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SF PERUSALS

Samuel French Acting Edition

Play On!

by Rick Abbot

SAMUEL FRENCH

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CAST OF CHARACTERS

(In order of Appearance)

AGGIE MANVILLE—a stage manager and prompter

GERALDINE "GERRY" DUNBAR—a community theatre director

HENRY BENISH ("Lord Dudley"—a Character Actor)

POLLY BENISH ("Lady Margaret"—a Character Actress)

MARLA "SMITTY" SMITH ("Doris the maid"—a Supporting Player)

SAUL WATSON ("Doctor Rex Forbes"—a Villain)

BILLY CAREWE ("Stephen Sellers"—a Juvenile)

VIOLET IMBRY ("Diana Lassiter"—an Ingenue)

LOUISE PEARY—a sound-and-lighting-and-scenic technician

PHYLLIS MONTAGUE—a novice playwright in the community

Time: The Present

Locale: The Stage of a Community Theatre

ACT ONE

A rehearsal of Phyllis's "Murder Most Foul."

ACT TWO

The dress rehearsal of their play.

ACT THREE

Opening night of their play.

[NOTE: For simplicity's sake, the speeches in PLAY ON! which appear in quotation-marks are speeches from "Murder Most Foul," the show-within-the-show; all other speeches are, of course, the words of the actors in *this* play, not the play they're *doing*.]

Play On !

ACT ONE

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 accouterments 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 50s;* MARLA "SMITTY" SMITH, *a pretty-but-awkward girl of about 17;* SAUL WATSON, *a thin, mustachioed man of about 45;* BILLY CAREWE, *an athletic-looking young man of spirit, about 25;* VIOLET IMBRY, *a pretty face behind which medical science may someday discover a pretty brain, about 22; and* LOUISE PEARY, *a sad-faced woman in plaid flannel shirt and denims, carrying a roll of gaffer's tape, about 35; ALL save* LOUISE *are carrying 9"x12" 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. (*Off.*) You want that corridor wall or don't you?!

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

LOUISE. (*Off.*) 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. (*Off.*) 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. (*Off.*) But you said—

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

(*CURTAIN pauses wherever it is, and starts re-opening.*)

LOUISE (*Off.*) 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. (*Off.*) 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 offstage! (AGGIE *will turn and exit, during:*) Everybody get back into positions. We'll take it from the top!

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

GERRY. YES!

SMITTY. (*Off.*) 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. (*Off.*) 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 curtseys 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. (*Off.*) "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 con*tent?*"

GERRY. "*Con*tent!"

VIOLET. "—con*tent*?"

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. (*Off.*) "*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. (*Off.*) I thought I could get the job finished while nobody was working.

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

LOUISE. (*Off.*) 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. (*Off.*) Louise dropped the coffeecup tray!

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

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

GERRY. Did anything break?

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

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

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

GERRY. Ladies! Ladies! Can you hold it down, *please!?* (*Listens; 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.*) 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. (*Shrugs.*) 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. (*Off.*) *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—!

GERRY. She's *promised* not to change anything *else*, Aggie.

AGGIE. What do you want to bet she's going to show up here with seven new pages?!

GERRY. Oh, *don't*, Aggie! *They* haven't learned the *last* batch of rewrites!

AGGIE. Small wonder, the way, Polly keeps inviting Phyllis to dinner, and getting her part fattened! It's almost as big as *she* is, now!

GERRY. Aggie, don't *you* start with the fat-jokes, please! I'm having enough trouble with *Saul!*

AGGIE. If Polly had her way, this play would be a one-woman *monologue!*

GERRY. Well, at least Phyllis is letting us do her play *free!*

AGGIE. Naturally! Nobody would pay *money* to do it!

GERRY. Be fair, Aggie—it's not *that* bad.

AGGIE. Oh—I suppose not. But if Polly keeps padding her part—!

GERRY. She won't. I'll have to put my foot down. Three days until dress rehearsal—we'll be lucky if we learn the lines we've *got!*

AGGIE. Oh, I don't know about that—some of the *mistakes* tonight are better than the *original* lines! If you'd just let the cast alone, this show could be a riot!

GERRY. Aggie, "Murder Most Foul" is *not* a *comedy!* Phyllis Montague would *scream* if the audience started *laughing* at it! She'd pass right out on the floor!

AGGIE. Well, then, you'd better have the smelling-salts handy for opening night.

GERRY. Oh, Aggie—!

(*But before they can continue, PLAYERS start returning to the stage, sipping coffee, so they let it drop.*)

GERRY. (*Starts off.*) Is there anything left in the pot? (*Will exit during:*)

SAUL. (*Who has just taken a sip, makes a terrible face.*) Not if you're lucky!

LOUISE. (*Off.*) I *heard* that, Saul Watson!

SAUL. (*Amiably.*) Then let it be a lessen to you!

(*Offstage, we hear* LOUISE *laugh.*)

POLLY. (*Sitting in center of sofa.*) I hope we get this act done tonight. Three days till dress rehearsal and we haven't even done a full run-through!

BILLY. Thank your friend *Phyllis* for *that!*

HENRY. You mustn't blame Phyllis, Billy—she's simply a perfectionist.

SMITTY. If she wasn't satisfied with the script, why did she submit it?

SAUL. Because if we'd picked some other show, she'd have had to wait till next *year* to get it done!

VIOLET. Why couldn't we do it as our *next* show?

BILLY. We've got our audiences pre-conditioned.

SAUL. "Brainwashed" is more like it!

POLLY. That's putting it rather strongly, Saul.

SAUL. It's the unvarnished truth. We never vary, season after season. We do a mystery, a comedy, a drama, and a musical, in that order, without fail.

VIOLET. Yes, but why?

HENRY. We started the theatre that way, and it just got to be a habit. For us *and* our patrons.

VIOLET. But what would be the harm if we mixed it up?

SAUL. It would confuse people. The comedy fans would come to the drama and laugh at all the tragic moments—and the musical fans would start beating time to the comedy—!

BILLY. Or sob during the mystery!

AGGIE. They may *still* do *that!*

GERRY. (*Re-enters with cup of coffee.*) Aggie! Whose side are you on, anyway?!

AGGIE. On the side of *sanity*—which doesn't do me much good around *here!* (*Exits toward coffee.*)

SAUL. (*Drains his cup.*) Well, *I'm* all set. Anybody *else* ready to give it a go?

POLLY. Oh, relax, Saul. We're all *much* too tense, tonight. Why do we keep *snapping* at each other the way we do? This near the opening, we're usually kidding around and having a *marvelous* time!

BILLY. If you want *my* opinion, we're running scared.

SMITTY. Scared of what?

SAUL. In our own way, Smitty, we're just as perfection-oriented as our author. We want the show to be a smash, not a smash-up.

HENRY. Amen.

(AGGIE *re-enters with empty tray, starts collecting cups.*)

POLLY. We'll get it. Somehow, no matter how awful a show may look in rehearsal, we always manage to bring it off.

GERRY. That's with a *printed* script, Polly. This typewritten stuff is okay, don't get me wrong—it's all the *revisions* that are killing us!

POLLY. But Phyllis gave her solemn word—

SAUL. It's the only kind of word she knows! I'll bet she's never giggled in her life!

VIOLET. And she promised the same thing *last* week, Polly, then showed up on Monday with three new scenes!

SAUL. I wish she wouldn't keep changing the identity of the murderer! I don't know whether to radiate menace or charm the pants off everyone!

GERRY. Well, you won't do *either* just *standing* there! Come on, everybody, positions! (AGGIE *will exit with the last of their cups, during:*) Let's see if we can't go through to the curtain without stopping. (*Will descend from stage and move toward her seat.*)

SMITTY. (*Starts Offstage.*) We'd better! I've got to get home and study for a biology exam!

BILLY. Wait, Smitty! . . . Gerry—are we taking it from the top, or where?

GERRY. Why don't we go back to Violet's line, when Smitty made her entrance too early, and do the page we left out?

(*PLAYERS ad-lib assent, and get into their positions.*)

VIOLET. I can't remember what my line *is!*

SAUL. Aggie, throw her a cue!

AGGIE. (*Off.*) Just let me find the place . . . (*They wait a moment; then:*) Okay, I found it. Violet, I'll feed you Billy's line, then you start.

VIOLET. Okay.

AGGIE. (*Off.*) "Ah, but Lady Margaret, he might have had motor trouble."

VIOLET. (*In character.*) "Yes, indeed. I do hope *he* hasn't had an—" Wait, I'll get it.

POLLY. I certainly *hope* so!

GERRY. Quiet, Polly. Go on, Violet.

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

SMITTY. (*Off.*) Is that where I—?

GERRY. No, no! That was "treacherous"! Wait for "lecherous"!

SMITTY. (*Off.*) Oh, yeah. Sorry.

GERRY. (*After a silence.*) Well? Who *does* have the next line?

AGGIE. (*Off.*) It's Polly's.

POLLY. (*Straightens up.*) Oh, my! Let me see—

AGGIE. (*Off.*) It's—

POLLY. No, don't tell me! I'll get it!

VIOLET. (*Happy to return* POLLY's *earlier comment.*) I certainly *hope* so!

GERRY. Oh, for the love of—!

POLLY. I've got it, I've got it! Violet, would you—?

VIOLET. (*Interrupts wearily with the cue-line:*) ". . . roads can be treacherous at night!"

POLLY. "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 Diamond—" (*Stops.*) Gerry—does it *have* to be called that?! It sounds like it comes from a delicatessen!

POLLY. That's because you're not sounding the "h," Billy. "*Dell*-hee!"—not "Delly"!

SAUL. Polly, that "h" is silent! It *is* pronounced "Delly"!

SMITTY. (*Enters.*) Can't we *please* go on? I've got to study for that exam!

GERRY. No, wait, Smitty—Billy's got a point. It *does* sound like it belongs alongside the liverwurst—it looks all right when you read it in the script, but it sounds just plain silly!

SAUL. Okay, so call it the "*Calcutta* Diamond"!

POLLY. You can't *do* that! Phyllis Montague told me particularly that she chose that name for its lovely alliteration—"*Del*hi *Di*amond"—

SAUL. Okay, so we'll alliterate—we'll call it the "Calcutta Carbuncle"!

VIOLET. *Carbuncle?*

SAUL. Yeah. It's a big stone like a ruby—a garnet-cut whatchacallit—a cabochon!

VIOLET. Well, it *sounds* like a big *zit!*

SAUL. So do you!

GERRY. Saul! Stop it! There *must* be another gem we can use—

POLLY. You shouldn't tamper with Phyllis's dialogue —she won't like it.

GERRY. She'll like it a lot *less* if her "Delhi Diamond" gets a *laugh!*

HENRY. Gerry's right, dear. We *should* have a different name for it.

POLLY. (*Half convinced.*) Well—

BILLY. Hey, *I've* got it! Let's call it the "Ranchipur Ruby"!

SAUL. Hey, I *like* that! It's got class!

POLLY. But whatever will we tell Phyllis?!

SMITTY. Tell her she *rewrote* it that way! She's done so many revisions, she'll probably believe it! (*Exits.*)

GERRY. Well, let's hope so! Meanwhile—*children*—can we return to the play?!

BILLY. Okay, okay. Where was I—?

AGGIE. (*Off.*) Hey, Gerry, should I write in that change, or not?

GERRY. You may as well—but do it in pencil, just in case.

AGGIE. (*Off.*) Gotcha. (*Beat.*) How do you spell "Ranchipur"?

GERRY. (*At wit's end.*) *Fake* it! Nobody has to *read* it but *you!* (*To* BILLY.) Go ahead with your line—it's the one right after Lord Dudley scoffs at the curse.

BILLY. Oh, yeah . . . "And yet—everyone who has ever owned the Ranchipur Ruby has always met with a dreadful demise!"

POLLY. There! You see? I *knew* there was a reason for Phyllis's words. It's double-alliteration: "Delhi Diamond" and "dreadful demise"!

SAUL. Oh, who *gives* a damn?!

HENRY. See here, you can't talk to my wife like that!

GERRY. Henry, for once I agree with Saul! Who *gives* a damn! Billy, go on!

BILLY. Right! . . . "And yet—everyone who has

ever owned the Ranchipur Ruby has always met with a *rotten requiem!*"

(*ALL laugh except* POLLY *and* HENRY.)

SAUL. Aw, c'mon, Billy! You sound like an elocution teacher!

BILLY. (*Shrugs.*) So does Phyllis Montague!

POLLY. Now, really—!

VIOLET. It double-alliterates, doesn't it?

GERRY. Billy—don't. Leave the line's ending as written. Please?

BILLY. Oh, all right. "—has always met with a dreadful demise!"

VIOLET. (*Beat.*) Oh! *My* line! (*Into character.*) "But Percival doesn't own the diamond—" Oops, wait! "—the *ruby* anymore—not since he sold it to Lord Dudley for Lady Margaret's collection."

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

BILLY. "See here, Doctor Forbes—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 Poppycock. Superstitious drivel!"

SAUL. "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. "When he looks at me—I feel as though his hands were moving all over my body."

POLLY. "But—he is a knight of the realm!"

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

(SMITTY *enters.*)

SMITTY. "Begging your pardon, milord, but should we delay dinner any longer?"

(*PHONE RINGS.*)

GERRY. (*Comes to her feet.*) *Louise!* What are you *doing?!*

LOUISE. (*Off.*) Isn't that where the phone rings? . . . Oh, wait! I turned two pages at once! Sorry about that!

POLLY. "Sorry," she says! If she does that during the performance—!

GERRY. She won't, Polly, she won't! Louise, you've got to be more careful!

LOUISE. (*Off.*) Look on the bright side. Now we know the phone-bell works.

POLLY. That woman! I could—!

SAUL. No you couldn't. Louise has a black belt in karate.

POLLY. And how do you know *I* haven't?!

SAUL. They only go up to size forty-four!

GERRY. (*Apprehensively.*) Saul—?

(*But it is too late;* POLLY *comes to her feet so fast that the chair falls over backwards, and storms Offstage with* HENRY *meekly in her wake, on:*)

POLLY. That does it! I'm through!

HENRY. Now, honey, you mustn't be hasty about this—! (*They are gone; remaining PLAYERS look accusingly at* SAUL.)

SAUL. (*Much abashed.*) I was only *kidding* . . .

LOUISE. (*Wanders Onstage.*) What was that crash? (*Sees fallen chair.*) Oh.

SAUL. I better go apologize.. (*Hurries out after duo.*)

VIOLET. (*Dispirited.*) What do we do now?

AGGIE. (*Comes Onstage, script in hand.*) You can't work *around* her—she's got herself in damn near every scene.

BILLY. (*Righting chair and straightening "sofa."*) Not the love scene in Act Two. Maybe we could do that one.

VIOLET. Can't we wait till we have a real sofa? That metal's awfully hard to cuddle on.

GERRY. Aggie, when *do* we get the sofa?

AGGIE. We should've had it two days ago.

GERRY. Could you call and find out?

AGGIE. I could try. (*Exits.*)

LOUISE. You want a look at that corridor wall, Gerry?

GERRY. (*Will get onto stage.*) Yes, I'd better. I'm worried about those braces.

LOUISE. You and me both. I've got six two-by-fours on it already, and the thing still flaps like a sail! (*They will move Offstage during:*)

SMITTY. Well, I guess I'll go hit the old biology book!

BILLY. You've got it *here?*

SMITTY. Why not? All the time I spend waiting to make my entrance, I could study for *three* exams! (*Exits.*)

BILLY. Well, Violet, whattaya say—?

VIOLET. Oh—all right. (*Gets up from "armchair," sits on "sofa."*) Ready when you are.

BILLY. (*Moves to point just inside right doorway.*) Okay. On your mark—get set— (*Into character.*) "Oh! Diana. I was seeking Lady Margaret."

VIOLET. "Lady Margaret is cutting roses in the

garden, Stephen." (*Looks down demurely, folds her hands in her lap.*) "She—may not return for some time."

BILLY. "I see." (*Moves closer.*) "Would you mind if I waited for her . . . here?"

VIOLET. "Naturally not."

BILLY. "Might I . . . sit?"

VIOLET. "If you are so inclined."

BILLY. (*Sits beside her.*) "Diana—"

VIOLET. (*Eyes still downcast, turns head away.*) "Yes, Stephen—?"

BILLY. "Would you take offense if I were to—to—?"

VIOLET. "Stephen, what are you trying to say?"

BILLY. "Oh, dash it all, Diana, must we play at words?! You *know* the message that longs to cry out from within my heart!"

VIOLET. (*Raises her eyes, looks at him.*) "Is it possible—do I dare for a moment imagine—that the message in your heart is the selfsame message that cries out from within my own—?"

BILLY. "Diana—do you mean—do I dare to dream—?" (*Takes her hands.*)

VIOLET. "Have a care, sir—have a care—you know that I am betrothed to another man!"

BILLY. "And yet—you do not draw away . . . ?"

VIOLET. "Oh, Stephen—can you not reason out *why?!*"

BILLY. "I—I am almost afraid to!"

VIOLET. "Then *cease* your noble trepidations, Stephen Sellers. For—though I am a high-born lady—I am also a woman!"

BILLY. "Oh, Diana!" (*Kisses her lightly on the lips.*)

VIOLET. "Oh, Stephen!" (*Lays her head against his shoulder.*) If Doctor Forbes should come upon us—!"

BILLY. "*Hang* your illustrious fiancé! He shall not

have you!" (*Kisses her again, a bit more firmly.*) "Oh, Diana—!"

VIOLET. Oh—Billy!

BILLY. Oh—Violet! (*And they go into a* real *clinch, clutching and caressing and swaying, the metal chairs rattling until:*)

LOUISE. (*Enters.*) What's all that clattering—?! (*They spring apart and come to their feet.*) Ha! No *wonder* you want a real sofa!

VIOLET. Now, Louise—!

LOUISE. I didn't see a thing. Not a thing. (*Gives a happy cackle of amusement and exits.*)

VIOLET. Billy—do you think she suspects?!

BILLY. How could she? I didn't suspect, *myself,* till just a moment ago!

VIOLET. Oh, darling, neither did I! (*They almost embrace, but break decorously apart and try to look innocent as they hear:*)

PHYLLIS. (*Off.*) *Yoo*-hoo—?! Anybody *here—?!*

VIOLET. Billy! That sounds like Miss Montague!

BILLY. Tonight? But she promised not to come back till dress rehearsal!

(*OTHERS reappear Onstage via various routes, all wearing the same apprehensive look as our duo.*)

GERRY. Did *you* all hear what *I* heard—?

POLLY. It sounded like *Phyllis!*

SAUL. Probably with five new pages of dialogue for *you!*

POLLY. (*With patient forebearance.*) Saul—I just accepted *one* apology from you—do you want to have to make *another?!*

SAUL. (*Sincerely.*) Sorry, Polly. (*This time we can definitely pinpoint the source of the voice as emanating from the rear of the theatre:*)

PHYLLIS. *Yoo*-hoo! How *are* you all?!

(*ALL turn and peer out into theatre, watching the progress of* PHYLLIS MONTAGUE—*a maiden lady of indeterminate age, probably anywhere between forty-two and fifty-seven—and especially noting the sheaf of papers she carries, as she hurries happily down the aisle toward the stage.*)

GERRY. Why—Phyllis—we weren't expecting you—at least, not tonight—!

PHYLLIS. Oh, I *know* I'm being a *naughty* girl, Geraldine, but I have so many new and good things to share with you all that I simply *couldn't* wait until the dress rehearsal!

SAUL. (*Wide-eyed, and absolutely frank:*) Well, *that's* a mercy!

(PHYLLIS *has gotten up Onstage, now, and is moving along the row of people there, handing each an identical sheaf of stapled-together pages, during:*)

GERRY. Phyllis! *More* changes? We *open* in four nights!

PHYLLIS. That's why I decided not to wait until dress rehearsal to stop by. This would be much-too-much to have to learn in one night!

HENRY. What makes you think we can do it in *three?*

PHYLLIS. Oh, don't be a tease, Henry. It's really all very simple. I've simply added just *one* extra character and cut the love-scene.

BILLY and VIOLET. (*In woeful unison.*) "*Cut* the *love*-scene"?!

PHYLLIS. Perhaps I'm putting it too strongly—it's not precisely cut—just cut out of Act Two and moved back to Act One.

BILLY. Oh, well, that's not so bad.

PHYLLIS. Except it's no longer between Diana and Stephen.

VIOLET. Then—between who else?

AGGIE. Yeah, the Lord and Lady are already married—

SMITTY. You *can't* mean the Doctor and the *Maid*—*can* you?

PHYLLIS. Oh, dear, perhaps I didn't make it clear. *Diana* still plays the scene—but now it's with Sir Percival!

GERRY. What? But Phyllis—

LOUISE. How can you do such a thing?

PHYLLIS. Oh, well, I got to thinking that perhaps a knight of the realm was a better catch for Diana than a mere rich commoner like Stephen, so—

LOUISE. Phyllis, I didn't say *why*—I said *how* can you do it? We don't *have* a Sir Percival in the play!

GERRY. Exactly! Everybody *refers* to him, all the time, but he never actually *appears!*

SAUL. Besides, it's kind of rough on *Diana* if you make that switch—considering that I *bump off* Percival before I show up at the house!

PHYLLIS. You *do?*

POLLY. Don't you even remember your own *plot,* Phyllis?

PHYLLIS. Yes, but I don't recall a *murder* . . . show me where it says so.

BILLY. We never actually *see* it done. But once we find that Percival has vanished, and then Rex has the famous gemstone Percival was bringing to the party, we figure out who *killed* him, see?

PHYLLIS. (*Pondering deeply.*) Murder. I never thought of it as a murder. I just thought that, well, Rex had picked Percival's pocket, and perhaps drained all the petrol from the tank of his car to keep him from the party. After all—murder is so—so—

GERRY. *Popular* with our *patrons!*

POLLY. And we're already *advertising* it as a murder mystery!

AGGIE. And we *do open* in *four nights,* Phyllis, for pete's *sake!* It's a bit late to audition Percivals!

PHYLLIS. Oh, but I've written you all the loveliest new lines . . . ! (*Looks ready to weep.*) Won't you—won't you at least have a *look* at them—?

(*There is a pause, and an exchange of glances among the group, and then—since none of them is truly heartless—they all shrug and mumble some sort of assent, and start looking—just a bit warily—at the new pages.*)

VIOLET. (*Gasps.*) I'm *pregnant!* (*OTHERS react, of course.*)

BILLY. You're *what?!*

VIOLET. I mean *Diana* is! (*OTHERS evince great relief; she continues:*) But who's the father?

PHYLLIS. That's on the third sheet. (*ALL flip pages like mad; then:*)

AGGIE. Lord Dudley!

POLLY. (*Appalled.*) Henry!

HENRY. (*Patiently.*) Polly, don't be an idiot.

POLLY. Oh. Yes. But—it *was* a bit of a shock.

BILLY. This is crazy! Phyllis, how can Dudley be the father, when he and Diana have only just met?!

PHYLLIS. Oh, that's on the fifth sheet. (*ALL flip pages again.*)

GERRY. *Amnesia?!*

PHYLLIS. Yes, because that explains why he doesn't remember their meeting.

SMITTY. But if she's carrying his child, *Diana* must remember something!

PHYLLIS. No, that's explained on page seven. (*Again ALL flip like crazy.*) You see, it was a very dark night, and—

GERRY. (*Closes up her sheaf, lets hand holding sheaf drop.*) Phyllis, this is totally *impossible!* The entire *thrust* of the plot is altered! Everybody has a brand-new motivation for what they do!

PHYLLIS. Well, surely, with a little work—

LOUISE. In the next four *days?!*

SAUL. We couldn't do it in four *months!*

PHYLLIS. But—I've worked so hard—!

GERRY. And we *haven't?!* Phyllis, there's *no way* we can make these changes at this late date!

PHYLLIS. But they're such *little* changes!

BILLY. Little?! What about the ending? If Stephen is going to marry Diana, won't her pregnancy kind of put a *crimp* in the festivities?

PHYLLIS. Well, I'm working on that.

GERRY. *More* changes?! Phyllis Montague, do you have any notion how *hard* it is to do a play—even a play that *doesn't* change direction every three days?! This script should have been finalized three *weeks* ago!

POLLY. (*Who has been reading the new sheets.*) What's this?! Lady Margaret goes into *shock* at the news of Diana's pregnancy and loses the power of *speech?!*

SAUL. (*Brightens.*) Really? Say, maybe this version's not so bad *after* all!

GERRY. (*Warningly.*) Saul . . . !

SMITTY. And what about my *mother?*

GERRY. (*Distracted.*) What *about* your mother?

SMITTY. Well, when I first tried out for the part, my mother insisted on looking over the script because she didn't want me in a play full of sex! If Diana's pregnant, I'll have to quit the show.

PHYLLIS. But she's only *two months* pregnant—I mean, it's not going to *show—?!*

SMITTY. Mother thinks ahead.

PHYLLIS. (*A little genteel blackmail.*) Well, of course, if you'd *all* rather not *do* my little play—

GERRY. (*Having none of it.*) Now, hold it *right* there, Phyllis! We all appreciate the chance to do a play for which we do not have to pay royalties—in fact, doing your show would put the theatre budget in the black for the first time in six months! However —when the play-reading committee agreed to do this play of yours, it was on the basis of the *original* script! Now, *that* play we promised to do, and we will—but all this *new* stuff has nothing to *do* with that agreement—!

PHYLLIS. (*Trying to hide her dismay.*) You're telling me that you now feel free to *reject* my play—?

GERRY. Not the play as *first* submitted, Phyllis—and I'll even allow you *all* the alterations you've *already* made—but this *last* batch is just too much!

PHYLLIS. (*One last stand.*) Do you have the authority to speak for the entire committee?

GERRY. No. But when I tell them it's either the *first* version or *no* version, I'll have their *unanimous* backing!

PHYLLIS. (*Trying to save face.*) Well, of course, if you really feel *strongly* about this matter, dear Geraldine— (*ALL simply stare at her; she wilts, and seeks an ally.*) Polly! How do *you* feel about it—?

POLLY. Well—I—it *is* rather close to opening night, Phyllis, and—and—of course, *perhaps*—

SAUL. (*Quietly.*) Remember—she cut *all* your speeches—

POLLY. (*Remembers.*) I'm with Gerry! (*Hands sheaf back to* PHYLLIS; *OTHERS all immediately do the same, until she holds an untidy stack, during:*)

VIOLET. Me, too!

BILLY. You bet!

SMITTY. Absolutely!

SAUL. Right on!

HENRY. I agree!

LOUISE. Thanks, anyway!

AGGIE. Nice try!

GERRY. Sorry, Phyllis!

PHYLLIS. (*Very annoyed and somewhat angry.*) All right. All right. Go ahead and *do* the original version. But if the show's *reviews* turn out to be a box-office disaster—well—!

SAUL. We'll all remember who *wrote* the original.

PHYLLIS. Oh! *Oh!* OH! (*Slams her stack under one arm and storms off into the wings; ALL pause, listening, till we hear DOOR SLAM.*)

GERRY. Do you think—maybe—we were a little rough on her—?

POLLY. She *did* take it rather hard . . .

HENRY. She said once at dinner that—she looks upon this play as her *child*—

POLLY. It's the only offspring she'll ever have—

HENRY. And when she tried to make that child a little prettier—

GERRY. Oh, dear! I wish you hadn't put it like that!

SAUL. Gerry, don't be a sap! Phyllis wasn't making her child *prettier*—she was giving it an extra *head!*

GERRY. (*Laughs, her good sense restored.*) You're right. Let's leave the kid alone and start learning to love it *as is!*

BILLY. *Now* you're talking!

AGGIE. Come on, everyone—you *came* here to rehearse—so let's *rehearse!*

LOUISE. (*Starts Offstage.*) I'll give you all to the count of three—and if I don't hear some snappy dialogue, I'm picking up that *hammer* again!

AGGIE. (*Moving after* LOUISE.) And *I'll* hold the *nails!*

GERRY. (*Starts Offstage as they exit.*) *I'm* grabbing

another cup of coffee—*you* people pick up your long faces and get into character! (*Exits.*)

BILLY. (*Calls after her.*) Shall we take it from the top?

GERRY. (*Off.*) *Not* if you want to finish the act before *dawn!* Pick it up from Saul's line about the telegraph office.

SAUL. Right! (*Gets into character as PLAYERS get into places, and:*) "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?"

(*The PHONE rings.*)

SAUL. "Does *that* answer your question?"

POLLY. "Stephen, I believe you owe Doctor Forbes an apology."

(*PHONE RINGS again.*)

HENRY. "You had best answer that, Doris, before we owe the *caller* an apology, too!"

SMITTY. (*Moving to phone.*) "Yes, sir!" (*Answers.*) "Hello—? . . . Who? . . . Why, yes, he is. Just a

moment." (*Extends phone to* HENRY.) "It's for you, sir."

HENRY. (*As he takes phone.*) "Who is it, Doris?"

SMITTY. "Sir Percival."

SAUL. (*Aghast.*) "It *can't* be—! . . . I mean—"

BILLY. (*Calmly.*) "Yes, Doctor? Exactly what *do* you mean?"

SAUL. "Why—I—I—"

(GERRY, *sipping coffee, appears in Upstage doorway, watching group, and* AGGIE *appears similarly outside Upstage window, during:*)

HENRY. (*On phone.*) "Hello? . . . What? . . . Ah! Yes, I see . . . Yes, thank you! Thank you very much!" (*Hangs up.*)

POLLY. "Why—Dudley—you look so strange! What did Percival *say?*"

(HENRY *opens his mouth to reply, but before he can:*)

GERRY. Excuse me, just a moment—

(*PLAYERS pause and all look toward her.*)

VIOLET. Did we do something wrong?

GERRY. No, of course not. But I wanted to see what you were all *doing* when the phone rang. Could we take it back a few lines—?

AGGIE. It's a long way to the end of the act, Gerry. Do you think—?

GERRY. This will only take a moment, Aggie. Just back up to Smitty's line about the phone, okay—?

(*PLAYERS ad-lib assent, shift into positions, and:*)

SMITTY. "The telephone has been out of order since this *afternoon,* mum."

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

(*And from the phone comes the sound of a musical AUTO-HORN* [*C-E-low G-E*]; ALL *react.*)

ALL. *Louise!*

LOUISE. (*Off.*) Sorry! I forgot to wind the tape back! Hang on—*now* I've got it!

(*PLAYERS get into position, and:*)

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

(*And from the phone comes the sound of a GUN-SHOT.*)

LOUISE. (*Off.*) Oops! Wrong place!

AGGIE. (*Shakes her head.*) And only four more days till opening night!

(*PLAYERS all sag, and we hear:*)

LOUISE. (*Off.*) *I'll* get it! (*Sound of AUTO-HORN.*) Oops! (*Sound of GUNSHOT.*) Sorry! (*Sound of SCREECH OF TIRES.*) Damn it all to hell!

(*And as we hear—in quick succession—the sounds of, in order, AUTO-HORN, THUNDERING FOOT-STEPS, SCREECH OF TIRES, GUNSHOT-SCREAM-GUNSHOT-SCREAM-GUNSHOT-SCREAM—during which the dispirited GROUP all sag lower and lower and lower—.*)

THE CURTAIN FALLS

ACT TWO

The set as we last saw it, except that the Upstage corridor wall is now in place, and there are a real sofa and a real armchair in place of the folding chairs in Act One. [NOTE: If you desire a more radical transformation, you might also have lacked, in Act One, the window-drapes, the tray of liquor bottles and glasses on the sideboard, and the books—or some of them—on the bookshelves; these items will be in place, now, of course, in this act.] Just before curtain-rise, have the house lights dim halfway *and the curtain closed until counterindicated. When lights have dimmed, we hear from the rear of house:*

GERRY. Louise? Why isn't the curtain open? (GERRY *will come down aisle to her place, during:*)

LOUISE. (*Off.*) There's a draft up here. The curtain keeps some of it out!

GERRY. That's because someone left the front door open. I closed it.

(*Curtain starts to open.*)

LOUISE. (*Off.*) Why are theatres always drafty backstage?!

AGGIE. (*Off.*) They're designed that way on purpose. The breeze comes in handy if the play smells!

(GERRY *sits in front row as curtain comes fully open.*)

GERRY. I don't suppose you have a *particular* play in mind, Aggie—?

AGGIE. (*Off. Laughs.*) Don't say I didn't warn you!

(GERRY *laughs, and then* BILLY *steps Onstage in costume* [*NOTE: Costumes for the play-within-the-play are a bit old-fashioned—Edwardian clothing for the men, evening gowns for* VIOLET *and* POLLY, *and a black dress with short white apron and cap for* SMITTY.])

BILLY. Gerry, do we have to wear makeup tonight?

GERRY. Well, I don't care so much about the men—but I did want to see how the women look—especially their hairdos.

BILLY. (*Starting off.*) I think they're using wigs.

GERRY. I've *seen* the wigs—I want to see how they look *wearing* them.

BILLY. I'll tell 'em. (*As he exits, he passes* AGGIE *just coming Onstage.*)

AGGIE. (*Flips a thumb Upstage.*) How do you like the wall?

GERRY. Well—it looks okay on *this* side—but how much space is there to move behind it?

AGGIE. If everyone's careful, they'll have about two inches clearance on either side— (*Lowers her voice, leans forward to add confidentially:*) Except for *Polly,* of course!

GERRY. How's she going to get from the garden to the prop table for the roses she brings onstage?

AGGIE. She doesn't have to. I'm going to keep the roses on *that* side of the stage. I told her it was to simplify things for her—but I didn't tell her what I simplifying.

GERRY. That's good thinking. We've got to keep her in a happy mood. She nearly walked out *again,* last night, thanks to Saul Watson!

AGGIE. (*Chuckles at the memory.*) You gotta admit —he was pretty funny!

GERRY. Yes, but his sense of humor cost us a half-hour! At least, I got him to *swear* he'll say that Lord Dudley is off to "*have a word* with Lady Margaret"—not "*chew the fat*" with her!

AGGIE. Yeah, but even if he behaves himself in rehearsal, how do we know what he's gonna do when the show's in performance?

GERRY. I don't want to think about it. I'm already having nightmares!

AGGIE. I'm surprised you can sleep at all. Tomorrow night, the whole thing will be out of your hands. All you can do *then* is stand in the wings and *pray* . . . there's not enough *room* to *kneel!*

GERRY. Maybe I'll just spend opening night in some cozy bar. In another town.

(LOUISE *enters, carrying a sparkling necklace.*)

LOUISE. Hey, how do you like *this* thing, Gerry? Looks *real,* doesn't it?!

GERRY. It certainly does. It was nice of Phyllis to lend it to us for the show. Costume jewelry that good is awfully expensive.

AGGIE. Have you figured out yet what to do about the central stone? We still haven't told Phyllis we've nixed her "Delhi Diamond"—how are we going to pass this thing off as a ruby?

GERRY. As a matter of fact, *Billy* came up with the solution to that: From now on, it's known as the "White Ruby of Ranchipur"!

LOUISE. (*Moving with necklace toward wall safe.*) *Is* there such a thing as a white ruby?

GERRY. (*Wearily.*) There is, *now!* (LOUISE *and* AGGIE *laugh;* LOUISE *opens door of safe.*) And *please* keep that in a safe place between performances, Louise. We wouldn't want it to get misplaced, or stolen!

LOUISE. Don't worry. I figure this necklace is our

ace in the hole—Phyllis will preoccupy herself worrying about *it* instead of the *play!*

AGGIE. There's something to *that,* all right.

GERRY. (*As* LOUISE *places necklace inside safe.*) You know, I'd feel a lot easier if that safe had a back to it. A person could tiptoe up in back of the flat and pick the necklace right up.

LOUISE. I could nail one on—but I'd have to take the safe down, first—and that would mean repainting the flat.

GERRY. Why would you have to take it down?

LOUISE. Because if I hammer on the back, and the front is where it is now, the whole thing'll tear loose from the flat and fall on the stage.

AGGIE. Tell you what—I'm not doing much except prompting, once this curtain's up. Why don't I just hang onto the thing, and then *hand* it to Saul when he reaches into the safe?

GERRY. Would you *mind,* Aggie? It'd set my mind at rest.

AGGIE. No trouble at all.

LOUISE. (*Will retrieve necklace and re-close safe, on:*) Well, you'd better practice it, then—tonight's your only chance before the opening.

AGGIE. (*Takes necklace.*) Easy as pie. But the practice can't hurt.

LOUISE. (*To* GERRY.) You ready for the mob, yet?

GERRY. I guess so—if they're all in costume.

LOUISE. Well, if they're not, it's their tough luck. (*Calls.*) Hey! Everybody onstage!

(*We hear ad-libs akin to "Okay!", "Coming!" and such, from the PLAYERS, and then they come on, all in costume—except that* VIOLET *is carrying her costume-wig.*)

GERRY. Line up along the front of the stage, will

you? I want to see how you all look. The costumes *seem* to fit all right . . .

(*They line up while she's speaking* [*NOTE: This will also be the curtain-call lineup, and goes thusly, starting at Stage Left:* SAUL, VIOLET, HENRY, POLLY, BILLY, SMITTY.])

POLLY. I think mine's just a little bit too small for me . . .

(*Then, as if expecting the worst after this lovely straight-line, PLAYERS all turn their heads to look at* SAUL.)

SAUL. (*Since their stares are as good as any commentary from him.*) I *didn't* say a *word!*

POLLY. And you'd better not!

GERRY. (*Annoyed.*) Polly, be fair! It's one thing if he *picks* on you—but if you're going to blow up every time you think he *might* say something—!

POLLY. (*Abashed.*) Yes. You're right. I'm sorry, Saul. Just—rehearsal jitters, I guess.

SAUL. No problem.

GERRY. Good. Now—turn around, all of you, slowly, so I can see what you look like in back . . . (*They do so, stopping once they're faced Upstage.*) Mmm—yes—yes—yes, you all look fine . . . oh, wait a minute! Violet, why aren't *you* wearing a bustle like Polly?

POLLY. (*Turns to face* GERRY.) I'm not *wearing* a bustle!

GERRY. Oh! Oh, dear, I'm sorry!

POLLY. (*Unexpectedly, laughs.*) *You're* sorry!

(*OTHERS all laugh, then, and an atmosphere of good humor floods the stage; remaining PLAYERS now face front again.*)

GERRY. Violet—why aren't you wearing that wig?

VIOLET. It's too big. Let me show you— (*Slips it on, and we see that it sits low on her brow, so that we can barely see her eyes.*) See? I look like a British sheepdog!

GERRY. Can't you pad it, or take a tuck in it, or something?

VIOLET. I'll think of something. I didn't have time, just now.

GERRY. Okay. Well, you're going to all *look* just *fine!* . . . Now suppose we see how well you can *act!*

AGGIE. Positions for Act One—?

GERRY. I guess we may as well start, yes.

(*PLAYERS start getting into position.*)

LOUISE. (*Starting off.*) You want to do it with the curtain?

GERRY. Yes, I do. I want *everything* just as if this were the *performance!*

PHYLLIS. (*Off.*) *Yoo*-hoo—!

(ALL *react.*)

AGGIE. Gerry, I think you just got your wish.

LOUISE. In spades! (LOUISE *and* AGGIE *exit as* PHYLLIS *enters, opposite.*)

PHYLLIS. Oh, Geraldine, I have the most dreadful news. We're going to have to change the name of my play!

GERRY. What? We can't, Phyllis! The programs are all printed, and the publicity's been mailed out—

PHYLLIS. But we must! I've just discovered that there is a *movie* with the *same* title—"Murder Most Foul"!

POLLY. Phyllis, no one in the audience is likely to be confused. They can *see* this isn't a *movie!*

SAUL. Right! In a movie, no one forgets their lines.

(*PLAYERS give him a woebegone look.*)

SMITTY. Don't *say* things like that, Saul! I'm having enough trouble already!

PHYLLIS. Oh, I *do* hope you are *joking,* Marla!

BILLY. *Who?* . . . Oh! I almost forgot your *real* name, Smitty.

SMITTY. No one ever uses it—except my mother.

SAUL. And Phyllis.

PHYLLIS. Oh, but I think nicknames are so vulgar, Saul. Don't you?

SAUL. I'm the wrong guy to ask, Phyl.

GERRY. (*Quickly, before* PHYLLIS *can quite become angry.*) *Phyllis*—I'm *so* glad you're here tonight, because—you can be a great *help* to us all.

(PHYLLIS, *very pleased, steps forward, so that she cannot see the dismay on the faces of the players, during:*)

PHYLLIS. Really? How?

GERRY. (*Realizing she's trapped herself, invents:*) Uh—why—you can listen to the lines, and see that everyone is doing them properly!

AGGIE. (*Steps Onstage, script in hand.*) And where does that leave *me?*

GERRY. Oh, Aggie, I didn't mean the *words,* exactly —I meant all the—uh—subtle little *nuances* of their *interpretation!*

AGGIE. (*Waves script mildly.*) The ones you forgot to tell *me* to mark down—?

GERRY. (*Wearily.*) Yes.

PHYLLIS. Shall I sit out there beside *you—?*

GERRY. *No!* . . . That is—uh—I make *notes* all the time during rehearsal. I might distract you.

AGGIE. (*Starts off.*) Louise, have you got a *chair* for our *playwright* back there—? (*Exits while we hear:*)

LOUISE. (*Off.*) If *you've* got a *dustrag*!

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. (*Off.*) You want the *music*, too?

GERRY. Of course! Everything exactly like the performance!

(*Curtain completes its close during:*)

AGGIE. (*Off.*) 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. (*Off.*) 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.*)

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

LOUISE. (*Off.*) 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 ladle 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. (*Off.*) 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. (*Off.*) 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. (*Off.*) 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 he 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 fiance, Diana!" (*To* GERRY.) That's a pretty dumb line, isn't it? She *knows* he's her fiance.

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

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

PHYLLIS. (*Off.*) 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 fiance, 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. (*Off.*) That line is *supposed* to be lighthearted. 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. (*Off.*) Henry!

HENRY. Only joking, dear.

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

HENRY. Uh—well—um—

GERRY. Henry, just *finish* your line and *go!*

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