

THE HEART OF MAN



A Chamber Play in One Act by
D. A. DORWART



Adapted from the Writings of
H. H. MUNRO (SAKI)

A dramatic adaptation of Saki stories, a chamber play sparkling with irony and wit. Under its dazzle and satire looms a wisdom and sadness born of a painfully acute sensibility to the subtle and delicate shadings at the heart of human feeling.

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Scene One

The setting is the drawing room of the moderately well-to-do rural estate known as Sappelton House. The room is suggested by two sofas stage right and left. They are in fact large wooden benches with arms and arched backs covered with richly textured, fringed spreads and throw pillows. In front of the left sofa is a low tray table. Upstage center is a large gilt picture frame, hanging as if over a fireplace mantle. Stage right is the frame of large white French window (doors). Through the opening can be seen the spacious gardens and grounds which have almost made up their mind to be a park. MUSIC.

At rise the room is unoccupied. Warm, late-afternoon sunlight streams in through the windows.

VERA (*entering stage left*). Won't you please come this way, Mr. Nuttel.

NORMAN (*offstage*). Yes. Of course. Thank you.

Vera is a very self-possessed young woman. After entering, she steps back to permit Norman to enter. He is in his mid-forties and is a fastidiously dressed gentleman of delicate constitution and anxious nature. He carries a hat and cane.

VERA. My aunt will be down presently. She's seeing to some last-minute preparations. In the meantime, you must try and put up with me, I'm afraid.

NORMAN. No doubt your aunt has placed me in the ablest of hands. Miss... Sappelton?

VERA (*accepting the flattery*). My name is Vera. Do, please. Have a seat, won't you.

Vera directs Norman to the stage right sofa, where he remains standing until she has seated herself on the sofa opposite him. Norman, whose back is now to the French window, places his cane to the side and his hat atop the sofa. There is a brief pause in which he grows slightly uncomfortable. He damps his upper lip with a lace handkerchief.

VERA. You are on holiday, I take it?

NORMAN. Yes. Yes, in a manner of speaking. More a sabbatical really.

VERA. We are a sleepy little village.

NORMAN. The landscape is certainly charming. The orchards and meadows, and the river wending along the valley. Something so wonderfully languorous about it all.

VERA (*apologetically sighing*). Nothing ever really happens here. Seedtime and harvest. An occasional outbreak of influenza. Or a mildly destructive thunderstorm. That is all we have to modify the monotony of our existence. Rather dreary, I fear.

NORMAN. On the contrary. I find it soothing. And, to be honest, it shall suit me perfectly. I'm here for a rest. (*Pause*) My...nerves.

Vera affirms sympathetically. After she feels they have had sufficient silent communion, she continues.

VERA. Do you know many of the people here about?

NORMAN. Not a soul. This is my first visit to the shire.

VERA. Oh, I see. Well, then let us hope it is an agreeable one.

NORMAN. My sister, you see, was staying here at the rectory – some four years ago.

VERA. In the old verger's lodge? (*Norman nods affirmatively.*) On holiday?

NORMAN. She was making a study of rural churches. Architecture is one of her hobbies. A passion more like. It was she who gave me letters of introduction. Made me promise not – as she put it – to mope about and bury myself in this rural retreat. Although, I must confide that the prospect of successive visits to a series of total strangers appears terribly...well...taxing.

VERA. You know practically nothing about my aunt, I take it then?

NORMAN. No. No, only her address and her name.

There is a brief pause before Vera speaks, more to herself than to Norman.

VERA. Her great tragedy happened three years ago. Yes, that would be since your sister's time.

NORMAN. Her tragedy?

VERA. You may wonder why we keep that window open on an autumn afternoon.

Norman turns around in the direction of the French window behind him. The light from the setting sun strikes his face straight on, while beginning to cast shadows throughout the room.

NORMAN. It is unseasonably warm for so late in the year. But has the window something to do with –

VERA. Out through that window, three years ago to a day, her husband and her younger brother went off for their day's shooting. They never came back. In crossing the moor to their favorite shooting ground, they were both engulfed in a treacherous bog.

NORMAN. Oh, dear. I...am...so –

VERA. It had been that dreadfully wet summer, you know. Rain, endless rain. (*Norman nods vaguely.*) Places that were safe in other years gave way suddenly. Without warning. Their bodies were never recovered. That was the most horrible part of it. (*Vera's voice loses its self-possessed note and falters. Norman is deeply distressed over her pain.*) Poor Aunt. She thinks that they will come back some day. They and little Bertie, the spaniel that was lost with them, and walk in at the window just as they used to do. That is why the window is kept open every evening till it is quite dusk.

Vera rises and slowly crosses stage right to a spot just short of the window as if beckoned by some outside force. While she elaborates on the story, she becomes less aware of Norman's presence and more involved in the vision she conjures. Norman in turn grows more and more tense as he becomes captive to her story and mesmerized by her every mood and gesture.

VERA (*cont'd.*). Poor, dear aunt. She has often told me how they went out, her husband with his white mackintosh over his arm. And Ronnie, her brother, singing, 'Bertie, why do you bound?' (*She laughs lightly at this reminiscence and turns to Norman. Not knowing what to do, he wanly smiles.*) As he always did to tease her, because she said it got on her nerves. (*Vera turns back to the window, the setting sun now strongly reflecting in her face and creating pockets of eerie shadows in the room.*) Do you know, sometimes on still, quiet evenings like this, I almost have a feeling that they will walk in through this window.

There is total silence. All of a sudden Mrs. Sappelton explodes into the room from stage left, sweeping toward Norman and extending her hand. She is a little too heavily made up and perhaps slightly tipsy. Although she works extremely hard at restraining herself, she is given to periodic outbursts. Norman rises stiffly, and Vera returns to the stage left sofa.

MRS. SAPPELTON (*effusively*). Mr. Nuttel. Mr. Nuttel. My deepest apologizes. I was...with cook seeing to some last-minute details. It's not often we have dinner guests these days. Isolated the way we are out here. I do hope Vera has been seeing to you?

NORMAN. She has been perfectly...engaging.

MRS. SAPPELTON. Extolling the virtues of the urban life no doubt. Its culture, its sophistication – its...laissez-faire attitudes. My niece is all too happy to tell you she is au courant. A woman of today. A woman of the 'New Era.' Whereas we. Well, we – We are a family of yesterday. (*Vera begins to speak but is interrupted.*) 'We may only be a quarter of a mile from the village, but we are a quarter century from the times.'

She crosses to the French window. Norman remains standing.

MRS. SAPPELTON (*cont'd.*). Tea will be arriving momentarily. I hope you don't mind the open window.

NORMAN. The grounds are charming, but the evening dampness –

MRS. SAPPELTON. My husband and brother will be home directly from shooting, and they always come in this way. (*Norman shoots a glance to Vera, who having seated herself on the sofa, acknowledges the pathetic nature of her aunt. Mrs. Sappelton crosses to the left sofa.*) They've been out for snipe in the marshes today, so they'll make a fine mess over my poor carpets. So like you men folk, isn't it? (*Norman is at a loss for words and rather weakly smiles in resignation.*) But I do draw the line with little Bertie. Our spaniel. The poor creature gets absolutely soaked. And I refuse to have him in until he's quite dry. (*Mrs. Sappelton, who has remained oblivious of Norman's standing, has seated herself on the sofa beside Vera.*) The shooting has not been particularly good this season. My husband says the scarcity of birds is due to all that rain we've been having. Drowns the nests, I suspect. (*Norman finds this cheerful rattling on most horrible. He looks to Vera for some assistance, but none is forthcoming. Despite her chatter, Mrs. Sappelton gives Norman only a fragment of her attention as her eyes constantly stray to the open window.*) Of course, Ronnie –

MRS. SAPPELTON (*cont'd.*). Do you know Ronnie? Oh, silly me. Of course, you don't. My little brother Ronnie says with the bog so drenched, the prospects for the ducks this winter is especially good. Says he'll have to motor down from London more often. Do you think so, Mr. Nuttel?

NORMAN. Pardon?

MRS. SAPPELTON. Ducks!

NORMAN. What?!

MRS. SAPPELTON. Will we have a good duck season?

NORMAN. I...uh...

MRS. SAPPELTON. You do hunt, Mr. Nuttel?

NORMAN. Uh, my doctors agreed in ordering me complete rest, you see.

MRS. SAPPLETON. Ah, yes, your letter did mention something –

NORMAN. Anything in the nature of violent physical exercise –

MRS. SAPPLETON. Hunting, then –

NORMAN. Is strictly forbidden, I'm afraid.

MRS. SAPPLETON (*distractedly*). Yes. I see. Pity. Pity. My men so enjoy a good hunt.

Mrs. Sappelton has once again turned her attention toward the window and is searching the horizon beyond.

NORMAN. I must avoid any mental excitement. In fact, I was just telling your niece–

MRS. SAPPLETON (*turning back to Norman*). I'm very partial to duck myself. How about you?

NORMAN. Oh. Well. Umm. On the matter of diet my doctors are not in such agreement.

MRS. SAPPLETON (*trying to be interested*). No?

NORMAN. At first, they prescribed food rich in iron –

MRS. SAPPLETON. Yes.

NORMAN. But alas, that seemed to produce little result.

MRS. SAPPLETON (*stifling another yawn*). I see, ah, yes.

NORMAN. But one grows accustomed to an abridged existence. I –

MRS. SAPPLETON (*jumping up and crossing to the window*). Ah ha! Here they are. The prodigals. What did I tell you? Just in time for tea.

Norman turns towards Vera with a look to convey sympathetic comprehension. However, she is staring out through the open window with dazed horror in her eyes as she slowly rises. Norman swings round in his seat and looks in the same direction. The sun, which is now extremely low on the horizon, lights up their faces from below and casts unreal and menacing shadows about the room. Norman is momentarily transfixed by the approach of the men, whose shadows dance across Norman's terrified face. Then a hoarse voice offstage right chants out.

RONNIE and MR. SAPPLETON (*alternately singing and then together*).

BERTIE, WHY DO YOU BOUND? I SAY,
BERTIE, WHAT HAVE YOU FOUND?
ARE THERE RABBITS IN YOUR SIGHT?
WILL THE RAVENS FEAST TONIGHT?
OH, BERTIE, WHY DO YOU DANCE?
GODSAKES, BERTIE, GIVE THEM A CHANCE.

Ronnie and Mr. Sappelton materialize stage right. Their appearance triggers Norman, who grabs wildly at his cane and hat and catapults off the sofa, falling prostrate on the floor. He scrambles up and dashes off left. Vera and Mrs. Sappelton drift left following his departure. Mr. Sappelton and Ronnie enter through the French window. Mr. Sappelton gives his gun to Ronnie, who places it to the side. Vera takes the white mackintosh from her uncle and exits left. Mrs. Sappelton crosses to her husband, who leans over and kisses her cheek.

MR. SAPPLETON. Here we are my dear. Fairly muddy, but most of it's dry.

RONNIE. Who was that who bolted out as we came up?

MRS. SAPPLETON. A most extraordinary man. A Mr. Nuttel.

MR. SAPPLETON. Nuttel? Nuttel?

MRS. SAPPLETON. Our dinner guest.

MR. SAPPLETON. Oh, yes. Yes, of course.

MRS. SAPPLETON. He could only talk about his illness. Terribly, terribly preoccupied.

Vera enters carrying the afternoon tea tray and places it on the table in front of the sofa.

RONNIE (*chuckling*). Not inclined to tea, I take it then?

Mr. Sappelton sits on sofa left and Ronnie on the stage right one. Mrs. Sappelton sits by her husband and begins pouring tea.

MRS. SAPPLETON. Dashed off without so much as a good-bye, mind you –

MR. SAPPLETON. Really?

MRS. SAPPLETON. – or any apology. I'm not sure whether to be grateful or to take offense.

VERA. I expect it was the spaniel. He told me he had a horror of dogs. Biscuit?

Vera, who has remained standing, assists by passing the tea biscuits, first to her uncle and then to Ronnie.

MR. SAPPLETON. Our Bertie? Thank you, love.

VERA. Mr. Nuttel told me how he was once hunted into a cemetery somewhere on the banks of the Ganges by a pack of pariah dogs. The poor man had to spend the entire night in a newly dug grave with the rabid creatures snarling and snapping and foaming just above him. Biscuit?

Vera offers the plate to Ronnie.

MR. SAPPLETON. Good Lord!

RONNIE (*taking a biscuit*). How absolutely awful. Ta.

Mrs. Sappelton continues pouring the tea.

MRS. SAPPLETON. Oh, yes. But still...to just...well, up and leave.

VERA. Really, Aunt! You must try to be more sympathetic. I should think such an experience enough to make anyone lose his nerve.

Vera stands upstage of the group. A faint smile crosses her face. She takes a bite of a biscuit as the lights fade. MUSIC. In the blackout Mrs. Sappelton removes the tea paraphernalia and tray table. Ronnie and Mr. Sappelton reset the sofas as the French window and picture frame fly out to be replaced by a street lamp and additional trees, whose leaves and branches cast a laced pattern of shade beneath them. The

men remove the pillows and spreads from the sofas to reveal two wooden park benches, silvered from age.

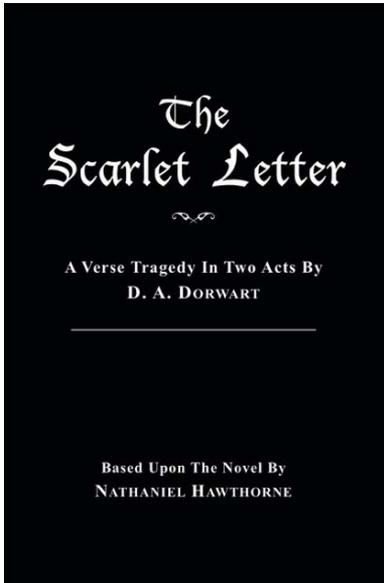
Scene Two

We are now in Hyde Park, London, several years later. A spot comes up on Vera as she enters in a hat and coat and stands downstage.

VERA (*to the audience*). The other day, when I was killing time and making bad resolutions for the New Year, it occurred to me that I would like to be a poet. The chief qualification, I understand, is that you must be born. Well, I hunted up my birth certificate and found that I was all right on that score. Then I got to work on a ‘Hymn to the New Year.’ That struck me as having possibilities. It would stimulate the imagination and take people out of their narrow, humdrum selves. No one has ever called me narrow or humdrum. I felt rather worked up about the whole thing, but the editors I contacted were unanimous in leaving it alone. They said the thing had been done before and done worse, and that the market these days for that sort of work was extremely limited.

Vera moves further stage left.

VERA (*cont’d.*). It was just on top of this discouragement that my friend Suzette asked me to write something in her album – something perhaps a little risqué. Now Suzette is a member of a Women’s Something or other – I never can remember – and she gave me a pamphlet to leave at the house of a doubtful voter and some fruit for a woman who was suffering from a virus. I thought it much cleverer to give the fruit to the former and the political literature to the sick woman. It seems the leaflet was addressed ‘To Those About to Wobble.’ I wasn’t responsible for the title. Anyway, the woman never recovered. But the voter, well, was completely won over by the fruit. I think that should have balanced matters. But Suzette was quite absurdly annoyed. Imagine, she called it bribery and said that I might have compromised the candidate she was supporting, and we got quite heated in arguing the matter. My temper began to slip its moorings. I look rather nice when I lose my temper. Finally, Suzette declared I shouldn’t write anything in her book, and I said I wouldn’t write anything in her nasty book. So, there wasn’t a very wide point of difference between us after all. (*Pause*) By the way, when you asked me to dine with you Friday, I said I was dining with Suzette. Well, I’m not. I’m dining with you. (*She starts to leave but turns back.*) Perhaps I have more talent for electioneering than for poetry.



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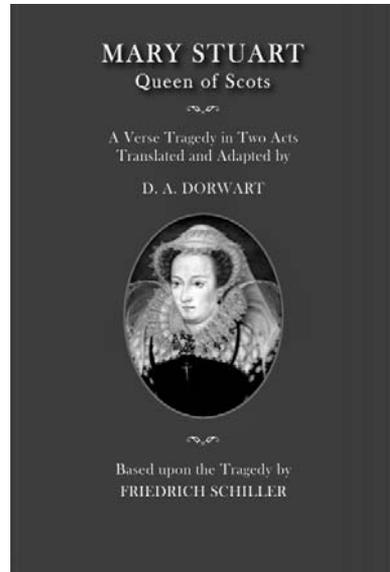
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