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Dramatic Publishing

MURDER BY MEMBERSHIP ONLY

Murder mystery/Comedy by
Thomas Hischak

MURDER BY MEMBERSHIP ONLY

Murder mystery/Comedy. By Thomas Hischak. Cast: 9w. This murder mystery-comedy occurs in the exclusive Orczy Club, an “inner sanctum” for women mystery writers in London. Most of them hate the arrogant Octavia Sturges, the most successful mystery writer of the day, so it is no surprise when she is found dead—poisoned by one of the poisons she was so fond of using in her stories. But what happens now? Should these specialists in murder try to solve the case themselves—at the risk of their own lives, since obviously the murderer is one of them—or should they call Scotland Yard? “How would it look if a roomful of mystery writers had to go to the police to solve a murder that took place under their very noses?” one of the characters in this play asks. The group decides to solve the murder themselves. Those present are the owner of the club, (a “big name” herself some years ago), two other writers, a critic, a journalist, a visitor from America who has just had her first mystery novel published, the cook (whose food Sturges hates), and Sturges’ long-suffering secretary. But there are many other surprises in this intriguing mystery play filled with humor, suspense, frightening moments and fun for the audience in trying to guess “whodunit?” Each of the remaining eight have an untold secret which causes suspicion to rise until another writer, Clarice Fergusson, is found strangled. As secrets are revealed, Hester Tandy and Eve Hawkins, both young and promising writers, confront each other when Eve unsuccessfully tries to poison Hester, and we learn Eve’s motives in the previous crimes. Recommended for all groups, teenage or adult, the play is easy to produce. Each of the nine characters provides a distinctive role for your actresses, and the well-constructed plot contributes to the fun of building to the spine-tingling climax. *One int. set. Costumes: modern. Approximate running time: 100 to 120 minutes. Code: MN3.*

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Murder by Membership Only

Murder
by
Membership
Only

A Mystery Comedy in Two Acts

for nine women

by

THOMAS HISCHAK

Family Plays

311 Washington St., Woodstock, IL 60098

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MURDER BY MEMBERSHIP ONLY

THE CHARACTERS

(9 Women, no men)

HESTER TANDY, *an English mystery writer, in her 30's; intelligent, frank, likable*

LYDIA BEATON, *private secretary to Mrs. Sturges; a spinster in late middle age; cold, efficient, nervous*

MRS. PLIMPTON, *a member of the Orczy Club, anywhere between 30 and 50 years old; quiet, aloof, but dominating when she speaks*

MADAME LECOQ, *the proprietor of the club, from France; a former author; in her 60's; motherly, warm*

CLARICE FURGUSSON, *another member, also a writer, in her 50's; harsh, impatient, not liked*

MRS. BALSER, *the cook, late middle age; quiet, but manages to make her complaints known*

EVE HAWKINS, *an American writer, anywhere between early 20's and mid 30's; fresh, vibrant, talkative*

OCTAVIA STURGES, *a famous mystery writer and a celebrity, in her 50's or 60's; loud, demanding, snobbish*

MAY COBBS, *a journalist, in her 20's; awkward, uncomfortable, nearly always says the wrong thing*

†

SYNOPSIS

ACT I

Scene 1: Mid-afternoon in December, the present

Scene 2: Several hours later

ACT II

A few minutes later

NOTES ON THE PLAY

“How would it look if a roomful of mystery writers had to go to the police to solve a murder that took place under their very noses?” one of the characters in this play asks.

This mystery-comedy takes place in the exclusive Orczy Club, an “inner sanctum” for women mystery writers in London. Everybody is in a stir because the most famous of the members is about to arrive—Octavia Sturges. As you can guess, most of the members are jealous of Sturges because of her success. Those present are the owner of the club, a “big name” herself some years ago; two other writers, a critic, a journalist, a visitor from America who has just had her first mystery novel published, the cook (whose food Sturges hates), and Sturges’ long suffering secretary.

It is no surprise when Sturges turns up murdered. But there are many other surprises in this intriguing mystery play—with humor, suspense, frightening moments, and fun for the audience in trying to guess “whodunit.”

Recommended for all groups, teenage or adult, the play is easy to produce, utilizing one interior set and modern costumes. Each of the nine characters provides a distinctive role for your actresses, and the well-constructed plot contributes to the fun of building to the spine-tingling climax.

MURDER BY MEMBERSHIP ONLY

By Thomas Mischak

ACT I

Scene 1

[The scene is the sitting room and adjacent hallway at the Orczy Club in London, an exclusive women-only club for mystery writers. It is mid-afternoon in December. MRS. PLIMPTON is quietly reading in a chair at Left. LYDIA BEATON is sitting on the sofa crocheting. HESTER TANDY is leaning over the back of the sofa showing her a diagram on posterboard, teasing her. MISS BEATON is obviously not enjoying the conversation]

HESTER. No, no. That wouldn't do at all. The window is barred. Securely. Besides, it's a three-story drop.

BEATON. That may be the case, Miss Tandy, but—

HESTER. And there are no vents, heating or otherwise. How does he get in and out?

BEATON. I'm sure I don't know—

HESTER. *[Straightening, dropping the diagram onto the sofa]* Think it out. The facts are all there.

BEATON. I have no wish to think out any such thing.

HESTER. *[Pacing to the table at right]* I'll review: One door, locked. One window, barred. No vents. Two chairs, Edwardian. A spool bed, a night table, a full-sized wardrobe. And it's raining outside.

BEATON. The condition of the weather doesn't interest me in the least, Miss Tandy—

HESTER. *[Crossing in front of the sofa to Beaton's right]* But it should, Miss Beaton. It should. Muddy footprints, perhaps. Or rain-drops fallen on the floor. Noisy shutters flapping the wind. Lightning streaks periodically illuminating the room with a blaze. Weather is very important.

BEATON. You are speaking to the wrong person about these matters. I have no interest in—

HESTER. Come, come Miss Beaton. Surely you must have picked up a few talents of your own after all these years working as private secretary for the great Octavia Sturges.

BEATON. Mrs. Sturges chooses not to discuss her novels with me. We maintain a very professional relationship.

HESTER. But you type them. Every murder, every word, every clue. Something must rub off somewhere.

BEATON. I'm sure I don't know what you mean.

HESTER. [*Pacing to Left*] You can't be involved with murder for so long a time and not be touched by it all. You must face the fact that you have blood all over your hands . . . figuratively speaking.

BEATON. I am a typist, Miss Tandy. You try to make me sound like an accessory to the crime.

HESTER. [*Turning rapidly and pointing an accusing finger at her (but not threateningly), Hester is playing a game, having fun*] Accessory to the crime! See? Even your speech is touched by it.

BEATON. This entire conversation is ridiculous. All of you writers have more imagination than is good for you.

HESTER. Don't underestimate what I say. Perhaps you will surprise us all.

BEATON. Surprise?

HESTER. [*Approaching her behind the sofa*] Yes. One day, Miss Beaton, you may astonish everyone and commit the perfect crime.

BEATON. [*Stiffening*] Nonsense!

HESTER. You've had all the knowledge at your fingertips for so long, it will become almost instinctive. Like second nature to you.

BEATON. I am not listening.

HESTER. You know a lot more than you can possibly guess. [*Leaning over the couch, ominously*] That makes you dangerous.

BEATON. Stop this foolish talk!

HESTER. Just who shall be the victim of all this carefully concealed knowledge? Only time will tell. Time . . .

BEATON. [*Angry and a bit upset*] Miss Tandy, I—!

PLIMPTON. [*Suddenly speaking from behind her book*] Rusted hinges.

HESTER. What's that?

PLIMPTON. Your puzzle. The closed room.

HESTER. Yes?

PLIMPTON. It must rain often. The metal bars on the window . . . they have rusted hinges.

HESTER. And that is your solution? Mrs. Plimpton, this is not one of those sloppy thrillers where ill-thought-out clues appear from nowhere in the last chapter. Rusted hinges, indeed!

PLIMPTON. It is a possible solution.

HESTER. That may be so on the television, but not in a Hester Tandy novel. Even I have standards.

PLIMPTON. The murderer knew that the hinges had become severely rusted and took advantage of that fact.

HESTER. And leave so obvious a clue behind him? Hardly. [*Laughing*] I see, Mrs. Plimpton, why you chose not to write detective fiction yourself. A wise decision, I am sure.

PLIMPTON. I am content being a mere observer.

HESTER. Critic, you mean. The Orczy Club is full of critics. A dozen women writers get together and every one of them turns into a critic. Everyone finds fault with everyone else's solutions. It's maddening.

PLIMPTON. It makes for conversation at tea. [*Returns to her book*]

HESTER. Miss Beaton, what do you think of rusted hinges?

BEATON. It sounds satisfactory enough to me.

HESTER. [*Crossing to table Right*] To a typist, I suppose it would. Octavia Sturges may get away with solutions like that but not in my books. Call me what you will, trite is not one of my literary flaws. [*Fingering the bottles on the table*] You have to be Great and Renowned before you can push off such a solution on the public. [*Turning to Beaton*] You should know that, typing all her work as you do. Her Percival Pomfront has had worst deductions than rusted hinges, I can tell you that.

BEATON. I do not see where it is my obligation to defend Mrs. Sturges' prose.

HESTER. I suppose not. How long are you two planning to stay in London this time?

BEATON. No more than a fortnight, I hope. The street traffic gets on Mrs. Sturges' nerves and she becomes more irritable than usual. Also the city air disrupts her appetite, so she says. I'm afraid the Cornwall house is the only place on earth where she is the least bit tolerable.

HESTER. [*Picking up one of the bottles and reading its label*] You and your employer get on marvelously, I can tell. Very professional, I think you said. Where is she now?

BEATON. Downstairs . . . with a journalist.

HESTER. [*Turns to her in surprise*] Journalist? How did that happen? Her coming here was a surprise. At least I was surprised. Weren't you surprised, Mrs. Plimpton?

PLIMPTON. [*Still deep in her book*] Nothing surprises me.

BEATON. It seems that a member of the press must have spotted Mrs. Sturges and me on the train this morning. They are all oh so persistent, you know.

HESTER. [*Replacing the bottle*] Not exactly. Journalists have never been known to bang down my door with enthusiasm.

BEATON. You should be grateful. Renown has many uncomfortable drawbacks.

HESTER. I'll have to remember that.

PLIMPTON. [*Suddenly*] The spool bed, perhaps.

HESTER. What's that?

PLIMPTON. In your puzzle. The spool bed is connected to the ceiling and is situated on an elevator lift. The murderer waited until the victim was asleep, then raised up the bed and—

HESTER. [*Cross to Plimpton, sits in chair beside her, laughing*] You have been reading too many Alfred Campion thrillers, Mrs. Plimpton. First rusted hinges, now elevator beds. I thought I joined this club for professional atmosphere.

BEATON. Well, do not look at me. I am, I'm pleased to say, not a member.

[*MADAM ULRICA LECOQ and CLARICE FURGUSSON enter the room from the hall and stand just inside the room. CLARICE is in the midst of complaining*]

CLARICE. And another thing, Madame Lecoq, I thought that it was a firm house rule of this club that no reporters or journalists of any sort were to be allowed on the premises. That was an understanding that I have always had from the start.

MADAME. Mrs. Sturges has asked that Miss Cobbs be allowed to stay for supper.

CLARICE. I do not see how that has any bearing on the question at hand. The house rules, it would seem to me, stand independent of the wishes of one member . . . a member, I am forced to add, who rather infrequently participates in the club's activities as it is.

MADAME. But that is just the case, my dear Clarice. Mrs. Sturges comes here so rarely these days, I thought no one would mind if—

CLARICE. But I do mind. I mind very much—

HESTER. Well, I don't mind. Do you mind, Mrs. Plimpton?

PLIMPTON. I am reading.

HESTER. She doesn't mind. What about you, Miss Beaton?

BEATON. I have no need to state my opinion of the press—

HESTER. She doesn't mind either. Who else is here today? We'll take a poll—

CLARICE. [*Cross behind Hester's chair*] I do not think this is any affair of yours, Hester Tandy!

MADAME. [*Cross to Clarice*] Please, Clarice, my sweet . . . just until after supper. It will not be so bad, no? And Miss Cobbs from the press seems very nice.

CLARICE. She'll be here for tea also, I suppose?

HESTER. She can have my biscuit if that is what worries you. I don't see what all the bother is about.

CLARICE. You wouldn't. That is precisely the problem around here. I hate to say such a thing in front of you, Madame Lecoq, but the quality of the Orczy Club has been steadily going downward for some time now and no one seems to be taking any notice of it. There was a time when the mere thought of a journalist here at dinner would be followed by a handful of resignations. But not today. It seems there are no restrictions at all. How is it possible to maintain an exclusive, restricted club of women authors without any restrictions? The criteria for membership has sunken so low as to be unidentifiable!

HESTER. Don't look now, Mrs. Plimpton, but I think you've been insulted.

PLIMPTON. I am reading.

CLARICE. [*Looking at Hester pointedly*] I was thinking more of second rate crime writers with only a few paperback sales to her credit.

HESTER. You'd kill for a first printing paperback contract, Clarice. If it weren't for the deluxe binding, not even stuffy old retired colonels would be buying your hardcover editions!

CLARICE. And just who would be buying your paperbacks if it weren't for the juvenile, lewd illustrations on the front cover?

MADAME. Please, please! There is no reason for this quarreling. There must be harmony or there can be no Orczy Club. It is that simple, no?

CLARICE. [*Cross to right side of bookshelves, looks at titles*] I was just expressing a general opinion. She is the one who so aptly made the personal application.

HESTER. I don't see how you can say that quality is low when the great Ulrica Lecoq is in our midst.

MADAME. Oh, you are too kind, Hester. But I have not written a word in twenty-three years. You flatter me to remember.

HESTER. Not a bit of flattery was intended, Madame. I've read everything you've written. Twice. And you are still the master in my eyes.

MADAME. But the translations . . . they are so terrible at times.

HESTER. I read the original French and I say you are a genius. Even Clarice would agree with me there.

CLARICE. I can recognize genius without your help, Miss Tandy. [*To MADAME*] But she is correct, Madame.

MADAME. Oh, but my time is past. They do not read my kind of fiction these days. So much fighting in the stories. Car chases. And sex. My poor Detective Bomposse did not understand sex. Not at all. He was too cultured. And I suppose I was too. I could not change my style. Not like Mrs. Sturges can. She can adapt to the times. I cannot.

CLARICE. I say there is no comparison.

HESTER. Where is the maestro now? Is she coming up for tea, Madame?

MADAME. Very soon.

CLARICE. [*Cross downstage to stand beside Madame*] I don't see how anyone can even speak of Octavia Sturges' fiction in the same breath as the great Detective Bomposse. Madame Lecoq created a master of detection; Octavia Sturges only writes of caricatures with stereotypic gimmicks.

MADAME. Oh, you do not do our distinguished member justice, no?

HESTER. Clarice is jealous again.

CLARICE. [*Glaring at Hester*] Compare the fiction. It speaks for itself. Jealousy has nothing whatsoever to do with it.

HESTER. [*Rise, cross Down Right*] Every time Octavia Sturges comes to London, everyone makes a big fuss over her and you hate it.

CLARICE. Nonsense.

HESTER. [*Turning to face Clarice*] And last month, when Octavia Sturges won the Father Brown award and you were not even nominated . . . didn't we have to hear you rage over that for a whole week?

CLARICE. Those awards mean nothing. Even you should know that.

MADAME. I remember the first time I won the Father Brown award. I wept. Baroness Orczy herself congratulated me. I was in awe of her, you see.

CLARICE. Back then it was an honor. Today that award is ludicrous. This year's runner up was that dreadful Hermione Willis! How can decent detective fiction be expected from someone living in Salt Lake City?

MADAME. I have read some of this Hermione Willis. She is not so bad, no?

HESTER. She's very clever . . . in an American sort of way.

CLARICE. The Father Brown award was not intended for cleverness. But, evidently, their standards have dropped also . . . or else Octavia Sturges would not be so frequent a recipient.

HESTER. [*Sitting at right end of sofa*] Tell me, Miss Beaton, is your employer as jealous of Clarice Fergusson as she is of her?

BEATON. I don't see where it is my obligation to state—

HESTER. [*To Clarice*] Obviously she isn't.

MADAME. [*Crossing behind sofa to Hester*] Please, please, ladies! I will not have it. I suggest the subject be changed immediately.

CLARICE. [*Cross Down Left, standing with her back to the others*] It is fine with me. I do not wish to continue this ridiculous discussion any further.

MADAME. [*Picking up HESTER's diagram from sofa*] An interesting diagram. The closed room puzzle, no?

HESTER. Yes.

MADAME. I see . . . Barred windows here?

HESTER. Yes. It's for my new novel.

MADAME. And the door is locked?

HESTER. Of course.

CLARICE. [*Haughtily*] How different . . .

HESTER. And it is raining outside.

MADAME. Raining . . . a very interesting dilemma.

HESTER. How does the murderer get in and get out?

MADAME. [*Cross to front of sofa, sits between Hester and Beaton*] The nightstand is very peculiarly placed. Perhaps a trap door . . . here.

PLIMPTON. One with rusted hinges?

MADAME. What is that, Mrs. Plimpton?

PLIMPTON. I also considered a trap door. But it would be rather difficult to conceal with no carpeting to hide it.

HESTER. She also suggested an elevator lift. Ian Fleming style.

MADAME. Nothing so complicated, that is my guess. The best way to enter a room is to do it simply and quietly. The less the overture, the more significant the effect.

[*MRS. BALSER, the cook, has quietly entered the room from the Up Right door. No one has noticed her*]

BALSER. Here you are, mum. [*Everyone jumps a bit at the surprise sound of her voice*] I've been looking all about.

MADAME. Yes? What is it, Mrs. Balsler?

BALSER. It's about tea, mum. How many places ought I set, seein' there's a newspaper girl downstairs with Missus Sturges?

MADAME. Miss Cobbs will be joining us. As will Miss Beaton, I hope?

BEATON. It is not my place to refuse . . .

MADAME. [*To BALSER*] And Miss Beaton also. Oh, and another visitor. An American.

CLARICE. What!

MADAME. A Miss Hawkins. That will make eight, Mrs. Balsler.

BALSER. [*Not pleased*] Very fine, mum.

MADAME. And that will be eight for supper also.

BALSER. As you like, mum. But I don't know what I'm going to fix Missus Sturges. You know how much of a fuss she can be at the table. Sent back half the meal last time she was here. There's a streak of the devil in that woman, I say.

MADAME. Just try to manage the best you can, Mrs. Balsler.

BALSER. Yes, mum. [*Mumbling to herself as she exits Up Right*] Eight for tea . . . eight for supper . . . and it ain't even near the holidays yet.

CLARICE. And just who is this American, Madame Lecoq?

MADAME. A sweet girl. On her vacation. She has just sold her first mystery novel in America and she so wishes to spend some of her holiday among the great lady writers. Those were her words: great lady writers. She is very nice.

CLARICE. [*Cross to Madame*] You are not considering allowing an American to join the Orczy Club!

MADAME. It is only for a few days. We certainly have the room for her.

CLARICE. But this is a reputable establishment for artists—not some hotel!

MADAME. But Miss Hawkins is an artist. It is true she is a young and unexperienced one. But perhaps she is very good.

HESTER. Some new blood could do us all a bit of good, I say.

CLARICE. If you ask me, there is absolutely nothing the matter with the old blood.

MADAME. Oh, to be young again. So full of possibilities! She may someday be a great writer herself. She may create another Lititia Carberry. Or even a Lady Molly!

CLARICE. That is a matter of anyone's conjecture. But I have always been of the understanding that the Orczy Club was for established figures in crime fiction. If we should become a haven for would-be . . .

[The door to the hall slowly opens, making a creaking sound, and all in the room direct their attention to it. A pause. Even MRS. PLIMP-TON stops reading. EVE HAWKINS puts her head into the room]

MADAME. Ah . . . come in, dear! Come in . . .

[EVE has a way of reciting to herself as though composing a story in her head as she floats about a room. Composing is exactly what she is doing. The others watch quietly with curiosity and some amusement as EVE wanders about the room, looking at everything and everybody]

EVE. "She slowly entered the room, the December afternoon sun striking her sideways, casting uncomfortable shadows on the paneling. The sitting room was warm, the air languid with the smell of antiquity . . . both in its architecture and its furnishings. The faces that greeted her were of a mixed sort. But a calm voice eased her tension, calling 'come in, dear, come in'"

HESTER. *[After a stunned pause, to the others]* This can't be the journalist.

MADAME. *[Rising]* My dear Miss Hawkins . . . come. Let me introduce you to everyone.

EVE. You must excuse me. I guess I was thinking out loud. *[Then recites to herself again]* "As she moved through the strange room, the impulses of anticipation ran throughout her. The others stared, knowingly. Their gazes were firm. Their expressions wide . . ."

MADAME. *[Not knowing what else to do]* This is Clarice Fergusson. And this is Hester Tandy. Both of them you are familiar with, no?

EVE. I should say so. *[Shakes hands with HESTER]* Pleased to meet you.

HESTER. "Her grip was firm. Her smile wide . . ."

EVE. Pardon?

HESTER. *[Laughing]* Just thinking out loud.

MADAME. Seated over there is Mrs. Plimpton, another one of our members. And this is Lydia Beaton, Mrs. Sturges' private secretary . . .

EVE. Sturges? Octavia Sturges?

BEATON. *[Pained]* Yes . . .

EVE. Oh, Mrs. Beaton . . . ! I don't know what to say . . . !

BEATON. Say "Miss" Beaton.

EVE. Oh.

MADAME. Mrs. Sturges will be joining us for tea shortly.

EVE. For real? Truly? Oh, but I can't believe it! Octavia Sturges!

CLARICE. This can become intolerable.

MADAME. Everyone, this is Miss Eve Hawkins.

EVE. Glad to meet you all.

CLARICE. Indeed . . .

HESTER. Madame Lecoq tells me you've just been published.

EVE. Yes! My first novel. Isn't it exciting?

CLARICE. I can hardly remember my first novel. There have been so many since.

HESTER. Yes. The only thing greater than Clarice's list of publications is her memory.

EVE. I was so surprised! Lippincott bought it just last month. They said it could have made Literary Guild but there wasn't enough sex in it for a first novel.

HESTER. Your name sounds rather familiar. Have you ever had anything else published?

EVE. Not a thing. Isn't it amazing? I'm taking this trip on the advance money . . . plus my savings. *[Recites to herself again as she returns to examining the room]* "She paced the room carefully, eyeing every detail, sniffing each distinctive odor—"

CLARICE. You do go in for sensuous prose, don't you, dear?

EVE. [*Still to herself, standing at Center stage, framed by the others*] "But she knew immediately that there was more here than meets the eye. A shiver of stimulation ran amuck within her . . ." Always consider the five senses. I learnt that in school.

CLARICE. School?

EVE. The Famous Writers' School. Mail order. You know.

CLARICE. Heaven spare me if I did . . .

EVE. They taught me all sorts of things. I don't know where I'd be without them— [*Picks up Hester's diagram*] Hey, whose map? Yours, Miss Beaton? For your new book . . . ?

BEATON. I don't write. I type.

EVE. And you do it very well. I read Octavia Sturges' last novel just the other day and it was great!

MADAME. This is Miss Tandy's diagram.

HESTER. [*To Eve*] How are you on the "closed room" technique?

EVE. What's that?

MADAME. A form of who-done-it, you might say, no?

HESTER. [*Cross to Eve, using the diagram to explain*] A murder has taken place in this room. The door is locked from the inside. The window is barred. There is a full-sized wardrobe, a spool bed—

EVE. Is it raining or snowing or is there a strong wind outside?

HESTER. [*Taken aback*] Yes, actually. It's raining.

EVE. That would cover the noise.

CLARICE. What noise?

PLIMPTON. Of the rusted hinges.

EVE. What . . . ?

PLIMPTON. Or an elevator. Under the spool bed.

EVE. No. Too complicated and too risky.

MADAME. I thought perhaps the nightstand was peculiarly placed . . .

EVE. Not for a left-handed person.

HESTER. How did you know the victim was left-handed?

EVE. Look at the angle of the bed. and the window cord.

MADAME. Of course . . . that makes perfect sense.

CLARICE. Well, what is your solution, Miss Hawkins?

EVE. Let me see . . . [*Recites, moves about*] "The little room was dark, but he could see his way by the brief splashes of lightning that forced their way through the iron bars on the window. Suddenly there was a scream—!" [*She screams, then quickly returns to the diagram*] I have it. The wardrobe! [*To Hester*] It's full-length, you say?

HESTER. Yes . . .

EVE. There's a door built into the back of it. It leads to the next

room right . . . [*points*] here. With the noise of the rain, the murderer could move back and forth like so

CLARICE. [*Laughs*] Ridiculous! Even for a Hester Tandy novel!

EVE. Not at all. The door could be hidden into the molding so well that only the sharpest of detectives would consider it.

CLARICE. [*Still laughing*] Such ideas!

HESTER. [*She is frowning. Takes the diagram away*] You have to read the whole book to fully appreciate it.

EVE. [*Pleased*] I guessed it?

MADAME. Congratulations, my dear! So you are a mystery writer after all!

EVE. I'm trying.

MADAME. You have a brilliant future before you, I would say. Someday you may be great. As great as—

[Noise from the hall. Everything stops as OCTAVIA STURGES appears in the doorway with MISS COBBS, who carries a camera and notebook]

COBBS. One shot of you coming through the doorway, Mrs. Sturges?

OCTAVIA. If you insist . . .

[MAY COBBS comes into the room, takes a few pictures and OCTAVIA poses, oblivious to EVE's reciting. The others dress the stage to give focus to Octavia]

EVE. "There she stood . . . the grande dame of the mystery novel . . . the mother earth of crime detection. Within her mind turn the wheels of incomparable deduction, the plots containing a thousand clues, the—"

CLARICE. Enough!

OCTAVIA. [*To Cobbs*] Yes, that is enough pictures for now. I never photograph well indoors, in any case. We'll take a few shots outside. After tea.

COBBS. Yes, Mrs. Sturges.

OCTAVIA. [*Notices others for the first time*] Ah, more suspects up here. Clarice Furgusson! How ever are you doing? And why did you give up writing? You were so . . . amusing.

CLARICE. I haven't stopped writing and you know it.

OCTAVIA. Pity.

MADAME. So, you have finally come up for tea, Mrs. Sturges. How nice.

OCTAVIA. [*Crosses to sofa and sits in its center*] I suppose you'll serve those dreadful biscuits with tea again. The Orczy Club may have