

CHARACTERS

CONSTANCE

ALFRED

Silence—a man grunts and shakes his paper—a woman flips over the pages of a book and sighs.

NB A married couple, ALFRED and CONSTANCE—middle class, childless, aged 45 and 42.

CONSTANCE: (*Sighs—thinks:*) Macbeth . . .

(*Flip.*)

Macedonia . . .

(*Flip.*)

Machine-gun . . .

(*Flip.*)

Magna Carta . . .

(*Flip.*)

Measles . . .

(*Flip.*)

Molluscs . . . molluscs . . .

ALFRED: (*Grunts—thinks:*) ‘ . . . the girl, wearing a red skirt and black sweater, asked the court that her name should not be continued in column five, —continued in column five . . . ’

(*Shakes paper.*)

CONSTANCE: (*Thinks:*) . . . Invertebrate animal . . . discovered that marine varieties . . .

(*Slams book shut.*)

I think enough for tonight—I wish the print wasn’t so small . . . Have you seen my pills anywhere?

ALFRED: Mmmm . . . (*Thinks—:*) ‘ . . . “anything like it in my thirty years on the Bench, ” he added. “While young louts like you are roaming the streets no girl is safe from . . . ”’

(*Impatiently*) Oh . . .

(*Turns page.*)

CONSTANCE: (*Thinks:*) February the fifth, March the fifth, April, May, June, July, August . . . six.

ALFRED: (*Thinks:*) 'A Smooth-as-Silk Beauty as Fast as they Come!'

CONSTANCE: (*Thinks:*) The Friday before last must have been the twenty-seventh, that's right, because the Gilberts came to dinner and that was a Friday because of Mrs Gilbert not eating the meat, and the Encyclopaedia always comes on the twenty-seventh, and it was just when the M to N came when I phoned Alfred at the office about what to give the Gilberts, so it must have been Friday the twenty-seventh. So last Sunday was the twenty-ninth, so today is twenty-nine plus seven makes thirty-six, so it must be the sixth, unless July has thirty-one, in which case it's the seventh, no, the fifth. Thirty days hath April, June, is it? Wait a minute, the Friday before last was the twenty-seventh . . .

ALFRED: (*Thinks:*) 'I found her to be a smooth-as-silk beauty with the classic lines of thrust of . . .'

CONSTANCE: Alfred, is it the fifth or the sixth?

ALFRED: Mmm? (*Thinks:*) ' . . . surging to sixty mph in nine seconds . . .'

CONSTANCE: Fifth?

ALFRED: Fifth what?

CONSTANCE: What's today?

ALFRED: Sunday . . . (*Thinks:*) ' . . . the handbrake a touch stiff and I'd like to see an extra ashtray for the passenger but otherwise . . . ' (*Up*) Oh for goodness' sake—you know I hate people looking over my shoulder.
(*Turns page.*)

CONSTANCE: (*Thinks:*) August the fifth, nineteen sixty-two. (*Up*) Alfred, in half an hour I'll be exactly forty-two-and-a-half years old. That's a thought, isn't it?

ALFRED: Mmmm . . . (*Thinks:*) 'Little old grey-haired Mrs Winifred Garters wept last night as . . .'

CONSTANCE: What time were you born, Alfred?

ALFRED: What?

CONSTANCE: I was born just as the clock struck half-past ten at night—what time were you born?

ALFRED: I can't remember.

CONSTANCE: Didn't anyone tell you?

ALFRED: That's what I can't remember.

(*Hall clock chiming ten.*)

Oh, what's that?—ten? We haven't had the news today. I think there's one now, isn't there? Turn on the box—hang on, where's the *Radio Times*?—ah—is this this week's?

CONSTANCE: Forty-two-and-a-half, and all I've got is a headache.

ALFRED: Is this the new one? 'August five to twelve'—what's today?

CONSTANCE: Sunday.

ALFRED: No—no—no—what's—oh never mind—yes, this is it—
News at five-past ten.

(*Turns on TV.*)

'Dial M for Murder'—oh, that might have been good.

CONSTANCE: It's an awful thing, you know. When you start worrying about the halves. I mean there's no purpose to make sense of it, is there? Every time it's half-past ten, it's another day older, and all I've done with it is to get up and stay up. Where's it all going?

(*Bring in finish of 'Dial M for Murder'—hold it and fade it low.*)

(*Thinks:*) They used to call me Millie . . . my middle name was my favourite till I was—how old was I? 17? Happy Birthday Millie, it used to be . . . Then I went over to Constance, it sounded more grown-up. Seventeen from forty-two. Twenty-five. A quarter of a century, constant Constance. . . . (*Up*) If I had a choice, perhaps I'd choose what I'm doing now. I don't care about that. But I want the choice. I don't want the moon, Alfred, all I want is the possibility of an alternative, so that I know I'm doing this because I want to instead of because there's nothing else.

ALFRED: Sshssh—hang on, Constance, let me hear the News . . .
(*Bring in opening of tape (if there is one) of the 10.05 pm News—5 August 1962.*)

NEWS: The News . . . Marilyn Monroe, the actress, was found dead in her Los Angeles home today . . .

(*Fade out.*)

ALFRED: (*Fading in with 'oh's' used as a sort of dirge—thinks:*)

Oh . . . oh . . . oh . . . oh . . . oh . . . poor
Marilyn . . . poor poor thing . . . What have they

done? . . . God, poor little thing . . . She must have been so unhappy. Oh Marilyn . . .

CONSTANCE: She seemed so full of life, didn't she?

ALFRED: (*Thinks:*) Abandoned . . . no love . . . like a child . . .

CONSTANCE: Poor thing, it's awful.

ALFRED: (*Thinks:*) Marilyn . . . you shouldn't have trusted them, they're all rotten . . .

CONSTANCE: Do you suppose she meant it? Oh, wasn't she lovely, I mean a lovely *person*, she made you feel it. Doesn't it go to show?

ALFRED: Oh, do shut up.

CONSTANCE: Alfred!

ALFRED: Oh, I'm sorry. I'm just tired . . . and upset.

CONSTANCE: It's all right, Alfred.

ALFRED: Of course she meant it. By God, you've only got to use your imagination. It's such a cold shallow world she was living in. No warmth or understanding—no one understood her, she was friendless.

CONSTANCE: Do you think so?

ALFRED: Of course. Hangers-on. People didn't appreciate her.

Just using her. A girl like that. It's a crime . . .

CONSTANCE: Fate.

ALFRED: Fate! Don't be absurd!

CONSTANCE: Please don't shout, Alfred.

ALFRED: (*Wearily*) Oh damn them, dammit . . . Oh, let's go to bed. I'm tired.

CONSTANCE: Yes. I'm worn out—hope I'll be able to sleep.

ALFRED: I can never stay awake, and you can never get to sleep—what's the matter with you?

CONSTANCE: I don't know—can't sleep with this headache.

ALFRED: You know, you read too much, you're always complaining of eye strain and headaches, well it's no wonder.

CONSTANCE: The print's too small, really.

(*Flip flip flip of pages:*)

ALFRED: The Universal Treasury of People, Places and Things: Illustrated. M to N . . . A lot of useless knowledge.

CONSTANCE: I've got as far as Molluscs, but I'm skipping madly.

ALFRED: You forget it all anyway.

CONSTANCE: No I don't, not all of it.

ALFRED: Well, you forgot about Catholics, didn't you? There must have been *something* about them under C.

CONSTANCE: (*Unhappy, offensive-defensive, a little desperate*) Oh Alfred, *please*—not now again . . .

ALFRED: *Catholics!* Catholics—don't—eat—meat—on—Fridays. Or under M—*Meat!*, what—Catholics—don't eat—on—a—Friday. Or F—*Friday!*, the—day—Catholics—don't—eat—meat—on. Oh my God, you could probably have found it under G—*Mrs Gilbert!*, wife to Alfred's boss *Mr Gilbert* and a staunch Catholic who does not eat meat on a Friday! (*Pause.*) D is for *Débâcle*—that which occurs when *Mrs Gilbert* is offered meat by her husband's chief accountant's wife on a Friday!

CONSTANCE: (*Crying*) Well, I wouldn't have forgotten if you hadn't been so awful on the phone—I phoned you to ask you what to get for dinner and you wouldn't give me a chance—Alfred—you were—you behaved . . .

ALFRED: Oh, don't cry—I couldn't talk to you then . . . You had to call up just as *Mr Gilbert*, Anglican, was hovering round my neck with my monthly report . . . Oh, what does it matter anyway . . .

(*Pages turned.*)

M is for Money . . . Universal Treasury all right . . . Two guineas a volume, a guinea per letter of the alphabet. How can you get a guinea's worth out of X? Or Z?

CONSTANCE: It was a lovely birthday present.

ALFRED: Well, I'm sorry I haven't got as much money as your rich brother Stanley.

CONSTANCE: Oh, you know I didn't mean that. But it's lovely to know that every month there's another volume coming. That's the seventh, counting the A to B I got on the actual day. It's O to P this month. Oranges and Orang-utans. I don't know—it's just that the time isn't all a waste, somehow, do you know what I mean?

ALFRED: What's the capital of Mongolia?

CONSTANCE: The point isn't to know the capital of Mongolia, Alfred—the point is to . . . Alfred, at half-past ten I'll be forty-two-and-a-half years old and it's all slipping by.

ALFRED: Well, I'm blessed—do you know they haven't even got *her* in here.

CONSTANCE: Who?

ALFRED: 'Monroe Doctrine . . . Monroe, James, President of the United States . . . ' Universal ruddy Treasury.

CONSTANCE: Well, they can't have everything. I remember my first ABC book—everything was so simple then. I thought that each letter only stood for the one word they gave, you know? A is for Apple, B is for Baby, C is for Cat . . . M was for Moon. It was ages before I knew that M was for anything else . . . like Millie . . . She was 36, he said, didn't he?

ALFRED: Did he? Poor dear . . . What I meant was that it needn't have happened. That's why you can't call it fate.

CONSTANCE: It's all right, I wasn't thinking.

ALFRED: It was just that she had no one to recognize her needs, you see. No one to turn to, I mean. No wonder the poor girl got desperate. Those *actors*—people like that—they've got no humanity, no understanding—self, self, it's such a selfish society. A girl like that, dying with a telephone in her hand—who did she have to call who would have done her any good? No one. Perhaps that's fate.

CONSTANCE: Yes, I suppose so.

ALFRED: Well, let's go up. I'll lock up—you have the bathroom first.

CONSTANCE: I wonder who she was trying to phone, though . . .
(*Fade out—sound of CONSTANCE getting into bed—or near offer.*)

Ooooooh, bed. I feel quite worn out.

ALFRED: You got up too early again.

CONSTANCE: I couldn't drop off once I woke up. It's getting very tiresome.

ALFRED: Don't those pills work?

CONSTANCE: I suppose they must help. I think I'll take an extra one tonight.

ALFRED: Yes, I should.

CONSTANCE: Oh—Alfred—I forgot my glass of water. Do you mind, while you're still up.

ALFRED: Oh, gosh, where is it?

CONSTANCE: On the wash-stand. (*Thinks:*) Oh God, if I'd been in her place I would have eaten the bloody meat and gone to confession . . . Bitch . . . I shouldn't have phoned Alfred at the office, though . . .

ALFRED: Here you are. Got the pills?

(*Clock chiming half-past ten—ALFRED getting into bed.*)

CONSTANCE: (*Thinks:*) Half-past ten, August the fifth, nineteen sixty-two. Well—Cheers! (*Gulps pill and drink.*) Happy anniversary, Millie.

(*Puts glass down.*)

ALFRED: Should I turn the light off?

CONSTANCE: Yes.

(*Click.*)

(*Thinks:*) Maple tree, Mozambique . . . Mandragora . . . Marzipan . . . Mother . . . Moon . . . Melon . . . Menopause . . . Mongolia . . .

ALFRED: (*Thinks:*) Marilyn . . . don't worry, I'm glad you phoned, . . . Don't be unhappy, love, tell me all about it and I'm sure I'll think of something . . . Do you feel better already?—Well, it's nice to have someone you know you can count on any time, isn't it? . . . Don't cry, don't cry any more . . . I'll make it all right . . . (*Up—sigh*) Poor old thing . . .

CONSTANCE: Oh, you mustn't worry about me, Alfred, I'll be all right . . . (*Thinks:*) Marshmallow . . . Mickey Mouse . . . Marriage . . . Moravia . . . Mule . . . Market . . . Mumps . . .