

**PHYLLIS.** (*Moving off after AGGIE.*) Oh, this is thrilling! Simply thrilling!

(*Exits, and we hear immediately:*)

**SAUL.** (*To GERRY, in a lowered voice.*) You got any *other* nice little surprises for us? I could use a thrill right now.

**GERRY.** (*Same level.*) It'll be okay, Saul. Don't lose your temper.

**BILLY.** (*Same level.*) What the hell are "nuances"?!

**SAUL.** (*Same level.*) Don't ask. Just grit your teeth and pray you've got 'em!

**POLLY.** (*To GERRY, same level.*) I thought you wanted us to go straight through without interruption?! With *Phyllis* back there listening for *nuances* - !

**SAUL.** (*Same level.*) Cheer up. Maybe Louise will drop a sandbag on her.

**PHYLLIS.** (*Off. Trills blithely.*) I'm read-y...!

**GERRY.** (*Sits back and sinks down apprehensively.*) Okay! Louise - close the damn - close the curtain, and we'll start!

(*Curtain starts to close as PLAYERS move into position.*)

**LOUISE.** (*Offstage.*) You want the *music*, too?

**GERRY.** Of course! Everything exactly like the performance!

(*Curtain completes its close during:*)

**AGGIE.** (*Offstage.*) Everybody hold your places during the music - !

**SMITTY.** I'm *offstage* when the curtain rises. I don't *have* a place.

**SAUL.** (*Now masked from our view by the closed curtain.*)

You're *lucky*!

**AGGIE.** (*Offstage.*) Quiet, everybody!

(*Music - something dark and mysterious - starts.*)

**GERRY.** The house lights! Louise, dim the house lights!

(*Lights in theatre dim, fully, and will remain down for remainder of this act.*)

That's fine, Louise! Do it like that at the opening - right after the music starts!

**LOUISE.** (*Offstage.*) Gotcha!

(*Music finishes on a loud, ominous chord; curtain opens.*)

(*Note: The Act One of Murder Most Foul tableau is: HENRY at the sideboard pouring a drink, VIOLET at the bookcase between upstage window and doorway, her back to us, seeking a book, and SMITTY using a featherduster on the front of the wall safe.*)

**SMITTY.** (*As she dusts.*) "Lord Dudley, will there be anyone at dinner tonight besides Sir Percival the famous archaeologist, Doctor Rex Forbes the famous scientist, and Stephen Sellers the famous millionaire?"

**HENRY.** "Other than myself and Lady Margaret, my wife, and the lovely socialite Diana Lassiter, here...no, Doris."

**SMITTY.** (*Starts toward stage right doorway, since she was only onstage to lull out vital information to the audience.*) "That's what I thought."

(*Exits.*)

**HENRY.** (*Has his drink, holds it as he turns toward VIOLET.*)

"I say, Diana, have you yet located that book on famous jewels of India that I told you must be there on the shelf?"

**VIOLET.** (*Who has been running a forefinger back and forth on the selfsame shelf during the opening lines, abruptly stops at a certain book.*) "Ah, yes! Here it is!"

(*Takes book, turns downstage, flips it open at its very center, and immediately reacts to what she sees there.*)

"Oh! I say, Lord Dudley - you didn't tell me there was a curse on the famous White Ruby of Ranchipur - ?!"

PHYLLIS. (*Offstage.*) The *what*!

GERRY. It's all right, Phyllis, it's all *right*!

PHYLLIS. (*Steps onstage.*) But that's supposed to be the Delhi Diamond!

GERRY. We had to change it, Phyllis.

PHYLLIS. For what *possible* reason?

SAUL. (*Offstage.*) It looked silly next to the liverwurst!

PHYLLIS. (*Looks uncertainly toward direction of his voice.*)

*What liverwurst? There's no liverwurst in my play!*

VIOLET. We just wanted to *keep* it that way.

PHYLLIS. I beg your pardon?

GERRY. Phyllis! Trust me! Please go back off the stage, and

Aggie will explain the change to you.

PHYLLIS. But - ?

GERRY. Please, Phyllis? We open tomorrow night!

PHYLLIS. Well - I - oh, very well, very well!

(*Exits; GERRY sinks back into seat.*)

GERRY. Go ahead with the show, people.

SMITTY. (*Offstage.*) From the top? I already put the featherduster away.

GERRY. No, no, no! Right from where we broke.

HENRY. Oh, all right. Violet - would you - ?

VIOLET. Oh, sure. (*Into character.*) "...the famous White Ruby of Ranchipur - ?!"

HENRY. "Fiddlesticks! A lot of hogwash! Damned superstitious rot!"

VIOLET. (*Will close book and put it back on shelf as she speaks.*) "But the book distinctly says that Lord Clyde

Fortescue, the first owner of the Del - the White Ruby of Ranchipur - " (*Stops.*) Gerry, can I just say "ruby"?!

I hate to say the whole mouthful every time!

GERRY. Yes, yes, yes! Just go on, go on!

VIOLET. (*Back into character.*) " - distinctly says that Lord Clyde Fortescue, the first owner of the ruby, was found floating in his tub, in his own blood! And the next

owner, Sir Giles Renfrew, had no sooner purchased the ruby from Lord Clyde's estate, when *he* was found in his stables, trampled to death by his favorite horse! And the *next* owner - "

HENRY. "Balderdash! Nonsense! A lot of old wives' tales!"

VIOLET. "How *can* it be? They *are* all dead - aren't they?"

HENRY. "Yes, but consider: I bought the ruby this morning - and I'm fine!"

(HENRY suddenly puts a hand to his head and sways.)

VIOLET. "Lord Dudley - is anything wrong?"

HENRY. "No-no. Nothing. Just one of my beastly attacks."

VIOLET. "How long have you had them?"

HENRY. "Since this morning."

VIOLET. "You don't suppose - ?"

HENRY. "Ridiculous! Sheer coincidence! Merest chance!"

SMITTY. (*Steps into room.*) "Doctor Forbes is here, Lord Dudley."

HENRY. "Ah! It is your fiancé, Diana!" (*To GERRY.*) That's a pretty dumb line, isn't it? She *knows* he's her fiancé.

PHYLLIS. (*Offstage.*) But the audience doesn't!

SAUL. Why don't I just wear a signboard?

PHYLLIS. (*Offstage.*) Now, really, Saul!

GERRY. Will you all stop your gabbing and get on with the play? It's far too late to make alterations now!

HENRY. Oh, all right. "...It is your fiancé, Diana!"

VIOLET. "Yes, being engaged to the world-famous scientist has made me the envy of all the girls in England!"

HENRY. "Ah, but a lovely belle like you deserves to have a ring!"

VIOLET. Speaking of dumb lines - !

GERRY. Violet - !

PHYLLIS. (*Offstage.*) That line is *supposed* to be light-hearted. The merriment provides emotional contrast with the atmosphere of terror.



SMITTY. That's the general atmosphere, all right.

GERRY. Will you all please – ?!

VIOLET. Yes, yes, yes! *(Into character.)* "You flatter me, Lord Dudley."

HENRY. "Doris, will you show the gentleman in?"

SMITTY. "At once, milord!"

*(She exits and SAUL enters.)*

SAUL. *(Bows, briefly.)* "Lord Dudley, Diana."

HENRY. "I'm sure you young people will want to be alone."

*(Starts toward upstage doorway.)*

"I'll just toddle off to my room and putter about."

GERRY. Not that exit, Henry! That goes to the kitchen and the maid's quarters!

HENRY. Oh, that's right.

*(Starts toward right doorway, but pauses short of exit.)*

Of course, she's quite a good looking maid – !

POLLY. *(Offstage.)* Henry!

HENRY. Only joking, dear.

SMITTY. *(Offstage.)* You mean I'm not good looking?

HENRY. Uh – well – um –

GERRY. Henry, just finish your line and go!

HENRY. Saul's got a line, first.

SAUL. I have? Oh! Right! ... "Really, Lord Dudley, you needn't go."

HENRY. "Nonsense. I was once in love, myself!"

POLLY. *(Offstage.)* Why does he say that in the past tense?!

GERRY. Polly, please – !

POLLY. *(Offstage.)* Sorry.

*(HENRY exits; SAUL moves to VIOLET and embraces her.)*

SAUL. "My dearest darling!"

VIOLET. "My sweet!"

*(They kiss, lightly, then stand apart.)*

SAUL. "My darling, I have a little surprise – "

*(Reaches into his pocket, then slumps.)*

Oh, damn!

GERRY. What's the matter?

SAUL. Forgot the stupid necklace!

*(Starts offstage.)*

Aggie – ?!

AGGIE. *(Steps on, extending necklace.)* Here. Sorry about that.

GERRY. Aggie, as stage manager, you're supposed to make certain everyone has all their props!

AGGIE. I know, I know. Phyllis was talking to me about "nuances" and I missed Saul's entrance.

GERRY. Phyllis – you really mustn't chat backstage when people have work to do.

PHYLLIS. *(Offstage.)* I do apologize, Geraldine. I forgot Agnes had things to do.

AGGIE. My fault for not reminding her.

*(Exits, on.)*

"Agnes"! Ye gods!

SAUL. Pick it up from where we left off?

GERRY. Good a spot as any.

SAUL. "My darling, I have a little surprise – the White Ruby of Ranchipur!"

VIOLET. "Oh! How incredibly lovely it is! Might I – try it on?"

SAUL. "Not afraid of the curse?"

VIOLET. "Well – not very much... May I – please – ?"

SAUL. "Certainly you shall. Here, allow me..."

*(She turns, he hangs it about her neck, then turns her around to face him.)*

"It is lovely – in such a lovely setting!"

**VIOLET.** (*Lowers her eyes demurely, turns partly away.*)

"Oh, Rex, what a thing to say –!"

**SAUL.** "I cannot decide which is lovelier, you or that fabulous gem."

**VIOLET.** "I simply must see myself in it – let me go find a mirror!"

(*Starts toward right doorway, but stops as POLLY enters.*)

**POLLY.** "Diana! That necklace! How dare you! Take it off at once!"

**VIOLET.** "Lady Margaret! I was only –"

**POLLY.** "Take it off, I say! This instant!"

**SAUL.** (*Helps VIOLET undo clasp.*) "Here, now, Lady Margaret, there's surely no harm done...?"

**POLLY.** "No harm, you say? How could you endanger the life of this dear girl – and your own fiancée!"

**VIOLET.** "Oh, I don't believe in that silly curse, Lady Margaret! After all, this is the twentieth century!"

(*VIOLET suddenly places the back of one hand to her forehead and sways.*)

**SAUL.** "Diana! Are you all right?"

**VIOLET.** "Yes – yes, I think so. It was just momentary – the room seemed to dip – my head started to spin – oh, but I'm quite all right, now."

**POLLY.** (*Takes necklace from SAUL.*) "I shall place this where it can do no more harm!"

(*Moves toward wall safe.*)

**SAUL.** "Aren't you being silly, Lady Margaret?"

**POLLY.** (*Twirling dial of safe to open it.*) "Perhaps I am. But it is better to be safe than sorry!"

**SAUL.** "Should you not at least wait until Lord Dudley has seen his newest possession?"

**POLLY.** "He shall see it in good time – when I feel brave enough to wear it. And do not forget – he purchased

it for me – so it is in actuality mine to deal with as I choose!"

(*Has safe open, thrusts necklace within – and we hear necklace clatter to floor beyond open back of safe.*)

Oh, dear, I pushed it too far!

**PHYLLIS.** (*Pops onstage.*) Do you mean to say there's no back on that thing?!

**AGGIE.** (*Enters, crosses to french doors, where she will exit during her line.*) My fault, my fault! I forgot I was supposed to be back there to grab the damned thing!

**GERRY.** Aggie, I hope you're making notes of all these things!

**AGGIE.** (*Offstage.*) Sure, sure. I just keep forgetting to read them!

**POLLY.** (*Wandering disconsolately away from safe.*) We'll never be ready by tomorrow night! Never! We're here almost an hour already, and we're not even halfway through the first act!

**AGGIE.** (*Enters carrying necklace.*) And we've only had two rehearsals of the third! And that's the most important act in the show!

**BILLY.** (*Steps onstage.*) Aggie's right. That's the act we're all really panicky about!

**VIOLET.** Why don't we do that act, right now! It's hard to do everything that comes before it, with that act hanging over our heads – if we felt more confident about it, I'm sure –

**GERRY.** All right, all right! *Anything* to get this show nailed down! Let's do the third act, get our confidence, and then run all three acts as fast as we can.

**SMITTY.** (*Steps onstage.*) How long will that take? My mother doesn't like me out too late on a school night. I just barely passed that biology exam.

**GERRY.** The sooner we begin, the sooner we'll finish! Come on, let's get moving!



*(All ad-lib assent; PLAYERS get into Act Three places, and NON-PLAYERS leave the stage.)*

LOUISE. (*Offstage.*) Do you want it with the curtain?

GERRY. Not now, Louise! Wait! We're running the entire show.

LOUISE. (*Offstage.*) Okay, but hang on a second while I find the right spot on my tape!

GERRY. You've got nothing till that phone bell. Find your place while we run the act!

LOUISE. (*Offstage.*) Well, I'll do my best!

GERRY. Go ahead, everybody. Top of Act Three!

*(PLAYERS brace themselves, then.)*

PHYLLIS. (*Off. A cry of triumph.*) I've got it!

*(PLAYERS all lurch like standees on a streetcar which has come to an abrupt stop; PHYLLIS rushes onstage.)*

GERRY. Phyllis, you can't just interrupt rehearsal this way -!

PHYLLIS. But I've solved the problem of the liverwurst!

SAUL. Damn it, that's already been solved!

PHYLLIS. There's no need to use profanity, Saul!

SAUL. That's what you think!

PHYLLIS. Please hear me out - I was so concerned with the loss of my lovely double-alliteration...!

GERRY. (*Anything to get the show rolling.*) All right, all right! Let's hear the solution, but be quick!

PHYLLIS. (*Excitedly.*) We don't have to say "Delhi Diamond" - we call it the "Darjeeling Diamond"! Do you see? It's still named after a town in India, but now -

GERRY. I get it, I get it, thank you very much, we'll make the change, now please get off the stage and I don't want to see or hear you again until we've finished rehearsing this act, okay?!

PHYLLIS. You don't have to get huffy about it!

*(Nose in air, exits from stage.)*

GERRY. Has everybody got the new name for that stupid gem?

*(PLAYERS al-lib assent.)*

Fine! Now - take it from the top of Act Three - and no stopping!

LOUISE. (*Offstage.*) What do you want to bet?

GERRY. Please, Louise -!

LOUISE. (*Offstage.*) Okay. Just thought it was a great opportunity to pick up some extra cash!

GERRY. (*Just short of a roar.*) Places! Everybody! And the neat person who interrupts dies! I don't mean get-yelled-at... I don't mean chewed-out... I mean dies!

*(Terrified PLAYERS brace themselves in position.)*

AGGIE. (*Offstage.*) On your marks - get set - go!

*(Out of sheer panic, PLAYERS will say all the following play-within-the-play lines at frantic double-speed, with heightened emotion in their tones, and physical movements corresponding extra-quick, akin to players in a speed-up movie film.)*

VIOLET. "Ah, Lord Dudley, you give the most charming parties in the whole of England!"

HENRY. "You are too kind, Diana. A pity Sir Percival could not be here."

POLLY. "Do you know - I'm worried about Percival! He's never accepted an invitation to one of our parties and then not shown up - at least, not without sending word."

BILLY. "Ah, but Lady Margaret, he might have had motor trouble."

VIOLET. Yes, indeed. I do hope he hasn't had an accident! These roads can be treacherous at night."

*(SMITTY rushes on, realizes she's early, gives a little gasp, then rushes out again; POLLY becomes distracted.)*

**POLLY.** Uh – I – oh, damn it all to hell!

*(Starts to cry, covers her face.)*

**GERRY.** *(Stands up.)* Wait. Please. This is all my fault.

I should be providing you with a pleasant atmosphere to work in, not strike terror into all your hearts. Just – take it from where you're at – and slow it down a little, okay – ?

**SAUL.** Does that mean you're not going to kill Polly?

**GERRY.** *(With a slight edge.)* Yes. But don't *you* start feeling too secure!

**SAUL.** *(Takes a slight backstep.)* Uh – right.

**GERRY.** *(Resumes her seat.)* Go ahead, Polly. The roads can be treacherous at night...

**POLLY.** *(A bit recovered.)* My – my mind's gone blank. I can't think. I –

**AGGIE.** *(Off. Feeding the line in soothing tones.)*

Don't say such a thing – it would make one think –

**POLLY.** Oh, yes, of course! *(Back into character, at normal speed.)* "Don't say such a thing! It would make one think that perhaps there was some truth, after all, in that story about the curse!"

**HENRY.** "Nonsense, my dear. There's no such thing as a curse."

**BILLY.** "And yet – everyone who has ever owned the Delhi – the ruby – the –" Wait, I'll get it – ! "...the *Darjeeling* Diamond – has always met with a dreadful demise!"

**PHYLLIS.** *(Offstage.)* Beautiful! Just beautiful!

**EVERYBODY ELSE.** *PHYLLIS!*

**PHYLLIS.** *(Offstage.)* Sorry.

**VIOLET.** "But Percival doesn't own the diamond – the ruby – the *diamond* – anymore – not since he sold it to Lord Dudley for Lady Margaret's correction – connection – confection – ?!"

**AGGIE.** *(Offstage.)* Collection!

**VIOLET.** " – collection."

**SAUL.** "Nevertheless – Percival *did* own it – and that might be enough."

**BILLY.** "See here, Doctor Fubbs – *Forbes* – !"

**GERRY.** Stop! ...Everybody take a deep breath and relax.

*(PLAYERS all do so.)*

Fine. Now just go on, and enjoy yourselves!

**BILLY.** " – you are a man of science – surely *you* don't believe in curses?"

**SAUL.** "I only know there are strange things in the history of India – things which defy rational explanation."

**HENRY.** "Nonsense. Sheer pockycop – *pock-ee-cop* – !"

*Ataagh!* "Poppycock! ...Superstitious drivel!"

**SAUL.** "Quite poppably –" Oh, damn it, *damn it*, DAMN IT!

**GERRY.** *(Amiably.)* Relax. You're all still too tense. Slow and easy does it.

**SAUL.** *(Takes a breath, continues.)* "Quite possibly, Lord Dudley – and yet –"

**POLLY.** "And yet – ?"

**SAUL.** "Where is Sir Percival?"

**VIOLET.** "Frankly, I'm *glad* he's not here!"

**POLLY.** "Why, Diana, what a thing to say!"

**VIOLET.** "I mean it. Sir Percival is – no gentleman."

**HENRY.** "Here, now, what are you saying?"

**VIOLET.** *(Without noticing that she's blowing her line.)*  
"When he looks at me – I feel as though his pants were moving all over my body!"

*(Other PLAYERS guffaw almost convulsively, turning away from her, unable to control their laughter.)*

What's the matter?

**GERRY.** It's his "hands," Violet, his "hands"!

**VIOLET.** Isn't that what I said?

**BILLY.** *(A bit more in control.)* You said "pants."

**VIOLET.** Oh!



(Starts to giggle.)

**GERRY.** Look, everyone, fun is fun, but we *would* like Smitty to get home sometime before dawn!

**VIOLET.** Right. I'm sorry.

(*Her face will twitch a bit, as will those of the other PLAYERS, as she says her line correctly – but we all know what they are remembering.*)

“...I feel as though his hands were moving all over my body.”

**POLLY.** (*Still in the throes of that blown version.*) “B-but – he is a knight of the –”

(*Suppressing a laugh, makes a sound like a raspberry; other PLAYERS break up helplessly.*)

**GERRY.** (*Sternly, quietly.*) That's it – laugh it up – we'll see just how funny you think this is tomorrow night...!

(*This sobers them; they regain control, fast.*)

**POLLY.** “...a knight of the realm!”

**VIOLET.** “He is a disgusting toad. And such toads can be lecherous at night!”

(*There is a pause; PLAYERS slowly, covertly, look toward still-empty right doorway; then SMITTY gallops onstage, only about two seconds late.*)

**SMITTY.** “Begging-your-pardon-milord –”

**GERRY.** Take it easy, take it easy, you'll be just fine.

**SMITTY.** (*A bit slower.*) “ – but should we delay dinner any longer?”

**HENRY.** “Mmm – no, I think not. Can't wait for Percival forever.”

(*Moves toward POLLY.*)

“Shall we, my dear?”

**POLLY.** “I suppose so. But – don't you think someone should call Percival's flat and ascertain the reason for his absence?”

**BILLY.** (*Moves around armchair to take VIOLET's arm as she rises.*) “Do you know – that might be a sound idea. There is something distinctly odd about all of this.”

**VIOLET.** “All of what, Stephen?”

**BILLY.** “This business about Percival and the necklace. He *did* say he was bringing it tonight, Lady Margaret?”

**POLLY.** “Well, actually, I – I –”

(*Stops, frowning.*)

**GERRY.** Now what's the matter?

**POLLY.** I just thought – *Saul* brings the necklace, in the first act, and I put it in the safe – so how can I say – ?

**PHYLLIS.** (*Offstage.*) Oh, dear! Oh, dear-oh-dear!

(*Rushes onstage.*)

I forgot to give you the new line! When I rewrote the first act, a few weeks back, I completely forgot about that line in *this* act!

**GERRY.** This is a hell of a time to think of it! What's the new line?

**PHYLLIS.** I – I don't have the rewrite *with* me – !

**GERRY.** *Approximately*, then!

(*Will get up and move up onto the stage.*)

We don't have time for a lot of fooling around with words! Just give us the *gist* of it and we'll improvise!

**PHYLLIS.** Well – um – Polly's line is basically the same – only she says something to Billy about him not being here when Saul brought the necklace, instead of Percival, do you see?

**GERRY.** Can you handle that, Polly?

**POLLY.** I – I think so – let me try it...

**GERRY.** Okay. Just get on with this thing!

(*Starts offstage.*)

I need a cup of coffee. Louise – is there any coffee back there?

**LOUISE.** (*Offstage.*) For want of a better name.

GERRY. (*Sighs.*) It'll have to do. Come along, Phyllis. The rest of you get back to work!

(GERRY and PHYLLIS exit; PLAYERS get back in place, and:)

POLLY. Feed me your line again, Billy – ?

BILLY. Uh...what the hell is it? ...Oh, yeah! ... “ – He did say he was bringing it tonight, Lady Margaret?”

POLLY. “Well, actually, I never spoke with him directly – but there was a message delivered this morning in the post – saying – ” uh. “ – saying that he'd asked Doctor Forbes to bring it *for* him!”

SMITTY. “What, on Saint Swithin's Day?”

SAUL. Wait a minute, wait a minute! That sounds as if it's against the law to *ask* somebody to *deliver* things on that day – the part about the post has to come last, Polly.

POLLY. Let me try it again... “ – but Doctor Forbes told me that Percival had asked *him* to deliver it, in a message delivered this morning in the post!”

SAUL. Ah, much better! Go ahead, Smitty.

SMITTY. “What, on Saint Swithin's Day?”

(SAUL *gruffaws.*)

GERRY. (*Offstage.*) Now what?!

SAUL. I'm sorry. It sounded like she couldn't go ahead on –

GERRY. (*Off. Truly angry.*) I don't give a good damn *what* it sounded like! If all you three-year-olds want to play *games* instead of learning this *play* – !

SAUL. (*Much chastened.*) I'm sorry, Gerry. Go on, Smitty, please.

SMITTY. (*Grimly.*) “ – Saint Swithin's Day!”

HENRY. “By Jove! Never thought of that! Margaret – are you *certain* about that message?”

POLLY. “Why – come to think of it – no.”

VIOLET. “You *didn't* receive a message?”

POLLY. “Oh, yes – I did – but now I wonder if it were actually from Percival!”

BILLY. “But it did come by post?”

POLLY. “I – I assumed it had – but – ”

HENRY. “Assumed? You mean, you didn't actually see it?”

POLLY. “Why, no.”

(PLAYERS are now “into rhythm” with their play, and do their roles well until the interruption.)

VIOLET. “Then how did you know its content?”

POLLY. “Why – Doctor Forbes told me what it had said.”

SAUL. “Is there any reason I shouldn't have?”

BILLY. “No, no, of course not, old chap. Only – if there was no delivery of the post, today, then how – ?”

SAUL. “It was not a letter. It was a telegram.”

BILLY. “I should like very much to see that telegram!”

SAUL. “Well – as a matter of fact – I don't have it. The message was phoned from the telegraph office.”

BILLY. “Doris – have there been any telephone messages this evening?”

SAUL. “See here, you insolent young pup! Are you doubting my word?!”

POLLY. “Of course he isn't, Rex! Stephen, you should apologize to Doctor Forbes.”

BILLY. “Oh, I shall. As soon as Doris answers my question.”

SMITTY. “No, sir.”

POLLY. “What, are you quite sure?”

SMITTY. “The telephone has been out of order since this afternoon, mum.”

BILLY. “Aha! And what do you say to *that*, Doctor Forbes?”

(There is a silence; PLAYERS slowly look toward the silent telephone, waiting; nothing happens; then:)

LOUISE. (*Offstage.*) Damn it all to hell! Phyllis, what have you done?!



**PHYLLIS.** (*Offstage.*) What have I done? What are you talking about? Did I get the phone bell out of order on the tape?

**GERRY.** (*Offstage.*) What were you doing with the tape, Phyllis?!

**PHYLLIS.** (*Offstage.*) Why – I just thought I'd give a listen to the sound effects and –

**LOUISE.** (*Offstage.*) And you erased the tape!

(**PLAYERS** onstage all slump, and ad-lib mutters of despair.)

There's nothing on it! Nothing!

**GERRY.** (*Offstage.*) Oh, Louise, are you sure – ?!

**LOUISE.** (*Offstage.*) Listen for yourself!

**GERRY.** (*Offstage.*) I don't hear anything – ?

**LOUISE.** (*Offstage.*) That's what I mean!

(*From the wings, we hear ad-libs of PHYLLIS recasting all sorts of apologies, GERRY trying to make peace, AGGIE bemoaning the future of the show, and LOUISE raising hell – all overlapping one another; then LOUISE, with a reel of recording tape, comes onstage, crossing toward far side and the backstage exit.*)

**POLLY.** Louise! You're not leaving?

**LOUISE.** (*Stops, center stage.*) Can't do a damn thing for you if I stay! I've got to get home and re-tape every one of those sound effects for the opening! (*Shouts offstage.*) And if that bubble-brained idiot so much as comes near my machine again, I'm gonna beat her head in with it!

(*She turns to continue her cross, but stops as GERRY – followed by a weepily contrite PHYLLIS – hastens onstage.*)

**GERRY.** Listen – as long as you *have* to do it all over, Louise – I've been thinking – perhaps we should have the telephone *hooked up* – to a button backstage – there are so many phone-calls in this show – wouldn't it be easier to ring the phone manually?

**LOUISE.** Well...yes, I guess it would – and it'd save me a lot of work tonight if I could leave those rings off the tape –

**AGGIE.** (*Enters.*) I can do the hookup. The end of the wire's already backstage, and there's a storage battery, too, for power.

**LOUISE.** (*A bit calmer.*) Okay. Just make sure you put the button somewhere near the tape recorder, so I don't have to leave the sound board to find it.

**AGGIE.** Of course.

(*Turns and exits.*)

**LOUISE.** Oh, and the rest of you –

(**PLAYERS** turn their attention to her.)

Remember one thing: When you *use* the phone in the play – be *sure* you hang it *up* right! If it's sitting the wrong way, so the buttons aren't depressed by the speaker part, the phone can't ring, got it?

(**PLAYERS** ad-lib assent.)

Okay. Now if you'll excuse me, I've got a hell of a lot of work to do!

(*Completes her cross and exits.*)

**PHYLLIS.** I'm so dreadfully sorry. I feel I owe each and every one of you an apology for what I've done –

**GERRY.** (*Takes her arm and starts leading her offstage.*) Write it down and mail it to them!

(*As they exit.*)

**SAUL.** (*Under his breath.*) Preferably on Saint Swithin's Day!

(*Then all PLAYERS react as phone rings.*)

**AGGIE.** (*Offstage.*) How's that for fast work!

**GERRY.** (*Offstage.*) Beautiful, Aggie, just beautiful! You deserve a cup of coffee for that.

**AGGIE.** (*Offstage.*) I'll settle for that stuff Louise brews.