

SHERLOCK HOLMES & BLACKMAIL IN BLOOD

by
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ACT ONE

A THEATRE

FOUR THEATRE BOXES. Two each flank either side of a STAGE. On it, an ACTOR IN SILHOUETTE silently emotes. WATSON whispers in the DARK.

WATSON

It can't be! Holmes? Holmes! Wake up! We're not even out of the first act yet!

Lights on a box. WATSON nudges HOLMES, whose eyes are closed.

HOLMES

I am awake, Watson.

WATSON

Your eyes were closed.

HOLMES

The better to listen to the verse speaking. And I can forget Hamlet is being played by the wrong sex

Light on stage. Hamlet is -- IRENE ADLER.

IRENE

O villain, villain, smiling, damned villain!

She returns into silhouette. Lights on a box opposite the stage from Holmes and Watson. A barrel-chested young man, medals adorning his tuxedo, drinks champagne and peers through opera glasses -- the KING OF BOHEMIA.

KING

(German accent)

The detective is here.

He swerves the glasses to the stage.

KING

What a pity. She is still as delicious as ever.

A SNORE emanates from the box floor. The king pours champagne on the UNSEEN SLEEPER -- eliciting a SNUFFLING SNORT.

KING

My dear Colonel, I do not mind you sleeping on the floor of the box. But could you refrain from disrupting this delicious performance by snoring?

The unseen snorer -- COLONEL VON KRAMM -- growls.

VON KRAMM

(drunkenly, German accent)

Hmph! Play-acting. Pretend emotions. Pretend battles, tit-tatting across the stage with their pretend swords. Titty-tat. Titty-tat.

A SWORD thrusts up above the rail of the box, brandished by a uniformed arm.

VON KRAMM

I could give those prancing posies a proper fencing lesson.

KING

Put that away!

The arm and sword go back out of sight. Then the arm reappears wielding a champagne glass.

VON KRAMM

Then give me some more champagne and I'll take my leave, so you can resume drooling over your doxy undisturbed. And your regal little heart can go pitty-pat, pitty-pat.

The king pulls the champagne bottle from an ice bucket nearby and fills the Colonel's extended glass as the lights return to...

...the stage...

...and Irene, a little further along in the play.

IRENE

O what a rogue and peasant slave am I! Is it not...

Irene slides into silhouette and dumb show as the lights come up on the box next to Holmes' box. GODFREY NORTON, eyes glued to opera glasses, sits with his sister, EVA BLACKWELL. Eva wears widow's weeds.

NORTON

...monstrously good, isn't it, Eva? Oh, I say, haven't I been the hog, having my eyes clapped to these all evening and not giving you a go.

He hands her the glasses.

EVA

Well, she is your fiancée, Godfrey.

(looks through glasses)

And a very beautiful one. Even in tights.

NORTON

Especially in tights!

EVA

Godfrey!

NORTON

If she keeps tempting me this way and doesn't set the date soon, I'm liable to turn into a right cad!

EVA

Not you, little brother! And even if you tried, I think Irene could hold you at bay. She's a formidable woman.

NORTON

Glad you approve, Eva. And that you came out this evening. You've been in seclusion too long.

EVA

It was time. And I couldn't have missed Irene's opening..

NORTON

It's good you and she have become such great friends. Some folk think actresses...

EVA

(scans theatre through glasses)

Pure snobbery. I admire her daring! To think, Hamlet! She is a woman unafraid. Look at the crowd that's come to...Oh!

Eva weaves in her seat.

NORTON
Eva! What's wrong?

EVA
I...fear...I'm a bit indisposed. I need some air.

NORTON
Let me help you...

EVA
No! You mustn't miss a moment. I'll be all right.

She rushes off, as the focus returns to...

...the stage

...and Irene's Hamlet.

IRENE
To be or not to be: that is the question:

The question is pondered in silhouetted mummery as lights rise on the last of the four boxes. CHARLES AUGUSTUS MILVERTON hunkers over the rail, opera glasses pushed against his EYEGLASSES. He is an overweight, over-dressed, middle-aged dandy. On the chair beside him flops a BOUQUET OF BEDRAGGLED FLOWERS and an OPEN HALF-EATEN BOX OF CANDY from which he greedily plunders BONBONS and pops into his mouth. He ogles Irene with equal gluttony.

Into his box limps a SMALL, DEFORMED, HUNCHED FIGURE. THE BURN-SCARRED FACE momentarily disguises the fact that this is a woman -- GERTA. She emits a RAGGED COUGH as she creeps toward the seat with the flowers and the candy.

MILVERTON
Ssssh! And don't crush those flowers with your crippled carcass.

GERTA
(remains standing; German accent)
It's not in her dressing room. Ach! Bonbons...

Gerta reaches for one. Milverton smacks her hand.

MILVERTON

...for Miss Adler. Keep your greasy, gnarled claws off them. If it's not backstage, try her house.

GERTA

Tonight?

MILVERTON

Hamlet doesn't die for another two and a half hours. What better opportunity to burgle her house?

He pops another bon-bon in his mouth. Gerta coughs again.

MILVERTON

Sssh!

He contemplates the stage with a malignant smile and...

on stage...

Miss Adler contemplates Yorick's skull.

IRENE

Alas, poor Yorick! I knew him, Horatio; a fellow of infinite jest...

Her performance once more returns to the shadows and in...

Holmes' box... Watson peruses the performance through his opera glasses...

WATSON

I must say she's the prettiest Hamlet I've ever seen.

HOLMES

Another reason she should not be playing it.

WATSON

Don't be such a mossback, Holmes. Have a gander...

HOLMES

My eyesight is in no way deficient, Watson.

WATSON

Only your manners. And your taste. She's really quite marvelous in the role.

HOLMES

If you accept that a woman can adequately probe the psychological nature of a man.

WATSON

What vanity! I can accept it. After all, your great brain has certainly expounded on the psychological perplexities of the opposite sex often enough. And Shakespeare did all right delving into the feminine psyche. So why not the reverse? And in Shakespeare's day, all the women were played by boys.

HOLMES

Yes, thank god, I've been spared the era of "squeaking Cleopatra boys".

WATSON

The gibe and the sneer all you've got? When your profession demands an open mind, I can't fathom your narrowness. Bernhardt's been doing pants parts for years.

HOLMES

Oh...The French...

WATSON

The English too!

Realizing he's raised his voice, he goes sotto voce but with no less irritated passion.

WATSON

We've had actresses doing breeches parts since the Restoration!

HOLMES

Another dubious theatrical era I thankfully escaped.

WATSON

And in opera, music hall, and panto! Where is your willing suspension of disbelief, Holmes?

HOLMES

Difficult to maintain when Hamlet's doublet has protuberances in the wrong place.

WATSON

Oho! Your eyesight is in no way deficient, deducing feminine protuberances.

HOLMES

Not deduction. Observation. One cannot deny the evidence that Miss Adler has been endowed with ample gifts beyond her histrionic flair.

WATSON

(puckishly)

Ample gifts? Well, I'm making some deductions of my own, old fellow.

HOLMES

(ruffled)

Oh, watch the play.

They do, as...

On stage...

Irene, as Hamlet, collapses to the floor.

IRENE

I am dead, Horatio...Report me and my cause aright...

...and she dies. Applause as the lights illuminate the boxes and the occupants stand, even Holmes, albeit belatedly and reluctantly.

NORTON

Brava! Brava!

The lights go down as Irene takes her bows.

BACKSTAGE

Irene, still in costume, throws on a robe and mops her face with a towel as she surveys the disarray of her dressing table. FLORRIE, a young maid (Played by Everybody Else), weeps and fusses over it, straightening things.

FLORRIE

It must've happened when I was in the wings for your quick change, mum. But what bloody blighter...excuse me, mum...would muck up your dressing table?

IRENE

What bloody blighter indeed, Florrie?

Irene's worried face suggests she has an idea. But she forces a smile and makes light of it.

IRENE

But you know us actresses. Rivalries, envy...
(darkly)
...enemies...

FLORRIE

That minx who plays Ophelia! She so jealous of you!

IRENE

Oh, come, Florrie. You've seen her act. Not enough imagination for anything this dangerously creative.

Florrie nods and then offers another suspect.

FLORRIE

Gertrude?

IRENE

(laughs)

No! Come, it's opening night! Standing ovation! A toast! Just you and me!
(pours them CHAMPAGNE)

Before the punters arrive to pounce on us with accolades!

FLORRIE

To you, mum!

They clink glasses and drink. Norton and Eva arrive. Norton embraces Irene.

NORTON

Darling! You were exquisite!

IRENE

Ha! Never trust the opinion of family or your fiancé. I'll take an objective, honest assessment. Eva?

EVA

Forgive me, Irene! I fear I missed a good bit. I became ill.

IRENE

That bad?

EVA

Don't be silly. The air in the theatre was so close, I was overcome. But what I saw was vibrant. Brilliant. And I shall be back to see all of it many more times. I'm so proud of you, my dear. So courageous!

They hug. Irene clears some flowers off a chair and hands them to Florrie.

IRENE

Here, Florrie, take these away. Sit, Eva.

Eva does and Florrie exits with the flowers.

EVA

I heard some critics talking in the lobby. Expect good notices.

IRENE

Oh, I never read notices.

Holmes and Watson arrive.

HOLMES

I have found there are two kinds of artists. Those who read their notices and those who say they don't, but do.

IRENE

I find the Strand Magazine much more entertaining than fawning critics, Mr. Holmes. I recognize you from the illustrations.

HOLMES

As overwrought as the prose, I fear.

WATSON

Which he says he doesn't read, but does.

HOLMES

(introducing Watson)

My fawning critic, Dr. Watson.

IRENE

Doctor, I enjoy your work so much.

WATSON

And I yours, miss. A magnificent performance. I can't recall when we last had such a pleasurable evening in the theatre.

IRENE

Ah, and does the doctor speak for you, Mr. Holmes?

HOLMES

Has been for years. You read the Strand.

IRENE

Well then, an opportunity to speak for yourself, sir.

HOLMES

An unique interpretation.

IRENE

From such a keen observer as yourself, I shall leave it there and take your deduction as a compliment.

WATSON

I'll be more unabashed and reiterate that it was stunning, Miss Adler. Absolutely stunning. And we're ever so grateful for your thoughtful generosity in sending us tickets.

IRENE

Tickets?

HOLMES

Ah!

He cocks a knowing eyebrow at Watson.

IRENE

I sent no tickets, sir.

Watson withers under Holmes' smug smile.

WATSON

That's what Holmes said, but this lovely note that came with them...

He plucks a note from his waistcoat. Irene reads it.

IRENE

Lovely indeed. But a forgery, I fear. It is not my stationary. And certainly not my hand. And despite its florid style, I would venture to say it isn't even a woman's hand.

WATSON

Why, that's just what...

IRENE

Mr. Holmes said?

Holmes smiles, warming to her.

HOLMES

I see a good actress needs strong powers of observation as well.

(to Watson)

Yes, sorry, old boy. Definitely a man's hand. The syntax and scripting of some of the letters has a continental flair. Germanic.

IRENE

Yes, Germanic, my guess.

HOLMES

Oh, I never guess.

WATSON

Well, perhaps the management...

IRENE

Oh, Mr. McDougal, being an exemplary model of Scottish frugality, would never hand out free tickets. Seems someone is creating a mystery for your friend, Mr. Holmes.

HOLMES

Must think your yarns in the Strand have been falling off, Watson.

WATSON

Well, if we're supposed to be tweaked by this prank, it seems the joke's on him and the evening turned out rather well for us.

IRENE

Indeed, I'm delighted you came. But forgive me. Allow me to introduce you to my fiancé, Godfrey Norton.

NORTON

A pleasure.

Handshakes all round.

IRENE

And my soon-to-be dear sister-in-law, Lady Blackwell.

WATSON

Charmed, Lady Blackwell.

HOLMES

Madam.

Milverton oozes backstage, flowers tucked under his arm. The candy box all but depleted.

Noticing this, Milverton snares one last bon-bon and thrusts the near-empty box at the returning Florrie.

MILVERTON

Have some candy, girl.

Straightening his tie and patting his pomaded hair, he grips the flowers, ready to press forward and present them.

HOLMES

Time to take our leave, Watson. I'm sure Miss Adler has many more admirers to..

MILVERTON

Yes, indeed!

Milverton pushes his way through. Holmes regards him with repugnance. Eva trembles.

MILVERTON

Congratulations, Miss Adler! Beerbohm Tree and Forbes-Robertson were indeed melancholy Danes in comparison to yours.

IRENE

Well, sir, melancholy is the point. I certainly hope I wasn't cheery.

MILVERTON

No, Dear Lady. Your gloom surpassed even Kean!

IRENE

You'd have been in your infancy to have seen Kean, sir. Hardly a discerning critic at such a tender age.

Milverton's smile slightly crumples, piqued but not put off by Irene's light mockery, he emits a feeble laugh.

HOLMES

Watson, look to the lady!

Eva swoons. Watson catches her as she topples off the chair

WATSON

Lady Blackwell!

Eva! To the divan, Doctor!

NORTON

He sweeps costumes and other debris from it and they lay Eva on it. Concerned, Irene takes Milverton's proffered flowers, shoving him out.

IRENE

Excuse me, sir! Thank you for coming and your kind words, but I must see to my friend.

She turns to Eva. And Milverton is left, meeting Holmes' icy glare. Milverton curtly tips his hat and wheels off. Holmes drifts over to the disarray on the dressing table, studying it.

Florrie!

IRENE

Florrie, a chocolate in her mouth, rushes to her mistress's call, nearly bumping into Milverton who snatches the candy box back and pops another bon-bon down his gullet on his way out.

Yes, mum?

FLORRIE

IRENE

My regrets to any well-wishers outside. Beg forgiveness, but tell them I am exhausted.

Florrie curtsies and exits. Irene notices Holmes examining her dressing table. While Watson checks Eva's pulse and Norton pours her some water, Irene re-directs Holmes' curiosity.

IRENE

A little artistic temperament, I fear. I muffed a bit in act four, scene five.

HOLMES

I did not notice.

IRENE

I must be good to have escaped your scrutiny. Perhaps, I should try my hand at crime.

WATSON

Is there any other way I can be of assistance, Lady Blackwell?