

Escape from the Asylum
by
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ESCAPE FROM THE ASYLUM

A Victorian Ladies' Detective Collective mystery, by Patricia Milton

CAST

LOVEDAY FORTESCUE, a former actress. A proto-feminist, intellectual, philosophical, and dramatic. Victorian era expectations of women infuriate her. Always wears gloves.

KATHERINE (KATIE) SMALLS, a biracial ex-patriot and actor/singer at The St. James Theatre. Badass American, trained in self-defense. Determined, matter-of-fact.

VALERIA HUNTER, a widow, Loveday's sister, who owns and operates the Hunter Lodging House. Nervous by nature, once nearly put away as "mad."

BANDERFORD CLUTTERBUCK*, a red-faced, mutton-chopped opportunist who frequently cheats at cards. Husband of the lady explorer, Mehetabel Fernsby.

FLORIAN VON GRABSTETTER*, a Viennese asylum doctor, proprietor of the infamous Belfry Institution for Nervous Diseases.

REGINALD PHILLIPS*, auteur acting manager at the St. James Theatre.

MISS ROSAMUND SMITH/FINEAS FERNSBY*, Mehetabel's ladies maid. A talented illusionist and cracksman.

(imagined) GHOST of Constable Henry Crane*

*NOTE: these roles are played by the same actor

LOCATION

The Parlor of the Hunter Lodging House, in the Battersea area of London, which also serves as the Collective's office. A street in London. TIME: Fall, 1895.

NOTE:

/ indicates the next line of dialogue begins, while current dialogue may continue

- indicates a cut off

... is a trail off at the end of a line of dialogue

Dual dialogue indicates two characters speaking simultaneously

SCENE 1.

KATIE and LOVEDAY in the Hunter Lodging
House parlor.

KATIE

Last night I dreamt we killed the Constable again.

GHOST, in the doorway, plays with a knife.

KATIE

His blood spreads out across the cobblestones. A black cat runs through it, spattering crimson on the hem of my dress. Neighbors peer at us from high windows up and down the street. Then, the police come and lock us away, Loveday, in a filthy cell!

LOVEDAY

Our deed was justified. Constable Crane was a killer, murdered countless women, and was aiming to kill you! Self-defence is not murder.

KATIE

We weren't believed. In my dream, we were sentenced to be hanged.

They look at GHOST. He exits. Lights change.
They begin pinning up their skirts.

LOVEDAY

The terrors we endured linger, still. But we must be able to look at what we did, and not be overtaken by it.

KATIE

If we accepted a new case, it would cheer me up!

LOVEDAY

Not the case my sister has proposed.

KATIE

We haven't been able to publicize our detective skills. We solved a mystery where others couldn't, but ...

KATIE (CONT'D)

No one would believe us that Constable Crane was a killer of women. The police are ... you know. Above the law. (gestures to where the GHOST stood) They'd be on his side. Yet here is somebody who wants to hire us!

LOVEDAY

We cannot accept an assignment from a man who wishes us to shadow some poor woman through the streets of London. This Banderford Clutterbuck is likely up to no good.

KATIE

He told Missus Hunter it's legitimate.

LOVEDAY

I'm quite certain his only concern is whether the lady is seeing other men. Now, are you prepared to be trounced?

KATIE retrieves two umbrellas. LOVEDAY selects one. They begin to spar.

KATIE

If we're gonna turn down a case, I deserve a better explanation.

LOVEDAY

I do not wish to argue whilst we are fighting.

As LOVEDAY hesitates, KATIE quickly delivers a mock death thrust.

KATIE

You are slower than a turtle stuck in mud. That's you, dead on the floor. (beat) *En-garde!*

The women stand at the ready.

KATIE

Allez! Allez! Battons-nous!

LOVEDAY

(not moving) Pray, refrain from speaking French in my presence.

KATIE

I need to practice what I learned in Paris: French. Umbrella fighting. Also, pantomime.

LOVEDAY

Excellent. Speak to me in pantomime.

They stand at the ready, KATIE nods, and they begin the fight again.

LOVEDAY

You have been uncharacteristically quiet about your latest role at the Saint James Theatre.

KATIE

Mister Phillips, the acting manager, is a briar in my side. My pay is late. And the part they've got me playin' is downright egregious. Watch your wrist!

They stop.

LOVEDAY

Like that?

KATIE adjusts LOVEDAY's wrist.

LOVEDAY

They have given you a supporting role, then?

KATIE

I'm cast as a Creole madwoman shut up in her husband's attic, and I finish up Act Five by burnin' down his house. I play Bertha Mason, the wife of Mister Rochester.

LOVEDAY

Surely "Jane Eyre" is a modern masterpiece.

KATIE

Any husband attemptin' to lock *me* in an attic would meet his sorry end before he could beg for my mercy. (They fight again.) Phillips has marked me as a "problem," and he dogs my every move. Which is why we need to take on a payin' case, as detectives! Even if it means followin' a lady to see if she's havin' an affair.

LOVEDAY signals "stop."

LOVEDAY

It is a matter of principle.

KATIE

Missus Hunter isn't gonna sit still while a seven crown fee gets out the door.

LOVEDAY

Let her raise her typical penny-pinching fuss. I am armed.

VALERIA enters, out of breath.

VALERIA

Kindly prepare yourselves for a visitor. (They do nothing) Hurry: straighten your skirts. Put those away immediately. Mister Banderford Clutterbuck is waiting!

KATIE

Loveday was just sayin' we won't take his case.

LOVEDAY

We will not pursue, and spy on women, to establish their infidelity.

VALERIA

This is not such an assignment! And the *fee* /will be

LOVEDAY

What type of assignment is it? A juicy murder would be lovely. (oops) In the abstract.

BANDERFORD CLUTTERBUCK busts in.
He carries a cane.

BANDERFORD

I could not help but overhear your voices, Missus Hunter.

VALERIA

Of course. Please, meet the rest of our collective. (introducing) Mister Banderford Clutterbuck. My sister, Miss Loveday Fortescue. (Takes her umbrella.)

BANDERFORD

Good day.

LOVEDAY

(sotto voce to VALERIA) I have not yet finished quarrelling.

VALERIA

(to BANDERFORD) My sister is temperamental, as she has not yet had her tea. This is my associate; also, a lodger, here: Miss Katherine Smalls.

BANDERFORD

Good morning.

KATIE

Pleased to meet you.

VALERIA

Miss Smalls is an American, but is nevertheless trustworthy. Pray, take a seat.

The women do not sit.

LOVEDAY

You may be seated, sir. We think more swiftly on our feet. And I observe you have a cane.

BANDERFORD

The cane is a gift from my wife, and I use it exclusively for passing through the streets. It allows me to knock aside horses, stray dogs, and the odd urchin. I am quite capable of standing and walking without it. Harrumph! As a gentleman, I wouldn't dream of sitting in the presence of a lady.

The women stare at BANDERFORD. He sits.
VALERIA collects KATIE's umbrella, sets it aside.

KATIE

Missus Hunter says you want to hire us.

BANDERFORD

(to VALERIA) Your husband permits you to meet with a man outside of his presence?

VALERIA

My husband is dead; and thus has little to say in the matter.

BANDERFORD

I understand you three are consulting detectives.

LOVEDAY

Illustrious ones. Have you exhausted the resources of the Metropolitan Police?

BANDERFORD

Harrumph. I do not trust the police!

The women exchange glances.

LOVEDAY

Our own assessment of the Metropolitan Police may not be shared in polite company. You wish us to follow a woman. Please tell us why.

BANDERFORD

Valuable items have gone missing from my home. I suspect this woman is the thief.

VALERIA

(triumphant, to LOVEDAY) Then you do *not* suspect her of being unfaithful!

BANDERFORD

To whom? She is unmarried ... And so plain she is likely to remain so. I will pay you seven crowns when you ensnare the woman, as agreed.

KATIE

The lady in question? The one you say is makin' off with your stuff?

BANDERFORD

Miss Rosamund Smith, a ladies' maid in my wife's employ. Miss Smith is approximately my height, not young, nor old, and with brown hair. In outward appearance she is shy, retiring, and quite stupid.

KATIE

Yet she's smart enough to carry out these thefts under your nose. Beggin' your pardon.

BANDERFORD

As I stipulated, harrumph! In the last several weeks, seven articles of tremendous value have been taken from my home. I have made up a list.

BANDERFORD gives the list to KATIE.

BANDERFORD

The stolen articles and their value, as well as my address, and a description of the thief. It should be sufficient to get you started.

KATIE

(reading) Paintings on silk. Three rare maps.

BANDERFORD

Hand-drawn maps of far-flung places. My wife also inherited from her father a collection of rare antique artworks rendered on silk. These treasures are kept in our home. The entire trove is worth, in total, some fifteen *thousand* pounds.

VALERIA

My goodness!

KATIE

Have you searched Miss Smith's room? The rest of the house?

BANDERFORD

Thoroughly. To no avail.

LOVEDAY

What about outside intruders? Burglars/

BANDERFORD

Impossible. Do you ladies understand the workings of electricity?

VALERIA

It flows through pipes, and is hideously expensive.

BANDERFORD

I see I must explain simply. Three weeks ago, I installed a remarkable new theft prevention device at both my front and rear doors. A good friend of mine, and a wizard of electricity, created it.

KATIE

Isn't your friend a suspect? He has knowledge / of

BANDERFORD

(not happy to be interrupted) The accusation is impertinent. Harrumph!

KATIE

Sorry, Mister Clutterbuck. We must ask questions. I mean no disrespect.

BANDERFORD

(calming) My friend is talented in matters of electrical current. He is no thief.

LOVEDAY

His device?

BANDERFORD

I do not understand the technical details. But first, my friend affixed what he calls “cracksman tags” to each of the precious articles ‘round the house. Then, at my entrance doors, he installed a kind of “electric trip wire.” Its current reacts uniquely with the tags. Should anyone cross the electric field with one of the items, an alarm will sound.

VALERIA

This sounds like a fabulation from a Jules Verne novel.

LOVEDAY

I am filled with astonishment ... and just a tiny bit of skepticism.

BANDERFORD

It is genuine, and a masterwork of theft detection. I keep it activated constantly, with one exception. When I must enter or leave my home, I switch it off, immediately reactivating it after I have crossed the threshold.

VALERIA

Why is that, Mr. Clutterbuck?

BANDERFORD

Because I do not care to step through a trip-wire of electricity! Harrumph! Besides, I am certain, beyond doubt, that the thief is *not* myself.

LOVEDAY

Of course. And has Miss Smith tripped the alarm?

BANDERFORD

Never. Yet ... five items have disappeared *after* the device was installed.

KATIE

Maybe it's broken.

BANDERFORD

I test the apparatus daily.

They think.

KATIE

Miss Smith is lowering the items out of a window to an accomplice waiting/ below.

LOVEDAY

Miss Smith is deactivating the device, somehow.

BANDERFORD

Out of the question. I live on a well-travelled street: Criminal activity would be observed by passersby at any hour. As for deactivation, I alone have that knowledge.

VALERIA

You permit Miss Smith free access to your valuables?

BANDERFORD

I will enjoy my own possessions! (roars) I won't be cowed by a serving girl!

The ladies exchange glances.

VALERIA

That is quite the dilemma.

LOVEDAY

To which there would appear to be a simple solution: Fire Miss Smith.

BANDERFORD

No. I don't merely wish to thefts to stop. I want this woman caught. And punished.

VALERIA

Her imprisonment would gratify you?

BANDERFORD

More than that. (beat) I *must* learn how the valuables are being smuggled from my house. How is this dull... woman besting the most modern theft-defying device known to man?

KATIE

And, naturally, you would like to retrieve the things she has stolen. But, why hire *us*, Mister Clutterbuck?

BANDERFORD

I am compelled to do so. It is a violation of the social norm for men to trail after women through the streets.

KATIE

An awful lot of men have never heard of this norm.

BANDERFORD

I am a *gentleman*, and as such, I may not follow her. In addition, the stolen items were never placed in frames, so you see ...

LOVEDAY

Ah! You believe Miss Smith may be concealing the booty in her bloomers. Yet, as a man, you may not conduct a search of her person.

BANDERFORD

Exactly. Harrumph.

KATIE

You think she's wearin' alarm-evading underwear?

BANDERFORD

That is up to you ladies to determine!

KATIE

Maybe your wife could search Miss Smith.

BANDERFORD

(beat) My wife is ... She is confined. With a nervous disorder, I am unhappy to say. In any event, my wife remains quite insistent on Miss Smith's innocence. Mehetabel stands firm that her maid is honest/ and-

VALERIA

“Mehetabel?!”

BANDERFORD

My wife, yes.

VALERIA

A “nervous disorder” ... Can you *possibly* mean Mehetabel ... Fernsby? The explorer?

BANDERFORD

The *former* explorer. My *present* wife.

VALERIA

(thunderstruck) Why, I- *You*, Mister Clutterbuck This is shocking! I had no idea!

BANDERFORD

Do you have something you wish to inquire of me, Missus Hunter?

VALERIA sits, frozen.

BANDERFORD

Harrumph. Let us get on with it, please.

KATIE

Hold on a minute. About this wife of yours/

BANDERFORD

Never mind my wife!

KATIE

You said these valuables are an inheritance of your wife's. I'm only askin' /

BANDERFORD

My wife has been deemed lunatic, by law. Harrumph! The valuables are mine, now.

LOVEDAY

Tell us a bit more about her: it may provide us with clues about the stolen goods.

BANDERFORD

I assure you, it will not.

KATIE

But it *might*.

BANDERFORD

My beloved wife is recently and most unfortunately taken ill, and has been ensconced for her safety in an annex of the Belfry Institution for Nervous Diseases. She has a ladies' disease called ... Uterine Fury.

VALERIA

It's quite shameless!

LOVEDAY

(not accusing, thinking) You have locked your wife away in a lunatic asylum.

BANDERFORD

Yes, according to the law, and for her own good.

KATIE

What are her symptoms?

BANDERFORD

My Mehetabel travels to an immoderate extent. Harrumph. She has time and again exposed herself to grievous risk in some far-off land, full of foreigners.

LOVEDAY

Have you never taken a risk? Traveled afar?

BANDERFORD

It is beside the point! (Silence. He blusters) Harrumph! She refused to adopt my last name upon our marriage! It's bloody unromantic!

KATIE

Yet it seems perfectly sane. Beggin' your pardon.

BANDERFORD

I will not abide a furious uterus! Harrumph. *Two* doctors assessed my wife's pitiable condition/

VALERIA

At *your* request?

BANDERFORD

See here. She is incapable of tending to her affairs. That is why I have asked *you* to follow the thief and bring me proof! Yet you *dare* to question me/

VALERIA

I am dismayed at the details of this story. We must reconsider accepting the case!

LOVEDAY

Calm yourself, Valeria. (to BANDERFORD) It is an excellent brief for our collective. We wholeheartedly agree to your terms/

VALERIA

I do *not* agree!

BANDERFORD rises, intending to go.
LOVEDAY gets between the door and
BANDERFORD.

LOVEDAY

We require three crowns in advance, for miscellaneous expenses.

BANDERFORD

No! Second thoughts have descended upon me!

VALERIA

May they beat a tattoo upon your head!

BANDERFORD

Outrageous!

LOVEDAY

Do not be put off by my sister's outburst! (She looks to KATIE: *Help*) She is merely/

KATIE

Made cranky by her too-tight corset.

BANDERFORD

I would *never* employ a collective whose members feel free to challenge me, to my face.

VALERIA

I do not wear a corset.

BANDERFORD

I shall seek assistance elsewhere!

KATIE

You won't get it, Mister Clutterbuck/

LOVEDAY

We are the *only* all-female detective consultancy in all of England.

BANDERFORD

You have treated me as if I were some sort of irascible shag-bag! Harrumph! I would not hire you, were you the only female detectives in the Empire!

He grabs the cane from LOVEDAY.

LOVEDAY

Surely you wish to recover your stolen belongings/

KATIE

Missus Hunter is just a touch on the jittery side.

BANDERFORD

I have rendered my decision, ladies. Look to your etiquette, and respect your betters ... if you wish to remain in business. Good day!

BANDERFORD exits.

LOVEDAY

What on earth has come over you, Valeria?

KATIE

At this rate, we will *never* get a pay in' case!

VALERIA

(to LOVEDAY) *You* were determined to reject this assignment from the start/

LOVEDAY

Just as *you* had embraced it with enthusiasm/

VALERIA

That was before I understood this- this pernicious, patronizing prat is the husband of the valiant explorer Mehetabel Fernsby. I had no idea her husband was named "Clutterbuck"/

KATIE

I never heard of her. Or him. It's *seven* crowns!

VALERIA

Do you want to work for a scoundrel like Clutterbuck?

KATIE

I work for Mister Phillips. He's a scoundrel who holds back our wages.

VALERIA

I am sorry for your precarious finances, Katie, but the Belfry Institution for Nervous Diseases is a vile torture chamber.

LOVEDAY

You are not wrong. But you must recover yourself. Despite his dismissiveness, the man was offering us a rare opportunity to fulfill our aspirations as detectives.

KATIE

We've been sittin' idle for months. We're as stale as last week's crumpets!

VALERIA

His wife is *not* lunatic!

KATIE

How do you know that?

VALERIA

Mehetabel Fernsby is a heroine among the ladies of the Greater London Needlework Society. This shameful asylum business was written up in our newsletter.

She retrieves a newsletter. They examine it.

KATIE

This is her likeness? (a compliment) She's a bit of a jam.

LOVEDAY

A lovely woman. Saddled with a husband who whacks animals and random children.

VALERIA

Mehetabel's family has experienced a raft of misfortune in the last two years. First, her brother went missing, without a trace.

LOVEDAY

I read about that.

KATIE

A misplaced brother would rattle anybody.

VALERIA

Then her father passed on, and she married that despicable bounder. Surely these incidents are heavy ballast on her soul. But "gone mad?" No.

LOVEDAY

She is impressive , we agree, and Clutterbuck is a rotter. But to reject an offer of money:
This is not the sister I know.

VALERIA

Integrity is more important than money.

KATIE

This is not the landlady I know.

LOVEDAY

You alarm me, Valeria. I observe you are unnerved by Miss Fernsby's situation.

VALERIA

You know why it upsets me.

LOVEDAY

We have rarely spoken of your own near-admission to the asylum at the hands of your
late husband.

VALERIA

Do not speak of Nigel! Nor of his nefarious scheme to commit me!

LOVEDAY

Forgetting is hard work, dear sister. Clearly the incident plagues you still.

KATIE

I shudder to think ... you might still be locked away. Lucky thing you took him out for
that really short boat ride.

LOVEDAY

A fortunate accident.

VALERIA

This woman is not so fortunate! A world explorer: Boxed into a tiny, barren room.

KATIE

Why would Mehetabel marry the brute?

VALERIA

I understand he is from the country. Such men are notoriously well endowed, and are said
to be skilled in the mattress arts.

KATIE

(beat) Seems unlikely.

LOVEDAY

Women make appalling marital choices all the time. Look at Valeria, here.

VALERIA

Do not employ me, your beloved sister, as a bad example.

LOVEDAY

My apologies, but you are handy by.

VALERIA

Mehetabel married shortly after her father died, when her senses had been shattered by grief. She could not bear her father's absence. She begged the Needlework Society ladies to attend a séance, of all things.

KATIE

A séance! How exciting!

VALERIA

I do not approve of séances. I mention it only to illustrate how distraught she was.

KATIE

Maybe she *is* crazy. (beat.) Don't act like I just defamed the Queen. It's possible, and you know it! The way we're corseted in manner, mind, and body, it's a miracle more ladies don't become lunatic.

LOVEDAY

"Lunatic." I do not like the word. Nor the idea that the moon makes women mad. Let's adopt more refined designations. "Of unsound mind," perhaps.

KATIE

How 'bout "unwell?"

VALERIA

None of your rephrasing is of any consequence! She remains locked up, and her husband did not hire us.

LOVEDAY

You are never so pleased as when my ambitions are thwarted.

KATIE

Missus Hunter. You've got your point of view, and, naturally, you don't want the assignment. But in the meantime, I am desperate for money, and we have nothing at all to detect! (indicates LOVEDAY) This one won't follow unfaithful wives, (indicates VALERIA) and you have objections to working for villains. Dare I say it: y'all are overparticular! Which means: I'm left stuck in an attic, acting a madwoman bent on arson, six nights and two matinees a week ... till I drop!

LOVEDAY

Take heart, Katie. I have a proposition. Let us gather the information we have gleaned from Mister Clutterbuck ... and conduct our own, independent investigation.

KATIE

Without pay? How is that of any help, Loveday?

LOVEDAY

We will solve two cases at once! One of us follows Miss Smith, the ladies maid, on her daily errands ... to observe if, or how, she is stealing the valuables. The others investigate the Belfry Institution, and deduce the truth of Miss Fernsby's incarceration.

KATIE

For free?

LOVEDAY

Yes, but: Think of the notoriety! Surely, the Sunday Times will publish the success of three impressive lady detectives. We may become celebrities ... with a steady stream of paying clients, eager for our services.

VALERIA

This is too dangerous, and therefore foolish!

LOVEDAY

Valeria, after all we have lived through ... will you not finally trust me? Sherlock Holmes is more widely known than we are, and he doesn't even exist! (silence) If we detect her confinement is in some way irregular, we may be able to aid Miss Fernsby.

KATIE

I'm agreeable, to catch the thief and help the explorer.

VALERIA

Help Mehetabel; in what manner? (thinks) Free her from her captivity?

LOVEDAY

Let us not put the buggy before the trotter.

VALERIA

If you are in earnest about investigating the asylum, I will cooperate. I reserve the right to complain.

KATIE

How are we gonna proceed? We've only got Clutterbuck's account of the situation.

LOVEDAY

Yes. I have a term for Mister Clutterbuck. It begins with "f" and ends with "d."

VALERIA

"Featherbrained?" Fetid? "Flaccid?"

KATIE

/"Fuck -?"

LOVEDAY

(louder than KATIE) Don't say it!

KATIE

It's a New York expression, meaning/ he's-

LOVEDAY

The word I sought was "fraud." Because Clutterbuck is a *fraud*, he may have misled us. Katie, where is the list of stolen items? He said he had placed a value on the lot.

KATIE

(reading) "Six thousand pounds." (whistles)

LOVEDAY

Valeria, retrieve your shawl. You will shadow Miss Smith.

KATIE

Her? But I have a bicycle!

LOVEDAY

You and I will be busy. And you, sister, are too fragile to risk contact with a mad-doctor.

VALERIA

I have *never* left this house in pursuit of clues. Besides, I must begin making supper: a lovely fish-bits pie.

KATIE

“Fish-bits.” What kinda bits?

VALERIA

Bits of fish!

LOVEDAY

Yes, but you make a fish head chowder and a fish tail stew. These aspects of the fish are identified, and, indeed, called by name. “Fish-bits” is ambiguous, alarmingly so.

KATIE

She also makes fish fingers, and fish balls.

LOVEDAY

Which will go unremarked. (to VALERIA) The bits may wait. Spying supersedes supper.

VALERIA

Shadowing a criminal is beyond my capabilities!

KATIE

An imprisoned woman needs you.

VALERIA

I- I cannot guarantee success. But, to preserve Miss Fernsby’s inheritance, I will do it.

KATIE

(Hands the paper to VALERIA.) Here you go: the address, the items stolen, their value, and Miss Smith’s description.

LOVEDAY

Follow Miss Smith from the Clutterbuck house. Determine if she is guilty. And, please, for the sake of all our intestines... Purchase a chicken!

VALERIA exits.

KATIE

I could follow that Smith lady just fine.

LOVEDAY

Without a doubt. But you and I must speak with this asylum doctor. (thinking) His methods are said to be quite modern. He claims to have invented a contraption that cures uterine fury.

KATIE

Is “uterine fury” a real condition? Seems to me Clutterbuck's declared his wife mad to claim her fortune.

LOVEDAY

It is an unassailable English tradition. Like having a picnic by the Thames, or plotting to blow up Parliament. (beat) We must interrogate the husband's habits. I do wish there were more of us. We cannot have eyes everywhere, ourselves. (beat) In any case, this afternoon, we will venture inside the mind of a mad-doctor ... and I will hatch a plan.

KATIE is dubious. Blackout. End SCENE I.

SCENE II.

Lights indicate outdoors. Music, street sounds. In a spot, VALERIA, terrified, furtive, makes her way through the streets. We see MISS SMITH, wearing a veiled hat that covers her face to her nose, with a shopping basket. VALERIA avoids being seen, as she peers through a set of opera glasses to keep her quarry in view. She clutches her shawl around her. Sound of a peddler's shout: "Chickens! Fresh birds!" VALERIA turns to look. MISS SMITH looks over her shoulder, hurries away. Determined not to lose her target, VALERIA follows.

Blackout. End Scene II.

SCENE III.

LOVEDAY and KATIE in the Hunter Lodging House Parlor. Evening, same day.

LOVEDAY

It is a simple artifice: effortless for an actress of your considerable talent. (beat) We cannot hope to penetrate the asylum without a plan.

KATIE

You cooked up a plan already: I dissolve the bars on her cell window with nitric acid, and set her free.

LOVEDAY

As a plan, it is quite ingenious; yet it is incomplete. How will we contend with Doctor Von Grabstetter and his staff? How can they fail to notice an American actress standing on a ladder outside Miss Fernsby's cell, fumes rising from a bottle in her hand?

KATIE

Good point.

LOVEDAY

We must assess our enemy, and devise a method of *distraction*.

KATIE

Like ... a loud noise?

LOVEDAY

A particular distraction tailored to the mad-doctor, his staff, and the asylum. That is what this ruse will help us determine. I have sent for the man.

KATIE

He's comin' here?

LOVEDAY

At any moment. When he arrives, my plan will commence. I will probe his vulnerabilities.

KATIE

I'm afraid to ask what that means.

LOVEDAY

It means, by observation, I will determine the distraction we may use whilst you carry out the rescue. Here is our scenario: When the doctor arrives, he will be greeted by me: A distraught relative. My dear "Cousin Katie" - that's you - has gone plainly and dementedly mad.

KATIE

I'm your *cousin*? How's that going to be received? (silence) No. I'm a lodger, making my home here in the Hunter Lodging House.

LOVEDAY

Fact, then, not fiction. Perfect. (beat. Puzzled) Hold on a tick. Why are you present?

KATIE

I'm acting as your chaperone, so you won't be left alone with a man.

LOVEDAY

Good. And thus, you will allow him to diagnose you. As mad.

KATIE

Do I look devoid of sanity to you?

LOVEDAY

You are from America. (Silence) We must play to our strengths. You are a gifted actress. Adopt your character from Jane Eyre/

KATIE

Oh, no. No screamin' and no matchsticks/

LOVEDAY

Then simply remain silent. I will steer the good doctor toward the assessment that you are in a catatonic state. (beat) Do not regard me as if I have requested you swim the Bristol Channel.

KATIE

You haven't considered ... Loveday. You are a white lady. When women like you are thought to be mad, you're prescribed a rest cure. For women who look like me, on the other hand/

LOVEDAY

You are the perfect/

KATIE

The perfect subject for a "scientific experiment!"

LOVEDAY

(beat) Surely this is an exaggeration.

KATIE

It's not. I know the truth about these doctors, and what they do to women like me. They feel self-assured medicating us, whether we say "yes" or "no." We are refused ether for the pain of the operating table. As a woman without means, as an immigrant, I might be locked up in the pauper's asylum, where I could end up missin' a vital organ! I do not consent to this.

LOVEDAY

This is my oversight, Katie. I withdraw my strategy entirely, with apologies.

KATIE

Besides ... Don't you want to know if he's corrupt? Or incompetent? Let's see if he'll assess a woman of sound mind as mad.

LOVEDAY

How shall we find and enlist a perfectly sane white woman in the next few moments?

KATIE

You don't qualify, so. (thinks) You'll say you've got some other relative ... Your mother. Who is arrivin' from some other location. We ask him to diagnose her, sight unseen. If the doctor is willin' to lock up a woman he's never even met/

LOVEDAY

The charlatan is confirmed.

KATIE

What if he figures out what we're aiming to do?

LOVEDAY

He may. But think! If we can deduce how to distract him, free Mehetabel, and catch the thief who is looting her inheritance/

KATIE

That's a whole lot of "if's."

LOVEDAY

A clear path will develop, I believe, after the good doctor arrives. (beat) Will you participate, then?

KATIE assents. A knock on the door.

KATIE

You let him in. I'll stand over here, and make suggestions.

LOVEDAY admits Florian VON GRABSTETTER. He is dressed in a black suit, tall hat with black bow, and wears a mourning armband. He clutches a wooden box under his arm.

LOVEDAY

Herr Doctor Von Grabstetter! Thank you for coming on such a chilly, forbidding evening.

VON GRABSTETTER

I am at your service, Fraulein Fortescue.

LOVEDAY

I see you are in mourning. Double thanks, for visiting us in your hour of bereavement.

VON GRABSTATTER's face crumples. He sniffles, gasps for air, takes out an enormous black handkerchief, dabs his eyes. Recovers.

VON GRABSTETTER

I suffer from ze untimely death of ze matron of ze asylum staff.

LOVEDAY

Dear me. Terrible.

VON GRABSTETTER

Dreadful.

KATIE

A cryin' shame.

LOVEDAY

My deepest condolences. May I take your hat? And your, um/

VON GRABSTETTER

Mein hut. Danke.

VON GRABSTETTER continues to clutch the box. LOVEDAY removes his hat, places it on the side table.

LOVEDAY

And your ... your box?

VON GRABSTETTER

Ah, you observe: I have brought mitt me ze brand new, portable "Doctor Von Grabstetter Intra-Uterine Magnetic Polarity Apparatus."

LOVEDAY

M-hm.

VON GRABSTETTER

It detects ze hysterical uterine dysfunction.

KATIE

(realises they should be amazed) Oh, my! How astonishing!

LOVEDAY

Remarkable! May I set it over here?

VON GRABSTETTER

You must be very careful.

LOVEDAY gingerly takes the box from VON GRABSTETTER and sets it on the side table. Throughout the rest of the scene LOVEDAY and KATIE improvise with the DOCTOR.

LOVEDAY

Doctor, this is my chaperone, Miss Smalls. She is a dear friend, and is familiar with the situation.

VON GRABSTETTER

Zis iz ze woman you vish to commit?

LOVEDAY

Oh, no! My mother. She's, er, arriving on the train.

KATIE

No!

VON GRABSTETTER

I see. You said you vish to lock her up immediately?

LOVEDAY

Can you diagnose her if she's not here? (beat) She is an affluent woman.

VON GRABSTETTER

Ze absence of ze wealthy lunatic is no impediment.

LOVEDAY

We- we need more information, of course. I'm concerned for Mother's comfort, and her safety. For example, what about the ground-plan, and the security of the asylum? You have a new edifice, I understand? A more modern building is our preference.

VON GRABSTETTER has a pamphlet.

VON GRABSTETTER

Ja, ve have a room in ze new auxiliary building, across ze way from ze main asylum, on ze ground floor. Each room is self-contained, mit ze single door. It is oh, so restful.

LOVEDAY

I imagine you keep the cell latchkeys ... on your person?

KATIE

Missus Fortescue is a feisty one. She'll snatch those keys right out of your hand.

LOVEDAY

Miss Smalls knows my mother all too well.

VON GRABSTETTER

We have keys for ze front door, *ja*. No keys for ze cells. Keys may be grabbed und stuck into ze eye of ze doctor. So: Each interior door is secured by ze single, heavy sliding iron bolt. (He mimes shooting a bolt.) Simple, yet effective. Two vindows, mit ze strong metal bars. Straw bedding, und ze handy sink. Plus: ze magnetic polarity apparatus.

LOVEDAY

This is exactly as I have heard it described.

VON GRABSTETTER

If I have satisfied your curiosity, let us proceed mit ze diagnosis: Please, vat kinds of symptoms does ze lady exhibit?

LOVEDAY

She ... Perhaps *you* can tell us, doctor. The causes why a woman may be locked away.

KATIE

For her own good.

VON GRABSTETTER

There are oh, so many reasons: Ze speaking out of turn, ze carbonic gas, ze political excitement, ze sexual fantasies, ze rebelling against ze loving husband ... any of zese zings, und hallo? Zey are *hin in der marün!* (Off their looks) Zey are broken in ze apricot.

LOVEDAY

A colorful idiom. My mother is, I must admit, outspoken.

VON GRABSTETTER

Zis is very common, indicating ze condition called: uterine fury. Ze voman becomes bossy and talkative. Please, her dreams? I am highly skilled at ze dream interpretation.

KATIE

Remember, Loveday? On a recent visit, she discussed a recurring dream. In it, she ... kills a police constable with her fan.

LOVEDAY

Katie, that is, without doubt, exceedingly normal.

VON GRABSTETTER

Ah, *ja*. Ze fan is ze metaphor. When closed, ze fan is representing ze penis.

KATIE and LOVEDAY exchange glances.

LOVEDAY

How fascinating, Doctor Von Grabstetter. My mother expresses dismay at London society, at the restrictions enforced on her.

VON GRABSTETTER

Ja, ja, ze unreasonable grievances. Ze hysterical patient is rebellious und obstinate. You see, ze social conformity is ze key to ze woman's mental strength! *Obedience* is ze most clear indication of sanity. So, for example, if I were to take ze ladies' hand...

He grabs LOVEDAY's gloved hand. She freezes.
KATIE gets an umbrella, stands ready.

VON GRABSTETTER

Zis is meant mit good will, of course. (*sotto voce*, to LOVEDAY) Your chaperone is grasping ze umbrella. Does she do zis often?

LOVEDAY

She enjoys a tidy room, and hates when a brolley is out of place.

LOVEDAY retrieves her hand.

VON GRABSTETTER

Ze umbrella is also ze symbol, und ze metaphor. When closed, as you may observe, ze umbrella is representing ze penis.

KATIE

(sets umbrella aside) Doctor, please tell us. Does everything have to be a penis?

VON GRABSTETTER

Zis is ze foundation of modern psychology. Ve Viennese have proved this!

LOVEDAY

Miss Smalls is, of course, demure, soft-spoken, and quite sane.

VON GRABSTETTER

(to LOVEDAY, intently) *You* are wearing ze gloves, indoors. Zis is ... “unusual.”

LOVEDAY

Oh! I- I- I-

KATIE

Miss Fortescue's hands were scarred in a theatrical fire, years ago. But it doesn't trouble you, right, Loveday? (to the doctor) She never complains.

LOVEDAY

I ... my hands are quite disfigured.

KATIE

Since Miss Fortescue's mind is very, very sound, she covers these blemishes ... so that men will not observe them and be repulsed.

VON GRABSTETTER

Ah. Is traditional. Let's see. Ze potential patient: Does she exhibit ze sexual deviance?

LOVEDAY

You are speaking of my *mother*!

VON GRABSTETTER

Ze disobedience: it is sufficient.

LOVEDAY

Is that what happened to Mehetabel Fernsby, Doctor Von Grabstetter? She was disobedient? We understand she is a resident.

VON GRABSTETTER

Hm. *Ja*. Zis is correct. *Sie hat nicht alle Tassen im Schrank*. (off their looks) She is missing ze cups in ze cupboard. She is ze only lonely patient in ze new asylum annex. (to LOVEDAY) Your mother and she vill be fast friends.

KATIE

You believe she's gone mad, from what?

VON GRABSTETTER

Ve are pursuing her cure, Missy. (He indicates the box.) I use zis apparatus to determine ze prognosis. Ze large magnets on ze inside may determine if ze patient may be having ze improper uterine positioning.

LOVEDAY

Improper uterine/

VON GRABSTETTER

Ze Intra-Uterine Magnetic Polarity Apparatus locates ze position of ze madwoman's womb. It is detecting ze wandering uterus, where it floats in ze upper regions of ze body.

VON GRABSTETTER retrieves the box from the side table. The women back away.

LOVEDAY

Mum's internal organs are no gadabouts.

VON GRABSTETTER

Ze womb may move hither and thither! I have ze same device, in ze larger model, in each of ze patient's rooms in ze Belfry Institution. I vill demonstrate/ it

KATIE

That's not necessary!

As VON GRABSTETTER brings the box close to KATIE, her hand is magnetically attracted to the box. It sticks there.

VON GRABSTETTER

Hm. Ve must remove ze ring. Ze magnetic pull is very strong/

LOVEDAY

I thought that ring was made of gold, Katie.

KATIE

(upset) So did I.

KATIE retrieves her hand with great difficulty, removes her ring, pockets it. VON GRABSTETTER opens the box and takes out an ultrasound-like wand, connected by wires to the box. The ladies are horrified.

LOVEDAY

You need not exhibit the machine to us!

VON GRABSTETTER

Zis is ze most modern patho-gnomonic device in use today! In zis way I may diagnose ze characteristics of ze nervous diseases/ and-

LOVEDAY

Doctor, I will not commit my mother, nor will I pay for her diagnosis /unless-

VON GRABSTETTER

You say you will not pay?

LOVEDAY

I'm sure your device is ... extraordinary. But I have more questions.

KATIE

(to LOVEDAY) You said you wanted a good accountin' of the asylum's caretakers.

LOVEDAY

How many orderlies and nurses are on duty? How often do they make rounds?

VON GRABSTETTER sets the wand back in the box. The ladies relax a bit.

VON GRABSTETTER

Zis is a most sorrowful topic. My dear Miss Fortescue, I agreed to meet viz you as ze matter of professional courtesy. But as you observed, I am in mourning. Zis is due to ze shocking death of my - my - my -

Out comes the handkerchief. He is overcome.

VON GRABSTETTER

I speak of ze matron of ze Belfry Institution, Miss Bettina Pichler. She is gone!

LOVEDAY

How very sad.

VON GRABSTETTER

It is more zan sad, it is tragic. Now, ve have no female presence at Belfry, no kindly pair of ze silken hands, no gentle woman's touch. (beat) But I am ready to assist. Your mother, Miss Fortescue, is clearly suffering from ze lunacy/

KATIE

Loveday ... the rest of the staff? The ones who are still alive?

VON GRABSTETTER

(weeping) Ze matron staff vas only Fraulein Pichler. Now, I alone care for ze patients.

LOVEDAY

Your asylum is without nurses? No orderlies at all?

VON GRABSTETTER

Nein, nein, nein, just in ze auxiliary building. Ve have ze orderly in ze main building.

LOVEDAY

This is a fascinating turn of events. (She and KATIE exchange looks) I would venture that you cared deeply for ... the late Miss Pichler?

VON GRABSTETTER

(chokes up) She vas an extraordinary woman. Quite strong. Ankles like ze Alpine ibex! She vas ... invaluable, impossible to replace.

KATIE

It breaks my heart, to think of poor Miss Bettina. You must be devastated, Doctor!

VON GRABSTETTER works the handkerchief.

VON GRABSTETTER

How can I hire anoizzer matron? Who can be ze substitute for Bettina, *mein herzschlag!*

KATIE looks to LOVEDAY with urgency.

KATIE

Loveday, look at how *distracted* the doctor is! Forlorn and weepin' ... He's *distracted* from grief! We must give him some kind of / assistance.

VON GRABSTETTER

(weeping) My beloved Bettina!

LOVEDAY

I am moved by this flood of emotion. You obviously profoundly loved your matron/

VON GRABSTETTER

Is true. I am sorry. I am ze wreck, like ze ship in ze storm on ze rocks.

LOVEDAY

Of course. And now, your ship is becalmed. The thought of Miss Pichler haunts you.

KATIE

Yes. She *haunts* you! (at LOVEDAY) Her *spirit* longs to connect with you again.

KATIE and LOVEDAY signal urgently out of
the doctor's line of sight.

LOVEDAY

I am sure her ghostly presence misses you.

VON GRABSTETTER

(weeping) She had ze most loving growl.

LOVEDAY

A growl you would dearly love to hear once more!

KATIE

If only Bettina could reach out to you from beyond the grave! Loveday?

LOVEDAY

Doctor, this deep grief welling inside you is not unknown to us. This longing for contact with the precious person, now departed.

KATIE

Your distress can be eased.

VON GRABSTETTER

How?

LOVEDAY

I must enquire: Are you familiar with the practice of the séance?

VON GRABSTETTER

You mean ... ze chatting *mitt* ze dead people? Ve have zis in Vienna, but it is a hoax.

LOVEDAY

In *Vienna*, yes. British scientists from the London Spiritualist Association have developed a new scientific technique that is yet unbeknownst to Austrians, Herr Doctor.

KATIE

In England, the séance is "séan-tific" ... An analytical, de...articulated meeting between yourself and, for example, the ghost of your dear, departed Bettina.

LOVEDAY

Mechanical engineers have established that the veil between the spirit world and ours is thin, and fine.

VON GRABSTETTER

Iz possible? I cannot but hope ... Is zis somezing I might do? I may pierce ze veil?

KATIE

(sotto voce to LOVEDAY) Penis metaphor.

LOVEDAY

I can introduce to you an accomplished guide to the ethereal realm! World-renowned scientific medium, Missus Valeria Hunter!

VON GRABSTETTER

World-renowned? But I have not heard of her.

KATIE

Because she is world-renowned in the spirit world.

VON GRABSTETTER

You vill arrange zis for me!

LOVEDAY

Perhaps, I wonder. Yes! I believe I can convince Madame Valeria to conduct a séance for you, in this very house.

VON GRABSTETTER

To meet again! Mit Bettina? To hear from her lips zat she still loves me! Zis would be too good to be true!

VON GRABSTETTER

Now, zis “séance” ... please describe ze scientific basis.

LOVEDAY

Why, it is quite similar to your magnetic polarity box, there. (beat) Katie?

KATIE

You see, a signal sent by the medium galvanizes an, uh, cytoplasmic belt and pulley, and/

LOVEDAY

Yes, I remember: A neural cantilever conveys the departed from the astral plane to ours.

KATIE

There's a machine. (beat) It's activated by magnets!

VON GRABSTETTER

Ah! Is very good.

LOVEDAY

Madame Valeria possesses an astonishing, er, scientific gift: the / power-

KATIE

A gift that astonishes even her! The power to draw spirits back from the nether world into our own. How about ... tomorrow night?

VON GRABSTETTER

Ja! Is convenient! I vill return on ze morrow! Ve vill reach out to Bettina's spirit!

VON GRABSTETTER moves to retrieve his hat, and his box.

VON GRABSTETTER

Vat about your mother, Miss Fortescue?. For ze tiny sum of one hundred pounds per month/

LOVEDAY

My dear Doctor Von Grabstetter, I do not wish to admit my mother to your asylum whilst you have no matron. She requires a *female* attendant.

VON GRABSTETTER

But I am ze mad-doctor! She has nothing to fear from me/

KATIE

Aren't you in violation of some English code ... leaving Mehetabel Fernsby alone, with no staff, in an empty building?

VON GRABSTETTER

(to LOVEDAY) She is quite ze chatterbox. (to KATIE) You are in error. Ze orderly poops in upon her, every hour, as ze clock strikes. He walks from ze main asylum to ze annex, to conduct ze check.

LOVEDAY

(noting to KATIE) Every hour upon the hour.

VON GRABSTETTER

Like ze clockwork, to peek in ze door.

LOVEDAY

I may consider admitting Mother, *after* you have sorted your staff. Now we will bid you/

KATIE

Auf Wiedersehen.

LOVEDAY

Goodbye.

VON GRABSTETTER

Until tomorrow night!

VON GRABSTETTER exits.

LOVEDAY

Imagine if a lady displayed such unfettered emotion.

KATIE

He'd insist her womb had climbed up and lodged behind her tear ducts!

LOVEDAY

That such a foolish doctor wields power over helpless women is ... it's ...

KATIE

Not surprising. Common as cobblestones. (beat) You're gonna make Missus Hunter conduct a séance with that mad doctor? You said, yourself, she's in a fragile state/

LOVEDAY

The séance will be over in a jiffy. And it allows us to detain the doctor, whilst you will await the chiming of the hour, and observe the orderly return to the main asylum.

KATIE

Then I'll go to work to free Miss Fernsby.

LOVEDAY

There is the one catch. (worried) Mehetabel did lose her father, and mislay her brother. The patient *may be* of unsound mind, as you noted.

KATIE

We'll detonate that bridge when we get to it. (beat) Loveday, may I ask: Do your blemished hands still bother you?

LOVEDAY

Don't be silly. I keep them hidden.

VALERIA enters. Exhausted, she crosses to sit.

LOVEDAY

There you are, dear sister! What have you discovered?

VALERIA

I have worn a hole in the sole of my shoes, yet I am none the wiser as to whether Miss Smith is a cunning thief, or a complete innocent.

LOVEDAY

Her movements?

VALERIA

She walked from shop to stall for hours. The only deviation in her routine was: once, in a dark alley ... She bestowed a coin upon a young lad who waited there for her.

KATIE

Where? What alley?

VALERIA

I did not note its name. (beat) It is around the corner from the Beefsteak Gentleman's Club. I told you, I have not the first idea how to gather clues!

KATIE

You did just fine.

VALERIA

(looks closely) Loveday? There is a fiendish furtiveness in your eye. What have you been doing, whilst I've been away?

LOVEDAY

(all smiles) My dearest, darling sister ...

BLACKOUT. END ACT I.

ACT II. SCENE I.

The séance is arranged center stage. Next
afternoon. KATIE and REGINALD enter.

KATIE

Your presence is mystifyin' ... but if you are delivering my pay, Mister Phillips, you're most welcome.

REGINALD

I do not deliver pay to actors.

KATIE

Seein' as it's been weeks/ since

REGINALD

Miss Smalls, I am here to fetch you for an immediate rehearsal. *

KATIE

Why are we rehearsin'? We already opened.

REGINALD

You are rehearsing. I have been told your performance has deteriorated.

KATIE

I- I can't go to rehearsal. I have somethin' urgent to do.

REGINALD

The stage manager reports you are acting the role of the madwoman as if she were sane.

KATIE

I am actin' Bertha as I understand her character.

REGINALD

The lunatic you portray is neither racially pure nor mentally stable. The second caused by the first. Surely you understand this.

KATIE

Beggin' your indulgence, Mister Phillips. That woman isn't mentally unstable. She's homesick. Angry her husband's takin' up with Jane Eyre.

KATIE (CONT'D)

He's forced her to change her name and hidden her in an attic, alone. She's become a stranger to herself. Any woman in the audience will recognize these feelings/

REGINALD

Consigning Bertha to the attic is a kindness. We have discussed this.

KATIE

Rochester hurls insults at her: calls her "pygmy" and "savage." How would you like it if your wife locked *you* in an attic, and called you a "flapdoodle?"

REGINALD

My home life is none of your concern! You will step on your marks and speak your lines as insanely as possible.

KATIE

I have no lines!

REGINALD

Your empathy for the character is touching, but ... Why do you care? She is a *fiction*.

KATIE

She is of the same mixed heritage as my own. Miss Bronte has silenced her. Without a defense, without my actin' the part as a sympathetic human being, what conclusions will the audience draw about women like me?

REGINALD

You will rehearse at the theater in twenty minutes. You will not stop until I am satisfied you are sufficiently lunatic.

A moment.

KATIE

My sanity is precious to me, and I'm tired of leavin' my dignity at the stage door. I quit!

REGINALD

(controlling his temper) Fine. Your understudy will step in. She is a lodger here, correct?

KATIE

Miss Lister? Rebecca is a straw-haired girl, about as Creole as vanilla pudding.

REGINALD

She will apply burnt cork to her face, as is customary.

REGINALD crosses to the downstage door.

KATIE

Will burnt cork bestow acting talent on that slab of mutton? You'll regret losing me, Mister Phillips. *My* performances attract crowds. No one can hold a candle/ to my

REGINALD

Rebecca can hold a whole candelabra to you! You are a curiosity, perhaps, but a known troublemaker. You are banned, and will not act at the St. James Theatre again.

LOVEDAY and VALERIA enter.

VALERIA

May I help you, sir?

KATIE

He's ... This is- An acting manager. Reginald Phillips. He's callin' on Rebecca.

VALERIA

I will walk you to the dining hall. House rules are, you must meet with her there.

REGINALD

You are most kind.

KATIE

(as they exit) Missus Hunter! Be sure to serve him a slice of that delicious fish bits pie.

VALERIA and REGINALD exit.

LOVEDAY

What was that about? (beat) Are you all right?

KATIE

Don't you worry about me. (pulling herself together) I'm fully prepared for my mission, with nitric acid, clay, chloroform, and a new invention: gloves made out of rubber.

LOVEDAY

Excellent.

KATIE

It's not excellent. We are losin' sight of the prize. We've abandoned the trail of Miss Smith. She could be stealin' all of Mehetabel's fortune this very minute.

LOVEDAY

I must stay with Valeria as she meets the asylum doctor.

KATIE

Not you; I'm sayin' *I* will pursue the woman. (surprised silence) After I've completed my assignment. Bust out Mehetabel from her cell; then, catch up with Miss Smith. I've got a bicycle just beggin' to speed through the city.

LOVEDAY

Are you up to something?

KATIE

My life is an open book. Kind of a field manual on how to be amazin'.

VALERIA enters.

LOVEDAY

What of your performance at the theater? (silence) It will be nearly curtain when you free Miss Fernsby. Yet here you are, stepping forward for an additional task ... One that will make you tardier still.

KATIE

I can't possibly be tardy. (beat) I quit.

VALERIA

Oh, my.

KATIE

I've got the lay of the land, here ... just like back home. I'll never play the heroine. I don't look the part, according to them.

LOVEDAY

That is unfair. You are beautiful, and talented, *and* a heroine, Katie.

VALERIA

Irrefutably. But ... I do worry about your rent.

KATIE

Which is why I need to spy on Miss Smith! Figure out how she's stealin' the valuables. (to LOVEDAY) You said we'll get publicity by solving the case. (beat) I'll leave the asylum, walk the lady here; then I'll bicycle over to Clutterbuck's house.

LOVEDAY

You may pursue her. But not from his home. This evening, you will likely find Miss Smith lurking in the vicinity of Clutterbuck's *club*.

VALERIA

The man is no Socialist, surely.

LOVEDAY

Not the Socialist Club, Valeria. Clutterbuck dines nightly at the Beefsteak Gentlemen's Club ... and a lady, who is most likely Miss Smith, has been spotted loitering outside.

VALERIA

That club is nearby to the alley where I saw Miss Smith yesterday.

KATIE

They're in this together? That doesn't add up. Unless ... they were lovers, they broke up, and he's settin' her up, to get rid of her. (beat) Who "spotted" the two of them?

LOVEDAY

My ... source. My friend. (admitting) Mister Liam Desmond, the Acting Manager of the Garrick Theatre. He is also a member of the Club. Mister Desmond has agreed to harbor the victim after her rescue. Katie, you will bring Miss Fernsby directly from the asylum to Mister Desmond's.

KATIE

Mister Desmond lives all the way over in Chelsea.

LOVEDAY, at the courtyard door, points to the window, across. KATIE takes this in.

LOVEDAY

Yes, but you see, that flat belongs to Mister Desmond. He ... It's He also keeps a flat. Here in Battersea.

VALERIA

Hmmm.

KATIE

You know the address of this secret flat ... how?

LOVEDAY

I do not need opinions from the two of you about our benign friendship.

VALERIA

Mine was a neutral “hmm,” not a suspicious “hmm.”

LOVEDAY

I am Mister Desmond's *acquaintance*. He has inside knowledge of London's clubs, and is a brilliant informant. Liam is Irish, and therefore chatty.

KATIE

Oh, now he's “Liam?” I s'pose havin' a brush with some "acquaintance" is a fine English tradition, like huntin' foxes, or hatin' foreigners.

LOVEDAY

Stop it! It is his *office*. You will place candles in his second-story window, to signal us. One candle if you have failed in your mission. Two candles if you have freed the lady. Liam's physician friend will be waiting to examine Miss Fernsby. When Valeria and I see the signal, we will dispatch Von Grabstetter back to his empty asylum annex, post haste.

KATIE

Is this is some already-existing signal? One candle meanin' "Sneak on over!"/ and

LOVEDAY

Your insinuations are ill-founded! Were one to rub Liam and me together, as two sticks, we would not generate a single spark!

VALERIA

A curious turn of phrase.

LOVEDAY

(Exasperated) Liam is not my type. He is quite bearded, and hairy all over his cheeks and chin, like a wild animal!

KATIE

How's his chest? I don't see a drawback.

VALERIA

Well. Irishmen are known to be good-looking, with a natural ability in the sensuous amusements. (silence) The Needlework Society occasionally chats about subjects other than embroidery.

LOVEDAY, upset, turns away to the window.

KATIE

Loveday. What I hear you sayin', is you have brought a man into our collective. Without once consultin' us.

VALERIA

This is an appallingly solitary decision.

KATIE

In fact, you're always makin' elaborate plans without askin' Missus Hunter and me.

LOVEDAY

That is because *I* am the sensible one in this collective!

Shocked silence, then:

VALERIA

That is unkind.

KATIE

I have something to say/

LOVEDAY

That is not what I mean! I mean, I do ... make plans. You adjust them, when necessary. You execute them brilliantly. It is a sensible division of tasks. (beat. They are silent) In any event, Liam has agreed to help us, and he is perfectly principled/

VALERIA

You may believe so, but how can *we* be sure this Desmond person is as you say?

KATIE

I'm reservin' judgement. Tell us why your "sensible" self thinks he's credible.

LOVEDAY

(considers) All right. As you may know, Mister Desmond is/

KATIE

An acting manager. Not usually a sign of virtue.

LOVEDAY

He had recently requested I read aloud a new play script with him.

KATIE

You quit acting.

LOVEDAY

He offered me two shillings. I am financially dependent on my sister! I must say ... (to VALERIA) thinking about you, er ... swamping ... your tosser of a husband is inspiring to me. The courage of others can encourage courage in ourselves.

VALERIA

You are always confident.

LOVEDAY

No. I carry with me the gut-churning fear that that wherever I go, I will be turned out.

KATIE

That's on account of the fire that charred your hands.

LOVEDAY

So. I arrived at the flat. Liam greeted me warmly. He is a very warm person.

KATIE

He's an actin' manager, so, he's not technically a person.

LOVEDAY

Please don't interrupt. (beat) Liam was wholly professional. As we read, my spirit lifted up. I again played a character on the stage, which I have always profoundly loved... even after the theatre itself turned upon me. Burned me. (beat) A stage direction bade the woman remove her gloves. Without thinking, so deep in the lady's psyche I was, I peeled off my gloves.

KATIE

(this is shocking) Exposin' your scars.

VALERIA

Oh, my dear Loveday.

LOVEDAY

I read on. It was a few moments before I realized what I had done: the damage the fire had wreaked upon my hands was quite visible. Searing shame, carried all these years, crowded the breath from my throat. Finally, I looked up. I searched Liam's face for a look of disgust, of pity. But the horror that I expected because of my physical defect? Was absent. And my heart shone, a little, with joy. At the same time, I was furious at myself.

VALERIA

Why, for mercy's sake?

LOVEDAY

Had I gone mad? Without my knowledge, I had submitted myself to our society's communal delusion: that a lady's worth depends upon the opinions of men.

KATIE

You want your worth taken as a given: that's far from mad.

LOVEDAY

I quickly donned my gloves again. We finished reading the script, and then we ... *conversed*, only, for more than an hour. I told him of our collective, which he admired. He shared his knowledge of Clutterbuck, and this loiterer who resembles the ladies' maid.

VALERIA

I understand why you trust him. *Not* why you fail to trust us.

LOVEDAY

I'm so sorry I did not confer with you, but ... he provided us with clues!

VALERIA

I will accept Desmond ... as a temporary associate. (beat) Your hands, sister: They need not distress you.

LOVEDAY

What distresses me is society's attitude toward women whom it views as ... damaged. The marks do remind me of the terror of the fire.

A moment.

KATIE

I s'pose it's fine if we accept Mister Desmond's assistance.

LOVEDAY

Thank you. You will stop being so nettlesome?

KATIE

(thinks) Only if *you* will let Missus Hunter and me start makin' plans.

VALERIA

Katie is right. We do not require you to be our taskmaster.

LOVEDAY

(reluctant) I admit I am more at ease when I am in control.

KATIE

We're detectives. We detected that.

LOVEDAY

All right. When a plan is next required, you may devise it.

Big Ben chimes, 5 pm. During the following,
KATIE fetches her muff from the side table,
retrieving coins and clipping.

LOVEDAY (CONT'D)

Note the time! It has flown, and we are due to hold a séance with a corrupt asylum doctor
... whilst you, Katie, free an explorer.

KATIE

I nearly forgot. There's six pence left, Missus Hunter, from my buy in' the nitric acid.

VALERIA

You must keep that for your trouble.

KATIE

Thank you. I clipped a newspaper item, too, see? "The unusual death of Miss Bettina
Pichler, asylum matron."

KATIE gives a clipping to VALERIA. Affixes
the muff to her waist. The sisters read.

LOVEDAY

Poor Bettina. Good work, Katie.

KATIE

(crossing to the door) Transport the lady to Mister Desmond's house. One candle if I've failed. Two candles if I've rescued the lady. Then I'm off to the Beefsteak Club, to shadow Miss Smith.

LOVEDAY

Best hurry.

KATIE

(before she exits) Good luck with the séance, "Madame Valeria." I'll say a prayer. And please, if you have it in your heart ... say one for me.

KATIE exits wearing her muff. LOVEDAY and VALERIA arrange the table, placing on it a table runner, tarot cards and a candle.

VALERIA

Loveday, I know I agreed to this bollocks scheme ...but, what if a panic overcomes me?

LOVEDAY

We do not panic. We are English. Is there anything I may fetch for you?

VALERIA

I should like an immediate holiday in Spain.

LOVEDAY

Nonsense.

VALERIA

How will I remember the invocation? I am uncertain I can perform. You and Katie are the actresses, not I.

LOVEDAY

It must be you, sister. He has met us.

VALERIA

I am not a capable person!

LOVEDAY

Valeria. You have killed two men. That argues for your minimal competence.

VALERIA

Séances are nothing but claptrap. I do not believe in the afterlife. Especially for the Viennese.

LOVEDAY

You need simply pretend.

VALERIA

(thinks) If there *is* an afterlife, what of my drowned husband, Nigel? Or the constable I helped to kill? I may come upon them, by accident. It would be monstrously awkward.

LOVEDAY

There is no chance of that, sister.

VALERIA

What if the spirit of this “Bettina Pichler” speaks only Austrian? How will I know what she is saying?

LOVEDAY

(taken aback) Mediums do not actually *speak* with these spirits they supposedly elicit. You will convince the man, by using the information provided by the newspaper clipping.

VALERIA

This ruse you have concocted will not be simple, not at all!

LOVEDAY

Rise to it! Was it simple for Joan of Arc?

VALERIA

They burned her at the stake/

LOVEDAY

Was it simple for Lady Jane Grey?

VALERIA

She was beheaded with an ax/

LOVEDAY

Was it simple for ... (I don't know) Medusa?

VALERIA

Murdered by Perseus, who put her head in a bag. You are maddening.

LOVEDAY

Well, *I* didn't have them killed, Valeria.

VALERIA

The fact does not bring me comfort.

LOVEDAY

Then let this comfort you: the séance is one of the only settings in our society where a woman holds the power. Would you not enjoy wielding power over a mad doctor?

VALERIA

(thinks) Yes.

LOVEDAY

You *must* carry on. Otherwise Katie will be caught, and Miss Fernsby remain imprisoned.

VALERIA

(Resolved) I will not let that happen. Now, may we discuss ... my hatbox?

A knock at the down left door. LOVEDAY and VALERIA argue briefly in pantomime, then VALERIA exits through the up left door.

LOVEDAY

One moment!

She surveys the table, lights the candle.

LOVEDAY

Is that you, Herr Doctor Von Grabstetter?

Muffled "*Ja.*" LOVEDAY admits VON GRABSTETTER, still in mourning garb.

LOVEDAY

Herr Doctor! How good of you to come!

VON GRABSTETTER

Good evening. I cannot contain ze excitement. Vere is ze medium?

LOVEDAY

She is ... presently, erm, ... levitating. Please, be seated. I'll just go get her down.

LOVEDAY crosses to the door. Opens it, and
VALERIA enters. VALERIA avoids the doctor.

VON GRABSTETTER

Madame Valeria.

LOVEDAY adjusts a chair to be further away
from the Doctor. VALERIA sits.

VALERIA

This is the bereaved? (before he can speak) Shhhh. That will be one crown.

LOVEDAY

Madame Valeria!

VALERIA

(to LOVEDAY, defensive) I require funding to conduct my scientific experiments.

VON GRABSTETTER

Is fine. (Pays her.) I am excited you vill bring my beloved back to me.

VALERIA

We must clasp hands. (They do) Grip my hand and do not let go, unless the spirits direct.

VON GRABSTETTER

Is Bettina present? Can you see her? Does she still burn for me?

VALERIA

Patience! I must intone the invocation.
There is a land where we all go,
Whence ne'er the frost nor cold wind blow,
In glow surround these gentle ghosts,

VALERIA (CONT'D)

We welcome you, as you draw close.
Heaven's promise, our departed duteous,
We cry out to you! Set right our uterus! ...es.
(booming) Greetings, gentle spirit! Speak thee to us?

VALERIA appears to enter a trance.

VALERIA (CONT'D)

Herr Doctor Von Grabstetter. Your nurse Miss Bettina Pichler, late of the Belfry Asylum, Twenty-Seven High Street, has gone toes up. You seek a sign from her, that she still cherishes you.

VON GRABSTETTER

Zis is quite dumbfounding.

VALERIA

Quiet! I sense Miss Pichler. She is trying to reach me. Attempting to tell me her story. She says she suffered a devastation, that had calamitous effect on you, Herr Doctor.

VON GRABSTETTER

Ja. Ja!

VALERIA

She died abruptly. (peeks at VON GRABSTETTER) There. She nods her head at my assessment. A catastrophe. A disaster. A misadventure!

VON GRABSTETTER

Is zis verifiable? If you can speak mit my Bettina, zen ... You vill now tell me how she died. She vill instruct you.

VALERIA

I see Miss Pichler, alone. Wandering in the outdoors.

VON GRABSTETTER

All of zis is most correct.

VALERIA

A spirit demands, "Break hands!"

They do. VALERIA makes magical gestures.
LOVEDAY looks to the window.

VALERIA (CONT'D)

I have a sensation of water. Miss Pichler is wet through/

VON GRABSTETTER

Zis is factual! Vat iz ze scientific basis, please?

VALERIA

I must perform the sprinkling of ... of the ectoplasmic fluid. (She sprinkles over the table.) This fluid eases the ghostly throat so Miss Pichler may speak freely.

VALERIA rises. Her hands are a bit wet.

VALERIA

Your beloved is sopping, drenched, her clothes heavy. There is ... suddenly, water everywhere. Water ... (VALERIA is in her own memory) Water surrounds me! I am floating, gasping for breath.

Lights change. VALERIA is terrified.

VON GRABSTETTER

Vat is zis, now?

VALERIA

I am accused of murder. I have fallen from the dunking chair! (calls out) "I am innocent!" (low) I will surely drown. Or, no. ... I am diagnosed as mad, and nurses compel up on me a water cure. I peer below the waves. A man yanks at my skirts! His face in shadow, he pulls me under the surface. I fight for my life; he is relentless. It is my husband, Nigel! I realize ... I am to be annihilated. I am undone!

LOVEDAY rises, puts her hand on VALERIA's arm. VALERIA returns. Lights change.

LOVEDAY

Madame Valeria, do not wander about in the unsavory areas of the afterlife, it is not safe!

VON GRABSTETTER

(gets up) *Mein* Bettina did not drown. Miss Fortescue? Vat is going on here?

LOVEDAY

The underworld is vast, and crowded with evil spirits. (to VALERIA) Madame. You are dry, and safe. Neither accused, nor mad. Your husband is drowned, many years ago. He, and the Thames, are where you left them.

VALERIA

(calming, sitting) I do remember: Nigel is dead.

VON GRABSTETTER

I did not come here to chit-chat mit her husband. Ladies? Vere is ze *science*?

He stands, then starts to leave.

VALERIA

Wait! Bettina has returned! I see her ... there!

VON GRABSTETTER

Zis is hinky. (to LOVEDAY) You promised ze demonstration of ze scientific device!

LOVEDAY

Please, you must be seated ... so Madame may galvanize the cytoplasmic belt and pulley!

VALERIA is bewildered. LOVEDAY retrieves a hatbox from under the table, from which protrudes a headband affixed with magnets.

LOVEDAY

Your Magnetic Semaphoric Communication Device, Madame Valeria!

VALERIA

You will assist me, as I will employ this, er, machine, to urge Miss Pichler to speak.

VON GRABSTETTER

(hesitates, returns) Is better.

VALERIA

Please. Join us at the table. (he hesitates. She booms.) *I am in command!* (beat) And now, to retrieve the doctor's true love, I will magnetize the bereaved.

He sits. LOVEDAY applies magnets to the doctor's head.

VON GRABSTETTER

Ooof. Is compressing me!

VALERIA

Tighter! Painful sensation sweetens the lovers' reunion. There. Bettina stands in the middle of a downpour.

VON GRABSTETTER

(suspicious) Say more.

VALERIA

In ... in Hyde Park.

VON GRABSTETTER

Ja! She was in Hyde Park. (to LOVEDAY) Ze accuracy is astonishing.

LOVEDAY

It's the magnets.

LOVEDAY looks to the window.

VALERIA

Bettina is hurrying along a path, thinking only of you, Herr Doctor. She muses, "The Viennese are hopelessly attractive, and known to be expert at carnal congress."

VON GRABSTETTER

You have ze gift.

During VALERIA's speech, lights and sound effects enhance her description.

VALERIA

Suddenly: A grievous thunderclap! (she rises) The clouds close in, and rain pours down upon Bettina! Soaked, shivering, she takes shelter from the storm. She huddles ... under a sturdy tree. Oh, Miss Pichler. Bad idea! What's that, you say? A bolt of lightning is attracted ... by the metal stays in your corset! And BOOM! You are struck down, unable to cry out, perishing instantly! With the thoughts of your precious asylum doctor still, feverishly, floating like, uh, lily pads on the ... dimming pond of your mind. And now there is only ... the smell of smoke.

LOVEDAY

What a senseless tragedy. Death by undergarment.

VON GRABSTETTER

I liked zat corset.

VALERIA makes a card rise from the deck.
Shows the card.

VON GRABSTETTER

Vat is ze card: Ze Fool? Is zis ze sign? I do not understand.

VALERIA

The Fool walks joyfully through the world, Herr Doctor Von Grabstetter. Bettina wants only happiness for you.

LOVEDAY crosses to the window.

VON GRABSTETTER

Ja, ja, but vere is ze sign? A sign zat I may be sure of her unceasing love?

VALERIA

Bettina speaks! She says, you must not be so demanding, now that she's dead.

LOVEDAY

A moment, Madame Valeria!

VALERIA

She points out that she has agreed to visit you, when she might have been napping.

LOVEDAY

Now, Madame Valeria. I require your attention. I am witnessing a sign.

VON GRABSTETTER

(jumping up) A sign?

VALERIA

(to VON GRABSTETTER) Please, sit down. *I* must examine and interpret the sign.

VALERIA rises, crosses to the courtyard door.

LOVEDAY

It is but one light ... Bother!

VALERIA

No, look. Two lights! Two gleams in the darkness! It betokens a triumph!

VON GRABSTETTER

Vat is it? Is it Bettina, signaling to me?

VON GRABSTETTER, clutching the hatbox,
crosses to see.

VON GRABSTETTER

You are looking at ... vat?

LOVEDAY

Oh! It is *three*. Three lights? I have no interpretation for three!

VALERIA

What is the significance of *three*?

The sisters stare at each other.

VON GRABSTETTER

It *is* a sign! Allow me to interpret. Ze significance of "three" is ze three little words
Bettina and I vould vhisper to each ozzer: *Ich liebe dich!*

LOVEDAY

(to VALERIA) I am bewildered.

VON GRABSTETTER

Und ze candles: each one, a "shaft" of light. A *shaft!* Don't you see? (They don't.)
Bettina is delivering to me ... ze penis metaphor!

BLACKOUT. END SCENE.

SCENE II.

Fifteen minutes later. VON GRABSTETTER is gone. VALERIA and LOVEDAY pacing. KATIE enters from the down left door. A moment. The sisters speak at once.

VALERIA
What does three candles signify?

LOVEDAY
What do you mean by that signal? And why have you not left promptly for the Gentlemen's club as I asked you?

KATIE
(to LOVEDAY) You said: one candle that I could not free her, two candles that I had brought her with me. I asked "Liam" to put up three candles, on account of ... Ladies, when I arrived at the asylum, our madwoman was *gone*.

VALERIA
Gone?

KATIE
Missing. Absent. Disappeared.

LOVEDAY
Not in her cell?

KATIE
Her window is 'round the back of the buildin', so ... Look. I first went to the asylum annex's front door, to knock, and see there really were no staff on the premises.

LOVEDAY
Sensible.

KATIE
Thank you. When there was no answer, naturally, I... kicked in the door.

VALERIA
How very American of you.

KATIE
I'm disappointed I didn't need the nitric acid, bein' a science aficionado and all. But if you're ever knocking and not getting an answer, kickin' in the the door is a real time saver.

LOVEDAY

So you proceeded to / her-

KATIE

I walked through the front door right down the hall to her cell. It had her name on it. "Missus Clutterbuck" on a little placard, even though she didn't take his surname, because the husband is a /

LOVEDAY

Misbegotten gibface/

KATIE

Accurate. And when I arrived at her cell door ...

VALERIA

It was ajar?

KATIE

She is not the risen Christ, Missus Hunter. The door was shut tight and still locked, with a four-inch sliding iron bolt. I slid it back, and went inside the room ... a tiny space of just a few feet square. It was empty! Bars screwed in, intact on the windows. Nothing at all in the room but what the doctor described: straw bedding, a tiny sink, a large model ... magnetic polarity uterus-transportation device.

VALERIA

A what?

KATIE

A contraption he invented ... to discover where a lady's uterus may have wandered off to.

VALERIA

Honestly. Men cannot seem to find *any* of the pertinent parts of a woman's body.

KATIE

The apparatus in her room was dismantled, entirely, maybe for cleanin'.

LOVEDAY

Were the floorboards in place?

KATIE

Everything was normal, with no hidin' places or tunnels to the outside world. Except ... there was no lady.

VALERIA

Mehetabel escaped a completely sealed room in a locked-up, fortified asylum annex?

LOVEDAY

Perhaps she was set free by some ... other detective?

VALERIA

Perhaps the doctor had her moved.

KATIE

Maybe she melted herself into a puddle and seeped under the door. I don't know!

VALERIA

Could her husband have kidnapped Mehetabel? Perhaps, murdered her? I would not put any desperate action past that brute.

KATIE

There was not a single clue to be had in her room. Locked as it was from the outside ... I'm baffled.

LOVEDAY

(turning away, thinking) This sudden disappearance is alarming. I must devise a plan!

LOVEDAY turns back. They glare at her.

LOVEDAY

(embarrassed) Oh! Quite right. Your turn.

KATIE

I figure Miss Smith, her ladies' maid, knows somethin' about Mehetabel's disappearance.

LOVEDAY

So you will follow her. That was the substance of *my* plan.

KATIE

No ... We've got to capture Miss Smith, and interrogate her.

VALERIA

You two will venture to the Beefsteak Club, get hold of her, and convince the woman to come here. Where I will be waiting, in safety.

Music. KATIE gets her umbrella. LOVEDAY gets hers, but KATIE disarms her.

KATIE

Uh. You ... lack skills. Take my fur muff. There's all kinds of useful stuff inside.

LOVEDAY takes the muff.

VALERIA

The night moves swiftly forward. You must lay hands on this enigmatic thief, if we are to have a chance to find Mehetabel.

LOVEDAY

(to KATIE) Shall we ride your bicycle?

KATIE

(to LOVEDAY) You, Miss Smith, and me? Will capsize my bicycle. Wait; Liam has a sweet little horse carriage. Think you can prevail on him to take us there and back?

LOVEDAY

He is agreeable, above all other traits. Off we go!

KATIE raises her umbrella.

LOVEDAY/KATIE

To the Beefsteak Club! To capture Miss Smith!

They exit. VALERIA stands, remembers. For a self-satisfied moment, she makes her hocus-pocus gestures. BLACKOUT. End Scene II.

SCENE III.

The Hunter Lodging House Parlor. Enter KATIE and MISS SMITH, engaged in combat: KATIE with umbrella, MISS SMITH with CLUTTERBUCK's cane. VALERIA enters from the upstage door.

VALERIA

What on earth? I have just cleaned this rug. Stop that immediately!

KATIE

(to VALERIA) Lock the door!

SMITH

I am no thief; you have mistaken me!

VALERIA

(locking the upstage door) Get her, Katie!

MISS SMITH

You'll not capture me!

LOVEDAY enters, panting.

LOVEDAY

Do not succumb, Katie!

KATIE

Don't just stand there watching. Help me!

LOVEDAY

What shall I do?

SMITH

(a strike) Ha!

KATIE

For heaven's sake! Look inside the muff I gave you!

LOVEDAY reaches in, pulls out gloves. Tosses them on the floor, draws out and tosses a small flask. Draws out a knife. VALERIA locks the downstage door.

LOVEDAY

You keep a dagger ... in your muff?

KATIE

Every sensible woman does.

MISS SMITH rushes for the down left door, but it is locked. With knife trained on her, and backed by KATIE with her umbrella, LOVEDAY retrieves the cane.

SMITH

No! You must give that back! I shall not try to run away, I promise.

KATIE

You just did.

LOVEDAY

(to VALERIA, escorting SMITH into the room.) We found her at the back door of the Beefsteak Gentlemen's Club.

KATIE

On the back stoop with a boy, who dodged inside before we could grab him.

VALERIA

(to KATIE) Have you fought through the streets, all the way here?

KATIE

This one attacked Loveday. We had to chloroform her. She drowsed in the carriage/

LOVEDAY

But the chloroform wore off as we entered ... and we had used up the lot. (to KATIE) It is almost as if this was *not* well-planned.

SMITH

I do not even know of what I am accused!

KATIE

You've been stealing Miss Fernsby's maps and artwork.

VALERIA

How did you evade the electrical alarm installed at the front and rear doors?

MISS SMITH

The anti-theft machine cannot be over-ridden. This is kidnap!

LOVEDAY

She did *not* override it. (ticks off) The device was operational. The alarm never rang. If the mechanism is sound, it can mean only one thing: Clutterbuck perpetrated the crimes.

SMITH

See? It was not I.

KATIE

You and Clutterbuck were in it together! He wouldn't offer to hire us, to point the finger at himself. But he'd cheerfully incriminate *you*.

LOVEDAY

He was but an unwitting accomplice. (beat) Miss Smith holds the answer to your befuddlement. (to SMITH) Do you deny it?

SMITH

I choose to remain silent. (quickly) You must let me go. It is essential I get back to the Beefsteak Club, before Mister Clutterbuck decides to go home! He dines with great haste.

KATIE

Clutterbuck is being diverted this very minute, by a chatty Irishman.

LOVEDAY

While I knew who was doing it, I had no idea how. It was only after listening to the incessant drumbeat of a certain ... unpleasant *metaphor* over the last two days, that the answer became clear. So I demand of you, Miss Smith ... (dramatic pause)

VALERIA

(who has been holding it) Whatever are you doing with Mister Clutterbuck's cane?

LOVEDAY

Valeria, your outburst is ill-timed. (to SMITH) This cane: a gift from his wife, was it not? A hollow cane is perfect for transporting items that can be furled ... such as maps, or paintings on silk. Clutterbuck told us no framed items were stolen, and *this* is why.

LOVEDAY tries, cannot remove the handle of the cane. KATIE crosses, easily removes it. KATIE pulls a map from the cane shaft.

LOVEDAY

Miss Smith, here, would steal a rolled item, like that/

KATIE

In the dark of night! While Clutterbuck slept!

LOVEDAY

Katie/

KATIE

She would stuff the loot inside his cane, which Clutterbuck proly keeps in the umbrella stand by the front door/ and

LOVEDAY takes the cane from KATIE.

LOVEDAY

Katie! Let us not get ahead of ... my speech-making. (KATIE assents.) Miss Smith would then follow Clutterbuck to his club, where he invariably checked his cane at the cloak room. (to SMITH) Your co-conspirator, the lad we saw/

SMITH

Leave Billy out of this!

LOVEDAY

You and Billy would make an exchange at the back entrance. You would remove the stolen plunder... returning the cane to Billy before Clutterbuck had finished his supper. Have I got the details correct, Miss Smith?

SMITH

(beat) *If* I confirm this ... I must be let go!

LOVEDAY

(beat) I cannot rid myself of the thought that I know you, Miss Smith.

They peer at MISS SMITH. KATIE retrieves the newsletter.

VALERIA

Your face, it nudges my mem'ry.

KATIE

Weren't you in this Needlework Society Newsletter?

They look.

KATIE (CONT'D)

Mehetabel? That's impossible. She was locked up when the items were stolen.

SMITH

I am not she. I am Rosamund Smith, her ladies' maid.

LOVEDAY

You are not Mehetabel. Your chin is all wrong. But, your *eyes*. (It dawns) Oh. Oh! You are not a villain, as we assumed. My sincere apologies.

SMITH

Do you expect me to trust you, after seizing me and giving me chloroform?

LOVEDAY

I did not know, then, who you were. Have no fears: we are quite allergic to the authorities. Forgive our offense. We three have been trying to *help* Mehetabel.

KATIE

For free! I tried to rescue her, earlier, but she was missing. (to LOVEDAY) Who is she?

VALERIA

We fear her husband may have done away with her. As her ladies' maid, do you know/

SMITH

Mehetabel is not dead. She is aboard a train to the port city of Felixstowe. We sail tomorrow evening. She is quite sane and in good health.

*

VALERIA

Wonderful news!

KATIE

Where are the treasures you stole from her? (to LOVEDAY) Who is she?

SMITH

The missing treasures are in her trunk. The sale of these fine valuables will give her sufficient resources to make further expeditions, far away from her husband.

LOVEDAY

Miss Smith, I understand if you will not trust us ... but, pray, will you reveal your other name? We have in common our deep care for Mehetabel. To show our good will, my colleagues will now abandon their weapons.

KATIE

We'll do what, now?

LOVEDAY

She just said, she became a thief to fund Mehetabel's freedom. She is our ally. (to SMITH) And we are yours, if you will have us.

They set down their weapons. SMITH removes her hat and wig, revealing FINEAS FERNSBY.

FINEAS

I am ... sometimes called Fineas Fernsby. Mehetabel's brother.

KATIE

(finally) Thank you!

VALERIA

The family resemblance is indisputable. Mister Clutterbuck never marked it?

FINEAS

As a servant, I remain invisible to him. (to LOVEDAY) How did you know?

LOVEDAY

You were once an ubiquitous item in the London society pages ... the subject of scandalous gossip. Then, two years ago, you seemed to disappear. Yet your family made no attempt to find you. No investigation, no advertisements, no memorial.

FINEAS

I could not persuade my sister to forswear Clutterbuck. I convinced her to hire me, as “Miss Smith,” her ladies’ maid, so I might look after her. She understands and affirms my affinity for donning ladies’ clothing. You may not approve of my inclination. Our society, as a rule, does not. But Mehetabel respects and loves me ... exactly as I am.

A moment.

VALERIA

Men wearing ladies’ clothing is a venerable English tradition, is it not? Like ... dancing naked ‘round Stonehenge of a Solstice evening. (beat. Defensive) When weather permits.

KATIE

It’s a nice gown. The accessories need help.

LOVEDAY

In my opinion ... I would covet the name of your dressmaker.

KATIE

We're glad your sister’s on her way to safety. But her cell door was locked from the outside, and I searched that room. I can’t imagine how ... (Thinking, she twists the ring on her hand.) There was nothin’ in there, but ... straw, and- (She looks at the ring.) The uterus-relocation device! I thought that infernal box had been dismantled for scrubbin’ or somethin’. But, that’s not it! Mehetabel herself broke it apart ... to get at the magnets!

FINEAS

Powerful magnets/

KATIE

She used ‘em to slide back the iron bolt from her side of the door, and set herself free. Before she fled, she re-bolted the door, leavin’ behind a puzzle ... that I have now solved. (thinks) Mister Fernsby, tonight, these two ladies lured the asylum doctor away from watchin' your sister. Our collective's efforts helped buy her time to escape.

FINEAS replaces SMITH's wig/hat. Adjusts it.

SMITH

Thank you all. (indicates the cane) May I?

LOVEDAY gives SMITH the cane. KATIE offers the map.

FINEAS

Please, keep the map. It should fetch a thousand pounds from a dealer.

KATIE

A thousand pounds! We can buy our own horse carriage.

LOVEDAY

This is a triumph that will be made famous in the Sunday Times. Fresh clients will be queuing up to hire us/

SMITH

No. You mustn't tell anyone about this, ever. Our society is quite mad; thus, we face great risk. (silence) Do you promise?

LOVEDAY

Our collective must remain unacknowledged?

VALERIA

Then that beastly Clutterbuck will face no consequences!

SMITH

A wealthy, connected, and powerful man? Justice never comes for the likes of him.

LOVEDAY

(looks to the others) You are too vulnerable. We promise. We must comfort ourselves with our small victories.

LOVEDAY (CONT'D)

I suppose, in the wider scheme of things, one woman's freedom matters little. But: to be a woman set free by her own ingenuity! That matters quite a lot... to me.

SMITH crosses to the door.

SMITH

Ladies, thank you for your eventual kindness.

LOVEDAY crosses to a side table upstage,
pours whiskies. The ladies gather.

LOVEDAY

Surely you can join us for a quick toast, Miss Smith?

SMITH joins them. They raise glasses.

VALERIA

To Someday, when powerful men who dismiss, misuse, and exploit us *will* receive justice.

KATIE readies to drink.

SMITH

To Someday, when we who do not conform to society's demands will be admired and affirmed!

*
*

KATIE readies to drink.

LOVEDAY

To Someday, when women will not need to free themselves and flee ... They'll be championed by a society that values them!

KATIE

(beat) Do you believe that?

LOVEDAY

I must believe it. Yes. Until someday arrives, we must all help each other ... escape from the asylum!

Music up. The four clink glasses. Quick blackout. End of play.