

ABBY. No, dear, this makes twelve.

*(Mortimer backs away from them, stunned, toward phone stool at desk.)*

MARTHA. Oh, I think you're wrong, Abby. This is only eleven.

ABBY. No, dear, because I remember when Mr. Hoskins first came in, it occurred to me that he would make just an even dozen.

MARTHA. Well, you really shouldn't count the first one.

ABBY. Oh, *I* was counting the first one. So that makes it twelve. *(Phone rings. Mortimer, in a daze, turns toward it and without picking up receiver, speaks.)*

MORTIMER. Hello! *(He comes to, picks up receiver.)* Hello. Oh, hello, Al. My, it's good to hear your voice.

*(Abby, at table, is still holding out for a "twelve" count.)*

ABBY. Well, anyway, they're all down in the cellar—

MORTIMER. *(To aunts.)* Ssshhh— *(Into phone, as aunts cross to sideboard and put candelabras from top to bottom shelf.)* Oh, no, Al, I'm sober as a lark. I just called you because I was feeling a little Pirandello—Piran—you wouldn't know, Al. Look, I'm glad you called. Get hold of George right away. He's got to review the play tonight. I can't make it. No, Al, you're wrong. I'll tell you all about it tomorrow. Well, George has got to cover the play tonight! This is my department and I'm running it! You get ahold of George! *(He hangs up and sits a moment trying to collect himself.)* Now let's see, where were we? *(He suddenly leaps from stool.)* TWELVE!

MARTHA. Yes, Abby thinks we ought to count the first one and that makes twelve. *(She goes back to sideboard.)*

*(Mortimer takes chair R. of table and faces it toward R. stage, then takes Martha by the hand, leads her to chair and sets her in it.)*

MORTIMER. All right—now—who was the first one?

ABBY. *(Crossing from above table to Mortimer.)* Mr. Midgeley. He was a Baptist.

MARTHA. Of course, I still think we can't claim full credit for him because he just died.

ABBY. Martha means without any help from us. You see, Mr. Midgeley came here looking for a room—

MARTHA. It was right after you moved to New York.

ABBY. —And it didn't seem right for that lovely room to be going to waste when there were so many people who needed it—

MARTHA. —He was such a lonely old man...

ABBY. All his kith and kin were dead and it left him so forlorn and unhappy—

MARTHA. —We felt so sorry for him.

ABBY. And then when his heart attack came—and he sat dead in that chair (*Pointing to armchair.*) looking so peaceful—remember, Martha—we made up our minds then and there that if we could help other lonely old men to that same peace—we would!

MORTIMER. (*All ears.*) He dropped dead right in that chair! How awful for you!

MARTHA. Oh, no, dear. Why, it was rather like old times. Your grandfather always used to have a cadaver or two around the house. You see, Teddy had been digging in Panama and he thought Mr. Midgely was a Yellow Fever victim.

ABBY. That meant he had to be buried immediately.

MARTHA. So we all took him down to Panama and put him in the lock. (*She rises, puts her arm around Abby.*) Now that's why we told you not to worry about it because we know exactly what's to be done.

MORTIMER. And that's how all this started—that man walking in here and dropping dead.

ABBY. Of course, we realized we couldn't depend on that happening again. So—

MARTHA. (*Crosses to Mortimer.*) You remember those jars of poison that have been up on the shelves in Grandfather's laboratory all these years—?

ABBY. You know your Aunt Martha's knack for mixing things. You've eaten enough of her piccalilli.

MARTHA. Well, dear, for a gallon of elderberry wine I take one teaspoonful of arsenic, then add a half teaspoonful of strychnine and then just a pinch of cyanide.

MORTIMER. (*Appraisingly.*) Should have quite a kick.

ABBY. Yes! As a matter of fact one of our gentlemen found time to say "How delicious!"

ABBY. (*To Mortimer.*) I wish you were here for dinner.

MARTHA. I'm trying on...