

"WIT AND MOONLIGHT"

A large room -- part living room; part bedroom suite; part plaza -- constructed the reality of dreams as much as in the solidness of the furniture filling it. A large, plush bed with a number of pillows and blankets on it, dominates one side. A writing desk awash with books and papers butts up against the back of a vanity upon which rests perfumes, puffs, fans and a manuscript. Bookcases line the walls. Other pieces of furniture, such as a worn fainting couch along with stacks of books and manuscripts are scattered about the room.

Moonlight invades the room like waterfall.

SHAW, seated at the writing desk, scribbles furiously on a letter.

SHAW

Twenty-four June 1892. Twenty-nine Fitzroy Square, West.  
Dear Miss Terry, I went to the Lyric Club today, and listened to your friend Miss Gambogi.

ELLEN, enters wearing a dressing gown. She does not address Shaw directly.

ELLEN

Twenty-nine June 1892. I am exceedingly obliged to you for troubling yourself so much about my little friend.

She sits at the vanity and begins brushing her hair and applying make-up. Shaw rises and paces around the room.

SHAW

My verdict briefly is that as a drawing-room singer Miss Gambogi is no better than many others; and I would not walk a hundred yards to hear her sing again. Do you know D'Oyly Carte or Mrs D'Oyly Carte, who was Miss Lenoir? They always have several companies touring in a small way with their Savoy repertory; and they are the only people in the comic opera line in London, as far as I know, with whom Miss Gambogi's "niceness" would not be a disadvantage.

ELLEN

Four July 1892. And to think I thought you huffy! It's mostest kind to write to me so about my young friend, and I'll follow up the clue about Mr. D'Oyly Cart's provincial tours.

SHAW

(Overlapping)

I really did not mean to be stiff. I was presuming on the chance of your never having heard of me; but I was also running a considerable risk of your writing something of this kind to my editor: -- "Sir: I wrote to you to ask you a trifling favor. In return, you have exposed me to a communication from the vilest of mankind, an enemy of religion and society, a shameless spouter of sedition in the streets, a wretch whose opinions about the womanliness which is the glory of my sex have made hardened profligates blush, a champion of the monster Ibsen, and one whom, to crown all, Mr Irving held up to public execration at a banquet in Liverpool for calling me an ignoramus. Henceforth, Mr Yates, we are strangers. I am, Sir, your obedient servant, Ellen Terry." Lots of people take that view of me, and go out of their way to print it. And from their point of view, it is perfectly true --

ELLEN

(Interrupting)

Did you call me an "ignoramus?"

She smiles.

SHAW

-- all except the calling you an ignoramus.

Shaw goes to a bookshelf;  
searches for and retrieves a  
small volume. He places it  
delicately on the vanity.

ELLEN

Well, I forgive you for speaking the truth. No more. You have no time, and I very little. Thank you. Thank you. Thank you for all your beautifulness. If you could ask me to do a little thing for you some day, I would do it, or I'd try to. Yours sincerely, Ellen Terry.

SHAW

The word ignoramus occurs in the book, *The Quintessence of Ibsenism*, which I send you herewith.

Ellen picks up the small book; she gently flips through a few pages, savouring a moment on a page here and there while moving around the room. Eventually, she comes to rest on the fainting couch, clutches the book to her chest, reclines and closes her eyes as if in a delightful dream.

SHAW (CONT'D)

When I wrote that book I had a terrible grudge against you. It arose in this way. One day I went into an afternoon performance, and found a poor ungifted, dowdy, charmless young woman struggling pathetically with Ibsen's *Lady from the Sea*. I thanked my stars that I was not a dramatic critic, and had not to go home and tell her that after all her study and toil she had done far more harm than good. That was the first act of my little experience. Act two was another visit to another theatre.

He turns toward Ellen.

SHAW (CONT'D)

There I found the woman who ought to have played the Lady from the Sea. -- the woman with all the nameless charm, all the skill, all the force, in a word, all the genius -- playing -- guess what? Nance Oldfield. Why, a charade the whole artistic weight of which would not have taxed the strength of the top joint of her little finger. And the silly public delightedly applauding. I was furious. If I had been a god, and had created her powers for her, I should have interrupted the performance with thunder, and asked in a fearful voice why she was wasting the sacred fire of which I had made her trustee. But I knew that she had made her powers for herself, and could be called to account by nobody for the use she had made of them. So I sat helpless and went off in impotent rage. Since then I have never heard Nance Oldfield praised without vowing vengeance. And you, Nance Oldfield, what have you done to set against the records of these hardly used ones? Why (say you) created my incomparable self, sir. True, irresistible Ellen, quite true. That silences me. Farewell.

Music, Schubert's *ELLEN'S GESANG III (LIED DES GEFANGENEN JÄGERS)*, softly bounces through the room. The warm pink hue of dawn floods through the window.

SHAW (CONT'D)

One November 1895. My Dear Miss Terry, to my great exasperation I hear that you are going to play Madame Sans Gêne. And I have just finished a beautiful little one-act play for Napoleon and a strange lady -- a strange lady who will be murdered by someone else whilst you are nonsensically pretending to play a washer-woman.

ELLEN

If you give Napoleon and that Strange Lady (Lord, how attractively tingling it sounds!) to anyone but me I'll -- write to you every day! (I always feel inclined that way.) Ah, but be kind, and let me know that "lady."

SHAW

Very well: here is the Strange lady for you, by book post.

Shaw places the manuscript with small note firmly down near Ellen.

SHAW (CONT'D)

It is of no use now that it is written, because nobody can act it. This is not one of my great plays, you must know: it is only a display of my knowledge of stage tricks -- a commercial traveler's sample. You would like my *Candida* much better; but I never let people read that: I always read it to them. They can be heard sobbing three streets off. G. Bernard Shaw.

ELLEN

(Reading the note attached to the manuscript.)

Dear Madam, My attention has been called to certain marginal notes made by you upon a copy of the *Chicago Tribune* dated the 25th. I note a statement, apparently referring to my Napoleonic play, that "H.I. quite loves it, and will do it finely." Now I have to observe on this, first, that if the matter is one of love, the only initials I care for are not H.I., but E.T.; and second, that if Henry Irving, or H.I., has any serious intentions I should like to know whether they are honorable or not. But it is all nonsense: you are only playing with me. It will go to that beautiful Mrs. Patrick Campbell, who won my heart long ago. She shall play the *Strange Lady*. Yes, it shall be so. Farewell, faithless Ellen.

Ellen looks at Shaw; then begins to read the manuscript.

SHAW

Six April 1896. There is a song of Schubert's in which the gentleman wants "to sun himself in Ellen's eyes." That is what I am going to do for a while this evening in my Easter cottage. The weather has frowned; but fortune has smiled. Ten splendid things have happened: to wit, one, a letter from Ellen Terry; two, a cheque for my *Chicago* royalties, swollen by the dollars of the thousands of people who were turned away from the doors where Ellen was acting and had to go to Arms and the Man *faute de mieux*; three, a letter from Ellen Terry.

Ellen exits quickly.

SHAW (CONT'D)

Four, the rolling away of the clouds from the difficult second act of my new play, leaving the view clear and triumphant right on to the curtain; five, a letter from Ellen Terry; six, a beautiful sunset ride over the hills and far away, thinking of Ellen Terry; seven, a letter from Ellen Terry; eight, a letter from Ellen Terry; nine, a letter from Ellen Terry; ten, a letter from Ellen Ellen Ellen Ellen Ellen Ellen Ellen Eleanor Ellenest Terry. Who has told you that Mrs. Pat is to have my Strange Lady? He lies in his throat whoever he is. And yet I suspect Henry Irving -- oh, I suspect him. You see the devil can quote Shakespear for his own purpose.

The music FADES OUT as Ellen enters.

ELLEN

H.I. came here last night and he will agree to produce your Napoleonad, The Man of Destiny, next year, or forfeit rights, if that must be an imperative condition.

SHAW

He will not produce it for your sake: no man ever does anything for a woman's sake: from our birth to our death we are women's babies, always wanting something from them, never giving them anything except something to keep for us. Has he ever loved you for the millionth fraction of a moment? If so, for that be all his sins forgiven unto him. I do not know whether women ever love. I rather doubt it: they pity a man, mother him, delight in making him love them; but I always suspect that their tenderness is deepened by their remorse for being unable to love him. Man's one gift is that at his best he can love -- not constantly, nor faithfully, nor often, nor for long, -- but for a moment - a few minutes perhaps out of years.

ELLEN

Meanwhile go to Henry about that confounded duck of a play, or write him a line please, for a line clinches matters between man and man.

ELLEN sinks to the couch.

SHAW

My present difficulty is that I want to reincarnate Candida -- to write another Candida play for YOU. Heaven knows how many plays I shall have to write before I earn one that belongs of divine right to you. Some day, when you have two hours to spare, you must let me read Candida to you. You will find me a disagreeably cruel-looking, middle-aged Irishman; but that cannot be helped.

ELLEN

Your lovely letters! My star has stopped dancing, and for a while I am down -- down. They came to do my eyes and in a few days I'm to be blinded for a fortnight. Just as I want a holiday and to look at the grass, and the Sea! And to finish studying Imogen. Shakespere. With justice you might scream out against a woman of my age playing the parts I do. I only do it to please H.I. and because I "draw." We have had a good long success in it. "Fashionable crazes" don't last for over twenty years. You should discontinue "going" on so against Shakespeare. You'll see whether "nobody wants Shakespeare in September." Cease your fuming about S. Goodbye. Farewell and don't write to me again. (Yes, do, in September). E.T.

The lights transition. A dusty late afternoon.

SHAW

There are no clocks and no calendars here but surely it must be September by this time. If not, keep this letter until it is, and then read it. The negotiations concerning The Man of Destiny did not get very far. I proposed conditions to Sir H.I. Sir H.I. declined the mental effort of bothering about my conditions, and proposed exactly what I barred. If you are really bent on playing that ridiculous washerwoman, there is an end of The Man of Destiny, since H.I cannot play two Napoleons, mine and Sardou's, on top of one another.

OFFSTAGE VOICES: voices calling for Shaw

SHAW (CONT'D)

Bother: they insist on my stopping writing and cycling off to Ipswich with them. I don't want to go to Ipswich.

ELLEN

Dear Gentleman, I was very glad to see a letter from you to me, and I "kept it" till the last! I wish I could write neatly, tidily like you. Can't. What a muddle about this little play. I wish you'd just give it to him to do what he likes with it. He'll play it quick enough, never fear.

SHAW

Do you know I should not mind giving him the play to do as he likes with if that were practically possible, but it isn't -- at least, not on terms that I could propose and he accept.

ELLEN

The part of Imogen is not yet well fixed in my memory; and it is so difficult to get the words. The words! Panic will possess me the first moment each morning until I know those words.

SHAW

It is down right maddening to think of your slaving over Imogen. Of course you can't remember it: who could? Well, that is because Shakespear is as dead dramatically as a doornail. When you have finished Imogen, finish with Shakespear. Time flies; and you must act something before you die.

ELLEN

I wish Cymbeline were "cut", and I could read Candida. Drive down to Hampton court some Saturday or Sunday and read it to me. Of course you are busy, but never mind. Let things slide and come before the fine warm days are fled. You'll like reading me you own work and I shall like hearing it. At least I suppose I shall! Although I fear mine are very dull wits, and second times of reading are best.

SHAW

We have been joined by an Irish millionairess [named Charlotte] who has had cleverness and character enough to decline the station of life -- "great catch for somebody" -- to which it please God to call her, and whom we have incorporated into our Fabian family with great success. I am going to refresh my heart by falling in love with her. I love falling in love -- but, mind, only with her, not with the million; so someone else must marry her if she can stand him after me.

ELLEN

Very well then I'll go on with my rehearsalling and you go on whilst holidaying with your "falling in love."

SHAW

Farewell, then, until after Cymbeline, oh divine quintessential Ellen of the wise heart: we shall meet at Philippi, or in the Elysian fields or where you will. G.B.S.

ELLEN

Farewell.

TRAINS SOUNDS are heard. The lights transition -- high noon.

ELLEN (CONT'D)

Missfire! That's the word. That's what I am doing as I get older. And I shall have to give it up.

SHAW

Missfires belong to the elementary stage of "making points." When you were a small baby, a very small baby, long before you could be trusted by yourself and were born, you had no bones. Then little stars and points of love began to appear in you like the specks of butter in churned milk. These points multiplied and grew until they all integrated into a complete little skeleton, upon which Ellen Terry was built. Now that is how you become an actress. At first you try to make a few points and don't know how to make them. Then you do know how to make them and you think of a few more. When they missfire, you are greatly put out. But finally the points all integrate into one continuous point, which is the whole part itself.

Take your own Imogen as if it were *the* Imogen and play it for all you are worth; and don't relax your determination or look back disconcertedly on a missfire in this or that line until the last word is out of your mouth and the curtain down. Then go home to bed, and sleep comfortably with your part of the work done.

ELLEN

You have become a habit with me, Sir, and each morning before breakfast I take you, like a dear pill. The only thing that distresses me (though it joys me too) is that you write back again quick -- like thought -- you kind Dear, when you ought not to waste yourself upon unconsidered trifles. Ah, cracked and stupid fool to take up this man's time because he's good to you. I think I'd rather never meet you -- in the flesh.

SHAW

Very well, you shan't meet me in the flesh if you'd rather not. There is something deeply touching in that. Did you never meet a man who could bear meeting and knowing? Perhaps you're right: Oscar Wilde said of me: "An excellent man: he has no enemies; and none of his friends like him."

ELLEN

Don't misunderstand my words, and call me up in your mind's eye as a sweetly pathetic picture who "Never met a man worth meeting and knowing"! that's not so. But I must hear your plays. Mayn't I have *Candida*? Do you think I'll run away with her?

SHAW

*Candida* doesn't matter. I begin to think it an overrated play, especially in comparison to the one I have just begun. You simply couldn't read it: the first scene would bore you to death and you would never take it up again. Unless I read it to you, you must wait until it is produced, if it ever is. You can be blindfolded, and then I can enter the room and get behind a screen and read away. This plan will have the enormous advantage that if you don't like the play you can slip out after the first speech or two, and slip back again and cough (to prove your presence) just before the end. I will promise not to utter a single word outside the play, and not to peep round the screen. G.B.S.