

SETTING

ACT ONE

Scene I: The Great Hall at Monkswell Manor. Late afternoon

Scene II: The same. The following day after lunch

ACT TWO

The same. Ten minutes later

ACT ONE

Scene I

(Scene – The Great Hall at Monkswell Manor. Late afternoon.)

(The house looks not so much a period piece but a house which has been lived in by generations of the same family with dwindling resources. There are tall windows up centre; a big arched opening up right leading to the entrance hall, the front door and the kitchen; and an arched opening left leading upstairs to the bedrooms. Up left leading off the stairs is the door to the library; down left is the door to the drawing-room; and down right the door (opening onstage) to the dining-room, right is an open fireplace and beneath the window up centre a window seat and a radiator.)

(The Hall is furnished as a lounge. There is some good old oak, including a large refectory table by the window up centre, an oak chest in the entrance hall up right, and a stool on the stairs left. The curtains and the upholstered furniture – a sofa left centre, an armchair centre, a large leather armchair right, and a small Victorian armchair down right – are shabby and old-fashioned. There is a combined desk and bookcase left, with a radio and telephone on it and a chair beside it. There is another chair up right centre by the window, a Canterbury containing newspapers and magazines above the fireplace and a small half circular card table behind the sofa. There are two wall brackets over the fireplace which are worked together; and a wall bracket on the left wall, one left of the library door and one in the entrance hall, which are also worked together. There

are double switches left of the arch up right, and on the downstage side of the door down left, and a single switch on the upstage side of the door down right. A table lamp stands on the sofa table.)

(See the Ground Plan)

(Before the curtain rises the House Lights fade to a complete blackout and the music of "Three Blind Mice" is heard.)

(When the curtain rises the stage is in complete darkness. The music fades giving place to a shrill whistle of the same tune, "Three Blind Mice." A woman's piercing scream is heard then a mixture of male and female voices saying: "My God, what's that?" "Went that way!" "Oh, my God!" Then a police whistle sounds, followed by several other police whistles, all of which fade to silence.)

VOICE ON THE RADIO. ...and according to Scotland Yard, the crime took place at twenty-four Culver Street, Paddington.

(The lights come up, revealing the Hall at Monkswell Manor. It is late afternoon, and almost dark. Snow can be seen falling heavily through the windows up centre. There is a fire burning. A freshly-painted sign board is standing on its side on the stairs against the archway left; it has on it in large letters: Monkswell Manor Guest House.)

The murdered woman was a Mrs. Maureen Lyon. In connection with the murder, the police are anxious to interview a man seen in the vicinity, wearing a dark overcoat, light scarf, and a soft felt hat.

(MOLLIE RALSTON enters through the arch up right. She is a tall, pretty young woman with an ingenuous air, in her twenties. She puts down her handbag and gloves on the armchair centre then crosses to the radio and switches it off during the next speech. She places a small parcel in the desk cupboard.)

Motorists are warned against ice-bound roads. The heavy snow is expected to continue, and throughout the country there will be a certain freezing, particularly at points on the north and northeast coast of Scotland.

MOLLIE. *(calling)* Mrs. Barlow! Mrs. Barlow! *(Receiving no reply she crosses to the armchair centre, picks up her handbag and one glove and then goes out through the arch up right. She removes her overcoat and then returns.)* Brr! It's cold. *(She goes to the wall switch above the door down right and switches on the wall brackets over the fireplace. She moves up to the window, feels the radiator and draws the curtains. Then she moves down to the sofa table and switches on the table lamp. She looks round and notices the large sign board lying on its side on the stairs. She picks it up and places it against the wall left of the window alcove. She steps back, nodding her head.)* It really does look nice – oh! *(She notices that there is no "S" on the sign.)* How stupid of Giles. *(She looks at her watch then at the clock.)* Gosh!

(MOLLIE hurries off up the stairs left. GILES enters from the front door right. He is a rather arrogant but attractive young man in his twenties. He stamps his feet to shake off the snow, opens the oak chest and puts inside a big paper carrier he has been carrying. He takes off his overcoat, hat and scarf, moves down and throws them on the armchair centre. Then he goes to the fire and warms his hands.)

GILES. *(calling)* Mollie? Mollie? Mollie? Where are you?

(MOLLIE enters from the arch left.)

MOLLIE. *(cheerfully)* Doing all the work, you brute. *(She crosses to GILES.)*

GILES. Oh, there you are – leave it all to me. Shall I stoke the Aga?

MOLLIE. Done.

GILES. *(kissing her)* Hullo, sweetheart. Your nose is cold.

MOLLIE. I've just come in. *(She crosses to the fire.)*

GILES. Why? Where have you been? Surely you've not been out in this weather?

MOLLIE. I had to go down to the village for some stuff I'd forgotten. Did you get the chicken netting?

GILES. It wasn't the right kind. (*He sits on the left arm of the armchair centre.*) I went on to another dump but that wasn't any good either. Practically a whole day wasted. My God, I'm half frozen. Car was skidding like anything. The snow's coming down thick. What do you bet we're not snowed up tomorrow?

MOLLIE. Oh dear, I do hope not. (*She crosses to the radiator and feels it.*) If only the pipes don't freeze.

GILES. (*rising and moving up to MOLLIE*) We'll have to keep the central heating well stoked up. (*He feels the radiator.*) H'm, not too good – I wish they'd send the coke along. We've not got any too much.

MOLLIE. (*moving down to the sofa and sitting*) Oh! I do so want everything to go well at first. First impressions are so important.

GILES. (*moving down to right of the sofa*) Is everything ready? Nobody's arrived yet, I suppose?

MOLLIE. No, thank goodness. I think everything's in order. Mrs. Barlow's hooked it early. Afraid of the weather, I suppose.

GILES. What a nuisance these daily women are. That leaves everything on your shoulders.

MOLLIE. *And yours!* This is a partnership.

GILES. (*crossing to the fire*) So long as you don't ask me to cook.

MOLLIE. (*rising*) No, no, that's my department. Anyway, we've got lots of tins in case we are snowed up. (*Crossing to GILES*) Oh, Giles, do you think it's going to be all right?

GILES. Got cold feet, have you? Are you sorry now we didn't sell the place when your aunt left it to you, instead of having this mad idea of running it as a guest house?

MOLLIE. No, I'm not. I love it. And talking of a guest house. Just look at *that!* (*She indicates the sign board in an accusing manner.*)

GILES. (*complacently*) Pretty good, what? (*He crosses to left of the sign board.*)

MOLLIE. It's a disaster! Don't you see? You've left out the "S." Monkwell instead of Monkswell.

GILES. Good Lord, so I did. However did I come to do that? But it doesn't really matter, does it? Monkwell is just as good a name.

MOLLIE. You're in disgrace. (*She crosses to the desk.*) Go and stoke up the central heating.

GILES. Across that icy yard! Ugh! Shall I bank it up for the night now?

MOLLIE. No, you don't do that until ten or eleven o'clock at night.

GILES. How appalling!

MOLLIE. Hurry up. Someone may arrive at any minute now.

GILES. You've got all the rooms worked out?

MOLLIE. Yes. (*She sits at the desk and picks up a paper from it.*) Mrs. Boyle, Front Fourposter Room. Major Metcalf, Blue Room. Miss Casewell, East Room. Mr. Wren, Oak Room.

GILES. (*crossing to right of the sofa table*) I wonder what all these people will be like. Oughtn't we to have got rent in advance?

MOLLIE. Oh no, I don't think so.

GILES. We're rather mugs at this game.

MOLLIE. They bring luggage. If they don't pay we hang on to their luggage. It's quite simple.

GILES. I can't help thinking we ought to have taken a correspondence course in hotel keeping. We're sure to get had in some way. Their luggage might be just bricks wrapped up in newspaper and where should we be then?

MOLLIE. They all wrote from very good addresses.

GILES. That's what servants with forged references do.
Some of these people may be criminals hiding from
the police. *(He moves up to the sign board and picks it up.)*

MOLLIE. I don't care what they are so long as they pay us
seven guineas every week.

GILES. You're such a wonderful woman of business, Mollie.

*(GILES exits through the arch up right, carrying the sign
board. MOLLIE switches on the radio.)*

VOICE ON THE RADIO. And according to Scotland Yard,
the crime took place at twenty-four Culver Street,
Paddington. The murdered woman was a Mrs.
Maureen Lyon. In connection with the murder, the
police –

(MOLLIE rises and crosses to the armchair centre.)

– are anxious to interview a man seen in the vicinity,
wearing a dark overcoat –

(MOLLIE picks up GILES' overcoat.)

– light scarf –

(MOLLIE picks up his scarf.)

– and a soft felt hat.

*(MOLLIE picks up his hat and exits through the arch up
right.)*

Motorists are warned against ice-bound roads.

(The door bell rings.)

The heavy snow is expected to continue, and
throughout the country...

*(MOLLIE enters, crosses to the desk, switches off the radio
and hurries off through the arch up right.)*

MOLLIE. *(off)* How do you do?

CHRISTOPHER. *(off)* Thanks so much.

*(CHRISTOPHER WREN enters through the arch up right
with a suitcase which he places right of the refectory
table. He is a rather wild-looking neurotic young man.)*

His hair is long and untidy and he wears a woven artistic tie. He has a confiding, almost childish manner.)

(MOLLIE enters and moves up centre.)

Weather is simply awful. My taxi gave up at your gate. *(He crosses and places his hat on the sofa table.)* Wouldn't attempt the drive. No sporting instinct. *(moving up to MOLLIE)* Are you Mrs. Ralston? How delightful! My name's Wren.

MOLLIE. How do you do, Mr. Wren?

CHRISTOPHER. You know you're not at all as I'd pictured you. I've been thinking of you as a retired general's widow, Indian Army. I thought you'd be terrifically grim and Memsahibish, and that the whole place would be simply crammed with Benares brass. Instead, it's heavenly *(crossing below the sofa to left of the sofa table)* – quite heavenly. Lovely proportions. *(pointing at the desk)* That's a fake! *(pointing at the sofa table)* Ah, but this table's genuine. I'm simply going to love this place. *(He moves below the armchair centre.)* Have you got any wax flowers or birds of Paradise?

MOLLIE. I'm afraid not.

CHRISTOPHER. What a pity! Well, what about a sideboard? A purple plummy mahogany sideboard with great solid carved fruits on it?

MOLLIE. Yes, we have – in the dining-room. *(She glances at the door down right.)*

CHRISTOPHER. *(following her glance)* In here? *(He moves down right and opens the door.)* I must see it.

(CHRISTOPHER exits into the dining-room and MOLLIE follows him. GILES enters through the archway up right. He looks round and examines the suitcase. Hearing voices from the dining-room, GILES exits up right.)

MOLLIE. *(off)* Do come and warm yourself.

(MOLLIE enters from the dining-room, followed by CHRISTOPHER. MOLLIE moves centre.)

CHRISTOPHER. *(as he enters)* Absolutely perfect. Real bedrock respectability. But why do away with a centre mahogany table? *(looking off right)* Little tables just spoil the effect.

(GILES enters up right and stands left of the large armchair right.)

MOLLIE. We thought guests would prefer them – this is my husband.

CHRISTOPHER. *(moving up to GILES and shaking hands with him)* How do you do? Terrible weather, isn't it? Takes one back to Dickens and Scrooge and that irritating Tiny Tim. So bogus. *(He turns towards the fire.)* Of course, Mrs. Ralston, you're absolutely right about the little tables. I was being carried away by my feeling for period. If you had a mahogany dining-table, you'd have to have the right family round it. *(He turns to GILES.)* Stern handsome father with a beard, prolific, faded mother, eleven children of assorted ages, a grim governess, and somebody called "poor Harriet," the poor relation who acts as general dogsbody and is very, very grateful for being given a good home!

GILES. *(disliking him)* I'll take your suitcase upstairs for you. *(He picks up the suitcase. To MOLLIE)* Oak Room, did you say?

MOLLIE. Yes.

CHRISTOPHER. I do hope that it's got a fourposter with little chintz roses?

GILES. It hasn't.

(GILES exits left up the stairs with the suitcase.)

CHRISTOPHER. I don't believe your husband is going to like me. *(Moving a few paces towards MOLLIE.)* How long have you been married? Are you very much in love?

MOLLIE. *(coldly)* We've been married just a year. *(moving towards the stairs left)* Perhaps you'd like to go up and see your room?

CHRISTOPHER. Ticked off! *(He moves above the sofa table.)*
But I do so like knowing all about people. I mean, I think people are so madly interesting. Don't you?

MOLLIE. Well, I suppose some are and *(turning to CHRISTOPHER)* some are not.

CHRISTOPHER. No, I don't agree. They're *all* interesting, because you never really know what anyone is like – or what they are really thinking. For instance, *you* don't know what *I'm* thinking about now, do you? *(He smiles as at some secret joke.)*

MOLLIE. Not in the least. *(She moves down to the sofa table and takes a cigarette from the box.)* Cigarette?

CHRISTOPHER. No, thank you. *(moving to right of MOLLIE)* You see? The only people who really know what other people are like are artists – and they don't know why they know it! But if they're portrait painters *(He moves centre.)* it comes out – *(He sits on the right arm of the sofa.)* on the canvas.

MOLLIE. Are you a painter? *(She lights her cigarette.)*

CHRISTOPHER. No, I'm an architect. My parents, you know, baptized me Christopher, in the hope that I would be an architect. Christopher Wren! *(He laughs.)* As good as halfway home. Actually, of course, everyone laughs about it and makes jokes about St Paul's. However – who knows? – I may yet have the last laugh.

(GILES enters from the archway up left and crosses to the arch up right.)

Chris Wren's Prefab Nests may yet go down in history!
(to GILES) I'm going to like it here. I find your wife *most* sympathetic.

GILES. *(coldly)* Indeed.

CHRISTOPHER. *(turning to look at MOLLIE)* And really very beautiful.

MOLLIE. Oh, don't be absurd.

(GILES leans on the back of the large armchair.)

CHRISTOPHER. There, isn't that like an Englishwoman? Compliments always embarrass them. European women take compliments as a matter of course, but Englishwomen have all the feminine spirit crushed out of them by their husbands. *(He turns and looks at GILES.)* There's something very boorish about English husbands.

MOLLIE. *(hastily)* Come up and see your room. *(She crosses to the arch up left.)*

CHRISTOPHER. Shall I?

MOLLIE. *(to GILES)* Could you stoke up the hot water boiler?

(MOLLIE and CHRISTOPHER exit up the stairs left.)

GILES scowls and crosses to centre. The door bell peals.

There is a pause then it peals several times impatiently.

GILES exits hurriedly up right to the front door. The sound of wind and snow is heard for a moment or two.)

MRS. BOYLE. *(off)* This is Monkswell Manor, I presume?

GILES. *(off)* Yes...

(MRS. BOYLE enters through the archway up right, carrying a suitcase, some magazines and her gloves. She is a large, imposing woman in a very bad temper.)

MRS. BOYLE. I am Mrs. Boyle. *(She puts down the suitcase.)*

GILES. I'm Giles Ralston. Come in to the fire, Mrs. Boyle, and get warm.

(MRS. BOYLE moves down to the fire.)

Awful weather, isn't it? Is this your only luggage?

MRS. BOYLE. A Major – Metcalf, is it? – is seeing to it.

GILES. I'll leave the door for him.

(GILES goes out to the front door.)

MRS. BOYLE. The taxi wouldn't risk coming up the drive.

(GILES returns and comes down to left of MRS. BOYLE.)

It stopped at the gate. We had to share a taxi from the station – and there was great difficulty in getting *that*. *(accusingly)* Nothing ordered to meet us, it seems.

GILES. I'm so sorry. We didn't know what train you would be coming by, you see, otherwise of course, we'd have seen that someone was – er – standing by.

MRS. BOYLE. All trains should have been met.

GILES. Let me take your coat.

(MRS. BOYLE hands GILES her gloves and magazines. She stands by the fire warming her hands.)

My wife will be here in a moment. I'll just go along and give Metcalf a hand with the bags.

(GILES exits up right to the front door.)

MRS. BOYLE. *(moving up to the arch as GILES goes)* The drive might at least have been cleared of snow. *(after his exit)* Most offhand and casual, I must say. *(She moves down to the fire and looks round her disapprovingly.)*

(MOLLIE hurries in from the stairs left, a little breathless.)

MOLLIE. I'm so sorry I...

MRS. BOYLE. Mrs. Ralston?

MOLLIE. Yes. I... *(She crosses to MRS. BOYLE, half puts out her hand, then draws it back, uncertain of what guest house proprietors are supposed to do.)*

(MRS. BOYLE surveys MOLLIE with displeasure.)

MRS. BOYLE. You're very young.

MOLLIE. Young?

MRS. BOYLE. To be running an establishment of this kind. You can't have had much experience.

MOLLIE. *(backing away)* There has to be a beginning for everything, hasn't there?

MRS. BOYLE. I see. Quite inexperienced. *(She looks round.)* An old house. I hope you haven't got dry rot. *(She sniffs suspiciously.)*

MOLLIE. *(indignantly)* Certainly not!

MRS. BOYLE. A lot of people don't know they have got dry rot until it's too late to do anything about it.

MOLLIE. The house is in perfect condition.

MRS. BOYLE. H'm – it could do with a coat of paint. You know, you've got worm in this oak.

GILES. *(off)* This way, Major.

(GILES and MAJOR METCALF enter up right. MAJOR METCALF is a middle-aged, square-shouldered man, very military in manner and bearing. GILES moves up centre. MAJOR METCALF puts down a suitcase he is carrying and moves above the armchair centre; MOLLIE moves up to meet him.)

This is my wife.

MAJOR METCALF. *(shaking hands with MOLLIE)* How d'you do? Absolute blizzard outside. Thought at one time we shouldn't make it. *(He sees MRS. BOYLE.)* Oh, I beg your pardon. *(He removes his hat.)*

(MRS. BOYLE exits down right.)

If it goes on like this I should say you'll have five or six feet of snow by morning. *(He crosses to the fire.)* Not seen anything like it since I was on leave in nineteen-forty.

GILES. I'll take these up. *(Picking up the cases. To MOLLIE)* Which rooms did you say? Blue Room and the Rose Room.

MOLLIE. No – I put Mr. Wren in the Rose Room. He liked the fourposter so much. So it's Mrs. Boyle in the Oak Room and Major Metcalf in the Blue Room.

GILES. *(authoritatively)* Major! *(He moves left towards the stairs.)*

MAJOR METCALF. *(instinctively the soldier)* Sir!

(MAJOR METCALF follows GILES and they exit up the stairs left. MRS. BOYLE enters down right and moves up to the fireplace.)

MRS. BOYLE. Do you have much servant difficulty here?

MOLLIE. We have quite a good local woman who comes in from the village.

MRS. BOYLE. And what indoor staff?

MOLLIE. No indoor staff. Just us. *(She moves down to left of the armchair centre.)*

MRS. BOYLE. Indeed. I understood this was a guest house in full running order.

MOLLIE. We're only just starting.

MRS. BOYLE. I would have said that a proper staff of servants was essential before opening this kind of establishment. I consider your advertisement was most misleading. May I ask if I am the only guest – with Major Metcalf, that is?

MOLLIE. Oh no, there are several here.

MRS. BOYLE. This weather, too. A blizzard (*She turns to the fire.*) – no less – all very unfortunate.

MOLLIE. But we couldn't very well foresee the weather!

(CHRISTOPHER WREN *enters quietly from the stairs left and comes up behind MOLLIE.*)

CHRISTOPHER. (*singing*)

“THE NORTH WIND DOTTH BLOW
AND IT WILL BRING SNOW
AND WHAT WILL THE ROBIN DO THEN, POOR THING?”

I adore nursery rhymes, don't you? Always so tragic and *macabre*. That's why children like them.

MOLLIE. May I introduce, Mr. Wren – Mrs. Boyle.

(CHRISTOPHER *bows.*)

MRS. BOYLE. (*coldly*) How d'you do?

CHRISTOPHER. This is a *very* beautiful house. Don't you think so?

MRS. BOYLE. I have come to the time of life when the amenities of an establishment are more important than its appearance.

(CHRISTOPHER *backs away up right. GILES enters from the stairs left and stands below the arch.*)

If I had not believed this was a running concern I should never have come here. I understand it was *fully* equipped with every home comfort.

GILES. There is no obligation for you to remain here if you are not satisfied, Mrs. Boyle.

MRS. BOYLE. (*crossing to right of the sofa*) No, indeed, I should not think of doing so.

GILES. If there has been any misapprehension it would perhaps be better if you went elsewhere. I could ring up for the taxi to return. The roads are not yet blocked.

(**CHRISTOPHER** moves down and sits in the armchair centre.)

We have had so many applications for rooms that we shall be able to fill your place quite easily. In any case we are raising our terms next month.

MRS. BOYLE. I am certainly not going to leave before I have tried what the place is like. You needn't think you can turn me out now.

(**GILES** moves down left.)

Perhaps you will take me up to my bedroom, Mrs. Ralston? (*She moves majestically towards the staircase left.*)

MOLLIE. Certainly, Mrs. Boyle. (*She follows MRS. BOYLE. To GILES, softly, as she passes him*) Darling, you were wonderful...

(**MRS. BOYLE** and **MOLLIE** exit left up the stairs.)

CHRISTOPHER. (*rising; childishly*) I think that's a perfectly horrible woman. I don't like her at all. I'd love to see you turn her out into the snow. Serve her right.

GILES. It's a pleasure I've got to forgo, I'm afraid.

(*The door bell peals.*)

Lord, there's another of them.

(**GILES** goes out to the front door.)

(*off*) Come in – come in.

(**CHRISTOPHER** moves to the sofa and sits. **MISS CASEWELL** enters up right. *She is a young woman of a manly type, and carries a case. She has a long dark coat, a light scarf and no hat.* **GILES** enters)

MISS CASEWELL. *(in a deep, manly voice)* Afraid my car's bogged about half a mile down the road – ran into a drift.

GILES. Let me take this. *(He takes her case and puts it right of the refectory table.)* Any more stuff in the car?

MISS CASEWELL. *(moving down to the fire)* No, I travel light.

(GILES moves above the armchair centre.)

Ha, glad to see you've got a good fire. *(She straddles in front of it in a manly fashion.)*

GILES. Er – Mr. Wren – Miss – ?

MISS CASEWELL. Casewell. *(She nods to CHRISTOPHER.)*

GILES. My wife will be down in a minute.

MISS CASEWELL. No hurry. *(She takes off her overcoat.)* Got to get myself thawed out. Looks as though you're going to be snowed up here. *(taking an evening paper from her overcoat pocket)* Weather forecast says heavy falls expected. Motorists warned, etcetera. Hope you've got plenty of provisions in.

GILES. Oh yes. My wife's an excellent manager. Anyway, we can always eat our hens.

MISS CASEWELL. Before we start eating each other, eh?

(She laughs stridently and throws the overcoat at GILES, who catches it. She sits in the armchair centre.)

CHRISTOPHER. *(rising and crossing to the fire)* Any news in the paper – apart from the weather?

MISS CASEWELL. Usual political crisis. Oh yes, and a rather juicy murder!

CHRISTOPHER. A murder? *(turning to MISS CASEWELL)* Oh, I like murder!

MISS CASEWELL. *(handing him the paper)* They seem to think it was a homicidal maniac. Strangled a woman somewhere near Paddington. Sex maniac, I suppose. *(She looks at GILES.)*

(GILES crosses to left of the sofa table.)

CHRISTOPHER. Doesn't say much, does it? (*He sits in the small armchair right and reads.*) "The police are anxious to interview a man seen in the vicinity of Culver Street at the time. Medium height, wearing darkish overcoat, lightish scarf and soft felt hat. Police messages to this effect have been broadcast throughout the day."

MISS CASEWELL. Useful description. Fit pretty well anyone, wouldn't it?

CHRISTOPHER. When it says that the police are anxious to interview someone, is that a polite way of hinting that he's the murderer?

MISS CASEWELL. Could be.

GILES. Who was the woman who was murdered?

CHRISTOPHER. Mrs. Lyon. Mrs. Maureen Lyon.

GILES. Young or old?

CHRISTOPHER. It doesn't say. It doesn't seem to have been robbery...

MISS CASEWELL. (*to GILES*) I told you – sex maniac.

(*MOLLIE comes down the stairs and crosses to MISS CASEWELL.*)

GILES. Here's Miss Casewell, Mollie. My wife.

MISS CASEWELL. (*rising*) How d'you do? (*She shakes hands with MOLLIE vigorously.*)

(*GILES picks up her case.*)

MOLLIE. It's an awful night. Would you like to come up to your room? The water's hot if you'd like a bath.

MISS CASEWELL. You're right, I would.

(*MOLLIE and MISS CASEWELL exit to the stairs left.*)

GILES follows them, carrying the case. Left alone, **CHRISTOPHER** rises and makes an exploration. He opens the door down left, peeps in and then exits. A moment or two later he reappears on the stairs left. He crosses to the arch up right and looks off. He sings "Little Jack Horner" and chuckles to himself, giving the impression of being slightly unhinged mentally. He

moves behind the refectory table. GILES and MOLLIE enter from the stairs left, talking. CHRISTOPHER hides behind the curtain. MOLLIE moves above the armchair centre and GILES moves to the right end of the refectory table.)

MOLLIE. I must hurry out to the kitchen and get on with things. Major Metcalf is very nice. He won't be difficult. It's Mrs. Boyle really frightens me. We *must* have a nice dinner. I was thinking of opening two tins of minced beef and cereal and a tin of peas, and mashing the potatoes. And there's stewed figs and custard. Do you think that will be all right?

GILES. Oh – I should think so. Not – not very original, perhaps.

CHRISTOPHER. *(coming from behind the curtains and moving between GILES and MOLLIE.)* Do let me help. I adore cooking. Why not an omelette? You've got eggs, haven't you?

MOLLIE. Oh yes, we've got plenty of eggs. We keep lots of fowls. They don't lay as well as they should but we've put down a lot of eggs.

(GILES breaks away left.)

CHRISTOPHER. And if you've got a bottle of cheap, any type wine, you could add it to the – “minced beef and cereals,” did you say? Give it a continental flavour. Show me where the kitchen is and what you've got, and I daresay I shall have an inspiration.

MOLLIE. Come on.

(MOLLIE and CHRISTOPHER exit through the archway right to the kitchen. GILES frowns, ejaculates something uncomplimentary to CHRISTOPHER and crosses to the small armchair down right. He picks up the newspaper and stands reading it with deep attention. He jumps as MOLLIE returns to the room and speaks.)

Isn't he sweet? *(She moves above the sofa table.)* He's put on an apron and he's getting all the things together.

He says leave it all to him and don't come back for half an hour. If our guests want to do the cooking themselves, it will save a lot of trouble.

GILES. Why on earth did you give him the best room?

MOLLIE. I told you, he liked the fourposter.

GILES. He liked the pretty fourposter. Twerp!

MOLLIE. Giles!

GILES. I've got no use for that kind. (*significantly*) You didn't handle his suitcase, I did.

MOLLIE. Had it got bricks in it? (*She crosses to the armchair centre and sits.*)

GILES. It was no weight at all. If you ask me there was *nothing* inside it. He's probably one of those young men who go about bilking hotel keepers.

MOLLIE. I don't believe it. I like him. (*She pauses.*) I think Miss Casewell's rather peculiar, don't you?

GILES. Terrible female – if she *is* a female.

MOLLIE. It seems very hard that all our guests should be either unpleasant or odd. Anyway, I think Major Metcalf's all right, don't you?

GILES. Probably drinks!

MOLLIE. Oh, do you think so?

GILES. No, I don't. I was just feeling rather depressed. Well, at any rate we know the worst now. They've all arrived.

(*The door bell rings.*)

MOLLIE. Who can that be?

GILES. Probably the Culver Street murderer.

MOLLIE. (*rising*) Don't!

(*GILES exits up right to the front door. MOLLIE crosses to the fire.*)

GILES. (*off*) Oh.

(*MR. PARAVICINI staggers in up right, carrying a small bag. He is foreign and dark and elderly with a rather flamboyant moustache. He is a slightly taller edition of*

Hercule Poirot, which may give a wrong impression to the audience. He wears a heavy fur-lined overcoat. He leans on the left side of the arch and puts down the bag. GILES enters.)

PARAVICINI. A thousand pardons. I am – where am I?

GILES. This is Monkswell Manor Guest House.

PARAVICINI. But what stupendous good fortune! Madame!
(He moves down to MOLLIE, takes her hand and kisses it.)

(GILES crosses above the armchair centre.)

What an answer to prayer. A guest house – and a charming hostess. My Rolls Royce, alas, has run into a snowdrift. Blinding snow everywhere. I do not know where I am. Perhaps, I think to myself, I shall freeze to death. And then I take a little bag, I stagger through the snow, I see before me big iron gates. A habitation! I am saved. Twice I fall into the snow as I come up your drive, but at last I arrive and immediately – *(He looks round.)* despair turns to joy. *(changing his manner)* You can let me have a room – yes?

GILES. Oh yes...

MOLLIE. It's rather a small one, I'm afraid.

PARAVICINI. Naturally – naturally – you have other guests.

MOLLIE. We've only just opened this place as a guest house today, and so we're – we're rather new at it.

PARAVICINI. *(leering at MOLLIE)* Charming – charming...

GILES. What about your luggage?

PARAVICINI. That is of no consequence. I have locked the car securely.

GILES. But wouldn't it be better to get it in?

PARAVICINI. No, no. *(He moves up to right of GILES.)* I can assure you on such a night as this, there will be no thieves abroad. And for me, my wants are very simple. I have all I need – here – in this little bag. Yes, all that I need.

MOLLIE. You'd better get thoroughly warm.

(PARAVICINI crosses to the fire.)

I'll see about your room. (She moves to the armchair centre.) I'm afraid it's rather a cold room because it faces north, but all the others are occupied.

PARAVICINI. You have several guests, then?

MOLLIE. There's Mrs. Boyle and Major Metcalf and Miss Casewell and a young man called Christopher Wren – and now – you.

PARAVICINI. Yes – the unexpected guest. The guest that you did not invite. The guest who just arrived – from nowhere – out of the storm. It sounds quite dramatic, does it not? Who am I? You do not know. Where do I come from? You do not know. Me, I am the man of mystery. (He laughs.)

(MOLLIE laughs and looks at GILES, who grins feebly.)

PARAVICINI nods his head at MOLLIE in high good humour)

But now, I tell you this. I complete the picture. From now on there will be no more arrivals. And no departures either. By tomorrow – perhaps even already – we are cut off from civilization. No butcher, no baker, no milkman, no postman, no daily papers – nobody and nothing but ourselves. That is admirable – admirable. It could not suit me better. My name, by the way, is Paravicini. (He moves down to the small armchair right.)

MOLLIE. Oh yes. Ours is Ralston.

(GILES moves to left of MOLLIE.)

PARAVICINI. Mr. and Mrs. Ralston? (He nods his head as they agree. He looks round him and moves up to right of MOLLIE.) And this – is Monkswell Manor Guest House, you said? Good. Monkswell Manor Guest House. (He laughs.) Perfect. (He laughs.) Perfect. (He laughs and crosses to the fireplace.)

(MOLLIE looks at GILES and they both look at PARAVICINI uneasily as – the curtain falls.)

Scene II

(Scene – The same. The following afternoon.)

(When the curtain rises it is not snowing, but snow can be seen banked high against the window. MAJOR METCALF is seated on the sofa reading a book, and MRS. BOYLE is sitting in the large armchair right in front of the fire, writing on a pad on her knee.)

MRS. BOYLE. I consider it *most* dishonest not to have told me they were only just starting this place.

MAJOR METCALF. Well, everything's got to have a beginning, you know. Excellent breakfast this morning. Good coffee. Scrambled eggs, home-made marmalade. And all nicely served, too. Little woman does it all herself.

MRS. BOYLE. Amateurs – there should be a proper staff.

MAJOR METCALF. Excellent lunch, too.

MRS. BOYLE. Cornbeef.

MAJOR METCALF. But very well disguised cornbeef. Red wine in it. Mrs. Ralston promised to make a pie for us tonight.

MRS. BOYLE. *(rising and crossing to the radiator)* These radiators are not really hot. I shall speak about it.

MAJOR METCALF. Very comfortable beds, too. At least mine was. Hope yours was, too.

MRS. BOYLE. It was quite adequate. *(She returns to the large armchair right and sits.)* I don't quite see why the best bedroom should have been given to that *very* peculiar young man.

MAJOR METCALF. Got here ahead of us. First come, first served.

MRS. BOYLE. From the advertisement I got *quite* a different impression of what this place would be like. A comfortable writing-room, and a much larger place altogether – with bridge and other amenities.

MAJOR METCALF. Regular old tabbies' delight.

MRS. BOYLE. I beg your pardon.

MAJOR METCALF. Er – I mean, yes, I quite see what you mean.

(CHRISTOPHER enters left from the stairs unnoticed.)

MRS. BOYLE. No, indeed, I shan't stay here long.

CHRISTOPHER. *(laughing)* No. No, I don't suppose you will.

(CHRISTOPHER exits into the library up left.)

MRS. BOYLE. Really that is a very peculiar young man. Unbalanced mentally, I shouldn't wonder.

MAJOR METCALF. Think he's escaped from a lunatic asylum.

MRS. BOYLE. I shouldn't be at all surprised.

(MOLLIE enters through the archway up right.)

MOLLIE. *(calling upstairs)* Giles?

GILES. *(off)* Yes?

MOLLIE. Can you shovel the snow away again from the back door?

GILES. *(off)* Coming.

(MOLLIE disappears through the arch.)

MAJOR METCALF. I'll give you a hand, what? *(He rises and crosses up right to the arch.)* Good exercise. Must have exercise.

(MAJOR METCALF exits. GILES enters from the stairs, crosses and exits up right. MOLLIE returns, carrying a duster and a vacuum cleaner, crosses the hall and runs upstairs. She collides with MISS CASEWELL who is coming down the stairs.)

MOLLIE. Sorry!

MISS CASEWELL. That's all right.

(MOLLIE exits. MISS CASEWELL comes slowly centre.)

MRS. BOYLE. Really! What an incredible young woman. Doesn't she know anything about housework? Carrying a carpet sweeper through the front hall. Aren't there any back stairs?

MISS CASEWELL. (*taking a cigarette from a packet in her handbag*)
Oh yes – nice back stairs. (*She crosses to the fire.*) Very
convenient if there was a fire. (*She lights the cigarette.*)

MRS. BOYLE. Then why not use them? Anyway, all the
housework should have been done in the morning
before lunch.

MISS CASEWELL. I gather our hostess had to cook the lunch.

MRS. BOYLE. All very haphazard and amateurish. There
should be a proper staff.

MISS CASEWELL. Not very easy to get nowadays, is it?

MRS. BOYLE. No, indeed, the lower classes seem to have no
idea of their responsibilities.

MISS CASEWELL. Poor old lower classes. Got the bit between
their teeth, haven't they?

MRS. BOYLE. (*frostily*) I gather you are a Socialist.

MISS CASEWELL. Oh, I wouldn't say that. I'm not a Red –
just pale pink. (*She moves to the sofa and sits on the right
arm.*) But I don't take much interest in politics – I live
abroad.

MRS. BOYLE. I suppose conditions are much easier abroad.

MISS CASEWELL. I don't have to cook and clean – as I gather
most people have to do in this country.

MRS. BOYLE. This country has gone sadly downhill. Not
what it used to be. I sold my house last year. Everything
was too difficult.

MISS CASEWELL. Hotels and guest houses are easier.

MRS. BOYLE. They certainly solve some of one's problems.
Are you over in England for long?

MISS CASEWELL. Depends. I've got some business to see to.
When it's done – I shall go back.

MRS. BOYLE. To France?

MISS CASEWELL. No.

MRS. BOYLE. Italy?

MISS CASEWELL. No. (*She grins.*)

(MRS. BOYLE looks at her inquiringly but MISS CASEWELL does not respond. MRS. BOYLE starts writing. MISS CASEWELL grins as she looks at her, crosses to the radio, turns it on, at first softly, then increases the volume.)

MRS. BOYLE. (annoyed, as she is writing) Would you mind not having that on quite so loud! I always find the radio rather distracting when one is trying to write letters.

MISS CASEWELL. Do you?

MRS. BOYLE. If you don't particularly want to listen just now...

MISS CASEWELL. It's my favourite music. There's a writing table in there. (She nods towards the library door up left.)

MRS. BOYLE. I know. But it's much warmer here.

MISS CASEWELL. Much warmer, I agree. (She dances to the music.)

(MRS. BOYLE, after a moment's glare, rises and exits into the library up left. MISS CASEWELL grins, moves to the sofa table, and stubs out her cigarette. She moves up stage and picks up a magazine from the refectory table.)

Bloody old bitch. (She moves to the large armchair and sits.)

(CHRISTOPHER enters from the library up left and moves down left.)

CHRISTOPHER. Oh!

MISS CASEWELL. Hullo.

CHRISTOPHER. (gesturing back to the library) Wherever I go that woman seems to hunt me down – and then she glares at me – positively glares.

MISS CASEWELL. (indicating the radio) Turn it down a bit.

(CHRISTOPHER turns the radio down until it is playing quite softly.)

CHRISTOPHER. Is that all right?

MISS CASEWELL. Oh yes, it's served its purpose.

CHRISTOPHER. What purpose?

MISS CASEWELL. Tactics, boy.

(CHRISTOPHER looks puzzled. MISS CASEWELL indicates the library.)

CHRISTOPHER. Oh, you mean *her*.

MISS CASEWELL. She'd pinched the best chair. I've got it now.

CHRISTOPHER. You drove her out. I'm glad. I'm very glad. I don't like her a bit. (*crossing quickly to MISS CASEWELL*) Let's think of things we can do to annoy her, shall we? I wish she'd go away from here.

MISS CASEWELL. In this? Not a hope.

CHRISTOPHER. But when the snow melts.

MISS CASEWELL. Oh, when the snow melts lots of things may have happened.

CHRISTOPHER. Yes – yes – that's true. (*He goes to the window.*) Snow's rather lovely, isn't it? So peaceful – and pure... It makes one forget things.

MISS CASEWELL. It doesn't make me forget.

CHRISTOPHER. How fierce you sound.

MISS CASEWELL. I was thinking.

CHRISTOPHER. What sort of thinking? (*He sits on the window seat.*)

MISS CASEWELL. Ice on a bedroom jug, chilblains, raw and bleeding – one thin ragged blanket – a child shivering with cold and fear.

CHRISTOPHER. My dear, it sounds too, too grim – what is it? A novel?

MISS CASEWELL. You didn't know I was a writer, did you?

CHRISTOPHER. Are you? (*He rises and moves down to her.*)

MISS CASEWELL. Sorry to disappoint you. Actually I'm not. (*She puts the magazine up in front of her face.*)

(CHRISTOPHER looks at her doubtfully, then crosses left, turns up the radio very loud and exits into the drawing-room. The telephone rings. MOLLIE runs down the stairs, duster in hand, and goes to the telephone.)

MOLLIE. (*picking up the receiver*) Yes? (*She turns off the radio.*)
Yes – this is Monkswell Manor Guest House... What?...
No, I'm afraid Mr. Ralston can't come to the telephone
just now. This is Mrs. Ralston speaking. Who...? The
Berkshire Police?

(*MISS CASEWELL lowers her magazine.*)

Oh yes, yes, Superintendent Hogben, I'm afraid that's
impossible. He'd never get here. We're snowed up.
Completely snowed up. The roads are impassable...

(*MISS CASEWELL rises and crosses to the arch up left.*)

Nothing can get through... Yes... Very well... But
what... Hullo – hullo... (*She replaces the receiver.*)

(*GILES enters up right wearing an overcoat. He removes
the overcoat and hangs it up in the hall.*)

GILES. Mollie, do you know where there's another spade?

MOLLIE. (*moving up centre*) Giles, the police have just rung
up.

MISS CASEWELL. Trouble with the police, eh? Serving liquor
without a licence?

(*MISS CASEWELL exits left up the stairs.*)

MOLLIE. They're sending out an inspector or a sergeant or
something.

GILES. (*moving to right of MOLLIE*) But he'll never get here.

MOLLIE. That's what I told them. But they seemed quite
confident that he would.

GILES. Nonsense. Even a jeep couldn't get through today.
Anyway, what's it all about?

MOLLIE. That's what I asked. But he wouldn't say. Just
said I was to impress on my husband to listen very
carefully to what Sergeant Trotter, I think it was, had
to say, and to follow his instructions implicitly. Isn't it
extraordinary?

GILES. (*moving down to the fire*) What on earth do you think
we've done?

MOLLIE. (*moving to left of GILES*) Do you think it's those nylons from Gibraltar?

GILES. I did remember to get the wireless licence, didn't I?

MOLLIE. Yes, it's in the kitchen dresser.

GILES. I had rather a near shave with the car the other day but it was entirely the other fellow's fault.

MOLLIE. We must have done something...

GILES. (*kneeling and putting a log on the fire*) Probably something to do with running this place. I expect we've ignored some tinpot regulation of some Ministry or other. You practically can't avoid it, nowadays. (*He rises and faces MOLLIE.*)

MOLLIE. Oh dear, I wish we'd never started this place. We're going to be snowed up for days, and everyone is cross, and we shall go through all our reserve of tins.

GILES. Cheer up, darling, (*He takes MOLLIE in his arms.*) everything's going all right at the moment. I've filled up all the coalscuttles, and brought in the wood, and stoked the Aga and done the hens. I'll go and do the boiler next, and chop some kindling... (*He breaks off.*) You know, Mollie, (*He moves slowly up to right of the refectory table.*) come to think of it, it must be something pretty serious to send a police sergeant trekking out in all this. It must be something really urgent...

(**GILES** and **MOLLIE** look at each other uneasily. **MRS.**

BOYLE enters from the library up left.)

MRS. BOYLE. (*coming to left of the refectory table*) Ah, there you are, Mr. Ralston. Do you know the central heating in the library is practically stone cold?

GILES. Sorry, Mrs. Boyle, we're a bit short of coke and...

MRS. BOYLE. I am paying seven guineas a week here – seven guineas and I do not want to freeze.

GILES. I'll go and stoke it up.

(**GILES** exits by the archway up right. **MOLLIE** follows him to the arch.)

MRS. BOYLE. Mrs. Ralston, if you don't mind my saying so, that is a very extraordinary young man you have staying here. His manners – and his ties – and does he ever brush his hair?

MOLLIE. He's an extremely brilliant young architect.

MRS. BOYLE. I beg your pardon?

MOLLIE. Christopher Wren is an architect...

MRS. BOYLE. My dear young woman. I have naturally heard of Sir Christopher Wren. (*She crosses to the fire.*) Of course, he was an architect. He built St Paul's. You young people seem to think that no-one is educated but yourselves.

MOLLIE. I meant *this* Wren. His name is Christopher. His parents called him that because they hoped he'd be an architect. (*She crosses to the sofa table and takes a cigarette from the box.*) And he is – or nearly one – so it turned out all right.

MRS. BOYLE. Humph. Sounds a fishy story to me. (*She sits in the large armchair.*) I should make some inquiries about him if I were you. What do you know of him?

MOLLIE. Just as much as I know about you, Mrs. Boyle – which is that you are both paying us seven guineas a week. (*She lights her cigarette.*) That is really all I need to know, isn't it? And all that concerns me. It doesn't matter to me whether I like my guests, or whether (*meaningly*) I don't.

MRS. BOYLE. You are young and inexperienced and should welcome advice from someone more knowledgeable than yourself. And what about this foreigner?

MOLLIE. What about him?

MRS. BOYLE. You weren't expecting him, were you?

MOLLIE. To turn away a *bona fide* traveller is against the law, Mrs. Boyle. *You* should know that.

MRS. BOYLE. Why do you say that?

MOLLIE. (*moving down centre*) Weren't you a magistrate, sitting on the bench, Mrs. Boyle?

MRS. BOYLE. All I say is that this Paravicini, or whatever he calls himself, seems to me...

(PARAVICINI enters softly from the stairs left.)

PARAVICINI. Beware, dear lady. You talk of the devil and here he is. Ha, ha.

(MRS. BOYLE jumps.)

MRS. BOYLE. I didn't hear you come in.

(MOLLIE moves behind the sofa table.)

PARAVICINI. I came in on tiptoe – like this. (*He demonstrates, moving down centre.*) Nobody ever hears me if I do not want them to. I find that very amusing.

MRS. BOYLE. Indeed?

PARAVICINI. (*sitting in the armchair centre*) Now there was a young lady...

MRS. BOYLE. (*rising*) Well, I must get on with my letters. I'll see if it's a little warmer in the drawing-room.

(MRS. BOYLE exits to the drawing-room down left.

MOLLIE follows her to the door.)

PARAVICINI. My charming hostess looks upset. What is it, dear lady? (*He leers at her.*)

MOLLIE. Everything's rather difficult this morning. Because of the snow.

PARAVICINI. Yes. Snow makes things difficult, does it not? (*He rises.*) Or else it makes them easy. (*He moves up to the refectory table and sits.*) Yes – very easy.

MOLLIE. I don't know what you mean.

PARAVICINI. No, there is quite a lot you do not know. I think, for one thing, that you do not know very much about running a guest house.

MOLLIE. (*moving to left of the sofa table and stubbing out her cigarette*) I daresay we don't. But we mean to make a go of it.

PARAVICINI. Bravo – bravo! (*He claps his hands and rises.*)

MOLLIE. I'm not such a very bad cook...

PARAVICINI. (*leering*) You are without doubt an enchanting cook. (*He moves behind the sofa table and takes MOLLIE's hand.*)

(*MOLLIE draws it away and moves below the sofa down centre.*)

May I give you a little word of warning, Mrs. Ralston? (*moving below the sofa*) You and your husband must not be too trusting, you know. Have you references with these guests of yours?

MOLLIE. Is that usual? (*She turns to PARAVICINI.*) I always thought people just – just *came*?

PARAVICINI. It is advisable to know a little about the people who sleep under your roof. Take, for example, myself. I turn up saying that my car is overturned in a snowdrift. What do you know of me? Nothing at all! I may be a thief, a robber, (*He moves slowly towards MOLLIE.*) a fugitive from justice – a madman – even – a murderer.

MOLLIE. (*backing away*) Oh!

PARAVICINI. You see! And perhaps you know just as little of your other guests.

MOLLIE. Well, as far as Mrs. Boyle goes...

(*MRS. BOYLE enters from the drawing-room. MOLLIE moves up centre to the refectory table.*)

MRS. BOYLE. The drawing-room is far too cold to sit in. I shall write my letters in here. (*She crosses to the large armchair.*)

PARAVICINI. Allow me to poke the fire for you. (*He moves right and does so.*)

(*MAJOR METCALF enters up right through the archway.*)

MAJOR METCALF. (*to MOLLIE; with old-fashioned modesty*) Mrs. Ralston, is your husband about? I'm afraid the pipes of the – er – the downstairs cloakroom are frozen.

MOLLIE. Oh dear. What an awful day. First the police and then the pipes. (*She moves to the arch up right.*)

(PARAVICINI drops the poker with a clatter. MAJOR METCALF stands as though paralysed.)

MRS. BOYLE. (startled) Police?

MAJOR METCALF. (loudly, as if incredulous) Police, did you say? (He moves to the left end of the refectory table.)

MOLLIE. They rang up. Just now. To say they're sending a sergeant out here. (She looks at the snow.) But I don't think he'll ever get here.

(GILES enters from the archway up right with a basket of logs.)

GILES. The ruddy coke's more than half stones. And the price... Hullo, is anything the matter?

MAJOR METCALF. I hear the police are on their way here. Why?

GILES. Oh, that's all right. No-one can get through in this. Why, the drifts must be five feet deep. The roads are all banked up. Nobody will get here today. (He takes the logs to the fireplace.) Excuse me, Mr. Paravicini. May I put these down.

(PARAVICINI moves down stage of the fireplace. There are three sharp taps on the window as SERGEANT TROTTER presses his face to the pane and peers in. MOLLIE gives a cry and points. GILES crosses and throws open the window. SERGEANT TROTTER is on skis and is a cheerful, commonplace young man with a slight cockney accent.)

TROTTER. Are you Mr. Ralston?

GILES. Yes.

TROTTER. Thank you, sir. Detective Sergeant Trotter. Berkshire Police. Can I get these skis off and stow them somewhere?

GILES. (pointing right) Go round that way to the front door. I'll meet you.

TROTTER. Thank you, sir.

(GILES leaves the window open and exits to the front door up right.)

MRS. BOYLE. I suppose that's what we pay our police force for, nowadays, to go round enjoying themselves at winter sports.

(MOLLIE crosses below the refectory table to the window.)

PARAVICINI. *(moving up to centre of the refectory table; in a fierce whisper to MOLLIE)* Why did you send for the police, Mrs. Ralston?

MOLLIE. But I didn't. *(She shuts the window.)*

(CHRISTOPHER enters from the drawing-room left and comes to left of the sofa. PARAVICINI moves to the right end of the refectory table.)

CHRISTOPHER. Who's that man? Where did he come from? He passed the drawing-room window on skis. All over snow and looking terribly hearty.

MRS. BOYLE. You may believe it or not, but that man is a policeman. A policeman – ski-ing!

(GILES and TROTTER enter from the front door. TROTTER has removed his skis and is carrying them.)

GILES. *(moving right of the arch up right)* Er – this is Detective Sergeant Trotter.

TROTTER. *(moving to left of the large armchair)* Good afternoon.

MRS. BOYLE. You can't be a sergeant. You're too young.

TROTTER. I'm not quite as young as I look, madam.

CHRISTOPHER. But terribly hearty.

GILES. We'll stow your skis away under the stairs.

(GILES and TROTTER exit through the archway up right.)

MAJOR METCALF. Excuse me, Mrs. Ralston, but may I use your telephone?

MOLLIE. Of course, Major Metcalf.

(MAJOR METCALF goes to the telephone and dials.)

CHRISTOPHER. *(sitting at the right end of the sofa)* He's very attractive, don't you think so? I always think that policemen are very attractive.

MRS. BOYLE. No brains. You can see that at a glance.

MAJOR METCALF. *(into the telephone)* Hullo! Hullo!... *(to MOLLIE)* Mrs. Ralston, this telephone is dead – quite dead.

MOLLIE. It was all right about half an hour ago.

MAJOR METCALF. The line's gone with the weight of the snow, I suppose.

CHRISTOPHER. *(laughing hysterically)* So we're quite cut off now. Quite cut off. That's funny, isn't it?

MAJOR METCALF. *(moving to left of the sofa)* I don't see anything to laugh at.

MRS. BOYLE. No, indeed.

CHRISTOPHER. Ah, it's a private joke of my own. Hist, the sleuth is returning.

(TROTTER enters from the archway up right, followed by GILES. TROTTER moves down centre while GILES crosses to left of the sofa table.)

TROTTER. *(taking out his notebook)* Now we can get to business, Mr. Ralston. Mrs. Ralston?

(MOLLIE moves down centre.)

GILES. Do you want to see us alone? If so, we can go into the library. *(He points towards the library door up left.)*

TROTTER. *(turning his back to the audience)* It's not necessary, sir. It'll save time if everybody's present. If I might sit at this table? *(He moves up to the right end of the refectory table.)*

PARAVICINI. I beg your pardon. *(He moves behind the table to the left end.)*

TROTTER. Thank you. *(He settles himself in a judicial manner centre behind the refectory table.)*

MOLLIE. Oh, do hurry up and tell us. *(She moves up to the right end of the refectory table.)* What have we done?

TROTTER. (*surprised*) Done? Oh, it's nothing of *that* kind, Mrs. Ralston. It's something quite different. It's more a matter of police protection, if you understand me.

MOLLIE. Police protection?

TROTTER. It relates to the death of Mrs. Lyon – Mrs. Maureen Lyon of twenty-four Culver Street, London, West two, who was murdered yesterday, the fifteenth instant. You may have heard or read about the case?

MOLLIE. Yes. I heard it on the wireless. The woman who was strangled?

TROTTER. That's right, madam. (*to GILES*) The first thing I want to know is if you were acquainted with this Mrs. Lyon.

GILES. Never heard of her.

(*MOLLIE shakes her head.*)

TROTTER. You mayn't have known of her under the name of Lyon. Lyon wasn't her real name. She had a police record and her fingerprints were on file so we were able to identify her without difficulty. Her real name was Maureen Stanning. Her husband was a farmer, John Stanning, who resided at Longridge Farm not very far from here.

GILES. Longridge Farm! Wasn't that where those children...?

TROTTER. Yes, the Longridge Farm case.

(*MISS CASEWELL enters from the stairs left.*)

MISS CASEWELL. Three children... (*She crosses to the armchair down right and sits.*)

(*Everyone watches her.*)

TROTTER. That's right, miss. The Corrigans. Two boys and a girl. Brought before the court as in need of care and protection. A home was found for them with Mr. and Mrs. Stanning at Longridge Farm. One of the children subsequently died as the result of criminal neglect and persistent ill-treatment. Case made a bit of a sensation at the time.

MOLLIE. (*very much shaken*) It was horrible.

TROTTER. The Stannings were sentenced to terms of imprisonment. Stanning died in prison. Mrs. Stanning served her sentence and was duly released. Yesterday, as I say, she was found strangled at twenty-four Culver Street.

MOLLIE. Who did it?

TROTTER. I'm coming to that, madam. A notebook was picked up near the scene of the crime. In that notebook was written two addresses. One was twenty-four Culver Street. The other (*he pauses*) was Monkswell Manor.

GILES. What?

TROTTER. Yes, sir.

(During the next speech PARAVICINI moves slowly left to the stairs and leans on the upstage side of the arch.)

That's why Superintendent Hogben, on receiving this information from Scotland Yard, thought it imperative for me to come out here and find out if you knew of any connection between this house, or anyone in this house, and the Longridge Farm case.

GILES. (*moving to the left end of the refectory table*) There's nothing – absolutely nothing. It must be a coincidence.

TROTTER. Superintendent Hogben doesn't think it is a coincidence, sir.

(MAJOR METCALF turns and looks at TROTTER. During the next speeches he takes out his pipe and fills it.)

He'd have come himself if it had been in any way possible. Under the weather conditions, and as I can ski, he sent me with instructions to get full particulars of everyone in the house, to report back to him by phone, and to take what measures I thought fit to ensure the safety of the household.

GILES. Safety? What danger does he think we're in? Good Lord, he's not suggesting that somebody is going to be killed here.

TROTTER. I don't want to frighten any of the ladies – but frankly, yes, that is the idea.

GILES. But – why?

TROTTER. That's what I'm here to find out.

GILES. But the whole thing's crazy!

TROTTER. Yes, sir. It's because it's crazy that it's dangerous.

MRS. BOYLE. Nonsense!

MISS CASEWELL. I must say it seems a bit far-fetched.

CHRISTOPHER. I think it's wonderful. (*He turns and looks at MAJOR METCALF.*)

(*MAJOR METCALF lights his pipe.*)

MOLLIE. Is there something that you haven't told us, Sergeant?

TROTTER. Yes, Mrs. Ralston. Below the two addresses was written "Three Blind Mice." And on the dead woman's body was a paper with "This is the First" written on it, and below the words, a drawing of three little mice and a bar of music. The music was the tune of the nursery rhyme *Three Blind Mice*. You know how it goes. (*He sings*) "Three Blind Mice..."

MOLLIE. (*singing*)

“THREE BLIND MICE,
SEE HOW THEY RUN,
THEY ALL RAN AFTER THE FARMER'S WIFE...”

Oh, it's horrible.

GILES. There were three children and one died?

TROTTER. Yes, the youngest, a boy of eleven.

GILES. What happened to the other two?

TROTTER. The girl was adopted by someone. We haven't been able to trace her present whereabouts. The elder boy would now be about twenty-two. Deserted from the Army and has not been heard of since. According

to the Army psychologist, was definitely schizophrenic.
(*explaining*) A bit queer in the head, that's to say.

MOLLIE. They think that it was he who killed Mrs. Lyon – Mrs. Stanning? (*She moves down to the armchair centre.*)

TROTTER. Yes.

MOLLIE. And that he's a homicidal maniac (*she sits*) and that he will turn up here and try to kill someone – but why?

TROTTER. That's what I've got to find out from you. As the Superintendent sees it, there must be some connection. (*to GILES*) Now you state, sir, that you yourself have never had any connection with the Longridge Farm case?

GILES. No.

TROTTER. And the same goes for you, madam?

MOLLIE. (*not at ease*) I – no – I mean – no connection.

TROTTER. What about servants?

(*MRS. BOYLE registers disapproval.*)

MOLLIE. We haven't got any servants. (*She rises and moves up right to the arch.*) That reminds me. Would you mind, Sergeant Trotter, if I went to the kitchen? I'll be there if you want me.

TROTTER. That's quite all right, Mrs. Ralston.

(*MOLLIE exits by the archway up right. GILES crosses up right to the arch, but he is stopped as TROTTER speaks.*)

Now can I have all your names, please?

MRS. BOYLE. This is quite ridiculous. We are merely staying in a kind of hotel. We only arrived yesterday. We've nothing to do with this place.

TROTTER. You'd planned to come here in advance, though. You'd booked your rooms here ahead.

MRS. BOYLE. Well, yes. All except Mr—? (*She looks at PARAVICINI.*)

PARAVICINI. Paravicini. (*He moves to the left end of the refectory table.*) My car overturned in a snowdrift.

TROTTER. I see. What I'm getting at is that anyone who's been following you around might know very well that you were coming here. Now, there's just one thing I want to know and I want to know it quick. Which one of you is it that has some connection with that business at Longridge Farm?

(There is a dead silence.)

You're not being very sensible, you know. One of you is in danger – deadly danger. I've got to know which one that is.

(There is another silence.)

All right, I'll ask you one by one. *(to PARAVICINI)* You, first, since you seem to have arrived here more or less by accident, Mr. Pari—?

PARAVICINI. Para – Paravicini. But, my dear Inspector, I know nothing, but nothing of what you have been talking about. I am a stranger in this country. I know nothing of these local affairs of bygone years.

TROTTER. *(rising and moving down to left of MRS. BOYLE)* Mrs—?

MRS. BOYLE. Boyle. I don't see – really I consider it an impertinence... Why on earth should *I* have anything to do with such – this distressing business?

(MAJOR METCALF looks sharply at her.)

TROTTER. *(looking at MISS CASEWELL)* Miss—?

MISS CASEWELL. *(slowly)* Casewell. Leslie Casewell. I never heard of Longridge Farm, and I know nothing about it.

TROTTER. *(moving to right of the sofa; to MAJOR METCALF)* You, sir?

MAJOR METCALF. Metcalf – Major. Read about the case in the papers at the time. I was stationed at Edinburgh then. No personal knowledge.

TROTTER. *(to CHRISTOPHER)* And you?

CHRISTOPHER. Christopher Wren. I was a mere child at the time. I don't remember even hearing about it.

TROTTER. (*moving behind the sofa table*) And that's all you have to say – any of you?

(*There is a silence.*)

(*moving centre*) Well, if one of you gets murdered, you'll have yourself to blame. Now then, Mr. Ralston, can I have a look round the house?

(*TROTTER exits up right with GILES. PARAVICINI sits at the window seat.*)

CHRISTOPHER. (*rising*) My dears, how melodramatic. He's very attractive, isn't he? (*He moves up to the refectory table.*) I do admire the police. So stern and hardboiled. Quite a thrill, this whole business. *Three Blind Mice.* How does the tune go? (*He whistles or hums it.*)

MRS. BOYLE. Really, Mr. Wren!

CHRISTOPHER. Don't you like it? (*He moves to left of MRS. BOYLE.*) But it's a signature tune – the signature of the murderer. Just fancy what a kick he must be getting out of it.

MRS. BOYLE. Melodramatic rubbish. I don't believe a word of it.

CHRISTOPHER. (*stalking behind her*) But just wait, Mrs. Boyle. Till I creep up behind you, and you feel my hands on your throat.

MRS. BOYLE. Stop... (*She rises.*)

MAJOR METCALF. That'll do, Christopher. It's a poor joke, anyway. In fact, it's not a joke at all.

CHRISTOPHER. Oh, but it *is!* (*He moves above the armchair centre.*) That's just what it is. A madman's joke. That's just what makes it so deliciously *macabre.* (*He moves up right to the archway, looks round and giggles.*) If you could just see your faces!

(*CHRISTOPHER exits through the archway.*)

MRS. BOYLE. (*moving up right to the arch*) A singularly ill-mannered and neurotic young man.

(MOLLIE enters from the dining-room down right and stands by the door.)

MOLLIE. Where's Giles?

MISS CASEWELL. Taking our policeman on a conducted tour of the house.

MRS. BOYLE. (*moving down to the large armchair*) Your friend, the architect, has been behaving in a most abnormal manner.

MAJOR METCALF. Young fellows seem nervy nowadays. Daresay he'll grow out of it.

MRS. BOYLE. (*sitting*) Nerves? I've no patience with people who say they have nerves. I haven't any nerves.

(MISS CASEWELL rises and crosses to the stairs left.)

MAJOR METCALF. No? Perhaps that's just as well for you, Mrs. Boyle.

MRS. BOYLE. What do you mean?

MAJOR METCALF. (*moving to left of the armchair centre*) I think you were actually one of the magistrates on the Bench at the time. In fact, you were responsible for sending those three children to Longridge Farm.

MRS. BOYLE. Really, Major Metcalf. I can hardly be held responsible. We had reports from welfare workers. The farm people seemed very nice and were most anxious to have the children. It seemed most satisfactory. Eggs and fresh milk and a healthy out-of-doors life.

MAJOR METCALF. Kicks, blows, starvation, and a thoroughly vicious couple.

MRS. BOYLE. But how was I to know? They were very civilly spoken.

MOLLIE. Yes, I was right. (*She moves up centre and stares at*

MRS. BOYLE.) *It was you...*

(MAJOR METCALF looks sharply at MOLLIE.)

MRS. BOYLE. One tries to do a public duty and all one gets is abuse.

(PARAVICINI laughs heartily.)

PARAVICINI. You must forgive me, but indeed I find all this most amusing. I enjoy myself greatly.

(Still laughing, PARAVICINI exits down left to the drawing-room. MOLLIE moves to right of the sofa.)

MRS. BOYLE. I never did like that man!

MISS CASEWELL. *(moving to left of the sofa table)* Where did he come from last night? *(She takes a cigarette from the box.)*

MOLLIE. I don't know.

MISS CASEWELL. Looks a bit of a spiv to me. Makes his face up, too. Rouge and powder. Disgusting. He must be quite old, too. *(She lights the cigarette.)*

MOLLIE. And yet he skips about as though he were quite young.

MAJOR METCALF. You'll be wanting more wood. I'll get it.

(MAJOR METCALF exits up right.)

MOLLIE. It's almost dark and yet it's only four in the afternoon. I'll turn the lights on. *(She moves down right and switches on the wall brackets over the fireplace.)* That's better.

(There is a pause. MRS. BOYLE glances uncomfortably first at MOLLIE and then at MISS CASEWELL, who are both watching her.)

MRS. BOYLE. *(assembling her writing things)* Now where did I leave my pen? *(She rises and crosses left.)*

(MRS. BOYLE exits up left to the library. There is the sound of a piano being played from the drawing-room – the tune of "Three Blind Mice" picked out with one finger.)

MOLLIE. *(moving up to the window to close the curtains)* What a horrid little tune that is.

MISS CASEWELL. Don't you like it? Reminds you of your childhood perhaps – an unhappy childhood?

MOLLIE. I was very happy as a child. *(She moves round to centre of the refectory table.)*

MISS CASEWELL. You were lucky.

MOLLIE. Weren't you happy?

MISS CASEWELL. *(crossing to the fire)* No.

MOLLIE. I'm sorry.

MISS CASEWELL. But all that's a long time ago. One gets over things.

MOLLIE. I suppose so.

MISS CASEWELL. Or doesn't one? Damned hard to say.

MOLLIE. They say that what happened when you're a child matters more than anything else.

MISS CASEWELL. They say – they say. Who says?

MOLLIE. Psychologists.

MISS CASEWELL. All humbug. Just a damned lot of nonsense. I've no use for psychologists and psychiatrists.

MOLLIE. *(moving down below the sofa)* I've never really had much to do with them.

MISS CASEWELL. A good thing for you you haven't. It's all a lot of hooey – the whole thing. Life's what you make of it. Go straight ahead – don't look back.

MOLLIE. One can't always help looking back.

MISS CASEWELL. Nonsense. It's a question of will power.

MOLLIE. Perhaps.

MISS CASEWELL. *(forcefully)* I know. *(She moves down centre.)*

MOLLIE. I expect you're right... *(She sighs.)* But sometimes things happen – to make you remember...

MISS CASEWELL. Don't give in. Turn your back on them.

MOLLIE. Is that really the right way? I wonder. Perhaps that's all wrong. Perhaps one ought really to – face them.

MISS CASEWELL. Depends what you're talking about.

MOLLIE. *(with a slight laugh)* Sometimes, I hardly know what I am talking about. *(She sits on the sofa.)*

MISS CASEWELL. *(moving to MOLLIE)* Nothing from the past is going to affect me – except in the way I want it to.

(GILES and TROTTER enter from the stairs left.)

TROTTER. Well, everything's all right upstairs. *(He looks at the open dining-room door, crosses and exits into the dining-room. He reappears in the archway up right.)*

(MISS CASEWELL exits into the dining-room, leaving the door open. MOLLIE rises and begins to tidy up, rearranging the cushions, then moves up to the curtains. GILES moves up to left of MOLLIE. TROTTER crosses down left.)

(Opening the door down left) What's in here, drawing-room?

(The sound of the piano is heard much louder while the door is open. TROTTER exits into the drawing-room and shuts the door. Presently he reappears at the door up left.)

MRS. BOYLE. *(off)* Would you mind shutting that door. This place is full of draughts.

TROTTER. Sorry, madam, but I've got to get the lay of the land.

(TROTTER closes the door and exits up the stairs. MOLLIE moves above the armchair centre.)

GILES. *(coming down to left of MOLLIE)* Mollie, what's all this...?

(TROTTER reappears down the stairs.)

TROTTER. Well, that completes the tour. Nothing suspicious. I think I'll make my report now to Superintendent Hogben. *(He goes to the telephone.)*

MOLLIE. *(moving to left of the refectory table)* But you can't telephone. The line's dead...

TROTTER. *(swinging round sharply)* What? *(He picks up the receiver.)* Since when?

MOLLIE. Major Metcalf tried it just after you arrived.

TROTTER. But it was all right earlier. Superintendent Hogben got through all right.

MOLLIE. Oh yes. I suppose, since then, the lines are down with the snow.

TROTTER. I wonder. It may have been *cut*. (*He puts the receiver down and turns to them.*)

GILES. Cut? But who could cut it?

TROTTER. Mr. Ralston... Just how much do you know about these people who are staying in your guest house?

GILES. I – we – we don't really know anything about them.

TROTTER. Ah. (*He moves above the sofa table.*)

GILES. (*moving to right of TROTTER*) Mrs. Boyle wrote from a Bournemouth hotel, Major Metcalf from an address in – where was it?

MOLLIE. Leamington. (*She moves to left of TROTTER.*)

GILES. Wren wrote from Hampstead and the Casewell woman from a private hotel in Kensington. Paravicini, as we've told you, turned up out of the blue last night. Still, I suppose they've all got ration books – that sort of thing.

TROTTER. I shall go into all that, of course. But there's not much reliance to be placed on that sort of evidence.

MOLLIE. But even if this – this maniac is trying to get here and kill us all – or one of us, we're quite safe now. Because of the snow. No-one can get here till it melts.

TROTTER. Unless he's here already.

GILES. Here already?

TROTTER. Why not, Mr. Ralston? All these people arrived here yesterday evening. Some hours after the murder of Mrs. Stanning. Plenty of time to get here.

GILES. But except for Mr. Paravicini, they'd all booked beforehand.

TROTTER. Well, why not? These crimes were planned.

GILES. Crimes? There's only been one crime. In Culver Street. Why are you sure there will be another here?

TROTTER. That it will happen here, no – I hope to prevent that. That it will be attempted, yes.

GILES. *(crossing to the fire)* I can't believe it. It's so fantastic.

TROTTER. It isn't fantastic. It's just facts.

MOLLIE. You've got a description of what this – man looked like in London?

TROTTER. Medium height, indeterminate build, darkish overcoat, soft felt hat, face hidden by a muffler. Spoke in a whisper. *(He crosses to left of the armchair centre. He pauses.)* There are three darkish overcoats hanging up in the hall now. One of them is yours, Mr. Ralston... There are three lightish felt hats...

(GILES starts to move towards the arch up right but he stops when MOLLIE speaks.)

MOLLIE. I still can't believe it.

TROTTER. You see? It's this telephone wire that worries me. If it's been cut... *(He crosses to the phone, bends down and studies the wire.)*

MOLLIE. I must go and get on with the vegetables.

(MOLLIE exits through the archway up right. GILES picks up MOLLIE's glove from the armchair centre and holds it absently, smoothing it out. He extracts a London bus ticket from the glove – stares at it – then after MOLLIE – then back to the ticket.)

TROTTER. Is there an extension?

(GILES frowns at the bus ticket, and does not answer.)

GILES. I beg your pardon. Did you say something?

TROTTER. Yes, Mr. Ralston, I said "Is there an extension?" *(He crosses to centre.)*

GILES. Yes, up in our bedroom.

TROTTER. Go and try it up there for me, will you?

(GILES exits to the stairs, carrying the glove and bus ticket and looking dazed. TROTTER continues to trace the wire to the window. He pulls back the curtain and opens the window, trying to follow the wire. He crosses

to the arch up right, goes out and returns with a torch. He moves to the window, jumps out and bends down, looking, then disappears out of sight. It is practically dark. MRS. BOYLE enters from the library up left, shivers and notices the open window.)

MRS. BOYLE. *(moving to the window)* Who's left this window open? *(She shuts the window and closes the curtain, then moves to the fire and puts another log on it. She crosses to the radio and turns it on. She moves up to the refectory table, picks up a magazine and looks at it.)*

(There is a music programme on the radio. MRS. BOYLE frowns, moves to the radio and tunes into a different programme)

VOICE ON THE RADIO. ...to understand what I may term as the mechanics of fear, you have to study the precise effect produced on the human mind. Imagine, for instance, that you are alone in a room. It is late in the afternoon. A door opens softly behind you...

(The door down right opens. The tune of "Three Blind Mice" is heard whistled. MRS. BOYLE turns with a start)

MRS. BOYLE. *(with relief)* Oh, it's you. I can't find any programme worth listening to. *(She moves to the radio and tunes in to the music programme.)*

(A hand shows through the open doorway and clicks the light switch. The lights suddenly go out)

Here – what are you doing? Why did you turn out the light?

(The radio is at full volume, and through it are heard gurgles and a scuffle. MRS. BOYLE's body falls. MOLLIE enters by the archway up right and stands perplexed.)

MOLLIE. Why is it all dark? What a noise!

(She switches on the lights at the switch up right and crosses to the radio to turn it down. Then she sees MRS. BOYLE lying strangled in front of the sofa and screams as – the curtain quickly falls.)