

A TOMB WITH A VIEW

A Comedy-Thriller

NORMAN ROBBINS

SAMUEL



FRENCH

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NEW YORK TORONTO SYDNEY HOLLYWOOD

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CHARACTERS

Hamilton Penworthy

Lucien Tomb

Dora Tomb

Emily Tomb

Marcus Tomb

Anne Franklin

Agatha Hammond

Freda Mountjoy

Peregrine (Perry) Potter

Monica Tomb

The action takes place in the Library of Monument House

ACT I Evening

ACT II Scene 1 Fifteen minutes later

 Scene 2 The following morning

ACT III That evening

Time—the present

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(See also page ii)

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Tom, the Piper's Son
The Wonderful Story of Mother Goose

ACT I

The Library of Monument, home of the Tomb family, about fifty miles from London. Evening

The room is dominated by an immense black walnut fireplace in the centre of the rear wall. Outsize vases rest on the outer edges of the thick mantel, and in the centre stands a very heavy and ornate marble clock. Above the mantel a thick gold frame holds a terrifying portrait of the late Septimus Tomb, gaunt, wrinkled, almost bald, with the bloodshot pop-eyes of a raving lunatic. The eyes appear to follow whoever is in the room. A heavily carved wooden fender protects against sparks from the log fire, and huge fire-dogs of brass with attendant implements are in position. A thick hearthrug is in front of the fender. Massive empty bookcases, their dusty shelves protected by fine mesh doors, are built into the walls on either side of the fireplace. One of them, however, is a secret door that opens on a pivot into the room. One side wall is dominated by great french windows. Thick velvet drapes hang from a matching pelmet, and coffee-coloured net curtains obscure the view of overgrown shrubs outside. Meshed, empty bookcases fill the wall-space either side of the windows. Below the windows, slightly into the room, a small octagonal table is set. On it stand several cut-glass decanters containing various brightly coloured liquids, and a collection of glasses and goblets. Beside the table is a comfortable leather wing-chair: it is on a swivel, or easy-glide castors. In the opposite wall are massive Gothic doors of black walnut: each door has a large brass knob. These double doors form the only obvious entrance into the room. When they are open, a glimpse of the wide hall may be seen. Above the doorway is an old-fashioned roll-top writing-desk. The top is open, and a blotter, selection of quill pens, inks, papers, etc., may be seen. Papers are also crammed into the pigeon-holes and shelves. Loose envelopes lie on the floor as though spilt by accident. Above the desk is another empty, meshed bookcase, and below a small wastepaper bin. Above this an internal telephone is fixed. Below the doors, meshed, empty bookcases fill the remaining wall. Opposite the drinks table is a matching one, with a family Bible—a massive, leather-tooled tome in faded brown and gold. Just above the doorway, angled towards the drinks table, is a leather-topped library table with a library chair behind it. Ranged opposite this are eight matching dining-chairs in two rows of four, obviously brought in for the sole purpose of the Will reading. The room is thickly carpeted. Wall lights provide an alternative to the central chandelier: both switches are by the door

When the CURTAIN rises, the window drapes are drawn, the fire lit, and the central chandelier switched on. The room is empty, and the internal telephone is ringing furiously. After a moment it stops. A wolf howls: long and drawn out, the cry hangs in the air, then fades to silence

The Library doors open, and Hamilton Penworthy enters. He is aged about seventy, and looks every inch the family solicitor that he is. Black tailcoat and waistcoat, gold turnip-watch with fob and chain, wing-collared shirt, pin-striped trousers and black shoes with spats. He carries a battered old deeds box which contains the Will and several other papers

Penworthy (*coughing*) Damned fog.

Still spluttering, he closes the doors, deposits the deeds box on the library table, and proceeds to the fireplace to warm his hands. As he does so, the wolf cry is repeated. Without appearing to notice, Penworthy turns from the fire and moves down to the drinks table. Surveying the decanters with a slight frown, he chooses one of the less brightly coloured liquids, cautiously sniffs at it, then pours himself a drink. The wolf howls again. Replacing the decanter Penworthy turns, picking up his glass, and gazes at the portrait of Septimus
He raises his glass

To you, Septimus. Wherever you may be. (*He chuckles*)

The wolf cry comes again. For the first time Penworthy reacts. He glances at the closed doors and shakes his head. Taking a sip at his liquid, he seats himself in the wing-chair

(*Thoughtfully*) He knows there's something in the wind, doesn't he? Senses it—even down there in the cellars. He's no fool, young Master Oliver. Been restless for days so they tell me—and still another week to full moon. (*He sips*)

The cry comes again, to be followed at once by the sound of an angry voice in the hall

Lucien (*off*) Quiet down there, damn you! Quiet!

Penworthy quickly knocks back the rest of his drink, puts the glass down and begins to rise

Lucien Tomb flings open the doors and struts into the room. He is an overweight, pompous and petulant man of about fifty. Balding, myopic, dressed in ill-fitting tweeds, he is quivering with indignation

So there you are, Penworthy. Helping yourself to *my* drinks again.

Penworthy (*protesting*) My dear Mr Lucien . . .

Lucien I knew it. The moment you *refused* to answer my telephone call. What is the use of internal telephones if no-one will answer them?

Penworthy (*glancing at the telephone*) I assure you . . .

Lucien And what do you mean by telling Mrs Hammond to lay an extra place at the dinner table, eh? May I remind you that *I* am head of this household now that *that*—(*indicating the painting*)—crazy old fool is dead, and as such, *I* give the orders. If you wish to dine with us, then you ask *my* permission, family solicitor or not.

Penworthy If you'll allow me to explain . . .

Lucien (*spluttering*) There's no *need* to explain. I consider it a gross impertinence on your part, Penworthy. *Gross impertinence.*

Penworthy Nevertheless, I wish to point out that far from inviting myself to join you at the table, I was merely following the instructions of your—*(pause)* late father, that on the day of his Will reading, an additional place be set for one of the beneficiaries.

Lucien *(his eyes popping)* This is *monstrous*. I absolutely *refuse* to sit at the same table as Oliver. He was never allowed out of his cell whilst father was alive, and I don't see why we should have to tolerate him now. He should have been committed *years* ago. The day he bit off the gardener's ear.

Penworthy *(nodding)* A most distressing occurrence. *(With a quick smile)* But fortunately the poor chap was stone deaf and had no further use for it. Still—it was a tricky moment. *(He clears his throat)* However, that's all beside the point. The—er—the other beneficiary isn't your brother Oliver. It's a *stranger*. Someone quite unknown to the members of this family and something of an unknown quantity in herself. I'm assured though, that in the outside world, so to speak, she is something of a celebrity.

Lucien *(outraged)* You mean it's a *female*?

Penworthy *(nodding)* Miss Ermytrude Ash, by name. A writer of romantic novels for women.

Lucien *(firmly)* Never *heard* of her.

Penworthy Nor I. But apparently your late father was very fond of her literary style, so wished to include her in his bequests as a small token of his appreciation.

Lucien She won't *accept* it, of course?

Penworthy That's entirely up to her, Mr Lucien. Naturally I wrote to her publishers, and was duly informed that she would arrive here tonight by the seven-fifteen train. I—er—I took the liberty of arranging a taxi to bring her from the station.

Lucien You're being uncommonly *free* with my money, Penworthy, if you don't mind my saying so. And how long do we have to put up with this *person*? You know how Dora feels about strangers.

Penworthy I'm afraid the duration of Miss Ash's stay at Monument House will depend on if she is willing to accept the terms of the legacy or not. She *could* be gone by tomorrow, but on the other hand . . . *(He spreads his hands)*

Lucien And what *are* the terms?

Penworthy Unfortunately I'm unable to tell you until the actual reading of the document. The terms must be explained in the full hearing of *all* parties.

Lucien *(his voice rising)* But I want to know *now*, Penworthy. I will not have perfect strangers wandering about my home, poking their noses into things that don't concern them. I won't *have* it.

Dora Tomb enters the room in a flurry of black chiffon. She is an emaciated woman of forty-nine, but could easily pass for sixty. Her hair is a grey nest, her skin like parchment, and her cheeks are over-rouged. A black chiffon scarf trails for yards behind her

Dora Won't have what, Lucien?

Lucien (*Turning to her in annoyance*) Strangers in the house. Absolute strangers.

Dora (*with a loud shriek of fear*) The police. (*She staggers*)

Lucien (*exasperatedly*) Don't be so stupid. Dora.

Dora (*clutching at him fiercely*) They were all accidents, Lucien. *Accidents*. Even the Tax Inspector. Don't let them take me.

Penworthy Miss Dora—please. *Please*. The lady concerned is quite unconnected with the police force. Merely a beneficiary of your father's Will who is to spend the night at Monument House.

Dora (*startled*) Here? But that's *impossible*. No-one *ever* spends the night here. Not if they *know* us.

Penworthy I'm sorry, Miss Dora. But it's a condition of your late father's and quite binding. He was most definite about it.

Lucien This is *intolerable*. Absolute *blackmail*.

Dora (*her eyes sparkling*) Oh, but Lucien—we can put her in the bedroom with the four-poster. I've always wanted to see how it worked with a *real* body in it.

Penworthy (*coughing*) I—er—I'm afraid *not*, Miss Dora. Not this time. The unexpected disappearance of Miss Ash might prove somewhat embarrassing for all of us. She *is* rather famous, you see. I regret she'll have to leave here *alive*.

Dora (*put out*) That's so *typical* of Father. No consideration for any of us. How dare he force us to have this woman in our home? What right has he? What *right* has he, I say?

The bookcase secret door pivots open to reveal Emily Tomb. She is forty-six years old, and like her brother, distinctly overweight. She wears men's clothing, and has close-cropped hair. In the outside world she could easily be mistaken for an all-in wrestler. She is chewing an apple

Emily (*gnawing*) About five million poundsworth of right, at a rough guess. Wouldn't you say so, Penworthy?

Penworthy Good evening, Miss Emily.

Emily moves forward and the panel closes

Emily (*glancing at them all*) Vultures beginning to gather, I see. All eager for their share of the carcass.

Dora (*frostily*) There's nothing of the vulture about me, Emily Tomb. Nothing at all.

Emily I'm sorry. Perhaps I should have referred to *you* as a carrion crow.

After all—I notice you're trying to dress the part. (*She takes a bite of apple*)

Dora (*stung*) How dare you? How *dare* you!

Penworthy If you'll pardon my saying so, Miss Emily. This ridiculous enmity between you and your sister would be far better hidden whilst outsiders are present.

Emily *Ridiculous* enmity? (*She glares at Dora*) That old cow poisoned our mother.

Penworthy Mistakes happen with the most organized people, Miss Emily.

Though I myself would not have considered hemlock or foxgloves suitable ingredients for Flower Wine, obviously Miss Dora thought otherwise. And Mrs Tomb *did* compliment her on the taste before the convulsions began.

Emily (*sourly*) And I suppose that makes everything all right again, does it? Well nobody asked for your opinion, and just in passing, *I'll* decide the way I'm going to behave around here.

Penworthy That is, of course, entirely up to you. But if I might be permitted to quote from your late father's letter of instructions— (*He produces a letter from his inside pocket and opens it*) "And if that big-mouthed bitch Emily opens her trap in front of my guest, then she loses her share of the cash and you can split it between the rest of the morons..."

All react

Emily (*snarling*) Let me see that. (*She lumbers down to him and grabs the letter. She scans it rapidly, then blazes*) He can't do this!

Penworthy Nonetheless, he *has* done, Miss Emily, so I think it will be in your own interests to restrain yourself whilst Miss Ash is on the premises. Don't you agree?

Emily glares at him, then thrusts the letter back at him as he holds out his hand for it. She moves back to the fireplace

I need hardly add that Mr Tomb included similar instructions regarding the other members of the family. He—er—didn't want anyone to feel—left out, so to speak.

Lucien (*disbelievingly*) You mean he threatens *me* in that letter? *Me*.

Dora (*agitatedly*) There must be some mistake.

Penworthy (*gently*) There's no mistake, Miss Dora. Your father was most explicit. You are required to abstain from any mention of your—er—*horticultural* studies, and Mr Lucien his experiments in the East Wing.

Lucien This is monstrous. I refuse to be silenced. Absolutely refuse.

Dora But I don't understand, Mr Penworthy. What possible objection could there be to my mentioning our lovely gardens?

Emily (*growling*) Somebody might ask what you've *planted* in them.

Dora (*turning to her, peeved*) And why shouldn't they? Those beds are beautifully laid out.

Emily So are the bodies under them.

Lucien (*snapping*) You've been told about mentioning that before, Emily. It's a subject best left dead and buried.

Emily (*amused*) You said it. (*She bites into her apple*)

Dora (*to Penworthy*) But he's *never* said I mustn't talk about the gardens to our guests before. Never.

Emily That's because we haven't had guests before. At least—ones who had to be allowed to go home again.

Lucien (*firmly*) That is enough, Emily. I don't want to hear another word.

Emily (*glowering*) In that case, brother *dear*, you'd better stuff those piggy ears of yours with cotton-wool, because I haven't finished yet. Not by a

long way. (*To Penworthy*) It doesn't take a great deal of imagination to work out what's behind all this, does it?

Penworthy All *what*, Miss Emily?

Emily These conditions. Threats. Whatever you want to call them. I think we all know why the old goat gave you that letter, don't we?

Lucien Well *I* certainly don't. I fail to see the reason entirely.

Dora So do I.

Emily (*with contempt*) Then you're even more stupid than I gave you credit for.

Lucien (*indignantly*) Well, really (*He moves away in pique*)

Emily (*her voice rising*) It's obvious, isn't it? All those little trips to London. The letters marked "Strictly private and personal". It's staring you in the face and you're too blind to see it.

As Emily is speaking, Marcus Tomb enters. He is forty-three years old and imagines himself to be Caesar. He wears a flowing white toga, purple lined and edged in gold, and a laurel crown. His feet are bare and sandalled

Marcus (*grandly*). What sayest thou to me now? Speak once again.

Emily (*glancing at him*) Keep out of this, peabrain, and get back to your nursemaid.

Penworthy Good evening, Mr Marcus.

Marcus (*recognizing him*) Why have you stol'n upon us thus? You, like Caesar's sister; the wife of Antony, should have an army for an usher, and the neighs of horses to tell of her approach long ere she did appear . . . (*He embraces Penworthy heartily*)

Lucien (*distastefully*) If you wouldn't *mind*. Marcus.

Marcus releases Penworthy and turns

We were just discussing a letter that Father gave to Mr Penworthy. A disgraceful document. Absolutely disgraceful.

Dora (*nodding eagerly*) Simply wicked, my dear.

Marcus (*suddenly pointing at the portrait*) Your letter did withhold our breaking forth, till we perceiv'd both how you were wrong led and we in negligent danger.

Penworthy (*frowning*) Pardon?

Emily The scheming old devil. He's made fools of us all. Every single one of us.

Lucien (*tartly*) No-one's made a fool of *me*.

Emily They didn't *have* to. Nature did a first-class job. (*She snarls*) You fat imbecile. You haven't even the brains to understand what he *has* done. *I'm* the only one in this crackpot family who knows why we're all expected to act normal whilst his precious lady novelist is caged up with us.

Dora (*indignantly*) I will not stay here and be called a crackpot in my own home.

Lucien *My* home, dear. *My* home. I'm the eldest. (*To Emily*) But I quite agree with Dora. We refuse to be subjected to your unpleasant insinu-

ations any longer. (*To Penworthy*) You may call us when the rest of the legatees are assembled.

Emily (*flopping into the wing-chair with a harsh laugh*) You see? You can't even face the truth.

Lucien (*purple with rage*) What truth?

Anne Franklin enters. She is a pretty girl of twenty-five to thirty wearing a nurse's uniform, and carrying a kidney-shaped steel dish which contains a hypodermic syringe and cotton-wool swabs. She moves towards Marcus

Emily (*loudly*) About them, you moronic monster. They're secretly married.

Everyone reacts in shock. Anne half turns and drops the dish

Lucien (*gaping*) Married?

Dora (*with her hand to her throat*) But they can't be. It's impossible.

Marcus (*gravely*) The people know it; and have receiv'd his accusations. (*His head drops on to his chest.*)

Emily (*triumphantly*) I thought that'd shake you. It's the only way it makes sense. He doesn't want his little bride to know she married into a family of lunatics.

Anne stoops and quickly gathers up her things

Lucien (*blazing*) Emily . . .

Emily (*heaving herself upright*) Face up to it, Lucy-boy. You're not trying to pretend we're just an average, home-loving family who spend our time doing good works for the community, are you? There's not one of us left this crumbling ruin for the past twenty years.

Dora (*fiercely*) There's never been the need. Everything we've ever wanted has been right here. The Chapel, the sick-room, the gardens *and* the burial grounds.

Emily (*sneering*) Oh, yes. We mustn't forget the burial grounds, must we? Even though we get more use out of the flower beds.

Lucien (*shouting*) Emily!

Emily (*standing*) Stop kidding yourselves. We haven't kept out of sight because we've wanted to. We've *had* to. We're the local Frankensteins. There's Oliver—chained up in the cellars thinking he's a werewolf . . .

A long howl comes from Oliver. Emily speaks through it

Marcus—so convinced he's Caesar, we expect him to be assassinated at any moment. Dotty Dora there—brewing up poisoned wines and popping off victims like ninepins—

Dora (*wailing*) Stop her, someone! Stop her!

Emily—and you. Fat little Lucien—locked in the East Wing mixing up your stinking chemicals and killing off half the wild life in the district!

Lucien (*puce with rage*) That is a lie! A dirty filthy lie!

Emily (*shouting him down*) Of course it is! (*She sneers*) And sweet little sister Monica is the Mother Superior of the local Convent, isn't she?

Dora (*trembling with agitation*) And what about *you*? You with your disgusting—depraved . . .! (*She flounders for words*)

Anne (*firmly*) Excuse me. (*She moves towards the door*)

Emily Oh, don't go, Nurse. I'm sure you'll not hear anything you don't already know.

Anne (*coldly*) I'm sure I won't, Miss Emily. But I have to change the needle and swabs. They're no longer sterile.

Emily I shouldn't let that worry you, dear. He'll be just as mad, no matter *what* you use on him.

Anne (*icily polite*) Mr Marcus is not mad, Miss Emily. Merely "disturbed". And he's been a lot better since we began treatment. Dr Fell has every confidence in its eventual success.

Emily (*sneering*) That charlatan. What does *he* know?

Anne Dr Fell is an *excellent* physician. Known and respected all over England. I think *you* might do worse than pay him a visit yourself.

Anne sweeps out of the room

Emily (*yelling after her*) Snotty little bitch! (*To the others*) And the sooner we get rid of *her*, the better. (*She glares at Marcus*) That goes for you too, bird-brain. Move!

Marcus (*his eyes narrowing*) No, Caesar shall not; danger knows full well that Caesar is more dangerous than he. We are two lions litter'd in one day, and I the elder and more terrible—

Lucien Oh, shut up, Marcus. No-one's going anywhere. *I* am head of this household, and Nurse Franklin will remain here until I see fit to dismiss her. Is that clear, Emily?

Penworthy gives a discreet cough

Penworthy If I might be allowed to put in a word? I'd just like to remind you that our guests should be arriving at any moment. It would be as wise to settle your differences before they do so.

Lucien Guests?

Emily (*glowering*) Did you say *guests*?

Dora (*alarmed*) More of them? You mean there are more?

Penworthy There's no cause for alarm, I assure you. The other person will not be remaining. He is merely a travelling companion of Miss Ash, and will be returning to London on the next train.

Lucien He? A man?

Dora (*horrified*) A *police* man?

Penworthy Miss Ash's *secretary*. Peregrine Potter, by name. (*To Dora*) So you see—there's nothing to be afraid of, is there?

Marcus (*clapping Dora's shoulder heartily*) Cowards die many times before their deaths; the valiant never taste of death but once.

Dora (*unsurely*) And he doesn't know about the Avon lady?

Lucien Of course he doesn't, Dora. How could he?

Dora Or the insurance salesman?

Penworthy Nothing at all, I promise you. However—to ensure that he *remains* in ignorance, it would be better if you refrained from offering him a sample of your home-made wine. Don't you agree?

Lucien (*pouring himself a drink from the same decanter that Penworthy used*) I consider that remark quite uncalled for, Penworthy. Dora may have

her faults, but she'd never offer wine to a *servant*. It would be an obvious breach of social manners.

Emily I wouldn't let that worry you. He'd never live to tell.

Penworthy To be quite certain, though, I think Miss Dora's special brews had better be placed under lock and key until both our visitors have left. As I remarked earlier—accidents can happen (*He gives a dry laugh*)

Dora (*nodding*) I'll do it at once, shall I? Right away.

Lucien And I'll hold the key.

Dora scuttles to the door, stops, turns, runs back to the drinks table, picks up the decanter both men used, plus one other, and turns to exit again

Dora (*with a sheepish giggle*) I almost forgot these.

Penworthy and Lucien react

Penworthy (*with difficulty*) Miss Dora . . .

Dora (*about to exit*) Yes?

Penworthy (*indicating the decanter*) One of yours??

Dora (*all smiles*) Why, yes. It's my Mock-Crusted Port. (*She realizes*) Did you like it?

Penworthy's hand goes to his throat. Lucien's glass falls from his nerveless fingers.

Lucien (*hoarsely*) Nurse . . . (*louder*) Nurse . . . !

Dora (*startled*) What is it, Lucien? (*She looks at the glass on the floor*) Oh—you drank some, too. (*She gives a sudden light laugh*) It's all right, silly. It's perfectly safe. I made it from plums. (*She lifts the other decanter*) This is the one that's poisonous.

Giggling happily, Dora exits

Penworthy and Lucien look sheepish. Emily gives a bellow of laughter

Anne enters with a fresh syringe and swabs in the dish

Anne (*as she enters*) Did you call, Mr Lucien? (*She moves to Marcus*)

Lucien No. No. It was nothing. (*He coughs and turns away*)

Anne (*to Marcus*) Let me have your arm, Marcus.

Emily (*snarling*) You're not going to stick that thing into him now, are you? Not while we're here?

Anne That was the idea, Miss Emily. Hardly a novel sight for you after all this time. (*She prepares the needle*)

Marcus solemnly exposes his upper arm

Penworthy Er—Nurse . . .

Anne (*turning*) Yes, Mr Penworthy?

Penworthy Would you help Mr Marcus change into something—er—a little less *noticeable* for the Will reading? The late Mr Tomb requested that it be a slightly more formal gathering as outsiders will be present.

Anne (*surprised*) Outsiders? Here? (*Recovering*) I—er—I'm sorry. I didn't mean to . . . Yes. Yes, of course. (*To Marcus*) Come along, Marcus. I—er—I'll do this upstairs. Let's get you out of your toga and into a nice

suit, shall we? (*She takes his arm and collects the steel dish, etc.*)

Marcus I thank you for your pains and courtesy.

Anne and Marcus exit

Emily (*looking after them*) Whey-faced little trollop. (*To Penworthy*) The old man hasn't left *her* anything, has he?

Penworthy Just a small legacy, Miss Emily.

Emily *How small?*

Penworthy A token sum for faithful service over the past two years. Nothing untoward, I assure you.

Emily You don't assure me at all, you old crook. There's something fishy going on around here, and I want to know what it is. Is this Ash woman married to the old man or isn't she? Come on. Out with it. If anybody knows, it's you.

Penworthy To the best of my knowledge, Miss Ash and your father have never even met. More than that, I am unable to tell you at the moment.

Lucien And what's that supposed to mean?

Emily (*taking Penworthy by the lapels*) It's been six weeks now since the late unlamented passed on, and we still don't know how much cash is coming to us. (*She begins to shake him slowly*) I'm warning you, Penworthy. If you're up to something, I'm going to snap you into little pieces and plant you with Dora's mistakes. Understand?

Penworthy (*choking*) My dear Miss Emily. I am a highly respectable solicitor.

Emily If you were respectable, you wouldn't be working for this family. (*She gives him a final shake and releases him*)

Lucien (*outraged*) Really, Emily.

Penworthy (*tidying himself*) Naturally I understand your impatience at the delay, but my instructions were quite explicit. There have been a great many details to attend to, and vast wealth does create certain problems, you know.

Emily So does the lack of it. I need that money. Fast.

Lucien So do I. My experiments have come to a complete halt due to my financial difficulties. Further delays may cause complete disaster, and I'm sure the Prime Minister would be very annoyed if *that* happened.

Penworthy I promise you'll get everything that's coming to you within twenty-four hours. Word of honour.

Agatha Hammond enters. Housekeeper to the family for over forty years, she is grim, outspoken and unlovely. She is aged about sixty-five, sallow faced, and her hair is scraped back into an untidy bun. She is dressed in unrelieved black

Agatha (*flatly*) There's a phone call. For him. (*She indicates Penworthy with a tilt of her head*) Say's it's urgent.

Lucien Who is it, Agatha?

Agatha Him from the car hire down the village.

Penworthy Ah, yes. Draycott. He's collecting our guests from the station. (*He moves towards the door*)

Agatha He'll find that difficult. They've not arrived.

Penworthy (*startled*) Not . . . (*He recovers*) I'd better speak to him.

Penworthy hurries out

Lucien (*fuming*) I knew it. I *knew* it. More delays. (*To Agatha*) He's sure he hasn't just missed them I suppose?

Agatha He could hardly do that, Mr Lucien. The train didn't stop. Went through without so much as a whistle. I suppose this means we'll be eating as normal? We'll not be wanting the extra place?

Lucien Never mind the extra place. What about the *Will reading*?

Emily We'll have that as soon as Penworthy gets off the telephone.

Lucien (*irately*) How can we? He's already told us he can't read it until everyone is here. (*Loudly*) I am *most* annoyed.

Emily Keep your shirt on, Lucy-boy. He'll read it.

Agatha Lot of fuss about nothing, if you ask me. Wills are meant to be read when people are dead. Not when they're playing hide-and-seek. (*She moves to the door*)

Lucien (*warningly*) Agatha.

Agatha (*turning*) Your father is about as dead as I am, Mr Lucien. I heard what I heard, and I know what I know, and that's enough for me.

Emily (*snarling*) And it's enough for *me* to know I saw the old maniac sealed in that mausoleum six weeks ago with a marble slab over his ugly face. Understand?

Agatha (*still flatly*) You saw his coffin interred, Miss Emily. I'll grant you that. (*Darkly*) But which of you actually *saw* him inside it? (*Fiercely*) *None* of you. That box was screwed down and sealed before they'd let anyone into the room. Isn't that true?

Emily What did you expect? They didn't want us to catch whatever it was he died of. The quack told us it was highly infectious.

Agatha (*Nodding grimly*) And you all believed him? (*Fiercely*) Doctors have been bribed before today. He's not dead. Not him. I've heard him moving about the house. Down in the cellars and in the passages. I've heard him here—in this very room—night after night.

Emily You've been hitting the cooking sherry again, you old bat.

Agatha (*shaking her head*) I'd recognize that voice of his *anywhere*. *And* the other one.

Lucien Who was it?

Agatha (*shaking her head again*) That's his business, not mine. I'm only a servant in this house. When he wants you to know what's going on, he'll tell you himself—just like he always has done.

Emily Can't you get it into your thick skull, he's dead? Dead.

Agatha (*glancing at her*) Your father is a strange man, Miss Emily. If he wants everyone to think he's dead, then he must have good reason. I've questioned nothing he's done or said these last forty years, so I'll play along with his little games now; but I'd sincerely advise you all to watch your tongues for the next few days. Now if you'll excuse me, I'll go and see to the meal.

Agatha exits

Emily (*looking after her*) She's mad. Stark, staring mad.

Lucien (*uneasily*) But what if she's right? If he isn't dead?

Emily (*harshly*) Of course he's dead, you brainless toad. Dead and rotting by this time. She's trying to put the wind up us, that's all.

Lucien But why?

Emily I'm trying to think. (*Her eyes narrow*) Got it. (*She snaps her fingers*) Penworthy. *He's* the brains behind this one.

Lucien Penworthy?

Emily Of course. (*She moves to the drinks table*) Hamilton-clever-Penworthy. Our respectable family solicitor. If you'll use that feeble little brain of yours for a few minutes, you'll see I'm right. Who's in the best position to try and swindle us out of our money? Penworthy. Who's kept us waiting six weeks before finally making up his mind to let us know what's in the old man's Will? Penworthy. And who's the only one who knows anything about this mysterious Ash woman? *Penworthy.*

Lucien (*after a moment*) What are we going to do?

Emily (*lowering herself into the wing-chair*) I'll tell you . . .

There is a loud knocking at the outer door. Emily and Lucien look at each other, startled

Lucien (*almost in a whisper*) Them?

Emily (*half rising*) Can't be. The train went straight through.

There is a moment's silence

Lucien Shall I answer it?

Emily No. Leave it to Agatha. That's what she's paid for, isn't it?

The sound of heavy bolts being drawn is heard. The hinges groan loudly as the door is opened

Freda (*off*) Oh, Good evening. This *is* Monument House, isn't it? The residence of the Tomb family? Oh, thank goodness for that. I thought we were lost. The fog, you know. I believe you're expecting me. Ash is the name. Ermynrude Ash.

Lucien It is her.

Lucien and Emily hurry to the door to peer

Agatha (*off*) You'd best come in, I suppose. I'll tell them you're here.

Perry (*off*) Thank you.

The sound of the door closing is heard

Agatha (*off*) Through there.

Emily and Lucien almost fall over each other in their hurry to get back into the room

Freda Mountjoy and Peregrine (Perry) Potter enter, followed by Agatha. Freda is a smart, slim, middle-aged woman, wearing a jaunty hat and coat over a smart two-piece suit. Perry is a nervous thirty-five-year-old, looking most uncomfortable in a dark suit and white shirt

The Ash woman and friend.

Freda's eyebrows lift

I'll tell Mr Penworthy they've arrived.

Agatha exits

Emily (*eyeing Freda*) So . . . You're the mysterious Miss Ash, are you?

Freda Er—yes. (*Trying to be friendly*) Good evening, Miss . . . ?

Emily Tomb. Emily Tomb. And this is my brother, Lucien.

Lucien The famous scientist.

Freda (*indicating Perry*) My—er—my secretary, Mr Potter.

Perry (*extending his hand to Emily*) How do you do?

Emily (*ignoring it*) We expected you to come by train, Miss Ash.

Lucien Even sent a taxi to the station for you.

Freda I'm terribly sorry, but we *had* to come down by car. It seems that the train doesn't stop at your local station on Saturdays during winter, and what with the fog warning on the radio this afternoon, we thought it best to set off as soon as possible. We did try to warn you, but your number is ex-directory. I do hope we haven't kept you waiting too long?

Emily We've been waiting six weeks, so I suppose we can last out another few minutes. (*She turns away*) Drink?

Freda (*removing her topcoat*) Thank you. A small sherry if you have it. (*She puts the coat on the writing-table*)

Perry Not for me, thanks. I don't drink.

Lucien (*offering a cigarette-box*) Smoke?

Perry I don't smoke, either.

Emily (*pouring the drinks*) Really? I do hope you're not going to tell us you make your own dresses. (*Taking a glass to Freda*) One sherry coming up.

Lucien (*looking pointedly at the glass*) Emily . . .

Emily Relax. It's a good one.

Freda (*taking the glass*) Thank you. (*She smiles*) To tell you the truth, I couldn't tell a good one from a cheap one.

Emily You would if it were one of Dora's.

Lucien That's our sister. She makes wine as a hobby.

Freda How very interesting. And are they always successful?

Emily No-one's ever complained. (*She moves up to the fire and puts another log on*)

Freda (*sipping*) I suppose she gets most of her ingredients from the gardens? You must have simply *acres* of them, if the drive is anything to go by.

(*Brightly*) I love gardening, don't you? It's so *relaxing*—puts you at peace with the world. (*She smiles*) Give me half a chance to get into those rose beds of yours, and I'd never come out again.

Emily (*drily*) Not without an exhumation order, and that's for sure.

Before any further development can take place, Penworthy hurries into the room

Penworthy My dear Miss Ash. (*He wrings her hand*) Welcome to Monument

House. (*He realizes*) Forgive me. Hamilton Penworthy, the family solicitor. I—er—I see you've already met Miss Emily and Mr Lucien. The others will be right down. (*He indicates a chair*) Please be seated.

Freda Thank you, but I'd prefer to stand for the moment. It's been a long drive. Visibility was very poor. Perry had an awful job getting us here. I don't drive myself, you see. (*She indicates Perry*) My secretary, Peregrine Potter.

Perry (*extending his hand*) Hello.

Penworthy (*Ignoring him*) How very kind of you to spare the time to come down here. I realize, of course, how busy you must be . . .

Freda Well—I *am* in the middle of my new book, *Daughter of Allah*, but I just couldn't resist it. I mean—it's like something out of one of my own stories. Being left a legacy by a perfect stranger. Simply fantastic.

Perry I'll say.

Penworthy There was nothing perfect about the late Mr Tomb, I'm afraid. He was a man of *many* vices. However, your books made him very happy. I understand that in his own room he had copies of every book you'd ever written, so obviously they made a great impression on him. A very great impression.

Emily Especially when the bookcase collapsed and he finished up underneath them all.

Perry gives a nervous laugh, then chokes it

Lucien (*glaring at him*) It wasn't funny at the time. He contracted some rare disease from the woodwork and died shortly afterwards—so we're told.

Penworthy But not before he made over a portion of his estate to you in gratitude for what you'd done for him. The late Mr Tomb was a very rich man, and I'm sure you'll be more than pleased with what he left you.

Freda I'm sure I shall. I mean—I never expected . . .

Emily Neither did we. But now that you do, I'm sure you wouldn't mind if the rest of us found out exactly what *we've* got coming to us. (*To Penworthy*) Penworthy.

Penworthy Er—yes. I see no further reason for delay. (*He goes to the internal telephone and picks it up*) I'll ask Mrs Hammond to summon the rest of the family.

Emily Don't bother. I'll go find Monica, and Lucien can get the others.

Lucien Good idea. (*To Freda*) Excuse me.

Lucien exits

Penworthy (*replacing the telephone*) I'm not sure where you'll find Miss Monica. I haven't seen her all day.

Emily Don't worry. I've got an infallible system for tracking that one down. It never fails.

Penworthy What's that?

Emily I just whisper that there's a man in the house, and there she is.

Emily exits

Penworthy (*giving an embarrassed cough*) Always joking, our Miss Emily.
(*He gives a little laugh*)

Freda Yes. (*She glances at Perry*)

Perry Yes.

Freda (*after a slight pause*) I hope you'll forgive me if I'm mistaken, Mr Penworthy—but I rather feel that I'm not exactly a *welcome* guest here.

Penworthy (*aghast*) My dear Miss Ash . . .

Freda (*quickly*) No, no, it's quite all right. I understand perfectly. It's only natural for them to resent my presence under the circumstances. From their point of view I've no right to be here at all. They don't know *me*, and I don't know *them*. Why the late Mr Tomb wanted to make *me* a beneficiary I can't imagine. (*Curiously*) How much am I supposed to inherit from the estate, as a matter of interest?

Penworthy Like the others, I'm afraid you'll have to wait until the reading to find that out. I'm sorry, but I can make no exceptions.

Freda (*ruefully*) I was afraid you'd say that, only it's so foggy outside, and rather a long drive back to London. If you could have told me quietly, I'd have left without more ado. I have no wish to upset the family, and in any case intend to give the money to a suitable charity.

Penworthy (*spluttering*) Charity? (*Choking*) Excuse me. (*He coughs wildly*) I've just remembered something. Something important.

Penworthy staggers to the door and exits

For a moment they stare after him, then Freda throws a quick glance at Perry, moves to the doors and quietly closes them. Keeping her back to the doors, she speaks to him

Freda And what did you make of all *that*?

Perry (*uncertainly*) Well—it certainly *seemed* to work.

Freda Oh, Perry. Of course it worked. It always does. They don't suspect a thing.

Perry I suppose not. But . . . (*He stops helplessly*)

Freda But what? (*She moves to him*)

Perry You're sure we'll get away with it? I mean—we've never pulled anything like *this* before, have we? This time we're dealing with the Law.

Freda (*patting his cheek*) And do you think I've never dealt with the Law before, darling? Being the widow of a High Court Judge *has* its advantages. (*Seriously*) Now listen. By the look of things, we're not going to find out much until the whole family's gathered together, but with a bit of luck we'll know exactly how much the mythical Miss Ash is inheriting within the next hour. Agreed?

Perry (*nodding*) Agreed. But I'd hardly call her the *mythical* Miss Ash. I mean—after all—she has written quite a few books, you know.

Freda True. But we both know that very few people have actually met her, don't we? In fact, you can count them on one hand, so there's no chance of being recognized and accused of impersonation, is there? Now, let's assume we've got the Will reading over with and know where we stand. What do you do then?

Perry I—er—I excuse myself, explaining I have to go back to London.

Get into the car, make for the rendezvous, then wait for your call. Right?

Freda Right. Now don't worry. Everything's going to be fine.

Perry I wish I were as confident as you, Freda.

Freda (*laughing*) Well you know what they say about me? The biggest little con-merchant in the game. That's how I've managed to get away with it so long. The difference a few clothes and a new hair-style makes. (*Seriously*) Now, according to this Penworthy character, I'm supposed to stay here overnight—which is a bit of a bore. However, I'll get away first thing tomorrow morning and I should be with you no later than half-past eight at a rough guess, so don't forget to meet me.

Perry I'll be there. Shaking like a leaf.

Freda It's going to be a walk-over. I can feel it.

Perry If you say so. (*He looks round*) Is that the late lamented, do you think?

Freda Looks more like Dracula's grandfather to me. It's enough to give you the willies. But it's this *room* that interests me.

Perry (*puzzled*) Why?

Freda Haven't you noticed anything—odd?

Perry (*helplessly*) Like what?

Freda The bookcases, for instance. They're all empty. In fact, apart from that one over there—(*She indicates the Bible on the table*)—there isn't a book in the room.

Perry Oh, *that*. Yes, well . . .

Freda (*moving around*) Here we are—in a multi-millionaire's library, and there isn't a single book on the shelves. Now in view of what we've been told, doesn't that strike you as being a little *strange*?

Perry Well . . .

Freda (*turning*) If you ask me, Septimus Tomb never read a book in his life.

Perry But he must have done. Or else . . .

Freda Why leave Ermytrude Ash what may turn out to be a small fortune in his Will? Exactly.

Perry (*bewildered*) The whole thing sounds crazy to me.

Freda By the look of that painting, and the two bright sparks we met earlier, *I'm* beginning to think that the whole family may be only sixty pence to the pound. We're going to have to move very carefully, Perry. Very carefully indeed.

The wolf howl sounds

Perry (*frowning*) Didn't notice any dogs when we arrived, did you? (*He laughs nervously*) Sounded almost like a wolf.

Lucien (*off*) Quiet, down there!

Freda They're coming back. Now remember. Relax and leave everything to me.

The doors open and Penworthy enters, followed by Dora, Lucien, Marcus, now in a suit, and Anne. Agatha follows up the rear and closes the doors

Penworthy Forgive me, Miss Ash. A slight lapse of memory on my part.

but all is settled now. May I introduce you to the others? Miss Dora Tomb and Mr Marcus Tomb. (*He indicates them*)

Freda (*warmly*) How do you do?

They stare at her in silence

Penworthy Miss Franklin, our resident nurse.

Anne (*smiling*) Hello.

Penworthy And Mrs Hammond, the housekeeper whom you have already met, of course. (*To the others*) Miss Ermyntrude Ash, the famous novelist.

Freda (*indicating Perry*) And this is Perry—my faithful secretary.

Dora (*advancing to Dora, with his hand outstretched*) Hello.

Perry (*recoiling with a shriek*) No.

Perry stops and looks at his hand in surprise

Anne (*edging Marcus forward*) Marcus. Shake hands with Mr Perry.

Marcus (*drawing back*) Let me have men about me that are fat; sleek-headed men, and such as sleep o' nights. Yon Cassius has a lean and hungry look. He thinks too much: such men are dangerous.

Freda's eyebrows rise and she looks at Anne

Anne (*quickly*) Very good, Marcus. That was word perfect. (*To Freda and Perry*) He's studying the role of Caesar for the Town Festival, you know.

Freda How—interesting.

Anne (*smiling*) Isn't it? (*To Marcus*) Perhaps we'd better sit down, had we? (*She takes his arm*)

Penworthy A good idea. Miss Monica and Miss Emily will be with us shortly so if you wouldn't mind . . . (*He indicates the chairs*)

Everyone moves to the chairs. Dora keeping a nervous eye on Perry. Penworthy takes up the deeds box and begins to sort through it. Seating is as follows: front row downstage: empty, empty, Dora, Lucien. Back row downstage: Freda, Agatha, Anne, Marcus. Perry is left standing, so takes a chair from the front row and puts it beside Freda. He is about to sit when voices are heard, off

Monica (*off*) Take your hands off me, you fat bitch!

Emily (*off*) In there, tramp!

The doors fly open and Monica Tomb is propelled into the room, followed by Emily. Monica is an extremely attractive woman of thirty-five, with a stunning figure. She wears a skin-tight gown, low cut, and her hair cascades about her shoulders

Penworthy (*turning*) Ah, Miss Monica.

Monica (*ignoring him and turning to Emily*) Lay those flabby fingers of yours on me again, sister dear, and I'll bite them off at the elbows. Understand?

Penworthy (*firmly*) Miss Monica. We have guests present.

Monica (*snarling*) Tell them to get knotted. And you can . . . (*She sees Perry*) Oh. (*She smoothes herself down quickly*)

Penworthy May I introduce you to Miss Ermytrude Ash, the novelist, and Mr Potter, her secretary.

Perry *Peregrine* Potter, that is. (*He moves forward and holds his hand out to her*)

Monica (*taking it eagerly*) Hello. (*She mouths a kiss at him*)

Startled, Perry tries to withdraw his hand, but Monica refuses to let go. With a great deal of effort he manages to free himself and totters backwards to his chair

Emily (*lumbering to the chair beside Dora*) Calm down, hot-lips. Dinner isn't till *after* the reading. (*She sits*)

Monica (*sweetly*) In that case, we'll have plenty of time to bring your trough through here, won't we? (*She blows another kiss at Perry*)

Freda (*clearing her throat*) Good evening, Miss Tomb. (*She half rises*)

Monica (*looking her over*) Hmm. So you're the mysterious Emmy Ash, are you? No wonder the Old Man took such a shine to you. You're quite a dish for an old lady.

Freda (*taken aback*) Well—thank you.

Monica (*oozing over to stand beside Perry*) I've read a couple of your books, as a matter of fact. (*She toys with Perry's hair, to his obvious discomfort*)

Freda Oh. And—did you like them?

Monica No. (*She moves behind Perry, and plays with his tie*)

Freda I see.

Monica (*sliding her fingers inside Perry's shirt*) No offence, but all that romantic slush doesn't do a thing for me. I prefer the *real* thing. Hot and *strong*.

Perry gives a gasp as she squeezes him under his shirt

Penworthy Ahem.

Monica (*removing her hand from Perry's chest*) Looks like the fun's going to start. I'd better make myself comfortable. (*With a wriggle, she moves down to the wing-chair and settles herself in*) I can hear *perfectly* from here, Mr Penworthy. Take it away. The floor's yours. (*She pours herself a drink*)

Penworthy clears his throat, rustles his papers and moves behind the writing-table

Penworthy (*surveying them*) First of all I'd like to thank you all for being here this evening.

Emily This is a Will reading, not a garden party. Get on with it.

Penworthy As you all know, Mr Tomb was one of the country's richest men, and is now . . .

Emily One of the *deadest*. Skip the lecture and get on to how much he left and what we're getting out of it.

Penworthy (*annoyed*) If I might be allowed to *continue*, Miss Emily?

Emily glowers but is silent

Thank you. (*Pause*) Shortly before his death, instructions were issued to

convert all his assets, with the exception of this house and its grounds, into cash. This was done—much against my advice, I might add, and realized the total of seven million pounds.

An excited rustle fills the room

Emily How much of it's mine?

Penworthy (*ignoring her*) Of this seven million pounds handed over to him, three million was deposited in a London bank, and the rest was retained by Mr Tomb himself. Unfortunately, we have no idea what he did with it.

Lucien (*rising*) You mean—it's vanished? Four million pounds?

Penworthy Exactly. Gone without trace. (*He holds up his hands as the babble begins*) However, whilst the search for it goes on, I am required to read to you the contents of his Last Will and Testament, and the conditions therein. (*He sits and waits for them all to quieten*) To begin with—Mr Tomb insisted on writing out his own Will, scorning my advice and experience. It was delivered to me with a covering letter concerning certain instructions which I have carried out, and now I am ready to reveal its contents. (*He opens the Will*)

Emily And not before time.

Lucien Do be quiet, Emily.

Penworthy (*reading*) "To each of my six children: Lucien, Emily, Marcus, Dora Lucrezia, Monica and Oliver, the sum of four hundred thousand pounds each.

There is general reaction

To my housekeeper, Agatha Hammond, and my son's nurse, Anne Elisabeth Franklin, providing they are still in my service at the time of my death, the sum of one hundred thousand pounds each.

There is general reaction

To my solicitor, Hamilton Penworthy, the sum of four hundred thousand pounds. (*Pause*) The remainder of my estate, I leave to Miss Ermyntrude Ash, a writer of romantic novels, residing at an unknown address, but I suspect in London. This I do in gratitude for what she's done for me."

Freda (*Baffled*) But I haven't . . .

Penworthy "As you all know, I've suffered with insomnia for many years, and her books put me to sleep quicker than any tablets that quack doctor ever gives me."

Perry gives a nervous laugh then chokes it

"If, however, she chooses not to accept this legacy, then split it between the rest of them in equal shares."

Dora (*jumping up*) Forgery. It's a forgery.

Emily We'll fight this through every court in the land.

Lucien (*spluttering*) Four million pounds. To an absolute stranger.

Monica Not forgetting the house.

Dora She can't possibly accept it. That money belongs to us. Every penny of it. It's ours. The family's.

Anne (*quietly rising and looking at Freda*) Congratulations, Miss Ash.

I'm very happy for you.

Freda (*with a quick, tight smile*) Thank you.

Penworthy (*slightly louder*) There is a further passage . . .

Lucien Ah . . .

All look at Penworthy expectantly

Penworthy "In order to protect his interests, if Miss Ash decides to accept this legacy, she is required to take up residence in Monument House."

Freda (*stunned*) What?

Penworthy (*with a smile*) He wanted all your future novels to be written here.

Freda (*rising*) But I'm afraid that's out of the question, Mr Penworthy. I couldn't possibly stay in this house. Under any circumstances.

Penworthy Four million pounds, Miss Ash. It's a lot of money.

Perry (*dazed*) Four million.

Freda (*uncertainly*) I . . . (*She looks at Perry*) I can't think. (*She sits*)

Anne (*to Penworthy*) Excuse me. But as I've never been left anything in a Will before, I wonder if you can give me any idea of when I might get the money?

Emily The nightingale's showing her claws at last, I see.

Anne (*coldly*) I'm not asking for myself, Miss Emily. I have a very good reason for wanting to know.

Emily I'll bet.

Penworthy (*uncomfortably*) Ah—I regret to have to tell you this, Miss Franklin—but here we encounter a slight *setback*, so to speak.

Monica Setback?

All look at Penworthy

Penworthy (*most apologetically*) As I told you earlier, of the seven million realized, Mr Tomb himself took four. The—er—the missing millions which appear to be the property of Miss Ash at the moment.

Lucien Yes, yes. Go on.

Penworthy Unfortunately—in making his arrangements for the disposal of his wealth—he quite forgot about death duties.

Dora Death duties?

Monica What about them?

Penworthy Well, in this case—the death duties on the Tomb fortune amount to—three million pounds—

Everyone registers shock

—and as this was all the money we could find—it has been turned over to Her Majesty's Government as requested. There's not a penny left.

Lucien (*gaping*) You—you mean . . .

Emily (*rising*) We've got *nothing*?

Dora We're penniless?

Monica It's a fix! A carve-up!

Penworthy Unfortunately, we are all in the same boat. None of us will

receive a brass farthing unless the other four million is found and Miss Ash refuses her portion . . .

Lucien (*whirling to face Freda*) But she *has* refused, haven't you? You can't change your mind now.

Penworthy Miss Ash has until tomorrow morning. I cannot take an acceptance or refusal until that time. My hands are tied.

Emily And so will your throat be if she walks off with that money.

Dora (*to Penworthy*) You're a lawyer. Do something!

Penworthy (*spreading his hands*) I can do nothing until the appointed time. Now I suggest you all go to your rooms and prepare yourselves for dinner.

Emily Dinner?

Penworthy Miss Ash has a lot to think about. I think we should leave her in solitude for a short while.

Agatha (*finally rising*) It'll be twenty minutes. (*She looks Freda up and down grimly*) That should give her *plenty* of time.

Agatha exits

Anne (*helping Marcus up*) Come along, Marcus. Back to your room.

Marcus (*gravely*) Caesar shall forth; the things that threaten'd me ne'er look'd but on my back; when they shall see the face of Caesar they are vanished.

Anne (*glancing at Perry and Freda*) That's right. Perfect again. (*To them*) Excuse us. And don't worry. They can't do a thing about it. It's all yours.

Anne exits with Marcus. Lucien, Dora and Emily glare at Freda, then follow the others out

There is a silence

Penworthy Well, Miss Ash. You're a very fortunate lady.

Freda (*shakily*) So it would seem. (*She glances at Perry again*)

Penworthy It's a lot of money—if we find it.

Freda Yes.

Perry (*suddenly*) I—I wonder if you'll excuse me?

Freda (*alarmed*) Perry?

Perry I really should be getting back to London.

Monica You're not leaving? Not tonight?

Perry (*gulping*) I'm afraid I've got to. Work, you know.

Monica (*quickly*) But it's foggy outside. I'm sure I can find a warm bed for you here.

Perry It's most kind of you—but I'll really have to be going.

Freda Perry?

Perry (*to her*) Do what you think best. I—I'll leave it to you. See you tomorrow—at the office.

Freda (*uncertainly*) But . . . (*Taking a grip on herself*) Right. I'll see you first thing. Drive carefully.

Monica (*eagerly*) I'll see you to your car.

Perry exits hurriedly, chased by Monica

Penworthy moves to the doors and closes them

Penworthy You intend to work tomorrow as usual, Miss Ash? After all this excitement?

Freda (*shakily*) Nothing like work for keeping the mind active.

Penworthy How right you are, my dear. My own thought exactly. (*He moves to the drinks table and pours two drinks with his back to the audience*) A little toast to your new-found wealth—always providing you accept it, of course. (*He takes a glass to her*)

Freda (*accepting it*) I don't see how I can. I mean—I never expected I'd have to live here to inherit. It's just impossible.

Penworthy Then you intend to refuse?

Freda I didn't say that. I've still to think things over. I mean—it will have its advantages, of course . . . (*She sips*)

Penworthy But also its drawbacks. (*He sips his drink*)

Freda I'm afraid so. On the other hand—I *might* be able to work something out. Subject to certain conditions of my own. (*She moves to the fireplace*) Four million pounds.

Penworthy If we find it.

Freda (*turning*) But there *is* the house.

Penworthy As you say. There is the house.

Freda And four million pounds is a lot of money to have in cash, Mr Penworthy, isn't it? It would take up an awful lot of room, wouldn't you think?

Penworthy Well—yes.

Freda Then hasn't it crossed your mind that most probably it's here? Hidden away somewhere inside Monument House?

Penworthy I must admit that I too shared your notion, Miss Ash, but an extensive search has failed to reveal its whereabouts.

Freda Perhaps you haven't been searching in the right places. Maybe I can do better. (*She sips at her glass*)

Penworthy You mean . . .

Freda I've decided to accept. If there's four million pounds in this house, I'm going to have it. It's legally mine, and I know just what I'm going to do with it.

Penworthy But what about the family?

Freda Oh, I'll see them all right, don't worry. But they'll have to go. I can't have them hanging around while I'm—writing.

Penworthy So your mind is made up?

Freda (*with a smile*) Yes. it is. (*She moves to the wing-chair and sits*) Quite made up.

Penworthy (*drawing a deep breath*) Miss Ash—I will be quite honest with you. I had hoped that you might, under the circumstances, waive your rights to the house and fortune. After all, you did not know Mr Tomb, and he had never met you. Agreed?

Freda Agreed.

Penworthy I see now that this was a vain hope. You have every intention of claiming your inheritance.

Freda does not reply, but sits smiling, glass in her hand

This places me in rather an awkward position. (*He moves to the fireplace*) For many years I have handled the affairs of this family, and have been told several times that I would benefit greatly for my services under Mr Tomb's Will. No doubt the sum of four hundred thousand pounds would appear to you adequate reward, but I'm afraid I anticipated rather more, and acted accordingly.

Freda continues to smile, not flinching a muscle as Penworthy roams around the room

Over a period of time I incurred debts of over one million pounds. A sum that needs repaying rather urgently. You, Miss Ash, are the only person who can help me at this time, so therefore, I shall have the money from you.

Behind Penworthy, the secret door begins to open

Not all at once, you understand. One must be discreet. But little by little the money will flow to me, and soon I will have it all. (*He suddenly notices the open panel*) Excuse me. (*He moves to the opening and looks inside*) It's quite all right. Miss Ash and I have come to an agreement which will satisfy all parties—for the time being. (*He turns away and moves back to Freda*) So, you see—everything is going to plan. Just as I said it would. (*He rests his hand on Freda's shoulder*)

Without a flicker of emotion, she topples slowly on to the floor, stone dead. Penworthy smiles down at her as—

the CURTAIN slowly falls

ACT II

SCENE 1

The same. Fifteen minutes later

The body of Freda has been removed and the secret panel is closed. Penworthy stands at the octagonal table, hand resting on the Bible, facing front. Dora, a rapt look on her face, is sitting on one of the dining-chairs, whilst Lucien, glass in hand, is standing by the fireplace, a scowl on his face. Emily sits perched on the table edge, munching an apple, and Monica stands behind the wing-chair. Penworthy is speaking

Penworthy . . . Naturally I summoned the aid of Nurse Franklin but it was too late. Miss Ash was beyond mortal help. (*Sadly*) It was her heart, of course. And the shock of the inheritance.

Lucien (*fuming*) That's all very well, Penworthy, but why did the wretched woman want to drop dead in *this* house? Couldn't she have had the decency to wait until she'd arrived home?

Penworthy My dear Mr Lucien—

Emily (*cutting in*) Well, you must admit it's very *opportune*. For everybody.

Penworthy But naturally. It would be hypocritical of us to pretend otherwise. We all stand to gain a great deal from this unfortunate event, do we not? Whereas before we had nothing, we now have the house to share between us.

Monica Not to mention four million pounds.

Lucien If we ever find them.

Penworthy Oh, we shall. Never fear. But to return to the subject of Miss Ash. She is—(*he coughs*)—I mean—*was* a well-known novelist. Her unexpected demise is bound to cause comment in the outside world. Comment, and perhaps even *suspicion*.

Lucien Suspicion?

Penworthy (*mildly*) But of course. Under the circumstances, an autopsy will be performed, and an inquest will be a matter of course. I need hardly add that *all* of us may be called to give evidence—especially if it turns out that she had no previous record of heart trouble.

Dora Oh. (*She looks at the others in anguish*)

Lucien (*spluttering*) Are you suggesting that because a perfect stranger chooses to have her heart attack in this house, the whole family is to be subjected to public investigation? I won't allow it. Do you hear, Penworthy. I won't allow it.

Emily (*heaving herself off the table*) I don't think we need worry about that, sweetie pie. There's quite a *simple* way of avoiding an investigation—*isn't* there, Penworthy?