

MARGOT & MAX

telephone is on the upstage end of desk.) The desk chair has its back to the windows. Below the desk is a waste-paper basket. L. C. is a sofa. R. of this is a stool. Behind sofa is an oblong table on which there is a silver cigarette case, an ash tray, and a vase of flowers. D. L. is a chair and behind this chair is a small wall table with a wicker mending basket filled with stockings, scissors, etc. Below the sofa is a low, round coffee table. There is a chandelier (or overhead lights) over the C. of the room, and two wall brackets in the L. wall above the fireplace. Both of these are controlled by light switches inside and at R. of the hall door. The standard lamp is switched on and off at the standard lamp itself. At present no lights are on, it still being daylight outside, but the light begins to fade during the first scene between Max and Margot. The fire is burning brightly and the hall door is closed. As the curtain rises, Margot is handing Max a drink. They are both seated on the sofa. She suddenly hears something in the passage outside, rises and goes to the hall door, which she opens and peeps through for a moment. Then she closes the hall door and turns to Max.

MARGOT. (A little worried.) For a moment I thought it was Tony. I'm sorry I interrupted you. What were we talking about . . . ?

MAX. I was just telling you that I murdered exactly fifty-two people since I saw you last.

MARGOT. (With a laugh, picks up her drink from coffee table. Sits on sofa.) Oh, yes—one a week. How did you do it?

MAX. Every way I could think of. I electrocuted some in their baths, locked others in the garage with the motor running or pushed them through windows and over cliffs. Other weeks I preferred to poison, shoot, strangle, stab, slug or suffocate.

MARGOT. Just according to how you felt?

MAX. When you write for that kind of television you don't have time to feel anything.

MARGOT. Where do you get all your ideas from?

MAX. Oh—newspaper stories—police files—bad dreams—other writers . . .

MARGOT. You once told me you'd never write anything that wasn't original.

MAX. Huh—you try being original fifty-two times a year!

MARGOT. Suppose you just dry up and can't think of anything?

MAX. If it comes to that I just use my three hats.

MARGOT. What do you mean?

MAX. I've got three old hats marked: Who kills who, How, and Why.

MARGOT. Which is what? I mean what's Why?

MAX. Why is the motive for killing. You've got to have a motive, you know. There are only five important ones. Fear—jealousy—money—revenge—and protecting someone you love. I just write them down on pieces of paper and pick one out of the Why hat.

MARGOT. Sounds rather like sorting the week's washing.

MAX. It's about as artistic as that. But better paid. It's no more frustrating than writing plays that aren't produced or novels that aren't published. . . . And don't forget this: It all goes to prove that WITO makes teeth bright—white and bite!

MARGOT. (Laughs.) Let's have your glass, Max.

MAX. No . . . I'm all right, thanks.

MARGOT. I could hardly believe it when I heard your voice. At first I thought you were phoning from New York.

MAX. Yes, I thought you were shouting a little louder than necessary. As a matter of fact I was just around the corner. (A pause anxiously.) Was it all right . . . my phoning like that?

MARGOT. Yes, of course.

MAX. Was that—Tony who answered?

MARGOT. Yes, it was. (An awkward pause.) I do hope he isn't going to be too late. Poor darling. He always gets caught when we're going to the theater. (Pause.) So you're not here on a holiday—this time?

MAX. No, not this time. I came over to write some short TV films. After that I think I'll knock off for a year and write that novel. I've got to write it some day.

MARGOT. Another crime story?

MAX. I have to stick to crime—it's my stock in trade. But there's no reason why a murder story can't be as good as anything else. And I think I could write a good one if I took the time. I thought of a pretty fair gimmick on the plane coming over. There's a pair of twins—identical—one lives in Paris and the other in New York—all of a sudden they both decide to . . . (Margot has been drowsing anxious and loses interest in all this.)

MARGOT. (*Interrupting.*) Max, before Tony comes I ought to explain something.

MAX. Yes?

MARGOT. I didn't tell him anything about us.

MAX. Oh.

MARGOT. When you rang up yesterday, I just said that you were a television writer I'd met when he was in America.

MAX. Well, that's true enough.

MARGOT. I said I'd met you again just before you went back to New York and you promised to look us up if you ever came back.

MAX. I see.

MARGOT. Max, I know you think it's silly, but when you get to know Tony, you'll understand why.

MAX. Margot, I'd like to get one thing straight. (*Rises and sits on arm of sofa.*) Things are O.K. now between you and Tony?

MARGOT. They couldn't be better. And I want to keep them that way.

MAX. I'm very glad—at least I guess I will be when I get used to the idea.

MARGOT. There's something else, Max.

MAX. Yes?

MARGOT. I wasn't going to tell you but . . .

MAX. Come on, let's have it . . .

MARGOT. Well, you remember those letters you wrote me?

MAX. Of course.

MARGOT. After I read them I burnt them. I thought it best. All except one. You probably know the one I mean.

MAX. I can guess. I never should have written it.

MARGOT. I know. But I loved it just the same. I used to carry it round wherever I went. Then one day Tony and I were going to spend the week end with some friends in the country. While we were waiting on the platform I noticed my handbag was missing . . . and the letter was inside.

MAX. I see. . . . Where was this?

MARGOT. Victoria Station. I thought I must have left it in the restaurant but when I went to look for it, it had gone.

MAX. You never found it?

MARGOT. I recovered the handbag about two weeks later from the lost and found. But the letter wasn't there. (*Pause.*) Then a

week after I received a note. It told me what I had to do to get the letter back.

MAX. Go on.

MARGOT. I was to draw fifty pounds from my bank in five-pound notes, then change them for used one-pound notes. It said that if I went to the police or told anyone else—he would show the letter to my husband.

MAX. May I see it? (*Margot exits into bedroom. Max gets up and paces uneasily around the room. He takes a cigarette from the silver box on table behind sofa and lights it. Then Margot enters from bedroom holding two white envelopes. She hands one of these to Max who takes out the note and examines it.*) Printed—all capitals. Anyone could have done this. (*Margot hands him the other envelope.*)

MARGOT. Then—two days later—I got this one. (*Max takes out the second note.*)

MAX. (*Glancing at the postmarks.*) Both mailed in Brixton. (*Reading.*) "Tie up money in a package and mail to John S. King, 23 Newport Street, Brixton, S.W.9. You will get your letter by return." Well, of all the . . .

MARGOT. That's a little shop. People use it as a forwarding address.

MAX. Did you mail the money?

MARGOT. Yes, but the letter was never returned. . . . So after waiting two weeks I went there. They said they'd never heard of a man by that name, and the parcel was still there. It had never been opened.

MAX. Well, I suppose that's something. (*Max puts the notes back in the envelopes and puts them into his wallet.*) May I keep these?

MARGOT. (*Hesitates.*) Yes. . . . If you like.

MAX. You didn't tell Tony?

MARGOT. No, I didn't tell anyone. (*Pause.*) I can't understand why the man didn't collect the money.

MAX. He was probably in jail by that time. (*Pause.*) You never heard from him again?

MARGOT. No.

MAX. Well, let me know if you do. I'll find him and fix him so he can't read, let alone write. (*Pause.*) Is that why you asked me to stop writing?

MARGOT. Yes. I was in an awful panic. I imagined that every letter you wrote me would be opened and read by someone.

MAX. Why didn't you tell me?

MARGOT. You couldn't have done anything. You would probably have made me tell Tony and the police. As it was only fifty pounds I thought I'd pay up and have done with it.

MAX. Margot, are you ever going to tell Tony—about us?

MARGOT. (Horried.) No. I couldn't possibly tell him. Not now.

MAX. Why not? Don't you think we'd all get on better in the end if . . .

MARGOT. Please, Max, I know Tony—you don't.

MAX. You don't have to tell me. Just the thought of meeting him makes me, shall we say, uncomfortable.

MARGOT. Oh, you'll get on fine. He's changed a lot this last year.

. . . Now, he's a model husband. (Slowly and thoughtfully.) In fact, it was exactly a year ago that it happened.

MAX. What happened?

MARGOT. Tony suddenly grew up. He seemed to change overnight from a rather selfish little person into a perfectly reasonable grownup. You remember that night—I came to say good-bye?

MAX. How could I forget? Tony had gone off to play in a tennis tournament.

MARGOT. He did—but he came back. I'm not much good at writing about things like this, so I didn't try. But when I left you that night I came back here. I sat down on the sofa and had a good cry. Then I fell asleep. When I woke up he was standing in the hall with all his bags and tennis rackets. He just said that he had decided to give up tennis for good and settle down.

MAX. Just like that? (Margot gets up. Takes Max's glass and hers to drink shelf in R. bookcase and pours out drinks.)

MARGOT. Just like that. Of course I didn't believe him at first. I'd got so used to tagging around after him wherever he went, I could see no end to it. But he meant it all right. He went out the very next day and got himself a job. (A church clock chimes.) What were we doing—exactly a year ago?

MAX. I was putting the mushrooms into the spaghetti. I nearly turned round and said, "I can't go through with this. Let's find Tony and have it out with him."

MARGOT. I felt that way, too. I wanted so much to say some-

thing—and all I could do was to stand there—quite uselessly—with a drip on the end of my nose. What did you do when I'd gone?

MAX. I walked along the Embankment and stared at the Chelsea gas works.

MARGOT. (With a laugh, crossing to Max.) Were you thinking about the gas works—or me?

MAX. Neither. I was writing a story. I always do when I'm miserable.

MARGOT. A sad story?

MAX. A triumphant story—my hero was an eminent writer coming from America with his pockets full of money ready to snatch his lady love from the arms of her jealous husband.

MARGOT. (Smiling.) Only to find that husband and wife were very happy, thank you.

MAX. And that he was very glad to know it.

MARGOT. (Handing Max his glass.) Max, let's drink to—the way things turn out.

MAX. (Raising glass to Margot.) Way things turn . . . (But before they can drink, there is the sound of a key in the hall door. They both turn toward it, as if it had interrupted their toast. Tony enters. He is thirty-four and has an easy charm. His mind is always active and he usually seems very sure of himself.)

~~MARGOT. Oh, there you are. . . . We thought you were never coming. . . . What have you been up to?~~

~~TONY. Sorry, darling. The boss blew in just as I was leaving. (As Tony takes off his overcoat and hangs it up on coat rack, Max stands a little awkwardly, facing hall.)~~

~~MARGOT. Tony, this is Max Halliday.~~

~~TONY. Hullo, Max.~~

~~MAX. (Shaking hands.) Tony. . . .~~

~~TONY. I'm terribly sorry to be so late. Has Margot been looking after you all right? How's your drink? (Tony crosses to drink shelf and mixes himself drink. Margot sits on sofa.)~~

~~MARGOT. We've been drinking ourselves silly waiting for you.~~

~~TONY. Well, how do you like it over here, Max?~~

~~MAX. Fine.~~

~~TONY. Is this your first visit to London?~~

~~MAX. Uh—no—I was here a year ago for a vacation.~~

~~TONY. Oh, yes, that's right. Margot told me. You write for the radio, don't you?~~

MARCOT. (*Interrupting*.) Max, before Tony comes I ought to explain something.

MAX. Yes?

MARCOT. I didn't tell him anything about us.

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MARCOT. When you rang up yesterday, I just said that you were a television writer I'd met when he was in America.

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