

His Partner's Wife ~ A Real-Life Play in One Act by Sir Hall Caine

CHARACTERS.

LIEUTENANT DAVID HARPER
MRS. DAVID HARPER
COSETTE THOMAS.....Maid to Mrs. Harper
SERGEANT O'DOWD.....Of the Canadian Army
GENERAL JACKSON.....Of the Canadian Army
M. BOURGEOIS.....Commissioner of Police, Paris

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BASED UPON A REAL EPISODE THAT HAPPENED DURING THE WAR.

SCENE: Paris, shortly after the signing of the armistice.

THE scene is a sitting room in an apartment house in the Rue de la Chapelle, Paris. It is night. The electric light burning.
(Enter Commissioner of Police and General Jackson.)

COMMISSIONER—This is the scene of the crime. I thought it best to hold the inquiry on the spot.
GENERAL—Sure.

COM. (calling)—Inspector, send in the accused officer. (Commissioner and general sit at large table. A lieutenant of the Canadian army enters by door on right. To lieutenant)—This is merely a preliminary inquiry. If the evidence against you seems sufficient you will be sent for trial on a charge of causing the death of Daniel Harriman in this room, between the hours of ten and eleven last night. I represent the French police. General Jackson is here to watch the inquiry for the Canadian Overseas Forces. You are not compelled to speak, but I warn you that anything you say may be used against you. You understand?

LIEUTENANT—Perfectly.

COM.—You are Lieutenant David Harper, of the Canadian army, formerly living at this address, 19 Rue de la Chapelle, Paris?

LIEUT.—No, sir; Lieutenant John Harper, formerly of Winnipeg, Canada.

COM.—You adhere to that story?

LIEUT.—I do.

COM.—Then you say the lady who lives in this apartment is not your wife?

LIEUT.—No, sir.

COM.—Her child is not your child?

LIEUT. (after short pause)—No, sir.

COM.—The dead man, Daniel Harriman, was not your friend and your partner?

LIEUT.—No, sir.

COM. (calling)—Cosette Thomas. (Enter a young French maid.) You are the maid in this apartment?

COSETTE—Oui, monsieur.

COM.—Except yourself, your mistress and her little daughter are the only persons living here?

COSETTE—Oui, monsieur. Mistress's husband has been at the front since the beginning of the war.

COM.—Tell us what happened last night.

COSETTE—Mistress was dressing and I was putting little Marie to bed when I heard a ring at the front door, monsieur. It was Monsieur Harriman.

COM.—M. Harriman was a friend of your mistress's?

COSETTE—Oui, monsieur.

COM.—He came frequently?

COSETTE—Oui, monsieur.

COM.—Generally at night?

COSETTE—Oui, monsieur.

COM.—What happened next?

COSETTE—Monsieur Harriman came through to this room and I went to tell mistress, monsieur.

COM.—What did she say?

COSETTE—"You can go to bed, Cosette. I'll let monsieur out."

COM.—And about ten o'clock you were awakened by a pistol shot?

COSETTE—Two shots, monsieur.

COM.—And then?

COSETTE—Mistress began to scream, and I put on some clothes and came running in here, monsieur.

COM.—What did you see?

COSETTE—Mr. Harriman was on the floor and mistress was crying over him, "He's dead! He's dead! My husband has killed him!"

COM.—Cosette, how long have you been in Mrs. Harper's service?

COSETTE—Six months, monsieur.

COM.—Then you were not here when her husband went to the war?

COSETTE—Oh, no, monsieur.

COM.—In that case you have never seen him?

COSETTE—Never, monsieur.

SERG.—Six of our officers were killed in it, and Lieutenant David Harper was one of them, sir.

COM.—Then who do you say this officer is?

SERG.—Lieutenant John Harper, sir.

GENERAL.—There were two Lieutenant Harpers in your company, isn't that so, sergeant?

SERG.—There were, general.

GENERAL.—Related?

SERG.—Not that I know of, sir.

GENERAL.—Any resemblance?

SERG.—As like as two peas, sir.

COM.—You say Lieutenant David Harper was one of the seven Canadian officers killed in last night's railway accident?

SERG.—I do, sir. I found him among the dead, sir.

SERG.—Don't speak of it, sir.

COM.—Then how did you identify him?

SERG.—As we used to do on the battlefield—by his identification disk, sir.

COM.—What was it?

SERG.—101, sir.

COM.—And what is Lieutenant John Harper's number?

SERG.—224, sir.

COM.—So if the accused is Lieutenant John Harper his identification disk will bear the latter number?

SERG.—It will, sir.

COM.—Examine it.

(Sergeant steps up to lieutenant, opens his tunic, draws out the disk and hands it to commissioner.)

SERG.—224, sir.

GENERAL.—Surely you are satisfied, M. Commissioner?

COM. (sternly)—Sergeant O'Dowd, look at this officer and answer me on your word of honor as a soldier—is he Lieutenant David Harper or is he not?

SERG. (after a moment, firmly)—He is not.

COM.—You can go, sergeant. Cosette, call your mistress.

GENERAL.—The wife?

In the first hours of her bereavement? Is this necessary, M. Commissioner?

COM.—I'm afraid it is, general. (A young woman enters. Her eyes are red, as if she had been crying.) You are the wife of Lieutenant David Harper?

MRS. H.—Widow, sir.

COM.—He was a good man and a good husband?

MRS. H.—The best man and the best husband in the world, sir.

COM.—You knew the dead man, Daniel Harriman?

MRS. H. (dropping her head)—Yes, sir.

COM.—Was he a good man, also?

MRS. H. (fiercely)—He was a fiend, sir.

COM.—Yet you were on intimate terms with him?

MRS. H.—God forgive me, yes.

COM.—When did your intimacy begin?

MRS. H.—I knew him before my marriage, sir.

COM.—Was he your lover, then, or merely a friend?

MRS. H.—A friend—he wished to marry me.

COM.—And you refused him in favor of David Harper?

MRS. H.—Yes, sir.

COM.—They were partners?

MRS. H.—Yes, sir.

COM.—When the war broke out your husband joined up immediately?

MRS. H.—Yes; being a Canadian he joined the Canadian forces, sir.

COM.—Leaving Harriman to carry on the business?

MRS. H.—Yes; Mr. Harriman was to pay my husband's share of the profits to me.

COM.—And did he?

MRS. H.—For two years, yes.

COM.—And then?

MRS. H.—Mr. Harriman came to tell me that the business had become bankrupt, that my income was at an end, that he could send me no more money.

COM.—The stopping of your income was a serious shock to you?

MRS. H.—It was frightful. I had my little Marie to care for.

COM.—What happened eventually?

MRS. H.—When I could not pay my rent, and my house was to be sold, and I was told that I would have to part with my child, and put her into a home, and go out to some kind of service Mr. Harriman came again.

COM.—He had started in business again by this time?

MRS. H.—Yes, with large Government contracts.

COM.—And then he began to make love to you?

MRS. H. (dropping her head)—Yes.

COM.—Told you there was no need for you to leave your beautiful home and send your child into a home and go out to service if you would only consent to receive his money?

MRS. H.—Yes.

COM.—And did you?

MRS. H. (breaking down)—Oh, I was a coward, a miserable, wicked coward. But I couldn't part with my child and I couldn't see it suffer. God forgive me! God forgive me!

COM.—Come to the facts of the crime. What happened yesterday?

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MRS. H.—Mr. Harriman called up to say he was coming in the evening, but I tried to put him off.

COM.—Why?

MRS. H.—Because I had heard from my husband that he was back in camp and expected to get home immediately.

COM.—Did you tell Harriman that?

MRS. H.—I didn't. He was always threatening that he would kill my husband if he lived through the war and came back to claim me.

COM.—So Harriman came?

MRS. H.—Yes.

COM.—And while he was here your husband arrived?

MRS. H.—There was a terrible scene.

COM.—Describe it.

MRS. H.—Mr. Harriman jumped to the conclusion that I had led him into a trap and he cursed me.

COM.—And then?

MRS. H.—My husband struck him and he fell.

COM.—And then?

MRS. H.—I don't know. I fainted, and when I recovered consciousness I was on the floor and Mrs. Harriman was dead and my husband was gone.

COM. (sternly)—Mrs. Harper, you are an American woman, are you not?

MRS. H.—Yes.

COM.—Brought up in a Puritan family?

MRS. H.—Yes.

COM.—Then look at this officer. No, look at him. (With a great effort she looks at lieutenant.) Now give me your solemn word—is that your husband, yes or no?

MRS. H. (with an effort)—No!

(Commissioner drops back to his seat, gathering up his papers. Mrs. Harper sinks on to music stool.)

GENERAL.—Surely you are satisfied, M. Commissioner?

COM.—Satisfied or not, I can go no further. (A child's cry comes from the inner room.) What's that?

MRS. H. (in terror)—Marie! Marie!

(There is a breathless silence for a moment. Then the door on right is pushed open and a child of seven comes to the threshold. She sees the lieutenant, breaks into a smile of recognition and runs to him with a cry.)

CHILD—Papa! Papa!

Papa!

(All rise, holding their breath. For a moment the lieutenant is seen to be going through a fearful struggle. Then, with a tragic cry, he snatches the child up in his arms.)

LIEUT.—Marie! My little Marie!

COM. (with a look of triumph)—Ah!

LIEUT. (putting down child, who goes to her mother)—Very well, I admit it.

COM.—And that you murdered Daniel Harriman?

LIEUT.—If you call it murder to kill a scoundrel who had my wife—yes.

COM.—I have nothing to do with that. If everybody with a grievance were allowed to take the law into his own hands there would be no sanctity in human life.

GENERAL.—Wait! Lieutenant, you hear what the commissioner says. If your wife has told us the truth you are the only person now living who knows all that took place in this room last night. Tell us your story.

LIEUT. (bracing himself)—I was to have come home on leave, as it were, to-day, and yesterday morning I received a message from my wife.

COM.—She telegraphed to you?

LIEUT.—Yes. She was overjoyed by the news that I was coming back to her at last; had laughed and cried over it; and was going to bed at nine o'clock to dream a dream on it.

COM.—Well?

LIEUT. (fiercely)—At eight o'clock I received an anonymous letter.

COM.—What did it say?

LIEUT.—That my wife had been false to me, that she was living with Harriman, and if I came up that night I would find them together.

COM.—What did you do?

LIEUT. (grimly)—Caught the nine o'clock train to Paris.

COM.—What were you going for?

LIEUT. (with intensity)—To kill my wife.

COM.—You arrived at the Gare de l'Est?

LIEUT.—Yes.

COM.—It would be ten o'clock by that time?

LIEUT.—The clock of the prison St. Lazare was striking ten as I ran out of the station.

COM.—You were running?

LIEUT.—Yes, all the way up the boulevards until I came opposite this house, and then I drew up with a shock. The windows of this room were blazing with light! And she had told me she was going to bed at nine!

COM.—When you reached the door—



"But don't think to trap me, as you've trapped others since your husband went to the war."

(All rise, holding their breath. For a moment the lieutenant is seen to be going through a fearful struggle. Then, with a tragic cry, he snatches the child up in his arms.)

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