

Mystery's #1 Bestselling Author



AGATHA
CHRISTIE

Three Blind Mice
and Other Stories

Three Blind Mice

Three Blind Mice

See how they run

See how they run

They all ran after the farmer's wife

She cut off their tails with a carving knife

Did you ever see such a sight in your life

As Three Blind Mice

It was very cold. The sky was dark and heavy with unshed snow.

A man in a dark overcoat, with his muffler pulled up round his face, and his hat pulled down over his eyes, came along Culver Street and went up the steps of number 74. He put his finger on the bell and heard it shrilling in the basement below.

Mrs Casey, her hands busy in the sink, said bitterly, "Drat that bell. Never any peace, there isn't."

Wheezing a little, she toiled up the basement stairs and opened the door.

The man standing silhouetted against the lowering sky outside asked in a whisper, "Mrs Lyon?"

"Second floor," said Mrs Casey. "You can go on up. Does she expect you?"

The man slowly shook his head.

"Oh, well, go on up and knock."

She watched him as he went up the shabbily carpeted stairs.

Afterward she said, he "gave her a funny feeling." But actually all she thought was that he must have a pretty bad cold only to be able to whisper like that - and no wonder with the weather what it was.

When the man got round the bend of the staircase he began to whistle softly. The tune he whistled was "Three Blind Mice."

Molly Davis stepped back into the road and looked up at the newly painted board by the gate.

MONKSWELL MANOR GUESTHOUSE

She nodded approval. It looked, it really did look, quite professional. Or, perhaps, one might say almost professional. The T of Guest House staggered uphill a little, and the end of Manor was slightly crowded, but on the whole Giles had made a wonderful job of it.

Giles was really very clever. There were so many things that he could do. She was always making fresh discoveries about this husband of hers. He said so little about himself that it was only by degrees that she was finding out what a lot of varied talents he had. An ex-naval man was always a "handy man," so people said.

Well, Giles would have need of all his talents in their new venture. Nobody could be more raw to the business of running a guest house than she and Giles. But it would be great fun. And it did solve the housing problem.

It had been Molly's idea. When Aunt Katherine died, and the lawyers wrote to her and informed her that her aunt had left her Monkswell Manor, the natural reaction of the young couple had been to sell it.

Giles had asked, "What is it like?"

And Molly had replied, "Oh, a big, rambling old house, full of stuffy, old-fashioned Victorian furniture. Rather a nice garden, but terribly overgrown since the war, because there's been only one old gardener left."

So they had decided to put the house on the market, and keep just enough furniture to furnish a small cottage or flat for themselves.

But two difficulties arose at once. First, there weren't any small cottages or flats to be found, and secondly, all the furniture was enormous.

"Well," said Molly, "we'll just have to sell it all. I suppose it will sell?" The solicitor assured them that nowadays anything would sell.

"Very probably," he said, "someone will buy it for a hotel or guest house in which case they might like to buy it with the furniture complete. Fortunately the house is in very good repair. The late Miss Emory had extensive repairs and modernizations done just before the war, and there has been very little deterioration. Oh, yes, it's in good shape."

And it was then that Molly had had her idea.

"Giles," she said, "why shouldn't we run it as a guest house ourselves?"

At first her husband had scoffed at the idea, but Molly had persisted.

"We needn't take very many people - not at first. It's an easy house to run - it's got hot and cold water in the bedrooms and central heating and a gas cooker. And we can have hens and ducks and our own eggs, and vegetables."

"Who'd do all the work - isn't it very hard to get servants?"

"Oh, we'd have to do the work. But wherever we lived we'd have to do that. A few extra people wouldn't really mean much more to do. We'd probably get a woman to come in after a bit when we got properly started. If we had only five people, each paying seven guineas a week -" Molly departed into the realms of somewhat optimistic mental arithmetic.

"And think, Giles," she ended, "it would be our own house. With our own things. As it is, it seems to me it will be years before we can ever find anywhere to live."

That, Giles admitted, was true. They had had so little time together since their hasty marriage, that they were both longing to settle down in a home.

So the great experiment was set under way. Advertisements were put in the local paper and in the Times, and various answers came.

And now, today, the first of the guests was to arrive. Giles had gone off early in the car to try and obtain some army wire netting that had been advertised as for sale on the other side of the county.

Molly announced the necessity of walking to the village to make some last purchases.

The only thing that was wrong was the weather. For the last two days it had been bitterly cold, and now the snow was beginning to fall.

Molly hurried up the drive, thick, feathery flakes falling on her waterproofed shoulders and bright curly hair. The weather forecasts had been lugubrious in the extreme. Heavy snowfall was to be expected.

She hoped anxiously that all the pipes wouldn't freeze. It would be too bad if everything went wrong just as they started.

She glanced at her watch. Past teatime. Would Giles have got back yet? Would he be wondering where she was?

"I had to go to the village again for something I had forgotten," she would say. And he would laugh and say, "More tins?"

Tins were a joke between them. They were always on the lookout for tins of food. The larder was really quite nicely

stocked now in case of emergencies.

And, Molly thought with a grimace as she looked up at the sky, it looked as though emergencies were going to present themselves very soon.

The house was empty. Giles was not back yet.

Molly went first into the kitchen, then upstairs, going round the newly prepared bedrooms. Mrs Boyle in the south room with the mahogany and the four-poster. Major Metcalf in the blue room with the oak. Mr Wren in the east room with the bay window. All the rooms looked very nice - and what a blessing that Aunt Katherine had had such a splendid stock of linen. Molly patted a counterpane into place and went downstairs again.

It was nearly dark. The house felt suddenly very quiet and empty. It was a lonely house, two miles from a village, two miles, as Molly put it, from anywhere.

She had often been alone in the house before - but she had never before been so conscious of being alone in it.

The snow beat in a soft flurry against the windowpanes. It made a whispery, uneasy sound.

Supposing Giles couldn't get back - supposing the snow was so thick that the car couldn't get through? Supposing she had to stay alone here - stay alone for days, perhaps.

She looked round the kitchen - a big, comfortable kitchen that seemed to call for a big, comfortable cook presiding at the kitchen table, her jaws moving rhythmically as she ate rock cakes and drank black tea - she should be flanked by a tall, elderly parlour-maid on one side and a round, rosy housemaid on the other, with a kitchen-maid at the other end of the table observing her betters with frightened eyes. And instead there was just herself, Molly Davis, playing a role that did not yet seem a very natural role to play.

Her whole life, at the moment, seemed unreal - Giles seemed unreal. She was playing a part - just playing a part.

A shadow passed the window, and she jumped - a strange man was coming through the snow. She heard the rattle of the side door. The stranger stood there in the open doorway, shaking off snow, a strange man, walking into the empty house. And then, suddenly, illusion fled.

"Oh Giles," she cried, "I'm so glad you've come!"

"Hullo, sweetheart! What filthy weather! Lord, I'm frozen."

He stamped his feet and blew through his hands.

Automatically Molly picked up the coat that he had thrown in a Giles-like manner onto the oak chest. She put it on a hanger, taking out of the stuffed pockets a muffler, a newspaper, a ball of string, and the morning's correspondence which he had shoved in pell mell. Moving into the kitchen, she laid down the articles on the dresser and put the kettle on the gas.

"Did you get the netting?" she asked. "What ages you've been."

"It wasn't the right kind. Wouldn't have been any good for us. I went on to another dump, but that wasn't any good either. What have you been doing with yourself? Nobody turned up yet, I suppose?"

"Mrs Boyle isn't coming till tomorrow, anyway."

"Major Metcalf and Mr Wren ought to be here today."

"Major Metcalf sent a card to say he wouldn't be here till tomorrow."

"Then that leaves us and Mr Wren for dinner. What do you think he's like? Correct sort of retired civil servant is my idea."

"No, I think he's an artist."

"In that case," said Giles, "we'd better get a week's rent in advance."

"Oh, no, Giles, they bring luggage. If they don't pay we hang on to their luggage."

"And suppose their luggage is stones wrapped up in newspaper? The truth is, Molly, we don't in the least know what we're up against in this business. I hope they don't spot what beginners we are."

"Mrs Boyle is sure to," said Molly. "She's that kind of woman." "How do you know? You haven't seen her?"

Molly turned away. She spread a newspaper on the table, fetched some cheese, and set to work to grate it.

"What's this?" inquired her husband.

"It's going to be Welsh rarebit," Molly informed him.

"Bread crumbs and mashed potatoes and just a teeny-weeny bit of cheese to justify its name."

"Aren't you a clever cook?" said her admiring husband.

"I wonder. I can do one thing at a time. It's assembling them that needs so much practice. Breakfast is the worst."

"Why?"

"Because it all happens at once - eggs and bacon and hot milk and coffee and toast. The milk boils over, or the toast burns, or the bacon frizzles, or the eggs go hard. You have to be as active as a scalded cat watching everything at once."

"I shall have to creep down unobserved tomorrow morning and watch this scalded-cat impersonation."

"The kettle's boiling," said Molly. "Shall we take the tray into the library and hear the wireless? It's almost time for the news."

"As we seem to be going to spend almost the whole of our time in the kitchen, we ought to have a wireless there, too."

"Yes. How nice kitchens are. I love this kitchen. I think it's far and away the nicest room in the house. I like the dresser and the plates, and I simply love the lavish feeling that an absolutely enormous kitchen range gives you - though, of course, I'm thankful I haven't got to cook on it."

"I suppose a whole year's fuel ration would go in one day."

"Almost certainly, I should say. But think of the great joints that were roasted in it - sirloins of beef and saddles of mutton. Colossal copper preserving-pans full of homemade strawberry jam with pounds and pounds of sugar going into it. What a lovely, comfortable age the Victorian age was. Look at the furniture upstairs, large and solid and rather ornate - but, oh! - the heavenly comfort of it, with lots of room for the clothes one used to have, and every drawer sliding in and out so easily. Do you remember that smart modern flat we were lent? Everything built in and sliding - only nothing slid - it always stuck. And the doors pushed shut - only they never stayed shut, or if they did shut they wouldn't open."

"Yes, that's the worst of gadgets. If they don't go right, you're sunk." "Well, come on, let's hear the news."

The news consisted mainly of grim warnings about the weather, the usual deadlock in foreign affairs, spirited bickerings in Parliament, and a murder in Culver Street, Paddington.

"Ugh," said Molly, switching it off. "Nothing but misery. I'm not going to hear appeals for fuel economy all over again. What do they expect you to do, sit and freeze? I don't think we ought to have tried to start a guest house in the winter. We ought to have waited until the spring." She added in a different tone of voice, "I wonder what the woman was like who was murdered."

"Mrs Lyon?"

"Was that her name? I wonder who wanted to murder her and why."

"Perhaps she had a fortune under the floor boards."

"When it says the police are anxious to interview a man 'seen in the vicinity' does that mean he's the murderer?"

"I think it's usually that. Just a polite way of putting it."

The shrill note of a bell made them both jump.

"That's the front door," said Giles. "Enter - a murderer," he added facetiously.

"It would be, of course, in a play. Hurry up. It must be Mr Wren. Now we shall see who's right about him, you or me."

Mr Wren and a flurry of snow came in together with a rush. All that Molly, standing in the library door, could see of the newcomer was his silhouette against the white world outside.

How alike, thought Molly, were all men in their livery of civilization. Dark overcoat, gray hat, muffler round the neck.

In another moment Giles had shut the front door against the elements, Mr Wren was unwinding his muffler and casting down his suitcase and flinging off his hat - all, it seemed, at the same time, and also talking. He had a high-pitched, almost querulous voice and stood revealed in the light of the hall as a young man with a shock of light, sunburned hair and pale, restless eyes.

"Too, too frightful," he was saying. "The English winter at its worst - a reversion to Dickens - Scrooge and Tiny Tim and all that. One had to be so terribly hearty to stand up to it all. Don't you think so? And I've had a terrible cross-country journey from Wales. Are you Mrs Davis? But how delightful!"

Molly's hand was seized in a quick, bony clasp.

"Not at all as I'd imagined you. I'd pictured you, you know, as an Indian army general's widow. Terrifically grim and memsahibish - and Benares whatnot - a real Victorian whatnot. Heavenly, simply heavenly - Have you got any wax flowers? Or birds of paradise? Oh, but I'm simply going to love this place. I was afraid, you know, it would be very Olde Worlde - very, very Manor House - failing the Benares brass, I mean. Instead, it's marvellous - real Victorian bedrock respectability. Tell me, have you got one of those beautiful sideboards - mahogany - purple-plummy-mahogany with great carved fruits?"

"As a matter of fact," said Molly, rather breathless under this torrent of words, "we have." "No! Can I see it? At once. In here?"

His quickness was almost disconcerting. He had turned the handle of the dining-room door, and clicked on the light. Molly followed him in, conscious of Giles's disapproving profile on her left.

Mr Wren passed his long bony fingers over the rich carving of the massive sideboard with little cries of appreciation. Then he turned a reproachful glance upon his hostess.

"No big mahogany dining-table? All these little tables dotted about instead?" "We thought people would prefer it that way," said Molly.

"Darling, of course you're quite right. I was being carried away by my feeling for period. Of course, if you had the table, you'd have to have the right family round it. Stern, handsome father with a beard - prolific, faded mother, eleven children, a grim governess, and somebody called 'poor Harriet' - the poor relation who acts as general helper and is very, very grateful for being given a good home. Look at that grate - think of the flames leaping up the chimney and blistering poor Harriet's back."

"I'll take your suitcase upstairs," said Giles. "East room?"

"Yes," said Molly.

Mr Wren skipped out into the hall again as Giles went upstairs.

"Has it got a four-poster with little chintz roses?" he asked.

"No, it hasn't," said Giles and disappeared round the bend of the staircase.

"I don't believe your husband is going to like me," said Mr Wren. "What's he been in? The navy?"

"Yes"

"Yes.

"I thought so. They're much less tolerant than the army and the air force. How long have you been married? Are you very much in love with him?"

"Perhaps you'd like to come up and see your room."

"Yes, of course that was impertinent. But I did really want to know. I mean, it's interesting, don't you think, to know all about people? What they feel and think, I mean, not just who they are and what they do."

"I suppose," said Molly in a demure voice, "you are Mr Wren?"

The young man stopped short, clutched his hair in both hands and tugged at it.

"But how frightful - I never put first things first. Yes, I'm Christopher Wren - now, don't laugh. My parents were a romantic couple. They hoped I'd be an architect. So they thought it a splendid idea to christen me Christopher - halfway home, as it were."

"And are you an architect?" asked Molly, unable to help smiling.

"Yes, I am," said Mr Wren triumphantly. "At least I'm nearly one. I'm not fully qualified yet. But it's really a remarkable example of wishful thinking coming off for once. Mind you, actually the name will be a handicap. I shall never be the Christopher Wren. However, Chris Wren's Pre-Fab Nests may achieve fame."

Giles came down the stairs again, and Molly said, "I'll show you your room now, Mr Wren."

When she came down a few minutes later, Giles said, "Well, did he like the pretty oak furniture?"

"He was very anxious to have a four-poster, so I gave him the rose room instead." Giles grunted and murmured something that ended, "... young twerp."

"Now, look here, Giles," Molly assumed a severe demeanour. "This isn't a house party of guests we're entertaining. This is business. Whether you like Christopher Wren or not -"

"I don't," Giles interjected.

"- has nothing whatever to do with it. He's paying seven guineas a week, and that's all that matters."

"If he pays it, yes."

"He's agreed to pay it. We've got his letter."

"Did you transfer that suitcase of his to the rose room?"

"He carried it, of course."

"Very gallant. But it wouldn't have strained you. There's certainly no question of stones wrapped up in newspaper. It's so light that there seems to me there's probably nothing in it."

"Ssh, here he comes," said Molly warningly.

Christopher Wren was conducted to the library which looked, Molly thought, very nice, indeed, with its big chairs and its log fire. Dinner, she told him, would be in half an hour's time.

In reply to a question, she explained that there were no other guests at the moment. In that case, Christopher said, how would it be if he came into the kitchen and helped?

"I can cook you an omelette if you like," he said engagingly.

The subsequent proceedings took place in the kitchen, and Christopher helped with the washing up.

Somehow, Molly felt, it was not quite the right start for a conventional guest house - and Giles had not liked it at all. Oh, well, thought Molly, as she fell asleep, tomorrow when the others came it would be different.

The morning came with dark skies and snow. Giles looked grave, and Molly's heart fell. The weather was going to make everything very difficult.

Mrs Boyle arrived in the local taxi with chains on the wheels, and the driver brought pessimistic reports of the state of the road.

"Drifts afore nightfall," he prophesied.

Mrs Boyle herself did not lighten the prevailing gloom. She was a large, forbidding-looking woman with a resonant voice and a masterful manner. Her natural aggressiveness had been heightened by a war career of persistent and militant usefulness.

"If I had not believed this was a running concern, I should never have come," she said. "I naturally thought it was a well-established guest house, properly run on scientific lines."

"There is no obligation for you to remain if you are not satisfied, Mrs Boyle," said Giles. "No, indeed, and I shall not think of doing so."

"Perhaps, Mrs Boyle," said Giles, "you would like to ring up for a taxi. The roads are not yet blocked. If there has been any misapprehension it would, perhaps, be better if you went elsewhere." He added, "We have had so many applications for rooms that we shall be able to fill your place quite easily - indeed, in future we are charging a higher rate for our rooms."

Mrs Boyle threw him a sharp glance. "I am certainly not going to leave before I have tried what the place is like. Perhaps you would let me have a rather large bath towel, Mrs Davis. I am not accustomed to drying myself on a pocket handkerchief."

Giles grinned at Molly behind Mrs Boyle's retreating back. "Darling, you were wonderful," said Molly. "The way you stood up to her." "Bullies soon climb down when they get their own medicine," said Giles. "Oh, dear," said Molly. "I wonder how she'll get on with Christopher Wren." "She won't," said Giles.

And, indeed, that very afternoon, Mrs Boyle remarked to Molly, "That's a very peculiar young man," with distinct disfavour in her voice.

The baker arrived looking like an Arctic explorer and delivered the bread with the warning that his next call, due in two days' time, might not materialize.

"Hold-ups everywhere," he announced. "Got plenty of stores in, I hope?"

"Oh, yes," said Molly. "We've got lots of tins. I'd better take extra flour, though."

She thought vaguely that there was something the Irish made called soda bread. If the worst came to the worst she could probably make that.

The baker had also brought the papers, and she spread them out on the hall table. Foreign affairs had receded in importance. The weather and the murder of Mrs Lyon occupied the front page.

She was staring at the blurred reproduction of the dead woman's features when Christopher Wren's voice behind her said, "Rather a sordid murder, don't you think? Such a drab-looking woman and such a drab street. One can't feel, can one, that there is any story behind it?"

"I've no doubt," said Mrs Boyle with a snort, "that the creature got no more than she deserved."

"Oh." Mr Wren turned to her with engaging eagerness. "So you think it's definitely a sex crime, do you?"

"I suggested nothing of the kind, Mr Wren."

"But she was strangled, wasn't she? I wonder -" he held out his long white hands - "what it would feel like to strangle anyone."

"Really, Mr Wren!"

Christopher moved nearer to her, lowering his voice. "Have you considered, Mrs Boyle, just what it would feel like to be strangled?"

Mrs Boyle said again, even more indignantly, "Really, Mr Wren!"

Molly read hurriedly out, "'The man the police are anxious to interview was wearing a dark overcoat and a light Homburg hat, was of medium height, and wore a woolen scarf.'"

"In fact," said Christopher Wren, "he looked just like everybody else." He laughed. "Yes," said Molly. "Just like everybody else."

In his room at Scotland Yard, Inspector Parminter said to Detective Sergeant Kane, "I'll see those two workmen now."

"Yes, sir."

"What are they like?"

"Decent class workingmen. Rather slow reactions. Dependable."

"Right." Inspector Parminter nodded.

Presently two embarrassed-looking men in their best clothes were shown into his room.

Parminter summed them up with a quick eye. He was an adept at setting people at their ease.

"So you think you've some information that might be useful to us on the Lyon case," he said. "Good of you to come along. Sit down. Smoke?"

He waited while they accepted cigarettes and lit up.

"Pretty awful weather outside."

"It is that, sir."

"Well, now, then - let's have it."

The two men looked at each other, embarrassed now that it came to the difficulties of narration.

"Go ahead, Joe," said the bigger of the two.

Joe went ahead. "It was like this, see. We 'adn't got a match."

"Where was this?"

"Jarman Street - we was working on the road there - gas mains."

Inspector Parminter nodded. Later he would get down to exact details of time and place. Jarman Street, he knew was in the close vicinity of Culver Street where the tragedy had taken place.

"You hadn't got a match," he repeated encouragingly.

"No. Finished my box, I 'ad, and Bill's lighter wouldn't work, and so I spoke to a bloke as was passing. 'Can you give us a match, mister?' I says. Didn't think nothing particular, I didn't, not then. He was just passing - like lots of others - I just 'appened to arsk 'im."

Again Parminter nodded.

"Well, he give us a match, 'e did. Didn't say nothing. 'Cruel cold,' Bill said to 'im, and he just answered, whispering-like, 'Yes, it is.' Got a cold on his chest, I thought. He was all wrapped up, anyway. 'Thanks mister,' I says and gives him back his matches, and he moves off quick, so quick that when I sees 'e'd dropped something, it's almost too late to call 'im back. It was a little notebook as he must 'ave pulled out of 'is pocket when he got the matches out. 'Hi,

mister/ I calls after 'im, 'you've dropped something.' But he didn't seem to hear - he just quickens up and bolts round the corner, didn't 'e, Bill?"

"That's right," agreed Bill. "Like a scurrying rabbit."

"Into the Harrow Road, that was, and it didn't seem as we'd catch up with him there, not the rate 'e was going, and, anyway, by then it was a bit late - it was only a little book, not a wallet or anything like that - maybe it wasn't important. 'Funny bloke,' I says. 'His hat pulled down over his eyes, and all buttoned up - like a crook on the pictures,' I says to Bill, didn't I, Bill?"

"That's what you said," agreed Bill.

"Funny I should have said that, not that I thought anything at the time. Just in a hurry to get home, that's what I thought, and I didn't blame 'im. Not 'arf cold, it was!"

"Not' arf," agreed Bill.

"So I says to Bill, 'Let's 'ave a look at this little book and see if it's important.' Well, sir, I took a look. 'Only a couple of addresses,' I says to Bill. Seventy-Four Culver Street and some blinking manor 'ouse."

"Ritzy," said Bill with a snort of disapproval.

Joe continued his tale with a certain gusto now that he had got wound up.

"'Seventy-Four Culver Street,' I says to Bill. 'That's just round the corner from 'ere. When we knock off, we'll take it round' - and then I sees something written across the top of the page. 'What's this?' I says to Bill. And he takes it and reads it out. "'Three blind mice" -must be off 'is Knocker,' he says - and just at that very moment - yes, it was that very moment, sir, we 'ears some woman yelling, 'Murder!' a couple of streets away!"

Joe paused at this artistic climax.

"Didn't half yell, did she?" he resumed. "'Here,' I says to Bill, 'you nip along.' And by and by he comes back and says there's a big crowd and the police are there and some woman's had her throat cut or been strangled and that was the landlady who found her, yelling for the police. 'Where was it?' I says to him. 'In Culver Street,' he says. 'What number?' I asks, and he says he didn't rightly notice."

Bill coughed and shuffled his feet with the sheepish air of one who has not done himself justice.

"So I says, 'We'll nip around and make sure,' and when we finds it's number seventy-four we talked it over, and 'Maybe,' Bill says, 'the address in the notebook's got nothing to do with it,' and I says as maybe it has, and, anyway, after we've talked it over and heard the police want to interview a man who left the 'ouse about that time, well, we come along 'ere and ask if we can see the gentleman who's handling the case, and I'm sure I 'ope as we aren't wasting your time."

"You acted very properly," said Parminter approvingly. "You've brought the notebook with you? Thank you. Now -"

His questions became brisk and professional. He got places, times, dates - the only thing he did not get was a description of the man who had dropped the notebook. Instead he got the same description as he had already got from a hysterical landlady, the description of a hat pulled down over the eyes, a buttoned-up coat, a muffler swathed round the lower part of a face, a voice that was only a whisper, gloved hands.

When the men had gone he remained staring down at the little book lying open on his table. Presently it would go to the appropriate department to see what evidence, if any, of fingerprints it might reveal. But now his attention was held by the two addresses and by the line of small handwriting along the top of the page.

He turned his head as Sergeant Kane came into the room. "Come here, Kane. Look at this."

Kane stood behind him and let out a low whistle as he read out, "'Three Blind Mice!' Well, I'm dashed!"

"Yes." Parminter opened a drawer and took out a half sheet of notepaper which he laid beside the notebook on his desk. It had been found pinned carefully to the murdered woman.

On it was written, This is the first. Below was a childish drawing of three mice and a bar of music.

Kane whistled the tune softly. Three Blind Mice, See how they run -

"That's it, all right. That's the signature tune."

"Crazy, isn't it, sir?"

"Yes." Parminter frowned. "The identification of the woman is quite certain?"

"Yes, sir. Here's the report from the fingerprints department. Mrs Lyon, as she called herself, was really Maureen Gregg. She was released from Holloway two months ago on completion of her sentence."

Parminter said thoughtfully, "She went to Seventy-Four Culver Street calling herself Maureen Lyon. She occasionally drank a bit and she had been known to bring a man home with her once or twice. She displayed no fear of anything or anyone. There's no reason to believe she thought herself in any danger. This man rings the bell, asks for her, and is told by the landlady to go up to the second floor. She can't describe him, says only that he was of medium height and seemed to have a bad cold and lost his voice. She went back again to the basement and heard nothing of a suspicious nature. She did not hear the man go out. Ten minutes or so later she took tea to her lodger and discovered her strangled."

"This wasn't a casual murder, Kane. It was carefully planned."

He paused and then added abruptly, "I wonder how many houses there are in England called Monkswell Manor?"

"There might be only one, sir."

"That would probably be too much luck. But get on with it. There's no time to lose."

The sergeant's eye rested appreciatively on two entries in the notebook - 74 Culver Street; Monkswell Manor. He said, "So you think -"

Parminter said swiftly, "Yes. Don't you?"

"Could be. Monkswell Manor - now where - Do you know, sir, I could swear I've seen that name quite lately."

"Where?"

"That's what I'm trying to remember. Wait a minute - Newspaper - Times. Back page. Wait a minute - Hotels and boarding-houses - Half a sec, sir - it's an old one. I was doing the crossword."

He hurried out of the room and returned in triumph, "Here you are, sir, look." The inspector followed the pointing finger.

"Monkswell Manor, Harpleden, Berks." He drew the telephone toward him. "Get me the Berkshire County police."

With the arrival of Major Metcalf, Monkswell Manor settled into its routine as a going concern. Major Metcalf was neither formidable like Mrs Boyle, nor erratic like Christopher Wren. He was a stolid, middle-aged man of spruce military appearance, who had done most of his service in India. He appeared satisfied with his room and its furniture, and while he and Mrs Boyle did not actually find mutual friends, he had known cousins of friends of hers - "the Yorkshire branch," out in Poonah. His luggage, however, two heavy pigskin cases, satisfied even Giles's suspicious nature.

Truth to tell, Molly and Giles did not have much time for speculating about their guests. Between them, dinner was cooked, served, eaten, and washed up satisfactorily. Major Metcalf praised the coffee, and Giles and Molly retired to bed, tired but triumphant - to be roused about two in the morning by the persistent ringing of a bell.

"Damn," said Giles. "It's the front door. What on earth -"

"Hurry up," said Molly. "Go and see."

Casting a reproachful glance at her, Giles wrapped his dressing-gown round him and descended the stairs. Molly heard the bolts being drawn back and a murmur of voices in the hall. Presently, driven by curiosity, she crept out of

bed and went to peep from the top of the stairs. In the hall below, Giles was assisting a bearded stranger out of a snow-covered overcoat. Fragments of conversation floated up to her.

"Brrr." It was an explosive foreign sound. "My fingers are so cold I cannot feel them. And my feet -" A stamping sound was heard.

"Come in here." Giles threw open the library door. "It's warm. You'd better wait here while I get a room ready."

"I am indeed fortunate," said the stranger politely.

Molly peered inquisitively through the banisters. She saw an elderly man with a small black beard and Mephistophelean eyebrows. A man who moved with a young and jaunty step in spite of the gray at his temples.

Giles shut the library door on him and came quickly up the stairs. Molly rose from her crouching position.

"Who is it?" she demanded.

Giles grinned. "Another guest for the guest house. Car overturned in a snowdrift. He got himself out and was making his way as best he could - it's a howling blizzard still, listen to it - along the road when he saw our board. He said it was like an answer to prayer."

"You think he's-all right?"

"Darling, this isn't the sort of night for a housebreaker to be doing his rounds."

"He's a foreigner, isn't he?"

"Yes. His name's Paravicini. I saw his wallet - I rather think he showed it on purpose - simply crammed with notes. Which room shall we give him?"

"The green room. It's all tidy and ready. We'll just have to make up the bed."

"I suppose I'll have to lend him pajamas. All his things are in the car. He said he had to climb out through the window."

Molly fetched sheets, pillowcases, and towels.

As they hurriedly made the bed up, Giles said, "It's coming down thick. We're going to be snowed up, Molly, completely cut off. Rather exciting in a way, isn't it?"

"I don't know," said Molly doubtfully. "Do you think I can make soda bread, Giles?" "Of course you can. You can make anything," said her loyal husband.

"I've never tried to make bread. It's the sort of thing one takes for granted. It may be new or it may be stale but it's just something the baker brings. But if we're snowed up there won't be a baker."

"Nor a butcher, nor a postman. No newspapers. And probably no telephone." "Just the wireless telling us what to do?" "At any rate we make our own electric light."

"You must run the engine again tomorrow. And we must keep the central heating well stoked."

"I suppose our next lot of coke won't come in now. We're very low."

"Oh, bother. Giles, I feel we are in for a simply frightful time. Hurry up and get Para -whatever his name is. I'll go back to bed."

Morning brought confirmation of Giles's forebodings. Snow was piled five feet high, drifting up against the doors and windows. Outside it was still snowing. The world was white, silent, and - in some subtle way - menacing.

Mrs Boyle sat at breakfast. There was no one else in the dining-room. At the adjoining table, Major Metcalf's place had been cleared away. Mr Wren's table was still laid for breakfast. One early riser, presumably, and one late one. Mrs Boyle herself knew definitely that there was only one proper time for breakfast, nine o'clock.

Mrs Boyle had finished her excellent omelette and was champing toast between her strong white teeth. She was in a grudging and undecided mood. Monkswell Manor was not at all what she had imagined it would be. She had hoped for bridge, for faded spinsters whom she could impress with her social position and connections, and to whom she could hint at the importance and secrecy of her war service.

The end of the war had left Mrs Boyle marooned, as it were, on a desert shore. She had always been a busy woman, talking fluently of efficiency and organization. Her vigor and drive had prevented people asking whether she was, indeed, a good or efficient organizer.

War activities had suited her down to the ground. She had bossed people and bullied people and worried heads of departments and, to give her her due, had at no time spared herself. Subservient women had run to and fro, terrified of her slightest frown. And now all that exciting hustling life was over. She was back in private life, and her former private life had vanished.

Her house, which had been requisitioned by the army, needed thorough repairing and redecorating before she could return to it, and the difficulties of domestic help made a return to it impracticable in any case. Her friends were largely scattered and dispersed.

Presently, no doubt, she would find her niche, but at the moment it was a case of marking time. A hotel or a boarding-house seemed the answer. And she had chosen to come to Monkswell Manor.

She looked round her disparagingly.

Most dishonest, she said to herself, not to have told me they were only just starting.

She pushed her plate farther away from her. The fact that her breakfast had been excellently cooked and served, with good coffee and homemade marmalade, in a curious way annoyed her still more. It had deprived her of a legitimate cause of complaint. Her bed, too, had been comfortable, with embroidered sheets and a soft pillow. Mrs Boyle liked comfort, but she also liked to find fault. The latter was, perhaps, the stronger passion of the two.

Rising majestically, Mrs Boyle left the dining-room, passing in the doorway that very extraordinary young man with the red hair. He was wearing this morning a checked tie of virulent green - a woollen tie.

Preposterous, said Mrs Boyle to herself. Quite preposterous.

The way he looked at her, too, sideways out of those pale eyes of his - she didn't like it. There was something upsetting - unusual - about that faintly mocking glance.

Unbalanced mentally, I shouldn't wonder, said Mrs Boyle to herself.

She acknowledged his flamboyant bow with a slight inclination of her head and marched into the big drawing-room. Comfortable chairs here, particularly the large rose-colored one. She had better make it clear that that was to be her chair. She deposited her knitting on it as a precaution and walked over and laid a hand on the radiators. As she had suspected, they were only warm, not hot. Mrs Boyle's eye gleamed militantly. She could have something to say about that.

She glanced out of the window. Dreadful weather - quite dreadful. Well, she wouldn't stay here long - not unless more people came and made the place amusing.

Some snow slid off the roof with a soft whooshing sound. Mrs Boyle jumped. "No," she said out loud. "I shan't stay here long."

Somebody laughed - a faint, high chuckle. She turned her head sharply. Young Wren was standing in the doorway looking at her with that curious expression of his.

No," he said. "I don't suppose you will."

Major Metcalf was helping Giles to shovel away snow from the back door. He was a good worker, and Giles was quite vociferous in his expressions of gratitude.

"Good exercise," said Major Metcalf. "Must get exercise every day. Got to keep fit, you know."

So the major was an exercise fiend. Giles had feared as much. It went with his demand for breakfast at half past seven.

As though reading Giles's thoughts, the major said, "Very good of your missus to cook me an early breakfast. Nice to get a new-laid egg, too."

Giles had risen himself before seven, owing to the exigencies of hotel-keeping. He and Molly had had boiled eggs and tea and had set to on the sitting-rooms. Everything was spick-and-span. Giles could not help thinking that if he had been a guest in his own establishment, nothing would have dragged him out of bed on a morning such as this until the last possible moment.

The major, however, had been up and breakfasted, and roamed about the house, apparently full of energy seeking an outlet.

Well, thought Giles, there's plenty of snow to shovel.

He threw a sideways glance at his companion. Not an easy man to place, really. Hardbitten, well over middle age, something queerly watchful about the eyes. A man who was giving nothing away. Giles wondered why he had come to Monkswell Manor.

Demobilized, probably, and no job to go to.

Mr Paravicini came down late. He had coffee and a piece of toast - a frugal Continental breakfast.

He somewhat disconcerted Molly when she brought it to him by rising to his feet, bowing in an exaggerated manner, and exclaiming, "My charming hostess? I am right, am I not?"

Molly admitted rather shortly that he was right. She was in no mood for compliments at this hour.

"And why," she said, as she piled crockery recklessly in the sink, "everybody has to have their breakfast at a different time - It's a bit hard."

She slung the plates into the rack and hurried upstairs to deal with the beds. She could expect no assistance from Giles this morning. He had to clear a way to the boiler house and to the henhouse.

Molly did the beds at top speed and admittedly in the most slovenly manner, smoothing sheets and pulling them up as fast as she could.

She was at work on the baths when the telephone rang.

Molly first cursed at being interrupted, then felt a slight feeling of relief that the telephone at least was still in action, as she ran down to answer it. She arrived in the library a little breathless and lifted the receiver.

"Yes?"

A hearty voice with a slight but pleasant country burr asked, "Is that Monkswell Manor?"

"Monkswell Manor Guest House."

"Can I speak to Commander David, please?"

"I'm afraid he can't come to the telephone just now," said Molly. "This is Mrs Davis. Who is speaking, please?"

"Superintendent Hogben, Berkshire Police."

Molly gave a slight gasp. She said, "Oh, yes - er - yes?"

"Mrs Davis, rather an urgent matter has arisen. I don't wish to say very much over the telephone, but I have sent Detective Sergeant Trotter out to you, and he should be there any minute now."

"But he won't get here. We're snowed up - completely snowed up. The roads are impassable."

There was no break in the confidence of the voice at the other end.

"Trotter will get to you, all right," it said. "And please impress upon your husband, Mrs Davis, to listen very carefully to what Trotter has to tell you, and to follow his instructions implicitly. That's all."

"But, Superintendent Hogben, what -"

But there was a decisive click. Hogben had clearly said all he had to say and rung off. Molly waggled the telephone rest once or twice, then gave up. She turned as the door opened.

"Oh, Giles darling, there you are."

Giles had snow on his hair and a good deal of coal grime on his face. He looked hot.

"What is it, sweetheart? I've filled the coal scuttles and brought in the wood. I'll do the hens next and then have a look at the boiler. Is that right? What's the matter, Molly? You looked scared."

"Giles, it was the police."

"The police?" Giles sounded incredulous.

"Yes, they're sending out an inspector or a sergeant or something."

"But why? What have we done?"

"I don't know. Do you think it could be that two pounds of butter we had from Ireland?"

Giles was frowning. "I did remember to get the wireless license, didn't I?"

"Yes, it's in the desk. Giles, old Mrs Bidlock gave me five of her coupons for that old tweed coat of mine. I suppose that's wrong - but I think it's perfectly fair. I'm a coat less so why shouldn't I have the coupons? Oh, dear, what else is there we've done?"

"I had a near shave with the car the other day. But it was definitely the other fellow's fault. Definitely."

"We must have done something," wailed Molly.

"The trouble is that practically everything one does nowadays is illegal," said Giles gloomily. "That's why one has a permanent feeling of guilt. Actually I expect it's something to do with running this place. Running a guest house is probably chock-full of snags we've never heard of."

"I thought drink was the only thing that mattered. We haven't given anyone anything to drink. Otherwise, why shouldn't we run our own house any way we please?"

"I know. It sounds all right. But as I say, everything's more or less forbidden nowadays."

"Oh, dear," sighed Molly. "I wish we'd never started. We're going to be snowed up for days, and everybody will be cross and they'll eat all our reserves of tins -"

"Cheer up, sweetheart," said Giles. "We're having a bad break at the moment, but it will pan out all right."

He kissed the top of her head rather absentmindedly and, releasing her, said in a different voice, "You know, Molly, come to think of it, it must be something pretty serious to send a police sergeant trekking out here in all this." He waved a hand toward the snow outside. He said, "It must be something really urgent -"

As they stared at each other, the door opened, and Mrs Boyle came in.

"Ah, here you are, Mr Davis," said Mrs Boyle. "Do you know the central heating in the drawing-room is practically stone-cold?"

"I'm sorry, Mrs Boyle. We're rather short of coke and -"

Mrs Boyle cut in ruthlessly. "I am paying seven guineas a week here - seven guineas. And I do not expect to freeze."

Giles flushed. He said shortly, "I'll go and stoke it up." He went out of the room, and Mrs Boyle turned to Molly.

"If you don't mind my saying so, Mrs Davis, that is a very extraordinary young man you have staying here. His manners - and his ties - And does he never brush his hair?"

"He's an extremely brilliant young architect," said Molly.

"I beg your pardon?"

"Christopher Wren is an architect and -"

"My dear young woman," snapped Mrs Boyle, "I have naturally heard of Sir Christopher Wren. Of course he was an architect. He built St. Paul's. You young people seem to think that education came in with the Education Act."

"I meant this Wren. His name is Christopher. His parents called him that because they hoped he'd be an architect. And he is - or nearly - one, so it turned out all right."

"Humph," Mrs Boyle snorted. "It sounds a very fishy story to me. I should make some inquiries about him if I were you. What do you know about him?"

"Just as much as I know about you, Mrs Boyle - which is that both you and he are paying us seven guineas a week. That's really all that 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 -" Molly looked very steadily at Mrs Boyle - "or whether I don't."

Mrs Boyle flushed angrily. "You are young and inexperienced and should welcome advice from someone more knowledgeable than yourself. And what about this queer foreigner? When did he arrive?"

"In the middle of the night."

"Indeed. Most peculiar. Not a very conventional hour."

"To turn away bona fide travellers would be against the law, Mrs Boyle." Molly added sweetly. "You may not be aware of that."

"All I can say is that this Paravicini, or whatever he calls himself, seems to me -" "Beware, beware, dear lady. You talk of the devil and then -"

Mrs Boyle jumped as though it had been indeed the devil who addressed her. Mr Paravicini, who had minced quietly in without either of the two women noticing him, laughed and rubbed his hands together with a kind of elderly satanic glee.

"You startled me," said Mrs Boyle. "I did not hear you come in."

"I come in on tiptoe, so," said Mr Paravicini, "nobody ever hears me come and go. That I find very amusing. Sometimes I overhear things. That, too, amuses me." He added softly, "But I do not forget what I hear."

Mrs Boyle said rather feebly, "Indeed? I must get my knitting - I left it in the drawing-room."

She went out hurriedly. Molly stood looking at Mr Paravicini with a puzzled expression. He approached her with a kind of hop and skip.

"My charming hostess looks upset." Before she could prevent it, he picked up her hand and kissed it. "What is it, dear lady?"

Molly drew back a step. She was not sure that she liked Mr Paravicini much. He was leering at her like an elderly satyr.

"Everything is rather difficult this morning," she said lightly. "Because of the snow."

"Yes." Mr Paravicini turned his head round to look out of the window. "Snow makes everything very difficult, does it not? Or else it makes things very easy."

"I don't know what you mean."

"No," he said thoughtfully. "There is quite a lot that you do not know. I think, for one thing, that you do not know

very much about running a guest house."

Molly's chin went up belligerently. "I daresay we don't. But we mean to make a go of it."

"Bravo, bravo."

"After all," Molly's voice betrayed slight anxiety, "I'm not such a very bad cook -"

"You are, without doubt, an enchanting cook," said Mr Paravicini.

What a nuisance foreigners were, thought Molly.

Perhaps Mr Paravicini read her thoughts. At all events his manner changed. He spoke quietly and quite seriously.

"May I give you a little word of warning, Mrs Davis? You and your husband must not be too trusting, you know. Have you references with these guests of yours?"

"Is that usual?" Molly looked troubled. "I thought people just -just came."

"It is advisable always to know a little about the people who sleep under your roof." He leaned forward and tapped her on the shoulder in a minatory kind of way. "Take myself, for example. I turn up in the middle of the night. My car, I say, is overturned in a snowdrift. What do you know of me? Nothing at all. Perhaps you know nothing, either, of your other guests."

"Mrs Boyle -" began Molly, but stopped as that lady herself re-entered the room, knitting in hand.

"The drawing-room is too cold. I shall sit in here." She marched toward the fireplace. Mr Paravicini pirouetted swiftly ahead of her. "Allow me to poke the fire for you."

Molly was struck, as she had been the night before, by the youthful jauntiness of his step. She noticed that he always seemed careful to keep his back to the light, and now, as he knelt, poking the fire, she thought she saw the reason for it. Mr Paravicini's face was cleverly but decidedly "made up."

So the old idiot tried to make himself look younger than he was, did he? Well, he didn't succeed. He looked all his age and more. Only the youthful walk was incongruous.

Perhaps that, too, had been carefully counterfeited.

She was brought back from speculation to the disagreeable realities by the brisk entrance of Major Metcalf.

"Mrs Davis. I'm afraid the pipes of the - er -" he lowered his voice modestly, "downstairs cloakroom are frozen."

"Oh, dear," groaned Molly. "What an awful day. First the police and then the pipes."

Mr Paravicini dropped the poker into the grate with a clatter. Mrs Boyle stopped knitting.

Molly, looking at Major Metcalf, was puzzled by his sudden stiff immobility and by the indescribable expression on his face. It was an expression she could not place. It was as though all emotion had been drained out of it, leaving something carved out of wood behind.

He said in a short, staccato voice, "Police, did you say?"

She was conscious that behind the stiff immobility of his demeanour, some violent emotion was at work. It might have been fear or alertness or excitement - but there was something. This man, she said to herself, could be dangerous.

He said again, and this time his voice was just mildly curious, "What's that about the police?"

"They rang up," said Molly. "Just now. To say they're sending a sergeant out here." She looked toward the window. "But I shouldn't think he'll ever get here," she said hopefully.

"Why are they sending the police here?" He took a step nearer to her, but before she could reply the door opened, and Giles came in.

"This ruddy coke's more than half stones," he said angrily. Then he added sharply, "Is anything the matter?"

Major Metcalf turned to him. "I hear the police are coming out here," he said. "Why?"

"Oh, that's all right," said Giles. "No one can ever get through in this. Why, the drifts are five feet deep. The road's all banked up. Nobody will get here today."

And at that moment there came distinctly three loud taps on the window.

It startled them all. For a moment or two they did not locate the sound. It came with the emphasis and menace of a ghostly warning. And then, with a cry, Molly pointed to the French window. A man was standing there tapping on the pane, and the mystery of his arrival was explained by the fact that he wore skis.

With an exclamation, Giles crossed the room, fumbled with the catch, and threw open the French window.

"Thank you, sir," said the new arrival. He had a slightly common, cheerful voice and a well-bronzed face.

"Detective Sergeant Trotter," he announced himself.

Mrs Boyle peered at him over her knitting with disfavour.

"You can't be a sergeant," she said disapprovingly. "You're too young."

The young man, who was indeed very young, looked affronted at this criticism and said in a slightly annoyed tone, "I'm not quite as young as I look, madam."

His eye roved over the group and picked out Giles.

"Are you Mr Davis? Can I get these skis off and stow them somewhere?"

"Of course, come with me."

Mrs Boyle said acidly as the door to the hall closed behind them, "I suppose that's what we pay our police force for, nowadays, to go round enjoying themselves at winter sports."

Paravicini had come close to Molly. There was quite a hiss in his voice as he said in a quick, low voice, "Why did you send for the police, Mrs Davis?"

She recoiled a little before the steady malignity of his glance. This was a new Mr Paravicini. For a moment she felt afraid. She said helplessly, "But I didn't. I didn't."

And then Christopher Wren came excitedly through the door, saying in a high penetrating whisper, "Who's that man in the hall? Where did he come from? So terribly hearty and all over snow."

Mrs Boyle's voice boomed out over the click of her knitting-needles. "You may believe it or not, but that man is a policeman. A policeman - skiing!"

The final disruption of the lower classes had come, so her manner seemed to say.

Major Metcalf murmured to Molly, "Excuse me, Mrs Davis, but may I use your telephone?"

"Of course, Major Metcalf."

He went over to the instrument, just as Christopher Wren said shrilly, "He's very handsome, don't you think so? I always think policemen are terribly attractive."

"Hullo, hullo -" Major Metcalf was rattling the telephone irritably. He turned to Molly. "Mrs Davis, this telephone is dead, quite dead." "It was all right just now. I -"

She was interrupted. Christopher Wren was laughing, a high, shrill, almost hysterical laugh. "So we're quite cut off now. Quite cut off. That's funny, isn't it?"

"I don't see anything to laugh at," said Major Metcalf stiffly. "No, indeed," said Mrs Boyle.

Christopher was still in fits of laughter. "It's a private joke of my own," he said. "Hsh," he put his finger to his lips, "the sleuth is coming."

Giles came in with Sergeant Trotter. The latter had got rid of his skis and brushed off the snow and was holding in his hand a large notebook and pencil. He brought an atmosphere of unhurried judicial procedure with him.

"Molly," said Giles, "Sergeant Trotter wants a word with us alone." Molly followed them both out of the room. "We'll go in the study," Giles said.

They went into the small room at the back of the hall which was dignified by that name. Sergeant Trotter closed the door carefully behind him.

"What have we done, Sergeant?" Molly demanded plaintively.

"Done?" Sergeant Trotter stared at her. Then he smiled broadly. "Oh," he said. "It's nothing of that kind, madam. I'm sorry if there's been a misapprehension of any kind. No, Mrs Davis, it's something quite different. It's more a matter of police protection, if you understand me."

Not understanding him in the least, they both looked at him inquiringly.

Sergeant Trotter went on fluently, "It relates to the death of Mrs Lyon, Mrs Maureen Lyon, who was murdered in London two days ago. You may have read about the case."

"Yes," said Molly.

"The first thing I want to know is if you were acquainted with this Mrs Lyon?"

"Never heard of her," said Giles, and Molly murmured concurrence.

"Well, that's rather what we expected. But as a matter of fact Lyon wasn't the murdered woman's real name. She had a police record, and her fingerprints were on file, so we were able to identify her without any difficulty. Her real name was Gregg; Maureen Gregg. Her late husband, John Gregg, was a farmer who resided at Longridge Farm not very far from here. You may have heard of the Longridge Farm case."

The room was very still. Only one sound broke the stillness, a soft, unexpected plop as snow slithered off the roof and fell to the ground outside. It was a secret, almost sinister sound.

Trotter went on. "Three evacuee children were billeted on the Greggs at Longridge Farm in 1940. One of those children subsequently died as the result of criminal neglect and ill-treatment. The case made quite a sensation, and the Greggs were both sentenced to terms of imprisonment. Gregg escaped on his way to prison, he stole a car and had a crash while trying to evade the police. He was killed outright. Mrs Gregg served her sentence and was released two months ago."

"And now she's been murdered," said Giles. "Who do they think did it?"

But Sergeant Trotter was not to be hurried. "You remember the case, sir?" he asked.

Giles shook his head. "In 1940 I was a midshipman serving in the Mediterranean."

"I do remember hearing about it, I think," said Molly rather breathlessly. "But why do you come to us? What have we to do with it?"

"It's a question of your being in danger, Mrs Davis!" "Danger?" Giles spoke incredulously.

"It's like this, sir. A notebook was picked up near the scene of the crime. In it were written two addresses. The first was Seventy-Four Culver Street."

"Where the woman was murdered?" Molly put in.

"Yes" Mrs Davis. The other address was Monkswell Manor."

"What?" Molly's tone was incredulous. "But how extraordinary."

"Yes. That's why Superintendent Hogben thought it imperative to find out if you knew of any connection between you, or between this house, and the Longridge Farm case."

"There's nothing - absolutely nothing," said Giles. "It must be some coincidence."

Sergeant Trotter said gently, "Superintendent Hogben doesn't think it is a coincidence. He'd have come himself if it had been at all possible. Under the weather conditions, and as I'm an expert skier, he sent me with instructions to get full particulars of everyone in this house, to report back to him by phone, and to take all measures I thought expedient for the safety of the household."

Giles said sharply. "Safety? Good Lord, man, you don't think somebody is going to be killed here?"

Trotter said apologetically, "I didn't want to upset the lady, but yes, that is just what Superintendent Hogben does think."

"But what earthly reason could there be -"

Giles broke off, and Trotter said, "That's just what I'm here to find out."

"But the whole thing's crazy."

"Yes, sir, but it's because it's crazy that it's dangerous."

Molly said, "There's something more you haven't told us yet, isn't there, Sergeant?"

"Yes, madam. At the top of the page in the notebook was written, 'Three Blind Mice.' Pinned to the dead woman's body was a paper with 'This is the first' written on it. And below it a drawing of three mice and a bar of music. The music was the tune of the nursery rhyme 'Three Blind Mice.'"

Molly sang softly:

"Three Blind Mice,

See how they run.

They all ran after the farmer's wife!

She -"

She broke off. "Oh, it's horrible - horrible. There were three children, weren't there?" "Yes, Mrs Davis. A boy of fifteen, a girl of fourteen, and the boy of twelve who died." "What happened to the others?"

"The girl was, I believe, adopted by someone. We haven't been able to trace her. The boy would be just on twenty-three now. We've lost track of him. He was said to have always been a bit - queer. He joined up in the army at eighteen. Later he deserted. Since then he's disappeared. The army psychiatrist says definitely that he's not normal."

"You think that it was he who killed Mrs Lyon?" Giles asked. "And that he's a homicidal maniac and may turn up here for some unknown reason?"

"We think that there must be a connection between someone here and the Longridge Farm business. Once we can establish what that connection is, we will be forearmed. Now you state, sir, that you yourself have no connection with that case. The same goes for you, Mrs Davis?"

"I - oh, yes -yes."

"Perhaps you will tell me exactly who else there is in the house?"

They gave him the names. Mrs Boyle. Major Metcalf. Mr Christopher Wren. Mr Paravicini.

He wrote them down in his notebook.

"Servants?"

"We haven't any servants," said Molly. "And that reminds me, I must go and put the potatoes on."

She left the study abruptly.

Trotter turned to Giles. "What do you know about these people, sir?"

"I - We -" Giles paused. Then he said quietly, "Really, we don't know anything about them, Sergeant Trotter. Mrs Boyle wrote from a Bournemouth hotel. Major Metcalf from Leamington. Mr Wren from a private hotel in South Kensington. Mr Paravicini just turned up out of the blue - or rather out of the white - his car overturned in a snowdrift near here. Still, I suppose they'll have identity cards, ration books, that sort of thing?"

"I shall go into all that, of course."

"In a way it's lucky that the weather is so awful," said Giles. "The murderer can't very well turn up in this, can he?"

"Perhaps he doesn't need to, Mr Davis."

"What do you mean?"

Sergeant Trotter hesitated for a moment and then he said, "You've got to consider, sir, that he may be here already."

Giles stared at him. "What do you mean?"

"Mrs Gregg was killed two days ago. All your visitors here have arrived since then, Mr Davis."

"Yes, but they'd booked beforehand - some time beforehand - except for Paravicini." Sergeant Trotter sighed. His voice sounded tired. "These crimes were planned in advance."

"Crimes? But only one crime has happened yet. Why are you sure that there will be another?"

"That it will happen - no. I hope to prevent that. That it will be attempted, yes."

"But then - if you're right," Giles spoke excitedly, "there's only one person it could be. There's only one person who's the right age. Christopher Wren!"

Sergeant Trotter had joined Molly in the kitchen.

"I'd be glad, Mrs Davis, if you would come with me to the library. I want to make a general statement to everyone. Mr Davis has kindly gone to prepare the way -"

"All right - just let me finish these potatoes. Sometimes I wish Sir Walter Raleigh had never discovered the beastly things."

Sergeant Trotter preserved a disapproving silence. Molly said apologetically, "I can't really believe it, you see - It's so fantastic -"

"It isn't fantastic, Mrs Davis - It's just plain facts."

"You have a description of the man?" Molly asked curiously.

"Medium height, slight build, wore a dark overcoat and a light hat, spoke in a whisper, his face was hidden by a muffler. You see - that might be anybody." He paused and added, "There are three dark overcoats and light hats hanging up in your hall here, Mrs Davis."

"I don't think any of these people came from London."

"Didn't they, Mrs Davis?" With a swift movement Sergeant Trotter moved to the dresser and picked up a newspaper.

"The Evening Standard of February 19th. Two days ago. Someone brought that paper here, Mrs Davis."

"But how extraordinary." Molly stared, some faint chord of memory stirred. "Where can that paper have come from?"

"You mustn't take people always at their face value, Mrs Davis. You don't really know anything about these people

you have admitted to your house." He added, "I take it you and Mr Davis are new to the guest-house business?"

"Yes, we are," Molly admitted. She felt suddenly young, foolish, and childish.

"You haven't been married long, perhaps, either?"

"Just a year." She blushed slightly. "It was all rather sudden."

"Love at first sight," said Sergeant Trotter sympathetically.

Molly felt quite unable to snub him. "Yes," she said, and added in a burst of confidence, "we'd only known each other a fortnight."

Her thoughts went back over those fourteen days of whirlwind courtship. There hadn't been any doubts -they had both known. In a worrying, nerve-racked world, they had found the miracle of each other. A little smile came to her lips.

She came back to the present to find Sergeant Trotter eying her indulgently. "Your husband doesn't come from these parts, does he?" "No," said Molly vaguely. "He comes from Lincolnshire."

She knew very little of Giles's childhood and upbringing. His parents were dead, and he always avoided talking about his early days. He had had, she fancied, an unhappy childhood.

"You're both very young, if I may say so, to run a place of this kind," said Sergeant Trotter.

"Oh, I don't know. I'm twenty-two and -"

She broke off as the door opened and Giles came in.

"Everything's all set. I've given them a rough outline," he said. "I hope that's all right, Sergeant?"

"Saves time," said Trotter. "Are you ready, Mrs Davis?"

Four voices spoke at once as Sergeant Trotter entered the library.

Highest and shrillest was that of Christopher Wren declaring that this was too, too thrilling and he wasn't going to sleep a wink tonight, and please, please could we have all the gory details?

A kind of double-bass accompaniment came from Mrs Boyle. "Absolute outrage - sheer incompetence - police have no business to let murderers go roaming about the countryside."

Mr Paravicini was eloquent chiefly with his hands. His gesticulations were more eloquent than his words, which were drowned by Mrs Boyle's double bass. Major Metcalf could be heard in an occasional short staccato bark. He was asking for facts.

Trotter waited a moment or two, then he held up an authoritative hand and, rather surprisingly, there was silence.

"Thank you," he said. "Now, Mr Davis has given you an outline of why I'm here. I want to know one thing, and one thing only, and I want to know it quick. Which of you has some connection with the Longridge Farm case?"

The silence was unbroken. Four blank faces looked at Sergeant Trotter. The emotions of a few moments back - excitement, indignation, hysteria, inquiry, were wiped away as a sponge wipes out the chalk marks on a slate.

Sergeant Trotter spoke again, more urgently. "Please understand me. One of you, we have reason to believe, is in danger - deadly danger. I have got to know which one of you it is!"

And still no one spoke or moved.

Something like anger came into Trotter's voice. "Very well - I'll ask you one by one. Mr Paravicini?"

A very faint smile flickered across Mr Paravicini's face. He raised his hands in a protesting foreign gesture.

"But I am a stranger in these parts, Inspector. I know nothing, but nothing, of these local affairs of bygone years."

Trotter wasted no time. He snapped out, "Mrs Boyle?"

"Really I don't see why - I mean - why should I have anything to do with such a distressing business?"

"Mr Wren?"

Christopher said shrilly, "I was a mere child at the time. I don't remember even hearing about it."

"Major Metcalf?"

The Major said abruptly, "Read about it in the papers. I was stationed at Edinburgh at the time."

"That's all you have to say - any of you?" Silence again.

Trotter gave an exasperated sigh. "If one of you gets murdered," he said, "you'll only have yourself to blame." He turned abruptly and went out of the room.

"My dears," said Christopher. "How melodramatic!" He added, "He's very handsome, isn't he? I do admire the police. So stern and hard-boiled. Quite a thrill, this whole business. 'Three Blind Mice.' How does the tune go?"

He whistled the air softly, and Molly cried out involuntarily, "Don't!"

He whirled round on her and laughed. "But, darling," he said, "it's my signature tune. I've never been taken for a murderer before and I'm getting a tremendous kick out of it!"

"Melodramatic rubbish," said Mrs Boyle. "I don't believe a word of it."

Christopher's light eyes danced with an impish mischief. "But just wait, Mrs Boyle," he lowered his voice, "till I creep up behind you and you feel my hands round your throat."

Molly flinched.

Giles said angrily, "You're upsetting my wife, Wren. It's a damned poor joke, anyway."

"It's no joking matter," said Metcalf.

"Oh, but it is," said Christopher. "That's just what it is - a madman's joke. That's what makes it so deliciously macabre."

He looked round at them and laughed again. "If you could just see your faces," he said. Then he went swiftly out of the room.

Mrs Boyle recovered first. "A singularly ill-mannered and neurotic young man," she said. "Probably a conscientious objector."

"He tells me he was buried during an air raid for forty-eight hours before being dug out," said Major Metcalf. "That accounts for a good deal, I daresay."

"People have so many excuses for giving way to nerves," said Mrs Boyle acidly. "I'm sure I went through as much as anybody in the war, and my nerves are all right."

"Perhaps that's just as well for you, Mrs Boyle," said Metcalf.

"What do you mean?"

Major Metcalf said quietly, "I think you were actually the billeting officer for this district in 1940, Mrs Boyle."

He looked at Molly who gave a grave nod. "That is so, isn't it?"

An angry flush appeared on Mrs Boyle's face. "What of it?" she demanded.

Metcalf said gravely, "You were responsible for sending three children to Longridge Farm."

"Really, Major Metcalf, I don't see how I can be held responsible for what happened. The Farm people seemed very

nice and were most anxious to have the children. I don't see that I was to blame in any way - or that I can be held responsible -" Her voice trailed off.

Giles said sharply, "Why didn't you tell Sergeant Trotter this?"

"No business of the police," snapped Mrs Boyle. "I can look after myself."

Major Metcalf said quietly, "You'd better watch out."

Then he, too, left the room.

Molly murmured, "Of course, you were the billeting officer. I remember."

"Molly, did you know?" Giles stared at her.

"You had the big house on the common, didn't you?"

"Requisitioned," said Mrs Boyle. "And completely ruined," she added bitterly. "Devastated. Iniquitous."

Then, very softly, Mr Paravicini began to laugh. He threw his head back and laughed without restraint.

"You must forgive me," he gasped. "But, indeed. I find all this most amusing. I enjoy myself - yes, I enjoy myself greatly."

Sergeant Trotter re-entered the room at that moment. He threw a glance of disapproval at Mr Paravicini. "I'm glad," he said acidly, "that everyone finds this so funny."

"I apologize, my dear Inspector. I do apologize. I am spoiling the effect of your solemn warning."

Sergeant Trotter shrugged his shoulders. "I've done my best to make the position clear," he said. "And I'm not an inspector. I'm only a sergeant. I'd like to use the telephone, please, Mrs Davis."

"I abase myself," said Mr Paravicini. "I creep away."

Far from creeping, he left the room with that jaunty and youthful step that Molly had noticed before.

"He's an odd fish," said Giles.

"Criminal type"," said Trotter. "Wouldn't trust him a yard."

"Oh," said Molly. "You think he - but he's far too old - Or is he old at all? He uses make up -quite a lot of it. And his walk is young. Perhaps, he's made up to look old. Sergeant Trotter, do you think -"

Sergeant Trotter snubbed her severely. "We shan't get anywhere with unprofitable speculation, Mrs Davis," he said. "I must report to Superintendent Hogben."

He crossed to the telephone.

"But you can't," said Molly. "The telephone's dead."

"What?" Trotter swung round.

The sharp alarm in his voice impressed them all. "Dead? Since when?"

"Major Metcalf tried it just before you came."

"But it was all right before that. You got Superintendent Hogben's message?"

"Yes. I suppose - since then - the line's down - with the snow."

But Trotter's face remained grave. "I wonder," he said. "It may have been - cut."

Molly stared. "You think so?"

"I'm going to make sure."

He hurried out of the room. Giles hesitated, then went after him.

Molly exclaimed, "Good heavens! Nearly lunch time, I must get on - or we'll have nothing to eat."

As she rushed from the room, Mrs Boyle muttered, "Incompetent chit! What a place. I shan't pay seven guineas for this kind of thing."

Sergeant Trotter bent down, following the wires. He asked Giles, "Is there an extension?" "Yes, in our bedroom upstairs. Shall I go up and see there?"

"If you please."

Trotter opened the window and leaned out, brushing snow from the sill. Giles hurried up the stairs.

Mr Paravicini was in the big drawing-room. He went across to the grand piano and opened it. Sitting on the music stool, he picked out a tune softly with one finger.

Three Blind Mice, See how they run...

Christopher Wren was in his bedroom. He moved about it, whistling briskly. Suddenly the whistle wavered and died. He sat down on the edge of the bed He buried his face in his hands and began to sob. He murmured childishly, "I can't go on."

Then his mood changed. He stood up, squared his shoulders. "I've got to go on," he said. "I've got to go through with it."

Giles stood by the telephone in his and Molly's room. He bent down toward the skirting. One of Molly's gloves lay there. He picked it up. A pink bus ticket dropped out of it. Giles stood looking down at it as it fluttered to the ground. Watching it, his face changed. It might have been a different man who walked slowly, as though in a dream, to the door, opened it, and stood a moment peering along the corridor toward the head of the stairs.

Molly finished the potatoes, threw them into the pot, and set the pot on the fire. She glanced into the oven. Everything was all set, going according to plan.

On the kitchen table was the two-day-old copy of the Evening Standard. She frowned as she looked at it. If she could only just remember -

Suddenly her hands went to her eyes. "Oh, no," said Molly. "Oh, no!"

Slowly she took her hands away. She looked round the kitchen like someone looking at a strange place. So warm and comfortable and spacious, with its faint savory smell of cooking.

"Oh, no," she said again under her breath.

She moved slowly, like a sleepwalker, toward the door into the hall. She opened it. The house was silent except for someone whistling.

That tune -

Molly shivered and retreated. She waited a minute or two, glancing once more round the familiar kitchen. Yes, everything was in order and progressing. She went once more toward the kitchen door.

Major Metcalf came quietly down the back stairs. He waited a moment or two in the hall, then he opened the big cupboard under the stairs and peered in. Everything seemed quiet. Nobody about. As good a time as any to do what he had set out to do -

Mrs Boyle, in the library, turned the knobs of the radio with some irritation.

Her first attempt had brought her into the middle of a talk on the origin and significance of nursery rhymes. The last thing she wanted to hear. Twirling impatiently, she was informed by a cultured voice: "The psychology of fear must be thoroughly understood. Say you are alone in a room. A door opens softly behind you -"

A door did open.

Mrs Boyle, with a violent start, turned sharply.

"Oh, it's you," she said with relief. "Idiotic programs they have on this thing. I can't find anything worth listening to!"

"I shouldn't bother to listen, Mrs Boyle."

Mrs Boyle snorted. "What else is there for me to do?" she demanded. "Shut up in a house with a possible murderer - not that I believe that melodramatic story for a moment -"

"Don't you, Mrs Boyle?" "Why - what do you mean -"

The belt of the raincoat was slipped round her neck so quickly that she hardly realized its significance. The knob of the radio amplifier was turned higher. The lecturer on the psychology of fear shouted his learned remarks into the room and drowned what incidental noises there were attendant on Mrs Boyle's demise.

But there wasn't much noise. The killer was too expert for that.

They were all huddled in the kitchen. On the gas cooker the potatoes bubbled merrily. The savory smell from the oven of steak and kidney pie was stronger than ever.

Four shaken people stared at each other, the fifth, Molly, white and shivering, sipped at the glass of whisky that the sixth, Sergeant Trotter, had forced her to drink.

Sergeant Trotter himself, his face set and angry, looked round at the assembled people. Just five minutes had elapsed since Molly's terrified screams had brought him and the others racing to the library.

"She'd only just been killed when you got to her, Mrs Davis," he said. "Are you sure you didn't see or hear anybody as you came across the hall?"

"Whistling," said Molly faintly. "But that was earlier. I think - I'm not sure - I think I heard a door shut - softly, somewhere - just as I - as I - went into the library."

"Which door?"

"I don't know."

"Think, Mrs Davis - try and think - upstairs - downstairs - right, left?"

"I don't know, I tell you," cried Molly. "I'm not even sure I heard anything."

"Can't you stop bullying her?" said Giles angrily. "Can't you see she's all in?"

"I'm investigating a murder, Mr Davis - I beg your pardon - Commander Davis."

"I don't use my war rank, Sergeant."

"Quite so, sir." Trotter paused, as though he had made some subtle point. "As I say, I'm investigating a murder. Up to now nobody has taken this thing seriously. Mrs Boyle didn't. She held out on me with information. You all held out on me. Well, Mrs Boyle is dead. Unless we get to the bottom of this - and quickly, mind, there may be another death."

"Another? Nonsense. Why?"

"Because," said Sergeant Trotter gravely, "there were three little blind mice."

Giles said incredulously, "A death for each of them? But there would have to be a connection - I mean another connection with the case."

"Yes, there would have to be that." "But why another death here?"

"Because there were only two addresses in the notebook. There was only one possible victim at Seventy-Four Culver Street. She's dead. But at Monkswell Manor there is a wider field."

"Nonsense, Trotter. It would be a most unlikely coincidence that there should be two people brought here by chance, both of them with a share in the Longridge Farm case."

"Given certain circumstances, it wouldn't be so much of a coincidence. Think it out, Mr Davis." He turned toward the others. "I've had your accounts of where you all were when Mrs Boyle was killed. I'll check them over. You were in your room, Mr Wren, when you heard Mrs Davis scream?"

"Yes, Sergeant."

"Mr Davis, you were upstairs in your bedroom examining the telephone extension there?"

"Yes," said Giles.

"Mr Paravicini was in the drawing-room playing tunes on the piano. Nobody heard you, by the way, Mr Paravicini?"

"I was playing very, very softly, Sergeant, just with one finger." "What tune was it?"

"'Three Blind Mice,' Sergeant." He smiled. "The same tune that Mr Wren was whistling upstairs. The tune that's running through everybody's head."

"It's a horrid tune," said Molly.

"How about the telephone wire?" asked Metcalf. "Was it deliberately cut?"

"Yes, Major Metcalf. A section had been cut out just outside the dining-room window - I had just located the break when Mrs Davis screamed."

"But it's crazy. How can he hope to get away with it?" demanded Christopher shrilly. The sergeant measured him carefully with his eye.

"Perhaps he doesn't very much care about that," he said. "Or again, he may be quite sure he's too clever for us. Murderers get like that." He added, "We take a psychology course, you know, in our training. A schizophrenic's mentality is very interesting."

"Shall we cut out the long words?" said Giles.

"Certainly, Mr Davis. Two six-letter words are all that concern us at the moment. One's 'murder' and the other's 'danger.' That's what we've got to concentrate upon. Now, Major Metcalf, let me be quite clear about your movements. You say you were in the cellar - Why?"

"Looking around," said the major. "I looked in that cupboard place under the stairs and then I noticed a door there and I opened it and saw a flight of steps, so I went down there. Nice cellar you've got," he said to Giles. "Crypt of an old monastery, I should say."

"We're not engaged in antiquarian research, Major Metcalf. We're investigating a murder. Will you listen a moment, Mrs Davis? I'll leave the kitchen door open." He went out; a door shut with a faint creak. "Is that what you heard, Mrs Davis?" he asked as he reappeared in the open doorway.

"I - it does sound like it."

"That was the cupboard under the stairs. It could be, you know, that after killing Mrs Boyle, the murderer, retreating across the hall, heard you coming out of the kitchen, and slipped into the cupboard, pulling the door to after him."

"Then his fingerprints will be on the inside of the cupboard," cried Christopher. "Mine are there already," said Major Metcalf.

"Quite so," said Sergeant Trotter. "But we've a satisfactory explanation for those, haven't we?" he added smoothly.

"Look here, Sergeant," said Giles, "admittedly you're in charge of this affair. But this is my house, and in a certain degree I feel responsible for the people staying in it. Oughtn't we to take precautionary measures?"

"Such as, Mr Davis?"

"Well, to be frank, putting under restraint the person who seems pretty clearly indicated as the chief suspect."

He looked straight at Christopher Wren.

Christopher Wren sprang forward, his voice rose, shrill and hysterical. "It's not true! It's not true! You're all against me. Everyone's always against me. You're going to frame me for this. It's persecution - persecution -"

"Steady on, lad," said Major Metcalf.

"It's all right, Chris." Molly came forward. She put her hand on his arm. "Nobody's against you. Tell him it's all right," she said to Sergeant Trotter.

"We don't frame people," said Sergeant Trotter. "Tell him you're not going to arrest him."

"I'm not going to arrest anyone. To do that, I need evidence. There's no evidence - at present."

Giles cried out, "I think you're crazy, Molly. And you, too, Sergeant. There's only one person who fits the bill, and-"

"Wait, Giles, wait -" Molly broke in. "Oh, do be quiet. Sergeant Trotter, can I - can I speak to you a minute?"

"I'm staying," said Giles. "No, Giles, you, too, please."

Giles's face grew as dark as thunder. He said, "I don't know what's come over you, Molly." He followed the others out of the room, banging the door behind him. "Yes, Mrs Davis, what is it?"

"Sergeant Trotter, when you told us about the Longridge Farm case, you seemed to think that it must be the eldest boy who is - responsible for all this. But you don't know that?"

"That's perfectly true, Mrs Davis. But the probabilities lie that way - mental instability, desertion from the army, psychiatrist's report."

"Oh, I know, and therefore it all seems to point to Christopher. But I don't believe it is Christopher. There must be other - possibilities. Hadn't those three children any relations -parents, for instance?"

"Yes. The mother was dead. But the father was serving abroad." "Well, what about him? Where is he now?"

"We've no information. He obtained his demobilization papers last year." "And if the son was mentally unstable, the father may have been, too." "That is so."

"So the murderer may be middle-aged or old. Major Metcalf, remember, was frightfully upset when I told him the police had rung up. He really was."

Sergeant Trotter said quietly, "Please believe me, Mrs Davis, I've had all the possibilities in mind since the beginning. The boy, Jim - the father - even the sister. It could have been a woman, you know. I haven't overlooked anything. I may be pretty sure in my own mind -but I don't know - yet. It's very hard really to know about anything or anyone - especially in these days. You'd be surprised what we see in the police force. With marriages, especially. Hasty marriages - war marriages. There's no background, you see. No families or relations to meet. People accept each other's word. Fellow says he's a fighter pilot or an army major - the girl believes him implicitly. Sometimes she doesn't find out for a year or two that he's an absconding bank clerk with a wife and family, or an army-deserter."

He paused and went on.

"I know quite well what's in your mind, Mrs Davis. There's just one thing I'd like to say to you. The murderer's enjoying himself. That's the one thing I'm quite sure of."

He went toward the door.

Molly stood very straight and still, a red flush burning in her cheeks. After standing rigid for a moment or two, she moved slowly toward the stove, knelt down, and opened the oven door. A savory, familiar smell came toward her. Her heart lightened. It was as though suddenly she had been wafted back into the dear, familiar world of everyday things. Cooking, housework, homemaking, ordinary prosaic living.

So, from time immemorial women had cooked food for their men. The world of danger -of madness, receded.

Woman, in her kitchen, was safe - eternally safe.

The kitchen door opened. She turned her head as Christopher Wren entered. He was a little breathless.

"My dear," he said. "Such ructions! Somebody's stolen the sergeant's skis!" "The sergeant's skis? But why should anyone want to do that?"

"I really can't imagine. I mean, if the sergeant decided to go away and leave us, I should imagine that the murderer would be only too pleased. I mean, it really doesn't make sense, does it?"

"Giles put them in the cupboard under the stairs."

"Well, they're not there now. Intriguing, isn't it?" He laughed gleefully. "The sergeant's awfully angry about it. Snapping like a turtle. He's been pitching into poor Major Metcalf. The old boy sticks to it that he didn't notice whether they were there or not when he looked into the cupboard just before Mrs Boyle was murdered. Trotter says he must have noticed. If you ask me," Christopher lowered his voice and leaned forward, "this business is beginning to get Trotter down."

"It's getting us all down," said Molly.

"Not me. I find it most stimulating. It's all so delightfully unreal."

Molly said sharply, "You wouldn't say that if - if you'd been the one to find her. Mrs Boyle, I mean. I keep thinking of it - I can't forget it. Her face - all swollen and purple -"

She shivered. Christopher came across to her. He put a hand on her shoulder. "I know. I'm an idiot. I'm sorry. I didn't think."

A dry sob rose in Molly's throat. "It seemed all right just now - cooking - the kitchen," she spoke confusedly, incoherently. "And then suddenly - it was all back again - like a nightmare."

There was a curious expression on Christopher Wren's face as he stood there looking down on her bent head.

"I see," he said. "I see." He moved away. "Well, I'd better clear out and - not interrupt you."

Molly cried, "Don't go!" just as his hand was on the door handle.

He turned round, looking at her questioningly. Then he came slowly back.

"Do you really mean that?"

"Mean what?"

"You definitely don't want me to - go?"

"No, I tell you. I don't want to be alone. I'm afraid to be alone."

Christopher sat down by the table. Molly bent to the oven, lifted the pie to a higher shelf, shut the oven door, and came and joined him.

"That's very interesting," said Christopher in a level voice.

"What is?"

"That you're not afraid to be - alone with me. You're not, are you?"

She shook her head. "No, I'm not."

"Why aren't you afraid, Molly?"

"I don't know - I'm not."

"And yet I'm the only person who - fits the bill. One murderer as per schedule."

"No," said Molly. "There are - other possibilities, I've been talking to Sergeant Trotter about them."

"Did he agree with you?"

"He didn't disagree," said Molly slowly.

Certain words sounded over and over again in her head. Especially that last phrase: 'I know exactly what's in your mind, Mrs Davis.' But did he? Could he possibly know? He had said, too, 'that the murderer was enjoying himself.' Was that true?

She said to Christopher, "You're not exactly enjoying yourself, are you? In spite of what you said just now."

"Good God, no," said Christopher, staring. "What a very odd thing to say."

"Oh, I didn't say it. Sergeant Trotter did. I hate that man! He - he puts things into your head - things that aren't true - that can't possibly be true."

She put her hands to her head, covering her eyes with them. Very gently Christopher took those hands away.

"Look here, Molly/" he said, "what is all this?"

She let him force her gently into a chair by the kitchen table. His manner was no longer hysterical or childish.

"What's the matter, Molly?" he said.

Molly looked at him - a long appraising glance. She asked irrelevantly, "How long have I known you, Christopher? Two days?"

"Just about. You're thinking, aren't you, that though it's such a short time, we seem to know each other rather well."

"Yes - it's odd, isn't it?"

"Oh, I don't know. There's a kind of sympathy between us. Possibly because we've both -been up against it."

It was not a question. It was a statement. Molly let it pass. She said very quietly, and again it was a statement rather than a question, "Your name isn't really Christopher Wren, is it."

"No"

"No."

"Why did you -"

"Choose that? Oh, it seemed rather a pleasant whimsy. They used to jeer at me and call me Christopher Robin at school. Robin - Wren - association of ideas, I suppose."

"What's your real name?"

Christopher said quietly, "I don't think we'll go into that. It wouldn't mean anything to you. I'm not an architect. Actually, I'm a deserter from the army."

Just for a moment swift alarm leaped into Molly's eyes.

Christopher saw it. "Yes," he said. "Just like our unknown murderer. I told you I was the only one the specification fitted."

"Don't be stupid," said Molly. "I told you I didn't believe you were the murderer. Go on -tell me about yourself. What made you desert - nerves?"

"Being afraid, you mean? No, curiously enough, I wasn't afraid - not more than anyone else, that is to say. Actually I got a reputation for being rather cool under fire. No, it was something quite different It was - my mother."

"Your mother?"

"Yes - you see, she was killed - in an air raid. Buried. They - they had to dig her out. I don't know what happened to me when I heard about it - I suppose I went a little mad. I thought, you see, it happened to me. I felt I had to get home quickly and - and dig myself out - I can't explain - it was all confused." He lowered his head to his hands and spoke in a muffled voice. "I wandered about a long time, looking for her - or for myself - I don't know which. And then, when my mind cleared up, I was afraid to go back - or to report - I knew I could never explain. Since then, I've just been - nothing."

He stared at her, his young face hollow with despair.

"You mustn't feel like that," said Molly gently. "You can start again."

"Can one ever do that?"

"Of course - you're quite young."

"Yes, but you see - I've come to the end."

"No," said Molly. "You haven't come to the end, you only think you have. I believe everyone has that feeling once, at least, in their lives - that it's the end, that they can't go on."

"You've had it, haven't you, Molly? You must have - to be able to speak like that."

"Yes."

"What was yours?"

"Mine was just what happened to a lot of people. I was engaged to a young fighter pilot - and he was killed."

"Wasn't there more to it than that?"

"I suppose there was. I'd had a nasty shock when I was younger. I came up against something that was rather cruel and beastly. It predisposed me to think that life was always - horrible. When Jack was killed it just confirmed my belief that the whole of life was cruel and treacherous."

"I know. And then, I suppose," said Christopher, watching her, "Giles came along." "Yes."

He saw the smile, tender, almost shy, that trembled on her mouth. "Giles came - everything felt right and safe and happy - Giles!"

The smile fled from her lips. Her face was suddenly stricken. She shivered as though with cold.

"What's the matter, Molly? What's frightening you? You are frightened, aren't you?"

She nodded.

"And it's something to do with Giles? Something he's said or done?"

"It's not Giles, really. It's that horrible man!"

"What horrible man?" Christopher was surprised. "Paravicini?"

"No, no. Sergeant Trotter."

"Sergeant Trotter?"

"Suggesting things - hinting things - putting horrible thoughts into my mind about Giles - thoughts that I didn't know were there. Oh, I hate him - I hate him."

Christopher's eyebrows rose in slow surprise.

"Giles? Giles! Yes, of course, he and I are much of an age. He seems to me much older than I am - but I suppose he isn't, really. Yes, Giles might fit the bill equally well. But look here, Molly, that's all nonsense. Giles was down here with you the day that woman was killed in London."

Molly did not answer.

Christopher looked at her sharply. "Wasn't he here?"

Molly spoke breathlessly, the words coming out in an incoherent jumble. "He was out all day - in the car - he went over to the other side of the county about some wire netting in a sale there - at least that's what he said - that's what I thought - until - until -"

"Until what?"

Slowly Molly's hand reached out and traced the date of the Evening Standard that covered a portion of the kitchen table.

Christopher looked at it and said, "London edition, two days ago."

"It was in Giles's pocket when he came back. He - he must have been in London."

Christopher stared. He stared at the paper and he stared at Molly. He pursed up his lips and began to whistle, then checked himself abruptly. It wouldn't do to whistle that tune just now.

Choosing his words very carefully, and avoiding her eye, he said, "How much do you actually - know about Giles?"

"Don't," cried Molly. "Don't! That's just what that beast Trotter said - or hinted. That women often didn't know anything about the men that they married - especially in wartime. They - they just took the man's own account of himself."

That's true enough, I suppose."

"Don't you say it, too! I can't bear it. It's just because we're all in such a state, so worked up. We'd - we'd believe any fantastic suggestion - It's not true! I -"

She stopped. The kitchen door had opened.

Giles came in. There was rather a grim look on his face. "Am I interrupting anything?" he asked.

Christopher slipped from the table. "I'm just taking a few cookery lessons," he said.

"Indeed? Well, look here, Wren, tete-a-tetes aren't very healthy things at the present time. You keep out of the kitchen, do you hear?"

"Oh, but surely-"

"You keep away from my wife, Wren. She's not going to be the next victim."

"That," said Christopher, "is just what I'm worrying about."

If there was significance in the words, Giles did not apparently notice them. He merely turned a rather darker shade of brick-red. "I'll do the worrying," he said. "I can look after my own wife. Get the hell out of here."

Molly said in a clear voice, "Please go, Christopher. Yes - really."

Christopher moved slowly toward the door. "I shan't go very far," he said, and the words were addressed to Molly and held a very definite meaning.

"Will you get out of here?"

Christopher gave a high childish giggle. "Aye, aye, Commander," he said.

The door shut behind him. Giles turned on Molly.

"For God's sake, Molly, haven't you got any sense? Shut in here alone with a dangerous homicidal maniac!"

"He isn't the -" she changed her phrase quickly - "he isn't dangerous. Anyway, I'm on my guard. I can - look after myself."

Giles laughed unpleasantly. "So could Mrs Boyle."

"Oh, Giles, don't."

"Sorry, my dear. But I'm het up. That wretched boy. What you see in him I can't imagine."

Molly said slowly, "I'm sorry for him."

"Sorry for a homicidal lunatic?"

Molly gave him a curious glance. "I could be sorry for a homicidal lunatic," she said.

"Calling him Christopher, too. Since when have you been on Christian-name terms?"

"Oh Giles, don't be ridiculous. Everyone always uses Christian names nowadays. You know they do."

"Even after a couple of days? But perhaps it's more than that. Perhaps you knew Mr Christopher Wren, the phony architect, before he came here? Perhaps you suggested to him that he should come here? Perhaps you cooked it all up between you?"

Molly stared at him. "Giles, have you gone out of your mind? What on earth are you suggesting?"

"I'm suggesting that Christopher Wren is an old friend, that you're on rather closer terms with him than you'd like me to know."

"Giles, you must be crazy!"

"I suppose you'll stick to it that you never saw him until he walked in here. Rather odd that he should come and stay in an out-of-the-way place like this, isn't it?"

"Is it any odder than that Major Metcalf and - and Mrs Boyle should?"

"Yes-I think it is. I've always read that these murdering loonies had a peculiar fascination for women. Looks as though it were true. How did you get to know him? How long has this been going on?"

"You're being absolutely absurd, Giles. I never saw Christopher Wren until he arrived here."

"You didn't go up to London to meet him two days ago and fix up to meet here as strangers?"

"You know perfectly well, Giles, I haven't been up to London for weeks."

"Haven't you? That's interesting." He fished a fur-lined glove out of his pocket and held it out.

"That's one of the gloves you were wearing day before yesterday, isn't it? The day I was over at Sailham getting the netting."

"The day you were over at Sailham getting the netting," said Molly, eyeing him steadily. "Yes, I wore those gloves when I went out."

"You went to the village, you said. If you only went to the village, what is this doing inside that glove?"

Accusingly, he held out a pink bus ticket.

There was a moment's silence.

"You went to London," said Giles.

"All right," said Molly. Her chin shot up. "I went to London."

"To meet this chap Christopher Wren."

"No, not to meet Christopher."

"Then why did you go?"

"Just at the moment, Giles," said Molly, "I'm not going to tell you."

"Meaning you'll give yourself time to think up a good story!"

"I think," said Molly, "that I hate you!"

"I don't hate you," said Giles slowly. "But I almost wish I did. I simply feel that - I don't know you any more - I don't know anything about you."

"I feel the same," said Molly. "You - you're just a stranger. A man who lies to me -" "When have I ever lied to you?"

Molly laughed. "Do you think I believed that story of yours about the wire netting? You were in London, too, that day."

"I suppose you saw me there," said Giles. "And you didn't trust me enough -" "Trust you? I'll never trust anyone - ever - again."

Neither of them had noticed the soft opening of the kitchen door. Mr Paravicini gave a little cough.

"So embarrassing," he murmured. "I do hope you young people are not both saying just a little more than you mean. One is so apt to in these lovers' quarrels."

"Lovers' quarrels," said Giles derisively. "That's good."

"Quite so, quite so," said Mr Paravicini. "I know just how you feel. I have been through all this myself when I was a younger man. But what I came to say was that the inspector person is simply insisting that we should all come into the drawing-room. It appears that he has an idea." Mr Paravicini sniggered gently. "The police have a clue - yes, one hears that frequently. But an idea? I very much doubt it. A zealous and painstaking officer, no doubt, our Sergeant Trotter, but not, I think, over-endowed with brains."

"Go on, Giles," said Molly. "I've got the cooking to see to. Sergeant Trotter can do without me."

"Talking of cooking," said Mr Paravicini, skipping nimbly across the kitchen to Molly's side, "have you ever tried chicken livers served on toast that has been thickly spread with foie gras and a very thin rasher of bacon smeared with French mustard?"

"One doesn't see much foie gras nowadays," said Giles, "Come on, Paravicini."

"Shall I stay and assist you, dear lady?"

"You come along to the drawing-room, Paravicini," said Giles.

Mr Paravicini laughed softly.

"Your husband is afraid for you. Quite natural. He doesn't fancy the idea of leaving you alone with me. It is my sadistic tendencies he fears - not my dishonorable ones. I yield to force." He bowed gracefully and kissed the tips of his fingers.

Molly said uncomfortably, "Oh, Mr Paravicini, I'm sure -"

Mr Paravicini shook his head. He said to Giles, "You're very wise, young man. Take no chances. Can I prove to you - or to the inspector for that matter - that I am not a homicidal maniac? No, I cannot. Negatives are such difficult things to prove."

He hummed cheerfully.

Molly flinched. "Please Mr Paravicini - not that horrible tune."

"'Three Blind Mice' - so it was! The tune has got into my head. Now I come to think of it, it is a gruesome little rhyme. Not a nice little rhyme at all. But children like gruesome things. You may have noticed that? That rhyme is very English - the bucolic, cruel English countryside. 'She cut off their tails with a carving-knife.' Of course a child would love that - I could tell you things about children -"

"Please don't," said Molly faintly, "I think you're cruel, too." Her voice rose hysterically. "You laugh and smile - you're like a cat playing with a mouse - playing -"

She began to laugh.

"Steady, Molly," said Giles. "Come along, we'll all go into the drawing-room together. Trotter will be getting impatient. Never mind the cooking. Murder is more important than food."

"I'm not sure that I agree with you," said Mr Paravicini as he followed them with little skipping steps. "The condemned man ate a hearty breakfast - that's what they always say."

Christopher Wren joined them in the hall and received a scowl from Giles. He looked at Molly with a quick, anxious glance, but Molly, her head held high, walked looking straight ahead of her. They marched almost like a procession to the drawing-room door. Mr Paravicini brought up the rear with his little skipping steps.

Sergeant Trotter and Major Metcalf were standing waiting in the drawing-room. The major was looking sulky. Sergeant Trotter was looking flushed and energetic.

"That's right," he said, as they entered. "I wanted you all together. I want to make a certain experiment - and for that I shall require your co-operation."

"Will it take long?" Molly asked. "I'm rather busy in the kitchen. After all, we've got to have a meal sometime."

"Yes," said Trotter. "I appreciate that, Mrs Davis. But, if you'll excuse me, there are more important things than meals! Mrs Boyle, for instance, won't need another meal."

"Really, Sergeant," said Major Metcalf, "that's an extraordinarily tactless way of putting things."

"I'm sorry, Major Metcalf, but I want everyone to cooperate in this." "Have you found your skis, Sergeant Trotter?" asked Molly.

The young man reddened. "No, I have not, Mrs Davis. But I may say I have a very shrewd suspicion who took them. And of why they were taken. I won't say any more at present."

"Please don't," begged Mr Paravicini. "I always think explanations should be kept to the very end - that exciting last chapter, you know."

"This isn't a game, sir."

"Isn't it? Now there I think you're wrong. I think it is a game - to somebody."

"The murderer is enjoying himself," murmured Molly softly.

The others looked at her in astonishment. She flushed.

"I'm only quoting what Sergeant Trotter said to me."

Sergeant Trotter did not look too pleased. "It's all very well, Mr Paravicini, mentioning last chapters and speaking as though this was a mystery thriller," he said. "This is real. This is happening."

"So long," said Christopher Wren, fingering his neck gingerly, "as it doesn't happen to me."

"Now, then," said Major Metcalf. "None of that, young fellow. The sergeant here is going to tell us just what he wants us to do."

Sergeant Trotter cleared his throat. His voice became official.

"I took certain statements from you all a short time ago," he said. "Those statements related to your positions at the time when the murder of Mrs Boyle occurred. Mr Wren and Mr Davis were in their separate bedrooms. Mrs Davis was in the kitchen. Major Metcalf was in the cellar. Mr Paravicini was here in this room -"

He paused and then went on.

"Those are the statements you made. I have no means of checking those statements. They may be true - they may not. To put it quite clearly - four of those statements are true - but one of them is false. Which one?"

He looked from face to face. Nobody spoke.

"Four of you are speaking the truth - one is lying. I have a plan that may help me to discover the liar. And if I discover that one of you lied to me - then I know who the murderer is."

Giles said sharply, "Not necessarily. Someone might have lied -for some other reason." "I rather doubt that, Mr Davis."

"But what's the idea, man? You've just said you've no means of checking these statements?"

"No, but supposing everyone was to go through these movements a second time." "Bah," said Major Metcalf disparagingly. "Reconstruction of the crime. Foreign idea."

"Not a reconstruction of the crime, Major Metcalf. A reconstruction of the movements of apparently innocent persons."

"And what do you expect to learn from that?"

"You will forgive me if I don't make that clear just at the moment."

"You want," asked Molly, "a repeat performance?"

"More or less, Mrs Davis."

There was a silence. It was, somehow, an uneasy silence.

It's a trap, thought Molly. It's a trap - but I don't see how -

You might have thought that there were five guilty people in the room, instead of one guilty and four innocent ones. One and all cast doubtful sideways glances at the assured, smiling young man who proposed this innocent-sounding maneuver.

Christopher burst out shrilly, "But I don't see - I simply can't see - what you can possibly hope to find out - just by making people do the same thing they did before. It seems to me just nonsense!"

"Does it, Mr Wren?"

"Of course," said Giles slowly, "what you say goes, Sergeant. We'll co-operate. Are we all to do exactly what we did before?"

"The same actions will be performed, yes."

A faint ambiguity in the phrase made Major Metcalf look up sharply.

Sergeant Trotter went on.

"Mr Paravicini has told us that he sat at the piano and played a certain tune. Perhaps, Mr Paravicini, you would kindly show us exactly what you did do?"

"But certainly, my dear Sergeant."

Mr Paravicini skipped nimbly across the room to the grand piano and settled himself on the music stool.

"The maestro at the piano will play the signature tune to a murder," he said with a flourish.

He grinned, and with elaborate mannerisms he picked out with one finger the tune of "Three Blind Mice."

He's enjoying himself, thought Molly. He's enjoying himself.

In the big room the soft, muted notes had an almost eerie effect.

"Thank you, Mr Paravicini," said Sergeant Trotter. "That, I take it, is exactly how you played the tune on the - former occasion?"

"Yes, Sergeant, it is. I repeated it three times."

Sergeant Trotter turned to Molly. "Do you play the piano, Mrs Davis?" "Yes, Sergeant Trotter."

"Could you pick out the tune, as Mr Paravicini has done, playing it in exactly the same manner?"

"Certainly I could."

"Then will you go and sit at the piano and be ready to do so when I give the signal?"

Molly looked slightly bewildered. Then she crossed slowly to the piano.

Mr Paravicini rose from the piano stool with a shrill protest. "But, Sergeant, I understood that we were each to repeat our former roles. I was at the piano here."

"The same actions will be performed as on the former occasion - but they will not necessarily be performed by the same people."

"I - don't see the point of that," said Giles.

"There is a point, Mr Davis. It is a means of checking up on the original statements - and I may say of one statement in particular. Now, then, please. I will assign you your various stations. Mrs Davis will be here - at the piano. Mr Wren, will you kindly go to the kitchen? Just keep an eye on Mrs Davis's dinner. Mr Paravicini, will you go to Mr Wren's bedroom? There you can exercise your musical talents by whistling 'Three Blind Mice' just as he did. Major Metcalf, will you go up to Mr Davis's bedroom and examine the telephone there? And you, Mr Davis, will you look into the cupboard in the hall and then go down to the cellar?"

There was a moment's silence. Then four people moved slowly toward the door. Trotter followed them. He looked over his shoulder.

"Count up to fifty and then begin to play, Mrs Davis," he said.

He followed the others out. Before the door closed Molly heard Mr Paravicini's voice say shrilly, "I never knew the police were so fond of parlor games."

"Forty-eight, forty-nine, fifty."

Obediently, the counting finished, Molly began to play. Again the soft cruel little tune crept out into the big, echoing room.

Three Blind Mice See how they run...

Molly felt her heart beating faster and faster. As Paravicini had said, it was a strangely haunting and gruesome little rhyme. It had that childish incomprehension of pity which is so terrifying if met with in an adult.

Very faintly, from upstairs, she could hear the same tune being whistled in the bedroom above - Paravicini enacting the part of Christopher Wren.

Suddenly, next door, the wireless went on in the library. Sergeant Trotter must have set that going. He himself, then, was playing the part of Mrs Boyle.

But why? What was the point of it all? Where was the trap? For there was a trap, of that she was certain.

A draft of cold air blew across the back of her neck. She turned her head sharply. Surely the door had opened. Someone had come into the room - No, the room was empty. But suddenly she felt nervous - afraid. If someone should come in. Supposing Mr Paravicini should skip round the door, should come skipping over to the piano, his long fingers twitching and twisting -

"So you are playing your own funeral march, dear lady, a happy thought -" Nonsense -don't be stupid - don't imagine things. Besides, you can hear him whistling over your head, just as he can hear you.

She almost took her fingers off the piano as the idea came to her! Nobody had heard Mr Paravicini playing. Was that the trap? Was it, perhaps, possible that Mr Paravicini hadn't been playing at all? That he had been, not in the drawing-room, but in the library. In the library, strangling Mrs Boyle? He had been annoyed, very annoyed, when Trotter had arranged for her to play. He had laid stress on the softness with which he had picked out the tune. Of course, he had emphasized the softness in the hopes that it would be too soft to be heard outside the room. Because if anyone heard it this time who hadn't heard it last time - why then, Trotter would have got what he wanted - the person who had lied.

The door of the drawing-room opened. Molly, strung up to expect Paravicini, nearly screamed. But it was only Sergeant Trotter who entered, just as she finished the third repetition of the tune.

"Thank you, Mrs Davis," he said.

He was looking extremely pleased with himself, and his manner was brisk and confident.

Molly took her hands from the keys. "Have you got what you wanted?" she asked.

"Yes, indeed." His voice was exultant. "I've got exactly what I wanted."

"Which? Who?"

"Don't you know, Mrs Davis? Come, now - it's not so difficult. By the way, you've been, if I may say so, extraordinarily foolish. You've left me hunting about for the third victim. As a result, you've been in serious danger."

"Me? I don't know what you mean."

"I mean that you haven't been honest with me, Mrs Davis. You held out on me - just as Mrs Boyle held out on me."

"I don't understand."

"Oh, yes, you do. Why, when I first mentioned the Longridge Farm case, you knew all about it. Oh, yes, you did. You were upset. And it was you who confirmed that Mrs Boyle was the billeting officer for this part of the country. Both you and she came from these parts. So when I began to speculate who the third victim was likely to be, I plumped at once for you. You'd shown firsthand knowledge of the Longridge Farm business. We policemen aren't so dumb as we look, you know."

Molly said in a low voice, "You don't understand. I didn't want to remember."

"I can understand that." His voice changed a little. "Your maiden name was Wainwright, wasn't it?"

"Yes."

"And you're just a little older than you pretend to be. In 1940, when this thing happened, you were the schoolteacher at Abbeyvale school."

"No!"

"Oh, yes, you were, Mrs Davis."

"I wasn't, I tell you."

"The child who died managed to get a letter posted to you. He stole a stamp. The letter begged for help - help from his kind teacher. It's a teacher's business to find out why a child doesn't come to school. You didn't find out. You ignored the poor little devil's letter."

"Stop." Molly's cheeks were flaming. "It's my sister you are talking about. She was the schoolmistress. And she didn't ignore his letter. She was ill - with pneumonia. She never saw the letter until after the child was dead. It upset her dreadfully - dreadfully - she was a terribly sensitive person. But it wasn't her fault. It's because she took it to heart so dreadfully that I've never been able to bear being reminded of it. It's been a nightmare to me, always."

Molly's hands went to her eyes, covering them. When she took them away, Trotter was staring at her.

He said softly, "So it was your sister. Well, after all -" He gave a sudden queer smile. "It doesn't much matter, does

it? Your sister - my brother -"

He took something out of his pocket. He was smiling now, happily.

Molly stared at the object he held. "I always thought the police didn't carry revolvers," she said.

"The police don't," said the young man. He went on, "But you see, Mrs Davis, I'm not a policeman. I'm Jim. I'm Georgie's brother. You thought I was a policeman because I rang up from the call box in the village and said that Sergeant Trotter was on his way. Then I cut the telephone wires outside the house when I got here, so that you shouldn't be able to ring back to the police station."

Molly stared at him. The revolver was pointing at her now.

"Don't move, Mrs Davis - and don't scream - or I pull the trigger at once."

He was still smiling. It was, Molly realized with horror, a child's smile. And his voice, when he spoke, was becoming a child's voice.

"Yes," he said, "I'm Georgie's brother. Georgie died at Longridge Farm. That nasty woman sent us there, and the farmer's wife was cruel to us, and you wouldn't help us - three little blind mice. I said then I'd kill you all when I grew up. I meant it. I've thought of it ever since." He frowned suddenly. "They bothered me a lot in the army - that doctor kept asking me questions - I had to get away. I was afraid they'd stop me doing what I wanted to do. But I'm grown up now. Grown-ups can do what they like."

Molly pulled herself together. Talk to him, she said to herself. Distract his mind. "But, Jim, listen," she said. "You'll never get safely away."

His face clouded over. "Somebody's hidden my skis. I can't find them." He laughed. "But I daresay it will be all right. It's your husband's revolver. I took it out of his drawer. I daresay they'll think he shot you. Anyway - I don't care. It's been such fun - all of it Pretending! That woman in London, her face when she recognized me. That stupid woman this morning!"

He nodded his head.

Clearly, with eerie effect, came a whistle. Someone whistling the tune of "Three Blind Mice."

Trotter started, the revolver wavered - a voice shouted, "Down, Mrs Davis."

Molly dropped to the floor as Major Metcalf, rising from behind the concealment of the sofa by the door flung himself upon Trotter. The revolver went off - and the bullet lodged in one of the somewhat mediocre oil paintings dear to the heart of the late Miss Emory.

A moment later, all was pandemonium - Giles rushed in, followed by Christopher and Mr Paravicini.

Major Metcalf, retaining his grasp of Trotter, spoke in short explosive sentences.

"Came in while you were playing - slipped behind the sofa - I've been on to him from the beginning - that's to say, I knew he wasn't a police officer. I'm a police officer - Inspector Tanner. We arranged with Metcalf I should take his place. Scotland Yard thought it advisable to have someone on the spot. Now, my lad -" He spoke quite gently to the now docile Trotter. "You come with me. No one will hurt you. You'll be all right. We'll look after you."

In a piteous child's voice the bronzed young man asked, "Georgie won't be angry with me?"

Metcalf said, "No. Georgie won't be angry."

He murmured to Giles as he passed him, "Mad as a hatter, poor devil." They went out together. Mr Paravicini touched Christopher Wren on the arm. "You, also, my friend," he said, "come with me."

Giles and Molly, left alone, looked at each other. In another moment they were in each other's arms.

"Darling," said Giles, "you're sure he didn't hurt you?"

"No, no, I'm quite all right. Giles, I've been so terribly mixed up. I almost thought you - why did you go to London

that day?"

"Darling, I wanted to get you an anniversary present, for tomorrow. I didn't want you to know."

"How extraordinary! I went to London to get you a present and I didn't want you to know."

"I was insanely jealous of that neurotic ass. I must have been mad. Forgive me, darling." The door opened, and Mr Paravicini skipped in in his goatlike way. He was beaming.

"Interrupting the reconciliation - Such a charming scene - But, alas, I must bid you adieu. A police jeep has managed to get through. I shall persuade them to take me with them." He bent and whispered mysteriously in Molly's ear, "I may have a few embarrassments in the near future - but I am confident I can arrange matters, and if you should receive a case -with a goose, say, a turkey, some tins of foie gras, a ham - some nylon stockings, yes? Well, you understand, it will be with my compliments to a very charming lady. Mr Davis, my check is on the hall table."

He kissed Molly's hand and skipped to the door.

"Nylons?" murmured Molly, "Foie gras? Who is Mr Paravicini? Santa Claus?"

"Black-market style, I suspect," said Giles.

Christopher Wren poked a diffident head in. "My dears," he said, "I hope I'm not intruding, but there's a terrible smell of burning from the kitchen. Ought I to do something about it?"

With an anguished cry of "My pie!" Molly fled from the room.

Table of Contents

[Start](#)