

SHERLOCK HOLMES AND THE SPINSTERS OF BLACKMEAD

A MYSTERY IN TWO ACTS

By **C.P. Stancich**

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SPINSTERS OF BLACKMEAD**

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SYNOPSIS: Someone is murdering the women of Blackmead Manor, and the fiercely independent female academic community is reluctant to ask for help from outsiders. When Sherlock Holmes and Dr. Watson are drawn into the case, they find their reception as sticky as the mystery they must solve. A servant is found dead, a member of the Blackmead community is missing, and the great detective uncovers links to his arch enemy, Professor Moriarty. Is this merely another interesting case or a fatal trap for Holmes himself?

CAST OF CHARACTERS

(4 MEN, 7 WOMEN)

- HOLMES (m) The great detective. *(241 lines)*
- WATSON (m)..... A true-blooded Englishman, bright enough...unless he stands next to Holmes. *(203 lines)*
- MIRRIAM CRAY (f)..... A sensible youngish widow, intelligent, but with a propensity for blood-curdling screams. *(117 lines)*
- ALICE MILNE (f)..... A spinster of early middle age, intellectually formidable, the leader of the community. *(70 lines)*
- ESTELLE LAPOINT (f)..... A spinster of sarcasm and fierceness. *(73 lines)*
- GLENDA MACKAY (f) A spinster of some timidity. *(29 lines)*
- BILLIT (f)..... A capable housekeeper. *(30 lines)*

- DOVE (f) An impetuous adventurer. (49 lines)
- MRS. PETTIMAN (f) A country policeman's wife.
(42 lines)
- BUSBY (m) A boy, 10-14: a Baker Street
Irregular. (28 lines)
- SPENDLOVE (m) A body. (No lines)

SETS

BAKER ST

Two gentlemen's armchairs at far left corner of stage.

BLACKMEAD PARK

A bare stage except for a shrub or lawn statuary.

BLACKMEAD MANOR

Minimum: A manor house drawing room, A fireplace, left. Exits right-up and center-up. Two sofas facing each other. A writing table and chair, down left. A box seat covering a hiding place, up between the two exits. Chairs and a table down right. Small tables near the sofa. Any ephemera befitting a Victorian manor house.

PRODUCTION HISTORY

Sherlock Holmes and the Spinsters of Blackmead was originally produced by the Theater Company of Lafayette in Lafayette, CO in October and November of 2010 with the following cast:

SHERLOCK HOLMES	David Bliley
DR. WATSON	Don Thumim
MIRIAM CRAY	Chelsey McCrory
ALICE MILNE	Vonalda Utterback
ESTELLE LAPOINT	Hollie Laudal
GLENDA MACKAY	Heather Woodruff
BILLIT	Kirsten Jorgensen-Smith
OSCAR DOVE	Matt Barham
MRS. PETTIMAN	Sarah MacMillan
BUSBY	Peyton Baldwin
Director	Erich Toll
TLC Artistic Director	Madge Montgomery

To Glen and JoDeen Cushman: indefatigable “opening-nighters”

ACT ONE, SCENE 1

SCENE:

221B Baker Street/Blackmead Park, Cheshire. The action alternates.

TIME:

1897, early autumn, twilight.

AT RISE:

Lights up on BAKER ST, discovering HOLMES and WATSON seated in easy chairs. HOLMES fills his pipe thoughtfully, while WATSON reads a newspaper.

HOLMES: *(Playfully, with soft theatricality.)* Beware the doom!

WATSON: *(From behind his paper.)* What's that, Holmes?

HOLMES: *(Smiling.)* I said: beware the doom!

WATSON: *(Lowering the paper.)* That's what I thought you said.

HOLMES: The Doom of Devilsmoor!

WATSON: Ah. *(Shakes his head.)* We're off on that again.

HOLMES: The doom! The doom? Watson?

WATSON: It's a perfectly reasonable way to begin a narrative.

HOLMES: Florid...manipulative.

WATSON: Yes, well, I'm afraid literature is, by its nature, manipulative. Especially, I'm afraid, opening lines.

HOLMES: And titles. *(Rolls his eyes.)* "The Doom of Devilsmoor."

WATSON: The title! Come now, Holmes, you agreed that title was obvious. In fact... *(Breaks off, closing his eyes.)* No. I will not be drawn into this conversation again. We had this discussion when I read you the draft of my account...and again last month when the proofs came from the editor. Each time you ended up confessing you were perfectly happy with "The Doom of Devilsmoor" as a title.

HOLMES: Content, not happy. I confess that, as melodramatic as it was, from the moment your friend Oscar Dove invented it, the Doom was inevitable. *(Considers, chuckles.)* No one can escape the Doom of Devilsmoor!

WATSON: Oscar Dove was your friend first. Anyway, the account is published. And I would wager that I would find your own case notes—if you ever got around to filing them—filed under “D” for “Doom.”

HOLMES and WATSON share eye contact. HOLMES at last gives the slightest of playful shrugs

HOLMES: Well, “D” for “Devilsmoor,” possibly.

WATSON enjoys a satisfied smile, then snaps onto a frown.

WATSON: Wait a moment. You never criticize my editorial choices this late in the game unless I bring them up first. (*Considers, then cocks his head ruefully.*) My literary openings are not the only manipulative gambits on display this evening.

HOLMES: (*With admiration.*) Watson!

WATSON pulls a letter from his pocket.

WATSON: I’ve had a letter from Oscar Dove, and you’ve somehow deduced it, and you were manipulating me into a position so that you could pounce and once again astound me with a feat of deduction.

HOLMES erupts with a laugh.

HOLMES: My dear Watson, you have anticipated my anticipation! I am well and truly hoist by my own petard. Though in fact, except that you came in with the slight air of eagerness which I have labeled “Watson with news,” I didn’t so much deduce this evening that you had received one of Dove’s epistles.

WATSON: Oh?

HOLMES: No. Rather, I deduced yesterday that you would be receiving one.

WATSON: Yesterday! How?

HOLMES: Because the impetuous Dove has demonstrated a clear pattern since the affair of the “Doom.” He communicates to me upon impulse, and then thinks about it, considers more fully...

WATSON: And then writes to me.

HOLMES: With whom he feels more comfortable.

WATSON: (*Considers.*) So he wrote to you yesterday.

HOLMES instantly produces a letter. WATSON considers, then gives a snort. At the same instant, they snap open their letters.

WATSON: About the curious circumstances in Cheshire?

HOLMES: Yes, the women who inhabit a place called Blackmead Manor. He wanted to know if I’d heard anything about “The Spinsters of Blackmead.”

WATSON: Ah! Upon more reflection, he uses the official title. (*Searches the letter, reads.*) Blackmead Trust for the Advancement of Gentlewomen.

HOLMES: So I discovered. The well-endowed benevolence of a widow, Mrs. Caroline Fitzallen, who died some fifteen years ago.

WATSON: Leaving Blackmead Manor and its estate, Blackmead Park, together with considerable capital to fund the trust.

HOLMES: And the purpose of the trust no doubt provided a scandal to what are laughingly called the “right-thinking” people of society. The name alone is surely designed to provoke the vast majority of society.

WATSON: I like to think of myself as a right-thinking person.

HOLMES: There you are mistaken. You, my dear Watson, are a thoughtful person. Right-thinking people seldom think at all. They react. I imagine the reaction to Mrs. Fitzallen’s legacy was as vociferous as it was ill-informed. “What do gentlewomen need advancement for!” I shouldn’t be surprised if Mr. W.S. Gilbert hadn’t heard about Blackmead before he wrote “Princess Ida”!

WATSON: Holmes, when it comes to women’s issues, you yourself have not been the most generous—

HOLMES: I do not trouble myself about issues. I wish to know the facts of the case. I deduce from data. I do not react to the provocation of the Blackmead Trust for the Advancement of Gentlewomen, because I can make nothing out of it.

WATSON: You can't?

HOLMES: Can you?

WATSON hesitates, glancing at the letter.

WATSON: Well...no. It can mean anything.

HOLMES: So can most issues...women's or otherwise. So one looks for data.

WATSON: And have you?

HOLMES: *(Pauses, smiling.)* Having a day's start on you and no other cases of interest, yes. Blackmead provides funds for unmarried women engaged in academic, artistic and journalistic pursuits. The terms of the legacy are eccentric in that refuge is provided especially for women of a certain age who have never married. They receive a stipend and home, and in addition to their researches, they serve as arbiters for all appeals to the trust.

WATSON: That sounds reasonable enough.

HOLMES: Bearing in mind that the populace has seen reason with far less. Need I remind you that several dozen ginger-headed men once answered a six-line advertisement for a spurious organization claiming as its mission the propagation of that hair-color.

WATSON: *(Laughs.)* The Red-Headed League! But that was a ruse to lure a single man out of his place of business.

HOLMES: Yes, and Dr. Moriarty's ruse was made all the more plausible when five score red-headed Londoners turned out with the victim!

WATSON: Well, Blackmead is nothing like that, I hope. Especially since our acquaintance, Mrs. Mirriam Cray is in residence.

HOLMES: From what I found today, the trust is what it purports to be. Dove's misgivings are based on her finding. My letter mentioned mysterious deaths and a mysterious figure. I hope he was more detailed in yours.

As WATSON speaks, light slowly rises on the Blackmead Park set. A hooded and robed figure appears holding a long-bladed knife. It will skulk briefly, then retreat downstage.

WATSON: He says that Mrs. Cray came to Blackmead three weeks ago to visit an old friend, Miss Glenda MacKay, who is one of the four residential trustees. It seems Miss MacKay, indeed the whole household, was in mourning for a fifth member of the community... *(Searches the letter.)* ...a Miss Montegue, who died in an apparent accident on the grounds of Blackmead Park two months hence.

HOLMES: Two months before the present or before Cray arrived?

WATSON: Uh...he doesn't say.

HOLMES: *(Recoiling in disappointment.)* Sloppy, Dove, sloppy.

As WATSON continues, the hooded figure reappears down stage, looks about, then exits hurriedly upstage.

WATSON: This is apparently not the first sudden or suspicious death at the manor. There have also been reports of a mysterious figure lurking about the place. Mrs. Cray is holding, as he says, a watching brief, and as he is currently "in transit," he has advised her to call upon you if there is a crisis.

HOLMES: Has he? How magnanimous of him to propose me as his humble substitute.

WATSON: *(Chuckles.)* I don't think he meant it like that, Holmes. He and Mrs. Cray seemed to develop an attachment after that affair at Hurlstone. I hope she's all right down there. Blackmead is a long way from London.

Lights down on Baker St. There is a flash of distant lightning followed by thunder. LAPOINT enters up right, carrying a lantern. CRAY and MACKAY enter up-center, breathless and nervous.

CRAY: Is that you, Estelle?

LAPOINT: Yes. Who's that?

CRAY: Mirriam and Glenda.

LAPOINT joins the others.

LAPOINT: No luck in the summer house?

CRAY: Empty.

LAPOINT: Same at the grotto. As near as I could tell. The shadows are pretty deep already.

MACKAY: You're braver than I am, Estelle. I won't go near that place in broad daylight, not after what happened there.

CRAY puts an arm around MACKAY.

CRAY: Easy, Glenda. We're all together.

LAPOINT: It's getting too dark, and there's a storm moving in. We've left it too late. We should have begun a proper search this afternoon.

MACKAY: I thought the servants...

LAPOINT: So did I, but Mrs. Billit being down with chill, the word didn't get passed. Then we found out they only'd seen to the interior.

There is another flash of lightning, followed by thunder and the sound of wind. Enter MILNE, up right.

MILNE: Fawcett says there's been no sign at the stables, but he's having the boys take a look round the buildings as they shutter them. Nothing out here?

LAPOINT: Nothing. And we're running out of time.

MACKAY: Where can they be?

Enter BILLIT, up right with a lantern

MILNE: Billit! What are you doing out here?

LAPOINT: Thought you were under the weather.

BILLIT: Pardon me, Miss LaPoint, but we're all going to be under the weather if we stay out here. Under it and in it.

More lightning, wind and thunder.

MILNE: I'm afraid you're right.

CRAY: There's a little more time, surely.

They regard one another, lost for a course. CRAY delivers MACKAY to BILLIT.

CRAY: Billit, you take Miss MacKay back to the house. We'll be along directly. *(CRAY drifts down stage, looking off. BILLIT looks to MILNE, who considers, then nods.)*

MILNE: You go ahead. Have the fires built up. We'll have one last look.

BILLIT looks unconvinced, then shrugs, gathers up MACKAY and exits, up right. More wind.

MILNE: *(Looking aloft.)* But I don't see what we can do in this.

LAPOINT holds up a hand to stop MILNE. She regards CRAY.

LAPOINT: Alice, wait...

MILNE and LAPOINT approach CRAY.

MILNE: What is it, Mrs. Cray? *(Receives no reply.)* Mirriam? What do you see?

CRAY: Not see. I thought I heard someone.

Crash of thunder. Lights down on BLACKMEAD and up on BAKER ST. HOLMES is seated. WATSON is standing upstage, ushering in BUSBY, who is wearing his messenger's uniform.

HOLMES: Who is it, Watson?

WATSON: It's that rarest of creatures: a Baker Street Irregular here on regular business.

HOLMES: Busby! Good heavens! Still wearing the livery of the working man? What's it been? Three months?

BUSBY: Near enough. *(Tugs at his collar, uncomfortable.)* Feels like years.

HOLMES: I warned you. It goes against your nomadic nature. I am amazed you haven't chucked it in.

WATSON: Now, Holmes—

BUSBY: I was gonna do, lots of times. But it's like you said. You get used to the tips. And I like having the lodgings.

HOLMES: Ah, the subtle enslavement of the wage earner. I did warn you.

BUSBY: Didn't stop you from putting me forward, did it?

HOLMES: Ah...that was Watson. It was his recommendation. He was taken in by your bright eye and resourcefulness. I remain unconvinced.

WATSON: Or perhaps you didn't like being deprived of your steadiest spy and ferret. I seem to remember that opinion emerging...after a lengthy lecture on my interfering with the natural stratification of the society of London.

HOLMES: Did I lecture you? Possibly. I don't remember. Well, as inconvenient as it may have been, I begin to see the value of having a contact among the messenger boys. There are so many of them, they are almost as inconspicuous as the urchins. And the uniform is bound to get you indoors more readily. So you think you might keep at it?

BUSBY: Well, Mr. Holmes, I truly did like helping you with your cases, but the tough thing 'bout being an Irregular is...it's irregular.

WATSON and HOLMES regard each other.

WATSON: The boy's turned philosopher.

HOLMES: Yes, more matter for W.S. Gilbert. Never fear, Busby, in the field of detection, once an operative, always an operative. You may continue to rise in the commercial metropolis from messenger boy, to office boy, to clerk and beyond, but you will always be one of my agents.

BUSBY: Ta, Mr. Holmes. (*Considers, darkens.*) I think.

HOLMES: And what business brings you here this evening?

BUSBY considers, having forgotten, then reaches into his pocket.

BUSBY: Wire for you.

BUSBY hands over an envelope. HOLMES accepts it.

BUSBY: It's from that Mrs. Cray...of the Devilsmoor business.

HOLMES and WATSON regard each other. HOLMES opens the envelope and reads.

WATSON: (To *BUSBY*.) How's the reading coming along?

BUSBY: (Shrugs.) Better than the writing.

WATSON: You'll need to work on both if you want to be an office boy.

BUSBY: (Makes a face.) Ain't even sure I wanna be a messenger...yet.

HOLMES: Watson, things are progressing faster than even Dove suspected. It seems one of the four spinsters has disappeared.

WATSON: What?

HOLMES: As has one of the servants. A search is currently under way.

WATSON: Does she want our help?

HOLMES: That is not expressed here... (Considers.) But it is implicit.

HOLMES considers again. WATSON and BUSBY regard him, then each other, sharing an admiration for the detective at work. HOLMES rouses himself.

HOLMES: Thank you Busby, no reply...at least tonight.

HOLMES looks to WATSON, nodding upstage. WATSON reaches into his pocket, procuring a tip. BUSBY receives it with eager anticipation, then looks at it and makes a face. WATSON escorts BUSBY upstage.

WATSON: (To *BUSBY*.) You delivered a telegram, not the whereabouts of the missing treasure of the Great Fort of Agra.

BUSBY pauses, curtsies impishly, and exits. WATSON returns.

WATSON: Cheeky beggar. Well, what do you make of it, Holmes?

HOLMES rereads the telegram, remaining silent.

WATSON: A pair gone missing? Could it be some sort of innocent truancy?

HOLMES: *(Still pondering.)* I don't think Mirriam Cray would have wired if that were suspected. She has, you may remember, an embarrassing habit of screaming when surprised. She is therefore careful to appear reasoned and thoughtful at all other times. And indeed I have found her so. *(At last sets down the telegram.)* The conditions of this trust require more research.

WATSON: Are you proposing to do this research at Blackmead?

HOLMES: That is one location. But there is more to be done in London. Watson...

WATSON: I know that tone, Holmes. You are about to ask me if my practice might spare me a day or two.

HOLMES: And if I did, what would your reply be?

WATSON: *(Shaking his head.)* I dare say I could manage it.

HOLMES: Then once more I impose upon you to be my herald. We must devise a program of action and consult a timetable. Early train tomorrow, I think.

WATSON: *(Closing his eyes.)* I should have guessed it would be the early train.

HOLMES: And while on your journey, you might consider the meaning of a term that Oscar Dove included in his letter to me, but which he may have omitted in yours.

WATSON: What's that?

HOLMES: The term is "tontine," Watson. "Tontine."

Lights out on Baker St. Lights up with a flash of lightning on Blackmead Park. LAPOINT and MILNE are upstage, huddled together. CRAY is far upstage, bending over a body.

MILNE: Mirriam? Mrs. Cray...what is it?

CRAY: A body.

LAPOINT: *(Charged with fear.)* Not...not Emaline! *(LAPOINT clutches at MILNE.)*

CRAY: No...it's the footman, Spendlove. *(CRAY moves up to the others, taking the lantern from LAPOINT.)*

CRAY: (*To LAPOINT.*) Can you find your way to the stables in this light?

LAPOINT: The stables? (*Steadies herself.*) Yes. Yes, of course.

CRAY: (*Nods.*) Good. Find Fawcett. Tell him there's been an accident. He's to bring the stable lads, lanterns, and a hurdle.

LAPOINT braces herself, looking to MILNE, who nods. LAPOINT exits, up right. CRAY moves downstage, shining the light left and right.

CRAY: We shouldn't move the body, but I don't think we can risk leaving it out here in the park overnight, not with the storm coming. But you, Alice, as mistress of the house will have to approve that, because the police will want to know why he was moved.

MILNE: Police. But—

CRAY: He's been killed, Alice. Stabbed, I think.

MILNE: Murdered! Oh good heavens! You're sure?

CRAY: I wish I wasn't. But you may have heard me mention my recent encounter with such a victim.

MILNE: Yes. But...you're sure he's dead.

CRAY: Yes. I'm afraid what I heard back there was the poor man's death groan.

MILNE: But who—

CRAY: I don't know.

CRAY returns to MILNE.

CRAY: Now listen, Alice, we've just had a shock. Our minds are racing with possibilities. We can't do anything with them right now. We have to deal with what we can.

MILNE: (*Steadying herself.*) Yes. Yes, you're right.

CRAY: Good. Now, when Fawcett gets here with the boys, we should have them sweep the rest of the lawn as far as the trees, in case...

MILNE: In case... Oh god, yes, in case, Emiline!

CRAY: That's right. Then we'll have the body taken to the stables or someplace suitable. Are there police nearby?

MILNE: Police...uh...there's a constable in the village...what was his name? Oh, I know I know it. Something of your typical country copper...Pettiman! Yes, that's it!

CRAY: Good. Well, we'll have to decide if we should send for him tonight or wait until morning. *(CRAY turns back to the body.)* It's difficult to know what's best. I suppose... *(CRAY bends over the body.)*

MILNE: What are you doing?

CRAY: Looking for the knife. If we're going to move him, which I fear we must, then—

There is a masculine groan, followed by a flash of lightning. As the thunder sounds, SPENDLOVE lurches into a sitting position throwing an arm around CRAY. CRAY screams as SPENDLOVE holds her tight. He puts his mouth to her ear as she struggles. His whisper stops her struggling, but as she freezes, he groans and falls back to the ground, dead.

MILNE: Good god, Mirriam! Are you all right?

CRAY straightens.

CRAY: *(Catching her breath.)* That is a many-layered question, Alice, and the answer is “no,” for all of them. I'm chagrined because I was wrong about that poor man being dead. I've just been frightened out of a year's life. And I'm also angry because I'd promised myself I'd never again scream like...like a frightened woman when I was surprised.

MILNE: Well, my dear, under the circumstances—

CRAY: Even under this sort of provocation. *(CRAY holds the lantern over the body.)*

MILNE: Is he really—

CRAY: Keeping in mind that I've been wrong once already...yes.

MILNE: Mirriam, when he rose up...

CRAY: Yes.

MILNE: Did he say...anything?

CRAY: He tried to, *(She looks to MILNE.)* but nothing intelligible came out.

LAPOINT: (*Far off.*) Alice. We're coming. Are you all right?

MILNE: (*Calling.*) Yes. Hurry the men!

Lights sweep about from off right.

CRAY: Now listen, Alice. Best not speak of this. This is just the sort of thing to cause panic and suspicion. I'll tell the police when they get here, but nothing before. Agreed?

MILNE: (*Considers, then nods.*) All right.

CRAY shines the light over the body.

CRAY: Good. Because with a trustee still missing and this mystery, there's enough to worry about.

Lights down.

DO NOT COPY

ACT ONE, SCENE 2

SCENE:

221B Baker Street.

TIME:

The next morning.

AT RISE:

Lights up on an empty set, Enter HOLMES, followed by BUSBY, up. HOLMES leads the way to the chairs.

HOLMES: He was off on the first train this morning.

BUSBY: On that case?

HOLMES: Yes. I was on the point of going out myself on the same matter when you halloped me. You really must adopt a modicum of decorum if you insist on following Watson's advice and becoming a man of business. I don't think screeching like a Stepney hawker is quite the thing.

BUSBY: Beggin' your pardon, Mr. Holmes, but the way you was movin' and the distance I had to shout, I figured it was either a Stepney hawker or a clean miss.

HOLMES fixes BUSBY in a no-nonsense stare and holds out a hand.

HOLMES: I take it we have another missive from Blackmead?

BUSBY: *(Looking hurt.)* Didn't missive it. Got it right here as soon as it came in.

BUSBY hands over a telegram as HOLMES rolls his eye.

HOLMES: *(Warningly.)* Busby. Don't be obtuse. *(HOLMES opens the envelope and starts to read.)*

BUSBY: *(Under his breath, after a confused pause.)* Wouldn't know how. *(He watches HOLMES expectantly.)* It was a long'un. What's it say?

HOLMES, annoyed at being distracted, hisses a warning and flaps toward WATSON'S chair with the envelope. This causes a startled BUSBY to flop into the chair.

HOLMES: *(Reading.)* That is what I'm attempting to discover.

HOLMES reads the document with passing interest. BUSBY checks out the comfort of the chair, and deciding he likes the surroundings, muses on possibilities. HOLMES continues reading with increasing fascination. As he moves to the second page, his expression changes to one of recognition and alarm.

BUSBY: *(Playing up innocence.)* So...if Dr. Watson's away, you wouldn't be needin' a substitute?

HOLMES, overcome by a realization, collapses into his chair, letting his arms drop to his sides. He stares ahead in horror, working out the ramifications of his suspicions. BUSBY looks on with interest, followed by concern. HOLMES will remain oblivious to BUSBY's entreaties and BUSBY will grow increasingly alarmed at each failure.

BUSBY: Mr. Holmes? *(Pause.)* Mr. Holmes! *(Pause.)* MR. HOLMES! *(BUSBY rises in alarm and leans in close to HOLMES, then scampers up stage, and calls out the door.)* Mrs....uh...Missus What's-yer-name! *(Fights to remember.)* Mrs. Hudson! Mr. Holmes is having himself a fit!

HOLMES recovers at BUSBY's call and steadies himself with irritation.

HOLMES: Busby!

BUSBY cringes; HOLMES motions him back. BUSBY retreats from the door, then hesitates and retraces his steps, calling out again.

BUSBY: Never mind! He's better! *(BUSBY rejoins HOLMES.)* You all right, sir? You look like you've seen a ghost.

HOLMES: Do I? (*Loses himself in a memory.*) Ghost is a very good word. Certainly a phantom from the past... (*Stirs himself, looks to BUSBY.*) A very good word.

BUSBY: You're welcome. But what's happened?

HOLMES: A blunder! They've blundered onto something: Oscar Dove, with his nose for danger; Mirriam Cray with her bad luck; and now—thanks to my haste—Watson!

BUSBY: Danger?

HOLMES: Most certainly. And of the darkest kind.

BUSBY: Well, what do we do?

HOLMES: We? (*He stops and considers.*) We send telegrams! Several telegrams.

BUSBY rouses himself and pulls out a pad and pencil. HOLMES shakes his head.

HOLMES: I'll go with you to the office. There are several, and they must be carefully composed. And there is something else I need to do there.

BUSBY: Oh yeah?

HOLMES: (*With the first hint of the huntsman.*) I have to obtain for you a leave of absence. Because for the immediate future, you run exclusively for Sherlock Holmes.

BUSBY grins with anticipation. Lights down for a two-count, then a spot light opens up on HOLMES, standing in front of his chair.

HOLMES: To: Mycroft Holmes, Diogenese Club, London. Urgent we meet regarding business important to the Home Office, stop. Possibly the Foreign Office, too, stop. Am coming to call, stop. Sherlock.

Lights down for a one count, then spot up again on HOLMES, donning his coat.

HOLMES: To: Inspector Bradstreet, Scotland Yard, London. Calling to discuss old cases related to spy Oberstein and other more sinister figures from our past, stop. Stay put, stop. Holmes.

Lights down for a one-count, then spot up again on HOLMES, putting on his gloves.

HOLMES: To: Mrs. Mirriam Cray, Blackmead Manor, Cheshire. Second message received, stop. Doctor en route, stop. Suspect grave danger, stop. Your inclination toward silence re: “last testament” very wise, stop. Imperative you continue same course, stop. Mystery of missing trustee to be resolved at your location, stop. Proceed with caution and place trust in Doctor only, stop. A Hurlstone acquaintance.

Lights down for a one count, then spot up on HOLMES, readying his top hat.

HOLMES: To: Dr. John Watson, Blackmead Halt, Cheshire. Important developments, stop. Suspect double motive for deaths, stop. Do not consult with Cray where you may be overheard, stop. Proceed with caution and keep local constabulary at arm’s length, stop. Most important you do not spend nights at manor, stop. Hire a horse and trap and find the closest inn. Look for me soon, incognito possible, stop. Danger to you considerable, stop. Repeat: proceed with caution, stop. Holmes.

HOLMES dons his hat, and with a soft smile to the audience, turns up stage. Lights down.

ACT ONE, SCENE 3

SCENE:

Blackmead Manor, the drawing room.

TIME:

Later that day.

AT RISE:

Lights up on WATSON and LAPOINT. WATSON is apprehensive; LAPOINT is mildly hostile.

LAPOINT: I should apologize for the coolness of your reception, Dr. Watson.

WATSON: *(Attempting to deflect.)* Oh—

LAPOINT: But I won't. We are under siege and we have closed ranks.

WATSON: I assure you, Miss LaPoint, under these circumstances—

LAPOINT: *(Smiling.)* Yes, but I'm not speaking of these circumstances. Blackmead is very much a refuge from the male world...if need be, a bastion. We are sheltered, and you will find us jealous of that protection even at the best of times.

WATSON: My dear Miss... *(Retreats from his address.)* I mean, Miss LaPoint, I assure you, there would be nothing to apologize for, even at the best of times. I have encountered closed societies many times in my work. And your sex is not your only unifying factor...not the only reason to feel beset by outsiders. There's your work for the trust, your academic pursuits, the very fact that you live in a country retreat.

LAPOINT: *(Conceding a nod.)* Yes. I admit to a general resentment of outsiders. When we have a young applicant to the trust come down to stay in hopes of a grant to continue their studies, or for instance when Mrs. Cray arrived to visit Miss MacKay, I felt a momentary resentment...and a subsequent shame.

WATSON: But with men, the reaction is more severe.

LAPOINT: And from my point of view, more justified.

WATSON considers as LAPOINT observes. At length, WATSON nods thoughtfully. LAPOINT decides to relieve the tension by changing tack. She motions to the furniture and they sit.

LAPOINT: And as you say, the present circumstances would make any household close ranks. One of the servants murdered and one of the residents missing. This is a hostile environment...just especially so to men.

WATSON: And yet you do have men on the estate.

LAPOINT: Certainly. Fawcett, the stableman, and his lads, Wilkins, the gamekeeper, the unfortunate Spendlove. I should imagine they have become habituated to our hostility as we have to their presence.

WATSON: But Spendlove was the only male who worked in the house itself?

LAPOINT: Yes, and look what happened to him. On a cart on his way to the mortuary in Morston.

They share a smile.

WATSON: I hope that circumstance is down to a more specific cause. If his death is owed to a hostile genius loci, it may never be solved.

LAPOINT: Well, it wasn't a malevolent household atmosphere that put those holes in his body.

WATSON: How long had Spendlove been here?

LAPOINT: Several months.

WATSON: He replaced another footman?

LAPOINT: No. He was the first...at least in my time here. Alice—Miss Milne—brought him in under consultation with Billit, the housekeeper. The rest of us were skeptical. But there was the feeling, probably started by the housemaids, that there are some tasks, even indoors, more suited to the male physique.

WATSON: And as time passed?

LAPOINT: (*Shrugs.*) I suppose we grew used to him...up to a point. If forced, I would admit that in a household full of women, he managed for the most part to be inconspicuous. I'm not sure whether that's a compliment to him or a sad comment on me.

WATSON: And the others? Was there anything marked about their relationships with Spendlove?

LAPOINT: (*Shrugs.*) Well, Glenda found his bearing rustic enough to have him pose semi-recumbent against an oak for one her drawings this summer, and Alice once made an unprompted comment at dinner that he seemed to be working out, but that was because she felt she might have forced him on us. That's all I remember.

WATSON: What about your missing resident, Miss...Foster?

Enter MILNE, upstage. She pauses and listens, unnoticed by the others.

LAPOINT: I don't know, about the same as the rest of us. Emaline complained about his smelling of tobacco once. And then she recommended his facility for hanging pictures. That stuck out because Emaline is the least likely of us to notice anything about anybody. She has her face buried in books and old letters most of the time.

MILNE: By which Estelle means she is laudably studious.

WATSON stands as MILNE advances. She deflects his courtesy with a smile, and he reseats himself self-consciously.

WATSON: Miss Milne.

LAPOINT: I meant preoccupied.

MILNE: Dr. Watson, I'm afraid I had only the slimmest luck tracing Mrs. Cray.

LAPOINT: She went off with that man, didn't she?

WATSON: Man?

MILNE: Yes...her cousin, a Mr. Hugo Wainwright. Arrived not an hour before you.

LAPOINT: (*Aside, to WATSON.*) So you can understand while we feel besieged.

MILNE: She took him off, probably to explain why this wasn't the best time for a visit.

LAPOINT: She's probably enlisted him to help search. Mirriam is intrepid.

MILNE: She certainly was last night. At any rate, the word has gone out, and she'll soon be found.

LAPOINT: Let's hope so. The way things are going—

MILNE: Estelle, don't!

LAPOINT flinches and concedes a nod. Enter BILLIT, up.

BILLIT: Excuse me, ma'am.

MILNE: Yes, Billit.

BILLIT: Fawcett says that Mrs. Cray and the gentleman were walking in the orchard a few minutes ago. Should I send him over, or...?

LAPOINT stands, prompting WATSON to do the same.

LAPOINT: I'll do it. I was going for a walk while the weather's holding
(*To WATSON.*) I'll send her along.

MILNE: Thank you, Billit.

LAPOINT exits, BILLIT hesitates and is noticed by MILNE.

MILNE: Yes, Billit, what is it?

BILLIT: Will the gentlemen be staying the night, ma'am?

MILNE: Goodness, it's early yet, isn't it?

BILLIT: There's rooms to be aired, ma'am, and with all the commotion—

WATSON: I alas, cannot.

MILNE: Oh? Are you certain? There are plenty of rooms. Estelle hasn't put you off? I assure you that whatever she may have said, we are not so close-minded—

WATSON: No, no. Nothing like that. I have...some business to take care of.

MILNE: Oh? Well, if you're sure. (*MILNE nods to BILLIT, who turns to go.*)

WATSON: I was wondering, Billit...

BILLIT stops and turns back.

WATSON: I was wondering if I might ask you some questions, if you've finished helping the police, that is.

There is a pause. BILLIT slowly turns to MILNE, who suppresses a smirk. BILLIT turns to WATSON.

BILLIT: In my opinion, sir, the police are mighty scarce around here, considering the gravity of the goings-on. *(Moves toward the exit.)* But I'm about the house, sir. At your convenience. *(BILLIT exits.)*

WATSON: Thank you. *(To MILNE.)* The police?

MILNE: *(Fighting off a smile.)* Constable Pettiman, Blackmead Halt's own, is not available, it seems. There is a substitute.

WATSON: Not available? Why? And who's the substitute? Not some justice of the peace?

MILNE: *(Shakes her head, stifling a smirk.)* Mrs. Pettiman, his wife.

WATSON: His wife!

MILNE: And as to why the good constable is not available, well, I would not deprive you of the singular of experience hearing the reason from her own lips, as you certainly will. She's a very...gregarious...a robust personality.

WATSON: And she's leading the investigation? Of a murder and a disappearance!

MILNE: Yes. And with a friendly authority that motivated the household better than Billit or I had managed, and with a brand of common sense, the unorthodoxy of which would have made Blackmead's late benefactor proud. She politely deflected Mrs. Cray's suggestion that the constables from Morston be sent for, saying that there could be not better searchers than those from the estate. Then she sent the stable lads to rouse the farm tenants and is presently proving her point. She further reasoned that since we had already moved the body, there was no need to call out the cantankerous police surgeon. Rather she kept the body covered and is having her son drive it to the mortuary in Morston with a note for the same cantankerous doctor. It seemed most irregular. But none of us could think of a reason for opposing her.

WATSON: *(Considering.)* No...no, nor can I.

MILNE: And I had better warn you, when Mirriam revealed that you were expected, Mrs. Pettiman had quite a reaction.

WATSON: Did she? Well, Holmes and I are used to hostility from local police...though never their wives, in my experience.

MILNE: (*Grinning.*) Oh, it's not hostility, Doctor. It's admiration.

WATSON: What?

MILNE: She is quite the devotee of your chronicles.

PETTIMAN: (*Off.*) Oh? Yes, my dear, I do see.

MILNE: And here she comes now.

Enter PETTIMAN, followed by a fatigued MACKAY, up right.

PETTIMAN: (*To MACKAY.*) Well, I do see how it can prey on your mind. But you see, if you take action, then you don't give it the chance, do you, love? (*PETTIMAN sees the others, checks her progress and gasps.*) Oh dear. Can this be the man himself?

WATSON: (*Bowing slightly.*) John Watson.

PETTIMAN extends a hand and takes WATSON's vigorously the instant he offers. MACKAY moves around beside MILNE.

PETTIMAN: It is, it is! Mrs. Bert Pettiman, and I have long been an admirer of you and your colleague's work.

WATSON: Oh? Delighted.

PETTIMAN: More than once I've told my husband—he's constable 'round these parts only he's down with a sick cow at the moment—"Bert," I tell him, "Bert, why can't you be more like that Mr. Sherlock Holmes. Sure, doesn't Dr. Watson show you how?"

MILNE: (*Under her breath to MACKAY.*) Does she ever slow down?

MACKAY: (*Under her breath to MILNE.*) She hasn't so far.

WATSON: Well, I'm glad you've found them edifying. And now you have a chance to...uh...what with your husband being...

PETTIMAN: Down.

WATSON: Yes.

PETTIMAN: Sick cow.

MILNE: Dr. Watson, I believe you've yet to meet Glenda MacKay.

WATSON and MACKAY exchange nods.

MACKAY: Mrs. Pettiman wants to look at Emaline's room.

PETTIMAN: And to go over the house with the maids again, just to see what's what. *(To WATSON.)* Don't know what I'm looking for, but the grounds search seems to be going, so I thought...better to be thorough.

WATSON: Uh...yes...certainly.

MACKAY: I told her we looked for a note, but there was nothing.

PETTIMAN: Well, you know, a new pair of eyes.

MILNE: I'll take you through to Billit. She can get you the maids.

PETTIMAN: Fine. *(Smiles at WATSON.)* Doctor? We shall compare impressions later, I hope?

WATSON: *(With hasty politeness.)* I look forward to it.

MILNE ushers PETTIMAN out, up. MACKAY puffs out a breath of fatigue. She smiles at WATSON and offers her hand. They shake.

MACKAY: Dr. Watson, I'm so very glad you're here. Mirriam speaks of you with great admiration. Does she know you're here?

WATSON: Miss LaPoint has gone to tell her. She's strolling with her cousin, I believe.

MACKAY: *(Subdued.)* Not a cousin that I've met before. But then, Mirriam and I have not always kept in touch. I've been in this sanctuary for nearly six years, and I've only seen her once in that time.

WATSON: Well, I should imagine that under the terms of the trusteeship...

MACKAY: Oh, we're allowed travel. We must keep our principal residence here, but there's ample opportunity to escape the cloister. It is a true sanctuary, that way. Not a prison, but a place of retreat. I was encouraging Mirriam to spend part of her time with us...to help Alice and I with the journal. She's been married, so she could not become a trustee, but the trust has provision for other...classes of unmarried women.

WATSON: And how stands she disposed?

MACKAY: I don't know. I was on the point of pressing her when this business started. Now, my mind is full of misgivings about everything... This place. Emaline... (*Shakes her head.*) You'd need to know her, Doctor. The others keep hoping there will be a wire or letter, that she's gone off. But not Emaline. She traveled with great preparation, almost comical planning. It is against her nature to just leave. Besides, of all of us, she considered this place to be her home. I fear... (*Breaks off.*) I'm very glad you're here. Is Sherlock Holmes to be expected?

WATSON: I don't know. It depends on matters...in London.

MACKAY: (*Looking aloft.*) I should go upstairs...represent the trustees. I'm known as the emotional one of the group. Alice is the oldest and longest tenured resident, so she feels she should be an anchor. But she's as worried as the rest of us. (*Settles herself, forces a smile.*) Now, Doctor: is there anything you would like to ask me while we're alone...in case you would like me to be indiscreet?

WATSON: (*Chuckles.*) I'm sure there must be, but you've caught me off guard. I should consult with Mrs. Cray first, as she contacted us. How was that received, by the way?

MACKAY: Mirriam's presumption? No one said anything when she told us last night, but I could see Estelle was annoyed. I think, upon reflection, we were grateful. We are creatures of reflection; we needed someone to act.

WATSON: I see. Thank you. Perhaps one question. The dead man, Spendlove, he'd been with you several months?

MACKAY: Yes. Six, I think.

WATSON: Your impressions of him?

MACKAY: (*Considers.*) Interesting face. I found his posture striking; he stood rather like a statue of a Roman statesman. As a footman, he was adequate enough, but he didn't quite ring true. He had the wrong sort of patience, somehow.

WATSON: Patience?

MACKAY: Yes. It wasn't the patience of resignation, the way you find many servants. He seemed, ever so slightly, to be waiting for something. The patience of expectation, if that's not a contradiction.

WATSON: I see. Thank you, Miss MacKay.

MACKAY moves to exit.

MACKAY: Just something else that wasn't what it seemed. You don't notice them until the situation gets grave, and then you notice so much. *(Stops and turns.)* Like Mirriam's cousin's beard. *(MACKAY nods and exits, center up. WATSON ponders her last statement.)*

WATSON: Beard? Disguise. *(Recoils.)* Holmes! In disguise to astound me once again. How the deuce did he get down here before me?

Enter CRAY, up right.

CRAY: *(Slightly out of breath.)* Oh, Dr. Watson, here you are. I'm so glad.

They move toward each other to shake hands.

CRAY: Things have swiftly plunged out of my depth. I fairly scampered back when Estelle told me you were waiting.

WATSON: *(Smiling.)* Yes, I heard you'd gone for a stroll...with your cousin?

CRAY: *(Flashes a nervous smile.)* Uh...yes...that was yet another awkward development. *(CRAY opens her mouth to tell more, but is interrupted when the center-up door opens. Enter BILLIT, followed by DOVE in his disguise.)*

BILLIT: *(With mild disdain, as if she'd told him once already.)* They're in here, sir.

DOVE: *(Disguising his voice.)* Oh...yes...you were right all along, Mrs...uh, Miss...

BILLIT: Just Billit, sir. *(BILLIT exits. The door remains slightly ajar.)*

DOVE: *(To CRAY.)* I don't believe she cares for me.

DOVE nods to WATSON, prompting CRAY to introduce them. CRAY rolls her eyes and sighs.

CRAY: Dr. Watson, this is my cousin, Hugo Wainwright...who just happened to be in the area and now feels he should assist me.

DOVE: Delighted to meet you, Dr. Watson.

WATSON, barely able to play along, accepts a handshake.

WATSON: Hugo Wainwright? I didn't know you had a cousin, Mrs. Cray.

CRAY: *(With barely disguised sarcasm.)* No. It was a surprise to many. *(CRAY moves to the up-right exit, looking off.)*

WATSON: *(Grinning.)* I'm sorry, I really can't keep this up. Holmes, that is not one of your best disguises.

CRAY moves to the door, center up, and shuts it.

DOVE: I beg your pardon?

WATSON: Seriously, Holmes, that beard. And the voice. Not up to your usual.

DOVE: I say! What cheek.

CRAY: Stop it, the pair of you! *(Looks about, drops her voice.)* Things are serious, and you two are like a pair of eight-year-olds who've discovered the dressing-up box.

WATSON, beginning to realize his mistake, squints and looks closely at DOVE.

WATSON: Good god! Oscar Dove?

DOVE: Doctor.

WATSON chuckles and offers his hand again. The two shake with glee.

WATSON: Oscar Dove, the rampaging adventurer, I never!

CRAY: I don't believe it. There you stand, congratulating each other; one of you for a terrible disguise and the other for not being able to see through it. I feel like traitor enough letting you invite yourselves into it, and now I've colluded in a fraud.

WATSON: *(Pulling himself together.)* Uh, yes. Point taken. *(To DOVE.)* Well then, explain yourself. What are you doing here?

DOVE: Mirriam's latest letter overtook me in Bristol, so I thought I'd come up. This was before anyone knew about a murder. Since I knew she'd told everyone about the Doom of Devilsmoor and my involvement with Holmes, I thought I'd better...uh...be someone else.

WATSON: Ah. (*Hesitates.*) And the beard?

DOVE: Oh. Well, I'm afraid The Register had just run that interview with me on my Canadian holdings and they used rather a good likeness. So I thought, just to be safe.

WATSON: (*Looking to CRAY.*) That sounds reasonable.

CRAY: (*Dryly.*) Really. Now ask him why he chose a false voice?

WATSON recoils slightly, considers, and cocks his head toward DOVE. DOVE hesitates.

DOVE: No idea.

CRAY closes her eyes and claps a hand to her brow.

CRAY: Can we please get down to business. As much as I would like to, I can't see this as the work of an outside agent. If the danger is from inside, then we must be very careful.

WATSON: Ah! (*WATSON pulls a telegram from his pocket and holds it.*) I've instructions.

CRAY holds up her telegram.

CRAY: So do I.

They regard each other, then trade telegrams. WATSON reads. CRAY turns to DOVE.

CRAY: Check the hall.

DOVE retreats to the exit, up right, as CRAY reads. DOVE steps out and instantly returns to find the others considering what they've read. Each hands DOVE a telegram. CRAY retreats to the door center up as he reads. She opens it, looks through, and closes the door again.

DOVE: So the mystery deepens.

CRAY: (To WATSON.) You don't think Holmes could be exaggerating when he speaks of danger?

There is a pause as WATSON gives CRAY a deadpan look.

CRAY: I was afraid not.

DOVE: But Holmes will be so infuriatingly vague. He was always like this.

WATSON: He will not speak until he has all the facts buttoned up. His reasons for this are sound. Mind you, I've accused him more than once of doing it purely to astound his audience. He will announce a conclusion to a chain of logic that sounds incredible and only after one is dumbfounded does he introduce each link in that chain.

CRAY: (To DOVE.) Oscar, you don't follow. There are things in his wire to me that are deliberately cryptic. Look at the wording, the way he signs himself.

DOVE: He suspects someone may read it. Ergo, someone in the house. (Considers.) Yet he tells Watson on no account to stay, but he doesn't advise you to leave.

WATSON: (To CRAY.) Listen, this other admonishment to you. I gather he means... (Looks about and drops his voice.) Spendlove.

CRAY: (Nods.) His last words.

WATSON: And have you followed his advice?

CRAY: (Nods, then hesitates.) Well... (Nods toward DOVE.) In the orchard just now.

DOVE: There was no one in earshot.

WATSON nods to DOVE, beseeching him silently to check the two exits again. DOVE complies as WATSON nods CRAY farther down stage.

WATSON: (Lowering his voice still further.) Can you tell me?

CRAY: (*Hesitates, then leans close.*) Two words. “Professors” and then after a pause: “goddaughter.” Alice Milne was the only witness, but she didn’t hear. I told her it was of no consequence, and she has never pressed me.

WATSON: But they were of consequence to the dying man?

CRAY: Definitely. He used his dying breath to tell me. He deliberately whispered. It wasn’t delirium. It was his legacy. That was why I instantly knew I must keep it to myself. Does it mean anything to you?

WATSON: (*Considers, then gives up with a shake of the head.*) But it struck Holmes like a left jab, thus the telegrams.

There is an unvoiced agreement that the secret part of the meeting is over. There is a communal clearing of throats, and the three drift toward the furniture, raising their voices back to a normal range.

WATSON: So...I presume you’ve been looking into the Blackmead Trust, Mrs. Cray.

The trio seat themselves.

CRAY: Yes, Miss Milne gave me a copy of the provisions, which I will let you...and Cousin Hugo peruse before you go. Residencies are given only to women who have never been married. Spinsters, that is, according to the terms of the trust, unmarried women of 35 years or more who establish a residency of five years, may become permanent residents, that is, trustees with a regular stipend and a vote on dispensations from the income, interest and capital of the estate.

WATSON: And how many permanent residents have there been?

CRAY: Well, there were three charter members. Two of these were apparently elderly, and they died within a few years. The third was slightly younger and was the leader of the community until she passed on approximately five years ago. That was when Alice Milne succeeded to the chair.

WATSON: So three charter members. And how many later trustees, including Alice Milne?

CRAY: (*After reckoning to herself.*) Nine. But four departed the scene some time ago. One died. One resigned to move to America, one resigned for personal reasons—but which Estelle assures me was a feud with several other trustees. (*Darkens her tone.*) And one committed the gravest sin imaginable to the spinsterhood.

DOVE and WATSON lean close to CRAY.

CRAY: She got married.

DOVE and WATSON recoil slightly, then smile.

WATSON: All right, so that leaves five.

CRAY: Yes, as of a few months ago, when Glenda was awarded permanent residency, there were five. There were other candidates in residence over the years who left for various reasons before staying the required five years, but not recently.

WATSON: So that's Alice Milne, Estelle LaPoint, Glenda MacKay, Emaline Foster and...?

CRAY: Charlotte Montegue, who late last spring, went missing.

DOVE: And who subsequently was found dead at the base of a rock formation known as "the grotto," here on the estate. Her neck was broken. Half of her painting kit was found at the top of the grotto, the other half strewn around the bottom, near her body.

WATSON: An accident?

CRAY: The police...that is to say, Constable Pettiman and his superiors from Morston, were satisfied. As—for lack of any other explanation—were the inmates here.

DOVE: You said your friend Glenda wasn't satisfied.

CRAY: I said she was deeply upset by Charlotte's death. (*To WATSON.*) She wrote me about it while I was staying at Hurlstone, after that dreadful business. She was deeply shaken by the tragedy and wrote of some anger at the others, because they seemed to have recovered so swiftly.

DOVE: But she also wrote of how dubious a notion it was that Charlotte had gone to the top of the rocks to paint.

CRAY: Yes, but no one was happy with that. *(To WATSON.)* The grotto is highly picturesque...from a distance or from the bottom. But the top provides a view of absolutely nothing.

WATSON: Nothing?

CRAY: Trees. It's in plantation woodland. They are uniform and uninteresting and you can't see over them. The general opinion was that Charlotte must have been confirming that fact when she fell.

DOVE: They were forced to that opinion, you mean. By lack of any other ideas. But in light of recent events...

WATSON: Well, I agree about recent events. But regarding motive...

DOVE: Tell him about the tontine.

CRAY: *(Makes a face and sighs with fatigue.)* Oh, you tell him. You were the one who went on about it.

DOVE: You are aware of the term? A fund is established by a group, each having a share. While they may each receive income from the fund in the form of interest or dividends or what-have-you, the principle remains intact. It may only be claimed by the last survivor of the group.

WATSON: I am familiar with the device.

DOVE: So was the Late Caroline Fitzallen...or at least her lawyers. You see, it wasn't just the cause of women's scholarship that interested Blackmead's benefactor. She also had an interest in continuing a feud with certain members of her family beyond the grave.

WATSON: What?

DOVE: I did some checking, and it seems her intentions of furthering the cause of women's independence put her at odds with her family.

CRAY: Or her family's blinkered notions about what's due to women caused her to develop her interest in the advancement of women in the first place.

DOVE turns to CRAY, opening his mouth to engage her in discussion, but he thinks better of it.

DOVE: At any rate. She sets up the Blackmead trust to disappoint members of her family as well as to do noble works. And when the lawyers pester her for provisos in case the trust isn't the success she envisions, she comes up with another way to thwart the relatives.

CRAY: If after fifteen years, the number of trustees should ever be reduced to one, and there are no candidates working on establishing a five-year residency to become a trustee, then it is left up to the sole remaining trustee—

DOVE: To decide whether to attempt to recruit new members...or else dissolve the foundation and inherit the fortune.

WATSON: Good God!

CRAY: So the relatives get nothing unless plague wipes out everyone at once.

DOVE: Mirriam, you are avoiding the point. The foundation has passed its fifteenth birthday. There are no residents currently undergoing their probationary five-year term, and the number of trustees has dropped to four by mysterious means, and now, I fear, to three.

There is a pause.

CRAY: *(Unconvincingly.)* We still don't know about Emaline.

DOVE: *(Holding up a telegram.)* Read Holmes' telegram. You can tell he holds out no hope for Emaline Foster.

There is another pause as the three consider the gravity of the situation.

WATSON: That would mean that one of the three remaining trustees...

CRAY: *(Shaking her head, refusing to believe.)* We need more proof.

DOVE: *(Frustrated.)* Such as what?

CRAY: I don't know. But there would be other evidence. *(Searching.)* If there had been recent applicants and they been turned away. Or residents recently driven out before they could approach five years.

DOVE: Do you have access to—

DOVE is cut off by a muffled scream, off and aloft. The trio turn toward the exit, up right, but their feet remain rooted. There is a second scream; this nudges the three into motion. They move toward the exit, CRAY and WATSON leading DOVE. As they reach the threshold, WATSON and CRAY freeze again. They retreat slightly, parting to reveal MACKAY, wild-eyed and in shock, standing in the doorway.

CRAY: Glenda? What's happened?

MACKAY: Emaline.

CRAY: Glenda, just—

WATSON: Easy. She's in shock.

MACKAY: We were searching her room. One of the maids opened a cupboard, and...

Gripped again by the vision of what she saw, MACKAY screams. This scream is echoed by another, more distant scream, off and aloft. WATSON motions CRAY to take MACKAY, and bolts off, up right. MACKAY and CRAY advance haltingly down stage.

MACKAY: *(Trembling, almost breathless.)* She...she didn't look real at first. But then... *(Breaking into weeping.)* She was staring out at us!

MACKAY breaks into sobs. CRAY holds her tightly, then looks to DOVE, who is standing by helpless.

CRAY: It's all right, Glenda. We're here. *(To DOVE, with authority.)* Brandy. Now!

DOVE bolts into action, moving first left, then right, looking about the room. He stops in frustration.

DOVE: Where?

WATSON: *(Bellowing, from far off.)* Mirriam! Mrs. Cray! I have a hysterical maidservant, and I can't find Mrs. Pettiman!

CRAY and DOVE look about for a course of action. At length, CRAY delivers MACKAY to DOVE.

CRAY: Stay with her.

DOVE: Mirriam. What should—

CRAY heads off, up right.

CRAY: *(Calling back.)* Just look to her! If that doesn't work, yell the house down!

DOVE awkwardly puts an arm around MACKAY, who resists momentarily, then acquiesces.

MACKAY: I'm all right. It was the sight of her, poor Emaline!

DOVE: Yes, I can imagine.

MACKAY: Her face. *(Weakening.)* Her face. *(MACKAY swoons, passing out into DOVE's arms.)*

DOVE: *(Awkwardly.)* Oh...now...let's not do that. *(DOVE drags MACKAY to the sofa and eases her down. Ineffectively.)* There-there. There-there. *(DOVE steps back, observing MACKAY and considering.)* If that doesn't work, yell the house down. *(Looks about, calls tentatively.)* Uh...hello? *(DOVE moves up center, opening the door.)* We have a bit of a sticky situation here. Hello? *(DOVE exits, closing the door behind him. Through the door.)* Hello? Anyone—

There is a smack beyond the door, followed instantly by a groan of pain from DOVE. This is followed an instant later by the thud of a body hitting the floor. There is a two count before LAPOINT is heard off, up right.

LAPOINT: *(Off.)* Hello? *(Enter LAPOINT, up right.)* Anyone about, I thought I heard... *(Sees MACKAY and halts.)* What in the world? *(LAPOINT moves to MACKAY.)* Glenda? Glenda, what is it?

Enter BILLIT, up right.

BILLIT: What's happening? I heard noises. (*BILLIT advances on the others.*) Miss MacKay? What's happened to her, then?

LAPOINT: I don't know. I was coming in, and I thought I heard shouts...or screams. By the time I got my Wellingtons off, I came in to find...this.

BILLIT: Screams? You heard screams, Miss LaPoint?

LAPOINT: I think so. Didn't you?

BILLIT: No, not screams. I heard voices and running...through the ceiling in the dining room. Then after that, I heard more footsteps down here somewhere, moving fast. But I didn't hear any screaming.

MACKAY gives a soft moan.

LAPOINT: Something's happened. She looks pale.

Enter CRAY, up right. She pauses on the threshold, unobserved.

BILLIT: Yes, she does indeed. What's been going on?

CRAY: She looks pale because she, and one of the maids—Ivy, I think—discovered Emaline's body in her wardrobe. Now Mrs. Pettiman's turned up and nearly had a spell when she walked into the room. So...Billit, if you could go up and assist Dr. Watson...or Ivy...or Mrs. Pettiman...

BILLIT crosses on reflex, pausing when she gets beside CRAY.

BILLIT: (*To CRAY, in disbelief.*) Miss Foster? Dead?

CRAY: I'm afraid so.

BY C.P. STANCICH

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