

ROSENCRANTZ AND GUILDENSTERN.

A TRAGIC EPISODE,

IN THREE TABLEAUX,

FOUNDED ON AN OLD DANISH LEGEND.

BY

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Vaudeville Theatre, London, on Wednesday, June 3rd, 1891.*

DRAMATIS PERSONÆ

KING CLAUDIUS, <i>of Denmark</i>	MR. ALEXANDER WATSON
QUEEN GERTRUDE, <i>of Denmark</i>	MRS. THEODORE WRIGHT
HAMLET, <i>Queen Gertrude's Son – betrothed to OPHELIA</i>	MR. FRANK LINDO
ROSENCRANTZ, <i>a Courtier, in love with OPHELIA</i>	MR. S. HERBERTE-BASING
GUILDENSTERN, <i>a Courtier</i>	MR. C. LAMBOURNE
FIRST PLAYER.....	MR. C. STEWART
SECOND PLAYER.....	MISS BESSLE
OPHELIA	MISS MARY BESSLE

Courtiers, Pages, etc.

ARGUMENT

KING CLAUDIUS, *when a young man, wrote a five-act tragedy which was damned, and all reference to it forbidden under penalty of death. The KING has a son – HAMLET – whose tendency to soliloquy has so alarmed his mother, QUEEN GERTRUDE, that she has sent for ROSENCRANTZ and GUILDENSTERN, to devise some Court revels for his entertainment. ROSENCRANTZ is a former lover of OPHELIA (to whom HAMLET is betrothed), and they lay their heads together to devise a plan by which HAMLET might be put out of the way. Some Court theatricals are in preparation. OPHELIA and ROSENCRANTZ persuade HAMLET to play his father's tragedy before the KING and Court. HAMLET, who is unaware of the proscription, does so, and he is banished, and ROSENCRANTZ happily united to OPHELIA.*

ROSENCRANTZ AND GUILDENSTERN

FIRST TABLEAU.

Interior of KING CLAUDIUS'S Palace. CLAUDIUS discovered seated in a gloomy attitude. QUEEN GERTRUDE on a stool at his feet, consoling, him.

Q. Nay, be not sad, my lord!

Cl. Sad, lovèd Queen?

If by an effort to the will I could
Annul the ever present Past – disperse
The gaunt and gloomy ghosts of bygone deeds,
Or bind them with imperishable chains
In caverns of the past incarcerate,
Then could I smile again – but not till then!

Q. Oh, my dear lord!

If aught there be that gives thy soul unrest
Tell it to me.

Cl. Well-loved and faithful wife
Tender companion of my faltering life,
Yes; I *can* trust thee! Listen then to me:
Many years since – when but a headstrong lad –
I wrote a five-act tragedy.

Q. (interested). Indeed?

Cl. A play, writ by a king –

Q. And *such* a King! –

Cl. Finds a ready market. It was read at once,
But ere 'twas read, accepted. Then the Press
Teemed with porpentous import. Elsinore
Was duly placarded by willing hands;
We know that walls have ears – I gave them tongues –
And they were eloquent with promises.

Q. Even the *dead* walls?

Cl. (solemnly). Ay, the deader they,
The louder they proclaimed!

Q. (appalled). Oh, marvellous!

Cl. The day approached – all Denmark stood agape.
Arrangements were devised at once by which
Seats might be booked a twelvemonth in advance.
The first night came.

Q. And did the play succeed?

Cl. In one sense, yes.

Q. Oh, I was sure of it!

Cl. A farce was given to play the people in –
My tragedy succeeded that. That's all!

Q. And how long did it run?

Cl. About ten minutes.

Ere the first act had traced one-half its course
The curtain fell, never to rise again!

Q. And did the people hiss?

Cl. No – worse than that –
They laughed. Sick with the shame that covered me,
I knelt down, palsied, in my private box,
And prayed the hearsed and catacombèd dead
Might quit their vaults, and claim me for their own!
But it was not to be.

Q. Oh, my good lord,
The house was surely packed!

Cl. It was – by me.
My favourite courtiers crowded every place –
From floor to floor the house was peopled by
The sycophantic crew. My tragedy
Was more than even sycophants could stand!

Q. Was it, my lord, so very, very bad?

Cl. Not to deceive my trusting Queen, it was.

Q. And when the play failed, didst thou take no steps
To set thyself right with the world?

Cl. I did.
The acts were five – though by five acts too long,
I wrote an Act by way of epilogue –
An act by which the penalty of death
Was meted out to all who sneered at it.
The play was not good – but the punishment
Of those that laughed at it was capital.

Q. Think on't no more, my lord. Now, mark me well:
To cheer our son, whose solitary tastes
And tendency to long soliloquy
Have much alarmed us, I, unknown to thee,
Have sent for Rosencrantz and Guildenstern –
Two merry knaves, kin to Polonius,
Who will devise such revels in our Court –
Such antic schemes of harmless merriment –
As shall abstract his meditative mind
From sad employment. Claudius, who can tell
But that they may divert my lord as well?
Ah, they are here!

Enter GUILDENSTERN.

Guild. My homage to the Queen!

Enter ROSENCRANTZ.

Ros. (kneeling). In hot obedience to the Royal 'hest
We have arrived, prepared to do our best.

Q. We welcome you to Court. Our Chamberlain
Shall see that you are suitably disposed.
Here is his daughter. She will hear your will
And see that it receives fair countenance.

[*Exeunt KING and QUEEN lovingly.*

Enter OPHELIA.

Ros. Ophelia! [Both embrace her.

Oph. (delighted and surprised). Rosencrantz and Guildenstern!
This meeting likes me much. We have not met
Since we were babies!

Ros. The Queen hath summoned us,
And I have come in a half-hearted hope
That I may claim once more my baby-love!

Oph. Alas, I am betrothed!

Ros. Betrothed? To whom?

Oph. To Hamlet!

Ros. Oh, incomprehensible!
Thou lovest Hamlet?

Oph. (demurely). Nay, I said not so –
I said we were betrothed.

Guild. And what's he like?

Oph. Alike for no two seasons at a time.
Sometimes he's tall – sometimes he's very short –
Now with black hair – now with a flaxen wig –
Sometimes an English accent – then a French –
Then English with a strong provincial "burr"
Once an American, and once a Jew –
But Danish never, take him how you will!
And strange to say, whate'er his tongue may be,
Whether he's dark or flaxen – English – French –
Though we're in Denmark, A.D. ten – six – two –
He always dresses as King James the First!

Guild. Oh, he is surely mad!

Oph. Well, there again
Opinion is divided. Some men hold
That he's the sanest, far, of all sane men –
Some that he's really sane, but shamming mad –
Some that he's really mad, but shamming sane –
Some that he will be mad, some that he *was* –
Some that he couldn't be. But on the whole
(As far as I can make out what they mean)
The favourite theory's somewhat like this:
Hamlet is idiotically sane
With lucid intervals of lunacy.

Ros. We must devise some plan to stop this match!

Guild. Stay! Many years ago, King Claudius
Was guilty of a five-act tragedy.
The play was damned, and none may mention it
Under the pain of death. We might contrive
To make him play this piece before the King,
And take the consequence.

Ros. Impossible!
For every copy was destroyed.

Oph. But one –
My father's!

Ros. Eh?

Oph. In his capacity
As our Lord Chamberlain¹ he has *one* copy. I
This night, when all the Court is drowned in sleep,
Will creep with stealthy foot into his den
And there abstract the precious manuscript!

Guild. The plan is well conceived! but take good heed,
Your father may detect you.

Oph. Oh, dear, no.
My father spends his long official days
In reading all the rubbishing new plays.
From ten to four at work he may be found:
And then – my father sleeps exceeding sound!

[*Picture* OPHELIA, ROSENCRANTZ and GUILDENSTERN, *grouped*.]

SECOND TABLEAU.

Enter QUEEN, *meeting* ROSENCRANTZ and GUILDENSTERN.

Q. Have you as yet planned aught that may relieve
Our poor afflicted son's despondency?

Ros. Madam, we've lost no time. Already we
Are getting up some Court theatricals
In which the Prince will play a leading part.

Q. That's well be-thought – it will divert his mind.
But soft – he comes.

Ros. How gloomily he stalks,
As one o'erwhelmed with weight of anxious care.
He thrusts his hand into his bosom – thus –
Starts – looks around – then, as if reassured,
Rumples his hair and rolls his glassy eyes!

Q. (*appalled*). That means – he's going to soliloquize!
Prevent this, gentlemen, by any means!

Guild. We will, but how?

Q. Anticipate his points,
And follow out his argument for him;
Thus you will cut the ground from 'neath his feet
And leave him naught to say.

Ros. and Guild. We will! – we will!

[*They kneel*.]

Q. A mother's blessing be upon you, sirs! [*Exit*.]

Music. Enter HAMLET. *He stalks to chair, throws himself into it.*

¹ All bow reverentially at mention of this functionary.

Ham. To be – or not to be!

Ros. Yes – that’s the question –
Whether he’s bravest who will cut his throat
Rather than suffer all –

Guild. Or suffer all
Rather than cut his throat?

Ham. (*annoyed at interruption, says, “Go away – go away!” then resumes*).
To die – to sleep –

Ros. It’s nothing more – Death is but sleep spun out –
Why hesitate? [*Offers him a dagger.*]

Guild. The only question is
Between the choice of deaths, which death to choose. [*Offers a revolver.*]

Ham. (*in great terror*). Do take those dreadful things away. They make
My blood run cold. Go away – go away! (*They turn aside. HAMLET resumes.*)
To sleep, perchance to –

Ros. Dream.
That’s very true. I never dream myself,
But Guildenstern dreams all night long out loud.

Guild. (*coming down and kneeling.*)
With blushes, sir, I do confess it true!

Ham. This question, gentlemen, concerns me not.
(*Resumes.*) For who would bear the whips and scorns of time –

Ros. (*as guessing a riddle*). Who’d bear the whips and scorns? Now let me see.
Who’d bear them, eh?

Guild. (*same business*). Who’d bear the *scorns* of time?

Ros. (*correcting him*). The *whips* and scorns.

Guild. The whips and scorns, of course.
[HAMLET *about to protest.*]

Don’t tell us – let us guess – the *whips* of time?

Ham. Oh, sirs, this interruption likes us not.
I pray you give it up.

Ros. My lord, we do.
We cannot tell *who* bears these whips and scorns:

Ham. (*not heeding them, resumes*). But that the dread of something *after* death –

Ros. That’s true – *post mortem* and the coroner –
Felo-de-se – cross roads at twelve P.M. –
And then the forfeited life policy –
Exceedingly unpleasant.

Ham. (*really angry*). Gentlemen,
It must be patent to the merest dunce
Three persons can’t soliloquize at once!

[ROSENCRANTZ and GUILDENSTERN *retire*, GUILDENSTERN *goes off*.]

(*Aside.*) They’re playing on me! Playing upon *me*
Who am not fashioned to be played upon!

Show them a pipe – a thing of holes and stops
Made to be played on – and they’ll shrink abashed
And swear they have not skill on *that!* Now mark –

(*Aloud.*) Rosencrantz! Here! [*Producing a flute as ROSENCRANTZ comes.*]
This is a well-toned flute;

Play me an air upon it. Do not say
You know not *how!* (*Sneeringly.*)

Ros. Nay, but I *do* know how.

I'm rather good upon the flute – Observe –

[*Plays eight bars of hornpipe, then politely returns flute to HAMLET.*]

Ham. (peevishly). Oh, thankye. (*Aside.*) Everything goes wrong!

[*Retires and throws himself on dais, as if buried in soliloquy.*]

Enter OPHELIA, white with terror, holding a heavy MS.

Oph. Rosencrantz!

Ros. Well?

Oph. (in a stage whisper). I've found the manuscript,
But never put me to such work again!

Ros. Why, what has happened that you tremble so?

Oph. Last night I stole down from my room alone
And sought my father's den. I entered it!

The clock struck twelve, and then – oh, horrible! –

From chest and cabinet there issued forth

The mouldy spectres of five thousand plays,

All dead and gone – and many of them damned!

I shook with horror! They encompassed me,

Chattering forth the scenes and parts of scenes

Which my poor father wisely had cut out.

Oh, horrible – oh, 'twas most horrible! [*Covering her face.*]

Ros. What was't they uttered?

Oph. (severely). I decline to say.

The more I heard the more convinced was I

My father acted *most judiciously*;

Let that suffice thee.

Ros. Give me, then, the play,
And I'll submit it to the Prince.

Oph. (crossing to him). But stay,
Do not appear to urge him – hold him back,
Or he'll decline to play the piece – I know him.

Ham. (who has been soliloquising under his breath).

And lose the name of action! (*Rises and comes down.*)

Why, what's that?

Ros. We have been looking through some dozen plays
To find one suited to our company.

This is, my lord, a five-act tragedy.

'Tis called "Gonzago" – but it will not serve –

'Tis very long.

Ham. Is there a part for me?

Oph. There is, my lord, a most important part –
A mad Archbishop who becomes a Jew
To spite his diocese.

Ham. That's very good!

Ros. (turning over the pages). Here you go mad – and then, soliloquize:
Here you are the sane again – and then you don't:

Then, later on, you stab your aunt, because –
Well, I can't tell you *why* you stab your aunt,
But still – you stab her.

Ham. That's quite enough.

Ros. Then you become the leader of a troop
Of Greek banditti – and soliloquize –
After a long and undisturbed career
Of murder (tempered by soliloquy)
You see the sin and folly of your ways
And offer to resume your diocese;
But, just too late – for, terrible to tell,
As you're repenting (in soliloquy)
The Bench of Bishops seize you unawares
And blow you from a gun!

[*During this* HAMLET *has acted in pantomime the scenes described.*]

Ham. (excitedly.) That's excellent.
That's very good indeed – we'll play this piece! [Taking MS. from ROSENCRANTZ.]

Oph. But pray consider – all the other parts
Are insignificant.

Ham. What matters that?
We'll play this piece.

Ros. The plot's impossible,
And all the dialogue bombastic stuff.

Ham. I tell you, sir, that we will play this piece.
Bestir yourselves about it, and engage
All the most fairly famed tragedians
To play the small parts – as tragedians should.
A mad Archbishop! Yes, that's very good!

[*Picture. HAMLET reading MS., with limelight on him. ROSENCRANTZ at entrance, OPHELIA at entrance.*]

THIRD TABLEAU.

March. Enter procession. First, two Pages, who place themselves on each side of the platform; then ROSENCRANTZ and OPHELIA; then GUILDENSTERN and a Lady; then other Courtiers; then POLONIUS, backing before the KING and QUEEN. The KING sits, with the QUEEN on his left, OPHELIA on his right, ROSENCRANTZ stands above her, GUILDENSTERN and POLONIUS behind the KING and QUEEN; The Courtiers right and left.

Q. A fair good morrow to you, Rosencrantz.
How march the Royal revels?

Ros. Lamely, madam, lamely, like a one-legged duck. The Prince has discovered a strange play. He hath called it, "A Right Reckoning Long Delayed."

Cl. And of what fashion is the Prince's play?

Ros. 'Tis an excellent poor tragedy, my lord – a thing of shreds and patches welded into a form that hath mass without consistency, like an ill-built villa.

Q. But, sir, you should have used your best endeavours
To wean his phantasy from such a play.

Ros. Madam, I did, and with some success, for he now seeth the absurdity of its tragical catastrophes, and laughs at it as freely as we do. So, albeit the poor author had hoped to have drawn tears of sympathy, the Prince has resolved to present it as a piece of pompous folly intended to excite no loftier emotion than laughter and surprise. Here comes the Royal Tragedian with his troop.

Enter HAMLET and Players.

Ham. Good morrow, sir. This is our company of players. They have come to town to do honour and add completeness to our revels.

Cl. Good sirs, we welcome you to Elsinore.
Prepare ye now – we are agog to taste
The intellectual treat in store for us.

Ham. We are ready, sir. But before we begin, I would speak a word to you who are to play this piece. I have chosen this play in the face of sturdy opposition from my well-esteemed friends, who were for playing a piece with less bombastick fury and more frolick. (*Addressing KING.*) But I have thought this a fit play to be presented by reason of that very pedantical bombast and windy obtrusive rhetorick that they do rightly despise. For I hold that there is no such antick fellow as your bombastical hero who doth so earnestly spout forth his folly as to make his hearers believe that he is unconscious of all incongruity; whereas, he who doth so mark, label, and underscore his antick speeches as to show that he is alive to their absurdity seemeth to utter them under protest, and to take part with his audience against himself. (*Turing to Players.*) For which reason, I pray you, let there be no huge red noses, nor extravagant monstrous wigs, nor coarse men garbed as women, in this comi-tragedy; for such things are as much as to say, “I am a comick fellow – I pray you laugh at me, and hold what I say to be cleverly ridiculous.” Such labelling of humour is an impertinence to your audience, for it seemeth to imply that they are unable to recognise a joke unless it be pointed out to them. I pray you avoid it.

[Slight applause, which HAMLET acknowledges.]

First Player. Sir, we are beholden to you for your good counsels. But we would urge upon your consideration that we are accomplished players, who have spent many years in learning our profession; and we would venture to suggest that it would better befit your lordship to confine yourself to such matters as your lordship may be likely to understand. We, on our part, may have our own ideas as to the duties of heirs-apparent; but it would ill become us to air them before your lordship, who may be reasonably supposed to understand such matters more perfectly than your very humble servants.

[All applaud vigorously. HAMLET about to explode in anger. KING interrupts him. HAMLET thinks better of it, and angrily beckons Players to follow him. He and they exeunt.]

Cl. Come, let us take our places. Gather round
That all may see this fooling. Here’s a chair
In which I shall find room to roll about
When laughter takes possession of my soul.
Now we are ready.

Enter on platform a Loving Couple. Applause.

She. Shouldst thou prove faithless?

He. If I do
 Then let the world forget to woo (*kneeling*),
 The mountain tops bow down in fears,
 The midday sun dissolve in tears,
 And outraged nature, pale and bent,
 Fall prostrate in bewilderment!

[*All titter through this – breaking into a laugh at he end, the KING enjoying it more than anyone.*]

Oph. Truly, sir, I hope he will prove faithful, lest we should all be involved in this catastrophe.

Cl. (*laughing*). Much, indeed, depends upon his constancy. I am sure he hath all our prayers, gentlemen! (*To ROSENCRANTZ.*) Is this play well known?

Ros. (*advancing*). It is not, my lord. [*Turns back to OPHELIA.*]

Cl. Ha! I seem to have met with these lines before. Go on.

She. Hark, dost thou hear those trumpets and those drums?
 Thy hated rival, stern Gonzago, comes!
 [*Exeunt Loving Couple. Laughter, as before.*]

Q. And wherefore cometh Gonzago?

Ros. He cometh here to woo!

Q. Cannot he woo without an orchestra at his elbow? A fico for such wooing say I!

Cl. (*rather alarmed – aside to ROSENCRANTZ.*) Who is Gonzago?

Ros. He's a mad Archbishop of Elsinore. 'Tis a most ridiculous and mirthful character – and the more so for that the poor author had hoped to have appalled you with his tragedical end! [*Returns to OPHELIA.*]

[*During this the KING has shown that he has recognized his tragedy. He is horrified at the discovery.*]

Enter HAMLET, as Archbishop, with a robe and mitre. All laugh and applaud except the KING, who is miserable.

Ham. Far from the cares of Church and State
 I come to wreak my love and hate.
 Love whirls me to the lofty skies –
 Hate drags me where dark Pluto lies!

[*All laugh except KING.*]

Q. Marry, but he must have a nice time of it between them! Oh, sir, this passeth the bounds of ridicule, and to think that these lines were to have drawn our tears!

Oph. Truly, mine eyes run with tears, but they are begotten of laughter!

Ham. Gently, gently. Spare your ridicule, lest you have none left for the later scenes. The tragedy is full of such windy fooling. You shall hear more anon. There are five acts of this. (*All groan.*)

(*resumes*) For two great ends I daily fume –
 The altar and the deadly tomb.
 How can I live in such a state
 And hold my Arch-Bishopate?

Ros. (exhausted with laughter). Oh, my lord – I pray you end this, or I shall die with laughter!

Q. (ditto). Did mortal ever hear such metrical folly! Stop it, my good lord, or I shall assuredly do myself some injury.

Oph. (ditto). Oh sir – prythee have mercy on us – we have laughed till we can laugh no more!

Ham. The drollest scene is coming now. Listen.

Cl. (rises). Stop! *[All start.*

Stop, I say – cast off those mummeries!

Come hither Hamlet!

Ham. (takes off robes). Why, what ails you, sir?

Cl. (with suppressed fury). Know'st thou who wrote this play?

Ham. Not I indeed.

Nor do I care to know!

Cl. *I wrote this play –*

To mention it is death, by Denmark's law!

Q. (kneeling). Oh, spare him, for he is thine only child!

Cl. No – I have two (*QUEEN horrified.*) – my son – my play – both worthless! Both shall together perish!

[Draws dagger; QUEEN endeavours to restrain him.

Ham. (on his knees). Hold thine hand!

I can't bear death – I'm a philosopher!

Cl. That's true. But how shall we dispose of him? *[All puzzled.*

Oph. (suddenly). A thought!

There is a certain isle beyond the sea

Where dwell a cultured race – compared with whom

We are but poor brain-blind barbarians;

'Tis know as Engle-land. Oh, send him there!

If but the half I've heard of them be true

They will enshrine him on their great good hearts,

And men will rise or sink in good esteem

According as they worship him, or slight him!

Cl. Well, we're dull dogs in Denmark. It may be

That we've misjudged him. If such race there be –

(There may be – I am not a well-read man)

They're welcome to his philosophic brain –

So, Hamlet, get thee gone – and don't come back again!

[CLAUDIUS crosses to R. HAMLET, who is delighted at the suggestion, crosses to QUEEN and embraces her. He then embraces OPHELIA, who receives his kiss with marked coldness. Then he turns up on to platform and strikes an attitude, exclaiming, "To Engle-land!" At the same moment ROSENCRANTZ embraces OPHELIA. Picture.

CURTAIN.