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The Two Mrs Grenvilles

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Introduction: A Tale of Wealth, Ambition, and a Fatal Shot

Few novels capture the glittering yet treacherous world of high society as masterfully as Dominick Dunne's **The Two Mrs Grenvilles**. This 1985 novel, a staple of American crime fiction and a gripping family saga, plunges readers into the lives of the Grenvilles—a family whose name evokes old money, privilege, and a carefully maintained public image. At its heart, the story revolves around two women who share the same surname but are worlds apart: Alice Grenville, the imperious matriarch of a Gilded Age fortune, and her daughter-in-law Ann, a former chorus girl who marries into the family. When a scandalous shooting exposes the cracks in their polished world, Dunne weaves a narrative that is equal parts courtroom drama, social commentary, and psychological thriller. For anyone fascinated by the intersection of **true crime**, **American aristocracy**, and the destructive power of social ambition, **The Two Mrs Grenvilles** remains a timeless classic.

The Author Behind the Story: Dominick Dunne's Obsession with High Society

To understand **The Two Mrs Grenvilles**, one must first understand its author. Dominick Dunne was a former Hollywood producer and a keen observer of the wealthy elite. After a personal tragedy—the murder of his daughter—Dunne turned to writing, channeling his insider knowledge of the powerful and the privileged into novels and reportage. His work often blurs the line between fiction and reality, drawing on real-life scandals that captivated the public. For this novel, Dunne was inspired by the infamous 1955 shooting of Billy Woodward by his wife, Ann Woodward, a story that had haunted society pages for decades. Dunne transforms that raw material into a richly imagined tale, one that explores how **old money** guards its gates and how **new money** struggles to break in.

Dunne's own experiences among the upper crust give the novel an authenticity that few writers could achieve. He does not merely describe the opulence of Grenville Manor or the whispered conversations at charity galas; he makes readers feel the weight of tradition, the sting of exclusion, and the desperation that often accompanies the pursuit of status. This nuanced perspective is what elevates **The Two Mrs Grenvilles** from a simple whodunit to a penetrating examination of class dynamics in mid-century America.

Plot Overview: A Marriage Made in Scandal

The story begins with the marriage of Billy Grenville, scion of the Grenville dynasty, to Ann Van Degan, a vivacious young woman who performs in nightclubs under the stage name "Babette." Billy is smitten, but his mother, Alice Grenville, is not. Alice embodies the old aristocracy: cold, calculating, and fiercely protective of the family name. She sees Ann as an opportunist, a gold digger, and—worst of all—an outsider. Despite Alice's disapproval, Billy marries Ann, and the couple moves into a wing of the Grenville estate. From the start, the relationship between the two Mrs Grenvilles is fraught with tension.

Ann tries to adapt, hiring etiquette coaches, redecorating her rooms, and learning the intricate rules of upper-crust social life. Yet no matter how hard she tries, Alice and her circle never fully accept her. The snubs are subtle but devastating: invitations not extended, conversations that halt when she enters a room, and a constant reminder that she is merely tolerated. Meanwhile, Billy's affection for Ann begins to wane under the pressure of his mother's influence and his own drinking. The marriage becomes a battleground, with Billy caught between two powerful women.

Everything comes to a head one fateful night at the Grenville estate when a shot rings out. Billy is found dead, and Ann is holding the gun. She claims she mistook him for an intruder—a burglary scare that had been discussed earlier that evening. The police, the district attorney, and the press descend, turning the tragedy into a sensational story. Alice, desperate to preserve the family name, hires the best lawyers and uses her influence to shape the narrative. But the question lingers: Was it an accident, or was it murder?

The Trial That Never Was

In a clever narrative twist, Dunne sidesteps a traditional courtroom showdown. Instead, he focuses on the behind-closed-doors maneuvering that prevents Ann from ever being tried. The grand jury hears the case, and Ann is never indicted—thanks largely to Alice's power and the family's determination to avoid scandal. This aspect of the plot mirrors the real-life Woodward case, where Ann Woodward was never prosecuted. Dunne uses this silence to explore the corrosive effects of wealth and influence. The lack of a trial does not bring closure; it leaves a wound that festers for years, haunting everyone involved.

Character Study: The Two Mrs Grenvilles

At the center of the novel are its two title characters—Alice and Ann—each representing a different face of American society. Their conflict is the engine that drives the story.

Alice Grenville: The Gatekeeper of Old Money

Alice is a formidable figure. She is elegant, articulate, and utterly ruthless in her defense of the Grenville legacy. To her, class is not just about money; it is about breeding, taste, and an almost religious adherence to tradition. She views Ann as a threat—not because Ann is bad, but because she is unpredictable. Alice's rigidity is both her strength and her flaw. She can orchestrate a cover-up with brilliance, but her inability to show warmth or empathy isolates her from her son and, ultimately, from her own humanity. Dunne paints her not as a villain but as a tragic emblem of a dying aristocracy that cannot adapt.

Ann Grenville: The Aspiring Socialite

Ann, born Babette Van Degan, is a survivor. She grew up poor, clawed her way into show business, and caught the eye of a wealthy heir. She is not a simple gold digger—she genuinely loves Billy at first, and she desperately wants to be accepted. But her past haunts her. The novel shows her efforts to reinvent herself, taking diction lessons, learning which fork to use, and suppressing her natural spontaneity. Underneath the poised exterior, however, lies a woman who is deeply insecure and, as the scandal unfolds, increasingly desperate. Ann's character arc raises uncomfortable questions about assimilation and the price of ambition. Is she a victim of class prejudice, or is she complicit in her own downfall? Dunne leaves that ambiguity intact.

Billy Grenville: The Caught-In-Between Heir

Billy is often overlooked in discussions of **The Two Mrs Grenvilles**, but he is the fulcrum on which the tragedy balances. He loves his wife, but he is emotionally weak and unable to stand up to his domineering mother. His drinking, his infidelities, and his ultimate fate are all consequences of this fractured loyalty. Billy's character serves as a warning about the dangers of wealth without purpose—a man who has everything and yet nothing.

Themes: Class, Ambition, and the Mask of Respectability

The Two Mrs Grenvilles is far more than a thriller. Its themes resonate deeply with readers who are interested

in the sociology of wealth and the psychology of social climbing.

- Old Money vs. New Money: The novel explores the distinction between inherited wealth and earned fortune. Alice's world is built on generations of accumulated privilege, while Ann's wealth is contingent on her marriage. This tension is a classic theme in American literature, but Dunne gives it a fresh, modern edge.
- The Performance of Class: Both women perform a role: Alice plays the gracious hostess while secretly scheming; Ann plays the refined lady while hiding her humble roots. Dunne suggests that high society is a stage where everyone is acting, and those who forget their lines are destroyed.
- The Power of the Family Name: The Grenville name is both a shield and a prison. Alice uses it to protect the family from scandal, but that same protection suffocates truth and justice. The novel asks: Is a reputation worth a life?
- Public Scandals and Private Grief: Dunne, who wrote about the trial of Claus von Bülow and other celebrity cases, shows how media scrutiny distorts human tragedy. The Grenvilles become characters in a story they cannot control, their pain commodified for public consumption.

The 1987 Television Miniseries: A Visual Companion

Four years after the novel's publication, **The Two Mrs Grenvilles** was adapted into a television miniseries starring Ann-Margret as Ann and Claudette Colbert as Alice (in her final screen role). The miniseries remains a faithful and visually sumptuous adaptation, capturing the opulence and tension of Dunne's world. Ann-Margret's performance is particularly praised for conveying Ann's vulnerability and ambition. The miniseries introduces the story to a wider audience and is often cited as a benchmark for prestige television dramas of the era. For fans of the book, the adaptation is a worthwhile companion that brings the characters to life.

Why The Two Mrs Grenvilles Still Matters

Nearly four decades after its publication, **The Two Mrs Grenvilles** continues to attract readers. Its exploration of class divides feels as relevant as ever in an age of growing inequality and public obsession with the ultra-wealthy. The novel's nuanced portrayal of two complex women avoids easy judgments, forcing readers to question their own assumptions about morality, privilege, and justice. Moreover, Dominick Dunne's elegant prose—laced with wit and sorrow—makes for an engrossing read that transcends genre.

Book clubs, fans of true crime, and lovers of family sagas all find something to admire. The novel has been reissued multiple times and remains in print, a testament to its enduring appeal. For those new to Dunne's work, it serves as an excellent entry point into his dark, glamorous universe.

Conclusion: A Legacy of Scandal and Insight

The Two Mrs Grenvilles is a masterfully crafted novel that holds up a mirror to the glittering, often corrupt world of the American elite. Through the tragic story of Alice and Ann Grenville, Dominick Dunne explores the collision of old and new money, the performance of class, and the lengths people will go to protect their secrets. The novel's tension builds slowly, its characters are richly drawn, and its central question—who really killed Billy Grenville?—lingers long

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