE, Figure steals off stage right.

JUNE: Ohhh . . . ohhh . . . Maggie! Are you all right?

MAGGIE helps JUNE to chair.

MAGGIE: Of course I'm all right! What happened to you?

JUNE: Didn't you see?

MAGGIE: See what?

JUNE: Someone tried to kill you!

MAGGIE: What are you talking about?

JUNE: I'm not kidding! I was standing there like you said and someone dressed in black and wearing a mask came through the door from the hall. He went over to you and was about to put his hands around your neck when everything went blank! I tried to warn you! I really did!

MAGGIE: He must have gotten out before I saw him.

JUNE: He was here, take my word for it!

MAGGIE: Then we're on the right track! It must have been Jerry Parks!

JUNE: Maggie, we've got to stop all this!

MAGGIE: Stop now? The case is just about solved! Jerry Parks got the message to come and meet here tonight, right?

JUNE: Right!

MAGGIE: He's the only one who knew I'd be here, so it must have been him! We'll try again tomorrow and get him before he gets us!

ISADORA dances on right.

ISADORA: Ah! There you are!

MAGGIE: Oh, Miss McCullvey!

ISADORA: So you are the ones who wished to speak to me!

MAGGIE: What?

ISADORA: (*Holding up a note.*) I received this message under my door. It requested a meeting with me in the parlor at ten o'clock.

MAGGIE: You got that message?

ISADORA: Yes!

JUNE: (*To MAGGIE.*) I know I put it under the right door, Maggie.

ISADORA: What is it you wished to discuss?

MAGGIE: (*Covering.*) Well, we just wanted to let you know you ought to keep your door locked tonight.

ISADORA: Why didn't you just knock and tell me that downstairs? This is so disappointing! I expected something far more mysterious. Are you certain this is all you wanted?

MAGGIE: Yes, that's it.

ISADORA: (*Shaking her head, moving right.*) Such bizarre behavior! (*She dances off right.*)

MAGGIE: Which door did you put the note under, June?

JUNE: The one on the right.

MAGGIE: Whose right?

JUNE: Your right as you're going down the stairs.

MAGGIE: That's the left if you're going up the stairs!

JUNE: You didn't tell me which way I was going on the stairs, Maggie!

MAGGIE: Well, you stuck it under the wrong door.

JUNE: (*Nervously.*) And that means Jerry Parks never got the note . . . and that means somebody else might have been in here . . .

MAGGIE: (*Nervously.*) I never thought of that! Who could it be?

JUNE: I don't know.

MAGGIE: All we're sure of is somebody wants us out of the way!

The curtain falls.

ACT TWO, SCENE 1

AT RISE: *The same, the following morning. The parlor is empty.*

CRUMP: *(Off left.)* Breakfast! Breakfast, everyone!

FERN, wearing an apron, enters right. CRUMP enters left.

FERN: Anyone coming?

CRUMP: *(Conspiratorially.)* Not yet! Did you take care of everything, Mrs. Fern?

FERN: I slipped the notes in the mailboxes before the sun was up and I slid that special note to Detective Muckley under his door.

CRUMP: Good! I'm glad we decided to invite him!

FERN: Yes, I'm sure he'll want to help out.

CRUMP: It is his job, of course.

FERN: I hope we're not out of line!

CRUMP: We discussed that already, Mrs. Fern. It's our reputation I'm worried about, and we certainly can help the police, can't we?

FERN: But don't you think Detective Muckley will consider it a slap in his face?

CRUMP: Oh, no! Remember how stern that Superintendent was with him. He has to solve this case.

FERN: You're absolutely right. But what if the killer really shows up? How are we going to capture him?

CRUMP: Oh, dear! I hadn't thought of that! Let's give it a good think.

FERN: Maybe we should have done this first.

They pace back and forth; stopping when they have an idea.

CRUMP: What if . . . no, that's no good. What if he has a gun?

FERN: Oh, dear!

CRUMP: We could always . . . no, a knife would go through that.

FERN: Dear! Dear!

CRUMP: We could always . . . no, that's not very safe for you.

FERN: *(Stopping.)* Perhaps we should just stay in our rooms and let the whole thing work its way out.

CRUMP: No, no, that's no good. We have to follow through . . .
(*Brightly.*) And I think I have a good idea -

ISADORA suddenly dances into the room right.

ISADORA: Good morning, ladies! What a lovely day! I just received a letter from my agent!

CRUMP and FERN look at one another, smiling.

CRUMP: Really, Miss McCullvey?

ISADORA: (*Waving letter.*) Yes, here it is!

FERN: What does it say?

ISADORA: It's from Maxwell Baxwell. He's tied up with the International Dance Theater and he wants a meeting with me tonight to discuss a part in an ensemble opening in East Picklehoe, New Jersey!

CRUMP: Wonderful!

FERN: You must be excited!

ISADORA: Yes! I'm going to dance the day away!

CRUMP: Practice makes perfect.

ISADORA: You should have been a dancer, Miss Crump.

CRUMP: Oh, I've got two left feet!

ISADORA: I never let that stop me!

ISADORA dances off left. From left we hear a crash.

CRUMP: She does live in a dream world.

FERN: Perhaps she'll get a dancing job tonight.

CRUMP: I don't think so. There are guards outside, remember?

FERN: Oh, yes . . . I'd forgotten. I wonder if she got our note?

CRUMP: Probably hasn't opened it yet. She's just too excited about the letter from her agent.

FERN: It doesn't matter. Miss McCullvey can't be the killer!

CRUMP: You're right. She wouldn't hurt a fly!

PARKS enters right.

CRUMP: Good morning, Mr. Parks!

FERN: Lovely day, isn't it?

PARKS: (*Nervously.*) Morning. I wonder . . . if you could . . . no, forget it.

PARKS walks left.

CRUMP: What it is, Mr. Parks?

PARKS: Is . . . is your niece up yet, Miss Crump?

CRUMP: I think I heard her rummaging about.

PARKS: Oh, good.

CRUMP: She should be down in a few minutes.

PARKS: Good. Is there any tea?

FERN: Oh, yes, a fresh pot . . . and eggs and breakfast rolls, too.

PARKS: Thanks. (*After a slight pause.*) If you see your niece . . . could you tell her I'd like to talk to her?

CRUMP: All right, Mr. Parks.

PARKS nods, then exits left.

FERN: I thought he'd get around to noticing Maggie sooner or later.

CRUMP: (*Delighted.*) Oh, how nice! Now certainly he can't be the killer.

FERN: I agree. It must have been someone else.

COOKS enter right. They are dressed as in Act One.

FERN: Good morning, Mr. and Mrs. Cook.

COOK: Morning, girls! How are you today?

CRUMP: We made it through the night.

COOK: Good! Any coffee perking?

FERN: There certainly is. Mr. Parks and Miss McCullvey are in having their breakfasts.

BABS: Oh, do we have to sit with Slither Feet? All she'll do is dance around the table.

CRUMP: Oh, she probably won't take long to eat. She's got quite a bit of rehearsal to do today.

BABS: What, for barrel racing?

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COOK: Awwwww, c'mon, Babs! We've got to make the best of this!

BABS: (*Unconvinced.*) Yeah, sure, Barney, whatever!

CRUMP: Well, don't worry! I'm sure everything is going to work out soon.

COOK: You sound pretty sure about that.

FERN: Oh, we are!

COOK: Well, it'll be good to get things back to normal. C'mon, Babs!
(*COOKS exit left.*)

CRUMP: Oh, now they're such a nice young couple, I can't imagine it's them.

FERN: Well, it has to be somebody!

CRUMP: And we'll find out who tonight!

FERN: Oh, yes! You had an idea -

CRUMP: Shhhhhhhh!

CRUMP pulls FERN off right as MAGGIE and JUNE enter right.

JUNE: I wonder where your aunt and Mrs. Fern were going. They didn't even notice us.

MAGGIE: I think they were working on a crossword puzzle.

JUNE: They're such sweet old things.

MAGGIE: I know! And every time I see them I want to straighten this mess out faster and faster. They're so . . . helpless.

JUNE: So what's the plan, Sherlock?

MAGGIE: We're going to try the same thing again tonight.

JUNE: The old note-under-the-door routine?

MAGGIE: (*Nodding.*) Except I'm putting the note under Jerry Parks's door myself.

JUNE: I still think you're making a big mistake!

MAGGIE: Jerry Parks is the logical choice. He may have been lying in wait last night for his chance to get me alone. We don't know . . . all I'm sure of is that he's a conniving, dangerous killer! (*PARKS enters left. Overly friendly.*) Why, Jerry Parks, I was just talking about you!

PARKS: (*Nervously.*) Morning, Maggie . . . June.

JUNE: Sleep good? All night?

PARKS: (*Shaking his head.*) I was up late.

MAGGIE: (*Glancing at JUNE.*) Oh? Doing what?

PARKS: Trying to study.

MAGGIE: Chemistry?

PARKS: A little. I had some lab reports to write up, too.

MAGGIE: Those aren't as much fun as toxic chemistry, are they?

PARKS: Who ever said toxic chemistry is fun?

MAGGIE: I thought you're interested in poisons . . . cyanide . . . arsenic . . . strychnine . . . all that.

PARKS: Not really. Can I . . . can I bring you some . . . tea?

JUNE: (*Frightened.*) No! I . . . never drink tea.

MAGGIE: (*Overly brave.*) But I'd love some, Mr. Parks.

PARKS: (*Moving left.*) Coming right up. (*He turns back to them.*) And you should call me Jerry. (*He exits left.*)

JUNE: Are you crazy taking tea from him?

MAGGIE: I thought you were the one who said he's innocent!

JUNE: He is, but I'm not taking any chances!

MAGGIE: All I'm going to do is give him the perfect opportunity.

JUNE: He's not going to try anything in broad daylight, is he?

MAGGIE: He killed Moran in broad daylight, didn't he? Besides, I have a plan.

JUNE: You have more plans than an architect!

PARKS enters left carrying two mugs of tea. MAGGIE and JUNE sit as PARKS hands MAGGIE a mug. He sits on edge of couch or chair.

MAGGIE: Thank you, Jerry.

PARKS: I . . . I was anxious to see you this morning.

MAGGIE: (*Glancing at JUNE.*) Why?

PARKS: I . . . I want to apologize.

MAGGIE: (*Coyly.*) Whatever for?

PARKS: For being such a creep yesterday. I wasn't at my best.

MAGGIE: (*Sarcastically.*) I thought you were just charming.

PARKS: Oh . . . you don't have to tell me that. I know how I was.

Since we have to be here until this . . . thing . . . is over, I guess we ought to make the best of it, don't you think?

MAGGIE: Sure. Why not?

PARKS: You accept my apologies?

MAGGIE: Sure!

PARKS: And you, June?

JUNE: I guess so.

PARKS: I don't know why I act like that. I guess it's just a . . . defense.

MAGGIE: We all need defenses . . . just like criminals.

PARKS: That's a funny way of looking at it.

MAGGIE: Well, let's bury the hatchet!

MAGGIE raises her tea in a mock toast, then goes to drink it.

JUNE: (*Terrified.*) Maggie, no!

MAGGIE drops her mug.

MAGGIE: June! Now look at what you made me do!

JUNE: I'm sorry, but -

PARKS: I'll go get some more.

MAGGIE and JUNE stand, as does PARKS.

MAGGIE: Oh, that's okay, Jerry . . . I have to go change. I'm soaked!

PARKS: Yeah . . . you did get a bit wet.

MAGGIE: Thanks for the tea anyway.

PARKS: Sorry you didn't get to drink it.

MAGGIE: It's the thought that counts. (*MAGGIE leads JUNE off right.*) You clumsy oaf! I'll never get this stain out!

They're gone. PARKS scratches his head and picks up mugs. He sniffs the one MAGGIE had in her hand, then takes a tiny taste on his

finger tip. He makes a horrified face. He tries his own mug and is equally horrified.

PARKS: Arsenic!

He moves left to exit. CRUMP and FERN enter left.

CRUMP: Why, Mr. Parks! Did you get a chance to talk to Maggie and June?

PARKS: (*Nervously.*) Yes . . . yes . . . we had some . . . tea.

CRUMP: A very quick cup of tea.

PARKS: Maggie spilled some and . . . she went . . . upstairs to change.

CRUMP: What a clumsy thing to do!

PARKS: Not really! (*He exits left.*)

FERN: What do you suppose he meant by that?

CRUMP: I don't know . . . but he's acting very peculiarly this morning.

FERN: Everyone is, Crump.

CRUMP: You're right. This whole thing is getting to everyone . . . so our plan better work!

FERN has knelt down and is cleaning the spilled tea with her apron.

FERN: Look at this mess! I hope it doesn't leave a stain! (*She notices the smell.*) Crump!

CRUMP: What's wrong?

FERN: Smell this!

FERN holds up the apron as she stands. CRUMPsiffs it.

CRUMP: It smells very odd! Just like -

FERN: The wine glass! The tea was poisoned, too!

CRUMP: Oh dear! Someone's tried to kill Maggie!

FERN: We'd better tell Detective Muckley about this!

MUCKLEY enters left, unseen by CRUMP and FERN. He slips behind the screen as they talk.

CRUMP: No! He mustn't know a thing about this.

FERN: But the poison!

CRUMP: It wasn't meant for him!

FERN: But the next time . . .

CRUMP: Don't worry, Mrs. Fern . . . everything will work out.

FERN: I'm sure it will . . . Still . . .

CRUMP: We must be careful. You know what they say about the walls having ears.

FERN: You're right! The last couple of days I keep having this feeling we're being watched.

CRUMP: It's having the police around, I'm afraid.

FERN: Detective Muckley does make me uneasy.

CRUMP: Oh, we'll get rid of him soon enough . . . if we're careful.

FERN: I suppose you're right.

CRUMP: Of course I am. No one would ever suspect -

FERN: Shhhhh! Let's go clear the breakfast table . . .

CRUMP and FERN exit left. A pale, shaken MUCKLEY comes out from behind the screen. He moves to phone and is about to dial when PARKS enters left.

MUCKLEY: Say, Mr. Parks, where are you coming from so fast?

PARKS: Just washing up a couple of breakfast dishes.

MUCKLEY: You know . . . I haven't had much of a chance to talk to you about this here murder.

PARKS: I told you where I was. What else do you want to know?

MUCKLEY: How about these two old dames that run this place? What do you know about them?

PARKS: Not much. They're nice and they cook good meals.

MUCKLEY: Anybody in the house ever get sick?

PARKS: Sick?

MUCKLEY: Yeah! From eating the food?

PARKS: No. They've never poisoned anybody I know of, if that's what you mean.

MUCKLEY: Just asking! Just asking!

PARKS: Well, maybe you'd better stop wasting time and find the killer before it's too late.

MUCKLEY: What are you talking about?

PARKS: I've got a feeling he might try to kill somebody else!

MUCKLEY: That so? You got any evidence?

PARKS: No . . . just a feeling in my bones.

MUCKLEY: That's the weather, kid. This is a one-victim job. There aren't any tie-ins around here that I can see. Nobody around this place knows anything.

PARKS: Don't kid yourself! I think everybody knows more than they're telling you.

MUCKLEY: Yeah? Well, what do you know that I don't?

PARKS: (*Shrugging.*) Nothing! Nothing at all!

PARKS exits left. MUCKLEY picks up phone and dials.

MUCKLEY: Muckley here. Yeah, Boss . . . I mean Superintendent! Yeah . . . listen . . . there's a lot going on here I can't figure out. I got a message under my door this morning and it says to come to the parlor tonight at eleven and arrest the killer. Can you beat that? No! I don't got a clue who sent it . . . but I think I know who's behind this whole thing. I overheard the old ladies talking about bumping me off! No, I'm not pulling your leg. Yeah . . . all right. Meet you outside at ten fifteen tonight. Right, Boss . . . I mean Superintendent! No . . . I remember all about the cement boots.

The curtain falls.

ACT TWO, SCENE 2

AT RISE: *The parlor, that night shortly after ten-thirty. CRUMP sits knitting and FERN sits doing a crossword puzzle. JUNE sits on edge of chair, nervously flipping through a magazine.*

FERN: Crump, I need your help again!

CRUMP: Mrs. Fern, why don't you just buy one of those crossword puzzle dictionaries?

FERN: That would be cheating. How about a six letter word for "buggy"?

CRUMP: "Hansom."

FERN: I need a word for "buggy," not "attractive."

CRUMP: A hansom is a type of buggy. H-A-N-S-O-M.

FERN: Why that fits perfectly! You're getting very good at this.

CRUMP: With all this practice, I ought to be a grand champion or something. June, do you like crossword puzzles?

JUNE: *(Not paying attention.)* Ha?

CRUMP: June, what's wrong?

JUNE: *(Trying to be cheerful.)* Nothing!

CRUMP: Where's Maggie?

JUNE: Maggie Who?

CRUMP: My niece! What's she up to?

JUNE: *(Covering.)* Her hair. She's fixing it.

CRUMP: It looked perfectly fine at dinner . . . If you don't mind my saying so, you're very nervous, June.

FERN: Would you like a bit of warm milk to settle your nerves?

JUNE: *(Wringing her hands.)* No . . . no, thanks. I'll just wring my hands. That always seems to do the trick. I used to use worry beads but I always broke them.

CRUMP: Dear, dear . . . this must be especially unsettling for you, June. I'm so sorry.

JUNE: It's not your fault. *(After a pause.)* Is it?

FERN: Oh, heavens, no! But everything will be solved tonight, I'm sure.

JUNE: *(Suspiciously.)* How do you know that?

FERN: I just have a little hunch. We can't have a murderer running around here for very much longer, now can we?

CRUMP: I'm sure Detective Muckley has something up his sleeve.

JUNE: You mean besides his arm?

CRUMP: Oh, I know you don't think much of him, but I'm sure he's doing all he can under the circumstances.

JUNE: I wish I were as confident as you.

CRUMP: Now, why don't you come along and get a good night's sleep.

CRUMP rises, as does FERN.

JUNE: Oh, that's okay . . . I need to wait for Maggie.

CRUMP: Well, I think we're going to our rooms, now, aren't we, Mrs. Fern?

FERN: Why, it's twenty 'til eleven. It got so late!

CRUMP: You girls get right to bed. It's much safer. Night, dear!

JUNE: Night!

CRUMP and FERN exit left. JUNE looks around the room nervously and finds the walking stick. She picks it up, then sits down in chair facing left so her back is to stage right. After a moment, MAGGIE silently enters right, backing on. She doesn't see JUNE in chair, of course, and bumps into the chair. Both girls jump and scream. JUNE raises stick to hit MAGGIE, but then realizes who it is.

MAGGIE: You could have killed me!

JUNE: What are you doing sneaking up on me like that?

MAGGIE: I wasn't sneaking up on you!

JUNE: You were so! I never heard you come in! Don't scare me like that!

MAGGIE: I thought you were upstairs!

JUNE: No . . . I wanted to wait for you here.

MAGGIE: Good.

JUNE: What were you doing in the secret passageway this time?

MAGGIE: Looking for clues!

JUNE: We already did that.

MAGGIE: I know . . . I know . . . but I kept thinking there must be something else to all this! Why would anybody kill Mr. Moran.

JUNE: Did you find anything?

MAGGIE: (*Gloating.*) Did I find something!

JUNE: Well?

MAGGIE: You promise not to say a word?

JUNE: Cross my heart and hope to . . . well, I won't go that far!

MAGGIE: All right . . . I'll show you. (*She looks around the room, behind the screen and so on.*)

JUNE: Well? What is it?

MAGGIE: Look! (*She pulls two metal plates from her pocket. They are wrapped in cloth.*)

JUNE: Just a couple of metal plates.

MAGGIE: Shhhhhhhh! Don't use that word P-L-A-T-E-S.

JUNE: Why not?

MAGGIE: Look at these under the light.

JUNE takes plates and looks at them under a lamp.

JUNE: Wow!

MAGGIE: You see?

JUNE: You can print twenty and fifty dollar bills with these!

MAGGIE: Shhhhhhhh!

JUNE: Where'd you find them

MAGGIE: In a drawer in the old printing press.

JUNE: Do you think your aunt knows about these?

MAGGIE: How could they when they don't even know there's a secret passageway?

JUNE: Who do you think stole them?

MAGGIE: Jerry Parks! Who else?

JUNE: What about the Cooks? The printing press is in their closet isn't it?

MAGGIE: But what about the chemistry lab? Jerry Parks could have whipped up the poison any time. And don't forget he tried to kill me in broad daylight this morning.

JUNE: We're not sure the tea was poisoned. It just smelled kind of funny.

MAGGIE: (*With false conviction.*) Take my word for it! Jerry Parks has probably been printing money up there in that closet when the Cooks weren't around and Moran must have known about it, so he killed him. And somehow he's found out we know about it and



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