

MILDRED. All right, then, the wife is a "bad woman." She is tired of the husband and is about to divorce him. He'll be left with nothing so, naturally, this being a murder story, he decides to kill her. (*Ad-libs from the authors showing disapproval of the usual plot.*) I realize all this is very usual so far, but Mildred Z. Maxwell always has surprises up her typewriter. This husband . . . Oh, dear, I can't tell stories well. I wish you could see the characters as I do.

JASON. (*Rises and comes to corner of desk.*) Oh, but they can, Miss Maxwell. Just use your imagination. Describe them and we shall see them. (*Sits again.*)

(*LIGHTS fade to a spot on MILDRED at the podium.*)

MILDRED. I'll try. The husband plots out the murder most ingeniously. He has gotten hold of a third cousin or an old ne'er-do-well classmate or someone like that and is paying him to be an accomplice. (*GEORGE enters through arch and stands above desk.*) This middle scene I have worked out is between the two men. The husband, we'll call him George, should be good-looking in a way, dressed in a nice suit, and— (*AREA LIGHT above desk comes up on GEORGE. Since this is typical of one of MILDRED's earlier stories, the characters are dressed in the period of the thirties. GEORGE is in a bright pin-stripe suit, an overcoat slung over his shoulder. He wears a wide-brimmed slouch hat, sunglasses, and smokes with a cigarette holder. He speaks in a very smooth, oily voice.*) That's it. That's exactly what he should look like. Isn't imagination wonderful? (*Crosses up to him and examines him. He is frozen. The authors are intensely interested.*)

WHIT. That's an appalling bad suit. The cut—

JESS. Sh, this is her story.

WHIT. Sorry.

MILDRED. He is nice-looking. Oh, I forgot. He has broken his arm. (*Indicates his left arm which is in a cast and sling. To audience.*) That's a most important

plot point. (*Returns to the podium as the MAN saunters in through the French windows. By the time he reaches the area lighting, we realize we can see very little of him as he, too, wears an overcoat, dark glasses, smokes, and has his coat collar turned up. When he speaks, it is obvious he is of a much lower class than GEORGE.*) Now for the ne'er-do-well. He is, of course, ne'er-do-well looking. (*Turns and sees him.*) That's right. Perfect. George is just finishing plotting his intriguing murder. He says . . .

(*MUSIC suddenly blares forth. Perhaps it is the opening of Beethoven's Fifth. The authors look around for the source of the music. GEORGE turns and moves in to desk.*)

GEORGE. . . . and that's all you have to do. (*Pulls plane ticket from his sling. MAN takes it.*) Here's your plane ticket to Chicago made out in my name.

MAN. (*At L. of desk.*) You're sure nothin' can go wrong?

GEORGE. I've worked out even the smallest detail.

MILDRED. (*To audience.*) I haven't yet, of course, but I shall. (*MAN sits on bench by desk.*)

GEORGE. You will wear a cast and a sling. That will make you immediately identifiable. Get on the eleven o'clock plane, slouch down in your seat and pretend to sleep all the way. No one will pay attention to what you look like, just that you have the broken arm. Tomorrow, there will be eighty-some odd passengers who will swear I was on Flight 752 at the time of the murder.

MAN. (*As he puts the ticket in his coat pocket.*) Let us hope so.

GEORGE. It's fool-proof. At eleven-thirty, while you are somewhere between New York and Chicago, I shall get rid of Martha. And there's nothing the authorities can prove. (*Flicks ash in tray on desk.*) I am the one with the best motive, but I was apparently thirty thousand feet above the ground at the time it happened. A perfect alibi. (*MILDRED turns and gives a significant*

nod to the audience.) I shall take the twelve-thirty flight to Chicago under an assumed name and be there when Martha's body is discovered. I shall be properly shocked, attend the funeral as a dutiful husband should, and inherit the estate oh, so reluctantly. (*Sits in desk chair.*) And there's not a thing Roger will be able to prove.

MAN. Roger is the new man?

GEORGE. Oh, yes, Martha always has a new man ready, willing, and younger.

MAN. You're sure they can't connect me with you in any way?

GEORGE. How could they? As far as anyone knows, we haven't seen each other in fifteen years.

MAN. (*Rises.*) There's only one thing you've overlooked.

GEORGE. Which is?

MAN. The money. (*His hands on the desk, he leans in to GEORGE.*)

GEORGE. (*Rises, pulls large, stuffed envelope from his pocket and hands it to the MAN.*) It's all here.

MAN. I'll be thinking of you at eleven-thirty tonight. (*Starts to slowly stroll out through the French windows.*)

GEORGE. And I'll be thinking of the future. (*LIGHTS BLACKOUT on GEORGE and he disappears out the arch. MUSIC goes OFF.*)

MILDRED. As I said, I've also worked out the climax at eleven-thirty that night. Martha, the wife, is at home. I suppose she'd best be dressed in a negligee. They always seem to be. And she'd better be lovely, but a trifle hard-looking. (*LIGHT area above desk comes on and there is MARTHA exactly as MILDRED has described her. She is wearing a stunning negligee, her hair is done in a severe style and she is well bejeweled. She is facing u. and holds the receiver of the desk phone in her hand.*) Oh, very good. Yes, that's Martha. Perhaps she is talking with this Roger . . .

MARTHA. (*Turns as she talks.*) Yes, Roger, darling . . .

MILDRED. Wait a minute. (*MARTHA freezes right in the middle of a gesture.*) We need more atmosphere. A radio. Soft music in counterpoint to the scene we know is coming. Can I have a radio, please?

JASON. Anything you wish. (*Rises and calls.*) Radio! (*A GRIP comes in from the arch carrying a small radio which he places on the desk.*)

MILDRED. What service. Thank you.

GRIP. You're welcome. (*Starts off.*)

MILDRED. It should be playing music.

GRIP. (*As he exits through arch, he calls off.*) Hey, Charlie. Music!

(*MUSIC comes on playing something sensuous, perhaps "Bolero."*)

MILDRED. Martha is on the phone.

MARTHA. (*Unfreezes.*) He's gone. A quick divorce and then we'll be together. . . . No, he leaves on the eleven o'clock flight from Newark Airport. . . . (*Laughs.*) The poor thing won't be able to carry all his luggage with that broken arm. He'll have to tip a skycap. That will really hurt him. . . . What? Mexico, I think. Divorces overnight. (*Lights a cigarette from a pack on the desk.*) Of course you can, darling. I wouldn't dream of going alone. . . . First thing in the morning, Roger. Why not lunch at one? . . . Pick me up here. Till then. . . . Yes, I am, too. (*Blows a kiss into the phone, hangs up. Exhales a long puff. She hears footsteps coming down the stairs in the arch.*) Hello—is someone there? Who is it?

GEORGE. (*Enters through arch in area lighting.*) Hello, Martha.

MARTHA. (*Crosses around desk and sits on bench.*) What are you doing here? Did you get drunk and miss the plane?

GEORGE. Not at all. I have never been more sober in my life.

MARTHA. You know, I don't think I have ever seen you sober.

(The MUSIC stops abruptly and a RADIO ANNOUNCER'S VOICE is heard.)

ANNOUNCER. We interrupt this program for a news bulletin. Amalgamated Airlines Flight 752 from Newark to Chicago has crashed outside of Cleveland, Ohio. There are no survivors.

(GEORGE turns front, shocked. LIGHTS BLACKOUT except for the podium light on MILDRED. GEORGE and MARTHA leave through the arch.)

MILDRED. Surprise ending! I'm famous for them. Shock it to them with the last line. Do I get applause for that? (Pauses to see if audience applauds.) I should hope so. (LIGHTS DIM up on main room.) Of course there are lots of details to figure out, but we have our jealousy—the husband jealous of Roger, and the money which would rightfully be George's. What do you think? (Moves in c. a few steps.)

RODNEY. (The authors are all obviously far from happy.) I think it's nice, but—

MILDRED. (Defensively.) What?

RODNEY. There's no one you really care about. MILDRED. I never really cared about anyone in your books.

RODNEY. Now, now, now, let's not get testy. I always had a sympathetic ingenue in there somewhere.

JESS. Perhaps if they were nicer people. Suppose we met them at a cocktail party, for instance, and there's some amusing chit-chat.

WHIT. That's not the way Mildred writes, Jess.

JESS. Well, we're collaborating, aren't we?

BRAD. (Rises and faces RODNEY.) Why don't we update it? If George were with the CIA and he knew that Roger was a spy for some foreign power, then he could plant a honing device under Roger's lapel and overhear them making love. Be rather a sexy scene. (To the audience.) Audiences love that sort of thing.

GEORGE. (Moves to above MARTHA. All of these trite lines are said by the characters with tremendous intensity as they are "taking off" the usual situations.) Take a good look.

MARTHA. (Turns and looks at him.) You are sober. Is it because you have to buy your own Scotch now? You can get out. I've had my last look at you.

GEORGE. How right you are.

MARTHA. (Turns to him.) And just what does that mean?

GEORGE. I'm going to kill you. (Pulls out revolver from his sling.)

MARTHA. (Laughs, rises and moves D. R. of desk.) Don't be ridiculous.

GEORGE. I'm serious, Martha. Do you think I'm going to give up the job of being your husband without any retirement plan? (Moves D.)

MARTHA. You didn't retire. You were fired. Now get out of here. You can't scare me. Go on. Get on another plane. (Puts cigarette out.)

GEORGE. But I'm on one already. You see, Martha, there is someone flying over the country right now dressed like me with a broken arm. I have any number of witnesses who will swear I am not here but there. (Moves below the desk. Turns RADIO volume up higher.) It's all beautifully thought out.

MARTHA. (To U. R. corner of desk.) You're bluffing. Get out of here now or I'll call the police. (Picks up phone.)

GEORGE. You won't have time. (Is at D. R. corner of desk.)

MARTHA. I know you too well. You might think up something like this, but you'd never have the guts to pull it off. (Dials.)

GEORGE. You're wrong, Martha. (Fires and the gun goes off. MARTHA falls to the floor. He kneels beside her for a moment, then replaces the receiver in the cradle.)