

ACT I

(Curtain rises on the not-quite-furnished set of the play-within-the-play, *Murder Most Foul*. It looks as pictured in the "play setting" diagram in this script, but the sofa and armchair, right now, are represented by folding chairs, three for the sofa and one for the armchair, and the upstage corridor wall is not yet in place, so that we can see the theatre wall itself through the upstage doorway, and any "backstage clutter" one might normally see in such a place – a ladder, a saw-horse, buckets of paint and brushes, etc. Other accoutrements of the set, however, are as they will appear in the play-within-the-play when it is finally given. **PLAYERS** in this act will wear casual rehearsal clothing.)

(Note: A seat in the front row, in the downstage right area, should be reserved for **GERRY** for all performances, of course.)

(At curtain-rise, **AGGIE MANVILLE** is onstage, watching the curtain open, warily, as a stage manager should.)

AGGIE. (Calls offstage.) Okay, hold it, that's fine!

(Curtain stops, and she peers out into audience.)

Gerry? How's that?

GERRY. (From rear of theatre.) Where's the upstage corridor wall? Aggie, I thought I told you –

(She will walk down aisle to front edge of stage, during.)

AGGIE. It was too wobbly. They're putting on a couple more braces.

GERRY. *(Will come into our view; she is GERALDINE DUNBAR, the director; middle-aged and pleasant-looking.)* I hope they don't make 'em too bulky – our people have to be able to cross backstage behind that thing!

AGGIE. *(Shrugs.)* That's what I told them. All we need is somebody breaking a leg.

GERRY. Where are our players?

AGGIE. *(Jerks a thumb offstage.)* Going over their lines. You want 'em?

GERRY. Of course I want them! It's only three days till dress rehearsal! We've got to get this show moving!

AGGIE. *(Calls.)* Hey! Onstage, everybody!

(Through various doors there will wander in: HENRY and POLLY BENISH, a couple in their middle-fifties; MARLA "SMITTY" SMITH, a pretty-but-awkward girl of about seventeen; SAUL WATSON, a thin, mustachioed man of about forty-five; BILLY CAREWE, an athletic-looking young man of spirit, about twenty-five; VIOLET IMBRY, a pretty face behind which medical science may someday discover a pretty brain, about twenty-two; and LOUISE PEARY, a sad-faced woman in plaid flannel shirt and denims, carrying a roll of gaffer's tape, about thirty-five; all save LOUISE are carrying "nine by twelve" binders containing scripts for their play; the BENISHES will sit upon the sofa, the others will remain standing.)

(Note: For this act, "sofa" and "armchair" refer to the folding chair substitutes for these items.)

GERRY. Louise, don't you have any work to do?

LOUISE. *(Defensively-but-pessimistically, as she nearly always speaks.)* Aggie said everybody.

AGGIE. I didn't mean you.

LOUISE. I'm somebody.

GERRY. Everybody in the play, Louise.

LOUISE. She shoulda said so.

(Exits the way she came in.)

GERRY. Now, is everybody here?

VIOLET. Not counting Louise.

GERRY. I know, Violet, I know.

POLLY. *Can we get on with the rehearsal?*

(Before anyone can reply, we hear the sound of hammering from the direction in which LOUISE vanished.)

HENRY. Does she have to do that now?!

GERRY. Louise!

LOUISE. *(Off. Hammering stops.)* What?

GERRY. Do you have to do that now?

LOUISE. *(Offstage.)* You want that corridor wall or don't you?!

GERRY. Isn't there anything else you can work on?!

LOUISE. *(Offstage.)* I guess.

GERRY. Good. *(Gets command of herself.)* Now, ladies and gentlemen, let us take the action from the top of Act Three. We've wasted enough time already.

POLLY. *I've been ready for half an hour!*

BILLY. *Who hasn't?!*

GERRY. I'm sorry I was late. We've only got the one car, and Frank had to work late –

SAUL. You should've called me – I go right by your place, Gerry.

SMITTY. Saul picks me up for every rehearsal.

BILLY. *(Kidding SAUL.)* Does Margie know that?

SAUL. Aw, c'mon, Billy! Can't have Smitty coming by bicycle after dark.

GERRY. People, can we have these charming conversations later? We've got to get this *show* rehearsed!

POLLY. That's what I've been saying all along! Haven't I, Henry!

HENRY. Yes, dear.

GERRY. Polly, we're all as anxious as you are. This is a first play, by a new author, and we want to do it justice.

SAUL. Justice tempered with Mercy.

POLLY. I happen to think it's a *lovely* play!

SAUL. Sure. You've got the fattest part!

POLLY. How dare you!

HENRY. Darling, *he* means you have the most *lines*!

POLLY. I know *very well* what he meant!

GERRY. (*A bit stridently.*) Might I remind you all that the author will be here at dress rehearsal – and we still haven't learned the third act?!

(*All grimace, and ad-lib mumbled apologies, and start getting into position, during:*)

And what about those scripts? We should have been off book two weeks ago!

(*Positions for the play-within-the-play will be: HENRY at the sideboard, SAUL before the safe but facing into the room, POLLY in the center of the sofa, SMITTY just out of sight and ready to enter through stage right doorway, VIOLET in armchair, and BILLY standing just upstage of armchair.*)

(*Note: These will always be the "top of Act Three" positions for the group.*)

BILLY. (*Tosses script onto left third of sofa.*) I know my lines.

POLLY. (*Drops her script atop his.*) And I know mine.

GERRY. How about the rest of you?

(*They ad-lib apologetic mumbles, but put scripts down.*)

SMITTY. (*Offstage.*) Should I come in?

GERRY. (*Moves back and sits in front row, on:*) As soon as I give the signal. All right, everybody – top of Act Three... *Curtain!*

VIOLET. "Ah, Lord Dudley, you give the most charming parties –!"

(*And curtain starts to descend; GERRY leaps up.*)

GERRY. *Louise!*

LOUISE. (*Off. While curtain continues to close.*) What?

GERRY. Leave the damn curtain alone!

LOUISE. (*Offstage.*) But you said –

GERRY. That was for the *players*! We're starting the act, not ending it!

(*Curtain pauses wherever it is, and starts reopening.*)

LOUISE. (*Offstage.*) I was only doing my job!

(*PLAYERS ad-lib mumbles as curtain comes full open.*)

GERRY. That's fine! Now leave it alone, Louise, okay?

LOUISE. (*Offstage.*) Fine by me!

GERRY. (*Sinks into seat again.*) Okay, everybody, from the top again!

VIOLET. (*After a pause.*) Now?!

GERRY. Yes! Now!

VIOLET. (*A bit flustered.*) "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."

(*There is a silence; PLAYERS slowly look toward BILLY.*)

BILLY. Oh, is that *me*?

GERRY. I thought you *knew* your lines, Billy?!

BILLY. I do! I just forgot where I'm supposed to say them.

POLLY. (*Stands up.*) I can't stand it! He's doing this on purpose! I know he is!

GERRY. Polly, sit down! Billy, pay attention to the cues!

Take it back a line, and start again!

VIOLET. Whose line is it?

AGGIE. Polly's.

GERRY. (*Just realizing.*) Aggie! *Why* are you still onstage?

AGGIE. If I stay in the *wings*, I can't *hear* them!

GERRY. If you heard them, why didn't you throw Billy his line?!

AGGIE. Because you said not to throw them any lines unless they asked for them! I thought he was just pausing before speaking.

GERRY. All right, all right. Aggie, get the hell off stage!

(*AGGIE will turn and exit, during:*)

Everybody get back into positions. We'll take it from the top!

SMITTY. (*Offstage.*) Do *we* have to?!

GERRY. YES!

SMITTY. (*Offstage.*) You don't have to yell.

GERRY. That's what *you* think! (*Enforcing a calmness on her voice.*) Now – shall we begin once again – ?

(*All PLAYERS mumble assent.*)

Good. Take it from the top. Violet, go ahead.

VIOLET. (*Composes herself; then.*) "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 not to show up at one of our parties – " I mean –

GERRY. Go on, go on, go on!

POLLY. (*Recovering.*) " – 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 – !"

GERRY. No, no, no! That's " – he hasn't had an *accident*!"

VIOLET. That's what I *said*!

GERRY. You said, " – *he* hasn't had an accident!" As if someone else *did*!

VIOLET. Should we take it from the top?

POLLY. Oh, damn it!

SMITTY. (*Offstage.*) Come on, Violet!

VIOLET. All right. (*Back into character.*) "...I do hope he hasn't had an accident. These roads can be treacherous at night."

SMITTY. (*Enters and curtsies to HENRY.*) "Begging your pardon, milord, 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. (*Rises.*) "I suppose so. But – don't you think someone should call Percival's flat and ascertain the reason for his absence?"

BILLY. (*Coming 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, Billy?"

(*All PLAYERS sag, excepting VIOLET.*)

BILLY. Violet, you did it again!

VIOLET. Did what?

BILLY. Called me by my own name! I'm "Stephen"! "Stephen Sellers"! And you are "Diana Lassiter"! Is that so hard to remember?!

GERRY. Billy, do you *mind*?!

BILLY. What - ? Oh, sorry, Gerry.

GERRY. Take it from Violet's line.

VIOLET. Okay. (*In character.*) "All of what, Stephen?"

BILLY. (*Goes to speak, goes blank, sags, calls:*) *Line!*

AGGIE. (*Offstage.*) "This business about Percival and -"

BILLY. (*Interrupts.*) Got it! (*In character.*) "This business about Percival and the necklace. 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."

SMITTY. "What, on 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 actually were from Percival!"

BILLY. "I should very much like to *see* that telegram!"

GERRY. (*Jumps up.*) No-no-no! You've jumped the lines!

BILLY. Oh! Sorry. Just a moment - yeah, now I've got it. (*In character.*) "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."

VIOLET. "Then how did you know its *content*?"

GERRY. "Content!"

VIOLET. " - *content*?"

POLLY. "Why - Doctor Forbes told me what it had said."

(*PLAYERS look toward SAUL.*)

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. Uh - uh -

GERRY. *Now* you say that line! The one you jumped before!

BILLY. (*Into character.*) "I should very much like to *see* that cablegram!"

AGGIE. (*Offstage.*) "Telegram!"

BILLY. Oh, hell, what difference does it make?!

GERRY. None! But if Saul says "telegram," then *you* say "telegram!"

SAUL. What do you mean, "if"?! I *always* say "telegram"!

POLLY. I don't give a hoot in hell *who* says *what*! Can't we get *on* with this disaster?!

HENRY. If we'd get *through* the thing once, we could start *polishing* our *parts*!

POLLY. And when do we get the real furniture? These metal chairs are painful to work on!

SAUL. But they help you polish your parts...?!

POLLY. (*Incensed.*) There! He's doing it again!

GERRY. Saul, will you stop with the jokes and buckle down to work?!

SAUL. I was just trying to ease the tension.

HENRY. Your jokes about Polly are *causing* the tension!

SAUL. Okay-okay, no more jokes. Now can we please get back to the play?!

(*Offstage hammering starts again.*)

GERRY. *Louise!*

(*Hammering stops.*)

LOUISE. (*Offstage.*) I thought I could get the job finished while nobody was working.

GERRY. We're about to *start* working!

LOUISE. (*Offstage.*) Well, why didn't you say so?!

(*We hear clunk of dropped hammer.*)

I'm gonna make some coffee.

GERRY. *Fine!* (*Regains some control.*) Now – please – everybody in position, and we'll pick it up at Billy's line, all right?

(*PLAYERS mumble assent; then:*)

BILLY. (*In character.*) "I should very much like 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."

(*As PLAYERS look toward SMITTY, there is a crash backstage.*)

POLLY. What was that?

AGGIE. (*Offstage.*) Louise dropped the coffee cup tray!

LOUISE. (*Offstage.*) You bumped it out of my hands!

AGGIE. (*Offstage.*) The hell I did!

GERRY. Did anything break?

LOUISE. (*Offstage.*) I don't think so.

AGGIE. (*Offstage.*) She bent one of the spoons.

LOUISE. (*Offstage.*) That was bent!

GERRY. Ladies! Ladies! Can you hold it down, please?!

(*Listeners; silence; sighs in relief.*)

Okay, let's pick it up where we left off.

SMITTY. (*In character.*) "No, sir."

BILLY. (*Wasn't ready.*) What?

SMITTY. I said –

BILLY. I *know* what you said, I just wasn't ready for it.

GERRY. Go back to Billy's line and start again.

BILLY. Okay. Um...oh. "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!"

GERRY. Wait, wait! Smitty, that's short for "madam" – it doesn't mean the *phone* was keeping mum!

SMITTY. Oh! Oh, I see! (*Back into character.*) "...out of order since this *afternoon*, mum!"

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

(*SAUL opens his mouth, then pauses, frowning.*)

GERRY. Saul, that's your cue!

SAUL. Didn't we skip a page? This part is coming too early.

GERRY. Aggie – ?

AGGIE. Wait a minute, I'm trying to find the place. What page are *you* on?

GERRY. I left my script at home. I was so anxious to get the car, that as soon as Frank came in, I took right off without thinking about it.

AGGIE. (*Comes onstage, holding script.*) You know, I think Saul's right – we go right from page three-two to page three-four. Who's got a complete script?

(*PLAYERS grab up their scripts, start paging through them.*)

BILLY. I've got it! Page three-three. Saul's right! We skipped the whole bit about the diamond necklace.

AGGIE. How come I don't have that page?

GERRY. Oh, dear, maybe I miscounted when I was getting the Xeroxes made. Does everybody *else* have it?

(PLAYERS *ad-lib* assent.)

GERRY. Okay, then, let's back up and do the part we skipped.

AGGIE. How can I follow along without that page?

SAUL. Here, take *my* script. I've got the lines down cold.

(*A little testily.*) If I ever get the chance to *say* them!

BILLY. Say, while we're stopped, I've got a question.

GERRY. (*Wearily.*) What?

BILLY. It's about the play's title – isn't that a steal from something else? An old Agatha Christie movie, I think it was.

VIOLET. Oh, I don't think Phyllis Montague would *steal* a title, Billy.

SAUL. There's no way she *could*! No one can copyright a *title*! It's the law. There just aren't enough words to go around to name things.

BILLY. Even if that's true – what about the advertising for our show? Won't some people think this show *is* by Agatha Christie?

POLLY. (*Smugs.*) So much the better for our box office!

HENRY. And it *is* a murder mystery, so no one gets hurt!

VIOLET. Doesn't sound like much of a murder mystery, if no one gets hurt...?

SMITTY. I thought Sir Percival got bumped off by Doctor Forbes – ?!

GERRY. (*Who has been trying to regain control of the group during the overlap-delivery of preceding eight speeches.*) Hold it! All of you! Did we come here tonight to rehearse, or to discuss Originality versus Plagiarism?

BILLY. Gerry's right. Let's get back to work. Sorry I interrupted.

POLLY. Which line do we go back to?

SMITTY. Yeah, where does the necklace come in, anyhow?

AGGIE. (*Moving offstage, reading from script.*) Oh, I see what happened. Smitty, you came in too early.

SMITTY. I did? I thought I was supposed to enter when Violet says that line about the treacherous roads.

AGGIE. (*Laughs.*) You're *almost* right – it's where she says the line about "lecherous toads!"

SMITTY. Oh, gee, I'm sorry. But it *sounds* about the same.

SAUL. Phyllis Montague fancies herself a poet.

POLLY. She *is* a poet. A rare talent – and a great writer!

SAUL. Would you say that if she had you playing a *mute*?

HENRY. Now, see here – !

GERRY. Stop it, all of you! Smitty, listen to me – this is important – you *mustn't* take your cue from the words alone. Pay attention to the *plot*. Then you'll *know* when you're supposed to enter, even if Violet says the line *wrong*, don't you see?

VIOLET. I didn't say the line *wrong*!

BILLY. You didn't say it at *all*!

VIOLET. Well, how *could* I when Smitty came in *early*?

GERRY. All right, all right, that's enough! Do your arguing on your own time.

LOUISE. (*Offstage.*) *Coffee's* ready!

AGGIE. (*Closes script.*) Finally! I could use a cup!

POLLY. But we've barely gotten started!

GERRY. Listen, maybe a break is a good idea. Let's all have a cup, then take this thing from the top and get it right!

BILLY. *Now* you're talking!

(PLAYERS *will emigrate toward sound of LOUISE's call, and GERRY will come up on stage to join AGGIE as they exit.*)

GERRY. Aggie – don't go yet. I want to talk to you. I'm getting very worried about our progress.

AGGIE. What progress?!

GERRY. (*Laughs ruefully.*) I know what you mean. We've never been this far behind on a show.

AGGIE. It's not your fault, Gerry. We've never had the illustrious *author* in our hair before, either! If Phyllis didn't keep *rewriting* the damned show while the cast is trying to *learn* it – !