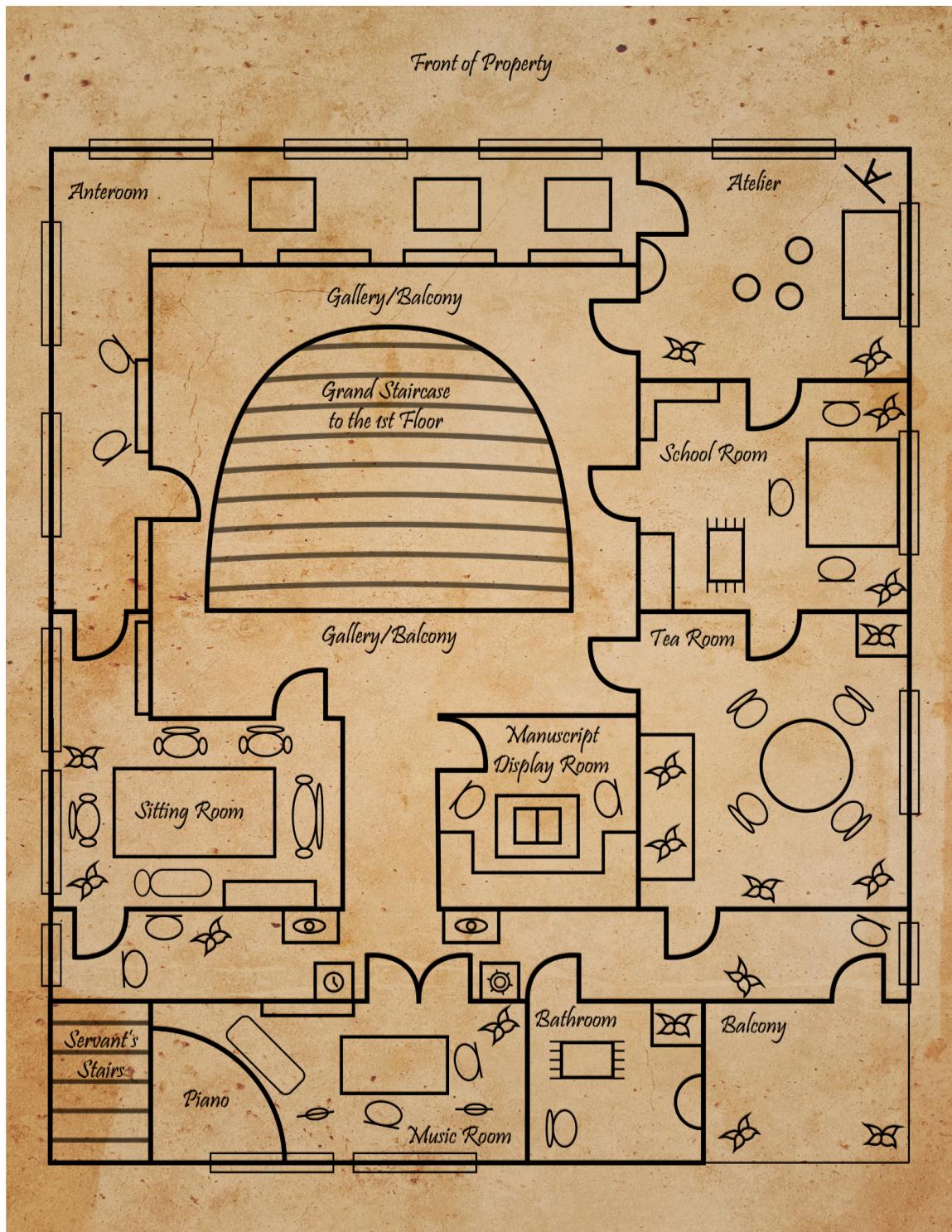


In the Nick of Time

Give your best simple, objective answer.



Interview 1:

Detective: Your name is Mr. Harold Fletchley?

Mr. Fletchley: That would be Lord Harold Fletchley, Baron of Pickleton, to you, sirrah.

D: You own Pickleton Park, at number 1 Pickleton Park Court?

F: That's correct. It's been in the family for almost half a millennium. My illustrious ancestors have kept the place in tip-top shape since the time of King Henry VIII and upholding the fine Fletchley name as a shining model throughout all -

D: Yes, yes. Anyway, Mr. Fletchley -

F: *Lord* Fletchley.

D: Anyway, at about half past two in the afternoon on Thursday last, the house at Pickleton Park was evacuated, and after it was cleared for all occupants to return, a valuable manuscript -

F: Given by Queen Elizabeth to my great-great-great-great -

D: A valuable manuscript was discovered stolen. A local handyman called in to fix the faucet of the second-floor bathroom, this handyman being a fellow by the name of Mr. Henry Windle of Little Pickleton, was arrested at 4:57 pm Friday at his house on Hickory Lane in possession of this manuscript. Does this all accord with your understanding of the situation?

F: Yes indeed. That scoundrel Windle shall pay for this!

D: The police are now seeking an explanation of the execution of the crime (the criminal being arrested and the motive clearly being financial gain). Mr. Windle has been terribly recalcitrant, and he won't tell us a word about how he pulled the whole thing off. We were hoping that you might be able to give us a bit more information on the matter. Where were you when the house was evacuated?

F: Well, evacuating of course. What do you think? We all went out to the South Lawn by the edge of the copse until the house was cleared for reentry.

D: Well, yes, obviously, but before you evacuated?

F: Ah, yes. I was in my study on the first floor, examining my fine and expansive stamp collection.

D: Thank you sir. And who else was on the second floor besides Mr. Windle?

F: Hmm . . . I do not track the every move of each member of the household - it is after all so well staffed that that would be impossible - but obviously the security guard, Mr. Locket, as well

as my two children, Guinevere and Augustine, both quite fine youngsters who I expect will grow up to run the house just as well as the family has for many centuries, and I suppose the tutor, Mr. York, and possibly a servant or two? I'm not really sure, not being the housekeeper after all.

D: And this document - what exactly is the nature of it? Briefly, if you please, Mr. Fletchley.

F: *Lord Fletchley!* Anyway, the manuscript. It is a fine example of Elizabethan birthday poetry, given to my ancestors by Queen Elizabeth I of England herself, written in French, Greek, Latin, and English, and valued at some £ 10,000.

D: And do you have any idea of how Mr. Windle might have found out about it?

F: It is of course widely renowned! How could he *not* know about it? I'm sure everyone from Cornwall to Yorkshire is familiar with it. I'm shocked and offended that the Pickleton Police appear not to appreciate or even know of the great treasures of their locality. This interview is positively preposterous! I shall be contacting my lawyer at once!

D: Mr. Fletchley, you aren't the one under investigation! You don't need- and he's gone.

[Door slams]

Interview 2:

Detective: Your name is Mr. John Locket?

Locket: Yessir.

D: And you work as a security guard at Pickleton Park?

L: Absolutely.

D: I understand that as the security guard, you are responsible for controlling entry into the house and for patrolling the house during the day?

L: That's correct.

D: So you screened Mr. Windle for entry last Thursday. Why did you permit him into the house? Was there anything that might have alerted you to his nefarious intentions?

L: Mr. Windle was coming to fix the faucet on the second floor. He's always the one we call for things like that, so nothing seemed out of the ordinary. I'd always thought he was a nice fellow, too - he comes to the support group at the OVA center in the village sometimes, though I don't know him too well. He was just carrying his toolbag and all, as usual. So it didn't seem like there was anything off about him, and I let him right on in and went back to patrolling the place.

D: I see. When did you first believe there was a problem?

L: I was patrolling the house - basically I just go up and down the halls, making sure everything is all fine and dandy - and I was doing the first floor when Mr. Windle first arrived. So I finished that up, did a quick walk-through of the basement (not much down there besides the kitchen, some servants' quarters, and some storage rooms) and started working my way back up the house. Well I get to the second floor, and I'm going around the gallery above the grand staircase, and I hear the tick-tick-tick, and I would know that sound anywhere, heard it a hundred times on deployment. So I radio to the butler to get everyone downstairs out, and then I start hollering and pounding on the doors around the gallery, telling them all to get out before the place gets blown up. I thought the bomb was going to sever us all from our souls. Everyone comes rushing out, I remember Augie came out of the school room so fast that his chair crashed over and broke, Mr. York was white as a sheet, slipping and sliding in his ridiculous shoes. And so I direct everyone to the South Lawn, since that's where the evacuation plan says to go.

D: After you evacuated the house, what did you do next?

L: Well, first thing I called up the police, told them to get a bomb squad up to Pickleton Park as soon as possible. Then I started checking that everyone was there. See, part of my job is to know who's in the house at any given time, so I began making sure that everyone was out. And that's when I noticed that Windle was missing. I realized he might not've heard me when I was running around to get people out, seeing as how he was in the bathroom on the back hallway. So I start dashing back up to the house, but by then the bomb squad has arrived and they tell me they'll take care of it.

D: Ultimately, it was Lord Fletchley who discovered that the manuscript had been stolen. As security guard, why did you not discover this sooner?

L: So we get back up to the house, once the bomb squad calls it clear, and Mr. Fletchley is pretty mad, because of all the damage, so he spends about an hour chewing me out. Then, he wanted me to go through the front parlor downstairs, the dining room, and the kitchens all careful and thorough, since by now the dinner guests will be arriving soon and he wants to be absolutely sure that it's all safe. Well, I tell him that the bomb squad already did that, and wouldn't it be better for me to check on the second floor anyway, and he says to do it anyway and not argue.

D: Very well. That will be sufficient. Thank you for your time, Mr. Locket.

Interview 3:

Detective: Your name is Ms. Sally Vent, correct?

Vent: Yeah.

D: And you work as a housecleaner at Pickleton Park? How long have you been working for Lord Fletchley?

V: I've been working for Mr. Fletchley 'bout ten years now. And yeah, I'm a maid.

D: At the time of the evacuation, where were you and what were you doing?

V: I was dusting in the tea room. It's a real fine place, teak sideboard, bone china, orchids and all, real fancy curtains too, an' Mr. Fletchley is most particular about it being kept all spic-and-span, so I always make sure to do a good job with the tea room. And Mrs. Fletchley - lovely woman, y'know - holds all her little tea parties up there, what with the nice big window, so I always take care there. Yeah.

D: When did you first think something was wrong?

V: Okay, so I was in the tea room, right, and just dusting away. I thought I heard something kinda funny, but then I remembered that Mr. Windle was coming to fix the faucet, it's been dripping for weeks, a real embarrassment Mr. Fletchley says, so then I thought it must just be that he was messin' around with it, doing something that might've made it a little louder for a moment, so I went on cleaning. Then Mr. Locket comes pounding on all the doors around the gallery at the top of the grand stair, tellin' us there's a bomb and we gotta get out quick.

D: Then, when the house was evacuated, how did you leave?

V: Well, lemme see. I guess I left through the back hallway, prolly woulda been faster to go down the main stair - the grand staircase, y'know, if you've ever been to one of the galas Mrs. Fletchley throws for the village, the one in May. But yeah, anyway, Mr. Fletchley doesn't really like us servants goin' up and down that one, just a matter of habit I guess that I went down the back hallway. I was pretty scared, too, in a real rush, and I tripped over something - some tools, I think it was - outside the music room door, crashed into one o' them fancy flowery vases in the hall. Well the thing positively smashed to pieces an' Mr. Fletchley will be right angry with me I'm sure, be lucky if I can keep my job. Anyhow, I keep going down the hallway 'til I get to the servants' stair, and the bomb was ticking real loud, I was afraid I was about to be blown to pieces-

D: Yes, yes, thank you. Okay. So then what happened after you went downstairs?

V: Well, I went out to the South Lawn, just like everyone else, we went a good ways away from the house, and we were in the rose garden from the house for prolly an hour or two until the police said the house was clear, then we all went back up, I had to do quite a bit of cleaning up on the second floor after all that rush to leave.

D: And do you know when it was discovered that the document was missing?

V: Hmm . . . I think no one really noticed up til that night, see the Fletchleys were havin' a dinner party, an' after the meal - Cook had made it up real nice, though some of it seemed like breakfast food if you ask me - herrings an' eggs an' stuff - but I guess rich folks just like it that way - and Mrs. Fletchley had invited quite a few friends, the Earl of Hickyacket, the Baronet of Upper Swively, a whole bunch of others, I can't really keep track. Yeah. So they had dinner, and then they went up to the second floor to the sitting room to drink coffee, 'cuz you can see the sunset real nice through those windows. I was serving the coffee, since the footman's mum broke her ankle the other week so he'd had to go help her out - she lives over in Boyleham-on-Cabbadge - and Thursday is the butler's day off. When they finished their coffee, Mr. Fletchley wanted to show them his art collection, so he took them into the art collection room - the one with all the big windows, though I guess it was dark by then. Then he wanted to show them the poem, he loves showing it to guests, never stops talkin' 'bout it even if they've seen it a hundred times before. So I'm jus' cleanin' up after the coffee - oh they also had these little cakes, the kind that are filled with jams or chocolate or something, so there were crumbs all over, too - and I hear someone scream. Well, I thought we'd already had quite a bit of excitement for the day, what with the evacuation and all, so I got real worried. Mr. Fletchley starts running around like mad, checkin' under sofa cushions and in cabinets and things, like a kid on a scavenger hunt or something - and he was completely red in the face. The guests couldn't do much but stand there, but Mrs. Fletchley told me what was goin' on and then she went and phoned the police. So yeah.

D: Thank you, Ms. Vent. That's all.

Interview 4:

Detective: Your name is Mr. Mo Grass, correct?

Grass: Tha's me.

D: You work as a gardener and groundskeeper at Pickleton Park?

G: Mhm. I also take care of all them finicky houseplants inside. They've got quite a big place up at the park, ye know, so there are a bunch of us gardeners, but I'm Head Gardener, and Mrs. Fletchley don't trust nobody else with her orchids.

D: I see. So where were you at the time of the evacuation and what were you doing?

G: So I was on the servant stairs, down at the back of the house, and I'd just started goin' from the second floor to the back lawn. You know, the back lawn is always pretty beat up, what with Augie and Guin always playin' croquet and things, always gotta be fixing it up for the garden parties and galas and stuff. But anyway, I'm on my way down to the South Lawn already. Then I hears that Locket fellow hollerin' and stomping about, and I figure that I oughta get out quick.

D: What were you doing on the second floor, and why were you going downstairs?

G: Like I tol' ye, Mrs. Fletchley is most particular about the house plants. So I was in the sitting room, looking after the potted palms, and I hear this strange kind of clicking noise. It sounded like it was coming from the direction of the South Lawn, so I figured it was them sprinklers, see they always make that kind of funny clicking noise when they get stuck, though it did seem kinda louder than normal.

D: Thank you. Since you were the first person out of the house, did you notice anything as you were leaving?

G: Hmm . . . Not that I can think of. Lots of crashing and banging, of course. Sounded like someone knocked over one of the palms at the top of the stairs, too - dumb place to put them, in my opinion, but I don't get to make those choices - and some dirt from the pot came rolling down the stairs. That must've been Mrs. Vent, she's a real clutz. This one time, I was down at the pub, jus' sittin' there and having myself a pint or two, and she comes in, barely in the door before she trips over the speaker. Mr. Windle - he does the sound systems down at the pub whenever there are performances - well he was real upset, on account of Mrs. Vent put her foot right through the thing. So then Scottie - owns the pub, he's an ol' friend of mine, we've gotten along well since our school days-

D: Very good. You said you know Mr. Windle?

G: A bit, yeah. Not well. He's the kinda fellow you run into on the High Street from time to time, but he ain't exactly sociable. Does his handyman things, I s'pose, fixin' this, settin' up for that, sound systems an' all, then goes home and does whatever he does at home. I dunno if he's got a

family. Don't think so. But not an unpleasant bloke, neither, seemed nice enough to me til now.
And at least he did fix the faucet.

D: Alright. Thank you very much sir.

Interview 5:

Detective: Your name is Mr. Albus York, correct?

York: Yes indeed.

D: And you tutor the Fletchley children at Pickleton Park?

Y: That is correct.

D: At the time of the evacuation, where were you?

Y: I was in the school room, teaching the children their Latin lesson.

D: Did you notice anything unusual or concerning before you were alerted by Mr. Locket?

Y: I did not think anything was amiss at the time, but I do recall that I noticed a mysterious sort of clicking or ticking noise, which at the time I thought was one of the wind-up toys that Augie and Guin have been so excited about of late. The sound was coming from the direction of the tea room, so I thought that perhaps one of them had left some wind-up toys running in the tea room after luncheon. I was just scolding them to go pick up their toys when Mr. Locket instructed us to evacuate.

D: What happened after you evacuated?

Y: We all went down to the South Lawn to wait for the all-clear. It was rather odd to see the entire household there. It reminded me a little of my days at Harrow, when everyone would turn out to see the cricket match with Eton.

D: I see. Do you know Mr. Windle?

Y: I am afraid not.

D: Very well, that's all. Thank you, Mr. York.

Inventory of items on second floor

Item, quantity	Location of item(s)	Value of item (£)
Hand-knotted Persian rug, 1	Sitting room	5,200

Floral porcelain jardiniere, 2	Hallway	300
Teak sideboard with custom-carved ornamentation, 1	Tea room	7,000
Depression-glass demitasses, 18	Tea room	20
Silver tea service, 1 (5-piece)	Tea room	8,000
Velvet-upholstered chaise longue, 1	Sitting room	900
Carved-relief fauteuil, 3	Sitting room	3,000
Velvet-upholstered settee	Sitting room	2,100
Glass-potted dendrobia, 3	Tea room	500
Oak trestle table, 1	School room	6,000
Cherry-wood butterfly table, 1	Tea room	5,300
Glass-potted neanthe bella palm, 7	Northeast atelier, tea room, school room	50
Gravicembalo col piano et forte, 1	Music room	17,000
Full-length walnut chronometer, 1	Hallway	10,500
Leather-upholstered bench, 1	Music room	900
Ceramic-potted areca palm, 2	Hallway	200
Antique and rare books, 200	Manuscript room	Individual values vary; total worth of 200,000
Ceramic-potted ponytail palm, 3	Sitting room	75
Ornamented brass candelabrum, 3	Sitting room	400
Pastoral scene, oil paint on canvas, by Giuseppe Spaghetti	Northwest art room	14,000
Porcelain washbasin with polished steel taps, 2	Water closet, northeast atelier	600

Walnut table with carved feet, 1	Music room	3,600
Walnut caquetoire, 2	Music room	1,200
Mother holding child, oil paint on canvas, by Andre-Jacques Baguette, 2	Northwest art room	16,700
Portrait of the first Baron of Pickleton, oil paint on canvas, by Henry Boggledon, 1	Sitting room	8,000
Hand-carved black walnut music rack, 2	Music room	4,700
Oak end tables with embroidered tablecloths, 2	Hallway	1,900
Party scene, oil on canvas, by Werner Putzhaus, 2	Northwest art room	12,000
Shelf with <i>Adenium obesum</i> , 1	Water closet	40
Battle scene, oil on canvas, by Franco Siesta, 1	Northwest art room	13,000
Porcelain toilet, 1	Water closet	400
Square-based standing lamp with hand-painted paper shade, 1	Hallway	800
Elizabethan natal anniversary greeting verse, 1	Manuscript room	10,000
Hand-painted soap dish, 1	Water closet	70
Woman in flower garden, screenprint, by Elizabeth Otterville, 1	Tea room	9,000
Glass-fronted shelving, 1 set	Manuscript room	3,000
Terracotta-potted philodendron, 1	Music room	90
Artisanally-braided footrug, 2	Water closet, school room	200
Familial musical scene, oil on	Music room	18,000

Canvas, by Evangelina Allegretto		
Mahogany and glass display case, 1	Manuscript room	5,000
Wegner wishbone seat, 2	Manuscript room	800
Periwinkle silk-covered wing chair, 4	Tea room	6,100
Maplewood easel, 1	Northeast atelier	200
Bergère, 5	Hallway, northwest art room	1,000
Maple shaker table, 1	Northeast atelier	3,900
Imported Australian dwarf ficus, 2	Balcony	100
3-legged stools, 3	Northeast atelier	4,000
Ladder-back maple chairs, 3	School room	700
Shelving with primers, 1	School room	2,000
Gallery seats, 3	Northwest art room	2,800

Total damages as of 10 am Friday:

£11,200