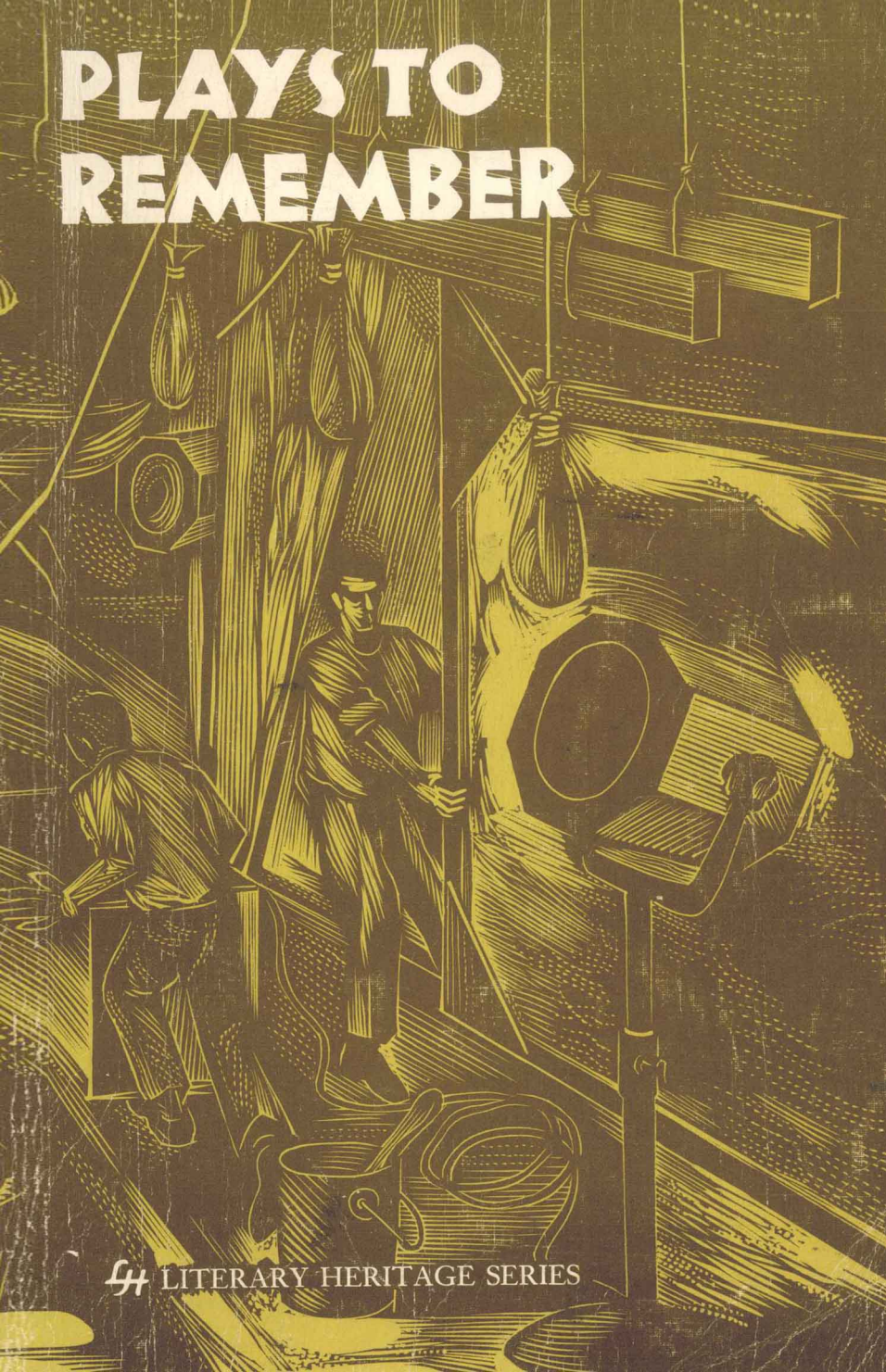


PLAYS TO REMEMBER



 LITERARY HERITAGE SERIES

PLAYS TO REMEMBER

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EVERYBODY WANTS TO GET INTO THE ACT

The spotlight shines on a little man wearing a battered hat, who sits down at the piano and begins to play. A pretty girl walks across the stage and interrupts him. He begins again but is interrupted by a second girl. He starts playing a third time. This time a man walks into the circular glow of the spotlight and begins talking to the piano player. The piano player bangs his hands down on the keyboard and stands up to look at the audience. He seems to be furious. He holds his hands palm upward in a gesture of frustration and says to the audience, "Everyone wants to get into the act!"

Actually, the little piano player is a comedian, and the interruptions are planned parts of a well-known comedy routine. Audiences have enjoyed this routine for years because they recognize truth in it. Many of us *do* want to get into the act. And we are annoyed when people take the spotlight away from us.

This is not to say that we are stagestruck and determined to set out for Hollywood or Broadway, where we will make a career of acting. But most of us do have an urge to be noticed. We have a desire to step into the limelight and to be seen when we are performing at our best. To some extent, our own desire to perform successfully creates in us an interest in seeing others do the same thing. To satisfy this interest, we attend theaters, watch television, and perhaps listen to plays on records or on the radio.

Most of the plays in this book are one-act plays. In short plays of this type, the playwright must tell you very soon who is doing what, and where it is being done, if you are to appreciate the play.

When you read each play, read the first few pages with particular care. Notice the aids to understanding the characters. In the list of characters which precedes each play, the playwright might indicate a character's occupation or his relationship to another character. When he describes the setting, the playwright sometimes describes the characters who are onstage and their costumes. Another clue to a character's personality can come from the way in which the stage directions say he should speak his lines. Or, you might learn about a character from what others say about him before he appears on the stage. Once you have acquainted yourself with the characters, you are ready to see what problems confront them and how they go about solving these problems.

Drama is the form in which literature most closely resembles life. When plays are performed, the characters breathe, and laugh, and shout, just as we do. As you read the plays in this book, encourage your imagination to take two steps. First, notice what kind of play you are reading. See whether it is a 'radio play, a television play, or a stage play; then imagine yourself enjoying that *kind* of play. Second, imagine that you are a quiet bystander where the action is taking place—a New York City apartment, a warden's office, a movie set. Then observe the characters act out their story.

Other things, too, have made watching plays one of man's favorite pastimes. Sometimes people want to experience the chills and suspense that a mystery can provide. On other occasions, they may prefer the warmth and humor of a family comedy. Or they may seek the color and the lively spirit of a musical. All these kinds of drama help fulfill man's emotional needs.

Different types of plays also suggest reasons why drama is popular throughout the world. A good movie is more than just a good movie. It is a chance to leave your regular routine for a few hours and lose yourself in the picture that flickers across the screen. Television drama brings plays and performers right into your home. It allows you to move the stage on which the play is performed into any room you wish to use. Plays on radio or on records give your imagination an opportunity to design the scenery and costumes.

The same can be said about plays that you read. These provide an even greater outlet, since you can imagine sound effects as well as characters and settings. You can visualize everything, in fact, except the plot, which the playwright spins out of the words on the page.

The oldest form of drama is simply a play performed by live actors in front of a live audience. Thousands of years before men learned that electronic impulses could carry their voices and images throughout the world—and even preserve them for future showings—actors were performing for audiences. Today many people consider live theater the highest form of drama. They believe that greater demands are put on an actor who performs in front of an audience because the actor who fluffs a line must somehow recover—there are no retakes. Also, a theater audience can see that an actor is not performing in a real room, or a real yard, but on a stage. The actor must be skillful enough to create the impression that he is in a real situation even though the eyes of the people in the audience are telling them that what they see is just an imitation of life.





SORRY, WRONG NUMBER

LUCILLE FLETCHER

SORRY, WRONG NUMBER

Have you ever accidentally overheard a conversation that was not meant for your ears? Suppose you overhear two people discussing a crime that is about to be committed. What should you do?

In *Sorry, Wrong Number* you will discover what Mrs. Elbert Stevenson does when she happens to hear such a conversation. Since Mrs. Stevenson is an invalid, she cannot run out to the nearest police station. She must depend on her telephone.

Although *Sorry, Wrong Number* was made into a movie and has been performed on the stage, it was originally a radio play. Consequently, it relies heavily on sounds to get across its dramatic punch. As you read, imagine the ringing, buzzing, clicking, and dialing of Mrs. Stevenson's telephone. Imagine, too, what kind of mood she is in when she slams down the receiver.

Listen. Mrs. Stevenson is just beginning to dial.

CHARACTERS

MRS. STEVENSON

OPERATOR

FIRST MAN

SECOND MAN (GEORGE)

CHIEF OPERATOR

SECOND OPERATOR

SERGEANT DUFFY

THIRD OPERATOR

WESTERN UNION MAN

INFORMATION OPERATOR

WOMAN, on staff of Henschley Hospital



(*Sound: Number being dialed on phone; busy signal.*)

MRS. STEVENSON (*a querulous, self-centered neurotic*). Oh—
dear! (*Slams down receiver. Dials OPERATOR.*)

OPERATOR. Your call, please?

MRS. STEVENSON. Operator? I've been dialing Murray Hill
4-0098 now for the last three-quarters of an hour, and the
line is always busy. But I don't see how it *could* be busy
that long. Will you try it for me, please?

OPERATOR. Murray Hill 4-0098? One moment, please.

MRS. STEVENSON. I don't see how it could be busy all this time.
It's my husband's office. He's working late tonight, and I'm
all alone here in the house. My health is very poor—and
I've been feeling so nervous all day—

OPERATOR. Ringing Murray Hill 4-0098.

(*Sound: Phone buzz. It rings three times. Receiver is picked
up at other end.*)

FIRST MAN. Hello.

MRS. STEVENSON. Hello? (*A little puzzled.*) Hello. Is Mr.
Stevenson there?

FIRST MAN (*into phone, as though he had not heard*). Hello.
(*Louder.*) Hello.

SECOND MAN (*slow, heavy quality, faintly foreign accent*).
Hello.

FIRST MAN. Hello. George?

GEORGE. Yes, sir.

MRS. STEVENSON (*louder and more imperious, to phone*). Hello.
Who's this? What number am I calling, please?

FIRST MAN. We have heard from our client. He says the coast
is clear for tonight.

GEORGE. Yes, sir.

FIRST MAN. Where are you now?

GEORGE. In a phone booth.

FIRST MAN. Okay. You know the address. At eleven o'clock the
private patrolman goes around to the bar on Second Avenue
for a beer. Be sure that all the lights downstairs are out.
There should be only one light visible from the street. At
eleven fifteen a subway train crosses the bridge. It makes a
noise in case her window is open and she should scream.

MRS. STEVENSON (*shocked*). Oh—hello! What number is this,
please?

GEORGE. Okay. I understand.

FIRST MAN. Make it quick. As little blood as possible. Our
client does not wish to make her suffer long.

GEORGE. A knife okay, sir?

FIRST MAN. Yes. A knife will be okay. And remember—remove
the rings and bracelets, and the jewelry in the bureau
drawer. Our client wishes it to look like simple robbery.

GEORGE. Okay, I get—
(*Sound: A bland buzzing signal.*)

MRS. STEVENSON (*clicking phone*). Oh! (*Bland buzzing signal
continues. She hangs up.*) How awful! How unspeakably—
(*Sound: Dialing. Phone buzz.*)

OPERATOR. Your call, please?

MRS. STEVENSON (*unnerved and breathless, into phone*). Operator, I—I've just been cut off.

OPERATOR. I'm sorry, madam. What number were you calling?

MRS. STEVENSON. Why—it was supposed to be Murray Hill 4-0098, but it wasn't. Some wires must have crossed—I was cut into a wrong number—and—I've just heard the most dreadful thing—a—a murder—and—(*Imperiously.*) Operator, you'll simply have to retrace that call at once.

OPERATOR. I beg your pardon, madam—I don't quite—

MRS. STEVENSON. Oh—I know it was a wrong number, and I had no business listening—but these two men—they were cold-blooded fiends—and they were going to murder somebody—some poor innocent woman—who was all alone—in a house near a bridge. And we've got to stop them—we've got to—

OPERATOR (*patiently*). What number were you calling, madam?

MRS. STEVENSON. That doesn't matter. This was a wrong number. And *you* dialed it. And we've got to find out what it was—immediately!

OPERATOR. But—madam—

MRS. STEVENSON. Oh, why are you so stupid? Look, it was obviously a case of some little slip of the finger. I told you to try Murray Hill 4-0098 for me—you dialed it—but your finger must have slipped—and I was connected with some other number—and I could hear them, but they couldn't hear me. Now I simply fail to see why you couldn't make that same mistake again—on purpose—why you couldn't *try* to dial Murray Hill 4-0098 in the same careless sort of way.

OPERATOR (*quickly*). Murray Hill 4-0098? I will try to get it for you, madam.

MRS. STEVENSON (*sarcastically*). Thank you.

(*Sound of dialing; busy signal.*)

OPERATOR. I am sorry. Murray Hill 4-0098 is busy.

MRS. STEVENSON (*frantically clicking receiver*). Operator.
Operator.

OPERATOR. Yes, madam.

MRS. STEVENSON (*angrily*). You *didn't* try to get that wrong number at all. I asked explicitly. And all you did was dial correctly.

OPERATOR. I am sorry. What number were you calling?

MRS. STEVENSON. Can't you, for once, forget what number I was calling, and do something specific? Now I want to trace that call. It's my civic duty—it's *your* civic duty—to trace that call—and to apprehend those dangerous killers—and if *you* won't—

OPERATOR. I will connect you with the Chief Operator.

MRS. STEVENSON. *Please!*

(*Sound of ringing.*)

- CHIEF OPERATOR (*coolly and professionally*). This is the Chief Operator.

MRS. STEVENSON. Chief Operator? I want you to trace a call. A telephone call. Immediately. I don't know where it came from, or who was making it, but it's absolutely necessary that it be tracked down. Because it was about a murder. Yes, a terrible, cold-blooded murder of a poor innocent woman—tonight—at eleven fifteen.

- CHIEF OPERATOR. I see.

MRS. STEVENSON (*high-strung, demanding*). Can you trace it for me? Can you track down those men?

- CHIEF OPERATOR. It depends, madam.

MRS. STEVENSON. Depends on what?

- CHIEF OPERATOR. It depends on whether the call is still going on. If it's a live call, we can trace it on the equipment. If it's been disconnected, we can't.

MRS. STEVENSON. Disconnected?

- CHIEF OPERATOR. If the parties have stopped talking to each other.

MRS. STEVENSON. Oh—but—but of course they must have stopped talking to each other by *now*. That was at least five minutes ago—and they didn't sound like the type who would make a long call.

• CHIEF OPERATOR. Well, I can try tracing it. Now—what is your name, madam?

MRS. STEVENSON. Mrs. Stevenson. Mrs. Elbert Stevenson. But—listen—

• CHIEF OPERATOR (*writing it down*). And your telephone number?

MRS. STEVENSON (*more irritated*). Plaza 3-2098. But if you go on wasting all this time—

• CHIEF OPERATOR. And what is your reason for wanting this call traced?

MRS. STEVENSON. My reason? Well—for heaven's sake—isn't it obvious? I overhear two men—they're killers—they're planning to murder this woman—it's a matter for the police.

• CHIEF OPERATOR. Have you told the police?

MRS. STEVENSON. No. How could I?

• CHIEF OPERATOR. You're making this check into a private call purely as a private individual?

MRS. STEVENSON. Yes. But meanwhile—

• CHIEF OPERATOR. Well, Mrs. Stevenson—I seriously doubt whether we could make this check for you at this time just on your say-so as a private individual. We'd have to have something more official.

MRS. STEVENSON. Oh, for heaven's sake! You mean to tell me I can't report a murder without getting tied up in all this red tape? Why, it's perfectly idiotic. All right, then. I *will* call the police. (*She slams down receiver.*) Ridiculous!

(*Sound of dialing.*)

SECOND OPERATOR. Your call, please?

MRS. STEVENSON (*very annoyed*). The Police Department—*please*.

SECOND OPERATOR. Ringing the Police Department.

(*Rings twice. Phone is picked up.*)

SERGEANT DUFFY. Police Department. Precinct 43. Duffy speaking.

MRS. STEVENSON. Police Department? Oh. This is Mrs. Stevenson—Mrs. Elbert Smythe Stevenson of 53 North Sutton Place. I'm calling up to report a murder.

DUFFY. Eh?

MRS. STEVENSON. I mean—the murder hasn't been committed yet. I just overheard plans for it over the telephone . . . over a wrong number that the operator gave me. I've been trying to trace down the call myself, but everybody is so stupid—and I guess in the end you're the only people who could *do* anything.

DUFFY (*not too impressed*). Yes, ma'am.

MRS. STEVENSON (*trying to impress him*). It was a perfectly definite murder. I heard their plans distinctly. Two men were talking, and they were going to murder some woman at eleven fifteen tonight—she lived in a house near a bridge.

DUFFY. Yes, ma'am.

MRS. STEVENSON. And there was a private patrolman on the street. He was going to go around for a beer on Second Avenue. And there was some third man—a client—who was paying to have this poor woman murdered— They were going to take her rings and bracelets—and use a knife— Well, it's unnerved me dreadfully—and I'm not well—

DUFFY. I see. When was all this, ma'am?

MRS. STEVENSON. About eight minutes ago. Oh . . . (*Relieved.*) then you *can* do something? You *do* understand—

DUFFY. And what is your name, ma'am?

MRS. STEVENSON (*impatiently*). Mrs. Stevenson. Mrs. Elbert Stevenson.

DUFFY. And your address?

MRS. STEVENSON. 53 North Sutton Place. That's near a bridge,

the Queensborough Bridge, you know—and *we* have a private patrolman on *our* street—and Second Avenue—
DUFFY. And what was that number you were calling?

MRS. STEVENSON. Murray Hill 4-0098. But—that wasn't the number I overheard. I mean Murray Hill 4-0098 is my husband's office. He's working late tonight, and I was trying to reach him to ask him to come home. I'm an invalid, you know—and it's the maid's night off—and I *hate* to be alone—even though he says I'm perfectly safe as long as I have the telephone right beside my bed.

DUFFY (*stolidly*). Well, we'll look into it, Mrs. Stevenson, and see if we can check it with the telephone company.

MRS. STEVENSON (*getting impatient*). But the telephone company said they couldn't check the call if the parties had stopped talking. I've already taken care of *that*.

DUFFY. Oh, yes?

MRS. STEVENSON (*highbanded*). Personally I feel you ought to do something far more immediate and drastic than just check the call. What good does checking the call do, if they've stopped talking? By the time you track it down, they'll already have committed the murder. (18)

DUFFY. Well, we'll take care of it, lady. Don't worry.

MRS. STEVENSON. I'd say the whole thing calls for a search—a complete and thorough search of the whole city. I'm very near a bridge, and I'm not far from Second Avenue. And I know *I'd* feel a whole lot better if you sent around a radio car to *this* neighborhood at once.

DUFFY. And what makes you think the murder's going to be committed in your neighborhood, ma'am?

MRS. STEVENSON. Oh, I don't know. The coincidence is so horrible. Second Avenue—the patrolman—the bridge—

DUFFY. Second Avenue is a very long street, ma'am. And do you happen to know how many bridges there are in the city of New York alone? Not to mention Brooklyn, Staten