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SF PERUSALS

Red Velvet

Lolita Chakrabarti

A Samuel French Acting Edition

SAMUEL FRENCH
FOUNDED 1830

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SAMUELFRENCH-LONDON.CO.UK

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ISBN 978-0-573-70322-5

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RED VELVET received its world premiere at the Tricycle Theatre, London on 11 October 2012 with the following cast (in order of appearance):

CASIMIR/HENRY FORESTER . . . . . Ferdinand Kingley
HALINA/BETTY LOVELL/
MARGARET ALDRIDGE . . . . . Rachel Finnegan
BERNARD WARD/TERENCE . . . . . Simon Chandler
IRA ALDRIDGE . . . . . Adrian Lester
CONNIE . . . . . Natasha Gordon
CHARLES KEAN . . . . . Ryan Kiggell
ELLEN TREE . . . . . Charlotte Lucas
PIERRE LAPORTE . . . . . Eugene O'Hare

RED VELVET was revived and opened at the Tricycle Theatre, London, on 23 January 2014 before making its American Premiere at St. Ann's Warehouse, New York on 25 March 2014 with the following cast (in order of appearance):

CASIMIR/HENRY FORESTER . . . . . Nic Jackman
HALINA/BETTY LOVELL/
MARGARET ALDRIDGE . . . . . Rachel Finnegan
BERNARD WARD/TERENCE . . . . . Simon Chandler
IRA ALDRIDGE . . . . . Adrian Lester
CONNIE . . . . . Natasha Gordon
CHARLES KEAN . . . . . Oliver Ryan
ELLEN TREE . . . . . Charlotte Lucas
PIERRE LAPORTE . . . . . Eugene O'Hare

The creative team for both productions were:

DIRECTOR . . . . . Indhu Rubasingham
DESIGNER . . . . . Tom Piper
LIGHTING DESIGNER . . . . . Paul Arditti
COMPOSER . . . . . Paul Englishby
CHOREOGRAPHER . . . . . Imogen Knight
CASTING . . . . . Julia Horan CDG

Rob Casey was the Associate Lighting Designer at St. Ann's Warehouse.

CHARACTERS

CASIMIR – White male, 20s, German-speaking Polish stage-hand. Inexperienced, low status and likes Halina

HALINA WOZNIAK – White female, 20s. Polish journalist. Bright, ambitious, frustrated with her life.

TERENCE – White male, 50s, English, Ira Aldridge's valet and dresser. Loyal, hard working.

IRA ALDRIDGE – Black male, 60, American, a leading actor. Grand, impatient, ferocious and unwell.

CONNIE – Jamaican female, any age, experienced, servant. Older than her years and the voice of truth.

BETTY LOVELL – White female, 20s, English, actress. Self concerned, not clever but pleasant.

HENRY FORESTER – White male, 20s, English actor. Political, self -interested, ambitious and earnest.

BERNARD WARDE – White male, 50s, English, actor. Old school, a bit lazy, opinionated and insecure.

CHARLES KEAN – White male, 30s, English, actor (son of Edmund Kean). Grand but without the talent to support it. Suffers from being Edmund's son.

ELLEN TREE – White female, late 20s, English, a leading actress. Talented, motivated, classical but progressive.

PIERRE LAPORTE – White male, mid 30s, French, manager of the theatre. Gay, revolutionary, entrepreneurial.

IRA ALDRIDGE – Black male, 26, American, actor. Ambitious, keen, passionate and optimistic.

MARGARET ALDRIDGE – White female, 30s, English, wife of Ira Aldridge, plain. Solid, trustworthy, Ira's rock.

SETTING

A Theatre dressing room, Lodz, Poland 1867
Theatre Royal, Covent Garden, London, 1833

TIME

Victorian (British and American), 19th Century

Scene One. A Theatre Dressing Room, Lodz, Poland, 1867. Evening

(An opulent room – all gilt and velvet. The room is dark. We see a dressing table with a lamp. A chaise longue and a mirror. A costume dummy next to a silk screen. There is a large trunk nearby. It is raining outside.)

(The main door opens and a man, **CASIMIR**, *German, 20s, enters. He hides in the shadows. A woman follows him in, they shouldn't be here. This is* **HALINA**, *20s, Polish. She closes the door.)*

HALINA. Casimir? Casimir. Mach keinen Unsinn. Wo bist Du?

(Casimir?... Casimir don't mess around…where are you?)

CASIMIR. Buh!

(Boo!)

(She jumps.)

HALINA. Mein Gott! Du bist ja furchtbar!

(Oh my god! You're terrible.)

CASIMIR. Und Du bist suess.

(And you're lovely.)

HALINA. Schau mal dieses Zimmer an…

(Look at this room…)

CASIMIR. Lieber wuerde ich Dich angucken.

(I'd rather look at you.)

HALINA. Es ist hier furchtbar still.

(It's very quiet in here.)

(He kisses her. She stumbles back. He catches her.)

CASIMIR. Achtung.
(Steady.)

HALINA. Tut mir leid, ich bin so ungeschickt. Was ist denn da drin?
(Sorry, I'm so clumsy. What's in here?)

(She goes to the trunk and tries to open it but can't.)

CASIMIR. Kostueme, wahrscheinlich. Und Zubehoer.
(Costumes probably. Personal props.)

HALINA. Du kennst Dich aber gut aus.
(You know everything.)

CASIMIR. Und Du duftest nach Erdbeeren.
(And you smell of strawberries.)

(He goes to kiss her again. A loud thud outside the door makes **CASIMIR** *and* **HALINA** *jump. They hide.)*

(The door swings opens and **TERENCE***, white, English, 50s, enters with a vanity case, a biscuit box under his arm, dragging a large, heavy suitcase.)*

*(***HALINA** *and* **CASIMIR** *freeze.* **TERENCE** *does not see them.)*

TERENCE. For goodness sake…

(He stumbles into the room lugging the case. He removes his wet coat and hangs it up.)

The red or the brocade, it's not a hard decision. But give a king a choice… My own bloody fault.

(As his eyes adjust, he edges to the dressing table.)

And if it's Lear why bring Shylock? O for a muse of logic. My back feels twice my age.

(He puts the vanity case and biscuit box down and finds the lamp. He opens the vanity case, brings out two birthday cards and a box of matches. He lights the lamp. **CASIMIR** *edges silently to the door and motions to* **HALINA** *who ignores him.* **TERENCE** *sees them.)*

Oh my giddy…! You frightened the life out of me… What on earth are you doing in here?

CASIMIR. Verzeihung, mein Herr… Wir haben uns verirrt. Verzeihung, bitte. Wir gehen schon.
(So sorry sir… We got lost I'm so sorry…we're going now.)

TERENCE. Who gave you permission to…?

HALINA. Good evening… I'm from The Lodz Times…

TERENCE. I beg your pardon?

CASIMIR. Was hast Du gerade gesagst?
(What are you saying?)

HALINA. I'm from top Polish paper, Lodz…

TERENCE. I'm sorry how did you get in here?

HALINA. Casimir was giving me tour…

TERENCE. A tour…?

CASIMIR. Du sprichst Englisch?
(You speak English?)

HALINA. Mr Aldridge is here?

TERENCE. These are private rooms. Now if you don't mind…

*(***TERENCE** *marches to the door and opens it for them to leave.* **CASIMIR** *moves,* **HALINA** *does not.)*

HALINA. I wrote an appointment. So I am here.

TERENCE. All interviews were cancelled…

CASIMIR. Ich verstehe nicht, was sie sagt, aber ich…
(I don't understand what she's saying but I'm…)

TERENCE. This is absolutely unacceptable…

HALINA. Mr Aldridge…is…is being ill?

TERENCE. Who told you that?

CASIMIR. Was sagst Du jetzt?
(What are you talking about?)

HALINA. He's been in Lodz ten days…

CASIMIR. Er scheint mir recht zornig.
(He's looking really annoyed.)

TERENCE. A chest cold, nothing more… Show her out. Get-her-out.

*(***CASIMIR** *takes her arm, she shrugs him off.* **TERENCE** *lays the suitcase down and starts to open it.)*

CASIMIR. Wir sollten gehen.
(We have to go.)

HALINA. A few questions, no problem.

TERENCE. … Show her out the same way you showed her in.

CASIMIR. Das war nicht meine Absicht. Ich hatte keine Ahnung, dass sie… Verzeihung, mein Herr…
(I didn't mean to… I had no idea that she… I'm so sorry sir I…)

IRA. *(O.S.)*
Terence! Terence!

TERENCE. For pity's sake!… Get out now!

*(***TERENCE** *motions them out.* **HALINA** *does not move.)*

TERENCE. You've no idea, no idea…

IRA. *(O.S.)*
Why is there no one to meet me! Where the devil…!

TERENCE. God help me!

*(***TERENCE** *rushes out.)*

IRA. *(O.S.)*
Get this thing off me, I'm drowning.

CASIMIR. Was in Gottes Namen?
(What the hell was that?)

HALINA. Tut mir leid…
(I'm sorry…)

CASIMIR. Entschuldigung? Entschuldigung? Was machst Du bloss? Was hast Du gesagt?
(Sorry? Sorry? What are you doing?)

HALINA. Ich muss mit ihm reden.
(I have to speak to him…)

(He grabs her arm roughly and pulls her towards the door.)

HALINA. Nein, nein. Lass mich los…
(No, no, get off me…)

CASIMIR. Ich verliere hier meine Stellung.
(I'll lose my job.)

HALINA. Bestimmt nicht.
(You won't.)

CASIMIR. Du hast mich ausgenutzt.
(You used me.)

HALINA. Ja, so ist es.
(That's how things work.)

*(***HALINA** *struggles hard.)*

TERENCE. *(O.S.)*
You have to keep wrapped up sir.

IRA. *(O.S.)*
Tryin' to kill me… I felt buried. I'm soaked. Like a gigantic sponge…

CASIMIR. Wir muessen weg hier.
(We have to go now.)

HALINA. Ich kann nicht.
(I can't.)

TERENCE. *(O.S.)*
I did suggest a cab sir. Before you go in…

*(***IRA ALDRIDGE***, black, American, 60 enters. He is well dressed, well fed and imposing.* **TERENCE** *follows carrying a long, heavy coat.)*

IRA. I am perfectly capable of…

*(***IRA** *sees* **HALINA** *and* **CASIMIR**. *Their struggle stops and no one dares speak.)*

IRA. These are my rooms?

TERENCE. Yes sir.

IRA. That is my name on the door?

TERENCE. Yes sir.

IRA. Then who the hell are the reception committee?

TERENCE. …a journalist…

IRA. For god's sake Terry, it isn't complicated.

TERENCE. I'm sorry…

IRA. This is private goddamn you. Private. How the hell did he sneak in…? Tell me, tell me that?

TERENCE. I've had sharp words with her sir. It's all in hand and she's leaving now.

*(***HALINA** *steps forward, hand outstretched.)*

HALINA. Erm…good evening… I'm… Halina Wozniak.

(Silence.)

HALINA. …I'm…senior reporter…with the Lodz Times…

*(***IRA** *stares at her.)*

TERENCE. I did cancel everything sir.

HALINA. Just a few…

IRA. What are you?

CASIMIR. Verzeihen Sie, mein Herr. Verzeihen Sie. (Sorry sir. Very sorry.)

TERENCE. A stage hand sir.

IRA. In cahoots with the skirt? A rummage in something sweet at my expense?

TERENCE. Go and call the manager at once.

*(***CASIMIR** *looks blank.)*

TERENCE. Oh for pity's sake. I'm terribly sorry sir, should I…?

*(***IRA** *silences him.)*

IRA. Are you not afraid? Because you really should be. An order from me and you'll be hauled away and charged.

*(***IRA** *circles her.)*

IRA. A senior reporter?… How senior?

HALINA. Sorry…?

IRA. You said senior…

HALINA. I work for…paper…

IRA. Your age?

HALINA. Twenty two.

IRA. Years of experience. That why they sent you?

CASIMIR. Tut mir leid, mein Herr, es tut mir furchtbar leid. Es wird nie wieder vorkommen. Sie haben mein Wort…

(I am sorry sir… I feel very… I am sorry… I promise I have learned my lesson. It absolutely won't happen…)

TERENCE. Quiet!

HALINA. It is not being his fault, it was on my request. I… I need to speak with you… My parents, they saw you, the last time. My father, he is…overwhelmed that I am coming to meet with you.

IRA. And you? Are you…overwhelmed?

HALINA. Yes.

*(***IRA** *looks at* **CASIMIR**.*)*

IRA. Resume your duties.

CASIMIR. Entschuldigung, mein Herr.

(Very sorry sir.)

IRA. Tell him.

HALINA. Er sagt, zurück zur Arbeit.

(He says get back to work.)

CASIMIR. Danke, mein Herr. Ich danke Ihnen.

(Thank you sir, thank you.)

*(***CASIMIR** *exits)*

TERENCE. I'm sorry sir…it's impossible to be understood here. I'll take her to the office myself.

IRA. If you'd been vigilant in the first place there'd be no damn need…

TERENCE. It wasn't… No sir.

IRA. It's not hard what you do. It's not a demanding role. It's vigilance Terence – vigilance.

*(***HALINA** *sees the cards on the table, picks one up.* **TERENCE** *grabs it back.)*

HALINA. Your birthday?…

TERENCE. Put that down.

HALINA. In Poland, we have name days…in that way you keep your age a…how you say…geheim…secret?

IRA. But I know yours…

HALINA. …Is it safe?

*(***IRA** *comes up close to* **HALINA**.*)*

IRA. I remember twenty two. Fearless and stupid, continuous guesswork. Playing at grown up. Making small talk but dying.

*(***HALINA** *looks like she might cry.)*

IRA. How long do I have?

TERENCE. Just an hour sir. They've put the performance as late as they can as you requested.

IRA. Leave her.

TERENCE. Pardon?

IRA. Must I constantly repeat…!

TERENCE. No sir.

*(***TERENCE** *exits.)*

HALINA. Thank you.

IRA. I haven't given you anything yet.

(He looks at her.)

IRA. So… You really a journalist?

HALINA. Yes, yes… I have my…job…papers.

(She rummages through her bag and finds her press papers. She also gets her notebook and pencil.)

IRA. See that full moon? Like a bowl of milk, hanging so low I wanted to drink it… Pass me that box.

*(***HALINA** *passes the biscuit box.)*

IRA. Amanda baked them herself but they crumbled, every last one of them.

HALINA. Amanda your wife…

IRA. I scoop them out in handfuls like the Indians do.

(He offers it to her. **HALINA** *gingerly takes a scoop and eats them with difficulty.)*

IRA. Tastes of…home.

*(***IRA** *dusts* **HALINA***'s mouth of crumbs.* **HALINA** *opens her notebook.)*

HALINA. …so, how you feeling?

IRA. About?

HALINA. You were being…you were sick…

IRA. Health makes dull conversation.

HALINA. I'm sorry… I just wanted…

*(***IRA** *starts to take off his shoes, undoes his cuffs, loosens his tie.* **HALINA** *is uncomfortable, unsure.)*

IRA. … Boy?!!

*(***IRA***'s shout makes* **HALINA** *jump.* **CASIMIR** *enters.)*

CASIMIR. Mein Herr?
(Sir?)

IRA. I need light.

CASIMIR. Tut mir Leid…verzeihung, mein Herr…
(I am sorry… I am so sorry sir…)

HALINA. Drehen Sie die Lampen hoch.

(Turn the lamps on.)

*(***CASIMIR** *does so.)*

IRA. You smell that? Been fifty years but I'm still there. Craning my scrawny neck as far as I can, peering at the stage over the bars. Joshua, a few years older than me, holding me back in case I fall. Under a spell at the back of the gods, a sea of red below filled with expectations of greatness…

HALINA. So… I wanted to ask you about…

IRA. Something about velvet – a deep promise of what's to come, the sweat of others embedded in the pile. A crushed map of who was here folded in.

*(***CASIMIR** *gets no instruction and reluctantly leaves.)*

IRA. You from here?

HALINA. Er…now…not before…well..my family are from Radom…in…

IRA. …the east. So you're Russian.

HALINA. No I am Polish.

IRA. But Poland doesn't exist.

HALINA. Of course we do but Prussian king and Russians are not admitting it.

IRA. Russians – an enduring people but they got nervous leaders. Uneasy about who's lurking in the dark. Banned my Scottish King – afraid it would give the people ideas. Birnam Wood coming to Moscow. That's the beauty of Shakespeare – he unnerves you.

HALINA. …You are from New York?

IRA. And you have done your homework.

*(***IRA** *massages his neck and shoulder.)*

IRA. Lear makes me stoop. Sits on me like a weight. I must wear him, not just his shoes…

*(***IRA** *unbuttons his waistcoat.)*

HALINA. So…? Do you find Lodz much changed?

IRA. The rail line comes all the way in now. There are more houses, more people, more streets… In the suitcase… the dressing gown…

(She is not a dresser but she goes to the suitcase and passes him the gown.)

HALINA. Everyone wants our cotton. Mr Sheibler's building two more factories.

IRA. Karol's a clever man.

HALINA. You are nonstop on tour?

IRA. I'm in demand.

HALINA. Of course. You must be meeting many people of interest. I read in paper you receive Knighthood…

IRA. From the Duke of Saxe-Meinengen yes.

HALINA. And you met Emperor Franz Joseph also?

IRA. There was a small presentation in Vienna…

HALINA. And London?… You must miss London?

IRA. Not really.

HALINA. You do not long in all these travelling to be… working at home? With your wife, children, friends…?

IRA. I go home when I can.

HALINA. Your wife is politician's daughter. Is…?

IRA. That was Margaret, my first wife.

HALINA. I make bad mistake. I…

IRA. She passed three years ago. Get your facts right.

HALINA. Yes…sorry… Your children must miss her.

IRA. We didn't have children.

HALINA. But I read you have four?

IRA. With Amanda, who used to be an opera singer. You want me to write this for you?

HALINA. I'm sorry I'm confused. Your eldest son is eighteen?

IRA. Uh huh.

HALINA. And just to be total clear for me…you married Amanda…?

IRA. Two years ago.

*(***HALINA** *scribbles.)*

HALINA. So…you haven't play London since… I have it here…sorry…my notes… Covent Garden was in…

(She rifles through her notebook.)

IRA. …'33.

HALINA. Yes…here. I have it here, '33…

IRA. I played the Lyceum in '58.

HALINA. I did not find information of that.

IRA. Hard to keep track of it all.

HALINA. But still you have not played Covent Garden again since…

IRA. I have played Cologne, Vienna, Dresden, Leipzig, St Petersberg, Moscow, Berlin, Prague, Stockholm, Budpest… I've been busy. I've recently agreed to play The Academy of Music in New York at the end of this month.

HALINA. Oh?

IRA. Four thousand six hundred seats, it's the Bolshoi twice over. D'you know I just found out that I'm the highest paid artist ever in Russia.

HALINA. Yes, no question. So many places. Which one you most enjoy?

IRA. Which one did I enjoy?

HALINA. Yes…it's alright to ask…?

IRA. Strangely…simple.

HALINA. I'm sorry I…

IRA. Rybinsk…north of Moscow. Not easy by road but the theatre was crammed. They'd never heard of Shakespeare. Can you imagine that? Every time I raised my hand – they literally gasped. It was a pin drop performance…

HALINA. You are English now.

IRA. …there was a flawed perfection in it. There really was.

HALINA. …I always thought, that for Englishmen, I mean for all actor…that London…is the er…absolute… roof…sorry, peak.

IRA. And I played it.

HALINA. But Covent Garden is more than…over 30 years past. You don't desire to go back?

IRA. I prefer to go forward.

HALINA. The reviews were…well, I… I met someone who said…

IRA. Gossip is not a good foundation for an interview.

HALINA. Gossip? Not gossip he is expert on…

IRA. I was there, just ask.

HALINA. Is it…is it not like addiction, once you play you must play more? To know your… your value and get… how you say…recognize for craft?… What I mean… I ask…why you have not played Covent Garden since?

IRA. Well…let me see…

HALINA. Halina.

IRA. …Halina… London is a limited pocket of work. Same faces…same buildings…same critics writing the same things. There's an indolence amongst those who have everything on their doorstep. So I chose to tour Europe – because one finds there is a thirst and one is invited to offer a glass of water. I've played Rybinsk and once you've done that it's hard to…to settle…for London.

HALINA. Yes…but London is…

IRA. I think that's enough.

HALINA. You played for…

IRA. I have to prepare…

HALINA. …only two nights…

IRA. For the long storm ahead.

HALINA. …why was that?

*(***IRA** *stops and looks directly at* **HALINA**.*)*

IRA. What do you normally write?

HALINA. Sorry?

IRA. What was your last article?

HALINA. My last article…?

IRA. Yes.

HALINA. Well…it was…an event in the community…

IRA. It wasn't an interview?

HALINA. No…it was a lady…she had…small dog who was trapped…

IRA. A dog?

HALINA. A family story that…

*(***IRA** *opens the door.)*

IRA. Terence!!

HALINA. But this article is important. We don't have such great artists…

*(***TERENCE** *enters.)*

TERENCE. Sir?… Time to go.

HALINA. But… I haven't finished…

TERENCE. Mr Aldridge is on stage shortly.

HALINA. I… I…we can continue after…?

TERENCE. You have to leave now. *(calling)* Boy!

HALINA. I have few more questions…please…

IRA. No, no, no, no, no. Let's put this cart back where she belongs. You exist because I do. Without me you'd be even less than you already are. You think I slog my whole life to lay myself out for you to pick your way through the irrelevant detail? You are artless, charmless, inept and disrespectful. A skirt and a face and nothing between. What have you done? What have you achieved?

HALINA. Mr Aldridge…!?

IRA. Get out!

TERENCE. Out. Now.

*(***TERENCE** *grabs her arm and pushes her out the door.* **CASIMIR** *is waiting outside.* **TERENCE** *closes the door on them.)*

IRA. For pity's sake why the hell do I pay you?

TERENCE. I don't know how she…

IRA. I told you never, never…!

TERENCE. It wasn't my fault, I was…

IRA. If you're not up to the damn task…

TERENCE. I'm sorry sir…it won't…happen again…

IRA. An amateur. A nobody, digging…

TERENCE. I've spoken to the manager…

IRA. We had better be full.

TERENCE. Completely.

IRA. Damn right we are.

(Awkward silence. **TERENCE** *gives him some medicine.)*

TERENCE. It'll be wonderful tonight sir, just wonderful. Back where we belong.

IRA. Over thirty years Terence… Can you imagine that?

TERENCE. Thirty years?

IRA. I am always alone.

TERENCE. But I'm here sir.

IRA. I don't want you…

TERENCE. Sorry…?

IRA. I said…

TERENCE. I'm sorry I let you down sir but… I'm here to assist…

IRA. I've been lying in that godless bed for ten days. You fed me, washed me, clothed me, you've assisted enough. This is what I do and I always do it alone, do you understand? It gets forgotten in the detail. You set up and clean up but the meat of the thing is only ever me. Is that clear?

TERENCE. Sir…if I may suggest…

IRA. What? What's to suggest Terry?

TERENCE. It's why I'm here… I'm always…it's my job sir.

IRA. And this is mine… This theatre is heaving because I am here. I – Am – Here. It is reputation that endures. Geography is irrelevant. Do you hear me?

TERENCE. Sir.

*(***TERENCE** *reluctantly starts to leave.)*

IRA. Terry…?

TERENCE. Sir?

IRA. Do you miss London?

TERENCE. Every day.

*(***TERENCE** *goes. As the door shuts* **IRA** *relaxes and we see he is exhausted.)*

(The sound of protesters, chanting, shouting. Coach and horses trying to get through. Police trying to keep order. Chaos. As the lights fade hundreds of voices, grow louder and louder. A distant 'Rule, Britannia! Britannia, rule the waves!' The sound of skirmishes become violent, screams, shouts.)

Scene Two. 1833 – 34 Years Earlier. The Stage. Theatre Royal, Covent Garden, London. Early Afternoon

(A few chairs placed randomly around the stage. There is a table to one side.)

(A Jamaican woman in a crisp uniform, **CONNIE***, enters with a tea tray. She arranges it on a table, methodically neat.)*

(The sounds of protest continue faintly as **BETTY LOVELL***, 20s, white,* **HENRY FORESTER***, 20s, white, and* **BERNARD WARDE***, 50s, white, enter. They remove coats, hats, put down bags.* **BETTY***'s coat is splattered with flour.)*

BETTY. It's absolutely mad out there. Connie I need you.

*(***CONNIE** *takes* **BETTY***'s splattered coat and exits.)*

BERNARD. They're ransacking the city…

HENRY. I'm sure London's seen worse sir. It's terrifically exciting.

BERNARD. Enough excitement on this stage thank you very much…

HENRY. But we're at a crossroads sir – a point of absolute, unequivocal change. Makes the blood rush.

BERNARD. Makes my blood freeze.

HENRY. The proposals are imperative Mr Warde.

BERNARD. You can't be that naive…

HENRY. The petitions have been gathering steam for years…

BERNARD. Most people probably don't even know what they're signing…

*(***CONNIE** *re-enters with a costume dummy and puts* **BETTY***'s coat on it. She inspects the flour damage.)*

HENRY. The buying and selling of human beings should be no part of any civilized society. When the trade is

finally abolished in all British colonies, we'll be able to hold our heads up high again sir…

BERNARD. For goodness sake boy, our whole economy relies on the labour force on those plantations. How do you think this theatre was built? It's how things are.

HENRY. I think that's terribly short sighted…

BERNARD. Then it's a good thing I have spectacles.

*(***BERNARD** *puts on his glasses and opens his newspaper. Irritated silence.)*

BETTY. Have you had any news about Mr Kean?

BERNARD. No.

BETTY. Awful wasn't it? I saw everything from the wings.

HENRY. I could tell something was amiss… When he spat 'Villain…' I don't know why, I just ran on.

BETTY. Did you hear what he said after he fell?

HENRY. Oh yes and his enunciation was perfect even then – "O God, I am dying. Speak to them, Charles".

BETTY. I was crying.

HENRY. Poor thing.

BETTY. I wonder what's going to happen?

*(***CONNIE** *brushes the coat down by hand.)*

BETTY. Can you brush it Connie?

CONNIE. Yes miss.

BETTY. Don't use water, it'll cake. *(to* **BERNARD***)* Did Pierre mention anything to you sir?

BERNARD. No, dear 'fraid not. Shifty lot the French, play their cards very close to the chest.

HENRY. How's Elfin Sprite?

BETTY. Deathly. It was meant to be a filler for Monday nights when Mr Kean wouldn't play but because of all this, we're on indefinitely. Houses are terrible… What have you been up to?

HENRY. I'm pathetic when I'm not working. I wasted every moment.

(The sound of protest outside swells briefly.)

BERNARD. They really should organise debate, not this kind of lawlessness.

HENRY. But people get frustrated Mr Warde…

BERNARD. I'll say but I don't throw flour at them to alleviate my tensions. If you want to say something, say it.

HENRY. How can they when they've stopped mass meetings? The government are so terrified of revolution they're suppressing us all.

BERNARD. This is an excuse for looting and bad behaviour. *(shouting outside)* This is England – there's no Bastille to storm here!

BETTY. My head's thumping!

BERNARD. It's that infernal racket…

BETTY. No I went out last night, drank far too much, couldn't afford any of it.

HENRY. Raw egg, dash of vinegar and a bit of salt. Works every time.

BERNARD. Look at this , it's like an obituary. He's still with us for god's sake. 'On Friday last Edmund Kean collapsed on stage marking the end of an era.' He's not going to feel better reading that is he?

*(***CONNIE** *shows* **BETTY** *the brushed coat.)*

BETTY. Thank god it wasn't eggs. Coat's not ruined is it?

CONNIE. No miss.

*(***BETTY** *indicates for* **CONNIE** *to take the coat to hang it up.)*

BETTY. D'you want a cup of tea?

HENRY. Not for me.

BETTY. Where's the sugar from Connie?

CONNIE. Don't know miss.

BETTY. I'll just have milk… I've stopped buying sugar and West Indian cotton – it's for a good cause. They're not well treated at all you know. Anyway East Indian cotton's on the up, cheaper too.

BERNARD. We are Great Britain. Cheap labour is part of every great country. It's how things are done.

HENRY. But they're people Mr Warde, like you and me. They don't even have basic human rights…

BERNARD. Oh for goodness sake, the world's not fair Henry. This isn't a fairy tale where everything comes up right in the end. This concept of equality and freedom, it's a fad, impossible to achieve because there'll always be those of us who must lead and those who follow. It is the very root of a civilized society. Now if you don't mind I'd rather focus on the problem at hand. Where on earth is Pierre? He did say two o'clock, didn't he?

BETTY. That's what I was told.

BERNARD. Well a later call would've been nice.

*(***CHARLES***, white, wiry, 30s, enters with* **ELLEN TREE***, white, forthright, late 20s. She guides him in, talking softly, helps him to a seat, takes his coat and bag.)*

(When they see **CHARLES KEAN** *a kind of hush settles. Everyone edges collectively around him.)*

BERNARD. Charles! How is your father?

BETTY. Any news?

CHARLES. He's very weak.

BETTY. Awful.

BERNARD. Totally unexpected, he just fell to the floor.

HENRY. I did try to catch him sir but…

CHARLES. I know. I know. Thank you all.

ELLEN. He's resting isn't he Charles? Weak but comfortable.

(Collection of sympathies – 'terrible', 'shame', 'just awful'.)

BETTY. Can I get you some tea Mr Kean?

CHARLES. Please.

BETTY. Miss Tree?

ELLEN. Yes Betty, thank you dear.

BETTY. Connie…

CONNIE. Yes miss.

*(***CONNIE** *prepares the tea.)*

BERNARD. How the devil did you get through?

ELLEN. We took a cab. Couple of Peelers at stage door helped us in.

BERNARD. Did you see The Times Charles? 'One is reminded of the momentous achievements of a very singular man'.

CHARLES. Thank you Bernard. That means a lot.

ELLEN. How are you Betty?

BETTY. I've not been sleeping at all well. And I haven't paid my lodgings this week. What if we go dark? If we close…

ELLEN. Pierre's called us in. There must be a plan.

BETTY. But can you be certain?

HENRY. Would you not rather be on hand at home sir?

CHARLES. No really…

HENRY. When my uncle John was ill I was an absolute puddle…

BERNARD. Are you really alright to go on Charles?

CHARLES. Thank you for your concern but… I feel of more service to father here, than at home.

HENRY. Have you given your Moor Mr Kean?

*(***CONNIE** *arrives with the tea.)*

BETTY. Henry!

CHARLES. No it's fine… Iago many times but…the title role was always father's.

ELLEN. You could go on with the book Charlie.

CHARLES. No need.

*(***CONNIE** *goes back to her 'station' as* **PIERRE LAPORTE***, white, French, very dapper, 35, enters through the auditorium, flustered and removing his coat.)*

ELLEN. Pierre…?

PIERRE. Oui. J'arrive.

ELLEN. Are you alright?

PIERRE. My ears are ringing. Someone knocked into me and ran off. I couldn't get round the building.

ELLEN. Connie, run and tell the company manager Mr Laporte has arrived safely will you?

(Exit **CONNIE***.)*

BERNARD. Have you checked your purse?

PIERRE. Oui, merci. Charles…thank you for coming in. Any improvement?

CHARLES. No, no… I'm afraid not.

PIERRE. Where's everyone else?

BETTY. They've blocked Trafalgar Square.

BERNARD. An absolute nightmare.

HENRY. But a minor inconvenience compared to the suffering…

BERNARD. Listen sonny Jim, I want sugar in my tea. I don't give a stuff how it gets there.

*(***CONNIE** *re enters.)*

BERNARD. Tea Connie. Buckets of sugar.

*(***BETTY** *puts a hand on* **HENRY***'s arm to silence him.)*

PIERRE. D'accord, we have no time to waste… There is much to do.

BETTY. Are we closing?

PIERRE. Non, non Betty, The Theatre Royal hasn't been dark since it opened. We will not be closing.

(Relieved murmurs.)

PIERRE. First, on behalf of us all, our thoughts are with you Charles. We pray Edmund will make a full recovery.

(Mutters of 'yes, yes,' 'hear, hear.' **CONNIE** *gives* **BERNARD** *his cup of tea and goes back to her station.)*

BERNARD. We'll move up will we?

PIERRE. Pardon?

BERNARD. Well… I hope I'm not speaking out of turn… but I rather presumed that Charles would take the title role and we'd all bump up.

PIERRE. Ah. I see. Non…er that is not the case…no 'bumping' Bernard.

BERNARD. Oh I see.

PIERRE. We will stay as we are.

CHARLES. How's that possible?

PIERRE. Well I have been in meetings these last two days discussing the options and… You have a pivotal role already Charles. If you move, Bernard must play Iago then Giles must play Brabantio.

HENRY. If you do need me sir, I'm word perfect on Cassio. I'm absolutely prepared.

PIERRE. Thank you Henry, but to be frank…it would be… too disruptive for us all.

CHARLES. We're disrupted already I think.

PIERRE. Of course but we must try to…

CHARLES. You're being extremely unclear Pierre.

PIERRE. I have engaged someone else… I didn't want to increase the pressure on you Charles.

CHARLES. Someone else?

PIERRE. Yes.

CHARLES. Is it William? Because I happen to know that he…

PIERRE. No. William's engaged.

BETTY. *(Whispered to* **HENRY***)*
William ?

HENRY. *(Mouths to* **BETTY***)*
Macready.

BETTY. *(Whispered back)*
Oh my!

CHARLES. Have you asked everyone Pierre? Is that how much you wish to avoid… disruption?

PIERRE. Not at all. My mind was clear from the start.

CHARLES. Then you're keeping us in suspense.

PIERRE. I have managed to coax Mr Aldridge, Ira Aldridge to debut on our stage.

HENRY. Oh my goodness!

BERNARD. Can't recall the face.

HENRY. That's just fantastic.

PIERRE. His returns are excellent. Full houses always.

HENRY. Sorry Mr Kean I didn't mean…

PIERRE. Ira has been in the provinces for many years collecting remarkable reviews.

CHARLES. Did you say Aldridge?

PIERRE. Oui. He has played the Moor to great acclaim in countless theatres.

ELLEN. Do you know him Charles?

CHARLES. I was meant to play with him in Belfast…a minor engagement. But I was ill, couldn't travel…

ELLEN. So frustrating…

CHARLES. It was only a couple of performances. Didn't hear anything of it.

ELLEN. Aldridge, Aldridge… I think I've read his reviews.

HENRY. Have you seen him Mr Laporte?

PIERRE. Mais oui.

HENRY. So you know…?

ELLEN. Know what?

HENRY. That he…really is the best man for the job.

BETTY. He's the one from the Coburg isn't he? 'The Revolt of Surinam'?

HENRY. He acted the other slaves off the stage.

ELLEN. So you've seen him?

HENRY. Several times. I had a friend in it - his first engagement. He was also one of the slaves. He wasn't terribly good I'm afraid. Tried too hard. Hasn't worked much since. But he did tell me how astonishing Mr Aldridge was to work with. I think that was one of his first engagements in this country.

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