*(**PLAYERS** ad-lib assent.)*

**GERRY.** Okay, then, let's back up and do the part we skipped.

**AGGIE.** How can I follow along without that page?

**SAUL.** Here, take *my* script. I've got the lines down cold. *(A little testily.) If* I ever get the chance to *say* them!

**BILLY.** Say, while we're stopped, I've got a question.

**GERRY.** *(Wearily.) What?*

**BILLY.** It's about the play's title – isn't that a steal from something else? An old Agatha Christie movie, I think it was.

**VIOLET.** Oh, *I* don't think Phyllis Montague would *steal* a title, Billy.

**SAUL.** There's no way she *could*! No one can copyright a *title*! It's the law. There just aren't enough words to go around to name things.

**BILLY.** Even if that's true – what about the advertising for our show? Won't some people think this show *is* by Agatha Christie?

**POLLY.** *(Shrugs.)* So much the better for our box office!

**HENRY.** And it *is* a murder mystery, so no one gets hurt!

**VIOLET.** Doesn't sound like much of a murder mystery, if no one gets hurt...?

**SMITTY.** *I* thought Sir Percival got bumped off by Doctor Forbes – ?!

**GERRY.** *(Who has been trying to regain control of the group during the overlap-delivery of preceding eight speeches.)* Hold it! All of you! Did we come here tonight to rehearse, or to discuss Originality versus Plagiarism?

**BILLY.** Gerry's right. Let's get back to work. Sorry I interrupted.

**POLLY.** Which line do we go back to?

**SMITTY.** Yeah, where does the necklace come in, anyhow?

**AGGIE.** *(Moving offstage, reading from script.)* Oh, *I* see what happened. Smitty, you came in too early.

**SMITTY.** I did? I thought I was supposed to enter when Violet says that line about the treacherous roads.



**AGGIE.** *(Laughs.)* You're *almost* right – it's where she says the line about "lecherous toads!"

**SMITTY.** Oh, gee, I'm sorry. But it *sounds* about the same.

**SAUL.** Phyllis Montague fancies herself a poet.

**POLLY.** She *is* a poet. A rare talent – and a great writer!

**SAUL.** Would you say that if she had you playing a *mute*?

**HENRY.** Now, see here – !

**GERRY.** Stop it, all of you! Smitty, listen to me – this is important – you *mustn't* take your cue from the words alone. Pay attention to the *plot*. Then you'll *know* when you're supposed to enter, even if Violet says the line *wrong*, don't you see?

**VIOLET.** *I* didn't say the line wrong!

**BILLY.** You didn't say it at *all*!

**VIOLET.** Well, how *could* I when Smitty came in *early*?!

**GERRY.** All right, all right, that's enough! Do your arguing on your own time.

**LOUISE.** *(Offstage.) Coffee's* ready!

**AGGIE.** *(Closes script.)* Finally! I could *use* a cup!

**POLLY.** But we've barely gotten started!

**GERRY.** Listen, maybe a break is a good idea. Let's all have a cup, then take this thing from the top and get it right!

**BILLY.** *Now* you're talking!

*(**PLAYERS** will emigrate toward sound of **LOUISE**'s call, and **GERRY** will come up on stage to join **AGGIE** as they exit.)*

**GERRY.** Aggie – don't go yet. I want to talk to you. I'm getting very worried about our progress.

**AGGIE.** *What* progress?!

**GERRY.** *(Laughs ruefully.)* I know what you mean. We've never been this far behind on a show.

**AGGIE.** It's not your fault, Gerry. We've never had the illustrious *author* in our hair before, either! If Phyllis didn't keep *rewriting* the damned show while the cast is trying to *learn* it – !

**GERRY.** She's *promised* not to change anything *else,* Aggie.

**AGGIE.** What do you want to bet she's going to show up here with seven new pages?!

**GERRY.** Oh, *don't,* Aggie! *They* haven't learned the *last* batch of rewrites!

**AGGIE.** Small wonder, the way Polly keeps inviting Phyllis to dinner, and getting her part fattened! It's almost as big as *she* is, now!

**GERRY.** Aggie, don't *you* start with the fat jokes, please! I'm having enough trouble with *Saul*!

**AGGIE.** If Polly had her way, this play would be a one-woman *monologue*!

**GERRY.** Well, at least Phyllis is letting us do her play *free*!

**AGGIE.** Naturally! Nobody would pay *money* to do it!

**GERRY.** Be fair, Aggie – it's not *that* bad.

**AGGIE.** Oh – I suppose not. But if Polly keeps padding her part – !

**GERRY.** She won't. I'll have to put my foot down. Three days until dress rehearsal – we'll be lucky if we learn the lines we've *got*!

**AGGIE.** Oh, I don't know about that – some of the *mistakes* tonight are better than the *original* lines! If you'd just let the cast alone, this show could be a riot!

**GERRY.** Aggie, *Murder Most Foul* is *not* a *comedy*! Phyllis Montague would *scream* if the audience started *laughing* at it! She'd pass right out on the floor!

**AGGIE.** Well, then, you'd better have the smelling salts handy for opening night.

**GERRY.** Oh, Aggie – !

*(But before they can continue,* **PLAYERS** *start returning to the stage, sipping coffee, so they let it drop.)*

**GERRY.** *(Starts off.)* Is there anything left in the pot?

*(***GERRY** *will exit during:)*

**SAUL.** *(Who has just taken a sip, makes a terrible face.)* Not if you're lucky!



**LOUISE.** *(Offstage.)* I *heard* that, Saul Watson!

**SAUL.** *(Amiably.)* Then let it be a lesson to you!

*(Offstage, we hear* **LOUISE** *laugh.)*

**POLLY.** *(Sitting in center of sofa.)* I hope we get this act done tonight. Three days till dress rehearsal and we haven't even done a full run-through!

**BILLY.** Thank your friend *Phyllis* for *that*!

**HENRY.** You mustn't blame Phyllis, Billy – she's simply a perfectionist.

**SMITTY.** If she wasn't satisfied with the script, why did she submit it?

**SAUL.** Because if we'd picked some other show, she'd have had to wait till next *year* to get it done!

**VIOLET.** Why couldn't we do it as our *next* show?

**BILLY.** We've got our audiences pre-conditioned.

**SAUL.** "Brainwashed" is more like it!

**POLLY.** That's putting it rather strongly, Saul.

**SAUL.** It's the unvarnished truth. We never vary, season after season. We do a mystery, a comedy, a drama, and a musical, in that order, without fail.

**VIOLET.** Yes, but why?

**HENRY.** We started the theatre that way, and it just got to be a habit. For us *and* our patrons.

**VIOLET.** But what would be the harm if we mixed it up?

**SAUL.** It would confuse people. The comedy fans would come to the drama and laugh at all the tragic moments – and the musical fans would start beating time to the comedy – !

**BILLY.** Or sob during the mystery!

**AGGIE.** They may *still* do *that*!

**GERRY.** *(Re-enters with cup of coffee.)* Aggie! Whose side are you on, anyway?!

**AGGIE.** On the side of *sanity* – which doesn't do me much good around *here*!

*(Exits toward coffee.)*