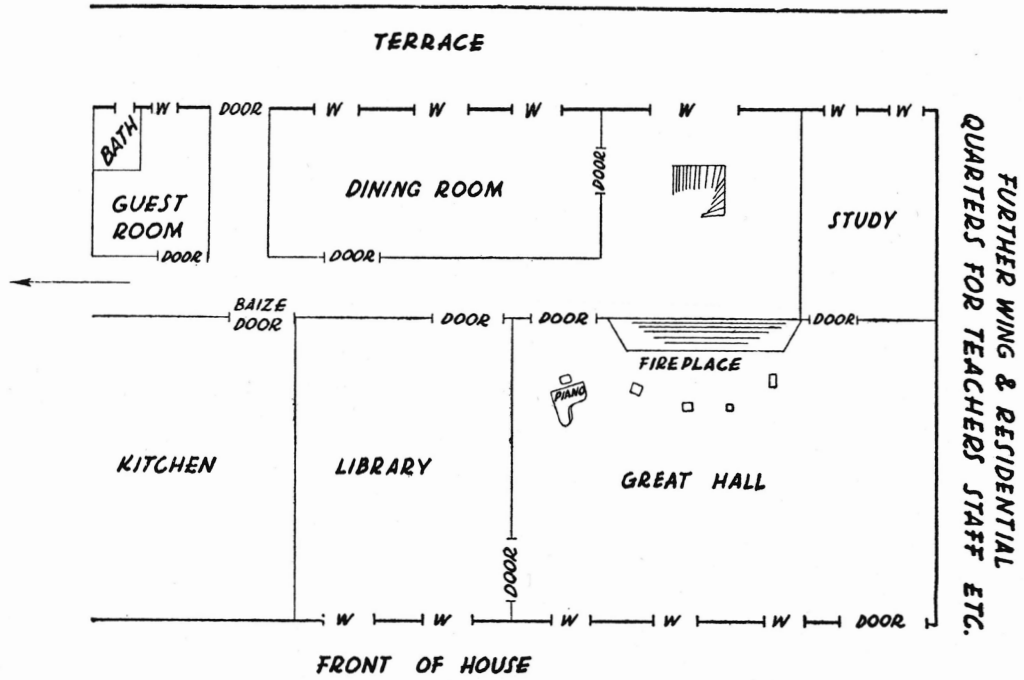


PLAN OF STONYGATES

# CHAPTER 1

Mrs Van Rydock moved a little back from the mirror and sighed.

'Well, that'll have to do,' she murmured. 'Think it's all right, Jane?'

Miss Marple eyed the Lanvanelli creation appraisingly.

'It seems to me a very beautiful gown,' she said.

'The gown's all right,' said Mrs Van Rydock and sighed.

'Take it off, Stephanie,' she said.

The elderly maid with the grey hair and the small pinched mouth eased the gown carefully up over Mrs Van Rydock's upstretched arms.

Mrs Van Rydock stood in front of the glass in her peach satin slip. She was exquisitely corseted. Her still shapely legs were encased in fine nylon stockings. Her face, beneath a layer of cosmetics and constantly toned up by massage, appeared almost girlish at a slight distance. Her hair was less grey than tending to hydrangea blue and was perfectly set. It was practically impossible when looking at Mrs Van Rydock to imagine what she would be like in a natural state. Everything that money

could do had been done for her—reinforced by diet, massage, and constant exercises.

Ruth Van Rydock looked humorously at her friend.

'Do you think most people would guess, Jane, that you and I are practically the same age?'

Miss Marple responded loyally.

'Not for a moment, I'm sure,' she said reassuringly. 'I'm afraid, you know, that *I* look every minute of *my* age!'

Miss Marple was white-haired, with a soft pink and white wrinkled face and innocent china blue eyes. She looked a very sweet old lady. Nobody would have called Mrs Van Rydock a sweet old lady.

'I guess you do, Jane,' said Mrs Van Rydock. She grinned suddenly, 'And so do I. Only not in the same way. "Wonderful how that old hag keeps her figure." That's what they say of me. But they know I'm an old hag all right! And, my God, do I feel like one!'

She dropped heavily on to the satin quilted chair.

'That's all right, Stephanie,' she said. 'You can go.'

Stephanie gathered up the dress and went out.

'Good old Stephanie,' said Ruth Van Rydock. 'She's been with me for over thirty years now. She's the only woman who knows what I really look like! Jane, I want to talk to you.'

Miss Marple leant forward a little. Her face took on a receptive expression. She looked, somehow, an incongruous figure in the ornate bedroom of the expensive hotel suite. She was dressed in rather dowdy black, carried a large shopping bag and looked every inch a lady.

'I'm worried, Jane. About Carrie Louise.'

'Carrie Louise?' Miss Marple repeated the name musingly. The sound of it took her a long way back.

The pensionnat in Florence. Herself, the pink and white English girl from a Cathedral Close. The two Martin girls, Americans, exciting to the English girl because of their quaint ways of speech and their forthright manner and vitality. Ruth, tall, eager, on top of the world; Carrie Louise, small, dainty, wistful.

'When did you see her last, Jane?'

'Oh! not for many many years. It must be twenty-five at least. Of course we still send cards at Christmas.'

Such an odd thing, friendship! She, young Jane Marple, and the two Americans. Their ways diverging almost at once, and yet the old affection persisting; occasional letters, remembrances at Christmas. Strange that Ruth whose home—or rather homes—had been in America should be the sister whom she had seen the more often of the two. No, perhaps not strange. Like most Americans of her class, Ruth had been cosmopolitan, every year or two she had come over to Europe, rushing from London to Paris, on to the Riviera, and back again, and always keen to snatch a few moments wherever she was with her old friends. There had been many meetings like this one. In Claridge's, or the Savoy, or the Berkeley, or the Dorchester. A *recherché* meal, affectionate reminiscences, and a hurried and affectionate goodbye. Ruth had never had time to visit St Mary Mead. Miss Marple had not, indeed, ever expected it. Everyone's life has a *tempo*. Ruth's was *presto* whereas Miss Marple's was content to be *adagio*.

So it was American Ruth whom she had seen most of,

whereas Carrie Louise who lived in England, she had not now seen for over twenty years. Odd, but quite natural, because when one lives in the same country there is no need to arrange meetings with old friends. One assumes that, sooner or later, one will see them without contrivance. Only, if you move in different spheres, that does not happen. The paths of Jane Marple and Carrie Louise did not cross. It was as simple as that.

'Why are you worried about Carrie Louise, Ruth?' asked Miss Marple.

'In a way that's what worries me most! I just don't know.'

'She's not ill?'

'She's very delicate—always has been. I wouldn't say she'd been any worse than usual—considering that she's getting on just as we all are.'

'Unhappy?'

'Oh *no*.'

No, it wouldn't be that, thought Miss Marple. It would be difficult to imagine Carrie Louise unhappy—and yet there were times in her life when she must have been. Only—the picture did not come clearly. Bewildered—yes—incredulous—yes—but violent grief—no.

Mrs Van Rydock's words came appositely.

'Carrie Louise,' she said, 'has always lived right out of this world. She doesn't know what it's like. Maybe it's *that* that worries me.'

'Her circumstances,' began Miss Marple, then stopped, shaking her head. 'No,' she said.

'No, it's she herself,' said Ruth Van Rydock. 'Carrie Louise was always the one of us who had ideals. Of course

it was the fashion when we were young to have ideals—we all had them, it was the proper thing for young girls. You were going to nurse lepers, Jane, and I was going to be a nun. One gets over all that nonsense. Marriage, I suppose one might say, knocks it out of one. Still, take it by and large, I haven't done badly out of marriage.'

Miss Marple thought that Ruth was expressing it mildly. Ruth had been married three times, each time to an extremely wealthy man, and the resultant divorces had increased her bank balance without in the least souring her disposition.

'Of course,' said Mrs Van Rydock, 'I've always been tough. Things don't get me down. I've not expected too much of life and certainly not expected too much of men—and I've done very well out of it—and no hard feelings. Tommy and I are still excellent friends, and Julius often asks me my opinion about the market.' Her face darkened. 'I believe that's what worries me about Carrie Louise—she's always had a tendency, you know, to marry *cranks*.'

'Cranks?'

'People with ideals. Carrie Louise was always a pushover for ideals. There she was, as pretty as they make them, just seventeen and listening with her eyes as big as saucers to old Gulbrandsen holding forth about his plans for the human race. Over fifty, and she married him, a widower with a family of grown-up children—all because of his philanthropic ideas. She used to sit listening to him spell-bound. Just like Desdemona and Othello. Only fortunately there was no Iago about to mess things up—and anyway Gulbrandsen wasn't black. He was a Swede or a Norwegian or something.'

Miss Marple nodded thoughtfully. The name of Gulbrandsen had an international significance. A man who with shrewd business acumen and perfect honesty had built up a fortune so colossal that really philanthropy had been the only solution to the disposal of it. The name still held significance. The Gulbrandsen Trust, the Gulbrandsen Research Fellowships, the Gulbrandsen Administrative Almshouses, and best known of all the vast educational College for the sons of working men.

'She didn't marry him for his money, you know,' said Ruth, '*I* should have if I'd married him at all. But not Carrie Louise. I don't know what would have happened if he hadn't died when she was thirty-two. Thirty-two's a very nice age for a widow. She's got experience, but she's still adaptable.'

The spinster listening to her, nodded gently whilst her mind revived, tentatively, widows she had known in the village of St Mary Mead.

'I was really happiest about Carrie Louise when she was married to Johnnie Restarick. Of course *he* married her for her money—or if not exactly that, at any rate he wouldn't have married her if she hadn't had any. Johnnie was a selfish, pleasure-loving, lazy hound, but that's so much safer than a crank. All Johnnie wanted was to live soft. He wanted Carrie Louise to go to the best dressmakers and have yachts and cars and enjoy herself with him. That kind of man is so very *safe*. Give him comfort and luxury and he'll purr like a cat and be absolutely charming to you. I never took that scene designing and theatrical stuff of his very seriously. But Carrie Louise was thrilled by it—saw it all as Art with a capital A and really forced him back into those

surroundings, and then that dreadful Yugoslavian woman got hold of him and just swept him off with her. He didn't really want to go. If Carrie Louise had waited and been sensible, he would have come back to her.'

'Did she care very much?' asked Miss Marple.

'That's the funny thing. I don't really believe she did. She was absolutely sweet about it all—but then she would be. She *is* sweet. Quite anxious to divorce him so that he and that creature could get married. And offering to give those two boys of his by his first marriage a home with her because it would be more settled for them. So there poor Johnnie was—he *had* to marry the woman and she led him an awful six months and then drove him over a precipice in a car in a fit of rage. They *said* it was an accident, but *I* think it was just temper!'

Mrs Van Rydock paused, took up a mirror and gazed at her face searchingly. She picked up her eyebrow tweezers and pulled out a hair.

'And what does Carrie Louise do next but marry this man Lewis Serrocold. Another crank! Another man with ideals! Oh, I don't say he isn't devoted to her—I think he is—but he's bitten by that same bug of wanting to improve everybody's lives for them. And really, you know, nobody can do that but yourself.'

'I wonder,' said Miss Marple.

'Only, of course, there's a fashion in these things, just like there is in clothes. (My dear, have you seen what Christian Dior is trying to make us wear in the way of skirts?) Where was I? Oh yes, Fashion. Well there's a fashion in philanthropy too. It used to be education in Gulbrandsen's

day. But that's out of date now. The State has stepped in. Everyone expects education as a matter of right—and doesn't think much of it when they get it! Juvenile Delinquency—that's what is the rage nowadays. All these young criminals and potential criminals. Everyone's mad about them. You should see Lewis Serrocold's eyes sparkle behind those thick glasses of his. Crazy with enthusiasm! One of those men of enormous will power who like living on a banana and a piece of toast and put all their energies into a Cause. And Carrie Louise eats it up—just as she always did. But I don't like it, Jane. They've had meetings of the Trustees and the whole place has been turned over to this new idea. It's a training establishment now for these juvenile criminals, complete with psychiatrists and psychologists and all the rest of it. There Lewis and Carrie Louise are, living there, surrounded by these boys—who aren't perhaps quite normal. And the place stiff with occupational therapists and teachers and enthusiasts, half of *them* quite mad. Cranks, all the lot of them, and my little Carrie Louise in the middle of it all!'

She paused—and stared helplessly at Miss Marple.

Miss Marple said in a faintly puzzled voice:

'But you haven't told me yet, Ruth, what you are really afraid of.'

'I tell you, I don't *know*! And *that's* what worries me. I've just been down there—for a flying visit. And I felt all along that there was something wrong. In the atmosphere—in the house—I know I'm not mistaken. I'm sensitive to atmosphere, always have been. Did I ever tell you how I urged Julius to sell out of Amalgamated Cereals before the

crash came? And wasn't I right? Yes, something is *wrong* down there. But I don't know why or what—if it's these dreadful young jailbirds—or if it's nearer home. I can't say what it is. There's Lewis just living for his ideas and not noticing anything else, and Carrie Louise, bless her, never seeing or hearing or thinking anything except what's a lovely sight, or a lovely sound, or a lovely thought. It's sweet but it isn't *practical*. There *is* such a thing as evil—and I want you, Jane, to go down there right away and find out just exactly what's the matter.'

'*Me*?' exclaimed Miss Marple. 'Why me?'

'Because you've got a nose for that sort of thing. You always had. You've always been a sweet innocent-looking creature, Jane, and all the time underneath nothing has ever surprised you, you always believe the worst.'

'The worst is so often true,' murmured Miss Marple.

'Why you have such a poor idea of human nature, I can't think—living in that sweet peaceful village of yours, so old world and pure.'

'You have never lived in a village, Ruth. The things that go on in a pure peaceful village would probably surprise you.'

'Oh I dare say. My point is that they don't surprise *you*. So you *will* go down to Stonygates and find out what's wrong, won't you?'

'But, Ruth dear, that would be a most difficult thing to do.'

'No, it wouldn't. I've thought it all out. If you won't be absolutely mad at me, I've prepared the ground already.'

Mrs Van Rydock paused, eyed Miss Marple rather uneasily, lighted a cigarette, and plunged rather nervously into explanation.

'You'll admit, I'm sure, that things have been difficult in this country since the war, for people with small fixed incomes—for people like you, that is to say, Jane.'

'Oh yes, indeed. But for the kindness, the really great kindness of my nephew Raymond, I don't know really where I should be.'

'Never mind your nephew,' said Mrs Van Rydock. 'Carrie Louise knows nothing about your nephew—or if she does, she knows him as a writer and has no idea that he's your nephew. The point, as I put it to Carrie Louise, is that it's just too bad about dear Jane. Really sometimes hardly enough to eat, and of course, far too proud ever to appeal to old friends. One couldn't, I said, suggest *money*—but a nice long rest in lovely surroundings, with an old friend and with plenty of nourishing food, and no cares or worries'—Ruth Van Rydock paused and then added defiantly, 'Now go on—be mad at me if you want to be.'

Miss Marple opened her china blue eyes in gentle surprise.

'But why should I be mad at you, Ruth? A very ingenious and plausible approach. I'm sure Carrie Louise responded.'

'She's writing to you. You'll find the letter when you get back. Honestly, Jane, you don't feel that I've taken an unpardonable liberty? You won't mind—'

She hesitated and Miss Marple put her thoughts deftly into words.

'Going to Stonygates as an object of charity—more or less under false pretences? Not in the least—if it is *necessary*. You think it is necessary—and I am inclined to agree with you.'

Mrs Van Rydock stared at her.

'But why? What have you heard?'

'I haven't heard anything. It's just your conviction. You're not a fanciful woman, Ruth.'

'No, but I haven't anything definite to go upon.'

'I remember,' said Miss Marple thoughtfully, 'one Sunday morning at church—it was the second Sunday in Advent—sitting behind Grace Lamble and feeling more and more worried about her. Quite sure, you know, that something was wrong—badly wrong—and yet being quite unable to say why. A most disturbing feeling and very very definite.'

'And was there something wrong?'

'Oh yes. Her father, the old Admiral, had been *very* peculiar for some time, and the very next day he went for her with the coal hammer, roaring out that she was Antichrist masquerading as his daughter. He nearly killed her. They took him away to the asylum and she eventually recovered after months in hospital—but it was a very near thing.'

'And you'd actually had a premonition that day in church?'

'I wouldn't call it a premonition. It was founded on *fact*—these things usually are, though one doesn't always recognise it at the time. She was wearing her Sunday hat the wrong way round. Very significant, really, because Grace Lamble was a most precise woman, not at all vague or absent-minded—and the circumstances under which she would not notice which way her hat was put on to go to church were really extremely limited. Her father, you see, had thrown a marble paperweight at her and it had shattered the looking-glass. She had caught up her hat, put it on, and hurried out of the house. Anxious to keep up

appearances and for the servants not to hear anything. She put down these actions, you see, to "dear Papa's Naval temper," she didn't realise that his mind was definitely unhinged. Though she ought to have realised it clearly enough. He was always complaining to her of being spied upon and of enemies—all the usual symptoms, in fact.'

Mrs Van Rydock gazed respectfully at her friend.

'Maybe, Jane,' she said, 'that St Mary Mead of yours isn't quite the idyllic retreat that I've always imagined it.'

'Human nature, dear, is very much the same everywhere. It is more difficult to observe it closely in a city, that is all.'

'And you'll go to Stonygates?'

'I'll go to Stonygates. A little unfair, perhaps, on my nephew Raymond. To let it be thought that he does not assist me, I mean. Still, the dear boy is in Mexico for six months. And by that time it should all be over.'

'What should all be over?'

'Carrie Louise's invitation will hardly be for an indefinite stay. Three weeks, perhaps—a month. That should be ample.'

'For you to find out what is wrong?'

'For me to find out what is wrong.'

'My, Jane,' said Mrs Van Rydock, 'you've got a lot of confidence in yourself, haven't you?'

Miss Marple looked faintly reproachful.

'*You* have confidence in me, Ruth. Or so you say . . . I can only assure you that I shall endeavour to justify your confidence.'