MURDER MISTAKEN

by Janet Green

SAMUEL FRENCH

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Murder Mistaken

After a short provincial tour, this play was produced at the Ambassador's Theatre, London, on Tuesday, 4th November, 1952, with the following cast :—

EMMIE	*Phyllis Morris*
MONICA BARE	*Iris Hoey*
PHILIP MORTIMER	*Antony Marlowe*
EDWARD BARE	*Derek Farr*
FREDA JEFFERIES	*Brenda de Banzie*
CHARLOTTE YOUNG	*Patricia Burke*

and subsequently at the Vaudeville Theatre, London.

Produced and designed by JOHN MCCORMICK

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The action of the play takes place in the sitting-room of Monica Bare's house at the top of Sunrise Hill, just outside a small market town in Kent.

ACT ONE

Scene 1. An afternoon in November.
Scene 2. Afternoon—a few days later.
Scene 3. Afternoon—eight weeks later.

ACT TWO

Scene 1. Noon—two months later.
Scene 2. Noon—ten days later.
Scene 3. After tea, the same day.

No reference is intended in this play to any person, alive or dead.

NOTE : *Running time, excluding intervals, is approximately one hour and fifty minutes.*

PRODUCTION NOTE

THE production of this play presents no particular problems, but bear in mind that the straightforward approach will be the most effective. Story value, plot development and characterisation are such that they require simple, direct presentation if the dramatic value is to be extracted in full.

The play is based on character. Edward, and his protagonists, do what they do and say what they say because they are the kind of people who cannot behave or talk in any other way. If the cast remember this, then a really first-class piece of theatre is ensured. The actress playing Charlotte has two characters to portray, and it is important that the transition should be very clearly defined.

The set may be built from stock flats. It is essential that the fireplace, french windows and the door be plainly visible to the entire audience at all times.

A large, second-hand, gas fire suitable for the purpose may easily be obtained from a sale-room and its conversion to electric illumination simply achieved by exchanging the asbestos backing for frosted glass, afterwards replacing the radiants. For a simple effect, tint the glass with streaked pink and amber lacquer, lighting it with one lamp on a variable resistance. To elaborate this method, divide the back into three sections horizontally, and light by three lamps controlled in three separate, variable resistances, so allowing the light to climb.

Perhaps the easiest way of simulating the hiss of escaping gas is to use a cylinder of compressed air. Alternatively, fit a second tyre valve (diametrically opposite to the original) on a fairly large, discarded inner tube; a garage will quickly do this for a small sum. Then, with an ordinary foot- or hand-pump attached to one valve, inflate the tube to provide an air reservoir. Remove the inner portion of the other valve and allow air to escape with a continuous and noisy hiss, maintaining the air pressure by an occasional use of the pump.

In either case, to complete the illusion, it is advisable to connect the source of the compressed air to the back of the gas fire with a piece of tubing.

As far as lighting is concerned, in the first scene of Act One the curtains are drawn and the only illumination in the room is from the gas fire. The light pools naturally round Monica's chair. When Emmie opens the curtains, the late afternoon light brings deep shadows into the recesses of the room. Gradually these shadows thicken, until the moment when Edward switches on the electric light. This brings a concentration of light and attention once again round Monica's chair for the vital moments which are to follow. As the twilight deepens the far corners of the room should almost disappear from view, leaving just sufficient light near the door for the last moments in the scene between Edward and Emmie.

In the next scene, the bright winter sun fills every corner of the room with light; and in Scene 3, as the afternoon light rapidly fades, the warm light of the gas fire should again show up in relief against the shadows, until the moment when Edward switches on the main lights in the room.

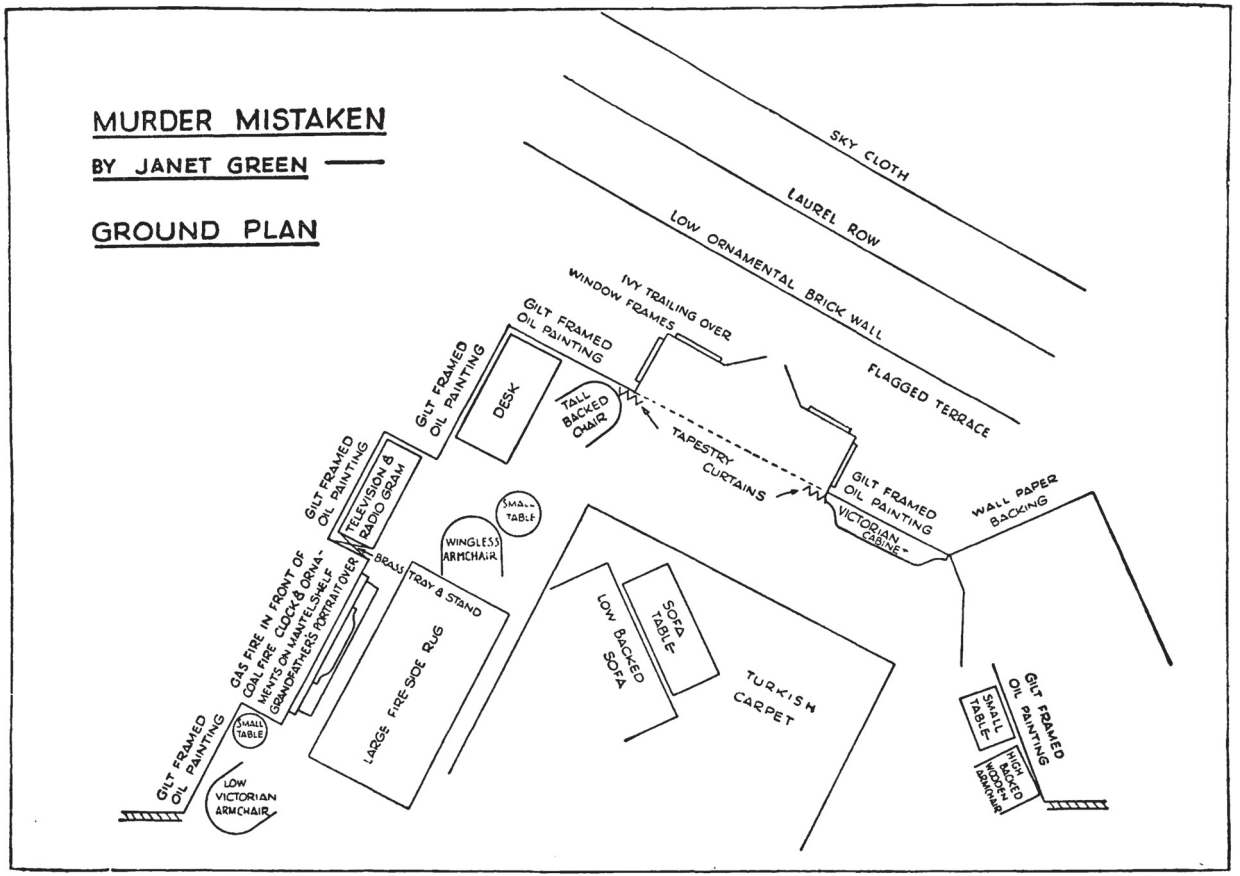
For the first two scenes of the second act the lighting for Act One, Scene 2, may be repeated; but in the third, and last, scene the afternoon light is beginning to fade. Again the farthest corners of the room dwindle into shadow. From the moment the action moves to the right of the stage, in front of the fireplace, the concentration of light in this area should be intensified, until the final moment when Freda moves to pick up the album. At this point, with the gentle light of the fire and the last rays of the sun slanting on her through the french windows, she becomes the focus of attention as the curtain falls.

JANET GREEN

CHARACTERS

(In the order of their appearance)

EMMIE	An elderly maid
MONICA BARE	A rich, middle-aged woman
PHILIP MORTIMER	A young lawyer
EDWARD BARE	Monica's young husband
FREDA JEFFERIES	A rich widow
CHARLOTTE YOUNG	A rich spinster


MURDER MISTAKEN
BY JANET GREEN
GROUND PLAN
SKY CLOTH
LAUREL ROW
LOW ORNAMENTAL BRICK WALL
IVY TRAILING OVER WINDOW FRAMES
GILT FRAMED OIL PAINTING
FLAGGED TERRACE
DESK
TALL BACKED CHAIR
TAPESTRY CURTAINS
GILT FRAMED OIL PAINTING
TELEVISION & RADIO GRAM
GILT FRAMED OIL PAINTING
WALL PAPER BACKING
VICTORIAN CABINET
SMALL TABLE
WINGLESS ARMCHAIR
BRASS TRAY & STAND
GAS FIRE IN FRONT OF COAL FIRE CLOCK & ORNAMENTS ON MANTEL-SHELF GRANDFATHERS PORTRAIT OVER
LARGE FIRE-SIDE RUG
LOW BACKED SOFA
SOFA TABLE
TURKISH CARPET
GILT FRAMED OIL PAINTING
SMALL TABLE
SMALL TABLE
HIGH BACKED WOODEN WARMING
GILT FRAMED OIL PAINTING
LOW VICTORIAN ARMCHAIR

MURDER MISTAKEN

ACT ONE

SCENE 1

SCENE: *The sitting-room in* MONICA BARE'S *house, built by her grandfather, just outside an old market town in Kent, on the top of a hill called Sunrise. An afternoon in November.*

Designed in the Gothic manner so favoured at the turn of the century, the room is dominated by the stone-mullioned french windows, through which may be seen lawns stretching away to a laurel hedge at the bottom of the garden. These windows are in the centre of the U.S. *wall. Stage* R. *in the middle of the wall, is a marble fireplace, housing an old gas fire; opposite, stage* L., *is a door leading to the rest of the house.*

D.R., *facing into the room, stands a low armchair, beside which is a small, occasional table. Over the fireplace hangs a portrait of a stern old country Victorian, while on the mantelpiece itself rests a heavy marble clock and ornaments. The alcove above the chimney breast is occupied by a large, expensive radiogram and a television set. A folding tea table with a brass tray is tucked beside the radio.*

MONICA'S *chair stands above the fireplace facing the audience, and on its left a small, occasional table. A heavy Edwardian desk, upon which stand the telephone and a table lamp, fills the* U.R. *corner of the room, and a carved armchair stands in front of it. The couch faces the fire and is set at an angle running away from* MONICA'S *chair to* C. *A table is set close behind it. Against the wall,* L. *of the french windows, there is an inlaid, Edwardian cabinet on which stand two large, ugly vases. Just below the door is a small table and next to this, almost on the setting line, is an upright carved armchair. The curtains are heavy tapestry and the oils in gilt frames which decorate the walls depict the "Scottish Scene" and "Still Life". The carved, inlaid, Edwardian furniture has become very much part of the room with its fifty years of solid use.*

To-day, the curtains are drawn and the scene is in half darkness.

MONICA BARE, *a big, middle-aged woman, is dozing in front of the fire. Convalescent from an illness, she is muffled up in shawls and woollies.*

EMMIE, *small, neat and elderly, puts her head round the door.* EMMIE *has lived for nearly twenty years in this house and her vision is narrow and undeveloped. Although she is considerably older than her mistress,* MONICA *always speaks to her as if she were a fairly intelligent fourteen and* EMMIE *has become so used to this form of address that she would be flustered and unhappy if anything were to be changed.* EMMIE *came originally from an outlying farm and her speech has remained countrified.*

EMMIE. You awake, m'm? (*Crosses to* U.S. *end of couch.*)

MONICA (*she is only trying to sleep*). Yes . . .

EMMIE. You've got a visitor, m'm.

MONICA. Oh, I can't see anybody, Emmie.

EMMIE. Mr. Mortimer's called. (L. *of* MONICA'S *chair.*) Shall I fetch him in?

MONICA. Oh, Mr. Mortimer! (*Sits up at once.*) Quick then, Emmie. Pull the curtains back. (EMMIE *crosses* U.S., *draws curtain* R.) Where's my comb and glass. (EMMIE *returns to* MONICA'S *table and hands her the comb and glass.*)

EMMIE. Did you get your sleep?

MONICA. No; I did try, though. My headache keeps me awake.

PHILIP (*off*). Can I come in, Mrs. Bare?

MONICA. Certainly not, Phip. I haven't finished titivating.

(EMMIE *crosses to draw* L. *curtain as* PHILIP MORTIMER, *ignoring* MONICA'S *command, comes in, smiling. He is a pleasant young man of about thirty, not very tall, but broad shouldered and husky. He is a little formal in his manners and speech.*)

PHILIP (*comes to, and lays his brief case on, table behind couch*). Well, now, how's the invalid to-day? (*Crosses* L. *of* MONICA'S *chair.*)

MONICA. Not at all well, Phip.

PHILIP. I'm so sorry. I hoped to find you up and about.

EMMIE (*comes* L.C.). Madam's ready for her tea, I expect, sir. Shall I get you a nice cup, too?

PHILIP. That's why I came at tea-time, Emmie. (EMMIE *is pleased and crosses towards door* L.)

MONICA. No, we must wait for Teddy, Phip. He always likes the first cup.

PHILIP. Where is Edward, Mrs. Bare?

MONICA. Gone down to match my patterns. All right, Emmie, toddle. Make the tea when you hear Mr. Bare. He'll be sure to whistle.

(EMMIE *goes out, shutting door behind her.*)

Like a glass of sherry, Phip?

PHILIP (*laughs as he sits* U.S. *end of couch*). No, thanks, I'm afraid it's too early for me. Only four o'clock.

MONICA. Nice, dry sack, (*Takes decanter and glass from small table.*) Teddy bought me. I had some before lunch. (*Giggles.*) I had some after lunch; I think I'll have another little glass now. (*Pours glass of sherry.*) Empty. (*Gives decanter to* PHILIP.) Put that back in the cupboard.

(PHILIP *looks at* MONICA *as if he would like to rebuke her, rises and crosses to cabinet* U.L. *putting decanter and glass on cabinet.*)

You had my letter then?

PHILIP (*crosses to top end of couch*). Yes. I—with all respect, Mrs. Bare, will you allow me to say that I don't feel happy about it?

MONICA (*kindly*). When I instruct my lawyer, Phip, it's because I want him to carry out my wishes.

PHILIP (*crosses* R. *of* MONICA'S *chair*). Forgive me, Mrs. Bare, but—are you quite sure you're well advised to make another

will? I hoped the one you made just after your marriage covered all the necessary points. It certainly looks after everybody; and when Edward dies, your grandfather's money goes where it belongs; back to the family.

MONICA. You mean back to Dora.

PHILIP. May I remind you that Mrs. Mackintosh is your only sister; your only relative, in fact. (*Moves in front of couch.*)

MONICA. Oh, stop talking like a lawyer, Phip, and sit down. (PHILIP *sits at top end of couch.*) I haven't seen Dora for twenty years. Any picture grows a little dim in that time. So we'll make the new will the way I want it, shall we?

PHILIP. I feel bound to say that it appears to me most unfair to Mrs. Mackintosh.

MONICA (*firmly*). You leave me to decide what's fair to Dora, and what isn't Phip. You're my lawyer and I pay you to do what I think is right; just as I paid your father when he was alive. Dora's a wealthy woman now. Her husband left her an enormous fortune. Little weed of a man, but everything he touched turned to money. Dora cut herself off from me, you know. Never came to see me; hardly ever wrote, except when I married Edward; busybodying letters trying to stop me.

(PHILIP *turns impatiently.*)

No, I don't have to think about Dora, any more. Teddy's different. If anything happened to me, and I'm a good bit older than Teddy, I must know he gets all the income. He's entitled to it.

PHILIP (*mildly*). Why?

MONICA. Because I say so. You're not doing my headache any good, you know, Phip.

PHILIP. I feel obliged to remind you Mrs. Bare, that your grandfather more than probably meant his money to be kept in the family.

MONICA. Teddy's my family. (*Softly.*) All the family I've got.

PHILIP. You know, Mrs. Mackintosh might say, in all fairness, that you never went over to see her.

MONICA. Kingston, Jamaica; too far. Teddy wanted to take me.

PHILIP (*surprised*). Really! You surprise me.

MONICA. You don't know Teddy, Phip. He'd like to go to Jamaica, Hong Kong, anywhere. He's so imaginative. Wants to see places, not just read about them.

PHILIP. Like a lot of us, Mrs. Bare. (*Rises and moves round top of couch a few paces.*)

MONICA. But he's a good boy. Wouldn't leave me. And I'm not strong enough for that kind of gallivanting. Prefer my own home.

(PHILIP *looks at her and decides to ask the question that is really on his mind.*)

PHILIP. Has Edward been pressing you to make a fresh will?

MONICA (*really angry*). Indeed he has not. Teddy doesn't know I ever made one will, let alone two. I've never told him. Wouldn't hurt the boy. He's very sensitive. (*Irritated,* PHILIP *crosses to* D.L.) This little go of influenza worried me. I lay upstairs fretting. Nearly went into Teddy once or twice and told him. (*Puts her finger up.*) Listen! (PHILIP *turns and looks toward windows.*) No, it's only a boy in the street. (*Earnestly.*) I want that will to-morrow, Phip; ready to sign.

PHILIP (*crosses to below table behind couch*). My mind would be so much easier if I felt sure that you hadn't been influenced in this matter, Mrs. Bare.

MONICA (*turns in her chair*). You're very unfair to Teddy, Phip. You forget it was his brains brought us the big price for the business. You'd have closed with those London people, wouldn't you? Well, wouldn't you?

PHILIP. I didn't trust Edward—Edward's judgment.

MONICA. You lost your temper and told me he was talking through the back of his neck.

(PHILIP *looks uncomfortable.*)

Yes, that's what you said. (PHILIP *crosses below and to centre of couch.*) Still you weren't the only one. (*Leans back and laughs.*) I remember being quite annoyed when he came to see me. Whatever does a young clerk know about selling a big business like ours, I thought. Mr. Mann should have come himself. Odd how it all turned out. I never thought it would lead to wedding bells, Phip. And that they'd ring out for me.

PHILIP. I think that surprised everybody, Mrs. Bare. I know I lost some sleep myself.

MONICA. Yes, you did your best to stop my marriage, Phip; didn't spare me one bit.

(PHILIP *is embarrassed.*)

Oh, I know you were worried; your father just passed over, dear old Sam. (*Sighs.*) And all the responsibility falling on your young shoulders. But you had no right to interfere. Bringing the Vicar here. It was very impertinent, Phip.

PHILIP (*wryly*). So you said at the time, Mrs. Bare.

MONICA (*leans forward*). And I say it again, Phip. I knew my own business best, then. And I know it best now. Teddy's made me very happy. I think I'd want to die if I had to go back to my old, lonely life. So you be a good boy and write that will as I want it; and when I want it! To-morrow! (*Leans back.*) Oh, Phip, it's hot in here. (*She finishes drink;* PHILIP *rises, takes her glass and puts it on small table by* MONICA'S *chair. Looks at her.*)

PHILIP. You seem to be wound up like a cocoon. Shall I open a window? (*Moves towards windows.*)

MONICA (*sits up again*). No! (PHILIP *stops.*) You mustn't open the window. Teddy shut it.

PHILIP (*returns to above couch*). I can't think why you go in for these gas fires, Mrs. Bare. They burn up all the oxygen. (*Points to earthenware bowl in the hearth.*) Look at that bowl! Bone dry!

MONICA. I have gas fires because they save work. I'll get

Emmie to fill the bowl again. (*Loosens her wraps.*) I feel languid to-day, Phip; no energy.

PHILIP. I'm not surprised; shut up in this atmosphere. Why not ask Edward to take you over to the bungalow? You need some sea air.

MONICA. I don't want to go to the sea this time of the year. (*Shivers.*) Too cold. Ssh!

(MONICA *puts her finger up again to listen and turns her head.* PHILIP *moves impatiently.*)

PHILIP. It isn't anybody!

MONICA. Yes, it is . . . there! (*Outside, someone is whistling.*) He's just turned into the gate. D'you hear?

PHILIP (*listens*). Yes, it is Edward. (*Picks up brief case and crosses to door.*) I think I ought to be off really.

(MONICA *has turned to the door, her face alight with loving anticipation.*)

EDWARD (*off*). Monnie! Monnie! (*Comes in.*) I've got a surprise for you. Guess what! (*He stops short when he sees* PHILIP *and smiles insolently.*) Oh, hello, Phip.

(EDWARD BARE *is a handsome boy; smart, astute and very smooth. Basically common, he has learnt to control his accent and only his untutored air and occasional, colloquial phraseology give away his humble beginning. When he is angry, or deeply moved, he might drop an "h". His manners, when they are good, are too good and when they are bad they are horrid. He never smokes.*)

PHILIP. Good afternoon, Edward.

MONICA. Did you get my patterns, Teddy?

(MONICA'S *voice is fond and from the moment that* EDWARD *enters the room she is bemused by him.*)

EDWARD. Yes, (*Crosses to her.*) matched them nicely. (*Leans over her chair.*) I got something else, as well.

MONICA. What?

EDWARD. Surprise! (*Slips a parcel behind* MONICA'S *back.*)

(MONICA *smiles as she feels it.*)

MONICA. Well!

EDWARD. We'll have some fun opening that.

(*They both look at* PHILIP, *wanting him to go.*)

PHILIP (*puts brief case on table* L. *and comes to foot of couch*). I've just been telling Mrs. Bare, Edward. She ought to get out. Influenza pulls down the constitution; makes one feel depressed.

EDWARD (*grins*). I know how to cure my wife's depression Phip. (*Arm round* MONICA.)

(EDWARD *looks at the parcel behind* MONICA'S *back and, laughs.* EDWARD'S *laugh is sharp and often comes unexpectedly, usually ending on a high note. He moves his shoulders under his coat with a characteristic gesture which he employs often.*)

MONICA. But I do feel very languid, Teddy.

PHILIP. Wrap her up, Edward, and take her out to the bungalow. It's very sheltered there.

EDWARD. Is it?

PHILIP. Take a thermos or something.

EDWARD. Or something!

(EDWARD *laughs.* MONICA *tries not to join in but fails.*)

We mustn't rush it. She still feels very languid, don't you, Monnie?

MONICA. I do, Teddy, I was saying to Phip——

PHILIP (*testily*). This damn gas fire; can't you feel the fug in this room, Edward? Mrs. Bare won't have a window open. Why not put the fire out?

EDWARD. Monnie hates a draught.

PHILIP. Well, I think it'd be a good thing, I really do.

EDWARD. Do you now?

PHILIP. Just for half an hour.

EDWARD. All right!

(EDWARD, *lounging at the back of* MONICA'S *chair, makes the word deliberately insolent.* MONICA *looks at* PHILIP, *who is forced to cross and turn out the gas fire.*)

MONICA (*as the fire goes down*). Oh, dear, all the cheer's going.

EDWARD. You want a nice cup of tea, Monnie. (*Goes towards hall.*) Soon brighten you up. (*Calls.*) Emmie! Emmie! Mrs. Bare wants her tea.

PHILIP. Well, if you'll excuse me, I must be on my way. (*Crosses to* L.C.) Time's moving.

MONICA. Not staying for tea, Phip?

PHILIP. No, thank you, Mrs. Bare.

EDWARD. How's the rugger, Phip?

(*He watches* PHILIP *collect his brief case.*)

You've never sent me that invitation, to watch a match, you promised me.

PHILIP. The invitation you asked me for, Edward. Tickets are on sale at the gate. I can't stop you buying one.

(EDWARD *laughs, then looks from* PHILIP *to* MONICA *and back again.*)

EDWARD. Been talking business, you two?

MONICA. Phip's going to do something for me, aren't you, Phip?

EDWARD. What's this, secrets? (*Goes towards* MONICA.)

MONICA. Only good ones, Teddy. I want it here to-morrow morning, Phip; ready to sign.

PHILIP. Very well, Mrs. Bare. I can see you've made up your mind.

MONICA (*pleased*). That's a good boy.

(EMMIE *comes in with the tea tray.*)

EDWARD. Ah, the princess of the tea cups!

(EMMIE *lays the tray on the table behind the couch and goes to get the folding tea table from above the fireplace.* EDWARD *throws himself down, leans over the back of the couch and helps himself to cakes.*)

MONICA. Light's going early to-day, Teddy.

EDWARD. Yes, there's fog about. (*Yawns. When* MONICA

looks at him, he puts his hand over his mouth.) Marshalls have got their tree in the window. Soon be Christmas.

(PHILIP *sees* EMMIE *struggling with the tea table and goes to help her.*)

MONICA. Oh, don't, you make me feel so old.

PHILIP (*coming* L. *of* MONICA'S *chair*). Well, good-bye, Mrs. Bare; I'll be up in the morning.

MONICA. Oh, can't you send a clerk, Phip? It's such a climb.

PHILIP. No trouble; you want it done. (*Crosses to door, picks up brief case from the table* L., *then turns and looks at* EDWARD, *lounging on the couch.*) Don't bother to see me out, Edward. I can see you're tired. (EXIT L.)

EDWARD. What's the matter with Phip?

MONICA. You ought to get up, dear, when visitors go.

EDWARD. Oh, I thought he was just the lawyer. (*Wrinkles his nose.*) Anyway, it's just as rude to notice it.

(MONICA *looks at* EMMIE, *who is lingering* L. *of her chair.*)

Well, toddle, Emmie, toddle. (EDWARD *rises briskly and comes behind* EMMIE, *and shoos her off, as though shooing a brood of chickens.* EMMIE *loves being teased and laughs as she goes off in a flurry, waving her arms as if they were wings.*) Emmie's getting very old, Monnie. Wants a bomb behind her. (*As he sits at top end of the couch he pulls the tea table between himself and* MONICA.)

MONICA, We all come to it, Teddy. I can't do anything about her. She's got no place to go but here.

EDWARD (*lays out the cups*). That's your kind heart.

(MONICA, *feeling behind her back, brings out the parcel* EDWARD *put there. She undoes it quickly and holds a half bottle of whisky up in her right hand.*)

MONICA. Clever Teddy Bare!

EDWARD. I said I'd get you something tasty for your tea.

(*As* MONICA *starts to open the bottle,* EDWARD *rises and takes it from her.*)