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Searches
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SEARCHES

Once again TV detectives are searching the suspects' rooms in some old rambling house in England. The Chief Inspector opens the bureau drawers in tiers, pulling out striped ties and folded white shirts; he sniffs every cut-glass bottle; he ruffles through papers on the desk, unclasps a small leather book and turns unerringly to the suspicious entry. In another room his tweed-coated assistant pushes back filmy dresses, and holds up a black high heel, checking for traces of a red garden clay. "Why is there a dead wasp on the nightstand?" he wonders aloud, while his superior calls him across the hall. "Why has someone thrown a glass of brandy into the fireplace?" Red herrings, these questions will never be answered, but the two men exchange knowing looks as the musical score, something in imitation of Elgar, swells in excitement. Downstairs in a library of mullioned windows and walls of gilt-stamped books, the impatient suspects drink sherry and smoke cigarettes, their faces twitching, their eyes shifty or worried or insouciant. Later, alone here in my own room, I wonder if I have any secrets from myself, and I open my top drawer briskly to see who this person is who calls herself by my name. What's this? All these curious hair ornaments, barrettes, tortoise shell combs, silvery elastic bands. Here's a snood; here are chiffon ribbons and satin ribbons; a box full of black bobby pins with blunt plastic tips and another containing thin sharp spidery hairpins; here's an ancient torn hairnet for blonds; here's an unopened package containing a nylon flexible comb tossed on top of jeweled pony-tail holders, a lime-plastic device for creating a French roll, a spongy nylon doughnut for a bun, and more barrettes, some cloisonné, others burnished metal. Oh how unerringly a detective's hands sort through this distracting clutter! The camera zooms in on a small box of "Bronchial-Pastillen" from the Hertenstein Drogerie in Luzern, Switzerland. Throat lozenges or cyanide tablets? I'm as surprised as the audience when I pry open the tin lid to discover a catch of fifty yellowed slips saved from the centers of crisp fortune cookies devoured years ago in forgotten Chinese restaurants. What can it mean? The camera moves in on my expression. Another red herring? Or the real clue to her existence?