Lillian Hellman
The Collected Plays
The Children’s Hour

For Dashiell Hammett
with thanks
The Children's Hour was first produced at Maxine Elliot's Theatre, New York City, on November 20, 1934, with the following cast:

(In the order of their appearance)

PEGGY ROGERS
MRS. LILY MORTAR
EVELYN MUNN
HELEN BURTON
LOIS FISHER
CATHERINE
ROSALIE WELLS
MARY TILFORD
KAREN WRIGHT
MARTHA DOBIE
DOCTOR JOSEPH CARDIN
AGATHA
MRS. AMELIA TILFORD
A GROCERY BOY

EUGENIA RAWLS
ALINE MC DERMOOT
ELIZABETH SECKEL
LYNNE FISHER
JACQUELINE RUSLING
BARBARA LEEDS
BARBARA BEALS
FLORENCE MC GEE
KATHERINE EMERY
ANNE REVERE
ROBERT KEITH
EDMONIA NOLLEY
KATHERINE EMMET
JACK TYLER

Produced and directed by
HERMAN SHUMLIN

Settings designed by
ALINE BERNSTEIN
Scenes

Act One
Living room of the Wright-Dobie School
Late afternoon in April.

Act Two
Scene 1. Living room at Mrs. Tilford’s.
   A few hours later.
Scene 2. The same. Later that evening.

Act Three
The same as Act One. November.

Act One

Scene: A room in the Wright-Dobie School for girls, a converted farmhouse about ten miles from the town of Lancet, Massachusetts. It is a comfortable, unpretentious room used as an afternoon study-room and at all other times as the living room.

A large door left center faces the audience. There is a single door right. Against both back walls are bookcases. A large desk is at right; a table, two sofas, and eight or ten chairs.

It is early in an afternoon in April.

At rise: Mrs. Lily Mortar is sitting in a large chair right center, with her head back and her eyes closed. She is a plump, florid woman of forty-five with dyed reddish hair. Her dress is too fancy for a classroom.

Seven girls, from twelve to fourteen years old, are informally grouped on chairs and sofa. Six of them are sewing with no great amount of industry on pieces of white material. One of the others, Evelyn Munn, is using her scissors to trim the hair of Rosalie, who sits, nervously, in front of her: she has Rosalie’s head bent back at an awkward angle and is enjoying herself.

The eighth girl, Peggy Rogers, is sitting in a higher chair than the others. She is reading aloud from a book. She is bored and she reads without a fig for a classroom.

Peggy. “It is twice blest; it blesseth him that gives and him that takes: ’tis mightiest in the mightiest; it becomes the throned monarch better than his crown; his sceptre shows the force of temporal power, the attribute to awe and majesty, wherein . . .” (Mrs. Mortar suddenly opens her eyes and stares at the hair cutting. The children make efforts to warn Evelyn. Peggy raises her voice until she is shouting) “doth sit the dread and fear of kings; but mercy is above . . .”

Mrs. Mortar. Evelyn! What are you doing?
Evelyn (she lisps). Uh — nothing, Mrs. Mortar.
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MRS. MORTAR. You are certainly doing something. You are ruining the scissors for one thing.

PEGGY (loudly). "But mercy is above. It ..."

MRS. MORTAR. Just a moment, Peggy. It is very unfortunate that you girls cannot sit quietly with your sewing and drink in the immortal words of the immortal bard. (She sighs) Evelyn, go back to your sewing.

EVELYN. I can't get the hem thright. Honeth, I've been trying for three weekth, but I juth can't do it.

MRS. MORTAR. Helen, please help Evelyn with the hem.

HELEN (rises, holding up the garment Evelyn has been working on. It is soiled and shapeless and so much has been cut off that it is now hardly large enough for a child of five. Gigglng). She can't ever wear that, Mrs. Mortar.

MRS. MORTAR (vaguely). Well, try to do something with it. Make some handkerchiefs or something. Be clever about it. Women must learn these tricks. (To Peggy) Continue. "Mightiest in the mightiest."

PEGGY. " 'Tis mightiest in the mightiest; it becomes the throned monarch better than his crown; his sceptre — his sceptre shows the force of temporal power, the attribute to awe and majesty, wherein —"

LOIS (from the back of the room chants softly and monotonously through the previous speech). Ferabam, ferabas, ferabat, ferabamus, ferabatis, fere — fere —

CATHERINE (two seats away, the book propped in front of her). Ferabant.

LOIS. Ferabamus, ferabatis, ferabant.

MRS. MORTAR. Who's doing that?

PEGGY (the noise ceases. She hurries on). "Wherein doth sit the dread and fear of kings; but mercy is above this sceptred sway, it is enthroned in the hearts of kings, it is an attribute to God himself —"

MRS. MORTAR (sadly). Peggy, can't you imagine yourself as Portia? Can't you read the lines with some feeling, some pity? (Dreamily) Pity. Ah! As Sir Henry said to me many's the time, pity makes the actress. Now, why can't you feel pity?

PEGGY. I guess I feel pity.

LOIS. Ferabamus, ferabatis, fere — fere —

CATHERINE. Ferabant, stupid.

MRS. MORTAR. How many people in this room are talking? Peggy, read the line again. I'll give you the cue.

PEGGY. What's a cue?

MRS. MORTAR. A cue is a line or word given the actor or actress to remind them of their next speech.

HELEN (softly). To remind him or her.

ROSALIE (a fattish girl with glasses). Weren't you ever in the movies, Mrs. Mortar?

MRS. MORTAR. I had many offers, my dear. But the cinema is a shallow art. It has no — no — (Vaguely) no fourth dimension. Now, Peggy, if you would only try to submerge yourself in this problem. You are pleading for the life of a man. (She rises and there are faint sighs from the girls, who stare at her with blank, bored faces. She recites with gestures) "But mercy is above this sceptred sway; it is enthroned in the hearts of kings, it is an attribute to God himself; and earthly power doth then show likest God's when mercy seasons justice."

LOIS (almost singing it). Utor, fruor, fungor, potior, and vescor take the dative.

CATHERINE. Take the ablative.

LOIS. Oh, dear. Utor, fruor, fung —

MRS. MORTAR (to Lois, with sarcasm). You have something to tell the class?

LOIS (apologetically). We've got a Latin exam this afternoon.

MRS. MORTAR. And you intend to occupy the sewing and elocution hour learning what should have been learnt yesterday?

CATHERINE (wearily). It takes her more than yesterday to learn it.

MRS. MORTAR. Well, I cannot allow you to interrupt us like this.

CATHERINE. But we're finished sewing.

LOIS (admiringly). I bet you were good at Latin, Mrs. Mortar.

MRS. MORTAR. Long ago, my dear, long ago. Now, take your book over by the window and don't disturb our enjoyment of Shakespeare. (Catherine and Lois rise, go to window, stand mumbling and gesturing) Let us go back again. "It is an attribute to —" (At this point the door opens far enough to let Mary Tilford, clutching a slightly faded bunch of wild flowers, squeeze cautiously in. She is fourteen, neither pretty nor ugly. She is an undistinguished-looking girl) "And earthly power doth then show likest God's when mercy
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seasons justice. We do pray for mercy, and that same prayer
doth teach —"

PEGGY (happily). You've skipped three lines.
MRS. MORTAR. In my entire career I've never missed a line.
PEGGY. But you did skip three lines. (Goes to Mrs. Mortar
with book) See?
MRS. MORTAR (seeing Mary sidling along wall toward other
end of the room, turns to her to avoid Peggy and the book).
Mary!
MARY. Yes, Mrs. Mortar?
MRS. MORTAR. This is a pretty time to be coming to your sew-
ing class, I must say. Even if you have no interest in your
work you might at least remember that you owe me a little
courtesy. Courtesy is breeding. Breeding is an excellent
thing. (Turns to class) Always remember that.
ROSALIE. Please, Mrs. Mortar, can I write that down?
MRS. MORTAR. Certainly. Suppose you all write it down.
PEGGY. But we wrote it down last week.
(Mary giggles.)
MRS. MORTAR. Mary, I am still awaiting your explanation.
Where have you been?
MARY. I took a walk.
MRS. MORTAR. So you took a walk. And may I ask, young lady,
are we in the habit of taking walks when we should be at
our classes?
MARY. I am sorry, Mrs. Mortar, I went to get you these flowers.
I thought you would like them and I didn't know it would
take so long to pick them.
MRS. MORTAR (flattered). Well, well.
MARY. You were telling us last week how much you liked
flowers, and I thought that I would bring you some and —
MRS. MORTAR. That was very sweet of you, Mary; I always like
thoughtfulness. But you must not allow anything to inter-
fere with your classes. Now run along, dear, and get a vase
and some water to put my flowers in. (Mary turns, sticks out
her tongue at Helen, says "A-a-a," and exits left) You may
put that book away, Peggy. I am sure your family need never
worry about your going on the stage.
PEGGY. I don't want to go on the stage. I want to be a light-
house keeper's wife.
MRS. MORTAR. Well, I certainly hope you won't read to him.
(The laughter of the class pleases her. Peggy sits down among
the other girls, who are making a great show of doing nothing.
Mrs. Mortar returns to her chair, puts her head back, closes
her eyes.)
CATHERINE. How much longer, O Cataline, are you going to
abuse our patience? (To Lois) Now translate it, and for
goodness' sakes try to get it right this time.
MRS. MORTAR (for no reason). "One master passion in the
breast, like Aaron's serpent, swallows all the rest."
(She and Lois are murmuring during Karen Wright's entrance.
Karen is an attractive woman of twenty-eight, casually pleas-
ant in manner, without sacrifice of warmth or dignity. She
smiles at the girls, goes to the desk. With her entrance there
is an immediate change in the manner of the girls: they are
fond of her and they respect her. She gives Mortar, whose quo-
tation has reached her, an annoyed look.)
LOIS. "Quo usque tandem abutere . . ."
KAREN (automatically). "Abutere." (Opens drawer in desk)
What's happened to your hair, Rosalie?
ROSALIE. It got cut, Miss Wright.
KAREN (smiling). I can see that. A new style? Looks as though
it has holes in it.
EVELYN (giggling). I didn't mean to do it that bad, Miss
Wright, but Rothalie 'th got funny hair. I thaw a picture
in the paper, and I wath trying to do it that way.
ROSALIE (feels her hair, looks pathetically at Karen). Oh, what
shall I do, Miss Wright? (Gesturing) It's long here, and it's
long here, and it's short here and —
KAREN. Come up to my room later and I'll see if I can fix it
for you.
MRS. MORTAR. And hereafter we'll have no more haircutting.
KAREN. Helen, have you found your bracelet?
HELEN. No, I haven't, and I've looked everywhere.
KAREN. Have another look. It must be in your room some-
where.
(Mary comes in right, with her flowers in a vase. Karen looks
at the flowers in surprise.)
MARY. Good afternoon, Miss Wright. (Sits down, looks at
Karen, who is staring hard at the flowers.)
KAREN. Hello, Mary.
MRS. MORTAR (fluttering around). Peggy has been reading
Portia for us.
(Peggy sighs.)
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KAREN. Peggy doesn't like Portia?

MRS. MORTAR. I don't think she quite appreciates it, but —

KAREN (patting Peggy on the head). I don't think I do either.

Where'd you get those flowers, Mary?

MRS. MORTAR. She picked them for me. (Hurriedly) It made her a little late to class, but she heard me say I loved flowers, and she went to get them for me. (With a sigh) The first wild flowers of the season.

KAREN. But not the very first, are they, Mary?

MARY. I don't know.

KAREN. Where did you get them?

MARY. Near Conway's cornfield, I think.

KAREN. It wasn't necessary to go so far. There was a bunch exactly like this in the garbage can this morning.

MRS. MORTAR (after a second). Oh, I can't believe it! What a nasty thing to do! (To Mary) And I suppose you have just as fine an excuse for being an hour late to breakfast this morning, and last week — (To Karen) I haven't wanted to tell you these things before, but —

KAREN (hurriedly, as a bell rings off stage). There's the bell.

Lois (walking toward door). Ad, ab, ante, in, de, inter, con, post, præ — (Looks up at Karen) I can't seem to remember the rest.

KAREN. Pre, pro, sub, super. Don't worry, Lois. You'll come out all right. (Lois smiles, exits. Mary attempts to make a quick exit) Wait a minute, Mary. (Reluctantly Mary turns back as the girls file out. Karen moves the small chairs, clearing the room as she talks) Mary, I've had the feeling — and I don't think I'm wrong — that the girls here are happy; that they like Miss Dobie and me, that they like the school. Do you think that's true?

MARY. Miss Wright, I have to get my Latin book.

KAREN. I thought it was true until you came here a year ago.

I don't think you're very happy here, and I'd like to find out why. (Looks at Mary, waits for an answer, gets none, shakes her head) Why, for example, do you find it necessary to lie to us so often?

MARY (without looking up). I'm not lying. I went out walking and I saw the flowers and they looked pretty and I didn't know it was so late.

KAREN (impatiently). Stop it, Mary! I'm not interested in hearing that foolish story again. I know you got the flowers out of the garbage can. What I do want to know is why you feel you have to lie out of it.

MARY. I did pick the flowers near Conway's. You never believe me. You believe everybody but me. It's always like that. Everything I say you fuss at me about. Everything I do is wrong.

KAREN. You know that isn't true. (Goes to Mary, puts her arm around her, waits until the sobbing has stopped) Look, Mary, look at me. (Raises Mary's face with her hand) Let's try to understand each other. If you feel that you have to take a walk, or that you just can't come to class, or that you'd like to go into the village by yourself, come and tell me — I'll try to understand. I don't say that I'll always agree that you should do exactly what you want to do, but I've had feelings like that, too — everybody has — and I won't be unreasonable about yours. But this way, this kind of lying you do, makes everything wrong.

MARY (looking steadily at Karen). I got the flowers near Conway's cornfield.

KAREN (looks at Mary, sighs, moves back toward desk and stands there for a moment). Well, there doesn't seem to be any other way with you; you'll have to be punished. Take your recreation periods alone for the next two weeks. No horseback riding and no hockey. Don't leave the school grounds for any reason whatsoever. Is that clear?

MARY (carefully). Saturday, too?

KAREN. Yes.

MARY. But you said I could go to the boat races.

KAREN. I'm sorry, but you can't go.

MARY. I'll tell my grandmother. I'll tell her how everybody treats me here and the way I get punished for every little thing I do. I'll tell her —

MRS. MORTAR. Why, I'd slap her hands!

KAREN (turning back from door, ignoring Mrs. Mortar's speech. To Mary). Go upstairs, Mary.

MARY. I don't feel well.

KAREN (wearily). Go upstairs now.

MARY. I've got a pain. I've had it all morning. It hurts right here. (Pointing vaguely in the direction of her heart) Really it does.

KAREN. Ask Miss Dobie to give you some hot water and bicarbonate of soda.
MARY. It's a bad pain. I've never had it before. My heart! It's my heart! It's stopping or something. I can't breathe. (She takes a long breath and falls awkwardly to the floor.)

KAREN (sighs, shakes her head, kneels beside Mary. To Mrs. Mortar). Ask Martha to phone Joe.

MRS. MORTAR (going out). Do you think — ? Heart trouble is very serious in a child.

(Karen picks Mary up from the floor and carries her off right. After a moment Martha Dobie enters center. She is about the same age as Karen. She is a nervous, high-strung woman.)

KAREN (enters right). Did you get Joe?

MARTHA (nodding). What happened to her? She was perfectly well a few hours ago.

KAREN. She probably still is. I told her she couldn't go to the boat races and she had a heart attack. (Sits down at desk and begins to mark papers) She's a problem, that kid. Her latest trick was kidding your aunt out of a sewing lesson with those faded flowers we threw out. Then she threatened to go to her grandmother with some tale about being mistreated.

MARTHA. And, please God, Grandma would believe her and take her away.

KAREN. Which would give the school a swell black eye. But we ought to do something.

MARTHA. How about having a talk with Mrs. Tilford?

KAREN (smiling). You want to do it? (Martha shakes her head)

I hate to do it. She's been so nice to us. Anyway, it wouldn't do any good. She's too crazy about Mary to see her faults very clearly — and the kid knows it.

MARTHA. How about asking Joe to say something to her? She'd listen to him.

KAREN. That would be admitting that we can't do the job ourselves.

MARTHA. Well, we can't, and we might as well admit it. We've tried everything we can think of. She's had more attention than any other three kids put together. And we still haven't the faintest idea what goes on inside her head.

KAREN. She's a strange girl.

MARTHA. That's putting it mildly.

KAREN (laughs). We always talk about her as if she were a grown woman.

MARTHA. It's not so funny. There's something the matter with

the kid. That's been true ever since the first day she came. She causes trouble here; she's bad for the other girls. I don't know what it is — it's a feeling I've got that it's wrong somewhere —

KAREN. All right, all right, we'll talk it over with Joe. Now what about our other pet nuisance?

MARTHA (laughs). My aunt the actress? What's she been up to now?

KAREN. Nothing unusual. Last night at dinner she was telling the girls about the time she lost her trunks in Butte, Montana, and how she gave her best performance of Rosalind during a hurricane. Today in the kitchen you could hear her on what Sir Henry said to her.

MARTHA. Wait until she does Hedda Gabler standing on one foot. Sir Henry taught her to do it that way. He said it was a test of great acting.

KAREN. You must have had a gay childhood.

MARTHA (bitterly). Oh, I did. I did, indeed. God, how I used to hate all that —

KAREN. Couldn't we get rid of her soon, Martha? I hate to make it hard on you, but she really ought not to be here.

MARTHA (after a moment). I know.

KAREN. We can scrape up enough money to send her away. Let's do it.

MARTHA (goes to her, affectionately pats her head). You've been very patient about it. I'm sorry and I'll talk to her today. It'll probably be a week or two before she can be ready to leave. Is that all right?

KAREN. Of course. (Looks at her watch) Did you get Joe himself on the phone?

MARTHA. He was already on his way. Isn't he always on his way over here?

KAREN (laughs). Well, I'm going to marry him, you know.

MARTHA (looking at her). You haven't talked of marriage for a long time.

KAREN. I've talked of it with Joe.

MARTHA. Then you are thinking about it — soon?

KAREN. Perhaps when the term is over. By that time we ought to be out of debt, and the school should be paying for itself.

MARTHA (nervously playing with a book on the table). Then we won't be taking our vacation together?
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KAREN. Of course we will. The three of us.

MARTHA. I had been looking forward to someplace by the lake — just you and me — the way we used to at college.

KAREN (cheerfully). Well, now there will be three of us. That'll be fun, too.

MARTHA (after a pause). Why haven't you told me this before?

KAREN. I'm not telling you anything we haven't talked about often.

MARTHA. But you're talking about it as soon now.

KAREN. I'm glad to be able to. I've been in love with Joe a long time. (Martha crosses to window and stands looking out, her back to Karen. Karen finishes marking papers and rises.) It's a big day for the school. Rosalie's finally put an "I" in could.

MARTHA (not turning from window). You really are going to leave, aren't you?

KAREN. I'm not going to leave, and you know it. Why do you say things like that? We agreed a long time ago that my marriage wasn't going to make any difference to the school.

MARTHA. But it will. You know it will. It can't help it.

KAREN. That's nonsense. Joe doesn't want me to give up here.

MARTHA (turning from window). It's been so damned hard building this thing up, slaving and going without things to make ends meet — think of having a winter coat without holes in the lining again! — and now when we're getting on our feet, you're all ready to let it go to hell.

KAREN. This is a silly argument, Martha. Let's quit it. You haven't listened to a word I've said. I'm not getting married tomorrow, and when I do, it's not going to interfere with my work here. You're making something out of nothing.

MARTHA. It's going to be hard going on alone afterward.

KAREN. For God's sake, do you expect me to give up my marriage?

MARTHA. I don't mean that, but it's so —

(Door, center, opens and Doctor Joseph Cardin comes in. He is a large, pleasant-looking, carelessly dressed man of about thirty-five.)

CARDIN. Hello, darling. Hi, Martha. What's the best news?

MARTHA. Hello, Joe.

KAREN. We tried to get you on the phone. Come in and look at your little cousin.

CARDIN. What's the matter with her now?

KAREN. You'd better come and see her. She says she has a pain in her heart. (Goes out, right.)

CARDIN (stopping to light a cigarette). Our little Mary pops up in every day's dispatches.

MARTHA (impatiently). Go and see her. Heart attacks are nothing to play with.

CARDIN (looks at her). Never played with one in my life. (Exits right.)

(Martha walks around room and finally goes to stare out window. Mrs. Mortar enters right.)

MRS. MORTAR. I was asked to leave the room. (Martha pays no attention.) It seems that I'm not wanted in the room during the examination.

MARTHA (over her shoulder). What difference does it make?

MRS. MORTAR. What difference does it make? Why, it was a deliberate snub.

MARTHA. There's very little pleasure in watching a man use a stethoscope.

MRS. MORTAR. Isn't it natural that the child should have me with her? Isn't it natural that an older woman should be present? (No answer) Very well, if you are so thick-skinned that you don't resent these things —

MARTHA. What are you talking about? Why, in the name of heaven, should you be with her?

MRS. MORTAR. It — it's customary for an older woman to be present during an examination.

MARTHA (laughs). Tell that to Joe. Maybe he'll give you a job as duenna for his office.

MRS. MORTAR. It was I who saved Delia Lampert's life the time she had that heart attack in Buffalo. We almost lost her that time. Poor Delia! We went over to London together. She married Robert Laffonne. Not seven months later he left her and ran away with Eve Cloun, who was playing the Infant Phenomenon in Birmingham —

MARTHA. Console yourself. If you've seen one heart attack, you've seen them all.

MRS. MORTAR. So you don't resent your aunt being snubbed and humiliated?

MARTHA. Oh, Aunt Lily!

MRS. MORTAR. Karen is consistently rude to me, and you know it.
MARTHA. I know that she is very polite to you, and — what's more important — very patient.

MRS. MORTAR. Patient with me? I, who have worked my fingers to the bone!

MARTHA. Don't tell yourself that too often, Aunt Lily; you'll come to believe it.

MRS. MORTAR. I know it's true. Where could you have gotten a woman of my reputation to give these children voice lessons, elocution lessons? Patient with me! Here I've donated my services —

MARTHA. You are being paid.

MRS. MORTAR. That small thing! I used to earn twice that for one performance.

MARTHA. The gilded days. It was very extravagant of them to pay you so much. (Suddenly tired of the whole thing) You're not very happy here, are you, Aunt Lily?

MRS. MORTAR. Satisfied enough, I guess, for a poor relation.

MARTHA (makes a motion of distaste). But you don't like the school or the farm or —

MRS. MORTAR. I told you at the beginning you shouldn't have bought a place like this. Burying yourself on a farm! You'll regret it.

MARTHA. We like it here. (After a moment) Aunt Lily, you've talked about London for a long time. Would you like to go over?

MRS. MORTAR (with a sigh). It's been twenty years, and I shall never live to see it again.

MARTHA. Well, you can go any time you like. We can spare the money now, and it will do you a lot of good. You pick out the boat you want and I'll get the passage. (She has been talking rapidly, anxious to end the whole thing) Now that's all fixed. You'll have a grand time seeing all your old friends, and if you live sensibly I ought to be able to let you have enough to get along on. (She begins to gather books, notebooks, and pencils.)

MRS. MORTAR (slowly). So you want me to leave?

MARTHA. That's not the way to put it. You've wanted to go ever since I can remember.

MRS. MORTAR. You're trying to get rid of me.

MARTHA. That's it. We don't want you around when we dig up the buried treasure.
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stand the idea of them being together. God knows what you'll do when they get married. You're jealous of him, that's what it is.

MARTHA (her voice is tense and the previous attitude of good-natured irritation is gone). I'm very fond of Joe, and you know it.

MRS. MORTAR. You're fonder of Karen, and I know that. And it's unnatural, just as unnatural as it can be. You don't like them being together. You were always like that even as a child. If you had a little girl friend, you always got mad when she liked anybody else. Well, you'd better get a beau of your own now — a woman of your age.

MARTHA. The sooner you get out of here the better. You are making me sick and I won't stand for it any longer. I want you to leave —

(At this point there is a sound outside the large doors center. Martha breaks off. After a moment she crosses to the door and opens it. Evelyn and Peggy are to be seen on the staircase. For a second she stands still as they stop and look at her. Then, afraid that her anger with her aunt will color anything she might say to the children, she crosses the room again and stands with her back to them.)

MARTHA. What were you doing outside the door?

EVELYN (hurriedly). We were going up there, with Dobie.

PEGGY. We came down to see how Mary was.

MARTHA. And you stopped long enough to see how we were.

Did you deliberately listen?

PEGGY. We didn't mean to. We heard voices and we couldn't help —

MRS. MORTAR (a social tone). Eavesdropping is something nice young ladies just don't do.

MARTHA (turning to face the children). Go upstairs now. We'll talk about this later. (Slowly shuts door as they begin to climb the stairs.)

MRS. MORTAR. You mean to say you're not going to do anything about that? (No answer. She laughs nastily) That's the trouble with these new-fangled notions of discipline and —

MARTHA (thoughtfully). You know, it's really bad having you around children.

MRS. MORTAR. What exactly does that mean?

MARTHA. It means that I don't like them hearing the things you say. Oh, I'll "do something about it," but the truth is that this is their home, and things shouldn't be said in it that they can't hear. When you're at your best, you're not for tender ears.

MRS. MORTAR. So now it's my fault, is it? Just as I said, whenever he's in the house you think you can take it out on me. You've got to have some way to let out steam and —

(Door opens, right, and Cardin comes in.)

MARTHA. How is Mary?

(Mrs. Mortar, head in air, gives Martha a malicious half-smile and exits center.)

MRS. MORTAR. Good day, Joseph.

CARDIN. What's the matter with the Duchess?

MARTHA. Just keeping her hand in, in case Sir Henry's watching her from above. What about Mary?

CARDIN. Nothing. Absolutely nothing.

MARTHA (sighs). I thought so.

CARDIN. I could have managed a better faint than that when I was six years old.

MARTHA. Nothing the matter with her at all?

CARDIN (laughs). No, ma'am, not a thing. Just a little something she thought up.

MARTHA. But it's such a silly thing to do. She knew we'd have you in. (Sighs) Maybe she's not so bright. Any idiots in your family, Joe? Any inbreeding?

CARDIN. Don't blame her on me. It's another side of the family.

(Laughs) You can look at Aunt Amelia and tell: old New England stock, never married out of Boston, still thinks honor is honor and dinner's at eight. Yes, ma'am, we're a proud old breed.

MARTHA. The Jukes were an old family, too. Look, Joe, have you any idea what is the matter with Mary? I mean, has she always been like this?

CARDIN. She's always been a honey. Aunt Amelia's spoiling hasn't helped any, either.

MARTHA. We're reaching the end of our rope with her. This kind of thing —

CARDIN (looking at her). Aren't you taking it too seriously?

MARTHA (after a second). I guess I am. But you stay around kids long enough and you won't know what to take seriously, either. But I do think somebody ought to talk to Mrs. Tilford about her.
THE CHILDREN'S HOUR

CARDIN. You wouldn't be meaning me now, would you, Miss Dobie?

MARTHA. Well, Karen and I were talking about it this afternoon and —

CARDIN. Listen, friend, I'm marrying Karen, but I'm not writing Mary Tilford in the contract. (Martha moves slightly. Cardin takes her by the shoulders and turns her around to face him again. His face is grave, his voice gentle) Forget Mary for a minute. You and I have got something to fight about. Every time anything's said about marrying — about Karen marrying me — you — I'm fond of you. I always thought you liked me. What is it? I know how fond you are of Karen, but our marriage oughtn't to make a great deal of difference —

MARTHA (pushing his hands from her shoulders). God damn you. I wish — (She puts her face in her hands. Cardin watches her in silence, mechanically lighting a cigarette. When she takes her hands from her face, she holds them out to him. Contritely) Joe, please, I'm sorry. I'm a fool, a nasty, bitter —

CARDIN (takes her hands in one of his, patting them with his other hand). Aw, shut up. (He puts an arm around her, and she leans her head against his lapel. They are standing like that when Karen comes in, right.)

MARTHA (to Karen, as she wipes her eyes). Your friend's got a nice shoulder to weep on.

KAREN. He's an admirable man in every way. Well, the angel child is now putting her clothes back on.

MARTHA. The angel child's influence is abroad even while she's unconscious. Her roommates were busy listening at the door while Aunt Lily and I were yelling at each other.

KAREN. We'll have to move those girls away from one another. (A bell rings from the rear of the house.)

MARTHA. That's my class. I'll send Peggy and Evelyn down. You talk to them.

KAREN. All right. (As Martha exits center, Karen goes toward door, right. As she passes Cardin she kisses him) Mary!

MARY. Who cares if she does? (Kicks table) And she can hear that, too.

(Small ornament falls off table and breaks on floor. Evelyn and Peggy gasp.)

EVELYN (frightened). Now what are you going to do?
PEGGY (stooping down in a vain effort to pick up the pieces).
You'll get the devil now. Dr. Cardin gave it to Miss Wright.
I guess it was kind of a lover's gift. People get awfully angry about a lover's gift.

MARY. Oh, leave it alone. She'll never know we did it.

PEGGY. We didn't do it. You did it yourself.

MARY. And what will you do if I say we did do it? (Laughs)
Never mind, I'll think of something else. The wind could've knocked it over.

EVELYN. Yeh. She' th going to believe that one.

MARY. Oh, stop worrying about it. I'll get out of it.

EVELYN. Did you really have a pain?

MARY. I fainted, didn't I?

PEGGY. I wish I could faint sometimes. I've never even worn glasses, like Rosalie.

MARY. A lot it'll get you to faint.

EVELYN. What did Mith Wright do to you when the clotlh left?

MARY. Told me I couldn't go to the boat races.

EVELYN. Whew!

PEGGY. But we'll remember everything that happens and we'll give you all the souvenirs and things.

MARY. I won't let you go if I can't go. But I'll find some way to go. What were you doing?

PEGGY. We came down to see what was happening to you, but the doors were closed and we could hear Miss Dobie and Mortar having an awful row. Then Miss Dobie opens the door and there we were.

MARY. And a lot of crawling and crying you both did too, I bet.

EVELYN. We were short of thorry about thitting. I gueth it wathn't —

MARY. Ah, you're always sorry about everything. What were they saying?

PEGGY. What was who saying?

MARY. Dobie and Mortar, silly.

PEGGY (evasively). Just talking, I guess.

EVELYN. Fighting, you mean.

MARY. About what?

EVELYN. Well, they were talking about Mortar going away to England and —

PEGGY. You know, it really wasn't very nice to've listened, and I think it's worse to tell.

MARY. You do, do you? You just don't tell me and see what happens.

(Peggy sighs.)

EVELYN. Mortar got awful thore at that and thaid they juth wanted to get rid of her, and then they thttared talking about Dr. Cardin.

MARY. What about him?

PEGGY. We'd better get started moving; Miss Wright will be back first thing we know.

MARY (fiercely). Shut up! Go on, Evelyn.

EVELYN. They're going to be married.

MARY. Everybody knows that.

PEGGY. But everybody doesn't know that Miss Dobie doesn't want them to get married. How do you like that?

(The door opens and Rosalie Wells sticks her head in.)

ROSALIE. I have a class soon. If you're going to move your things —

MARY. Close that door, you idiot. (Rosalie closes door, stands near it) What do you want?

ROSALIE. I'm trying to tell you. If you're going to move your things — not that I want you in with me — you'd better start right now. Miss Wright's coming in a minute.

MARY. Who cares if she is?

ROSALIE (starts for door). I'm just telling you for your own good.

PEGGY (getting up). We're coming.

MARY. No. Let Rosalie move our things.

ROSALIE. You crazy?

PEGGY (nervously). It's all right. Evelyn and I'll get your things. Come on, Evelyn.

MARY. Trying to get out of telling me, huh? Well, you won't get out of it that way. Sit down and stop being such a sissy. Rosalie, you go on up and move my things and don't say a word about our being down here.

ROSALIE. And who was your French maid yesterday, Mary Tilford?

MARY (laughing). You'll do for today. Now go on, Rosalie, and fix our things.

ROSALIE. You crazy?

MARY. And the next time we go into town, I'll let you wear my gold locket and buckle. You'll like that, won't you, Rosalie?
THE CHILDREN'S HOUR

ROSALE. (draws back, moves her hands nervously) I don't know what you're talking about.
MARY. Oh, I'm not talking about anything in particular. You just run along now and remind me the next time to get my buckle and locket for you.
ROSALE. (stares at her a moment). All right, I'll do it this time, but just 'cause I got a good disposition. But don't think you're going to boss me around, Mary Tilford.
MARY. (smiling). No, indeed. (Rosalie starts for door) And get the things done neatly, Rosalie. Don't muss my white linen bloomers—
(The door slams as Mary laughs.)
EVELYN. Now what do you think of that? What made her tho agreeable?
MARY. Oh, a little secret we got. Go on, now, what else did they say?
Peggy. Well, Mortar said that Dobie was jealous of them, and that she was like that when she was a little girl, and that she'd better get herself a beau of her own because it was unnatural, and that she never wanted anybody to like Miss Wright, and that was unnatural. Boy! Did Miss Dobie get sore at that!
EVELYN. Then we didn't hear any more. Peggy dropped a book.
MARY. What'd she mean Dobie was jealous?
Peggy. What's unnatural?
EVELYN. Un for not. Not natural.
Peggy. It's funny, because everybody gets married.
MARY. A lot of people don't— they're too ugly.
Peggy (jumps up, claps her hand to her mouth). Oh, my God! Rosalie'll find that copy of Mademoiselle de Maupin. She'll blab like the dickens.
MARY. Ah, she won't say a word.
EVELYN. Who getth the book when we move?
MARY. You can have it. That's what I was doing this morning— finishing it. There's one part in it—
Peggy. What part?
(Mary laughs.)
EVELYN. Well, what wath it?
MARY. Wait until you read it.
Peggy. It's a shame about being moved. I've got to go in with Helen, and she blows her nose all night. Lois told me.

MARY. It was a dirty trick making us move. She just wants to see how much fun she can take away from me. She hates me.
Peggy. No, she doesn't, Mary. She treats you just like the rest of us—almost better.
MARY. That's right, stick up for your crush. Take her side against mine.
Peggy. I didn't mean it that way.
EVELYN. (looks at her watch). We'd better get upthtairth.
MARY. I'm not going.
Peggy. Rosalie isn't so bad.
EVELYN. What you going to do about the vathe?
MARY. I don't care about Rosalie and I don't care about the vase. I'm not going to be here.
EVELYN and Peggy (together). Not going to be here! What do you mean?
MARY (calmly). I'm going home.
Peggy. Oh, Mary—
EVELYN. You can't do that.
MARY. Can't I? You just watch. (Begins to walk around the room) I'm not staying here. I'm going home and tell Grandma I'm not staying anymore. (Smiles to herself) I'll tell her I'm not happy. They're scared of Grandma—she helped 'em when they first started, you know—and when she tells 'em something, believe me, they'll sit up and listen. They can't get away with treating me like this, and they don't have to think they can.
Peggy (appalled). You just going to walk out like that?
EVELYN. What you going to tell your grandmother?
MARY. Oh, who cares? I'll think of something to tell her. I can always do it better on the spur of the moment.
Peggy. She'll send you right back.
MARY. You let me worry about that. Grandma's very fond of me, on account my father was her favorite son. I can manage her all right.
Peggy. I don't think you ought to go, really, Mary. It's just going to make an awful lot of trouble.
EVELYN. What 'th going to happen about the vathe?
MARY. Say I did it— it doesn't make a bit of difference anymore to me. Now listen, you two got to help. They won't miss me before dinner if you make Rosalie shut the door and
keep it shut. Now, I'll go through the field to French's, and
then I can get the bus to Homestead.
EVELYN. How you going to get to the threetcar?
MARY. Taxi, idiot.
Peggy. How are you going to get out of here in the first place?
MARY. I'm going to walk out. You know where the front door
is? Well, I'm going right out that front door.
EVELYN. Gee, I wouldn't have the nerve.
MARY. Of course you wouldn't. You'd let 'em do anything to
you they want. Well, they can't do it to me. Who's got any
money?
EVELYN. Not me. Not a thent.
MARY. I've got to have at least a dollar for the taxi and a dime
for the bus.
EVELYN. And where you going to find it?
Peggy. See? Why don't you just wait until your allowance comes
Monday, and then you can go anyplace you want. Maybe
by that time —
MARY. I'm going today. Now.
EVELYN. You can't walk to Lanthet.
MARY (goes to Peggy). You've got money. You've got two dol-
lars and twenty-five cents.
Peggy. I — I —
MARY. Go get it for me.
Peggy. No! No! I won't get it for you.
EVELYN. You can't have that money, Mary —
MARY. Get it for me.
Peggy (her voice is scared). I won't. I won't. Mamma doesn't
send me much allowance — not half as much as the rest of
you get — I saved this so long — you took it from me last
time —
EVELYN. Ah, she wanth that bithycle tho bad.
Peggy. I haven't gone to the movies, I haven't had any candy,
I haven't had anything the rest of you get all the time. It
took me so long to save that and I —
MARY. Go upstairs and get me the money.
Peggy (hysterically, backing away from her). I won't. I won't.
I won't.
(Mary makes a sudden move for her, grabs her left arm, and
jerks it back, hard and expertly. Peggy screams softly. Evelyn
Act Two

Scene 1.

SCENE: Living room at Mrs. Tilford's. It is a formal room, without being cold or elegant. The furniture is old, but excellent. The exit to the hall is left; glass doors, right, lead to a dining room that cannot be seen.

AT RISE: Stage is empty. Voices are heard in the hall.

AGATHA (offstage). What are you doing here? Well, come on in — don’t stand there gaping at me. Have they given you a holiday or did you just decide you’d get a better dinner here? (Agatha enters left, followed by Mary. Agatha is a sharp-faced maid, not young, with a querulous voice) Can’t you even say hello?

MARY. Hello, Agatha. You didn’t give me a chance. Where’s Grandma?

AGATHA. Why aren’t you in school? Look at your face and clothes. Have you been?

MARY. I got a little dirty coming home. I walked part of the way through the woods.

AGATHA. Why didn’t you put on your middy blouse and your old brown coat?

MARY. Oh, stop asking me questions. Where’s Grandma?

AGATHA. Where ought any clean person be at this time of day? She’s taking a bath.

MARY. Is anybody coming for dinner?

AGATHA. She didn’t say anything about you coming.

MARY. How could she, stupid? She didn’t know.

AGATHA. Then what are you doing here?

MARY. Leave me alone. I don’t feel well.

AGATHA. Why don’t you feel well? Who ever heard of a person going for a walk in the woods when they didn’t feel well?

MARY. Oh, leave me alone. I came home because I was sick.

AGATHA. You look all right.

MARY. But I don’t feel all right. I can’t even come home without everybody nagging at me.

AGATHA. Don’t think you’re fooling me, young lady. You might pull the wool over some people’s eyes, but — I bet you’ve been up to something again. (Stares suspiciously at Mary) Well, you wait right here till I tell your grandmother. And if you feel so sick, you certainly won’t want any dinner. A good dose of rhubarb and soda will fix you up. (Exits left.) (Mary makes a face in the direction Agatha has gone and stops sniffing. She looks nervously around the room, then goes to a low mirror and tries several experiments with her face in an attempt to make it look sick and haggard. Mrs. Tilford, followed by Agatha, enters left. Mrs. Tilford is a large, dignified woman in her sixties, with a pleasant, strong face.)

AGATHA (to Mrs. Tilford, as she follows her into the room). Why didn’t you put some cold water on your chest? Do you want to catch your death of cold at your age? Did you have to hurry so?

MRS. TILFORD. Mary, what are you doing home?

(Mary rushes to her and buries her head in Mrs. Tilford’s dress, crying. Mrs. Tilford pats her head, then puts an arm around her and leads her to a sofa.)

MRS. TILFORD. Never mind, dear; now stop crying and tell me what is the matter.

MARY (gradually stops crying, fondling Mrs. Tilford’s hand). It’s so good to see you, Grandma. You didn’t come to visit me all last week.

MRS. TILFORD. I was coming tomorrow.

MARY. I missed you so. (Smiling up at Mrs. Tilford) I was awful homesick.

MRS. TILFORD. I’m glad that’s all it was. I was frightened when Agatha said you were not well.

AGATHA. Did I say that? I said she needed a good dose of rhubarb and soda. Most likely she only came home for Wednesday night fudge cake.

MRS. TILFORD. We all get homesick. But how did you get here? Did Miss Karen drive you over?

MARY. I — I walked most of the way, and then a lady gave me a ride and — (Looks timidly at Mrs. Tilford.)

AGATHA. Did she have to walk through the woods in her very best coat?
MRS. TILFORD. Mary! Do you mean you left without permission? MARY (nervously). I ran away, Grandma. They didn't know — MRS. TILFORD. That was a very bad thing to do, and they'll be worried. Agatha, phone Miss Wright and tell her Mary is here. John will drive her back before dinner. MARY (as Agatha starts toward telephone). No, Grandma, don't do that. Please don't do that. Please let me stay. MRS. TILFORD. But, darling, you can't leave school anytime you please. You don't know how they'll punish me. MRS. TILFORD. I don't think they'll be that angry. Come, you're acting like a foolish little girl. MARY (hysterically, as she sees Agatha about to pick up the telephone). Grandma! Please! I can't go back! I can't! They'll kill me! They will, Grandma! They'll kill me! (Mrs. Tilford and Agatha stare at Mary in amazement. She puts her head in Mrs. Tilford's lap and sobs.) MRS. TILFORD (motioning with a hand for Agatha to leave the room). Never mind phoning now, Agatha. AGATHA. If you're going to let her — (Mrs. Tilford repeats the gesture. Agatha exits, right.) MRS. TILFORD. Stop crying, Mary. MARY. It's so nice here, Grandma. MRS. TILFORD. I'm glad you like being home with me, but at your age you can hardly — What made you say such a terrible thing about Miss Wright and Miss Dobie? You know they wouldn't hurt you. MARY. Oh, but they would. They — I — (Breaks off, looks around as if hunting for a clue) I fainted today! MRS. TILFORD. Faintened? MARY. Yes, I did. My heart — I had a pain in my heart. I couldn't help having a pain in my heart, and when I fainted right in class, they called Cousin Joe and he said I didn't. He said it was maybe only that I ate my breakfast too fast and Miss Wright blamed me for it. MRS. TILFORD (relieved). I'm sure if Joseph said it wasn't serious, it wasn't. MARY. But I did have a pain in my heart — honest. MRS. TILFORD. Have you still got it? MARY. I guess I haven't got it much anymore, but I feel a little weak, and I was so scared of Miss Wright being so mean to me just because I was sick. MRS. TILFORD. Scared of Karen? Nonsense. It's perfectly possible that you had a pain, but if you had really been sick your Cousin Joseph would certainly have known it. It's not nice to frighten people by pretending to be sick when you aren't. MARY. I didn't want to be sick, but I'm always getting punished for everything. MRS. TILFORD (gently). You mustn't imagine things like that, child, or you'll grow up to be a very unhappy woman. I'm not going to scold you anymore for coming home this time, though I suppose I should. Run along upstairs and wash your face and change your dress, and after dinner John will drive you back. Run along. MARY (happily). I can stay for dinner? MRS. TILFORD. Yes. MARY. Maybe I could stay till the first of the week. Saturday's your birthday and I could be here with you. MRS. TILFORD. We don't celebrate my birthday, dear. You'll have to go back to school after dinner. MARY. But — (She hesitates, then goes up to Mrs. Tilford and puts her arms around the older woman's neck. Softly) How much do you love me? MRS. TILFORD (smiling). As much as all the words in all the books in all the world. MARY. Remember when I was little and you used to tell me that right before I went to sleep? And it was a rule nobody could say another single word after you finished? You used to say "Wor-rr-ld," and then I had to shut my eyes tight. I miss you an awful lot, Grandma. MRS. TILFORD. And I miss you, but I'm afraid my Latin is too rusty — you'll learn it better in school. MARY. But couldn't I stay out the rest of this term? After the summer maybe I won't mind it so much. I'll study hard, honest, and — MRS. TILFORD. You're an earnest little coxer, but it's out of the question. Back you go tonight. (Gives Mary a playful slap) Let's not have any more talk about it now, and let's have no more running away from school ever. MARY (slowly). Then I really have to go back there tonight? MRS. TILFORD. Of course.
THE CHILDREN'S HOUR

MARY. You don't love me. You don't care whether they kill me or not.

MRS. TILFORD. Mary.

MARY. You don't! You don't! You don't care what happens to me.

MRS. TILFORD (sternly). But I do care that you're talking this way.

MARY. I'm sorry I said that, Grandma. I didn't mean to hurt your feelings. (Puts her arms around Mrs. Tilford's neck) Forgive me?

MRS. TILFORD. What made you talk like that?

MARY (in a whisper). I'm scared, Grandma. I'm scared. They'll do dreadful things to me.

MRS. TILFORD. Dreadful? Nonsense. They'll punish you for running away. You deserve to be punished.

MARY. It's not that. It's not anything I do. It never is. They — they just punish me anyhow, just like they got something against me. I'm afraid of them, Grandma.

MRS. TILFORD. That's ridiculous. What have they ever done to you that is so terrible?

MARY. A lot of things — all the time. Miss Wright says I can't go to the boat races and — (Realizing the inadequacy of this reply, she breaks off, hesitates, and finally stammers) It's — it's after what happened today.

MRS. TILFORD. You mean something else besides your naughtiness in pretending to faint and then running away?

MARY. I did faint. I didn't pretend. They just said that to make me feel bad. Anyway, it wasn't anything that I did.

MRS. TILFORD. What was it, then?

MARY. I can't tell you.

MRS. TILFORD. Why?

MARY (sulkily). Because you're just going to take their part.

MRS. TILFORD (a little annoyed). Very well. Now run upstairs and get ready for dinner.

MARY. It was — it was all about Miss Dobie and Mrs. Mortar. They were talking awful things and Peggy and Evelyn heard them and Miss Dobie found out, and then they made us move out rooms.

MRS. TILFORD. What has that to do with you? I don't understand a word you're saying.

MARY. They made us move our rooms. They said we couldn't be together anymore. They're afraid to have us near them.

that's what it is, and they're taking it out on me. They're scared of you.

MRS. TILFORD. For a little girl you're imagining a lot of big things. Why should they be scared of me?

MARY. They're afraid you'll find out.

MRS. TILFORD. Find out what?

MARY (vaguely). Things.

MRS. TILFORD. Run along, Mary.

MARY (slowly starting for door). All right. But there's a lot of things. They have secrets or something, and they're afraid I'll find out and tell you.

MRS. TILFORD. There's not necessarily anything wrong with people having secrets.

MARY. But they've got funny ones. Peggy and Evelyn heard Mrs. Mortar telling Miss Dobie that she was jealous of Miss Wright marrying Cousin Joe.

MRS. TILFORD. You shouldn't repeat things like that.

MARY. But that's what she said, Grandma. She said it was unnatural for a girl to feel that way.

MRS. TILFORD. What?

MARY. I'm just telling you what she said. She said there was something funny about it, and that Miss Dobie had always been like that, even when she was a little girl, and that it was unnatural —

MRS. TILFORD. Stop using that silly word, Mary.

MARY (vaguely realizing that she is on the right track, hurries on). But that was the word she kept using, Grandma, and then they got mad and told Mrs. Mortar she'd have to get out.

MRS. TILFORD. That was probably not the reason at all.

MARY (nodding vigorously). I bet it was, because honestly, Miss Dobie does get cranky and mean every time Cousin Joe comes, and today I heard her say to him: "God damn you," and then she said she was just a jealous fool and —

MRS. TILFORD. You have picked up some fine words, haven't you, Mary?

MARY. That's just what she said, Grandma, and one time Miss Dobie was crying in Miss Wright's room, and Miss Wright was trying to stop her, and she said that all right, maybe she wouldn't get married right away if —

MRS. TILFORD. How do you know all this?

MARY. We couldn't help hearing because they — I mean Miss
THE CHILDREN'S HOUR

Dobie — was talking awful loud, and their room is right next to ours.

MRS. TILFORD. Whose room?

MARY. Miss Wright's room, I mean, and you can just ask Peggy and Evelyn whether we didn't hear. Almost always Miss Dobie comes in after we go to bed and stays a long time. I guess that's why they want to get rid of us — of me — because we hear things. That's why they're making us move our room, and they punish me all the time for —

MRS. TILFORD. For eavesdropping. I should think. (She has said this mechanically. With nothing definite in her mind, she is making an effort to conceal the fact that Mary's description of the life at school has worried her) Well, now I think we've had enough gossip, don't you? Dinner's almost ready, and I can't eat with a girl who has such a dirty face.

MARY (softly). I've heard other things, too. I've heard other things. Plenty of other things, Grandma.

MRS. TILFORD. What things?

MARY. Bad things.

MRS. TILFORD. Well, what were they?

MARY. I can't tell you.

MRS. TILFORD. Mary, you're annoying me very much. If you have anything to say, then say it and stop acting silly.

MARY. I mean I can't say it out loud.

MRS. TILFORD. There couldn't possibly be anything so terrible that you couldn't say it out loud. Now either tell the truth or be still.

MARY. Well, a lot of things I don't understand. But it's awful, and sometimes they fight and then they make up, and Miss Dobie cries and Miss Wright gets mad, and then they make up again, and there are funny noises and we get scared.

MRS. TILFORD. Noises? I suppose you girls have a happy time imagining a murder.

MARY. And we've seen things, too. Funny things. (Sees the impatience of her grandmother) I'd tell you, but I got to whisper it.

MRS. TILFORD. Why must you whisper it?

MARY. I don't know. I just got to. (Climbs on the sofa next to Mrs. Tilford and begins whispering. At first the whisper is slow and hesitant, but it gradually works up to fast, excited talking. In the middle of it Mrs. Tilford stops her.)

MRS. TILFORD (trembling). Do you know what you're saying?

(WITHOUT ANSWERING, Mary goes back to the whispering until the older woman takes her by the shoulders and turns her around to stare in her face) Mary! Are you telling me the truth?

MARY. Honest, honest. You just ask Peggy and Evelyn and — (After a moment Mrs. Tilford gets up and begins to pace about the room. She is no longer listening to Mary, who keeps up a running fire of conversation) They know too. And maybe there're other kids who know, but we've always been frightened and so we didn't ask, and one night I was going to go and find out, but I got scared and we went to bed early so we wouldn't hear, but sometimes I couldn't help it, but we never talked about it much, because we thought they'd find out and — Oh, Grandma, don't make me go back to that awful place.

MRS. TILFORD (abstractedly). What? (Starts to move about again.)

MARY. Don't make me go back to that place. I just couldn't stand it anymore. Really, Grandma, I'm so unhappy there, and if only I could stay out the rest of the term, why, then —

MRS. TILFORD (makes irritated gesture). Be still a minute. (After a moment) You can stay here tonight.

MARY (hugging Mrs. Tilford). You're the nicest, loveliest grandma in all the world. You — you're not mad at me?

MRS. TILFORD. I'm not mad at you. Now get ready for dinner. (Mary kisses her and runs happily out left. Mrs. Tilford stands staring after her for a long moment. Then, very slowly, she puts on her eyeglasses and crosses to the phone. She dials a number) Is Miss Wright — is Miss Wright in? ( Waits a second, hurriedly puts down the receiver) Never mind, never mind. (Dials another number) Dr. Cardin, please. Mrs. Tilford. (She remains absolutely motionless while she waits. When she does speak, her voice is low and tense) Joseph? Joseph? Can you come to see me right away? Yes, I'm perfectly well. No, but it's important, Joseph, very important. I must see you right away. I — I can't tell you over the phone. Can't you come sooner? It's not about Mary's fainting — I said it's not about Mary, Joseph; in one way it's about Mary — (Suddenly quiet) But will the hospital take so long? Very well, Joseph, make it as soon as you can. (Hangs up the receiver, sits for a moment undecided. Then, taking a breath, she dials another number) Mrs. Munn, please. This
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is Mrs. Tilford. Miriam? This is Amelia Tilford. Could you come over right away? I want some advice — I want to tell you — Thank you.

Curtain

Scene 2.

SCENE: The same as Scene 1. The curtain has been lowered to mark the passing of a few hours.

AT RISE: Mary is lying on the floor playing with a puzzle. Agatha appears lugging blankets and pillows across the room. Almost at the door, she stops and gives Mary an annoyed look.

AGATHA. And see to it that she doesn't get my good quilt all dirty, and let her wear your green pajamas.

MARY. Who?

AGATHA. Who? Rosalie Wells is coming over to spend the night with you.

MARY. You mean she's going to sleep here?

AGATHA. You heard me.

MARY. What for?

AGATHA. Do I know all the crazy things that are happening around here? Mrs. Munn comes over and then they phone Mrs. Wells all the way to New York, three dollars and eighty-five cents and families starving, and Mrs. Wells wanted to know if Rosalie could stay here until tomorrow.

MARY (relieved). Oh. Couldn't Evelyn Munn come instead?

AGATHA. Sure. We'll have the whole town over to entertain you.

MARY. I won't let Rosalie Wells wear my new pajamas.

AGATHA (exits as the front doorbell rings). Don't tell me what you won't do. You'll act like a lady for once in your life.

(Offstage) Come on in, Rosalie. Just go on in there and make yourself at home. Have you had your dinner?

ROSALIE (offstage). Good evening. Yes'm.

AGATHA (offstage). Hang up your pretty coat. Have you had your bath?

ROSALIE (offstage). Yes, ma'am. This morning.

AGATHA (offstage). Well, you better have another one.

(She is climbing the stairs as Rosalie comes into the room. Mary, lying in front of the couch, is hidden from her. Gingersly Rosalie sits down on a chair.)

MARY (softly). Whoooooo. (Rosalie jumps) Whoooooo. (Rosalie, frightened, starts hurriedly for the door. Mary sits up, laughs)

You're a goose.

ROSALIE (belligerently). Oh, so it's you. Well, who likes to hear funny noises at night? You could have been a werewolf.

MARY. A werewolf sure wouldn't want you.

ROSALIE. You know everything, don't you? (Mary laughs. Rosalie comes over, stands staring at puzzle) Isn't it funny about school?

MARY. What's funny about it?

ROSALIE. Don't act like you can come home every night.

MARY. Maybe I can from now on. (Rolls over on her back luxuriously) Maybe I'm never going back.

ROSALIE. Am I going back? I don't want to stay home.

MARY. What'll you give to know?

ROSALIE. Nothing. I'll ask Mamma.

MARY. Will you give me a free T.L. if I tell you?

ROSALIE (thinks for a moment). All right. Lois Fisher told Helen that you were very smart.

MARY. That's an old one. I won't take it.

ROSALIE. You got to take it.

MARY. No.

ROSALIE (laughs). You don't know, anyway.

MARY. I know what I heard, and I know Grandma phoned your mother in New York. You're just going to spend the night here.

ROSALIE. But what's happened? Peggy and Helen and Evelyn and Lois went home tonight, too. Do you think somebody's got scarlet fever or something?

MARY. No.

ROSALIE. Do you know what it is? How'd you find out? (No answer) You're always pretending you know everything.

You're just faking. (Flounces away) Never mind, don't bother telling me. I think curiosity is very unladylike, anyhow. I have no concern with your silly secrets.

MARY. Suppose I told you that I just may have said that you were in on it?

ROSALIE. In on what?
THE CHILDREN'S HOUR

MARY. The secret. Suppose I told you that I may have said that you told me about it?

ROSALIE. Why, Mary Tilford! You can't do a thing like that.
I didn't tell you about anything. (Mary laughs) Did you tell your grandmother such a thing?

MARY. Maybe.

ROSALIE. Did you?

MARY. Maybe.

ROSALIE. Well, I'm going right up to your grandmother and tell her I didn't tell you anything — whatever it is. You're just trying to get me into trouble and I'm not going to let you. (Starts for door.)

MARY. Wait a minute, I'll come with you. I want to tell her about Helen Burton's bracelet.

ROSALIE (sits down suddenly). What about it?

MARY. Just that you stole it.

ROSALIE. Shut up. I didn't do any such thing.

MARY. Yes, you did.

ROSALIE (tearfully). You made it up. You're always making things up.

MARY. You can't call me a fibber, Rosalie Wells. That's a kind of a dare and I won't take a dare. I guess I'll go tell Grandma, anyway. Then she can call the police and they'll come for you and you'll spend the rest of your life in one of those solitary prisons and you'll get older and older, and when you're very old and can't see anymore, they'll let you out maybe and your mother and father will be dead and you won't have anywhere to go and you'll beg on the streets —

ROSALIE. I didn't steal anything. I borrowed the bracelet and I was going to put it back as soon as I'd worn it to the movies. I never meant to keep it.

MARY. Nobody'll believe that, least of all the police. You're just a common, ordinary thief. Stop that bawling. You'll have the whole house down here in a minute.

ROSALIE. You won't tell? Say you won't tell.

MARY. Am I a fibber?

ROSALIE. No.

MARY. Then say: "I apologize on my hands and knees."

ROSALIE. I apologize on my hands and knees. Let's play with the puzzle.

MARY. Wait a minute. Say: "From now on, I, Rosalie Wells, am the vassal of Mary Tilford and will do and say whatever she tells me under the solemn oath of a knight."

ROSALIE. I won't say that. That's the worst oath there is. (Mary starts for the door) Mary! Please don't —

MARY. Will you swear it?

ROSALIE (sniffing). But then you could tell me to do anything.

MARY. And you'd have to do it. Say it quick or I'll —

ROSALIE (hurriedly). From now on, I, Rosalie Wells, am the vassal of Mary Tilford and will do and say whatever she tells me under the solemn oath of a knight. (She gasps, and sits up straight as Mrs. Tilford enters.)

MARY. Don't forget that.

MRS. TILFORD. Good evening, Rosalie, you're looking very well.

ROSALIE. Good evening, Mrs. Tilford.

MARY. She's getting fatter every day.

MRS. TILFORD (abstractedly). Then it's very becoming. (Doorbell rings) That must be Joseph. Mary, take Rosalie into the library. Be sure you're both fast asleep by half past ten. (Rosalie starts to exit right, sees Mary, stops and hesitates.)

MARY. Go on, Rosalie. (Waits until Rosalie reluctantly exits)

Grandma.

MRS. TILFORD. Yes?

MARY. Grandma, Cousin Joe'll say I've got to go back. He'll say I really wasn't —

(Cardin enters and she runs from the room.)

CARDIN. Hello, Amelia. (Looks curiously at the fleeing Mary) Mary home, eh?

MRS. TILFORD (watching Mary as she leaves). Hello, Joseph. Sit down. (He sits down, looks at her curiously, waits for her to speak) Whisky?

CARDIN. Please. How are you feeling? Headaches again?

MRS. TILFORD (puts drink on table). No.

CARDIN. Those are good powders. Bicarbonate of soda and water. Never hurt anybody yet.

MRS. TILFORD. Yes. How have you been, Joseph? (Vaguely, sparing for time) I haven't seen you the last few weeks. Agatha misses you for Sunday dinners.

CARDIN. I've been busy. We're getting the results from the mating season right about now.

MRS. TILFORD. Did I take you away from a patient?

CARDIN. No. I was at the hospital.

MRS. TILFORD. How's it getting on?
CARDIN. Just the same. No money, badly equipped, a lousy laboratory, everybody growling at everybody else — Amelia, you didn't bring me here to talk about the hospital. What's the matter with you?

MRS. TILFORD. I — I have something to tell you.

CARDIN. Well, out with it.

MRS. TILFORD. It's a very hard thing to say, Joseph.

CARDIN. Hard for you to say to me? (No answer) Don't be worried about Mary. I guessed that she ran home to tell you about her faint. It was caused by nothing but bad temper and was very clumsily managed, at that. Amelia, she's a terribly spoilt —

MRS. TILFORD. I heard about the faint. That's not what is worrying me.

CARDIN (gently). Are you in some trouble?

MRS. TILFORD. We all are in trouble. Bad trouble.

CARDIN. We? Me, you mean? Nothing's the matter with me.

MRS. TILFORD. When did you last see Karen?

CARDIN. Today. This afternoon.

MRS. TILFORD. Oh. Not since seven o'clock?

CARDIN. What's happened since seven o'clock?

MRS. TILFORD. Joseph, you've been engaged to Karen for a long time. Are your plans any more definite than they were a year ago?

CARDIN. You can get ready to buy the wedding present. We'll have the wedding here, if you don't mind. The smell of clean little girls and boiled linen would worry me.

MRS. TILFORD. Why has Karen decided so suddenly to make it definite?

CARDIN. She has not suddenly decided anything. The school is pretty well on its feet, and now that Mrs. Mortar is leaving —

MRS. TILFORD. I've heard about their putting Mrs. Mortar out.

CARDIN. Putting her out? Well, maybe. But a nice sum for a trip and a promise that a good niece will support you the rest of your life is an enviable way of being put out.

MRS. TILFORD (slowly). Don't you find it odd, Joseph, that they want so much to get rid of that silly, harmless woman?

CARDIN. I don't know what you're talking about, but it isn't odd at all. Lily Mortar is not a harmless woman, although God knows she's silly enough. She's a tiresome, spoilt old bitch. If you're forming a Mortar Welfare Society, you're wasting your time. (Gets up, puts down his glass) It's not like you to waste your time. Now, what's it that's really on your mind?

MRS. TILFORD. You must not marry Karen.

CARDIN (shocked, he grim). You're a very impertinent lady. Why must I — (imitates her) not marry Karen?

MRS. TILFORD. Because there's something wrong with Karen — something horrible.

(The doorbell is heard to ring loud and long.)

CARDIN. I cannot allow you to say things like that, Amelia.

MRS. TILFORD. I have good reason for saying it. (Breaks off as she hears voices offstage) Who is that?

KAREN (offstage). Mrs. Tilford, Agatha. Is she in?

AGATHA (offstage). Yes'm. Come on in.

MRS. TILFORD. I won't have her here.

CARDIN (angrily). What are you talking about?

MRS. TILFORD. I won't have her here.

CARDIN. Then you don't want me here either. (Turns to face Karen and Martha) Darling, what —

KAREN (stops when she sees him, puts her hand over her eyes). Is it a joke, Joe?

MARTHA (with great force to Mrs. Tilford). We've come to find out what you are doing.

CARDIN (kissing Karen). What is it?

KAREN. It's crazy! It's crazy! What did she do it for?

CARDIN. What are you talking about? What do you mean?

MRS. TILFORD. You shouldn't have come here.

CARDIN. What is all this? What's happened?

KAREN. I tried to reach you. Hasn't she told you?

CARDIN. Nobody's told me anything. I haven't heard anything but wild talk. What is it, Karen? (She starts to speak, then dumberly shakes her head) What's happened, Martha?

MARTHA (violently). An insane asylum has been let loose. How do we know what's happened?

CARDIN. What was it?

KAREN. We didn't know what it was. Nobody would talk to us, nobody would tell us anything.

MARTHA. I'll tell you, I'll tell you. You see if you can make any sense out of it. At dinnertime Mrs. Munn's chauffeur said that Evelyn must be sent home right away. At half past seven Mrs. Burton arrived to tell us that she wanted Helen's things packed and that she'd wait outside because she didn't want
to enter a place like ours. Five minutes later the Wells’s butler came for Rosalie.

CARDIN. What was it?

MARTHA. It was a madhouse. People rushing in and out, the children being pushed into cars —

KAREN. Mrs. Rogers finally told us.

CARDIN. What? What?

KAREN. That — that Martha and I are — in love with each other. In love with each other. Mrs. Tilford told them.

CARDIN (for a moment stands staring at her incredulously. Then he walks across the room, stirs out of the window, and finally turns to Mrs. Tilford). Did you tell them that?

MRS. TILFORD. Yes.

CARDIN. Are you sick?

MRS. TILFORD. You know I’m not sick.

CARDIN (snapping the words out). Then what did you do it for?

MRS. TILFORD (slowly). Because it’s true.

KAREN (incredulously). You think it’s true, then?

MARTHA. You fool! You damn, vicious —

KAREN. Do you realize what you’re saying?

MRS. TILFORD. I realize it very well. And —

MARTHA. You realize nothing, nothing, nothing.

MRS. TILFORD. And that’s why I don’t think you should have come here. (Quietly) I shall not call you names, and I will not allow you to call me names. I can’t trust myself to talk about it with you now or ever.

KAREN. What’s she talking about, Joe? What’s she mean? What is she trying to do to us? What is everybody doing to us?

MARTHA (softly, as though to herself). Pushed around. We’re being pushed around by crazy people. (Shakes herself slightly) That’s an awful thing. And we’re standing here — (Cardin puts his arm around Karen, walks her to the window. They stand there together) We’re standing here taking it. (Suddenly with violence) Didn’t you know we’d come here? Were we supposed to lie down and grin while you kicked us around with these lies?

MRS. TILFORD. This can’t do any of us any good, Miss Dobie.

MARTHA (scornfully imitating her), “This can’t do any of us any good.” Listen, listen. Try to understand this: you’re not playing with paper dolls. We’re human beings, see? It’s our lives you’re fooling with. Our lives. That’s serious business for us. Can you understand that?

MRS. TILFORD. I can understand that, and I regret it. But you’ve been playing with children’s lives, and that’s why I stopped you. (More calmly) I know how serious this is for you, how serious it is for all of us.

CARDIN (bitterly). I don’t think you do know.

MRS. TILFORD. I wanted to avoid this meeting because it can’t do any good. You came here to find out if I had made the charge. You’ve found out. Let’s end it there. I’m sorry this had to be done to you, Joseph.

CARDIN. I don’t like your sympathy.

MRS. TILFORD. Very well. There’s nothing I mean to do, nothing I want to do. There’s nothing anybody can do.

CARDIN (carefully). You have already done a terrible thing.

MRS. TILFORD. I have done what I had to do. What they may be their own business. It becomes a great deal more than that when children are involved.

KAREN (wildly). It’s not true. Not a word of it is true; can’t you understand that?

MRS. TILFORD. There won’t be any punishment for either of you. This — this thing is your own. Go away with it. I don’t understand it and I don’t want any part of it.

MARTHA (slowly). So you thought we would go away?

MRS. TILFORD. I think that’s best for you.

MARTHA. There must be something we can do to you, and, whatever it is, we’ll find it.

MRS. TILFORD. That will be very unwise.

KAREN. You are right to be afraid.

MRS. TILFORD. I am not afraid, Karen.

CARDIN. You are old — and you are irresponsible.

KAREN (goes to Mrs. Tilford). I don’t want to have anything to do with your mess, do you hear me? It makes me feel dirty and sick to be forced to say this, but here it is; there isn’t a single word of truth in anything you’ve said. We’re standing here defending ourselves — and against what? Against a lie.

A great, awful lie.

MRS. TILFORD. I’m sorry that I can’t believe that.

KAREN. Damn you!

CARDIN. But you can believe this: they’ve worked eight long years to save enough money to buy that farm, to start that school. They did without everything that young people ought to have. You wouldn’t know about that. That school
meant things to them: self-respect, and bread and butter, and honest work. Do you know what it is to try so hard for anything? Well, now it's gone. *(Suddenly hits the side of the table with his hand)* What the hell did you do it for?

**MRS. TILFORD (softly).** It had to be done.

**CARDIN.** Righteousness is a great thing.

**MRS. TILFORD (gently).** I know how you must feel.

**CARDIN.** You don't know anything about how I feel. And you don't know how they feel, either.

**MRS. TILFORD.** I've loved you as much as I loved my own boys. I wouldn't have spared them; I couldn't spare you.

**CARDIN (fiercely).** I believe you.

**MARTHA.** What is there to do to you? What can we do to you? There must be something — something that makes you feel the way we do tonight. You don't want any part of this, you said. But you'll get a part. More than you bargained for. *(Suddenly)* Listen: are you willing to stand by everything you've said tonight?

**MRS. TILFORD.** Yes.

**MARTHA.** All right. That's fine. But don't get the idea we'll let you whisper this lie: you made it and you'll come out with it. Shriek it to your town of Lancaster. We'll make you shriek it — and we'll make you do it in a courtroom. *(Quielty)* Tomorrow, Mrs. Tilford, you will have a libel suit on your hands.

**MRS. TILFORD.** That will be very unwise.

**KAREN.** Very unwise — for you.

**MRS. TILFORD.** It is you I am thinking of. I am frightened for you. It was wrong of you to brazen it out here tonight; it would be criminally foolish of you to brazen it out in public. That can bring you nothing but pain. You must not be punished any further.

**MARTHA.** You feel that you are too old to be punished. You believe we should spare you.

**MRS. TILFORD.** You know that is not what I meant.

**CARDIN (turns from the window).** So you took a child's word for it?

**MARTHA (looks at him).** I knew it, too.

**KAREN.** That is really where you got it? I can't believe — it couldn't be. Why, she's a child.

**MARTHA.** She's not a child any longer.
all the time. Sometimes they have to, sometimes they don't. I've lied for a lot of different reasons, but there was seldom a time when, if I'd been given a second chance, I wouldn't have taken back the lie and told the truth. You're lucky if you ever get that chance. I'm telling you this because I'm about to ask you a question. Before you answer the question, I want to tell you that if you've I—, if you made a mistake, you must take this chance and say so. You won't be punished for it. Do you get all that?

MARY (timidly). Yes, Cousin Joe.

CARDIN (grimly). All right, let's get started. Were you telling your grandmother the truth this afternoon? The exact truth about Miss Wright and Miss Dobie?

MARY (without hesitation). Oh, yes.

(Karen sighs deeply. Martha, her fists closed tight, turns her back to the child. Cardin smiles as he looks at Mary.)

CARDIN. All right, Mary, that was your chance; you passed it up. (Pulls up a chair, sits down in front of her) Now let's find out things.

MRS. TILFORD. She's told you. Aren't you through?

CARDIN. Not by a long shot. You've started something and we'll finish it for you. Will you answer some more questions, Mary?

MARY. Yes, Cousin Joe.

MARTHA. Stop that sick, sweet tone.

(Mrs. Tilford half rises; Cardin motions her back.)

CARDIN. Why don't you like Miss Dobie and Miss Wright?

MARY. Oh, I do like them. They just don't like me. They never have liked me.

CARDIN. How do you know?

MARY. They're always picking on me. They're always punishing me for everything that happens. No matter what happens, it's always me.

CARDIN. Why do you think they do that?

MARY. Because—because they're—because they—(Stops, turns) Grandma, I—

CARDIN. All right, we'll skip that one. Did you get punished today?

MARY. Yes, and it was just because Peggy and Evelyn heard them and so they took it out on me.

KAREN. That's a lie.

CARDIN. Sssh. Heard what, Mary?

MARY. Mrs. Mortar told Miss Dobie that there was something funny about her. She said that she had a funny feeling about Miss Wright, and Mrs. Mortar said that was unnatural. That was why we got punished, just because—

KAREN. That was not the reason they got punished.

MRS. TILFORD (to Martha). Miss Dobie?

MARTHA. My aunt is a stupid woman. What she said was unpleasant; it was said to annoy me. It meant nothing more than that.

MARY. And, Cousin Joe, she said every time you came to the school Miss Dobie got jealous, and that she didn't want you to get married.

MARTHA (to Cardin). She said that, too. This—this child is taking little things, little family things, and making them have meanings. That—(Stops, suddenly regards Mary with a combination of disgust and interest) Where did you learn so much in so little time?

CARDIN. What do you think Mrs. Mortar meant by all that, Mary?

MRS. TILFORD. Stop it, Joseph!

MARY. I don't know, but it was always kind of funny and she always said things like that and all the girls would talk about it when Miss Dobie went and visited Miss Wright late at night—

KAREN (angrily). And we go to the movies at night and sometimes we read at night and sometimes we drink tea at night. Those are guilty things, too, Mrs. Tilford.

MARY. And there are always funny sounds and we'd stay awake and listen because we couldn't help hearing and I'd get frightened because the sounds were like—

MARTHA. Be still!

KAREN (with violence). No, no. You don't want her still now. What else did you hear?

MARY. Grandma, I—

MRS. TILFORD (bitterly to Cardin). You are trying to make her name it.

CARDIN (ignoring her, speaks to Mary). Go on.

MARY. I don't know; there were just sounds.

CARDIN. But what did you think they were? Why did they frighten you?

MARY (weakly). I don't know.
MRS. TILFORD. What is the truth?
MARY. It was Rosalie who saw them. I just said it was me so I
wouldn’t have to tell on Rosalie.
CARDIN (wearily). Oh, my God!
MARY. It was Rosalie, Grandma, she told us all about it. She
said she had read about it in a book and she knew. (Des-
perately). You ask Rosalie. You just ask Rosalie. She’ll tell
you. We used to talk about it all the time. That’s the truth,
that’s the honest truth. She said it was when the door was
open once and she told us all about it. I was just trying to
save Rosalie, and everybody jumps on me.
MRS. TILFORD (to Cardin). Please wait a minute. (Goes to library
door) Rosalie!
CARDIN. You’re giving yourself an awful beating, Amelia, and
you deserve whatever you get.
MRS. TILFORD (stands waiting for Rosalie, passes her hand over
her face). I don’t know. I don’t know, anymore. Maybe it’s
what I do deserve. (As Rosalie, frightened, appears at the
door, making bows to everybody, she takes the child gently
by the hand, brings her down center, talking nervously) I’m
sorry to keep you up so late, Rosalie. You must be tired.
(Speaks rapidly) Mary says there’s been a lot of talk in the
school lately about Miss Wright and Miss Dobie. Is that
true?
ROSALIE. I— I don’t know what you mean.
MRS. TILFORD. That things have been said among you girls.
ROSALIE (wide-eyed, frightened). What things? I never—I
— I—
KAREN (gently). Don’t be frightened.
MRS. TILFORD. What was the talk about, Rosalie?
ROSALIE (utterly bewildered). I don’t know what she means,
Miss Wright.
KAREN. Rosalie, Mary has told her grandmother that certain
things at school have been — er — puzzling you girls. You,
particularly.
ROSALIE. History puzzles me. I guess I’m not very good at his-
tory, and Helen helps me sometimes, if that—
KAREN. No, that’s not what she meant. She says that you told
her that you saw certain — certain acts between Miss Dobie
and myself. She says that once, when the door was open,
you saw us kissing each other in a way that— (Unable to
THE CHILDREN'S HOUR

bear the child’s look, she turns her back) women don’t kiss one another.

rosalie. Oh, Miss Wright, I didn’t, didn’t, I didn’t. I never said such a thing.
mrs. tilford (grimly). That’s true, my dear?

rosalie. I never saw any such thing. Mary always makes things up about me and everybody else. (Starts to weep in excitement) I never said any such thing ever. Why I never even could have thought of —

mary (staring at her, speaks very slowly). Yes, you did, Rosalie. You’re just trying to get out of it. I remember just when you said it. I remember it, because it was the day Helen Burton’s bracelet was —

rosalie (stands fascinated and fearful, looking at mary). I never did. I — I — you’re just —

mary. It was the day Helen’s bracelet was stolen, and nobody knew who did it, and Helen said that if her mother found out, she’d have the thief put in jail.

karen (puzzled, as are the others, by the sudden change in Rosalie’s manner). There’s nothing to cry about. You must help us by telling the truth. Why, what’s the matter, Rosalie?

mary. Grandma, there’s something I’ve got to tell you that —

rosalie (with a shrill cry). Yes. Yes. I did see it. I told Mary. What Mary said was right. I said it. I said it — (Threw herself on the couch, weeping hysterically; Martha stands leaning against the door; karen, cardin, and mrs. tilford are staring at Rosalie; Mary slowly sits down as the curtain falls.)

Curtain

Act Three

Scene: The same as act one. Living room of the school.

At Rise: The room has changed. It is not dirty, but it is dull and dark and uncared for. The windows are tightly shut, the curtains tightly drawn. karen is sitting in a large chair, right center, feet flat on floor. martha is lying on the couch, her face buried against the pillows, her back to karen. It is a minute or two after the rise of the curtain before either speaks.

Martha. It’s cold in here.

karen. Yes.

Martha. What time is it?

karen. I don’t know.

Martha. I was hoping it was time for my bath.

karen. Take it early today.

Martha (laughs). Oh, I couldn’t do that. I look forward all day to that bath. It’s my last touch with the full life. It makes me feel important to know that there’s one thing ahead of me, one thing I’ve got to do. You ought to get yourself something like that. I tell you, at five o’clock every day you comb your hair. How’s that? It’s better for you, take my word. You wake up in the morning and you say to yourself, the day’s not entirely empty, life is rich and full: at five o’clock I’ll comb my hair.

(They fall back into silence. A moment later the phone rings. Neither of them pays the slightest attention to it. But the ringing becomes too insistent. karen rises, takes the receiver off, goes back to her chair and sits down.)

karen. It’s raining.

Martha. Hungry?

karen. No. You?

Martha. No, but I’d like to be hungry. Remember how much we used to eat at college?

karen. That was ten years ago.
THE CHILDREN'S HOUR

MARTHA. Well, maybe we'll be hungry in another ten years. It's cheaper this way.

KAREN. What's the old thing about time being more nourishing than bread?

MARTHA. Maybe.

KAREN. Joe's late today. What time is it?

MARTHA (turns again to lie on her side). We've been sitting here for eight days asking each other the time. Haven't you heard? There isn't any time anymore.

KAREN. It's been days since we've been out of this house.

MARTHA. Well, we'll have to get off these chairs sooner or later. In a couple of months they'll need dusting.

KAREN. What'll we do when we get off?

MARTHA. God knows.

KAREN (almost in a whisper). It's awful.

MARTHA. Let's not talk about it. (After a moment) What about eggs for dinner?

KAREN. All right.

MARTHA. I'll make some potatoes with onions, the way you used to like them.

KAREN. It's a week ago Thursday. It never seemed real until the last day. It seems real enough now, all right. Let's go out.

MARTHA (turns over, stares at her). Where to?

KAREN. We'll take a walk.

MARTHA. Where'll we walk?

KAREN. Why shouldn't we take a walk? We won't see anybody, and suppose we do, what of it? We'll just —

MARTHA (slowly gets up). Come on. We'll go through the park.

KAREN. They might see us. (They stand looking at each other)

Let's not go. (Martha goes back, lies down again) We'll go tomorrow.

MARTHA (laughs). Stop kidding yourself.

KAREN. But Joe says we've got to go out. He says that all the people who don't think it's true will begin to wonder if we keep hiding this way.

MARTHA. If it makes you feel better to think there are such people, go ahead.

KAREN. He says we ought to go into town and go shopping and act as though —

MARTHA. Shopping? That's a sound idea. There aren't three stores in Lancet that would sell us anything. Hasn't he heard about the ladies' clubs and their meetings and their circulars and their visits and their —

KAREN (softly). Don't tell him.

MARTHA (gently). I won't. (There are footsteps in the hall, and the sound of something being dragged) There's our friend.

(A grocery boy appears lugging a box. He brings it into the room, stands staring at them, giggles a little. Walks toward Karen, stops, examines her. She sits tense, looking away from him. Without taking his eyes from Karen, he speaks.)

GROCERY BOY. I knocked on the kitchen door but nobody answered.

MARTHA. You said that yesterday. All right. Thanks. Good-bye.

KAREN (unable any longer to stand the stare). Make him stop it.

GROCERY BOY. Here are the things. (Giggles, moves toward Martha, stands looking at her. Suddenly Martha thrusts her hand in the air.)

MARTHA. I've got eight fingers, see? I'm a freak.

GROCERY BOY (giggling). There's a car comin' here. (Starts backing out of door, still looking.) Good-bye. (Exits.)

MARTHA. You still think we should go into town?

KAREN. I don't know. I don't know about anything anymore.

(After a moment) Martha, Martha, Martha —

MARTHA (gently). What is it, Karen?

KAREN. What are we going to do? It's like that dark hour of the night when half awake you struggle through the black mess you've been dreaming. Then, suddenly, you wake up and you see your own bed or your own nightgown and you know you're back again in a solid world. But now it's all the nightmare; there is no solid world. Oh, Martha, why did it happen. What happened? What are we doing here like this?

MARTHA. Waiting.

KAREN. For what?

MARTHA. I don't know.

KAREN. We've got to get out of this place. I can't stand it anymore.

MARTHA. You'll be getting married soon. Everything will be all right then.

KAREN (vaguely). Yes.

MARTHA (looks up at the tone). What is it?

KAREN. Nothing.
THE CHILDREN'S HOUR

MARTHA. There mustn't be anything wrong between you and Joe. Never.

KAREN (without conviction). Nothing's wrong. (As footsteps are heard in the hall, her face lights up) There's Joe now.

(Mrs. Mortar, small suitcase in hand, stands in the doorway, her face pushed coyly forward.)

MRS. MORTAR. And here I am. Hello, hello.

MARTHA (she has turned over on her back and is staring at her aunt. She speaks to Karen). The Duchess, isn't it? Returned at long last. (Too jovially) Come on in. We're delighted to see you. Are you tired from your journey? Is there something I can get you?

MRS. MORTAR (surprised). I'm very glad to see you both, and (looks around) I'm very glad to see the old place again. How is everything?

MARTHA. Everything's fine. We're splendid, thank you. You're just in time for tea.

MRS. MORTAR. You know, I should like some tea, if it isn't too much trouble.

MARTHA. No trouble at all. Some small sandwiches and a little brandy?

MRS. MORTAR (puzzled). Why, Martha.

MARTHA. Where the hell have you been?

MRS. MORTAR. Around, around. I had a most interesting time. Things —

MARTHA. Why didn't you answer my telegrams?

MRS. MORTAR. Things have changed in the theater — drastically changed, I might say.

MARTHA. Why didn't you answer my telegrams?

MRS. MORTAR. Oh, Martha, there's your temper again.

MARTHA. Answer me and don't bother about my temper.

MRS. MORTAR (nervously). I was moving around a great deal. (Conversationally) You know, I think it will throw a very revealing light on the state of the new theater when I tell you that the Lyceum in Rochester now has a toilet backstage.

MARTHA. To hell with the toilet in Rochester. Where were you?

MRS. MORTAR. Moving around, I tell you.

KAREN. What difference does it all make now?

MRS. MORTAR. Karen is quite right. Let bygones be bygones.

As I was saying, there's an effete something in the theater now, and that accounts for —

MARTHA. Why did you refuse to come back here and testify for us?

MRS. MORTAR. Why, Martha, I didn't refuse to come back at all. That's the wrong way to look at it. I was on a tour; that's a moral obligation, you know. Now don't let's talk about unpleasant things anymore. I'll go up and unpack a few things; tomorrow's plenty of time to get my trunk.

KAREN (laughs). Things have changed here, you know.

MARTHA. She doesn't know. She expected to walk right up to a comfortable fire and sit down and she very carefully waited until the whole thing was over. (Leans forward, speaking to Mrs. Mortar) Listen. Karen Wright and Martha Dobie brought a libel suit against a woman called Tilford because her grandchild had accused them of having what the judge called "sinful sexual knowledge of one another." (Mrs. Mortar holds up her hand in protest, and Martha laughs) Don't like that, do you? Well, a great part of the defense's case was based on remarks made by Lily Mortar, actress in the toilets of Rochester, against her niece, Martha. And a greater part of the defense's case rested on the telling fact that Mrs. Mortar would not appear in court to deny or explain those remarks. Mrs. Mortar had a moral obligation to the theater. As you probably read in the papers, we lost the case.

MRS. MORTAR. I didn't think of it that way, Martha. It couldn't have done any good for all of us to get mixed up in that unpleasant notoriety — (Sees Martha's face. Hastily) But now that you've explained it, why, I do see it your way, and I'm sorry I didn't come back. But now that I am here, I'm going to stand shoulder to shoulder with you. I know what you've gone through, but the body and heart do recover, you know. I'll be here working right along with you and we'll —

MARTHA. There's an eight o'clock train. Get on it.

MRS. MORTAR. Martha.

MARTHA. You've come back to pick the bones dry. There's nothing here for you.

MRS. MORTAR (sniffling a little). How can you talk to me like that?

MARTHA. Because I hate you. I've always hated you.

MRS. MORTAR (gently). God will punish you for that.
MARTHA. He's been doing all right.

MRS. MORTAR. When you wish to apologize, I will be temporarily in my room. (Starts to exit, almost bumps into Cardin, steps back with dignity) How do you do?

CARDIN (laughs). Look who's here. A little late, aren't you?

MRS. MORTAR. So it's you. Now, I call that loyal. A lot of men wouldn't still be here. They would have felt —

MARTHA. Get out of here.

KAREN (opening door). I'll call you when it's time for your train.

(Mrs. Mortar looks at her, exits.)

CARDIN. Now, what do you think brought her back?

KAREN. God knows.

MARTHA. I know. She was broke.

CARDIN (pats Martha on the shoulder). Don't let her worry you this time, Martha. We'll give her some money and get rid of her. (Pulls Karen to him) Been out today, darling?

KAREN. We started to go out.

CARDIN (shakes his head). Feel all right?

(Karen leans over to kiss him. Almost imperceptibly he pulls back.)

KAREN. Why did you do that?

MARTHA. Karen.

CARDIN. Do what?

KAREN. Draw back that way.

CARDIN (laughs, kisses her). If we sit around here much longer, we'll all be bats. I sold my place today to Foster.

KAREN. You did what?

CARDIN. We're getting married this week. Then we're going away — all three of us.

KAREN. You can't leave here. I won't have you do this for me. What about the hospital and —

CARDIN. Shut up, darling, it's all fixed. We're going to Vienna and we're going quick. Fischer wrote that I can have my old place back.

KAREN. No! No! I'm not going to let you.

CARDIN. It's already done. Fischer can't pay me much, but it'll be enough for the three of us. Plenty if we live cheap.

MARTHA. I couldn't go with you, Joe.

CARDIN. Nonsense, Martha, we're all going. We're going to have fun again.

KAREN (slowly). You don't want to go back to Vienna.

CARDIN. No.

KAREN. Then why?

CARDIN. Look: I don't want to go to Vienna; I'd rather have stayed here. But then you don't want to go to Vienna; you'd rather have stayed here. Well, to hell with that. We can't stay here, and Vienna offers enough to eat and sleep and drink beer on. Now don't object any more, please, darling. All right?

KAREN. All right.

MARTHA. I can't go. It's better for all of us if I don't.

CARDIN (puts his arm around her). Not now. You stay with us now. Later on, if you want it that way. All right?

MARTHA. (smiles). All right.

CARDIN. Swell. I'll buy you good coffee cakes and take you both to Ischl for a honeymoon.

MARTHA (picking up grocery box, she starts for door). A big coffee cake with a lot of raisins. It would be nice to like something again. (Exits.)

CARDIN (with a slightly forced heartiness). I'll be going back with a pretty girl who belongs to me. I'll show you off all over the place — to Dr. Engelhardt, and the nurse at the desk, and to the fat gal in the cake shop, and to Fischer. (Laughs) The last time I saw him was at the railroad station. He took me back of the baggage car. (With an imitation of an accent) "Joseph," he said, "you'll be a good doctor; I would trust you to cut up my Minna. But you're not a great doctor, and you never will be. Go back where you were born and take care of your sick. Leave the fancy work to the others." I came home.

KAREN. You'll be coming home again someday.

CARDIN. Let's not talk about it. (After a moment) You'll need some clothes?

KAREN. A few. Oh, your Dr. Fischer was so right. This is where you belong.

CARDIN. I need an overcoat and a suit. You'll need a lot of things — heavy things. It's cold there now, much colder than you'd expect —

KAREN. I've done this to you. I've taken you away from everything you want.

CARDIN. But it's lovely in the mountains, and that's where we'll go for a month.
KAREN. They—*they've* done it. They've taken away every chance we had. Everything we wanted, everything we were going to be.

CARDIN. And we've got to stop talking like that. *(Takes her by the shoulder)* We've got a chance. But it's just one chance, and if we miss it we're done for. It means that we've got to start putting the whole business behind us now. *Now,* Karen. What you've done, you've done—and that's that.

KAREN. What I've done?

CARDIN (impatiently). What's been done to you.

KAREN. What did you mean? *(When there is no answer)* What did you mean when you said: "What you've done"?

CARDIN *(shouting)*. Nothing. Nothing. *(Then very quietly)*

KAREN, there are a lot of people in this world who've had bad trouble in their lives. We're three of those people. We could sit around the rest of our lives and exist on that trouble, until in the end we had nothing else and we'd want nothing else. That's something I'm not coming to and I'm not going to let you come to.

KAREN. I know. I'm sorry. *(After a moment)* Joe, can we have a baby right away?

CARDIN *(vaguely)*. Yes, I guess so. Although we won't have much money now.

KAREN. You used to want one right away. You always said that was the way you wanted it. *(There's some reason for your changing.)*

CARDIN. My God, we can't go on like this. Everything I say to you is made to mean something else. We don't talk like people anymore. Oh, let's get out of here as fast as we can.

KAREN *(as though she is finishing the sentence for him)*. And every word will have a new meaning. You think we'll be able to run away from that? Woman, child, love, lawyer—no words that we can use in safety anymore. *(Laughs)* Sick, high-tragic people. That's what we'll be.

CARDIN *(gently)*. No, we won't, darling. Love is casual—that's the way it should be. We must find that out all over again. We must learn again to live and love like other people.

KAREN. It won't work.

CARDIN. What?

KAREN. The two of us together.

CARDIN *(sharply)*. Stop talking like that.

KAREN. It's true. *(Suddenly)*. I want you to say it now.

CARDIN. I don't know what you're talking about.

KAREN. Yes, you do. We've both known for a long time. I knew surely the day we lost the case. I was watching your face in court. It was ashamed—sad at being ashamed. Say it now, Joe. Ask it now.

CARDIN. I have nothing to ask. Nothing—*(Quickly)* All right. Is it—was it ever—

KAREN *(puts her hand over his mouth)*. No. Martha and I have never touched each other. *(Pulls his head down on her shoulder)* That's all right, darling. I'm glad you asked. I'm not mad a bit, really.

CARDIN. I'm sorry, Karen. I'm sorry. I didn't mean to hurt you, I—

KAREN. I know. You wanted to wait until it was all over, you really never wanted to ask at all. You didn't know for sure; you thought there might be just a little truth in it all. *(With great feeling)* You've been good to me and loyal. You're a fine man. *(Afraid of tears, she puts him, walks away)* Now go and sit down, Joe. I have things to say. *(They're all mixed up and I must get them clear.)*

CARDIN. Don't let's talk any more. Let's forget and go ahead.

KAREN *(puzzled)*. Go ahead?

CARDIN. Yes, Karen.

KAREN. You believe me, then?

CARDIN. Of course I believe you. I only had to hear you say it."

KAREN. No, no, no. That isn't the way things work. Maybe you believe me. I'd never know whether you did or not. You'd never know whether you did, either. We couldn't do it that way. Can't you see what would happen? We'd be hounded by it all our lives. I'd be frightened, always, and in the end my own fright would make me—would make me hate you. *(Sees slight movement he makes)* Yes, it would: I know it would. I'd hate you for what I thought I'd done to you. And I'd hate myself, too. It would grow and grow until we'd be ruined by it. *(Sees him about to speak)* Ah, Joe, you've seen all that yourself. You knew it first.

CARDIN *(softly)*. I didn't mean it that way; I don't now.

KAREN *(smiles)*. You're still trying to spare me, still trying to tell yourself that we might be all right again. But we won't be all right. Not ever, ever, ever. I don't know all the reasons...
why. Look, I’m standing here. I haven’t changed! (Holds out her hands) My hands look just the same, my face is the same, even my dress is old. We’re in a room we’ve been in so many times before; you’re sitting where you always sit; it’s nearly time for dinner. I’m like everybody else. I can have all the things that everybody has. I can have you and I can go to market, and we can go to the movies, and people will talk to me and — (Suddenly notices the pain in his face)
Oh, I’m sorry. I mustn’t talk like that. That couldn’t be true anymore.
CARDIN. It could be, Karen. We’ll make it be like that.
KAREN. No. That’s only what we’d like to have had. It’s what we can’t have now. Go home, darling.
CARDIN (with force). Don’t talk like that. No matter what it is, we can’t leave each other. I can’t leave you —
KAREN. Joe, Joe. Let’s do it now and quick; it will be too hard later on.
CARDIN. No, no, no. We love each other. (His voice breaks) I’d give anything not to have asked questions, Karen.
KAREN. It had to be asked sooner or later — and answered. You’re a good man — the best I’ll ever know — and you’ve been better to me than — But it’s no good now, for either of us; you can see that.
CARDIN. It can be. You say I helped you. Help me now; help me to be strong and good enough to — (Goes toward her with his arms out) Karen!
KAREN (drawing back). No, Joe! (Then, as he stops) Will you do something for me?
CARDIN. No. I won’t —
KAREN. Will you — will you go away for two days — a day — and think this all over by yourself — away from me and love and pity? Will you? And then decide.
CARDIN (after a long pause). Yes, if you want, but it won’t make any difference. We will —
KAREN. Don’t say anything. Please go now. (She sits down, smiles, closes her eyes. For a moment he stands looking at her, then slowly puts on his hat) And all my heart goes with you.
CARDIN (at door, leaving). I’ll be coming back. (Exits, slowly, reluctantly, closing door.)
KAREN (a moment after he has gone). No, you won’t. Never, darling. (Stays as she is until Martha enters right.)

THE CHILDREN’S HOUR

MARThA (goes to lamp, lights it). It gets dark so early now. (Sits down, stretches, laughs) Cooking always makes me feel better. Well, I guess we’ll have to give the Duchess some dinner. When the hawks descend, you’ve got to feed `em, Where’s Joe? (No answer) Where’s Joe?
KAREN. Gone.
MARThA. A patient? Will he be back in time for dinner?
KAREN. No.
MARThA (watching her). We’ll save dinner for him, then. Karen! What’s the matter?
KAREN. He won’t be back anymore.
MARThA (slowly and carefully). You mean he won’t be back anymore tonight.
KAREN. He won’t be back at all.
MARThA (quickly, walks to Karen). What happened? (Karen shakes her head) What happened, Karen?
KAREN. He thought that we had been lovers.
MARThA (tensely). I don’t believe you.
(Wearily Karen turns her head away.)
KAREN. All right.
MARThA (automatically). I don’t believe it. He’s never said a word all these months, all during the trial — (Suddenly grabs Karen by the shoulder, shakes her) Didn’t you tell him? For God’s sake, didn’t you tell him it wasn’t true?
KAREN. Yes.
MARThA. He didn’t believe you?
KAREN. I guess he believed me.
MARThA (angrily). Then what have you done?
KAREN. What had to be done.
MARThA. It’s all wrong. It’s silly. He’ll be back in a little while and you’ll clear it all up — (Realizes why that can’t be, covers her mouth with her hand) Oh, God, I wanted that for you so much.
KAREN. Don’t. I feel sick to my stomach.
MARThA (goes to couch opposite Karen, puts her head in her arms). What’s happened to us? What’s really happened to us?
KAREN. I don’t know. I want to be sleepy. I want to go to sleep.
MARThA. Go back to Joe. He’s strong; he’ll understand. It’s too much for you this way.
KAREN (irritably). Stop talking about it. Let’s pack and get out of here. Let’s take the train in the morning.
THE CHILDREN'S HOUR

MARTHA. The train to where?
KAREN. I don’t know. Someplace; anyplace.
MARTHA. A job? Money?
KAREN. In a big place we could get something to do.
MARTHA. They’d know about us. We’ve been famous.
KAREN. A small town, then.
MARTHA. They’d know more about us.
KAREN (as a child would say it). Isn’t there anywhere to go?
MARTHA. No. We’re bad people. We’ll sit. We’ll be sitting the rest of our lives wondering what’s happened to us. You think this scene is strange? Well, get used to it; we’ll be here for a long time. (Suddenly pinches Karen on the arm) Let’s pinch each other sometimes. We can tell whether we’re still living.
KAREN (shivers, listlessly gets up, starts making a fire in the fireplace). But this isn’t a new sin they tell us we’ve done. Other people aren’t destroyed by it.
MARTHA. They are the people who believe in it, who want it, who’ve chosen it. We aren’t like that. We don’t love each other. (Suddenly stops, crosses to fireplace, stands looking abstractedly at Karen. Speaks casually) I don’t love you. We’ve been very close to each other, of course. I’ve loved you like a friend, the way thousands of women feel about other women.
KAREN (only half listening). Yes.
MARTHA. Certainly that doesn’t mean anything. There’s nothing wrong about that. It’s perfectly natural that I should be fond of you, that I should —
KAREN (listlessly). Why are you saying all this to me?
MARTHA. Because I love you.
KAREN (vaguely). Yes, of course.
MARTHA. I love you that way — maybe the way they said I loved you. I don’t know. (Waits, gets no answer, kneels down next to Karen) Listen to me!
KAREN. What?
MARTHA. I have loved you the way they said.
KAREN. You’re crazy.
MARTHA. There’s always been something wrong. Always — as long as I can remember. But I never knew it until all this happened.
KAREN (for the first time looks up). Stop it!

MARTHA. You’re afraid of hearing it; I’m more afraid than you.
KAREN (puts her hands over her ears). I won’t listen to you.
MARTHA. Take your hands down. (Leans over, pulls Karen’s hands away) You’ve got to know it. I can’t keep it any longer. I’ve got to tell you how guilty I am.
KAREN (deliberately). You are guilty of nothing.
MARTHA. I’ve been telling myself that since the night we heard the child say it; I’ve been praying I could convince myself of it. I can’t, I can’t any longer. It’s there. I don’t know how, I don’t know why. But I did love you. I do love you. I resented your marriage; maybe because I wanted you; maybe I wanted you all along; maybe I couldn’t call it by a name; maybe it’s been there ever since I first knew you —
KAREN (tensely). It’s a lie. You’re telling yourself a lie. We never thought of each other that way.
KAREN (carefully). You are tired and sick.
MARTHA (as though she were talking to herself). It’s funny; it’s all mixed up. There’s something in you, and you don’t know it and you don’t do anything about it. Suddenly a child gets bored and lies — and there you are, seeing it for the first time. (Closes her eyes) I don’t know. It all seems to come back to me. In some way I’ve ruined your life. I’ve ruined my own. I didn’t even know. (Smiles) There’s a big difference between us now, Karen. I feel all dirty and — (Puts out her hand, touches Karen’s head) I can’t stay with you anymore, darling.
KAREN (in a shaken, uncertain tone). All this isn’t true. You’ve never said it; we’ll forget it by tomorrow —
MARTHA. Tomorrow? Karen, we would have had to invent a new language, as children do, without words like tomorrow.
KAREN (crying). Go and lie down, Martha. You’ll feel better. (Martha looks around the room, slowly, carefully. She is very quiet. Exits right, stands at door for a second looking at Karen, then slowly shuts the door behind her. Karen sits alone without moving. There is no sound in the house until, a few minutes after Martha’s exit, a shot is heard. The sound of the shot should not be too loud or too strong. For a few seconds after
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the noise has died out, Karen does not move. Then, suddenly, she springs from the chair, crosses the room, pulls open door, right. Almost at the same moment footsteps are heard on the staircase.)

MRS. MORTAR. What was that? Where is it? (Enters door center, frightened, aimlessly moving about) Karen! Martha! Where are you? I heard a shot. What was — (Stops as she sees Karen reappear, right. Walks toward her, still talking. Stops when she sees Karen’s face) What — what is it? (Karen moves her hands, shakes her head slightly, passes Mrs. Mortar, and goes toward window. Mrs. Mortar stares at her a moment, rushes past her through door right. Left alone, Karen leans against the window. Mrs. Mortar reenters crying. After a minute) What shall we do? What shall we do?

KAREN (in a toneless voice). Nothing.

MRS. MORTAR. We’ve got to get a doctor — right away. (Goes to phone, nervously, fumblingly starts to dial.)

KAREN (without turning). There isn’t any use.

MRS. MORTAR. We’ve got to do something. Oh, it’s awful. Poor Martha. I don’t know what we can do — (Puts phone down, collapses in chair, sobs quietly) You think she’s dea—

KAREN. Yes.

MRS. MORTAR. Poor, poor Martha. I can’t realize it’s true. Oh, how could she — she was so — I don’t know what — (Looks up, still crying, surprised) I’m — I’m frightened.

KAREN. Don’t cry.

MRS. MORTAR. I can’t help it. How can I help it? (Gradually the sobs cease, and she sits rocking herself) I’ll never forgive myself for the last words I said to her. But I was good to her, Karen, and you know God will excuse me for that once. I always tried to do everything I could. (Suddenly) Suicide’s a sin. (No answer. Timidly) Shouldn’t we call somebody to —

KAREN. In a little while.

MRS. MORTAR. She shouldn’t have done it, she shouldn’t have done it. It was because of all this awful business. She would have got a job and started all over again — she was just worried and sick and —

KAREN. That isn’t the reason she did it.

MRS. MORTAR. What — why —?

KAREN (wearily). What difference does it make now?
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sick. If only you could see her, you'd let her come for just a minute.

KAREN. I couldn't do that, Agatha.

AGATHA. I don't blame you. But I had to tell you. She's old.

It's going to kill her.

KAREN (bitterly). Kill her? Where is Mrs. Tilford?

AGATHA. Outside.

KAREN. All right.

AGATHA (presses Karen's arm). You always been a good girl.

(Hurriedly exits.)

MRS. MORTAR. You going to allow that woman to come in here?

With Martha lying there? How can you be so feelingless?

(She starts to cry) I won't stay and see it. I won't have anything to do with it. I'll never let that woman — (Rushes sobbing from the room.)

(A second after, Mrs. Tilford appears in the doorway. Her face, her walk, her voice have changed.)

MRS. TILFORD. Karen, let me come in.

(Without turning, Karen bows her head. Mrs. Tilford enters, stands staring at the floor.)

KAREN. Why have you come here?

MRS. TILFORD. I had to come. (Stretches out her hand to Karen, who does not turn. She drops her hand) I know now; I know it wasn't true.

KAREN. What?

MRS. TILFORD (carefully). I know it wasn't true, Karen.

KAREN (stares at her, shudders). You know it wasn't true? I don't care what you know. It doesn't matter anymore. If that's what you had to say, you've said it. Go away.

MRS. TILFORD (puts her hand to her throat). I've got to tell you.

KAREN. I don't want to hear you.

MRS. TILFORD. Last Tuesday Mrs. Wells found a bracelet in Rosalie's room. The bracelet had been hidden for several months. We found out that Rosalie had taken the bracelet from another girl, and that Mary — (Closes her eyes) that Mary knew that and used it to force Rosalie into saying that she had seen you and Miss Dobie together. I — I've talked to Mary. I've found out. (Karen suddenly begins to laugh, high and sharp) Don't do that, Karen. I have only a little more to say. I've tried to say it to you for six days. I've talked to Judge Potter. He will make all arrangements.

There will be a public apology and an explanation. The damage suit will be paid to you in full and — and any more that you will be kind enough to take from me. I — I must see that you won't suffer anymore.

KAREN. We're not going to suffer anymore. Martha is dead.

(Mrs. Tilford gasps, shakes her head as though to shake off the truth, and covers her face. Karen watches her for a minute) So you've come here to relieve your conscience? Well, I won't be your confessor. It's choking you, is it? (Violently) And you want to stop the choking, don't you? You've done a wrong and you have to right that wrong or you can't rest your head again. You want to be "just," don't you, and you wanted us to help you be just? You've come to the wrong place for help. You want to be a "good" woman again, don't you? (Bitterly) Oh, I know. You told us that night you had to do what you did. Now you "have" to do this. A public apology and money paid, and you can sleep again and eat again. That done and there'll be peace for you. You're old, and the old are callous. Ten, fifteen years left for you. But what of me? It's a whole life for me. A whole God-damned life. (Suddenly quiet, points to door, right) And what of her?

MRS. TILFORD (she is crying). You are still living.

KAREN. Yes. I guess so.

MRS. TILFORD (with a tremendous effort to control herself). I didn't come here to relieve myself. I swear to God I didn't.

I came to try — to try anything. I knew there wasn't any relief for me, Karen, and that there never would be again. (Tensely) But what I am or why I came doesn't matter. The only thing that matters is you and — You, now.

KAREN. There's nothing for me.

MRS. TILFORD. Oh, let's try to make something for you. You're young and I — I can help you.

KAREN (smiles). You can help me?

MRS. TILFORD (with great feeling). Take whatever I can give you. Take it for yourself and use it for yourself. It won't bring me peace, if that's what's worrying you. (Smiles) Those ten or fifteen years you talk about! They will be bad years.

KAREN. I'm tired, Mrs. Tilford. You will have a hard time ahead, won't you?

MRS. TILFORD. Yes.
KAREN. Mary?

MRS. TILFORD. I don't know.

KAREN. You can send her away.

MRS. TILFORD. No. I could never do that. Whatever she does, it must be to me and no one else. She's — she's —

KAREN. Yes. Your very own, to live with the rest of your life.

(For a moment she watches Mrs. Tilford's face) It's over for me now, but it will never end for you. She's harmed us both, but she's harmed you more, I guess. (Sits down beside Mrs. Tilford) I'm sorry.

MRS. TILFORD (clings to her). Then you'll try for yourself.

KAREN. All right.

MRS. TILFORD. You and Joe.

KAREN. No. We're not together anymore.

MRS. TILFORD (looks up at her). Did I do that, too?

KAREN. I don't think anyone did anything, anymore.

MRS. TILFORD (makes a half-movement to rise). I'll go to him right away.

KAREN. No, it's better now the way it is.

MRS. TILFORD. But he must know what I know, Karen. You must go back to him.

KAREN (smiles). No, not anymore.

MRS. TILFORD. You must, you must — (Sees her face, hesitates)

Perhaps later, Karen?

KAREN. Perhaps.

MRS. TILFORD (after a moment in which they both sit silent).

Come away from here now, Karen. (Karen shakes her head)

You can't stay with — (Moves her hand toward door, right.)

KAREN. When she is buried, then I will go.

MRS. TILFORD. You'll be all right?

KAREN. I'll be all right, I suppose. Good-bye, now.

(They both rise. Mrs. Tilford speaks, pleadingly.)

MRS. TILFORD. You'll let me help you? You'll let me try?

KAREN. Yes, if it will make you feel better.

MRS. TILFORD (with great feeling). Oh, yes, oh, yes, Karen.

(Karen walks toward the window.)

KAREN (suddenly). Is it nice out?

MRS. TILFORD. It's been cold. (Karen opens the window slightly, sits on the ledge.)

KAREN. It feels very good.

MRS. TILFORD. You'll write me sometime?

KAREN. If I ever have anything to say. Good-bye, now.

MRS. TILFORD. Good-bye, my dear.

(Karen smiles as Mrs. Tilford exits. She does not turn, but a minute later she raises her hand.)

KAREN. Good-bye.

Curtain