

SHAM—A PLAY IN ONE ACT

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Scene: Comfortably furnished living room.

Place: Wealthy suburban district of some large city.

Characters: CHARLES, the householder

CLARA, his wife

THE THIEF

When the curtain rises a man is alone on the stage. He is evidently a gentleman of culture — certainly he is dressed in excellent taste. Apparently he is viewing the room for the first time. Nothing pleases him, until a vase upon the mantle arrests his attention. He picks it up, smiles disdainfully and utters, Imitation. Other articles receive the same unfavorable verdict. Suddenly he pauses to listen, looks about him hurriedly for a place to hide, thinks better of it, and takes his place opposite the door smiling pleasantly and expectantly. The door opens and a young woman enters with a man at her heels. As she sees the thief she screams and retreats, backing the man out behind her. The thief smiles and waits. Soon the door opens again and the man enters with the woman clinging to him. They stare at the thief not knowing what to do or say.

THIEF. Good evening. . . . Good evening. . . . You surprised me. Can't say I expected you home so soon. . . . Was the opera an awful bore? . . . Will one of you speak, please— I can carry on a conversation alone, but as the word etymologically suggests, the question and answer method is to be preferred. If one of you will ask me how I do, we. . . .

CLARA. You . . . you . . . you're a thief.

THIEF. Exactly. And you, madam? The mistress of the house, I presume. I would gather as much from a glance at the earrings. Or, am I in error, are you another thief?

CLARA. This is our house. Charles why don't you do something? Don't stand there . . . make him go away. What have you taken?

CHAS. I say, old man, you'd better clear out.

CLARA. Yes, we've come home.

CHAS. If you've got anything of ours we aren't helpless, you know.

THIEF. Madam, if you'd be so kind,—may I examine your earrings? Humph! Quite as I thought. Artificial! Perfect exterior, no substance of worth. Quite like an empty banana peel folded back into shape. Oh, by the way, you're not armed, you know. I threw your revolver down the cold air shaft. Never carry one myself. Yours was in the bottom of your bureau drawer. Horribly disordered shape those drawers were in. Nice and neat on top; mice nest below. You want to watch those seeming trifles. They show up your character, old man.

CLARA. Well, I'd. . . .

THIEF. Please. . . . There's a dictum which goes like this, "Always tell a man by his bureau drawers." Oh, but I don't blame you, Charles, as much as.—Didn't it ever occur to you that a thief might drop in on you some night? What would he think?

CHAS. I don't think. . . .

THIEF. Ah, but you should, Charles. I said to myself when I opened that drawer, "They put on a great show, but they're shams—it's all on the surface. Probably a streak that runs through everything they do." You want to try for real neatness. This other sort of thing is just a form of dishonesty. Not terribly wrong in itself, but indicative. . . .

CLARA. Charles, I can't stand this. A thief talking to *us* about honesty . . . and in *our own* house.

THIEF. Just the place for honesty. Begin at home. Don't be constantly trying to fool yourselves and you won't be so prone to attempt fooling others.

CLARA. Grab hold of him, Charles. I'll telephone.

THIEF. You can't.

CLARA. You cut the wires?

THIEF. Didn't have to. The Company discontinued your service. You neglected the bill. Rather a shame . . . I wanted to put in a call but found even the telephone useless.

CLARA. Charles, do I have to stand here and be insulted?

- THIEF. Oh, I beg your pardon, sit down, won't you please?
- CLARA. I do not choose to. Charles, aren't you going to stop him? Are you going to let him take all we own?
- CHAS. He's not taking anything now, and you can't stop a man's talking, my dear.
- THIEF. Thank you, Charles. Now please let's all sit down. Paradoxically enough, I can assure you that I have something to give you. There isn't a genuine thing about the place, except Charles. Nothing irritates me like 'mask wearing,' and—well, I'm proud enough to think I can help you.
- CHAS. Clara, let's be sports.
- CLARA. No, if you won't do anything, I'll call the neighbors.
- THIEF. No neighbors to call. Nearest one is a block away and he isn't at home. Won't be for an hour. That's what comes from living in a fashionable suburb. You can't afford it either, can you Charles?
- CHAS. Truth is, Governor, we're a step away from the poor house.
- THIEF. Now wait a minute—things are not as bad as that. You've a good income and steady, haven't you? You could be living on easy street if this infernal complex of "putting on the dog" didn't have you within its clutches. To be more explicit, if you didn't have to pay about a hundred and fifty a month just for a roof over your heads. You are simply living beyond your means and for no good reason except perhaps to feed a foolish pride. Madam, won't you please sit down? I can't 'til you do, and I've been on my feet all day. It's hardly considerate.
- CLARA. I'll not be preached to by a thief.
- THIEF. Oh, now, now,—what difference the source of truth, as long as it is truth. And I haven't always been on the down grade.
- CHAS. Clara, let's be sociable. He wants to talk. Lonesome profession isn't it, old boy? Not every day you can have a chat with your costumers.
- THIEF. Yes, Charlie, my life is nearly as lonesome as yours, way out here without a friend. Will you have a cigarette? And you, Madam?
- CLARA. I do not care to smoke with a thief.
- THIEF. Right. Better not smoke anyway. I'm that old fashioned, I dislike seeing women smoke.

CHAS. Quite a cigarette!

THIEF. Your nearest neighbor's. This *was* his case. Exquisite taste! Or, perhaps you know. Great friend of yours.

CHAS. Hempsted's a connoisseur. We don't know the Hempsteds. They've never called.

THIEF. That's right, Charlie, tell the truth, now we can get places. But first, the opera, did you enjoy it?

CLARA. Oh my, yes, immensely, we are devoted to the very best.

CHAS. Clara!

CLARA. I always insist that Charles take me to the finest things.

THIEF. That's sufficient. Again I say, Charles, I don't blame you. The opera will not be over for an hour and I can't for the life of me imagine you leaving before the "lights on." Please let's cut out the make-believe. I think you both know the truth of your status, at least way down deep. I am quite sure you even appreciate the folly of it. But to know the truth is one thing; to be willing to manifest it to the world is another. That's truthfulness, honesty, integrity, "cards on the table," a virtue inclining its possessor to manifest himself, not only in word but also in deed and in life as he truly knows himself to be. It's just being fair. . . .

CLARA. Being fair. . . . I'd like to know. . . .

THIEF. Please don't screech. My head aches and your voice pierces so.

CHAS. Don't be hard on us, fellow!

THIEF. I have to be Charlie, for you are in a rut, axle deep. If you are man enough I think I can put you out on dry land, safe, secure and comfortable. Honesty is the high, grasscovered center of the road, dishonesty—the deep ruts on either side. Once you get in it is difficult to get out. The boaster—he would have the world think he's "tops"—is stuck in the rut on the right, while his partner, the "self belittler" is in the rut on the left waiting for someone to tell him he is not stuck at all. Neither can afford to pamper himself, but must muster up all the horse power he has toward shaking himself loose.

CHAS. Beg pardon, old man, but I don't follow you. This is a new situation for us, but we're anxious to learn.

THIEF. Charlie, you're a trump. I knew it the first moment I saw you. Here's my point: you're playing a game out here with

yourself, and it's a losing game for your blows at the world are all below the belt.

CHAS. Below the belt?

THIEF. Yes, you see we have to live in society and contribute our bit to its peace and well-being. We have to pay our taxes, and what is eminently more, we have to give each other those courtesies without which men could not happily live together. The least of these is honesty for there is no peace where there is no trust.

CLARA. You mean cheating at cards is out.

THIEF. I mean the cheater is out—the cheater at life. Life is like a game of cards. We are dealt just so many aces and deuces and we can't bid a slam on one ace and expect to cheat or talk our opponents into letting us have it. Our bids have to be determined by our hands, not our hands by our bids.

CHAS. Are we trying to make a slam with only one ace?

THIEF. No, I'd say you've two aces but you're overbidding; you're attempting to make everyone think you've all the face cards in the deck. You play your cards and get set—and shunned. I want to give you happiness and here is where it lies: knowing your hand, neither over-bidding it nor under-bidding it and playing it as best you can with every card on the table. Honesty has the qualities Portia attributed to mercy, it. . . .

CLARA. (*Proudly*) Blesseth him that gives and him that takes.

THIEF. Yes, him that gives with the joy of being able to look every man straight in the face with the "I'm on the level" smile. It rids him of the fear of being found out. It blesseth him that takes with a trusty friend.

CHAS. I believe I understand what you mean, Governor, but what can we do about it?

THIEF. You've a problem there, Charlie. It's not so hard to diagnose as it is to dispense and take the medicine. Right off, I would say you have to move out of here and go someplace where you can comfortably pay the rent, and then,—well, I'd suggest children. They have the marvelous and healthy effect of giving you something to worry about. They can so absorb your interest and ambition that you'll cease caring what your neighbors think of you.

CHAS. That's a big order.

THIEF. Sure, and you're a big man, Charlie. (*Glances at his watch*) This has been quite a lecture and I'll have to hurry along. But first I must see if you got it. I'll have time to give you only one question and you get but one chance. Here it is: what we have to decide now and decide very quickly, is, what would you like to have me take?

CLARA. What would we like to have . . . after all the preaching!

CHAS. You've got me, old man. I may be slow, but I don't see the necessity for your taking anything.

THIEF. I was afraid of this. Mind you there is nothing in your house that I want, but I'll take something just to accommodate you if you wish me to. Here's the case. Imagine that I go away without taking anything.

CLARA. That would suit me to a "t."

THIEF. Are you sure? Imagine it is tomorrow. The police and the reporters have caught wind of the story. Something has been taken from every house in Chamber Place, except one. The nature of the articles show that the thief is a man of rare discrimination—in fact a connoisseur of genuinity.

CLARA. A connoisseur. . . ?

THIEF. Yes, and of such judgment that to have him pass by your treasures is to cast doubt upon their authenticity. I do not exaggerate. . . . The public immediately asks, "Why did the thief take nothing from 2819 Chamber Place?" The answer is too obvious. There is nothing worth taking at 2819 Chamber Place. The public laughs. The neighbors laugh. What becomes of social pretensions after that? Have I made the question clear? Only one chance now. What would you like to have me take?

CHAS. I say that's neat—you can't have a thing,—we'll face. . . .

THIEF. Excellent, Charlie, one hundred percent.

CLARA. Oh, but you must take something. Here, how about this lovely hand-carved. . . .

THIEF. Stop. I saw it. It has the marks of the machine all over it. Zero, Clara . . . Where's my hat? . . . May I go, Charlie?

CHAS. Yes . . . and thanks, old man!

Thief exits and curtain.