

TEA AND ARSENIC

TWO ACT PLAY

By Craig Sodaro

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Heuer Publishing LLC, Cedar Rapids, Iowa

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PUBLISHED BY

HEUER PUBLISHING LLC

P.O. BOX 248 • CEDAR RAPIDS, IOWA 52406

TOLL FREE (800) 950-7529 • FAX (319) 368-8011

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SYNOPSIS: Maggie imagines a quiet spring break at her aunt's bed and breakfast while doing a bit of genealogical research. However, she's in for a rude surprise when just after she arrives, a man claiming to be a tax collector is poisoned. Unfortunately, there is no shortage of suspects: Barney Cook and his wife Babs look like they just breezed in from a show in Las Vegas; Isadora McCullvey dances through life, literally; and Jerry Parks claims he's a student. But each seems to be hiding something. Even the investigating police superintendent and his right-hand man, the Inspector, seem shady. When a ghostly figure gets into the action, Maggie's aunt, Miss Crump, and her best friend, Mrs. Fern, are sure it's the hand of that old witch hunter, Cotton Crump. Even though things start to go bump in the night, Maggie doesn't buy the idea that her ancestor has come back to life. Before long, Maggie and her best friend, June, realize they'd better figure out who wanted the tax collector dead - before someone else takes a sip of tea laced generously with arsenic.

CAST OF CHARACTERS
(6 MEN, 6 WOMEN)

- MRS. FERN.....Sixties, white hair, helpful and kind, but quite frank. *(189 lines)*
- MISS CRUMPSixties and white hair also. She's the owner of the Splinters and is devoted to her ancestry. Often naïve, but has her clever moments. *(263 lines)*
- BARNEY COOK.....Thirties, suave and sophisticated. Dresses to a tee and hands out complements like candy. *(55 lines)*
- BABS COOK.....Thirties, Barney's wife. She's got little of his tact or class. She's a flashy dresser and goes with whatever side's winning. *(36 lines)*

ISADORA MCCULLVEYLate twenties, loves to dance. She wears flowing dresses and is barefoot. On stage she is almost always dancing with determination. *(50 lines)*

MAGGIETwenty, a college student who's daring but tends to jump to conclusions. *(249 lines)*

JUNE.....Twenty, Maggie's friend from college. She's fearful but has a lot more common sense than her friend at times. *(183 lines)*

MORANTwenties, a crafty, short-tempered mob member. *(35 lines)*

MURPHYTwenties and up, Moran's partner. *(25 lines)*

JERRY PARKSTwenty, a college student devoted to his projects and books, somewhat socially inept. *(79 lines)*

MUCKLEY.....Thirties and up, an inept, tactless policeman. *(107 lines)*

SUPERINTENDENTThirties and up, a bizarre policeman who dresses like a peacock, uses elaborate words and never really seems to make sense. *(87 lines)*

SETTING

The entire action takes place in the parlor of an old New England mansion called the Splinters. There are two entrances, one left and one right. These can be doors, arches, or wing entrances. Couch flanked by two small tables and chairs at center. Screen up left set so audience can see slightly behind it, but characters on stage can't. Bookcase with clock on top of it sits up right. There is a desk down left with a telephone. Decorations should suggest an old house which, although well-preserved, has fallen on hard times. The dominating feature of the room is a large portrait of Cotton Crump hanging up center. He was the

founding father of the family, a severe Puritan leader whose eyes reflect a harsh existence. He glares down at the stage, watching everything that happens.

SYNOPSIS OF SCENES

All action takes place in the parlor of the Splinters.

Act One

Scene 1 An April morning.
Scene 2 A short time later.
Scene 3 Ten o'clock that night.

Act Two

Scene 1 The following morning.
Scene 2 Ten-thirty that night.

PROPERTIES

- ☐ Crossword puzzles (in book or from newspaper)
- ☐ Feather duster
- ☐ Wad of money
- ☐ Cash box
- ☐ Suitcase
- ☐ Sandwich
- ☐ Tray holding decanter and two wine glasses
- ☐ Bag of potato chips
- ☐ Large school books
- ☐ Notebook and pencil
- ☐ Police badge
- ☐ Vial
- ☐ Gun
- ☐ Handkerchief
- ☐ Walking stick
- ☐ Note
- ☐ Letter
- ☐ Two mugs of tea
- ☐ Apron
- ☐ Magazine(s)

- “Printing plates” - the size of dollar bills, can be cardboard painted black
- Pencil and paper
- Two frying pans
- Suitcase full of Babs’s clothing
- Garters
- Two guns
- Stick shift from car (use a wooden dowel topped with a small Styrofoam ball, painted black, the ball marked like a stick shift)

COSTUME NOTES

Modern, everyday dress for all characters unless specified below.

COOK: Flashy white suit, white fedora hat, red tie. He also needs a full-length black hooded robe. He can use a mask to cover his face and gloves to cover his hands.

BABS: Slinky dress(es) with a feather boa.

ISADORA: Long, flowing dress; she’s always barefoot.

SUPER: Black suit, black fedora, white tie and white flower. He can also have a black trenchcoat.

MUCKLEY: Same as Super, but use a red tie and red flower.

SOUND EFFECTS AND LIGHTING

Lights flash on cue, blackouts

Crash

Knocking

Clock chiming (various times)

Thunder

ACT ONE, SCENE 1

The parlor, late morning.

AT RISE:

MRS. FERN sits completing a crossword puzzle. MISS CRUMP bustles on left with feather duster. She dusts and straightens up with unusual fury, not noticing MRS. FERN until she begins to dust her as if she were a piece of furniture.

FERN: Crump! Crump! What are you doing?

CRUMP: Oh, why, Mrs. Fern, what on earth?!

FERN: I am not a piece of furniture!

CRUMP: Sorry! I just didn't notice you.

FERN: Obviously. Now, give me a four letter word for Chihuahua.

CRUMP: What?

FERN: That doesn't fit!

CRUMP: It wasn't meant to, Mrs. Fern. I've got too many things to do and here you sit asking me for a four letter word for Chihuahua.

FERN: What do you have to do that's so important?

CRUMP: Dust every room, vacuum, make sure all the food's ready -

FERN: Crump! It's only your niece who's coming, not the Queen of England!

CRUMP: I wish it were just the Queen! This is the daughter of my sister who thinks that our entire enterprise here at the Splinters is the most degrading thing to happen to the Crump family since Cotton Crump's oldest son opened that distillery in Kentucky!

FERN: *(Rising.)* Now don't get all worked up about it, Crump! Your niece Maggie will love it here and if she doesn't . . . well . . . she can just take the bus back to Boston . . . or Kentucky.

CRUMP: *(Calming down.)* I suppose you're right. She's a level-headed college student. She wants to soak up all our local history.

FERN: She might get water logged at the Splinters!

CRUMP: I know! The Splinters is dripping with history . . . ever since Cotton Crump laid the first stone. It might as well be a national monument. Did I tell you that Nathaniel Hawthorne actually spent the night here?

FERN: At least a dozen times.

CRUMP: No, only once. He slept in the room where Mr. and Mrs. Cook are staying.

FERN: Maybe we ought to charge them a bit more. After all, they're sleeping in a historical monument.

CRUMP: Oh, I couldn't do that!

FERN: Why not? How many other people can say they're sleeping in the same room as Nathaniel Hawthorne.

CRUMP: Well, now, maybe you have a point there.

FERN: *(Laughing.)* Oh, Crump! I think you're serious! Tell me, what time is Maggie arriving?

CRUMP: *(Suddenly busy again.)* Oh, any minute! The bus must be in already and they're getting a taxi from downtown.

FERN: *(Writing.)* I've got it! Tiny!

CRUMP: What's tiny?

FERN: Chihuahuas! *(Setting her crossword aside.)* Well, it certainly will be nice to see a new face around here.

CRUMP: I hope you mean that because they'll be here for their entire spring break.

FERN: They?

CRUMP: Yes, Maggie's bringing a friend to help her do her research. They're going to go over everything in the house . . . all the old papers, scrapbooks, everything!

FERN: Then she'd better bring her entire school! It'll take years to go through everything!

MR. and MRS. COOK enter left. He is dressed in a flashy white suit and red tie and twirls a white hat on his finger. She is equally flashy in a slinky dress topped with a feather boa.

COOK: Why, if it isn't our two golden goodies! How are you today, girls?

CRUMP: *(Flattered.)* Oh, why, hello, Mr. Cook! And Mrs. Cook, how lovely you look today!

BABS: Thanks! I bought this little number down at Gloria's Secrets. Like it?

CRUMP: Simply beautiful! They always have such . . . bright . . . things down there.

BABS: Oh, you shop there, too?

CRUMP: *(Embarrassed.)* Oh, goodness, no! I just look in the windows.

BABS: Well, you can borrow this any time you want.

FERN: I'm afraid it's not Crump's . . . color.

COOK: *(Pulling out a wad of money.)* Say, girls, maybe this month you can go down to Gloria's Secrets and buy yourself a little something. I'm raising our rent!

FERN: *(Looking to CRUMP, surprised.)* Oh, my . . . we . . .

COOK: *(Dismissing her protest.)* We're just so happy here we want to do justice to you fine ladies. Not a word of protest, please!

CRUMP: Well, my goodness, you must have heard us talking a minute ago.

FERN: Yes! We were saying we ought to charge a bit more because you're staying in the very room where Nathaniel Hawthorne spent a night.

BABS: Like, was he one of the Beatles?

COOK: *(A killer look to BABS.)* Yeah, the drummer! Now, ladies, that's an excellent reason to raise the rent. Here's our regular rent plus an extra twenty. *(Handing money to MRS. FERN.)*

CRUMP: You're too generous!

COOK: Look, we want to keep you two girls happy. And besides, how many newlyweds can say they're living in the same room what's his name stayed in. Right, Babs? *(He hugs BABS.)*

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BABS: (*Trying to sound enthused.*) Oh, yeah, Barney. It's a peach of a place.

FERN: Well, since you're giving us so much more money, why don't you let us give you a larger room. You could have one overlooking the garden.

COOK: (*Too quickly.*) No! Oh, no! The one we've got is just fine.

BABS: Yeah . . . it suits us to a "T".

CRUMP: But it's so small and you have that oversized closet . . .

COOK: We love the closet! We couldn't get along without it.

BABS: Yeah . . . we got a lot of stuff tied up in it.

CRUMP: Well, thank you very much, Mr. Cook.

FERN: Oh, yes! This will come in most handy.

COOK: Our pleasure. (*He turns to go, but stops and turns back.*) Say, you ladies wouldn't happen to have change for a fifty, would you?

CRUMP: Oh, I think so!

She goes to desk, opens drawer and takes out small cash box, which she opens.

COOK: I just got paid and they give us such big bills. You know how hard it is to crack a fifty?

FERN: Not really.

COOK: Take my word for it, then, it's tough.

CRUMP: (*Exchanging money with COOK.*) Here you are. My, what a crisp bill, Mr. Cook! I just love new money!

COOK: (*Laughing.*) Well I'll see if I can't find some more for you. Ladies? (*He exits right.*)

CRUMP: Bye bye!

FERN: My, they are something, aren't they?

CRUMP: (*Blissfully.*) You couldn't ask for finer lodgers. So prompt with the rent!

FERN: I know. They're so prompt sometimes I think they pay twice a month instead of once.

ISADORA MCCULLVEY dances on left. She wears a flowing dress and is barefooted. Her hair is like a bush atop her head, her movements dramatic.

ISADORA: Ah! My public!

CRUMP: Why, Miss McCullvey . . . how are you this morning?

ISADORA: Marvelous! Exhilarated! I've been practicing since five.

FERN: You must be tired! Come, sit down.

ISADORA: Tired? Dancing doesn't make me tired! I find it invigorating! Would you care to see a bit of my newest creation?

CRUMP: (*Hesitant.*) Oh, why . . .

ISADORA: I call it Flea and Frog Symphony for Feet! (*She dances about, talking breathlessly as she does so.*) It's the story of the eternal struggle between the insect and its adversary, the wicked frog! The insect takes small, light steps and flutters about in innocence. The frog is heavy with guilt. Deep . . . somber . . . cruel!

CRUMP: (*Shaking her head.*) Oh, yes . . . somber . . . cruel.

FERN: You certainly have your steps down, Miss McCullvey.

Loud knock off right.

FERN: There's somebody at the door!

CRUMP and FERN: *(Both moving right.)* I'll get it!

CRUMP: It's my niece!

CRUMP races off right. FERN turns back to a still-dancing ISADORA.

ISADORA: Why is she running off?

FERN: Lucky, I guess. Actually, her niece is here.

ISADORA: She left my performance because of a niece? Why . . . there isn't any dedication to the arts any more! There's no more love of beauty and perfection! *(She stops dancing.)* Is there at least some peanut butter in the cupboard?

FERN: Oh, yes, there's plenty. And there's bread in the breadbox.

ISADORA: Thank you! I'll just dance my way to a sandwich! *(She dances off stage left.)*

FERN: Just don't trip on that door jam!

Loud crash off left. CRUMP leads MAGGIE and JUNE on right. Both girls are casually dressed and each carries a suitcase.

CRUMP: Here we are, Mrs. Fern!

MAGGIE: *(Extending her hand.)* Hi, I'm Maggie and this is my friend, June.

JUNE: *(Also extending her hand.)* I'm happy to meet you!

FERN: It's so nice having both of you! I've been looking forward to meeting you, Maggie!

CRUMP: We're putting you in a room overlooking the garden. Such a lovely view - even if it is just a bit weedy.

FERN: We haven't had too much time to get down and dirty out there with all the rain we've had.

MAGGIE: That's okay! Anything green and bushy sounds great to us! We've been in the city too long.

JUNE: Really! It's so good to see something that isn't gray.

MAGGIE: The town is really a very pretty place.

CRUMP: *(At the portrait.)* That's probably why great great great great grandfather Cotton Crump chose this spot for the Splinters.

MAGGIE: *(Looking at portrait with distaste.)* That, I take it is my ancestor, Cotton Crump?

FERN: In all his glory!

MAGGIE: A real barrel of laughs, wasn't he?

JUNE: Not my idea of Santa Claus.

CRUMP: Oh, but girls, he had to be stern!

FERN: Such a harsh existence those people led. Imagine what they were up against! What was there to smile about?

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JUNE: Well, Maggie's not exactly a chip off the old block.

FERN: Glad to hear it!

CRUMP: Tell me about your mother, Maggie

They all sit down.

MAGGIE: Complaining, as usual . . . but she couldn't be better, really.

CRUMP: Good! She was quite upset, you know, when we first began to take in lodgers.

MAGGIE: Mother never did understand the first thing about economics.

CRUMP: (*Apologizing.*) We really didn't want to take lodgers, but we had to because there just wasn't enough money for upkeep on this old place. Your mother told me to sell it and come live with you . . . but I couldn't just sell the Splinters.

FERN: This has worked out beautifully for both of us.

CRUMP: Oh, indeed it has . . . and it's been very . . . educational taking lodgers in. We have some wonderful people staying with us.

ISADORA enters left eating a sandwich and dancing at the same time.

FERN: Miss McCullvey, meet Maggie, Miss Crump's niece and her friend June.

ISADORA: (*Still dancing.*) I am so charmed! I am Isadora McCullvey . . . the finest entrepreneur of modern dance within a radius of fifty miles! (*She stops dancing suddenly.*) My latest composition is Flea and Frog Symphony for Feet. Shall I continue?

MAGGIE: (*Tentatively.*) Why, of course . . .

FERN: (*Saving the situation.*) Oh, Miss McCullvey . . . I believe I hear your telephone ringing downstairs. Perhaps it's Carnegie Hall!

ISADORA: (*Delightly, dancing off right.*) I mustn't keep them waiting! I'll fly on the wings of the wind! So nice to meet you!

She dances off right followed by a crash.

CRUMP: We're most tolerant of Miss McCullvey. She did so want to be a great dancer, but so far, things haven't worked out for her.

MAGGIE: Well, with her talent, it's easy to see why.

CRUMP: Aren't you sweet to say so, dear.

JUNE: It's nice of you to let her dance around the living room.

FERN: Oh, she doesn't do that too often. Just on her way to the kitchen.

CRUMP: She does most of her serious work downstairs in her room.

FERN: We put her down there so no one would hear her thumping about.

MAGGIE: Good thinking! Who else do you have living here?

CRUMP: Oh, we have a pleasant couple, the Cooks. I don't know what they do or anything, but they're very nice and always pay their rent on time. And would you believe it? They even raised their own rent.

FERN: This morning they gave us an extra twenty dollars because they like their

room so much.

CRUMP: (*Proudly.*) They have the room where Nathaniel Hawthorne spent the night.

JUNE: (*Impressed.*) Hawthorne? *The* Hawthorne . . . slept here?

CRUMP: Under this very roof! He may have sat right where you're sitting!

JUNE: (*Nervously.*) There's no . . . headless horseman hiding around here, is there?

FERN: Only on the bookshelf!

CRUMP: Now across the hall from Miss McCullvey we've got a young man named Jerry Parks. He's a student like you . . . but he's rather quiet and always seems to be reading a book, so I'm afraid we don't know much about him, either.

FERN: It took him two days to get up enough courage to come in and ask for a room. He'd come by every day and look at our rooms-to-let sign and then he'd go away and come back later. Finally Crump asked him to come in and somehow he got up enough courage to accept.

MAGGIE: That's not a good way to do business, Aunt Ella! He could have been a stalker or something.

CRUMP: Well, this way is a whole lot better than having him standing out there staring at the house all the time.

FERN: Oh, he's a nice boy and is so wrapped up in his studies I don't think he knows anybody else is around.

JUNE: Gosh . . . he must be terribly shy.

MAGGIE: Or maybe he's got something to hide. Maybe he's a criminal from South America who has to keep his identity a secret.

CRUMP: Oh, no, Maggie! He doesn't even have an accent.

MAGGIE: Don't be too sure about the shy ones, Aunt Ella.

JUNE: Yeah . . . Maggie'll bring him out of his shell.

CRUMP: He could use some socializing I think. It'll do him good to have you girls around here.

MAGGIE: Well, we're anxious to get started digging up the family dirt!

FERN: Oh, there's tons of it.

CRUMP: We've a roomful of diaries, letters, scrapbooks, cookbooks, and trunks filled with who knows what!

MAGGIE: I hope there are lots of juicy tidbits. I'd like a few skeletons in the closet to give my family history report some punch!

FERN: Maybe you can ask Cotton Crump himself for a few stories!

JUNE: That's not funny!

CRUMP: But they say he wanders around this place at night . . . through hidden passageways and even out in the open. But we've never seen him, have we, Mrs. Fern?

FERN: Never even found a secret passageway.

CRUMP: We just hear a few odd noises at night . . . gongs . . . bangs . . . rattles.

JUNE: (*Frightened.*) You mean . . . things really do go bump in the night here?

FERN: You might say . . . but personally I just think we need a new refrigerator.

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CRUMP: Maybe so . . . but if you do run into Cotton Crump, June, don't worry.
He was a very little man and despite his mean look, if you bark loud enough,
I'm sure he'll go away.

MAGGIE: (To JUNE.) Yeah . . . he's not your type.

JUNE: For once I'm glad.

FERN: Let's take you up to your room.

MAGGIE: That bus ride was pretty long.

CRUMP: Well, I'm sure there won't be any excitement around here, so you'll get
all the rest you need!

ALL exit left. After a moment MORAN and MURPHY enter right, slinking about.

MURPHY: You sure this is the place, Moran?

MORAN: (Looking at a slip of paper.) This is it . . . 1213 Splinters Road.

MURPHY: Where'd you get the address?

During the next dialogue, they search about the room looking under the couch cushions, in drawers, and so on.

MORAN: Harry the Butcher had it on his person when we found his dead
corpse. Somebody in this place must have bumped him off because he was
getting too close to finding out who's running the dirty operation. He traced
'em all the way here . . . but then they got 'em.

MURPHY: (Nervously.) Well, maybe we ought to come back some other time.

MORAN: You nuts? Boss wants to find out who's behind the operation. It's set
up here all right! This place is built for it!

MURPHY: How are we supposed to find out anything?

MORAN: We just act respectable-like . . . and get an excuse to case the place
. . . you know, find out where it's stashed.

MURPHY: How are we gonna do that?

MORAN: You just watch the master at work.

MURPHY: Okay, Moran . . . but I don't like it here. Not one bit. Hey, Moran . . .
can I ask a dumb question?

MORAN: Go ahead. You've been asking enough of 'em already.

MURPHY: What are we looking for?

MORAN: You Klutz! You're looking for -

ISADORA dances on right.

ISADORA: Ah, gentlemen!

MORAN: Hey! Watch the feet, girlie!

ISADORA: I thought I heard strange voices up here. You must be Mr. Acres
and Mr. Tell from Carnegie Hall!

MORAN: Who and who?

ISADORA: You're here to see me dance! How lucky you are to have found me
in! I'm usually out, but today is special because I just finished creating my
Flea and Frog Symphony for Feet.

MORAN: Look, Twinkle Toes -

ISADORA: (*Waving him off.*) I shall give you a few steps to show you the type of thing I do best. Of course the actual performance will have to wait until we're on stage at the Hall.

ISADORA dances about wildly, frightening the two men.

MORAN: Hey, lady!

MURPHY: What is this, Moran? A dance studio?

MORAN: I don't know!

MURPHY: If I wanted dance lessons I'd have gone to Arthur Murray!

MORAN: (*To ISADORA.*) Hey, Twinkle Toes! Cut it out!

ISADORA stops instantly.

ISADORA: There! Did you notice the innocent movements of the insect compared with the strength movements of the frog?

MURPHY: Strength?

ISADORA: Marvelous word, isn't it? I just made it up. Perhaps when I stop dancing I'll invent a new dictionary!

MURPHY: Let's get out of here, Moran!

MORAN: Relax! (*To ISADORA.*) You the owner of this place, Flying Feet?

ISADORA: Owner? I own nothing but my talents!

MORAN: Yeah, well, we want to see the owners.

ISADORA: You mean you'd rather see Miss Crump and Mrs. Fern? They can't dance a step between the two of them!

MORAN: (*Short-tempered.*) We'll take our chances! We got business with 'em!

ISADORA: (*Sadly.*) But you said you were from Carnegie Hall. Why would you have business with them?

MORAN: You were the one who said we were from Carnegie Hall. We ain't. We just want to see the owners.

ISADORA: You're not from the Hall? You're not Mr. Acre and Mr. Tell?

MORAN: I'm Mr. Moran and this is Mr. Murphy. We're . . . ah . . . tax assessors. Why don't you dance off, Twinkle Toes, and hustle those owners in here.

ISADORA: Taxes! How revolting! I want no part of you! (*She races off left.*)

MURPHY: You handled that real nice, Moran.

MORAN: Yeah . . . I thought it went off perfect, considering she's nuts!

MURPHY: We really gonna be tax whatchamacallits?

MORAN: You got any better way to get a chance to look into every nook and cranny of this place?

MURPHY: No, but what do we gotta do?

MORAN: You don't do a thing, Murphy. Just sit and nod once in a while. I'll do all the talking. I got assessed one time and I know how they do it.

MURPHY: Real smart, Moran! But what are we looking for?

CRUMP and FERN enter left. They look bewildered.

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CRUMP: Hello, there . . . Miss McCullvey said that there were some men from the tax office here.

MORAN: Yeah. I'm Moran and this here's Murphy. We're *(with great importance.)* assessors.

FERN: Oh, dear.

MORAN: We're here to make an assessment.

CRUMP: But we've already been assessed, haven't we Mrs. Fern?

FERN: Indeed, yes! I thought that's what that man came for several months ago.

CRUMP: Yes, I remember . . . we received our tax bill and paid it. Three hundred eighteen dollars and twelve cents.

MORAN: Well, we want to check up and make sure there ain't no mistakes in that bill. See . . . we found that our former assessor made some mistakes and people ended up paying more than they should have. We might be able to get you gals a refund.

CRUMP: Why, how nice of you!

FERN: Yes! It's good to see such honesty displayed these days! I knew you were honest men when I first laid eyes on you. Why don't you sit down.

MORAN grins triumphantly at MURPHY as both sit with MRS. FERN.

CRUMP: I'll get some of our famous dandelion wine. We make it ourselves!

MORAN: Well, don't go to no trouble. We want to get this over quick as we can.

CRUMP: It's no trouble at all! *(She hurries off left.)*

FERN: We follow an old recipe we've had in the family for years. It's to die for!

MORAN: Look, lady . . . we don't got a whole lot of time.

FERN: Perfect! We only give it one glass at a time. It's a bit strong, you see.

MORAN: Yeah? Well, we'll just drink a short snort apiece.

FERN: Now, tell me . . . if you're from the tax office, where's your briefcase? You tax men always seem to be lugging around large packs of papers.

MORAN: *(Covering.)* Well, we're trying to . . . cut out as much paperwork as possible. So we keep little notebooks like this. *(He pulls out a tiny notebook.)* See here? It's got everything we need.

MURPHY: And it don't get lost.

FERN: You must be very efficient!

CRUMP enters left.

CRUMP: Oh, gentlemen, how about some nice homemade cookies with your wine?

MORAN: Skip the cookies! We got work to do.

CRUMP: Just baked this morning!

MORAN: We just ate. Now hurry up with the wine so we can case the joint! I mean . . . complete our assessment.

CRUMP: *(Flustered.)* Yes, all right . . . I'll hurry! *(She exits left.)*

MORAN: So, who owns this place?

FERN: Miss Crump owns the Splinters. It's her ancestral home. Been in the family since it was built by Cotton Crump in the late sixteen hundreds.

MURPHY: (*Indicating portrait.*) That him?

FERN: Yes.

MORAN: Looks like a mean son of a gun!

FERN: Oh, he was a very important puritanical leader.

MURPHY: Wouldn't want to cross his path.

FERN: (*Laughing.*) I don't think he'll hurt you now, Mr. Murphy. He's been dead three centuries.

MORAN: You just live here with Miss Crump?

FERN: Yes. We became friends on a cruise we took. A booklovers' cruise. That was right after my husband Freddie passed away. Crump asked me if I had any family or anything, and when I said no, she asked me to come here and live with her to help her take care of the house - it's so big and all. We began to take in lodgers a year or so ago because there just wasn't enough money for upkeep and all.

MORAN: (*Looking around.*) It is pretty old. When'd you say it was built?

CRUMP enters left carrying tray set with two glasses and a decanter. She sets tray on desk.

CRUMP: It was completed July 12, 1680. That's according to Cotton Crump's diary. (*She pours wine into glasses.*)

MORAN: Kept a diary, did he?

CRUMP: Yes! Fascinating thing! He filled it with sermons on righteousness and so forth. He was convinced that any evil would be paid for . . . and that those who are wicked would face . . . well, all sorts of problems!

MORAN: (*Squirming uncomfortably.*) That so?

CRUMP: Yes! Here you are! (*She hands MORAN and MURPHY each a glass of wine. They all turn to look at the portrait. Nervously, MORAN drinks his glass down.*) Don't you get that feeling by looking at his picture? Don't you think he's looking down on us now, making certain that everything is correct in this house? I'm sure that if any one of us were wicked at heart, he wouldn't hesitate for a moment to rise up from the picture and send whoever it was crashing to the floor in repentance! (*MORAN gags and falls to floor.*) Why, Mr. Moran, what a sense of humor you have!

MURPHY: He don't got a sense of humor! (*MURPHY bends over MORAN.*) Hey, Moran! Moran! (*After a slight pause.*) He's dead!

FERN: (*Shocked.*) Dead!

CRUMP: (*Frightened.*) Dead? Oh, I'm sure Cotton Crump . . . well, he didn't really . . . oh, dear!

MURPHY: This is serious!

FERN: Yes! I'll call the police and an ambulance.

MURPHY: (*Nervously.*) No! Don't do that! I'll call for you. You two sit down and be calm. (*MURPHY moves to phone and dials. Into phone, quietly so the women don't hear him.*) Boss? This is Murphy! You're right I'm scared!

TEA AND ARSENIC

Moran just kicked the bucket! He drank some wine and that was it. Somebody got to him! I don't know . . . just a couple of dizzy old dames. Send a car over right away! Yeah! (*He hangs up. To FERN and CRUMP.*) Ambulance is on the way.

FERN: Oh, this is dreadful!

CRUMP: Perfectly shocking! Poor Mr. Moran . . . just like that! I once had an aunt who went like that at a family reunion. Of course it was convenient because everyone was there for the funeral.

MURPHY: (*Frightened.*) I'm waiting outside! This place gives me the creeps!

FERN: Why don't you take your wine with you. It'll soothe your nerves.

MURPHY: I don't want any of that poison!

MURPHY races off right.

CRUMP: You don't suppose it was the wine, do you?

FERN: No one's ever died from it yet!

CRUMP picks up MORAN'S glass

CRUMP: It does have a pungent smell to it.

FERN: (*Sniffing it.*) Oh! Very bitter . . . sour . . . almost like -

CRUMP: I just can't believe it!

FERN: Dear, dear, Crump! The police will be coming and they'll think . . . I mean . . . if there was something in the wine, why they'll think we poisoned that poor man!

CRUMP: Oh, I hadn't thought of that! But then we're just jumping to conclusions. He must have had an attack of some kind.

FERN: I hope it wasn't the wine! They're likely to send us both to prison!

MAGGIE and JUNE enter left.

MAGGIE: (*Cheerfully.*) Who's getting locked up?

CRUMP: I'm afraid there's been an accident, girls.

JUNE: (*Noticing the body.*) Oh, my gosh!

MAGGIE: What happened to him?

JUNE: (*Terrified.*) Is . . . is . . . he . . .

FERN: Quite dead!

CRUMP: Afraid so!

JUNE: Oh, Maggie! He's . . . he's . . . oh!

MAGGIE: What happened to him?

CRUMP: Why I'd just brought in some dandelion wine and given him some and I was describing Cotton Crump and he just fell over onto the floor.

JUNE: (*Pointing to the portrait.*) I didn't like him from the start!

MAGGIE: June, stop it! We have to keep our heads. Aunt Ella, who is he?

CRUMP: A Mr. Moran from the tax assessor's office.

MAGGIE: A tax man?

FERN: Yes, and his associate seems to think there was poison in Mr. Moran's wine.

MAGGIE: You mean he was murdered?

JUNE: A murder? We haven't been here ten minutes and there's a murder! You said there wouldn't be any excitement!

MAGGIE: (*To FERN and CRUMP.*) June gets excited about everything!

JUNE: But this is . . . murder!

CRUMP: Perhaps you'd like a little dandelion wine to settle your nerves, June.

JUNE: (*Terrified.*) Wine? No!

MAGGIE: (*Covering.*) I don't think that would be a good idea, Aunt Ella.

FERN: Well, just sit down, then. That nice Mr. Murphy called the police and they're on their way.

No one sits.

MAGGIE: Where is this Mr. Murphy anyhow?

CRUMP: Waiting outside.

FERN: He was terribly upset.

CRUMP: Oh, Maggie! This is all such a terrible shock. And your just having arrived! I could cry!

MAGGIE puts her arm around CRUMP as JERRY PARKS enters right carrying a bag of potato chips and several large books. He halts when he sees everyone.

PARKS: What . . . what's going on?

FERN: Oh, Mr. Parks! The most dreadful thing's happened.

CRUMP: A tax man was just . . . just murdered.

PARKS: I've heard of worse things.

JUNE: But he's right there!

PARKS sees MORAN for the first time.

PARKS: What's he doing here?

CRUMP: That's where he was murdered.

PARKS: Looks like somebody's in trouble then.

FERN: His partner thinks it was the wine.

PARKS: He does look like he went suddenly. (*He picks up wine glass and sniffs.*) Yes, definitely full of poison. The smell is unmistakable. (*To FERN and CRUMP.*) Why'd you kill him?

CRUMP: We didn't do it!

FERN: Why should we have?

PARKS: Was he raising your taxes?

MAGGIE: (*Angrily.*) My aunt certainly wouldn't go around murdering tax men!

PARKS: (*Shrugging.*) Well, I hope they find who did it. It's a crime, you know.

MAGGIE: (*Slyly.*) Well, listen, Mr. Parks, how come you're so sure there's poison in the glass?

PARKS: We studied poisons extensively in my course on toxic chemistry.

TEA AND ARSENIC

MAGGIE: (*Unimpressed.*) Oh, so you're an expert.

PARKS: I didn't say that. I just said there's poison in that glass. Who are you, anyway?

CRUMP: Oh, I'm sorry, Mr. Parks. This is my niece Maggie and her friend June. They just arrived from Boston. They go to school there.

MAGGIE: But we don't study chemistry, unfortunately.

PARKS: Too bad. Well, I hope you find out who killed him. I've got to have some lunch myself.

PARKS exits left.

FERN: (*To MAGGIE.*) He'll warm up once you get to know him.

MAGGIE: Warm up to freezing!

CRUMP: Oh, this is one of his good days. I thought he was very chatty.

MAGGIE: Murder must bring out the best in him!

CRUMP: I hope not! I just can't imagine who would want this poor man out of the way.

MAGGIE: Maybe you don't know your lodgers as well as you think.

CRUMP: Oh, Maggie, don't be silly. It wasn't one of our lodgers!

MAGGIE: How do you know? Unless . . .

JUNE: Unless what?

MAGGIE: His partner!

FERN: Mr. Murphy? But he was so nice! Very interested in the house and all.

MAGGIE: He went outside?

CRUMP: Yes, he was very upset.

MAGGIE: Or he just wanted to get away! (*She runs off right.*)

JUNE: Maggie! Don't leave me here! (*She runs off right.*)

CRUMP: Oh, Mrs. Fern, I think we might have a big problem on our hands.

FERN: A murder! (*Nervously.*) Shall we . . . take the wine glasses and decanter and bury them?

CRUMP: That wouldn't be right, Mrs. Fern.

FERN: I suppose not. They'd nail us for sure then.

CRUMP: I think we should just face the music and dance.

FERN: Let's leave the dancing to Miss McCullvey.

MAGGIE and JUNE enter right.

MAGGIE: You know the tax man's partner?

CRUMP: Was he out there crying?

MAGGIE: He's gone!

FERN: Maybe he was around the corner or something.

MAGGIE: He's nowhere in sight.

CRUMP: Oh, dear!

MAGGIE: It seems there's more to this than meets the eye.

JUNE: At least the police are here. They just pulled up.

MAGGIE: I never realized you had such an underfunded police department.

FERN: What do you mean?

MAGGIE: They pulled up in a '78 Cadillac convertible!

Strong knocks off right as the curtain falls.

ACT ONE, SCENE 2

The same. MORAN'S body has been removed.

AT RISE:

CRUMP and FERN sit nervously.

FERN: Oh, Crump, it's such a relief having that poor man out of here.

CRUMP: I was just thinking the same thing. Thank goodness it's over with.

SUPERINTENDENT enters right. He is dressed in black - black suit, trenchcoat, hat. He wears a white tie and a white flower in his lapel.

SUPER: I don't think we can exactly say it's over with, ladies. Somebody bumped off Moran and we're gonna have to find out who did it, right?

FERN: *(Overzealously.)* Absolutely!

CRUMP: Yes! We want to do everything we can to help clear all this up.

SUPER: Glad to see you're willing to cooperate with our little operation. Now I got Detective Muckley with me and I'm putting him in charge of this here investigation . . . seeing as I got more pressing business to attend to myself. *(Calling left.)* Muckley! Get in here! *(To CRUMP and FERN.)* He's new on the job, but he knows his stuff. I hope.

MUCKLEY enters right. He is dressed like the SUPER, but wears a red flower and tie. He's very nervous.

MUCKLEY: Right here, boss!

SUPER: Superintendent, Muckley! Don't forget that. These ladies were just telling me how they're gonna cooperate with us on this . . . case.

MUCKLEY: This case. Yes, that will help.

CRUMP: We wouldn't want to do anything but help.

FERN: Imagine that poor man just dropping over like that!

SUPER: That's how it happened?

CRUMP: He took a sip of wine and . . . poof! He fell over.

SUPER: Muckley, make a note of that!

MUCKLEY pulls out tiny notebook and scribbles. SUPER snaps his fingers and MUCKLEY pulls chair behind SUPER, who sits.

SUPER: Ahhh! That's better!

CRUMP: *(Nervously.)* Superintendent Jones? May I ask you a small question?

TEA AND ARSENIC

SUPER: Can't think of a reason why not.

MUCKLEY: You want me to write this down, Boss?

SUPER: Superintendent!

CRUMP: Why did an old pick up come to take poor Mr. Moran away just now?

SUPER: Why, ah . . . *(Thinking.)* . . . ah, yes . . . okay! It's part of our city cutbacks. When some guy kicks the bucket and there ain't no immediate family around, the city sends whatever vehicle they got in the lot. And it sure didn't matter to Moran, right, Muckley? *(He chuckles.)*

CRUMP: It seems a bit . . . peculiar.

SUPER: You want higher taxes just so he could ride around in a limo?

FERN: I suppose not, but that man was here to see whether or not we've been overtaxed already.

SUPER: Ain't it a shame!

CRUMP: Yes, he was so nice.

SUPER: But somebody must have not liked him a whole lot. They stiffed him right here! Got any ideas who?

CRUMP: I don't think so!

FERN: How could we? We didn't have anything to do with it!

SUPER: Yeah? And why not?

CRUMP: Well, we never saw Mr. Moran before in our lives.

FERN: He and Mr. Murphy were total strangers.

SUPER: We can check on that. *(He snaps his fingers. MUCKLEY writes furiously.)*

CRUMP: Oh, it's the truth. Besides, why would we hurt him if he's here about giving us a tax refund?

SUPER: Maybe there was something you didn't want him to find out. His visit was a surprise, wasn't it?

CRUMP: Don't tax assessors always come unannounced? We don't have anything to hide, Superintendent.

FERN: Certainly not! This is all a horrible mistake!

The ladies begin to cry and pat one another on the back. SUPER rises.

SUPER: All right! All right! Turn off the waterworks! I get very cross when I see tears!

CRUMP: *(Calming down.)* Oh, we're very sorry. We wouldn't want to make you cross.

SUPER: Muckley, I'm gonna leave you in charge.

MUCKLEY: Me?

SUPER: That's right. And you're gonna do a good job, right?

MUCKLEY: Right, Boss!

SUPER: It's Superintendent Jones, Muckley!

MUCKLEY: Right, Boss!

SUPER: *(Angrily.)* Superintendent!

MUCKLEY: Right, Boss - I mean Superintendent!

SUPER: *(Calming down, patting MUCKLEY on head.)* Now, Detective Muckley .

. . you are to stay on these here premises for as long as it takes to locate and get the bum or bums who wasted Moran. You don't let anybody out of this place 'til that creep is found and brought to me . . . personally!

MUCKLEY: Right, Superintendent Smith.

SUPER: Jones!

MUCKLEY: Right, Boss! Superintendent!

SUPER: *(To FERN and CRUMP.)* So, you got a bunch of people living here?

CRUMP: Yes, the Splinters is a boarding house.

SUPER: Then you're all boarded up for a while. I'm putting a couple of guards out front who'll see nobody gets out. You folks do what Muckley here says and everything will be just peachy . . . except for the guilty party. That clear?

CRUMP: Yes!

FERN: Perfectly!

SUPER: Good! Now I'm going back to the office. Detective Muckley, you know how to reach me.

MUCKLEY: Right!

SUPER: You find the killer, Muckley, and there's a bonus in this for you.

MUCKLEY: *(Pleased.)* Really?

SUPER: Yeah! It won't be your last case.

MUCKLEY: *(Nervously.)* I see.

SUPER: I'm glad you see. Remember, Muckley, there's a pretty view from the bottom of the river if you mess up . . . and I can make sure you see it wearing a pair of cement boots.

MUCKLEY: Right, Boss!

SUPER: *(Exasperated.)* For the last time!

MUCKLEY: Su . . . per . . . in . . . ten . . . dent!

SUPER: *(Patting MUCKLEY'S face.)* That's better. *(To CRUMP and FERN.)* Now, ladies . . . do what you're told and nobody gets hurt.

CRUMP: *(Quickly.)* Right, Boss!

FERN: Superintendent! She meant Superintendent!

SUPER: *(Glancing at MUCKLEY.)* Call me when you're ready to make an arrest.

SUPER exits right. MUCKLEY visibly relaxes once SUPER is gone.

FERN: He's certainly a very unusual policeman.

CRUMP: His manner of investigation is a bit . . . hands off.

FERN: What was all that about cement boots, Detective?

MUCKLEY: Inside joke, Ma'am.

CRUMP: He sounded most upsetting to me!

FERN: Well, what do we do now, Detective Muckley?

MUCKLEY: You have to answer some questions.

FERN: That sounds like a good idea. Where do we begin?

MUCKLEY: Where were you two when this . . . crime took place?

FERN: Well, I was sitting here . . . talking with Mr. Moran and Mr. Murphy.

CRUMP: By the way, Detective, have you found Mr. Murphy yet?

MUCKLEY: Still looking for him!

TEA AND ARSENIC

CRUMP: I hope you find him and calm him down. He was so upset.

MUCKLEY: Oh, it's just a matter of time before we nab him. Now where were you, Miss Crump?

CRUMP: I was standing looking at Cotton Crump's picture. I'd just brought in the wine for Mr. Moran and Mr. Murphy and had given them each a glass.

MUCKLEY: Where'd the wine come from?

CRUMP: From the same decanter we've used for years.

MUCKLEY: Maybe I oughta take a look at it.

CRUMP: It's right out in the kitchen. I'll go get it. *(She exits left.)*

MUCKLEY: You said neither of you two knew this Moran?

FERN: We'd never seen him before. Another tax man came last fall and he was alone. Very tall with a briefcase. He didn't say much and just walked around playing with his calculator.

MUCKLEY: That so?

FERN: Yes. We offered him some wine, but he refused because he was working. I thought he was just unfriendly.

CRUMP enters left holding decanter and glass.

CRUMP: Here it is, and here's the glass poor Mr. Moran drank from. Perhaps you'd like a taste? It's homemade!

MUCKLEY: *(Holding up his hand quickly.)* No! I'm not too thirsty!

CRUMP: *(Disappointed.)* Oh, that's too bad. Maybe later.

FERN: I'm afraid nobody's going to like our wine after this, Crump.

CRUMP: I think you're right. We'll have to go back to jellies.

MUCKLEY: *(Sniffing decanter.)* This doesn't smell funny. *(He runs his finger around the rim, tastes it.)* Doesn't taste funny, either.

CRUMP: *(Insulted.)* I hope not! It's an old family recipe. Originally it was created for medicinal purposes.

FERN: Then other uses were . . . developed.

MUCKLEY: Wasn't exactly medicinal for Moran, was it? *(He picks up glass.)* And you said this was his glass? *(CRUMP nods. MUCKLEY sniffs glass.)*

Yuck! This stinks! He must have been awfully nice to drink something that smells this bad.

CRUMP: How chivalrous of him!

MUCKLEY: So we know one thing - the poison was in the glass, not the decanter.

PARKS enters right.

PARKS: The poison was in the glass before the wine was poured.

MUCKLEY: I was about to say the same thing myself.

PARKS: A good strong dose of potassium cyanide with a side of arsenic.

MUCKLEY: You took the words right out of my mouth.

PARKS: Instantaneous death!

MUCKLEY: Couldn't have been quicker. You wouldn't, by any chance, have

bumped off Moran, would you?

PARKS: Sorry, I can't help you there.

CRUMP: Oh, Detective Muckley, this is Mr. Parks, one of our boarders.

MUCKLEY: I see. Well, Mr. Parks, I'm under orders from Superintendent Smith -

FERN: Jones.

MUCKLEY: Right! Superintendent Jones to keep you all in the house here 'til this is cleared up.

PARKS: *(Not surprised.)* Excellent idea. I have enough studying to keep me busy while you're . . . doing whatever you'll be doing.

MUCKLEY: Nice of you to cooperate, Mr. Parks. So . . . where were you when this crime was committed?

PARKS: I was around the corner at the grocery store buying some potato chips.

CRUMP: That's right, Detective. I remember Mr. Parks came in with a bag of potato chips in one hand.

FERN: And his books in the other.

PARKS: I'm a student, you see. I eat junk and study.

MUCKLEY: That's it?

PARKS: 'Til I graduate. And if you don't have any other questions . . . *(He moves right.)*

MUCKLEY: Hold on! Did you know Moran?

PARKS: Never saw him before in my life. But honestly, Detective, nobody's going to admit they knew him, will they?

MUCKLEY: *(Scratching his head.)* You got a point there.

PARKS: Well, I've got some experiments to work on.

MUCKLEY: What kind of experiments?

PARKS: Chemical experiments.

MUCKLEY: Oh, yeah? You do a lot of experiments?

PARKS: Only the ones I have to. Right now I'm into anesthetics and toxics.

MUCKLEY: Toxics! Don't that mean -

PARKS: Poisons? It certainly does. If you need me, I'll be down in my room. *(He exits right.)*

FERN: He's such a smart young man, studying all the time.

MUCKLEY: Nobody's above suspicion, Ma'am. Now who else you got living here?

CRUMP: Well, there's my niece and her friend, but they just came this morning. They're on spring break.

MUCKLEY: I want to talk to 'em.

CRUMP: But they really couldn't have had anything to do with this crime! They just got here!

MUCKLEY: Call 'em down. They might have seen or heard something they don't even know is important.

CRUMP: They say that on television all the time! *(She moves left and calls.)* Maggie! June! Could you come down here for a second? *(To MUCKLEY.)* They're students in Boston. Maggie's come here to do a report on the Crump family for a history class she's taking.

TEA AND ARSENIC

MAGGIE and JUNE enter left.

MAGGIE: Yes, Aunt Ella?

CRUMP: Oh, Maggie, dear, this is Detective Muckley and he would like to ask you a few questions about . . . what happened.

MAGGIE: Sure.

JUNE: (*Incredulously.*) You're a detective?

MUCKLEY: Yeah! Detective Muckley at your service. Now, where were you two when Moran got hit?

MAGGIE: Got hit?

MUCKLEY: Yeah! You know . . . bumped off?

MAGGIE: Well, we were upstairs unpacking. We'd just arrived.

JUNE: So we don't know anything about anything.

MUCKLEY: I'll be the judge of that. Now you came downstairs, I take it, after Moran hit the floor.

MAGGIE: That's right. We came in and there was this man on the floor and Aunt Ella and Mrs. Fern were standing here.

MUCKLEY: Either of you know the deceased?

JUNE: People I know don't get murdered!

MAGGIE: Cool it, June! (*To MUCKLEY.*) No . . . we didn't know him. Excuse me, Detective Muckley, but are you really a policeman?

MUCKLEY: (*Offended.*) Yeah! I am a one hundred percent bone fide cop! And I got a badge to prove it! (*He whips out badge and flashes it quickly in front of them.*)

MAGGIE: (*Not convinced.*) I guess you're a detective all right.

MUCKLEY: Glad you see it that way.

MAGGIE: Do you have any other questions?

MUCKLEY: (*Thinking.*) Not right now. But don't leave town. I mean, you're not leaving town 'til this is cleared up.

MAGGIE: May we get back to work?

MUCKLEY: Work? What kind of work?

MAGGIE: We're researching. (*To CRUMP.*) And Aunt Ella, you wouldn't believe what you've got around this house! You can't imagine all the things hiding under your very nose!

MAGGIE and JUNE exit left.

CRUMP: Oh, we just have to get this cleared up as quickly as possible. I want my niece to have a nice visit, not like this.

MUCKLEY: I'm doing the best I can, lady! It's not easy, you know! What do I got to go on? You went out to get some wine. The poison was in the glass not the jug. He drank it and croaked. And nobody knew the guy in the first place!

FERN: Rather slim evidence, isn't that what you say, Detective?

MUCKLEY: It certainly is! But, wait a minute! If your jug was clean . . . and the glass had poison in it . . . then who could have put the junk in the glasses if it wasn't you, Miss Crump?

CRUMP: (*Nervously.*) Oh, dear! That does present a problem! It must have been put in the glasses before I poured the wine, but I never left those glasses or the decanter . . .

FERN: Yes, you did, Crump! You came in and asked us if we wanted some cookies!

CRUMP: (*Relieved.*) So I did!

FERN: Somebody could have put poison in the glasses while you were in here.

CRUMP: It was only a minute.

MUCKLEY: That's all it takes. Somebody must have recognized Moran and Murphy and wanted them out of the way! Probably somebody in your house! Now, where are the rest of your lodgers?

CRUMP: I'm not sure.

MUCKLEY: I want to see them all.

FERN: Why don't we show you to your room, first, Detective. Then we can roust them up for you.

CRUMP: Good idea!

MUCKLEY: Yeah . . . I'd like to case the place anyway.

FERN and CRUMP lead MUCKLEY off right. MAGGIE and JUNE enter left.

JUNE: Hey, Maggie? How come we don't tell that detective about the secret passageway we found?

MAGGIE: I don't trust him.

JUNE: He's got a badge.

MAGGIE: He flashed it so fast it could have been a Captain Marvel button for all we know.

JUNE: Maybe you're right.

MAGGIE: That passageway could be important. It runs all the way from the attic down to the basement. The killer could have used it when he escaped. And I just can't convince myself to tell Detective Muckley about it. He could be an impostor!

JUNE: Yeah! Like that guy at the university who taught a whole semester before they found out he was a waiter with a talent for doing impersonations.

MAGGIE: I even took his class!

JUNE: Really?

MAGGIE: I hated the guy!

JUNE: Well, I would, too, if I found out he was a fake.

MAGGIE: That's not it! He gave me a "D"! Yeah . . . we sure were a bunch of suckers . . . and I think we're going to be a couple of suckers here if we don't watch out.

JUNE: What do you mean?

MAGGIE: Something's fishy about this whole thing. I have a feeling everybody here is taking Aunt Ella and Mrs. Fern for a ride.

TEA AND ARSENIC

JUNE: You're telling me! But what can we do?

MAGGIE: (*Thinking.*) I don't know. There's got to be a clue here somewhere. That Mr. Moran wasn't killed because he was a tax assessor. There's something else.

JUNE: But what?

MAGGIE: Maybe he could have recognized one of the boarders as a criminal in hiding!

JUNE: That could be.

MAGGIE: Maybe he knew something valuable was hidden in this house and someone didn't want him to find it.

JUNE: That could be, too!

MAGGIE: Maybe he was a criminal himself and he had doublecrossed his partner.

JUNE: Even that could be!

MAGGIE: (*Disappointedly.*) Anything could be.

JUNE: So let's just leave it to the police.

MAGGIE: I told you! I don't trust Muckley!

JUNE: What if he's a real cop? He'll be plenty mad if you do anything to mess up his case.

MAGGIE: (*Conceding.*) You're right. But we've got to help in some way. Aunt Ella and Mrs. Fern are dear old ladies and it's not fair that they should have to go through all this. The publicity alone could put their house under if we don't help.

JUNE: So what can we do?

MAGGIE: We can snoop. We've already found the secret passageway. Who knows what else we'll find!

ISADORA bursts into the room, right.

ISADORA: Help! Murder! Police!

MAGGIE: Miss McCullvey, what's wrong?

ISADORA: Someone tried to kill me!

JUNE: What?

ISADORA: I found this in my peanut butter! (*She holds up small vial.*)

JUNE: What is it?

ISADORA: I believe it's poison!

MAGGIE: But who'd want to -

ISADORA: (*Dramatically.*) In a career like mine one makes enemies, young lady! Certainly it can't be a fan . . . but it could be a Russian ballerina I beat out for the part of Juliet once. Or was it the lead in Swan Lake?

MUCKLEY, CRUMP, and FERN enter left.

MUCKLEY: What's all the yelling about?

ISADORA: Who wants to know?

MUCKLEY: Detective Muckley wants to know!

CRUMP: Miss McCullvey, are you all right?

ISADORA: Yes, now! I was in the kitchen making a peanut butter sandwich when I discovered this in my Peter Pan!

She holds up vial. MUCKLEY grabs it.

MUCKLEY: Let me see this!

PARKS enters right.

PARKS: Potassium cyanide mixed with a touch of arsenic, no doubt.

MUCKLEY: Ah . . . yeah . . . no doubt whatever.

CRUMP: The same thing used to kill poor Mr. Moran!

MUCKLEY: Right. After pouring the poison in the glasses, the killer must have hidden the vial in the peanut butter.

ISADORA: Why couldn't he have stuck it in the yogurt?

MUCKLEY: *(To ISADORA.)* I take it you're a boarder here?

ISADORA: I certainly am! I am Isadora McCullvey! I do interpretive modern dance. My latest composition is the Frog and Flea Symphony for Feet. But I've just begun to work on A Slaying at the Splinters . . . a new dance depicting the tragic events of the last hour.

MUCKLEY: Not wasting any time, are you?

ISADORA: I strike while the iron's hot!

MUCKLEY: Any idea who would have put the poison in the Peter Pan?

ISADORA: Of course not! But everyone here knows of my passion for peanut butter! Such a passion that it almost served as my death warrant!

PARKS: The killer probably just stuck the vial in the first thing handy.

MUCKLEY: Yeah . . . so this definitely ties in with Moran's untimely demise. Somebody here is guilty now of not only killing Moran, but trying to bump off Dancing Dora here.

ISADORA: *(Insulted.)* Why you - !

ISADORA turns to exit right.

MUCKLEY: Hold it, sister! I'm gonna do anything I have to to get to the bottom of all this. Everybody understand? *(MUCKLEY pulls out a gun that he polishes with a handkerchief.)* Good . . . so we're all gonna have a nice little chat. Have a seat. *(No one sits. MUCKLEY clicks his gun. All sit immediately.)* That's better. We'll get to be good friends . . . all of us except for the bum who wasted poor Moran. I got a little something special in store for him!

The curtain falls.

TEA AND ARSENIC

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