

TALISMAN RING

by

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For Love Street Playhouse, Woodland
Performances: June, 2019

CHARACTERS
(in order of appearance)

SYLVESTER LAVENHAM	ninth Baron Lavenham
TRISTRAM SHIELD	Sylvester's great-nephew
EUSTACIE DE VAUBAN	Sylvester's granddaughter, half-French
LUCY	Eustacie's maid
LUDOVIC LAVENHAM	Sylvester's grandson and heir, cousin to Eustacie; he has been missing for two years
ABEL	A smuggler and Ludovic's comrade
JOSEPH NYE	the proprietor of the Red Lion Inn
SARAH THANE	a gentlewoman
SIR HUGH THANE	Sarah's brother
THE EXCISEMAN	an officer of the law, on the lookout for smugglers
MR. GREGG	Basil's valet
MR. JEREMIAH STUBBS	a Bow Street runner (detective)
MR. PEABODY	another Bow Street runner

Also assorted butlers and offstage voices

DOUBLE CASTING:

Tristram
Eustacie
Ludovic
Lucy/Sarah
Basil/Mr. Peabody
Sylvester/Abel/Hugh
The Court Butler/Nye/Gregg
Exciseman/Jeremiah Stubbs/Dower House Butler

PRODUCTION NOTE: the set may be as realistic or as abstract as resources and vision allow. However, the design must provide for fluid, quick transitions. A unit set, where light suggests rooms and outdoor areas, is preferable to lengthy scene changes. Nothing should disrupt the flow of the action.

ACT 1

SCENE 1

(Music up. Lights up slowly on huge canopy bed. An old man, Sylvester, lies in it, dying, surrounded by SERVANTS. Enter the BUTLER.)

BUTLER

Sir Tristram Shield has arrived, sir.

(TRISTRAM enters.)

SYLVESTER

Tristram. I knew you'd come.

TRISTRAM

Your death-bed, sir?

SYLVESTER

(he laughs)

My death-bed.

(to SERVANTS)

Leave us, you fools.

(SERVANTS exit)

When did I see you last?

TRISTRAM

Two years ago.

SYLVESTER

Loving family, ain't we? That other great nephew of mine is here.

TRISTRAM

Basil?

SYLVESTER

Basil! Ha! *He* calls himself *Beau* Lavenham! *I* was Beau Laveham in my day, but d'ye suppose that I decked myself out in a green coat and yellow pantaloons?

TRISTRAM

Probably not.

(pause)

You wrote that you had arranged a marriage for me with your granddaughter.

SYLVESTER

That don't please you much, does it?

TRISTRAM

Not much.

SYLVESTER

(laughs)

Get me some Madeira.

TRISTRAM

Surely, sir, in your condition--

SYLVESTER

Get it! Over there.

(as TRISTRAM pours him a glass of wine)

Eustacia is a good match for you. I've settled most of the unentailed property on her. Her father, that damned Frenchman...

(he struggles for the name)

TRISTRAM

The Vidame de Vauban.

SYLVESTER

That's it--the Vidame de Vauban left her nothing those fine French peasants didn't eventually steal. I thought France was growing too hot any any grandchild of mine, and I was right. How long is it now they sent the King to the guillotine, eh? A month is it? Never mind--the long and the short of it is, I've a fancy to see Eustacia married to you before I die.

TRISTRAM

Why me?

SYLVESTER

There's no one else. I won't have her marrying Basil--she don't like him. And neither do I.

TRISTRAM

You should not speak so ill of your heir.

SYLVESTER

He is not my heir!

TRISTRAM

But you must name someone. Surely not Ludovic--

SYLVESTER

Ludovic! Don't--I told you never--don't mention that young fool's name in my presence!

(Pause. Calming himself)

The estate will be in ward when I die and that's the end of it. You are my trustee.

TRISTRAM

(with distaste)

Good God!

SYLVESTER

(laughing weakly)

You'll run in my harness, even if I have to do it by dying. And I say it's time you was thinking of marriage. Not in love, are you?

TRISTRAM

No.

SYLVESTER

And that silly affair with...damme, so long ago I forget the girl's name--still letting that rankle you?

TRISTRAM

I'm not.

SYLVESTER

Good. Most woman will play you false, my boy--never met one yet that wasn't a fool at heart. I'm offering you a marriage of convenience.

TRISTRAM

Does she understand that?

SYLVESTER

She's French. Wouldn't understand anything else. Pull the bell. She's waiting outside.

TRISTRAM

You take a great deal for granted, Sylvester.

SYLVESTER

You would not have come here, my dear Tristram, had you not already made up your mind. Pull the bell.

(TRISTRAM does so. SYLVESTER continues cheerfully.)

I shan't live the week out. Heart and hard living.

(Enter BUTLER with EUSTACIE. She is beautiful and has a French accent.)

BUTLER

Mademoiselle de Vauban.

SYLVESTER

Ah, there you are. Let me present you, my child, to your cousin Tristram, whom you are going to marry. This, Tristram, is Eustacia. If you want a formal offer, no doubt he will make you one. After dinner.

EUSTACIE

I do not want a formal offer, it is a matter to me quite immaterial. But my name is Eustacie, which is, *enfin*, a very good name, and it is not Eu-stac-ci-a, which I cannot at all pronounce and which I find excessively ugly.

TRISTRAM

I hope I may be permitted to call you Eustacie, cousin?

EUSTACIE

Certainly; it will be quite *convenable*.

SYLVESTER

(to TRISTRAM)

She's eighteen. How old are you?

TRISTRAM

Thirty-five.

SYLVESTER

A very excellent age.

EUSTACIE

For what?

SYLVESTER

For marriage, miss! You may go down to dinner now, and get a little acquainted.

TRISTRAM

You are all consideration, sir.

SCENE 2

(EUSTACIE and TRISTRAM move to another part of the stage. Lights down on Sylvester.)

EUSTACIE

It is a pity you are so dark, for I do not like dark men in general. However, one must accustom oneself.

TRISTRAM

Thank you.

EUSTACIE

If my grandpapa had left me in France it is probable that I should have married a Duke.

TRISTRAM

It is more probably you would have gone to the guillotine.

EUSTACIE

Yes, that is quite true. My cousin Henriette and I used to speak of it. We made up our minds that we would wear white. I think one should wear white to the guillotine if one is quite young. Do you not agree?

TRISTRAM

I don't think it signifies what you wear if you are on your way to the scaffold.

EUSTACIE

But consider! You would be very sorry for a young girl in a tumbril, dressed all in white--

TRISTRAM

I should be very sorry for anyone in a tumbril, whatever their age or apparel.

EUSTACIE

You would be more sorry for a young girl--all alone and perhaps bound.

TRISTRAM

You wouldn't be all alone. There would be a great many other people in the tumbril with you.

EUSTACIE

In my tumbril, there would *not* have been a great many other people.

(Pause)

Grandpere says that you will make me a very good husband...and I expect he is right, for you certainly look like a good husband.

TRISTRAM

Indeed. I am sorry I cannot return the compliment by telling you that you look like a good wife.

EUSTACIE

No, I don't, do I? But do you think that I am pretty?

TRISTRAM

(in dampening tones)

Very.

EUSTACIE

(A revelation)

I remember now. You do not like women!

TRISTRAM

My dear cousin, I do not know who told you that I dislike women, but it is a gross exaggeration.

EUSTACIE

Yes, but do you mind that you are to marry me?

TRISTRAM

I should not be here if I minded...it would be absurd to pretend that either of us can feel for the other any passion--

EUSTACIE

Yes, it *would!*

TRISTRAM

Nevertheless I believe such marriages as ours often prosper.

EUSTACIE

But I ask myself why it is that you wish to be married?

TRISTRAM

Perhaps if I had a brother I should not wish it, but I am the last of my name, and it must not die with me. If you will consent to be my wife, so far as it may lie in my power I will promise that you shall not have cause to regret it. May I tell Sylvester that we have agreed to join hands?

EUSTACIE

Qu'importe? It is his command, *naturellement* we must obey him. But I must tell you that you are not at all the sort of man I thought I should marry. I dare say it will not be so very bad, though. If I can have a house in town, and perhaps a lover.

TRISTRAM

A what!

EUSTACIE

Well, in France it is quite *comme il faut*--in fact, quite *a la mode*--to have a lover when one is married.

TRISTRAM

In England it is neither *comme il faut* nor *a la mode*.

EUSTACIE

Vraiment? I do not yet know what is the fashion in England, but if you assure me it is not *a la mode*, I won't have any lover. Can I have a house in town?

(BUTLER enters)

BUTLER

Mr. Basil Lavenham.

(Enter BASIL, magnificently attired.)

EUSTACIE

(whispering)

Well, I would much rather be married to you than to him, at all events.

BASIL

Ah, Tristram. How do you do, my dear fellow?

TRISTRAM

Basil. It's some time since we met.

BASIL

But my dear, if you will bury yourself in Berkshire, what is one to do?

(HE moves to Eustacie)

Eustacie!

(HE bows over her hand gracefully)

So you have been making your other cousin's acquaintance?

EUSTACIE

Yes. We are betrothed.

BASIL

Oh? La la. So soon? Did Sylvester call this tune? Well, you are, both of you, very obedient, but are you quite, quite sure that you will deal well together?

TRISTRAM

(Grimly)

I hope so.

BASIL

If you are determined--and I must warn you, Eustacie, he is the most determined fellow imaginable--I must hope so too. But I do not think I expected either of you to be so *very* obedient. Sylvester is prodigious--quite prodigious. One cannot believe that he is really dying. It seems quite odd.

EUSTACIE

And it will seem quite odd to me when you are Lord Lavenham.

BASIL

Ah yes--but you see, I shall not be Lord Lavenham. My dear Tristram, will you try some of this snuff of mine?

EUSTACIE

But I don't understand--why will you not be Lord Lavenham?

BASIL

Because of Ludovic.

EUSTACIE

Ludovic?

BASIL

Sylvester's grandson. He is the heir.

EUSTACIE

But he is dead.

TRISTRAM

Who told you that?

EUSTACIE

Grandpere, naturellment. What did he do that was so wicked? It is a mystery, and, I think, very romantic.

TRISTRAM

There is no mystery. Nor is it in the least romantic. Ludovic was a wild young man who crowned a series of follies with murder.

EUSTACIE

Murder!

BASIL

And he isn't dead. At least, not that we know.

EUSTACIE

Enfin! Now you must tell me all!

BASIL

(looking at TRISTRAM)

Why not? One night, Eustacie, more than two years ago, our cousin Ludovic was gaming with a certain Sir Matthew Plunkett. Ludovic has lost heavily all night and Sir Matthew, being a person of--well, let us say indifferent breeding--was ill-mannered enough to demand a pledge. Ludovic took from his finger a ring, and gave it to Sir Matthew--a talisman ring of great antiquity and value.

EUSTACIE

What is a talisman ring?

TRISTRAM

Just a golden ring with figures engraved upon it.

BASIL

(to EUSTACIE)

It was supposed to be magic. To protect the wearer from harm.

(to TRISTRAM)

Tristram, you are a judge of such things--you must make him show you his collection, Eustacie--what was the value of the ring?

TRISTRAM

I don't know.

EUSTACIE

But what of Ludovic!

BASIL

Ah, yes, Ludovic. Well, naturally he expected Sir Matthew to return his ring--in exchange for what Ludovic owed him, of course--but Sir Matthew, with what one cannot help but feel was a lamentable want of tact, claimed he had won the ring outright. He would not give it up!

EUSTACIE

I am not at all surprised that Ludovic killed this *canaille!* He is without honor.

BASIL

Our cousin then conceived a plan, admittedly rash, of waylaying Plunkett, and forcing him to accept money in exchange for the ring. When he left that night, Tristram, clever fellow, guessed what he would be about and followed him. But you never found Ludovic, did you?

TRISTRAM

No. But as I returned home, I heard a shot fired in the distance. I thought nothing of it; it might have been a poacher, after all. The next morning Plunkett's body

was discovered, shot through the heart with Ludovic's crumpled handkerchief lying beside him.

EUSTACIE

What of the ring?

TRISTRAM

The ring was gone.

BASIL

And it has never been seen since.

TRISTRAM

By us, no.

BASIL

Yes, yes. I know you think Ludovic has it--but he swore he did not meet Plunkett that night.

TRISTRAM

He admitted to firing his gun.

BASIL

At an owl.

(to EUSTACIE)

He missed.

EUSTACIE

But did they hang him, then?

TRISTRAM

No, because we got him out of the country before he could be arrested.

BASIL

Sylvester and you got him out of the country. I had no hand in that, if you please.

TRISTRAM

Had Ludovic stayed to face a trial, nothing could have saved his neck.

BASIL

I believed the lad. And had he been permitted to face his trial the truth might have been found out. You made him appear a murderer confessed.

(Enter the BUTLER.)

BUTLER

(to TRISTRAM)

Sir, my lord wishes to see you.

(TRISTRAM bows to his cousin and exits.)

BASIL

It really is gratifying to see Tristram so compliant.

EUSTACIE

Where is Ludovic now?

BASIL

No one knows, my dear. He has vanished.

EUSTACIE

I think that Tristram did not like my cousin Ludovic.

BASIL

How clever you are, my dear.

EUSTACIE

What did you mean when you said he must show me his collection?

BASIL

Merely that he has quite a notable collection of antiquities...and other things. I am not a judge, but I have sometimes felt that I should like to see that collection myself.

EUSTACIE

Will he not let you?

BASIL

Of course. But collectors do not always show one quite all their treasures, you know.

(LIGHTS down on EUSTACIE and BASIL)

SCENE 3

(MUSIC up. LIGHTS up on SYLVESTER and TRISTRAM. SYVLESTER is gasping on the bed.)

TRISTRAM

My god!

(TRISTRAM goes to the dying man. There is a pause.)

SYLVESTER

I didn't mean to die until tomorrow.

(HE grasps TRISTRAM's wrist.)

Wanted to see you married first. I believe I shall try to last the night, just to spite that damned frippery fellow...he wants her, you know. Tristram, you must marry her! Promise me!

TRISTRAM

Yes, I'll marry her.

SYLVESTER

Always meant Ludovic to have her...damned young scoundrel. Often wondered. Do you think he was really telling the truth--after all?

(Pause)

You don't, eh? Well, Ludovic is the true heir. You can give him my signet ring if ever you see him again--and tell him not to pledge it!

(HE slips a great ruby ring into TRISTRAM's hand)

That Madeira was a mistake.

SCENE 4

(MUSIC change. LIGHT change. LIGHTS up on EUSTACIE with her maid LUCY, who is brushing Eustacie's hair. MUSIC continues under these next "dual" scenes. It should feel like a fugue.)

EUSTACIE

I wish that I had gone to Madame Guillotine in a tumbril. Alone!

LUCY

Oh, miss. Don't speak of such a thing.

EUSTACIE

I should have worn a white dress.

LUCY

You'd've looked lovely, Miss.

EUSTACIE

Yes. Only it is no use thinking of that, because instead I am going to be married.

LUCY

Married? Laws, you don't say!

EUSTACIE

Now that *Grandpere* is dead, I must marry my cousin--and if I do not, I shall have to live with a horrid chaperon and that would be much, much worse.

LUCY

There, there, miss--

EUSTACIE

Oh, well. I have not seen anyone whom I should like to have for my husband, so I suppose it does not signify in the least.

(Enter TRISTRAM, outside EUSTACIE's bedroom.)

TRISTRAM

Eustacie.

EUSTACIE

Yes, *mon cousin*.

TRISTRAM

I wish to speak with you. At once.

(SHE enters in her dressing gown.)

Good Lord!

EUSTACIE

What?

TRISTRAM

Never mind. Our marriage must be postponed. At least until after Sylvester's funeral.

EUSTACIE

(shrugging)

N'importe pas.

TRISTRAM

And you must name me a lady in the neighborhood with whom you'd like to stay.

EUSTACIE

I have no acquaintance in Sussex.

TRISTRAM

Well, it's confoundedly awkward--but I suppose, since you know no one, I shall have to let you stay.

EUSTACIE

I shall stay because I wish to. I do not have to do what you say.

(HE gives HER a look.)

Yet.

TRISTRAM

Don't be silly.

EUSTACIE

I am not silly. It is you who are silly--for ordering me about!

TRISTRAM

You are a great deal too young to manage your own affairs. Perhaps my mother will know better how to talk to you.

EUSTACIE

Your mother? Where is she?

TRISTRAM

In Bath. When the funeral is over, I am going to put you in her care until we can be married.

EUSTACIE

Describe to me your mother.

TRISTRAM

I do not think I know how to describe her. She will be very kind to you.

EUSTACIE

But what does she do? Does she go to parties?

TRISTRAM

She does not enjoy good health.

EUSTACIE

Oh, I see. First, I have to live here and then I am expected to go to Bath, where there are not parties, and after that you will take me to Berkshire, where I expect I shall die!

TRISTRAM

I hope not.

EUSTACIE

Well, I have had a very unhappy life without adventures, so it would not be wonderful if I went into a decline. Only nothing that is interesting ever happens to me, so I dare say I shall just die in childbed, which is a thing anyone can do.

TRISTRAM

Really, Eustacie!

EUSTACIE

I shall present to you an heir. And then I shall die.

(She continues in a more cheerful tone.)

Everyone will say that I was very young to die, and they will fetch you from the gaming-hell where you--

TRISTRAM

From where?

EUSTACIE

(impatiently)

A gaming-hell. Or perhaps a cock pit. You will feel great remorse when it is told to you that I am dying, and you will fling yourself on your horse, and ride *ventre a terre* to come to my death-bed. And then I shall forgive you--

TRISTRAM

What in heaven's name are you talking about? Why should you die?!

EUSTACIE

It has come upon me that you are not the sort of person that I wish to have for my husband!

TRISTRAM

Possibly! But I gave my word to Sylvester that I would marry you, and marry you I will.

EUSTACIE

You will not--because I shall instantly run away!

TRISTRAM

Don't be a little fool!

(HE exits.)

EUSTACIE

(shouting after him)

I do not want a husband who is thirty-five years old and has no conversation!

(Enter LUCY.)

You must help me escape.

LUCY

Laws, miss!

EUSTACIE

Yes! You must help me escape to be...a governess! I will go to a dark and gloomy home where I will teach two sweet young girls and they will possess a handsome brother who will fall in love with me. I wish I could see Tristram's face when he finds me gone. I dare say he will think I am dead.

LUCY

Miss. You don't really mean it?

EUSTACIE

But of course I mean it. When does the night mail coach come into town?

LUCY

Just before midnight, miss--but it's a long walk into town and--aren't you afraid of the Headless Horseman?

EUSTACIE

(delighted)

The Headless Horseman! Tell me all about him!

LUCY

They say he rides the forest, but never on a horse of his own. You'll find him up behind you with his arms around your waist.

(SHE grabs EUSTACIE's waist. EUSTACIE shrieks.
LUCY shrieks. They both SHRIEK.)

EUSTACIE

I do not believe it.

LUCY

Ask anyone, miss, if it's not true!

EUSTACIE

Go--get my cloak And a pistol! I ought to have a pistol.

LUCY

Good Gracious sake alive--whatever would you do with one of them nasty things?

EUSTACIE

I know where one is. It is my cousin Ludovic's. I saw it yesterday when I was looking through his old bedroom. Do you think it is loaded?

LUCY

Oh, mercy! I hope not.

EUSTACIE

Go, Lucy. Pack for me at once! I will contrive to get the pistol.

SCENE 5

(MUSIC up. LIGHT change, outdoors. The sound of insects and night birds. Enter LUDOVIC and ABEL, in silhouette. LUDOVIC gestures to ABEL, who moves to another part of the stage. There is a sound, off. LUDOVIC again motions to ABEL. They hide.)

(Enter EUSTACIE with cloak, pistol, and a bandbox. SHE struggles with the load. SHE makes her way across stage slowly, increasingly nervous. SHE hears a shrill whistle and stands still in fright.)

EUSTACIE

(whispering)

The Headless Horseman!

(calling out)

Who is there?

(Suddenly, SHE is attacked from behind by ABEL. SHE screams loudly, and hits him in her fright. HE screams in pain. LUDOVIC grabs EUSTACIE and puts a hand over her mouth.)

ABEL

Adone do! She'll be the ruin o' we!

LUDOVIC

(to EUSTACIE)

I'm sorry, my dear--but you mustn't screech. If I take my hand away, will you be quiet?

(SHE nods, then bites his hand. LUDOVIC screams in pain, and for a moment, ALL are screaming. Suddenly, EUSTACIE brings her pistol up. LUDOVIC counters with his own pistol. Silence.)

If you let that pistol off I'll murder you.

(to ABEL)

Abel, take the gun away from her!

ABEL

(after a moment's hesitation, to EUSTACIE)

It ain't loaded.

(to LUDOVIC)

If you won't do more, tie her up with a gag in her mouth.

LUDOVIC

No, no. She's too pretty. You won't squeak, will you, darling?

(SHE shakes her head.)

Good girl. I swear I won't hurt you.

EUSTACIE

I thought you were the Headless Horseman.

LUDOVIC

Well...I'm not.

EUSTACIE

What are you doing here?

LUDOVIC

What are *you* doing here?

EUSTACIE

I am going to London.

LUDOVIC

Oh. It's an odd time to be going to London, isn't it?

EUSTACIE

No, because I am going to catch the night mail, and you must let me go or I will be too late.

OFFSTAGE VOICE

(very far off)

This way, lads!

ABEL

She'll have the pack of them down on us in a trice!

LUDOVIC

I'm not going to let her go.

EUSTACIE

But certainly you are going to let me go!

LUDOVIC

I would if I could, but to tell you the truth--

ABEL

There's no call to do that! Dang me, master, if I don't think you're unaccountable crazed. I'm going to go off for a look-around--see if where those damned Excisemen are. Beggin' your pardon, Miss.

(Exit ABEL.)

EUSTACIE

You are smugglers then!

LUDOVIC

Free traders, my dear, free traders. Of only the finest French brandy, I assure you.

EUSTACIE

Well, you need not be afraid of me. I do not at all mind that you are smugg--free-traders. I wish I could be one too. I think I should like that.

LUDOVIC

We don't encourage females in the trade. It's too dangerous.

EUSTACIE

Well, I do not think it is fair that just because one is female one should never be allowed to have any adventures!

LUDOVIC

You seem to me to be having a deal of adventure. I might easily have choked the life out of you--in fact, I may still if you don't behave yourself. You're in a mighty tight corner.

EUSTACIE

Yes, I know I am having an adventure now. And, of course, I am enjoying it, but I should like to continue have adventures, which is a thing not at all easy to arrange. I suppose you have had a great many.

LUDOVIC

I have. So many that I'm devilish tired of 'em.

EUSTACIE

But I have had only this one small adventure and I am not yet tired. That is why I am going to London.

LUDOVIC

Well, you aren't going to London tonight.

EUSTACIE

I am! If I do not go tonight I shall have to go to Bath to play backgammon and be married to a person without sensibility!

LUDOVIC

Well, that would be too bad. We must think of something. You'll have to stay with me for now, but perhaps in the morning--

EUSTACIE

The morning will be too late! Oh! I find that you are quite abominable! You spoil everything, and what is more, I think you are excessively impertinent, because you have stolen my pistol.

LUDOVIC

Well, it's not even loaded. You can have it back, if you wish.

(HE hands it to her and notices something)

Where did you get this? Where?!

EUSTACIE

Du vrai, it belongs to my cousin Ludovic, but I feel very certain that he would not mind lending it to me, because he is of all my family the most romantic.

LUDOVIC

Who the devil are you?

EUSTACIE

I am Eustacie de Vauban.

LUDOVIC

Eustacie de Vauban...oh, yes--now I remember. But how do you come to be in England?

EUSTACIE

Well, my *Grandpere* thought that they would send me to the guillotine if I stayed in France, so he fetched me away. But if I had known that we would make me marry my cousin Tristram, who is not at all amusing, I should have preferred infinitely to have died!

LUDOVIC

I don't blame you. If you're running away from him, I'll do whatever I can to help you.

EUSTACIE

Do you know him, then?

LUDOVIC

Do I know him? I am your romantic cousin Ludovic!

(SHE screams in surprise)

Don't make that noise.

EUSTACIE

I am so enchanted to meet you! I thought I never should, because Tristram said you could not set foot in England any more. Did you kill that person whose name I have forgotten?

LUDOVIC
 No, I did not.

EUSTACIE
Bon! Then we must at once discover who did do it. This is a much better
 adventure than I thought.

LUDOVIC
 Why's that?

EUSTACIE
 Because *Grandpere* is dead.

LUDOVIC
 Sylvester dead. Devil take me.

EUSTACIE
 So now you are Lord lavenham.

LUDOVIC
 Do you believe me, then?

EUSTACIE
 But certainly.

LUDOVIC
 Well, save for Basil, you're the only person who does.

(Enter ABEL.)

ABEL
 (hissing)

Sir!

LUDOVIC
 Well?

ABEL
 There's a dunnamany excisemen out
 (Noticing EUSTACIE)
 Why's that dential wench still here? I thought you'd get rid of her.

LUDOVIC
 She's my cousin. Can't we get through to town?

ABEL
 Not likely. They're on to us.

LUDOVIC

(to EUSTACIE)

I'm sorry, my dear, but I can't let you go to London tonight. Those damned excisemen must have gotten wind of our convoy.

EXCISEMAN #1

(offstage, in distance)

Over here, lads!

LUDOVIC

(undertone)

Damme.

EXCISEMAN #1

(offstage, in the distance)

They went this way!

LUDOVIC

How'd they get so close?

ABEL

What'd we do?

LUDOVIC

Better separate. You know where to go. I'll lead them off your trail.

(ABEL exits. To EUSTACIE)

I don't know what the devil to do with you.

EXCISEMAN #2

(offstage, a little closer)

Over here, over here! I see them!

LUDOVIC

You wanted an adventure, right?

(THEY move to another part of the stage.)

EUSTACIE

Where are we going?

LUDOVIC

We're leading them off the trail. So Abel can get the brandy to a hiding place we know of.

(EUSTACIE hands HIM her bandbox)

What the thunder is that thing?

EUSTACIE

My bandbox.

LUDOVIC

Well, it's devilish in the way. Do you mind if we leave it?

EUSTACIE

No, certainly I do not mind. I too am tired of it.

(More offstage shouting.)

LUDOVIC

There may be some rough work done before the night's out, I warn you.

EUSTACIE

You're not afraid?

LUDOVIC

Lord, no, I like it. You won't, though--if there's any shooting done.

EUSTACIE

I wish that you would give me my pistol back, because if there is to be shooting, I should like to shoot, too.

EXCISEMAN #3

(Offstage, but closer)

I see him!

(EUSTACIE and LUDOVIC start to dash downstairs)

There's two of 'em!

EXCISEMAN #2

They went through those trees.

(EUSTACIE and LUDOVIC emerge downstairs.)

LUDOVIC

They're right behind us. Run!

(THEY dash across stage, climb up platform to upper level.)

Abel just needs a little more time, I think. Let's give the poor devils something to think about. Don't screech.

(HE shoots. THEY run through the thicket and momentarily into a pool of light.)

EXCISEMAN #1

(offstage)

He's there. This way!

LUDOVIC

C'mon!

EXCISEMAN #3

I see him!

(Another SHOT. LUDOVIC is hit.)

LUDOVIC

Now who'd have thought an exciseman could shoot as straight as that?

EUSTACIE

Are you hurt? You *are* hurt!

LUDOVIC

Just a scratch. Anyway, we've led them in such circles they'll be hunting one another til daylight.

EUSTACIE

Are you bleeding?

LUDOVIC

Like a pig.

EUSTACIE

(taking off his coat)

Then I must bandage you. If you bleed like a pig you will die, and I do not want you to die.

LUDOVIC

(weakly, as she is binding his wound)

It's alright. We're close to--the Red Lion. Joe Nye. He'll take me in. Just have to get there--

(EUSTACIE gets him to his feet. THEY move forward.)

You know, you'd be wasted on Tristram.

SCENE 6

(MUSIC up. LIGHT change. EUSTACIE, supporting LUDOVIC, stumbles to the threshold of the Red Lion.)

EUSTACIE

Mr. Nye, Mr. Nye...help please!

(NYE opens the door)

NYE

What's all this...is that you, Miss? From up at Court?

EUSTACIE

Yes, but never mind! An exciseman shot him--do you think he will die?

NYE

Die?! No! But, Lor', if he's found here...let's bring him in.

(THEY lay LUDOVIC down.)

Stay you there, Miss, and I'll bring some things to fix him up.

(NYE exits.)

EUSTACIE

Oh, please, cousin Ludovic, don't die.

(Enter SARAH, in a dressing gown with a candle.)

SARAH

Don't be alarmed. I woke with the pounding and because I'm of a prying disposition...I see I've thrust myself into an adventure. Is he badly hurt?

EUSTACIE

I think he's dying. He has bled, and bled, and bled.

SARAH

(putting down her candle)

That sounds very bad, certainly. Shall we see where he is hurt?

(as SHE examines Ludovic)

He's a friend of Nye's, is he?

EUSTACIE

He is my cousin--but you must not ask me anything about him and you must not tell anyone that you have ever seen him.

SARAH

Very well. I won't.

(Enter NYE.)

NYE

I beg you pardon, ma'am--you've been disturbed. It's nothing--naught but a lad I know who's been getting into trouble through a bit of poaching.

SARAH

(skeptically)

Yes, he would be poaching in the middle of February.

EUSTACIE

I dare say it seems very odd to you--but you should not have come downstairs.

SARAH

I know-- but pray don't tell me to go to bed again, for I couldn't sleep a wink with an adventure going on under my very nose! Let me present myself to you--I'm one Sarah Thane, a creature of no importance at all, traveling to London with my brother, Sir Hugh, whom you may hear snoring upstairs.

EUSTACIE

Well...if you quite understand that this is a very secret affair.

SARAH

Oh, I do.

(Seeing EUSTACIE hesitate)

No power on earth shall wring a syllable from me.

(LUDOVIC comes to.)

LUDOVIC

(seeing NYE)

Joe? Oh, I remember. Damme, cousin of mine, a girl--where is--

EUSTACIE

I'm here, *mon cousin*.

NYE

Have you gone crazy, to be comin' here? Who shot you?

LUDOVIC

Some damned exciseman. We landed a cargo of brandy and--

(NYE looks warningly at SARAH.)

SARAH

Oh, don't mind me. I'm sworn to secrecy.

LUDOVIC

Who are you?

NYE

It's Miss Thane, sir--who's putting up at the house. With her brother.

LUDOVIC

Oh, Lord.

NYE

That's right, sir, upstairs now. We'll get you into a bed for now. We'll have to find a way--

(in an undertone)

--to slip you into the secret cellar if the alarm's raised.

LUDOVIC

I'll be hanged if I'm put into that blasted cellar of yours, Nye!

EUSTACIE

No, you will not. I have quite decided that you must stop being a free-trader and become instead Lord Lavenham.

SARAH

That seems to me a most excellent idea. I suppose it will be quite easy.

LUDOVIC

Not really.

EUSTACIE

We shall arrange a plan, and I think perhaps Miss Thane might be very useful--and when it is shown to her that she holds your life in her hands, she will be interested and wish to assist us.

SARAH

Do I really hold his life in my hands? Well, of course, then, I'm much interested. In fact, I wouldn't be left out of this for the world.

LUDOVIC

I must tell, you ma'am--I am wanted by the Law for murder.

SARAH

Are you? How shocking.

(to NYE)

I think he should be put to bed.

NYE

Yes, ma'am. And I'll call Clem to clear off the snow--his bloody tracks'll lead

those excisemen right to the house.

(NYE carries LUDOVIC out.)

SARAH

I hope you mean to tell me all about it, for I'm dying of curiosity and I don't even know your name.

EUSTACIE

I am Eustacie de Vauban, and my cousin Ludovic is Lord Lavenham of Lavenham Court.

SARAH

I thought he was a smuggler.

EUSTACIE

He prefers free-trader. But it is of no importance because he has been falsely accused of murder and so is not able to be Lord Lavenham. But I am going to prove him innocent.

SARAH

Easily done, no doubt.

EUSTACIE

(doubtfully)

Perhaps not. We must find my cousin Ludovic's talisman ring--for whoever has it is the wicked killer. And me, I think that it was perhaps my cousin Tristram, for he has a collection of jewelry and besides, he is a person who might murder people.

SARAH

He sounds very disagreeable.

EUSTACIE

He is--very. And, do you know, I have suddenly thought that perhaps I had better marry him, because then he would have to show me his collection and if I found the talisman ring it would make everything right for Ludovic.

SARAH

But think--if you did not find the ring it would be tiresome to have wed all to no purpose. And perhaps he does not wish to marry you.

EUSTACIE

But he does. We are betrothed.

(gloomily)

Except he has no conversation. And he does not like women.

SARAH

But my dear, if he wants to marry you--

EUSTACIE

He does not *want* to marry me. It is just that he must have an heir, and because *Grandpere* made for us a *marriage de convenance*. Only *Grandpere* is dead now, and I am not going to marry a person who says that he would not care if I went to the guillotine in a tumbriel!

SARAH

Did he really say that? He must be a positive monster.

EUSTACIE

Well, no, he did not say exactly that. But when I asked him if he would not be sorry to see me, a *jeune fille*, in a tumbriel, and dressed all in white, he said he would be sorry for anyone in a tumbriel 'whatever their age--or apparel!'

SARAH

You need say no more. I can see he is a person of no sensibility.

EUSTACIE

And what is more, he is thirty-five years old, and he does not frequent gaming-hells or cock pits and when I asked him if he would ride *ventre a terre* to come to my deathbed, he said, "Certainly not!"

SARAH

That is more shocking than all the rest!

EUSTACIE

Yes, but fortunately I have escaped him and am having a real adventure. Except I have lost my bandbox and it has become a little awkward because all my things were in it.

SARAH

Don't let a miserable circumstance like that worry you. I will lend you a nightdress and tomorrow we will decide whether to go and look for the bandbox--though I feel that would be a spiritless thing to do--or whether to break into your home at dead of night and steal some more clothes for you.

EUSTACIE

(taking SARAH's hand)

I am very glad to have met you. I think I shall tell my cousin Ludovic that he must permit you to share the adventure. But first, I must explain to you everything, *enfin*.

SARAH

I wish you would.

SCENE 7

(LIGHTS down. MUSIC up. LIGHTS up. Enter HUGH, who is finishing some very good brandy. HE puts his hand on the fireplace. A beat.)

HUGH

(as if just noticing)

Hot!

(Enter SARAH.)

SARAH

Hugh.

HUGH

Oh, hello, Sally.

(indicating brandy)

Look what I found.

SARAH

Hugh. How nice for you. My dear, what are your engagements in town?

HUGH

(after a thoughtful pause)

Have I any?

SARAH

What I meant is, should you mind remaining here for a while?

HUGH

Not while this brandy lasts. It's my belief the liquor in this place never paid duty at any port.

SARAH

I think you are right. In fact, I met a smuggler last night.

HUGH

You ought to be more careful.

SARAH

Well, actually he is a baron, falsely accused of murder and robbed of his talisman ring, who has *taken* to smuggling.

HUGH

Oh. Did he bring anything with him?

SARAH

Yes. A lady.

HUGH

Well, what's the use in that.

(the bottle is empty)

Damme. Off for reinforcements.

SARAH

So you don't mind that if we stay for a few days?

HUGH

Sally! Of course we're staying!

(earnestly)

This brandy is some of the best I've ever tasted.

(HE exits. Enter TRISTRAM, who is not in good temper.
He is carrying EUSTACIE's bandbox, which is now
slightly the worse for wear.)

TRISTRAM

I beg your pardon: do you know where I may find the landlord?

(Beat.)

SARAH

Do tell me--are you--

(in a French accent)

--'my cousin Tristram?'

TRISTRAM

Yes, I am Tristram Shield, ma'am. I am afraid you have the advantage of me.

SARAH

Let me beg of you to sit down, Sir Tristram, and I will explain it to you.

TRISTRAM

Thank you, but as you have no doubt guessed, I am come in search of my cousin.

SARAH

Yes. And if you will just sit down--

TRISTRAM

(impatiently)

Is my cousin in the house?

SARAH

Well, yes. But I am not at all sure that you can see her.

TRISTRAM

Why there should be any doubt about my seeing her I am at a loss to understand.

SARAH

Well, you have behaved with a shocking lack of sensibility, have you not?

TRISTRAM

I was not aware of it, ma'am. All I know is that this morning I was informed by the upstairs maid that my cousin would not be coming down to breakfast, having left her home in the dead of night.

SARAH

She was wishful to become a governess.

TRISTRAM

Nonsense! Why should she wish anything of the kind?

SARAH

For adventure.

TRISTRAM

I have yet to learn that a governess's life is adventurous!

SARAH

(pityingly)

Oh, come sir. It must surely be within your knowledge that the eldest son of the house always falls in love with the governess and elopes with her in the teeth of all opposition.

TRISTRAM

Does he?

SARAH

Yes. But not, of course, until he has rescued her from an oubliette, and a band of masked ruffians set on to her by his mother.

TRISTRAM

Perhaps, since my cousin appears to have told you so much, she has also told you how she came to lose this.

(HE indicates the bandbox.)

SARAH

Sir. I know nothing of that receptacle.

TRISTRAM

Well, what did she do for night gear?

SARAH

Oh, I lent her what she needed.

TRISTRAM

And I suppose you did not think the loss of her baggage of sufficient interest to call for an explanation?

SARAH

To tell you the truth--

TRISTRAM

Thank you! I should like to hear the truth.

SARAH

(coldly)

To tell you the truth, she had a fright and dropped her bandbox.

TRISTRAM

What frightened her?

SARAH

A Headless Horseman.

TRISTRAM

Fiddlesticks. I think that it will be better if I see my cousin and hear her story from her own lips.

SARAH

Not if you are going to approach it in this deplorable spirit.

(In a saddened tone)

A man who could remain unaffected by the thought of a young girl, dressed in white, all alone, and in a tumbril--

TRISTRAM

Good God!

SARAH

Perhaps that might be forgiven, but heartlessness in refusing to ride *ventre a terre* to her deathbed--

(EUSTACIE, offstage is shouting at an exciseman.)

EUSTACIE

(offstage)

But you ask me the same idiocies again and again!

EXCISEMAN

(offstage)

I've seen the blood, miss, that's all I'll say.

SARAH

She's overwrought. I think it would be best if you came back tomorrow.

EUSTACIE

(offstage. Note: Use as much of the following as is necessary to cover Tristram/Sarah exchange.)

Vous etes un veritable idiot si vous croyez que J'abrite un criminel! Je ne connais pas de criminels, moi! Je suis issue d'une famille noble, espece d'imbecile, et sans la revolution, j'aurais epouse un duc! Et voila que vos m'insultez avec vos histoires d'escrocs, de la contrebande de spiritueux et quoi d'autre! Vous etes un mechant, un voyou, un petit esprit, te vous le dit!

TRISTRAM

What scrape is she in?

SARAH

Oh, none at all. I wish you would leave.

(Enter EUSTACIE with EXCISEMAN and NYE.)

EUSTACIE

But of course there was blood--buckets and buckets...

(SHE notices TRISTRAM)

...of it.

SARAH

(to TRISTRAM)

The truth is, my dear sir, that your cousin fell in with a band of smugglers last night and had a sad fright.

EXCISEMAN

Aye. And 'tis my belief they're hidin' in this inn!

NYE

The Red Lion's a respectable house--you'll find no smugglers here!

EXCISEMAN

A fine tale you've hatched--and Miss knowing no better than to back you up!

EUSTACIE

Very well. I will tell all. I am Eustacie de Vauban and I am the granddaughter of

Lord Lavenham. He is my cousin, Sir Tristram Shield.
 (EXCISEMAN touches his hat respectfully to
 TRISTRAM.)

I was making my escape.
 (Pointing to TRISTRAM)

From him.

EXCISEMAN
 But why'd you want to run away from your cousin?

EUSTACIE
 Because he would have forced me to marry him. I am in his power.

EXCISEMAN
 But, miss--

EUSTACIE
 Last night, I ran away. I met smugglers and I was *naturellement* very much afraid
 and they were too, for they fired at my--my--groom, and wounded him and he fell
 off his horse with my bandbox.

EXCISEMAN
 Then it queers me how there's no horse tracks own the road.

EUSTACIE
 The horse--bolted. It went back to the stable.

SARAH
 Maddened by fright.

EUSTACIE
 (repeating)
 Maddened by fright.

EXCISEMAN
 (to SARAH)
 How'd you know that?

SARAH
 Why, Sir Tristram who just telling me. When the riderless horse arrived he at
 once feared some mishap and set out to ride--*ventre a terre*--to the rescue. Is that
 not so, dear sir?

(There is a pause. Both SARAH and EUSTACIE look at
 TRISTRAM imploringly.)

TRISTRAM

Just so, ma'am.

EUSTACIE

And my *groom* was quite wounded, but I managed to transport him here to the Red Lion and that is the end of the story.

EXCISEMAN

Well, miss--I'd like to take a look at this groom of yours, if it's all the same to you.

SARAH

Are you suggesting that we would help a smuggler! My good man, do you know you are addressing a sister of a Justice of the Peace? My brother, who is in this house at this moment, holds the strongest views on smugglers and smuggled goods!

TRISTRAM

If the wounded man is indeed a groom for the Court *I* shall recognize him.

NYE

That's a mighty sound notion, sir. I'll lay Your Honor knows the lad as well as I do myself.

TRISTRAM

Do I indeed?

NYE

I'll take you to him right away.

(HE starts to move off. TRISTRAM follows him.
EUSTACIE steps forward, as if to bar the way, but
SARAH sweeps her aside.)

EUSTACIE

(whispering, to SARAH)

He must not see him! He must not!

SARAH

(loudly)

Yes, my love, let us go up too--in case the lad should be alarmed at having to face Sir Tristram.

NYE

(shouting off)

In my back bedchamber, sir! I always house smugglers there to be handy for the Excisemen.

(Lights up on LUDOVIC in bed. There is a pause.)

EXCISEMAN

Do you know him, sir?

TRISTRAM

Very well indeed. He does not look very like a smuggler.

EXCISEMAN

I'd say he looks uncommon like the old Lord, It's the nose.

TRISTRAM

It is a nose often seen in these parts.

EXCISEMAN

(embarrassed)

Oh, that's the way of it! Well, of course I ain't got no more to say, sir.

NYE

Then you can take yourself off! Next you'll be telling me I've got smuggled liquor in my cellar!

EXCISEMAN

(exiting off)

And so you have...

(Exit NYE and EXCISEMAN, arguing.)

EUSTACIE

(to TRISTRAM)

I will do anything you want! I will even marry you!

LUDOVIC

Oh, no you won't!

(to TRISTRAM)

And what the devil did you mean by telling him that I'm one of Sylvester's by-blows?

EUSTACIE

But I find that was very clever of him! Did you not think so, Sarah?

SARAH

Yes, you never told me he was such an excellent conspirator.

EUSTACIE

Well, truly I did not think he would be.

TRISTRAM

(to LUDOVIC)

What are you going here?

LUDOVIC

Free-trading.

TRISTRAM

What?! Hasn't your name been degraded enough?!

EUSTACIE

(to SARAH, with disgust)

You see how he is?!

SARAH

Yes. He seems to have no feeling for romance at all.

LUDOVIC

I'm ruined already, aren't I? I'll go to the devil in my own way!

(TRISTRAM pulls LUDOVIC's hand from under the coverlet.)

TRISTRAM

Where's the ring? If you had it, it would never leave your hand.

LUDOVIC

Famous! Where's the ring indeed. *You* do not know, of course.

TRISTRAM

What the devil do you mean by that!

LUDOVIC

Does the talisman ring grace your collection now? Tell me, does it give you satisfaction when you look at it?

TRISTRAM

If you were not a wounded man, I'd give you the thrashing of your life! I have stood veiled hints from Basil, but not even he dare say to my face what you have said!

LUDOVIC

Basil! Basil believed me--

TRISTRAM

So implicitly that he advised you to face your trial--with evidence enough against you to hang you...twice over.

(HE pauses, lost in thought.)

SARAH

What! What are you thinking?

TRISTRAM

Matthew Plunkett was shot by someone who wanted the Talisman Ring and nothing else.

(to LUDOVIC)

If you did not do it, I know of only one other who could have.

EUSTACIE

It was Basil! Why did I not think of that before! Miss Thane, it is my cousin Basil who is the villain and although you do not know him I assure you it is much, much better because he wears a silly hat!

SARAH

I perfectly agree. To tell you the truth, Sir Tristram is not sinister enough for my taste.

LUDOVIC

Wait, Eustacie--wait! This is not certain. Let me think.

TRISTRAM

Listen to me. I never had your ring in my life. Until this moment I would have sworn it was in your possession.

(There is a pause.)

LUDOVIC

But Basil...to plan a cold-blooded murder just to get my ring--

TRISTRAM

And the title. Don't forget that.

LUDOVIC

But he stood by me, he believed me--no, he couldn't do it.

SARAH

He must have a very subtle brain. He is, I am sure, a fiendish kind of person.

LUDOVIC

No, he isn't.

SARAH

Nonsense. He must be.

LUDOVIC

He's a might pleasant fellow, and I'd have sworn not one to wish anybody harm.

EUSTACIE

Alas, it is true. He is just nothing.

TRISTRAM

Sylvester mistrusted him.

(LUDOVIC makes a contemptuous sound)

Sylvester was no fool.

LUDOVIC

Sylvester mistrusted everyone. He mistrusted me!

TRISTRAM

So little did he mistrust you that he bade me give you his signet ring if ever I should see you again.

(HE gives HIM to the ruby ring.)

He said not to pledge it.

(LUDOVIC puts on the ring.)

He asked me just before he died whether I thought your story had been true after all.

LUDOVIC

You probably told him no.

TRISTRAM

I did. But that was before.

EUSTACIE

And now you will stay, *mon cousin*, won't you?

TRISTRAM

He can't. It was madness to come at all.

LUDOVIC

I shall stay. I shall find out who holds the Talisman Ring.

TRISTRAM

What can you hope to do in hiding that I cannot do openly? Why risk being arrested?

LUDOVIC

Because--if Basil has the ring, I know where to look for it.

(dramatic pause)

There's a secret panel in the Dower House.

(Beat. The two WOMEN exclaim with excitement.)

SARAH

Oh, I have wanted all my life to search for a secret panel! Do you think there is a hidden passage too?

EUSTACIE

Of course!

SARAH

With bats and dead men's bones.

EUSTACIE

Oh no. Not bats, no. That would not be reasonable. But certainly some bones, chained to the wall--

TRISTRAM

Where is the panel, Ludovic?

LUDOVIC

It's in the library, but what I can't for the life of me recall in which part.

TRISTRAM

That is unfortunate, since the library is almost entirely composed of paneling.

LUDOVIC

I dare say I shall recognize it when I see it.

TRISTRAM

How do you propose to see it? Basil is in Dower House, and means to stay there.

LUDOVIC

I shall have to break in at night.

SARAH

Or we could find the panel.

TRISTRAM

We?

SARAH

Certainly. Eustacie said I might share the adventure.

TRISTRAM

Nonsense.

EUSTACIE

But of course she will. Sarah is of utmost importance in this affair. As am I.

TRISTRAM

Then I'll have nothing to do with it.

EUSTACIE

Tant pis.

LUDOVIC

But I need you to help with the housebreaking!

TRISTRAM

Do you imagine that I am going to break into Basil's house?

SARAH

We may also need you if there to be any fighting.

TRISTRAM

I wish you would all rid yourselves of the notion that you are living within the pages of one of Mrs. Radcliffe's romances.

(to EUSTACIE)

I dare swear news of your foolish flight has even now reached Basil's ears. If she remains here what am I to tell him?

SARAH

I have it! I know Eustacie in Paris some years ago. Finding myself in the vicinity of her home, I sent to inform her of my arrival, whereupon the dear creature, misliking the Bath scheme, formed the idea of putting herself under my protection.

(LUDOVIC and EUSTACIE confer under)

Unfortunately, you, Sir Tristram, knowing nothing of me, and being possessed of a tyrannical disposition--I beg your pardon.

TRISTRAM

I did not speak.

SARAH

You refused to accede to Eustacie's request thus leaving her no alternative to instant flight. But now that you have seen me, you realize that I am altogether a proper person to have charge of a young lady, and you relent.

TRISTRAM

Do I?

SARAH

Certainly.

TRISTRAM

You are very good, ma'am, but--

EUSTACIE

(calling out)

Sarah! We have a plan.

LUDOVIC

You have a plan.

EUSTACIE

You and I shall go to Dower House and while I talk to Basil you will find the secret panel and steal the ring!

SARAH

Oh. Just find the panel and steal the ring. Yes. I dare say it will be quite easy.

EUSTACIE

Certainly it will be easy because I have thought of a very good plan, which is to pretend to Basil that I do not know what to do. I shall say to him that I have no one to advise me and I am afraid of Tristram and you will go away to draw a picture of the woodwork in the library. In that way you will be able to search for the secret panel and when you have found it, you can steal the ring. And make just a little drawing to show Basil.

LUDOVIC

It's too dangerous--and ten to one Basil will suspect something. She can't hunt for the catch to the panel under his very nose.

EUSTACIE

I told you, I will desire to speak with Basil alone. And he will like that.

LUDOVIC

He will, will he?

EUSTACIE

Yes, because he has said that he would like to marry me.

TRISTRAM

(suddenly)

I think it's a very good plan.

SARAH/EUSTACIE/LUDOVIC

You do?

TRISTRAM

Yes. Only if you do find the ring you must on no account remove it, Miss Thane. Make a sketch of that particular portion of the frieze so that we may easily find it again.

SARAH

I should mention--

TRISTRAM

The ring is worth nothing unless Basil is caught with it in his possession.

SARAH

Yes, but there's just one thing--

LUDOVIC

But I want my ring. I haven't had a day's good luck since I lost it.

SARAH

Just one thing, I--

EUSTACIE

But of course he must have his ring!

SARAH

I cannot draw!

(There is a moment of shocked silence.)

TRISTRAM

I thought that drawing was taught in every young ladies' seminary.

SARAH

That may be, but I still cannot draw.

EUSTACIE

But Sarah--it is most important that you should be able to make just a little drawing!

SARAH

I know. I quite see that a person who is unable to draw is unfit to take part in any adventure.

LUDOVIC

It seems to me that girls merely waste their time at school.

TRISTRAM

I shall have to join your party. *I can draw.*

EUSTACIE

But I have just run away from you. Basil will wonder why you are there.

TRISTRAM

I will join your party at the Dower House--unexpectedly--and you may counterfeit all the disgust you please.

SARAH

Yes! You will arrive upon some pretext, just in time to rescue the Basil from my importunities. Eustacie having signified her desire to hold private speech with him, he will hail your arrival with joy. I shall have to be a very stupid sort of a woman, and as, a great many questions about antiquities.

TRISTRAM

That's right. Just keep talking and you will be safe--Basil knows nothing of antiques. Comment enthusiastically upon the gold-figured oak wainscoting in the library.

LUDOVIC

Also the strap-and-jewel work overmantel in the drawing room. Sylvester used to say it was devilish fine.

TRISTRAM

Mention the muntins. And the pilasters.

SARAH

(committing it to memory)

Muntins. And pilasters. Right.

(Exit ALL. LIGHTS down.)

SCENE 8

(LIGHTS up on BASIL and GREGG. They have been fencing; finishing a move, perhaps.)

BASIL

Yes, very good. You are turning into quite the swordsman, Gregg.

GREGG

Thank you, sir. I hope to be helpful, sir.

BASIL

Perhaps I should reveal to you the Botta Secretti. I should like to practice it with someone.

GREGG

The Botta Secretti, sir?

BASIL

The indefensible move.

(THEY go through it slowly.)

I appear open. You, of course, strike at my leg.

(Riposte)

I appear open. You now strike at my shoulder. You are off balance. I move thus, numb your wrist so, and to the kill! Again!

(THEY go through the moves again.)

Allez. Because I appear vulnerable, you naturally strike...but things are not always as they appear.

(Kill. GREGG comes at BASIL again.)

You think you are attacking. But you are merely moving exactly...as...I...wish.

(Kill.)

The winner of the game, my dear valet, is the one who has thought it through to its conclusion.

GREGG

And is it always indefensible, sir? What if--

(Enter the Dower House BUTLER.)

BUTLER

Mademoiselle de Vaubon and Miss Sarah Thane, sir.

(Enter SARAH and EUSTACIE.)

BASIL

So here we have the little runaway! Poor, poor Tristram.

EUSTACIE

This is my cousin, Sarah. Basil, Miss Sarah Thane.

BASIL

Ah yes, the--er--acquaintance of Paris days, I believe. What a singularly happy chance it was that brought you to this unlikely spot, ma'am.

SARAH

(SHE is indeed acting like a very stupid woman.)

Yes, was it not? Oh! Such exquisite strap-and-jewel work! How I should love to sketch it!

BASIL

I believe it is considered to be very good--

SARAH

I adore antiquities. Dutch influence here, I think. And there...oh! I detect the touch of Torrigiano! A pity the muntins are not covered by pilasters. And the cartouches! Magnificent! I must examine them more closely.

(SHE moves away. BASIL and EUSTACIE talk privately.)

EUSTACIE

We have come today because I have suddenly thought that perhaps you, who are very much of the world, could advise me.

BASIL

My dear cousin, you surprise me.

EUSTACIE

Surprise you?

BASIL

You have not been precisely in the habit of seeking either my company or my advice, have you, *ma chérie*?

EUSTACIE

I find myself now in a situation of the most awkward.

BASIL

Well, well. I could show you how to end that.

(SARAH comes over again.)

SARAH

I am in raptures over your scratch mouldings, Mr. Lavenham.

BASIL

Perhaps we should step into the dining parlour--

SARAH

And your caryatids. Beautiful Italian Renaissance style--nothing at all like inferior Flemish craftsmanship. Lovely paneling--ah, the singular beauty of the Gothic! What a remarkable De Hooge!

(Enter the BUTLER with TRISTRAM.)

BUTLER

Sir Tristram Shield, sir.

EUSTACIE

Oh!

TRISTRAM

(to EUSTACIE)

I have been to the Red Lion and was told I should find you here! I do not understand what your purpose can have been in coming, for I particularly requested the favour of an interview with you this morning.

EUSTACIE

I told you I would not have any interview with you. And where I go is not at all your affair.

TRISTRAM

It is very much my affair, since I am responsible for you.

BASIL

My dear Tristram, do come in. I believe you are acquainted with Miss Thane.

TRISTRAM

Miss Thane and I have met, but--

BASIL

Nothing could be better! Miss Thane has done me the honour of coming to see my house, and, alas, you know how lamentably ignorant I am on the subject on antiques! But you, my dear fellow, who know so much--

SARAH

Oh! If it would not be troubling Sir Tristram--

TRISTRAM

(ungraciously)

I will, of course, be pleased to tell Miss Thane anything about--

SARAH

Wainscoting! It is of all things my delight.

BASIL

The wainscoting in the library would be worthy of a sketch--or two. Eustacie and I will wait for you here.

(SARAH and TRISTRAM move away, as BASIL leads EUSTACIE to a chair.)

TRISTRAM

Have you been talking like that the whole time?

SARAH

Without pause. He was itching to be rid of me.

TRISTRAM

I wonder he did not strangle you.

SARAH

He is too well-bred. Did I sound really feather-headed? I tried to.

TRISTRAM

Yes. You are an extremely accomplished woman, Miss Thane.

SARAH

I have a natural talent for acting. But your own efforts were by no means contemptible, I assure you.

(Beat.)

We have no time to waste if we are to find this panel.

TRISTRAM

Oh--the panel. Yes, of course.

(THEY exit. Focus on BASIL and EUSTACIE.)

EUSTACIE

If my dearest Sarah has any fault, it is just that she is a trifle talkative.

BASIL

Just a trifle. Do you really propose to accompany her to London?

EUSTACIE

Mais oui. But I cannot remain with her forever. Everything is so awkward.

BASIL

There is an alternative.

EUSTACIE

What do you advise me?

BASIL

You should consider the advantages of becoming a baroness.

EUSTACIE

What do you mean?

BASIL

I might make you one.

EUSTACIE

(bluntly)

You are not a baron, you!

BASIL

We don't know that.

EUSTACIE

So you think Ludovic is dead!

BASIL

Let us say rather that I should like very much to know whether or not he is dead, my dear.

(HE lays his hand on HERS.)

EUSTACIE

(thoughtfully)

Yes, I suppose you want to be Lord Lavenham. It is very natural.

BASIL

I do not set great store by it, but I should be glad of the title if it could win me the one thing I want.

EUSTACIE

Voyons, do you think I marry just for a title, me?

BASIL

Oh no, no, no! You would undoubtedly marry for love were it possible, but when one is debarred from a love-match, it is time to give weight to material considerations.

EUSTACIE

And you have given weight to them, *n'est-ce pas*? I am an heiress, as you reminded me yesterday.

BASIL

You are also enchanting.

EUSTACIE

I regret infinitely that I do not find you enchanting too.

BASIL

You want certain things, Eustacie, which I could give you.

EUSTACIE

I do not think it.

BASIL

You would like a house in town, balls, parties--in short, to lead precisely the life I lead. And I should not expect anything so dull as children. I require only that my wife's taste in dress should do me justice.

EUSTACIE

You propose to me a *mariage de convenance*--and that is just what I do not want.

BASIL

I proposed to you what I thought might be acceptable. Forget it! I love you!

(HE goes to her and embraces HER.)

Eustacie. From the moment of first laying eyes on you I have loved you!

(SHE breaks away from HIM. There is a pause.)

It seems that you do not find me so sympathetic as you would have had me believe, cousin. Now, I wonder why you wanted to come here today.

EUSTACIE

I thought you would advise me--not make love to me.

BASIL

Very well. Let us talk of something else. I had something in mind to ask you...what can it have been? Ah yes, I have it. The mysterious groom. Who was the mysterious groom, Eustacie?

EUSTACIE

The--

BASIL

--groom who did not exist. My man Gregg fell in with a certain riding-officer and gleaned from him a very interesting tale. A wounded groom whom you and Tristram vouched for. But when I made inquiries--being quite concerned, you know--the head stableman was quite positive that all his men were completely unwounded.

EUSTACIE

I was captured by smugglers that night and but for the man I saved I should have been killed.

BASIL

I never knew such chivalry existed amongst smugglers.

EUSTACIE

He was quite rough and not at all civil--but he had compassion upon me. Then the riding-officers shot at him and he was wounded and I did not know what to do, so I went to the Red Lion and asked Nye to help the smuggler.

BASIL

And Tristram? How were you able to persuade so stern a pattern of rectitude to support your story?

EUSTACIE

Oh. Tristram was grateful to my smuggler for saving me.

BASIL

What strange, incredible things do happen, to be sure. If I read this tale in a romance I should have said it was far too improbable to bear the least resemblance to the truth. Even more incredible, quite unbelievable in fact, I understand your smuggler was one of Sylvester's bastards!

EUSTACIE

Cousin!

BASIL

Perhaps I should have said "love-child." Such an odd coincidence, I'm surprised you forgot to mention it.

EUSTACIE

I did not forget it, but I don't speak of indelicate things!

(Enter TRISTRAM and SARAH. With relief.)

Oh, my dear Sarah. Where have you been?

SARAH

Sir, your library is magnificent, it--

BASIL

Eustacie has been telling me more about her little adventure. Yes, yes--I've heard all about Eustacie's smuggler. A connection of Sylvester's, I believe?

TRISTRAM

Just so. I thought there would be less noise made over the affair if he were allowed to escape.

BASIL

How quick of you to recognize one of Sylvester's--ah, I must not offend Eustacie's sensibilities again!--one of Sylvester's relations.

TRISTRAM

Oh, I knew him at once. You remember Jem Sunning, don't you?

BASIL

Jem Sunning. I thought he went to America.

TRISTRAM

Apparently he found free-trading more to his taste.

BASIL

But how could he have--

SARAH

Oh! I have just recollected. My poor brother. I promised to take tea with him. I'm afraid we must take our leave of you, Mr Lavenham. Thank you so much for allowing me to see your magnificent home--ah, I shall not soon forget the afternoon light casting its red glow on the cartouches--

BASIL

Farewell, then.

(Kissing EUSTACIE's hand)

My dear Eustacie. Tristram.

(Exit SARAH, TRISTRAM, and EUSTACIE. BASIL stands silently in thought for a moment. Enter GREGG.)

BASIL

Gregg. That exciseman--

GREGG

Yes, sir.

BASIL

He mentioned seeing a young man, did he not?

GREGG

I was informed so, sir.

BASIL

How old by your reckoning would Jem Sunning be at this present?

GREGG

I regret, sir, I am unable to answer with any degree of certainty. I should suppose

him to be somewhere in the region of one- or two-and-thirty.

BASIL

My memory is very imperfect, but I think he always used to be dark, was he not?

GREGG

Yes, sir. The late lord generally gave his own coloring to his descendants.

BASIL

Yes, I have heard that. In fact, I think I can call only one exception to mind.

GREGG

The riding officer, sir, spoke of a fair young man.

BASIL

Well, that is very odd, to be sure.

GREGG

Oh, and sir? The lady who accompanied Sir Tristram into the library. I understand she was desirous of inspecting the paneling?

BASIL

Well?

GREGG

It would explain why she was standing upon a chair to inspect the frieze and why Sir Tristram, when I entered the room, seemed to be sounding the lower panels.

BASIL

Did he? Did he indeed? Well, well.

(GREGG exits. BASIL fingers his quizzing glass.
LIGHTS transition.)

SCENE 9

(Enter SARAH and EUSTACIE. SARAH is explaining the library adventure.)

SARAH

It was the worst luck--I was standing on a chair, trying to find the catch to the secret panel in amongst an absolute sea of muntins or whatever they're called, when in walked that horrid valet!

(THEY are stopped by HUGH and LUDOVIC, arguing off.)

HUGH

(off)

Nice balance, but too short in the barrel.

(Enter HUGH and LUDOVIC. LUDOVIC has his gun out.)

LUDOVIC

The devil! I can hit a pip out of a playing card!

HUGH

It's a bet!

EUSTACIE

Ludovic!

SARAH

Hugh!

EUSTACIE

(going to LUDOVIC. Tragically.)

You are up!

LUDOVIC

Why not? I'm not an invalid.

(to SARAH)

Your brother's a prime one, Miss Thane. We've been playing piquet.

SARAH

But you weren't even supposed to meet. Oh dear, never mind--but what if I had been Basil--or an exciseman?!

LUDOVIC

(waving the pistol)

Oh, I'm well prepared.

EUSTACIE

Ludovic! You must go back to your room at once!

LUDOVIC

Sorry, m'dear. It's a bet, you see--and I can't leave Sir Hugh with guineas to lose!

(HE prepares to shoot.)

SARAH

Hugh! Let us admit that Ludovic is a crack shot and be done with it!

LUDOVIC

Well, I am a crack shot.

HUGH

Talking of crack shots, what was the name of the fellow who put out fifteen candles in the big chandelier at Mrs. Archer's once.

LUDOVIC

Sixteen.

HUGH

Fifteen was what I was told. He did it for a wager.

LUDOVIC

That's true enough, but there were sixteen.

HUGH

No, fifteen. I can't be mistaken.

LUDOVIC

Damn it, I ought to know. I did it!

HUGH

You're the man who shot the wicks off fifteen candles--

LUDOVIC

Sixteen candles!

HUGH

Devilish fine shooting. But are you sure you have the figure right? I rather fancy fifteen was the number.

LUDOVIC

Where's Tristram? He was there.

(Enter TRISTRAM.)

EUSTACIE

(tragically)

Ludovic is up!

LUDOVIC

Did I put out fifteen or sixteen candles at Mrs. Archer's house?

TRISTRAM

All I remember is you shattered a big mirror and brought the Constable in on us.

LUDOVIC

(As if suddenly remembering something)

Oh! By-the-by, did you find that panel?

SARAH

No, Ludovic, we did not find that panel. In spite of having searched for it for nearly half an hour.

HUGH

Lost something, Sally?

SARAH

(with awful calm.)

No, dear. It is Ludovic who has lost a talisman ring. I told you all about it yesterday.

HUGH

I do remember you telling me some rigmarole or anohter.

SARAH

(to LUDOVIC)

Your cousin has heard about Eustacie's groom and there is not doubt that he feels suspicious. Luckily, Sir Tristram had the presence of mind to tell him that the groom was--whom did you say he was, Sir Tristram?

TRISTRAM

Jem Sunning.

LUDOVIC

I thought he went to America.

TRISTRAM

He did. That was why I chose him. But I'm not sure that Basil believed me. It is more imperative than ever that you should get to some place of safety. If you won't go to Holland--

HUGH

Oh, I shouldn't go to Holland if I were you. Too many demmed pictures.

LUDOVIC

I'm going to stay here. If the worst comes to the worst, there's always the cellar.

TRISTRAM

Are you serious in thinking the ring may be behind that panel?

LUDOVIC

Of course I'm serious. Where else would he be likely to put it?

TRISTRAM

If I help you get into the house, can you find the panel?

LUDOVIC

I can try.

TRISTRAM

Yes, no doubt. But I have assisted in one aimless search for it, and I've no desire the repeat the experience.

LUDOVIC

Once I'm in the house you can leave it to me.

SARAH

(to TRISTRAM)

And just how shall you get into the Dower House, sir?

LUDOVIC

We can break in through a window.

EUSTACIE

Oh, Ludovic. You shall not! You will bleed, and bleed!

SARAH

And I'm sure you will never get Sir Tristram to agree to do anything so rash.

TRISTRAM

I must seem to you a very spiritless creature, Miss Thane.

HUGH

This all sounds very odd to me. You can't break into someone's house.

LUDOVIC

Why not? I'm not such a cripple as that.

HUGH

Well, I'm a Justice of the Peace and I can tell you--it's against the law!

LUDOVIC

So's smuggling and I'm in that so deep it don't much signify what I do now.

HUGH

You're never the smuggler my sister spoke to me about.

LUDOVIC

(grinning)

That's right.

EUSTACIE

(Taking HIM by the arm and pulling him towards the bedroom.)

Back to bed you...and no more talk of breaking-ins!

HUGH

(exiting after them)

Wait! Can you get me a pipe of that brandy Nye has in his cellar?

EUSTACIE

(dramatically)

He cannot, or he will put himself into a fever, and then he will die!

HUGH

Well, I'm not asking him to die...

(Exit EUSTACIE, LUDOVIC, and HUGH.)

SARAH

Whatever induced you to contemplate marriage with Eustacie?

TRISTRAM

I can hardly suppose, ma'am, that my private affairs can be of interest to you.

SARAH

(wisely)

Some people would take that for a set-down.

TRISTRAM

You do not seem to be of their number.

SARAH

Well, I have not had the benefit of a correct upbringing. But you have not answered my question. Why did you take it into your head to marry Eustacie?

TRISTRAM

The idea was taken into my great-uncle's head--not mine. Being the last of my line, it was my duty to marry. The alliance proposed to me was one on convenience. Had events turned out otherwise, Sylvester would have given her to Ludovic, not to me.

SARAH

Oh, that is famous! We can now promote the betrothal to him with clear consciences. But it is vexing for you to be obliged to look about your for another eligible lady. Are you set on marrying a young female--

TRISTRAM

I am not set on marrying anyone!

SARAH

--because very young girls are apt to be romantic and that would never do.

TRISTRAM

I certainly do not look for romance in marriage, but--

SARAH

It must be someone past the age of being hopeful of getting a husband, then.

TRISTRAM

(acidly)

Thank you.

SARAH

Not handsome--I do not think we can expect her to be more than passable.

TRISTRAM

Really, Miss Thane--

SARAH

Luckily, there are any number of plain females of good birth but small fortune to be found in town. After a certain number of years, they must yield place to younger sisters, you know.

TRISTRAM

You are too kind, ma'am.

SARAH

Not at all; I shall be delighted to help! I have just the sort of girl to suit you. A good, affectionate girl, with no pretensions to beauty and a grateful disposition. She's past the age of wanting to go to parties, and she won't expect you to make pretty speeches to her. I wonder--would you object to have having a slight--a very slight--squint in one eye?

TRISTRAM

Yes, I would, and--

SARAH

Well, that is a pity. I had thought of the very person.

TRISTRAM

Let me beg you not to waste your time thinking of another! The matter is not urgent.

SARAH

I cannot agree. After all, when one approached middle age--

TRISTRAM

Middle age--has anyone ever boxed your ears, Miss Thane?

SARAH

No.

TRISTRAM

You have been undeservedly fortunate. We will, if you please, leave the subject of my marriage. I do not anticipate an immediate entry into wedlock.

SARAH

That is perhaps wise. You are not cut out for matrimony. Your faith in females was shattered by an unfortunate affair in your youth, and--

TRISTRAM

Who told you that?!

SARAH

You did.

TRISTRAM

I?!

SARAH

Most certainly.

TRISTRAM

I do not know by what sign you knew that there had been an affair in my past about which I do not care to think, however--

SARAH

It seems to me inexplicable that you could have met your cousin with an open mind and yet failed to fall instantly in love with her.

TRISTRAM

There is no fear of my falling in love, ma'am. I learned my lesson early in life.

SARAH

How melancholy it is that so few people have the good sense to profit by their experience as you have done! I wonder if we should warn your cousins of the disillusionment in store for them.

TRISTRAM

(smiling a little)

I do not think it will be necessary, Miss Thane. Moreover, there is no immediate likelihood of their being married. Ludovic's affairs are in a very bad way. Now that he is up, you must do what you can to keep him hidden from everyone but us...and I need hardly tell you that it would be singularly awkward if he decided to break into Dower House without waiting for word from me. Do you think you can prevent him?

SARAH

Probably not. Fortunately, Eustacie seems to have a good influence on him.

(LIGHTS down on SARAH and TRISTRAM.)

SCENE 10

(MUSIC up. Small LIGHT up on LUDOVIC and EUSTACIE. They are kissing. LUDOVIC breaks away.)

LUDOVIC

I'm sorry. Forgive me!

(HE kisses HER again, then stops.)

Oh god, I have no right--I ought to be shot for doing such a thing.

EUSTACIE

Voyons! I find that you are excessively rude! I thought you wanted to kiss me!

LUDOVIC

Of course I wanted to! Oh, devil take it--if I were not an exile I should beg you to marry me. But I am, so--

EUSTACIE

It is not at all *convenable* that you should kiss me and then refuse to marry me. I am quite mortified.

LUDOVIC

I wish to God I could ask you to marry me!

EUSTACIE

If it is against your honor you need not make me a formal offer. We will just be betrothed without it.

LUDOVIC

Not until I've cleared my name.

EUSTACIE

But if you cannot, then what are we to do?

LUDOVIC

Forget we ever met.

EUSTACIE

(forlornly)

But me, I have a memory of the very longest.

LUDOVIC

Sweetheart, don't cry. I can't possibly let you marry me if I'm to remain an exile all my life.

EUSTACIE

Yes, you can. If I want to marry an exile, I shall.

LUDOVIC

You won't.

EUSTACIE

I will.

(SHE kisses HIM. Enter TRISTRAM. The lovers part.)

LUDOVIC

Tristram--

EUSTACIE

It's all right. We're to be married.

LUDOVIC

(to TRISTRAM)

I ought never to have done it, I know.

TRISTRAM

(with a pointed look at EUSTACIE)

I don't suppose you did do it.

(A small LIGHT up on BASIL and GREGG. The following scenes happen simultaneously.)

BASIL

Gregg, I think that we sometimes purchase our brandy from Joseph Nye.

GREGG

Yes, sir.

BASIL

We will purchase some more.

(GREGG nods.)

Also--

(BASIL takes out a sheet of paper)

Regard this.

GREGG

You've sent for the Bow Street Runners, sir? And they're coming?

BASIL

Why not? The law is still quite interested in the murder of Sir Matthew Plunkett.

EUSTACIE

If we cannot find that ring we shall go away to Italy, and--

TRISTRAM

If you are determined to marry Ludovic, I think we had better find the ring. Which is what I have come to tell you. I am on my way to Brighton, to find Basil's last butler.

LUDOVIC

His last butler? What for?

TRISTRAM

Since he was in Basil's employ at the time of the murder, it occurred to me I should find out what he can remember of Basil's movements on that night. I shall be gone several days--so while I'm away--

TRISTRAM AND BASIL

Be discreet.

BASIL

Mustn't be involved in this business.

GREGG

But what should I do?

EUSTACIE

But what should we do?

TRISTRAM

My advice?

BASIL

Tell the Runners Ludovic is in a secret cellar in the Red Lion!

TRISTRAM

Ludovic should stay in Nye's secret cellar.

GREGG

We'll find that cellar, sir.

BASIL

And tell them Ludovic is deadly with a pistol. That they say he never misses. And perhaps they should consider shooting first and asking questions later.

(MUSIC crescendos and out. LIGHTS out.)

(End ACT ONE.)

ACT TWO

SCENE 11

(MUSIC and LIGHTS up. Enter LUDOVIC, speaking as he enters. He is followed by Sir HUGH, holding a playing card.)

LUDOVIC

I may be cooped up in this house like some fatted pullet, but I can still take your wager. Stand over there and hold the card

(HE aims at the card.)

HUGH

You want me to hold the card??

LUDOVIC

Well, look around. What am I to set it on?

HUGH

You want to me to hold the card, and then...you shoot at me?

LUDOVIC

At the card. Are you afraid I'll miss?

HUGH

Well, yes, actually. I'm counting on it. After all, I just bet you twenty guineas--

(Enter SARAH, out of breath)

SARAH

Oh, of all the times--Ludovic, there's a Bow Street Runner not ten steps behind me.

LUDOVIC

A who?

SARAH

A detective, you provoking boy--looking for you. And there's another Runner outside, standing on top of the secret cellar door.

(LUDOVIC bolts upstairs.)

HUGH

Well, that's an odd thing--

SARAH

Oh, Hugh--I will explain later! Go away, will you?

(HE exits. Enter EUSTACIE, distraught.)

EUSTACIE

Sarah!

SARAH

I know. Ludovic's upstairs.

EUSTACIE

But why did he not go to the secret cellar--now he is trapped!

SARAH

Whoever sent them knows something--there's one of them outside, right on top of the passageway. Pray heaven he doesn't know what he's standing on. I'll find Nye. Perhaps he knows of another way for Ludovic to get to safety.

(Enter STUBBS, a Bow Street Runner. SARAH whispers to EUSTACIE)

Don't let him upstairs!

(to STUBBS, as SHE is leaving)

Oh, hello!

STUBBS

(to EUSTACIE)

Excuse me, miss. But have you seen a cove by the name of Nye about the place?

EUSTACIE

Who are you?

STUBBS

I am--

(impressively)

A Bow Street Runner.

EUSTACIE

(in ecstasy)

A Bow Street Runner!

(HE nods, suspiciously)

You must be very brave and clever!

(STUBBS mumbles something inarticulate.)

What is your name? And why have you come here?

STUBBS

Jeremiah Stubbs, miss. And I am here in the execution of my dooty.

EUSTACIE

How I should like to see you make an arrest. Are you after someone in this inn?

STUBBS

A desprit criminal, missy, that's the cove I'm after.

(EUSTACIE sees LUDOVIC beginning to leave the upstairs bedroom.)

EUSTACIE

I suppose you, who are a BOW STREET RUNNER have to capture a great many desperate criminals.

(LUDOVIC goes back into hiding. In this next exchange, STUBBS advances towards that hiding place, as if to go in.)

STUBBS

Oh well, miss. We don't take much account of that. Perhaps I'll just take a look upstairs.

EUSTACIE

Who is this criminal, I wonder.

STUBBS

A murderer!

EUSTACIE

(giving a shriek)

A murderer! Here?!

STUBBS

Aye. A young cove with blue eyes, light hair, height about five feet, ten inches...a Loodervic Lavenham.

EUSTACIE

But are you mad? Ludovic Lavenham is my cousin, *enfin!* A very wicked creature who we do not speak of even. I see now that you are a very brave man.

STUBBS

Why?

EUSTACIE

You have not been warned, then? *Je n'en reviendrais jamais!*

STUBBS

If it's all the same to you, miss, I'd just as soon you'd talk in a Christian language.

What was it they had ought to have warned me about?

EUSTACIE

His pistols! Do you not know that my cousin is the man who put out sixteen candles by shooting them?

STUBBS

He put out sixteen candles?

EUSTACIE

They say he never misses.

STUBBS

They ought to have warned me!

(There is a muffled SHRIEK and LUDOVIC, dressed as a woman, enters. HE carries a broken perfume bottle.)

LUDOVIC

(in a female voice, as he is entering)

Oh, oh, what shall I do! Mistress will kill me if she find out--

(seeing EUSTACIE)

Oh! Miss! I beg pardon! I've had an accident, Miss--

EUSTACIE

Wretched, wicked creature! You have broken my perfume bottle! Ah, it is too much, *enfin!*

(Enter NYE.)

Mr. Nye! Look at this horrible girl. She ruins my clothes, snarls my hair and how she has broken my perfume bottle. Do you not think I have cause to turn her over to this BOW STREET RUNNER?

NYE

(understanding at last)

Oh come, miss. The wench meant no harm. I'll have Clem clean it up.

EUSTACIE

I will tell you that it is...Lavinia!...herself who shall scrub it, for it is not at all Clem's fault.

(to LUDOVIC)

Out, you!

NYE

(apologetically, to STUBBS)

Miss has the temper of a fiend.

(During this next exchange, STUBBS and NYE confer

under.)

EUSTACIE

(whispering to LUDOVIC)

What are we to do? There is another one by the cellar! And he--

(indicating STUBBS)

--is going to search the house.

LUDOVIC

Let 'em search. There's no Ludovic here. Only Lavinia.

(NYE and STUBBS begin to exit.)

STUBBS

Well, I'm bound to do my dooty, Mr. Nye, whatever you say. I'll be searching the rest of the house now, if you don't mind.

NYE

Search anywhere you want. I've nothing to hide.

EUSTACIE

(in pursuit)

Oh, yes! Please start with my room! I expect you will pull all my dresses out and throw them on the floor! Oh, I wish I were back in Paris, where ladies are treated with civility--

(NYE and STUBBS exits hurriedly. To LUDOVIC:)

You look ridiculous.

LUDOVIC

I'm a fine, strapping girl. But I don't care much for Sarah's perfume, do you?

EUSTACIE

Is that her dress, *enfin*?

LUDOVIC

Well, I couldn't fit into yours, could I?

(Enter SARAH.)

SARAH

(To EUSTACIE, not seeing LUDOVIC)

I'm sorry it took so long to find Mr. Nye. Where's...

(SHE notices LUDOVIC, recoiling at the smell)

Ludovic?

EUSTACIE

Ludovic thought it would be a good thing to break a bottle of your perfume, so I

could be angry and he could hide his face and make believe to cry.

SARAH

Yes. I suppose it had to be the French perfume. And this is the gown you chose to wear?

LUDOVIC

It got a trifle split across the shoulders.

SARAH

So I imagine. But what is a mere gown compared to a man's life?

EUSTACIE

But this is all nothing! We must find a way to get you to the cellar.

SARAH

I'm sure we can manage that....the trick will be to find out who sent those horrid men here in the first place.

(THEY exit. LIGHT change.)

SCENE 12

(It is NIGHT. Enter STUBBS and PEABODY.
Then, enter GREGG.)

GREGG

Well?

STUBBS

It ain't well. You've fetched us down for nothing, that's what.

PEABODY

That's right.

GREGG

But I'm sure he was there! You looked everywhere?

STUBBS

(with scathing irony)

There now! If you haven't put me in mind of it! Dang me if I didn't forget to look inside one of them coal-boxes.

GREGG

And you are sure that he had no opportunity to seek safety anywhere?

STUBBS

By the time I was at the front door, Mr. Peabody here was guarding the back.

PEABODY

That's right.

GREGG

He must be hidden somewhere. I have head tell of Nye's secret cellars--

STUBBS

What's your interest in this Loodervic Lavenham?

GREGG

I have my reasons.

STUBBS

Looke! When I go ferreting for news of a desprit criminal, that's dooty. When you does the same thing, Mr. Gregg, it looks to me uncommon like spitefulness, which I don't hold with.

PEABODY

That's right.

STUBBS

That's right.

GREGG

Why, you may say so if you choose, Mr. Stubbs. But I hope I may ask if they let you go into the little back bedchamber.

STUBBS

'Course I did. And all I saw was the young French lady's maid.

GREGG

Her maid?!

STUBBS

Ay. Crying into her shawl fit to break yer heart.

GREGG

(putting it together)

So you didn't see her face. Perhaps she was a tall girl? A very tall girl?

STUBBS

Ay, she was a rare, strapping wench. She had yaller hair.

GREGG

So that was it.

STUBBS

What do you mean "so that was it?"

GREGG

That strapping wench was Ludovic Lavenham--and you've let him slip through your fingers!

STUBBS

Loodervic--impossible! That is--hummmm...but if it was him--and we ain't proved that yet--he's still there. All we have to do is make a pounce.

GREGG

Take my advice and go armed.

STUBBS

I did hear he was handy with his pops.

GREGG

They say he never misses. If I were in your shoes, I should think it as well to shoot him before he could shoot me.

STUBBS

I dare say. But we ain't allowed to go a-shooting of coves.

GREGG

But if you told how he shot first, and would have escaped, it would surely be overlooked...

(GREGG exits.)

STUBBS

(to PEABODY)

Seems to me, William, that there's someone unaccountable anxious to have this Ludovic Lavenham put away quick--and quiet, too.

PEABODY

That's right.

STUBBS

Still. We should find that blasted maid.

(STUBBS and PEABODY exit. Enter EUSTACIE and SARAH. It is important that STUBBS does not see SARAH.)

SARAH

I thought we routed those men.

EUSTACIE

They are villains of the most stubborn.

SARAH

It is most irksome of these persons to continue to haunt us. It quite puts an end to our adventures.

EUSTACIE

Yes, it does. Besides, I am afraid Ludovic will catch cold in the cellar.

SARAH

How inconsiderate of Sir Tristram to be gone at such a time. We could use his advice. But we've no word on his return. I fear there is nothing for it, Eustacie. We must get rid of the Runners ourselves.

EUSTACIE

But they are the kind of men who stay and stay and stay.

SARAH

I am afraid it is your abigail who is at the root of their obstinacy.
(SHE gets an idea.)

My love, I believe I have hit upon a notion! Would you--now, would you say I was a strapping wench?

EUSTACIE

Of a certainty I would say nothing of the kind! You are very tall, *bien entendu*, but--

SARAH

Say no more! I have a plan!

(MUSIC up. LIGHT change. It is night. STUBBS and PEABODY are watching the inn from out of doors. THEY share a flask.)

STUBBS

It's a cold night.

PEABODY

That's right.

STUBBS

It's not that I mind watchin' from out o' doors, mind...just that I wish'd I knew what I was watchin' for. That little French fiend said her abigail was already gone, on account of her being dismissed. Very suspicious.

PEABODY

That's right.

(EUSTACIE cautiously opens a door and looks out. SHE is the picture of stealth and deception.)

STUBBS

Look!

(EUSTACIE beckons to SARAH, who creeps out stealthily, swathed in cloaks.)

STUBBS

It were that self-same maid--all along I thought--too big for a female. There he goes!

PEABODY

That's right.

(THEY follow SARAH, who eludes them, creeping around the stage.)

STUBBS

Halt! In the name of the Law!

(HE grabs SARAH's cloak. THEY struggle.)

PEABODY

Mind his pops, Jerry!

(SARAH hits STUBBS in the face.)

Lordy, what a wild cat!

STUBBS

(as SARAH hits him.)

My nose!

(The fight continues.)

SARAH

(in a low voice)

Let me go! Let me go at once!

STUBBS

I arrest you in the name of the Law!

(Enter TRISTRAM, dressed for travel.)

TRISTRAM

What in God's name--

SARAH

Sir Tristram, help! Help!

(The fight continues. TRISTRAM overcomes the RUNNERS.)

TRISTRAM

(to SARAH)

Are you hurt? What is the meaning of this, Miss Thane?!

SARAH

These wretched creatures set upon me! I shall die of shock!

TRISTRAM

(torn between amusement and exasperation)

Are you out of your mind! How dare you do such a crazy thing!

(STUBBS and PEABODY recover. STUBBS moves bravely toward SARAH.)

STUBBS

I arrest you, Ludovic Lavenham, in the name of the Law.
(to TRISTRAM)

And it will go hard with them as seeks to interfere.

TRISTRAM

You fool! This is a lady.

SARAH

(dramatically)

Oh, don't let him touch me!

TRISTRAM

I've not intention of letting them touch you, but don't get in my way. Now, perhaps you will tell me what the devil you mean by arresting this lady!

STUBBS

It ain't a lady. He's a desperate criminal dressed up for an abigail! No lady could fight like him!

TRISTRAM

I tell you this is Sir Hugh Thane's sister. Look! Is this a man's face?

(HE pulls the hood from SARAH's face.)

SARAH

(tearfully)

When my brother hears of this, you will be sorry!

STUBBS

If we've made a mistake--

SARAH

I fear I may be going to swoon!

TRISTRAM

Can you walk or shall I carry you?

(Enter EUSTACIE.)

EUSTACIE

Mon Dieu! What has happened? Sarah, are you ill?

SARAH

I scarce know--two men attacked me--

EUSTACIE

Ah, she is swooning!

(SARAH swoons into TRISTRAM's arm, conveniently.)

What an outrage! What villainy! Carry her into the house.
(to cover cross, if necessary.)

Mr. Nye! Mr. Nye! Look at Miss Thane!

(TRANSITION. LIGHT change. ALL enter the Red Lion.
Enter NYE.)

NYE

What? Miss Thane in a swoon! I'll call Sir Hugh.

TRISTRAM

I think we should throw water over her. Cold water.

SARAH

(reviving briefly, whispers to him fiercely)

You dare...

(SARAH sinks back into her swoon.)

EUSTACIE

Wait! I shall instantly fetch the hartshorn!
(to STUBBS)

Bully! Imbecile!

(Enter HUGH.)

HUGH

What's all this? Nye told me some story about Sally fainting. Sally doesn't faint!
(seeing HER)

Good God, she's fainted!

EUSTACIE

These wicked mens attacked her--with sticks!

HUGH

What?! Attacked my sister!

SARAH

(moaning and waking up)

Where am I?

EUSTACIE

Dieu soit bien! She is better!

SARAH

Ah! Two men...with sticks! Oh, am I safe indeed?

NYE

It's a crying scandal, that's what it is.

SARAH

(seeing THEM)

Oh, don't let them touch me!

HUGH

Let them touch you! They had better try!

STUBBS

It was all a mistake, ma'am. No one don't want to touch you. It was the poor light and me...us not knowing you!

PEABODY

That's right!

HUGH

Hold your tongue! Sally, what happened?

SARAH

I went out for a breath of air and before I had gone above a dozen steps I heard someone running behind me and turning, saw two men coming for me and waving their sticks. I tried to escape, but they caught me--and handled me so roughly I was near swooning away on the spot. Then, by the mercy of Providence, who should come riding by but Sir Tristram. I screamed to him for help, and---and he flung himself from his horse and rescued me! He knocked them both down.

EUSTACIE

Tristram did that?! Truly, sir, I begin to like you very much indeed.

HUGH

(examining STUBBS's nose)

Drew his cork, too.

TRISTRAM

No, I fancy Miss Thane deserves the credit for that.

SARAH

I did hit him.

HUGH

Good girl! But what were they chasing you for?

SARAH

They said I was Ludovic Lavenham and...

(pointing at STUBBS)

He arrested me.

HUGH

He's mad.

NYE

Drunk more like it, sir. They've been drinking in my tap-room all afternoon.

HUGH

(horrified)

Not the brandy!

STUBBS

I take my solemn oath it ain't true.

PEABODY

That's right.

STUBBS

We suspicioned the Lady was that maid--

PEABODY

That's right.

STUBBS

Who was really Loodervic Laventham!

PEABODY

That's right.

HUGH

They are drunk!

PEABODY

(bursting forth)

Sir! We thought that maid were Loodervic Laventham on account of her being such a great strapping wench and then when she was turned off so sudden it were mightily suspicious-like and then when Miss here come out so cautious-like from the back door, we thought she was the maid who was...Loodervic Laventham.

STUBBS

That's right!

(defensively)

And what would she go out walking for when it was almost dark, anyways?

HUGH

I must say, it seems demmed odd to me.

SARAH
Oh...must I tell you?

HUGH
Well--yes.

SARAH
I went to meet Sir Tristram.

TRISTRAM
(beat)
This news should have been broken to you at a more suitable time, Thane.

SARAH
We cannot discuss such matters now! Do, pray, send these creatures away! I will believe they meant me no harm--but I vow and declare the very sight of them gives me a spasm!

HUGH
(to STUBBS)
You sir! Leave this house.

(Exit STUBBS and PEABODY. HUGH continues to regard SARAH in a puzzled manner.)

NYE
Now that they're gone. I'll let his lordship out of the cellar.

EUSTACIE
Yes, let us tell him of our success. Those wicked men will never return.

(Exit NYE and EUSTACIE.)

HUGH
(to TRISTRAM)
I dare say Sally knows what she's about, but I don't think you should appoint her to meet you like that. It's not at all the thing. Besides, if you want to see her, you can do it here, can't you? I've no objection.

SARAH
Hugh, really--

TRISTRAM
I fear you have no romantic leanings. A star-lit sky, the balmy night breezes.

HUGH
But this is February! The breeze isn't balmy at all!

TRISTRAM

(soulfully)

To persons deep in love, any breeze is balmy.

SARAH

Hateful wretch. Pay no heed to him, Hugh. Of course, I did not go to meet him!

TRISTRAM

You play fast and loose with me--you have dashed my hopes, shattered me--

SARAH

If you say another word, I'll box your ears.

HUGH

I see. You've been flirting again.

SARAH

No, I haven't! I said it merely to trick the Runners. Sir Tristram's arrival was quite by chance.

HUGH

But you told me--

TRISTRAM

The truth is that you have stumbled upon a secret romance, Thane.

HUGH

(pausing as he looks from one to the other)

I suppose it's all a hum. I'm going to the parlour. There's a devilish draft in here. Are you coming?

TRISTRAM

(stopping SARAH as SHE moves to follow HUGH)

Presently.

(Exit HUGH.)

SARAH

I suppose I deserved that.

TRISTRAM

Certainly you did. Are you at all hurt?

SARAH

Oh, no, merely a bruise or two. Your intervention was most timely.

TRISTRAM

And if I had not been there?

SARAH

I should have allowed them to drag me back here, of course, and fainted in Hugh's arms instead of yours.

TRISTRAM

I shouldn't have done it.

SARAH

Oh, perhaps it was not, as Eustacie would say, quite *convenable* but you will admit that it has rid us of a grave danger.

TRISTRAM

You might have been badly hurt.

SARAH

But I was not badly hurt, so we shall not consider that.

(Enter LUDOVIC with EUSTACIE.)

LUDOVIC

(kissing her cheek)

Sally, I swear you're an angel!

TRISTRAM

Anything less angelic than her conduct during the past half-hour I have yet to see. An accomplished liar would be nearer to the mark.

EUSTACIE

Quant a ça, you also told lies. You pretended to be in love with her--you know you did!

LUDOVIC

Perhaps he is in love with her. I vow I am!

SARAH

Cream-pot love, my child. You are pleased with me for having rid you of those Runners. But we are forgetting your business, Sir Tristram. Did you find Basil's former butler?

TRISTRAM

Kettering. Yes. But he had nothing to tell me. You have been much more excitingly employed.

LUDOVIC

Now that we've rid ourselves of those plaguey Runners, we ought to get into Dower House.

TRISTRAM

We must be wary. I fancy Basil's suspicions will not be as easily allayed as the Runners' were.

LUDOVIC

The devil a bit! I wish he'd leave--even for a night. Then we could break in and find my ring.

EUSTACIE

(as ALL are exiting)

Ludovic! You will do nothing of the sort!

(LIGHTS down. MUSIC up. Small LIGHT up on BASIL.
He is composing a letter.)

BASIL

My dear Tristram. I have been meaning to send word to you these past three days or more--but I am obliged to go to London tomorrow on a matter of stern necessity. My new coat, you know: it sags across the shoulders. Please let me know if you should have any commissions you may wish me to execute during my journey. Oh--and will you tell me the name of Sylvester's carpenter? My man tells me the bolt is off one of the library windows. Do not delay your reply.

(HE smiles and exits.)

SCENE 13

(LIGHTS up on ABEL, entering the inn. HE looks around a bit, then signals for LUDOVIC with a whistle. LUDOVIC enters, but seeing nothing, exits again. ABEL whistles, a similar exchange. Finally, LUDOVIC sees ABEL.)

LUDOVIC

Abel! What the devil are you doing at the inn? Has Nye seen you?

ABEL

Not yet he ain't. But I have dunnamany kegs of brandy waiting to be delivered here so soon as he gives the word.

LUDOVIC

Forget Nye. I've other work for you to do. Come here.

(HE pulls ABEL to a secluded spot)

You know why I took to smuggling, don't you, Abel?

(ABEL nods.)

Well, understand this--I didn't commit that murder.

ABEL

Oh? Happen you'll have to prove that if you'm wishful to take the old lord's place.

LUDOVIC

That's what I mean to do. And you're going to help me.

ABEL

I'm agreeable.

LUDOVIC

You know my cousin Basil?

ABEL

Aye, that I do.

LUDOVIC

I believe him to have in his possession a ring which belongs to me. If I can find that ring, I can prove I was innocent of Plunkett's death. I've got to search the Dower House, Abel...and tonight's the night. Basil sent a letter saying he was going to London today, and he won't be back 'til tomorrow. But I need a man to help me break in--you see how it is with me.

(LUDOVIC indicates his wounded arm.)

ABEL

Mmm. Nye's a better man 'n me for that sort of work.

LUDOVIC

True. But I've a cousin here--another cousin, not Basil--a cursed, cautious, interfering cousin who thinks it's a trap. And he's persuaded Nye to think the same.

ABEL

I never knew Joe Nye to be mistook--however, if you've a fancy to go, I'd best come with you, for you'll go anyways. What's the orders?

LUDOVIC

I want a horse saddled up at midnight. Everyone should be asleep by then. I'll get Sir Hugh drunk--he's the only one who stays up past ten anyway. Then, we'll ride to Dower House and the rest should be easy.

ABEL

There's only one thing as puts me into a bit of a quirk and that's how to keep Nye from suspicioning what we'm going to do.

LUDOVIC

He's not seen you.

ABEL

Odds are they'll tell him in the stables I've been around.

LUDOVIC

The devil a bit! Well, go talk to Nye then--but take care you don't let him guess you've had speech with me. Ask for me--he won't let you see me and it'll look well.

ABEL

'Til tonight, then.

LUDOVIC

Yes. Tonight.

(LIGHTS down. Darkness. HUGH snores up. Enter SARAH, in nightgown with candle. SHE knocks at Sir HUGH's door.)

SARAH

(whispering)

Hugh? Hugh? Stop that noise! Oh, what did that dratted boy give you to drink! You sound like a pit full of bears. Hugh!

(SHE notices an open window.)

Who left this open?

(notices something outside)

Ludovic! Oh, heavens! He's riding off!

(calling out)

Mr. Nye! Mr. Nye!

(Enter NYE in nightgown, with candle.)

NYE

Ay. What's all the commotion, then?

SARAH

Mr. Nye. I just saw Ludovic riding down the east road--he's going to Dower House, I am sure of it!

NYE

He wouldn't do it--not alone. He can't even saddle a horse with his arm in a--by God, you're right, ma'am! He must have seen Abel. That accounts for him being so uncommon cheerful, drat the boy! I'll get a horse and--

SARAH

Wait. I have a better notion. Send Clem to inform Sir Tristram. Once Ludovic has stepped into whatever trap they've set for him, Sir Tristram's the one person who can perhaps get him out.

NYE

(gratefully)

It's you who have the head, ma'am. I'll send word at once.

SCENE 14

(LIGHT change. ABEL and LUDOVIC are outside Dower House.)

LUDOVIC

Basil told my cousin that the bolt was off this library casement--give me a leg up.

(As he's balancing on ABEL)

And listen--if we walk into a trap get yourself out of it--you've helped me enough.

(beat)

Understand?

ABEL

I understand yer breakin' my back. Now get in there.

(HE hoists LUDOVIC up and into the room, then hands him a silver flask.)

Play off your dust afore we start?

LUDOVIC

No, I must keep a clear head. So must you, what's more. I don't want you disguised.

ABEL

(climbing through the window with LUDOVIC's help)

You've never seen me with the malt above water--not to notice.

LUDOVIC

I've seen you drunk as a wheelbarrow.

(HE takes out a pistol.)

Our best safeguard. In these parts they believe I can't miss and it makes 'em wary of tackling me.

ABEL

Well, I'm bound to say I disremember when I've seen you miss your target.

LUDOVIC

I missed an owl once, fool that I was! Pass me the lantern!

(LUDOVIC shines it about the room and sees the embossed panel he's looking for.)

There it is. Curse this arm! You'll have to hold the lantern, Abel. Hold the light so that I may see the frieze. No, more to the right. I think--no, I was wrong. It's not the fourth, but the third panel. Look!

(A panel opens, revealing a hole.)

It's a priest's hole. Give me the lantern!

(As LUDOVIC examines the hole, two MEN enter the room.)

ABEL

Sir! Save yourself!

LUDOVIC

(grabbing the lantern and disappearing into the hole)

The window, man! Be off!

(ABEL hides. Wavering candlelight fills the room.)

BUTLER

Stand! Stand!

GREGG

(going to panel, now closed)

He's here! I saw him!

BUTLER

Where?

GREGG

Here, behind the panel! I saw it close, I tell you! There's a priest's hole; we have him trapped!

BUTLER

(skeptically)

And perhaps you know how to get into this priest's hole you talk of?

GREGG

No, we were too late. Only the master knows the catch to it. We must keep a watch over it until he returns.

BUTLER

I don't understand what you're playing at, Mr Gregg, with all this talk of housebreakers and setting everyone to keep watch. Who's behind the panel?

GREGG

Oh, never mind that! Send someone to fetch the Constable!

(ABEL emerges with a gun)

ABEL

Stand where you be! Drop that gun.

(GREGG and ABEL shoot at each other at the same time.
The BUTLER goes to help overpower ABEL, who

clumsily eludes him. GREGG is frantic.)

GREGG

No! That's not the man. He's here, behind the paneling!

BUTLER

This one's good enough for me!

(Enter TRISTRAM. HE aims his pistol and shoots out the candles. The room is in complete darkness.)

Someone's shot out the candles!

GREGG

Ludovic's escaped. No one else could fire that shot!

TRISTRAM

(to himself, with satisfaction)

Oh, could they not?

(Seeing BUTLER advancing upon him, HE shouts to ABEL)

Book!

(A FIGHT ensues, with books as weapons. TRISTRAM, with minimal help from ABEL, overcomes GREGG and the BUTLER. TRISTRAM relights candles. LIGHT change.)

ABEL

Dang me if I know who you may be--but I'm tedious glad to meet a cove so uncommon ready to sport his canvas, that I will say!

TRISTRAM

You may not know me, but I know you, you addle-pated jackass! Where's Mr. Ludovic?

ABEL

I misdoubt I know what you'm talking about.

TRISTRAM

You damned fool! I'm his cousin!

ABEL

His cautious cousin! Lamentable cautious you be! Mr. Ludovic's got himself into that priest's hole he was crazy to find.

TRISTRAM

Then why the devil didn't he come out when I shot the candles out?

ABEL

Happen it ain't so easy to get out as what it is to get in. And what's more, that screeching valet knows where he is, ay, and who he is. He means to watch till his precious master gets home.

TRISTRAM

(looking at GREGG, who's still unconscious)

He'll do no watching yet awhile and he's the only one we have to fear. The butler's never seen my cousin.

ABEL

But he knows there's a man in the priest's hold, because t'other cove told him so.

TRISTRAM

I can handle him. Now get out of here--but stay close by. I may need you to show me where to find the catch that opens the panel.

(Exit ABEL, as BUTLER comes to.)

TRISTRAM

What the devil's amiss!

BUTLER

(relieved)

Oh, it's you, sir.

TRISTRAM

I was on my way home from Hand Cross when I heard pistol shots--I ride up and find all this--what's the meaning of it?

BUTLER

We've had housebreakers, sir--and one of them's hidden in some priest's hole I never heard of til now.

TRISTRAM

Priest's hole? Did you catch any of the housebreakers?

BUTLER

No, sir, and there's Gregg laying like one dead. There were a great many of them, I think--five or more.

TRISTRAM

Where's this precious priest's hole you talk of?

BUTLER

It's here, sir. I'm watching it. Only let that rascally fellow come out, that's all I ask!

TRISTRAM

I'll keep an eye on that. You help this fellow--

(indicating GREGG)

--up to his room. Gently now.

(BUTLER exits with GREGG, moaning. TRISTRAM goes to the panel and calls.)

Ludovic! All's clear. Come out.

(ABEL pops up at the window.)

ABEL

Happen he's suffocated inside that hole.

TRISTRAM

Nonsense. Where's the catch?

(ABEL indicates it.)

There? To the left?

(TRISTRAM opens the secret panel.)

Ludovic! Are you hurt?

(Pause, as HE peers in.)

Damn. He's not there.

(Enter GREGG, supported by the BUTLER.)

BUTLER

(to TRISTRAM)

He wouldn't stay put, sir.

GREGG

(blearily)

I tell you I can't go to my room. He's in there--he's--

(GREGG sees TRISTRAM)

So it's like that is it? But I'll watch. If he's there still he won't get away!

TRISTRAM

I'd get him a drop of brandy if I were you, Mr. Jenkyns.

(Exit BUTLER. TRISTRAM hits GREGG. GREGG falls to the floor in a faint. Re-enter BUTLER with brandy.)

He seems to have swooned off again. Carry the fellow up to his room--and this time keep him there.

BUTLER

(carrying GREGG out)

I warned him not to get up!

(THEY exit. ABEL pops up again.)

ABEL

Quick thinking, sir.

(Enter LUDOVIC, from another part of the stage.)

LUDOVIC

What a shambles! I'd give a monkey to see Basil's face when he comes home!
What brought you here, Tristram?

TRISTRAM

How the devil did you get out of the priest's hole?

LUDOVIC

(airily)

Oh, there's another way out. It leads up to Basil's bedchamber. I thought I might
as well hunt for the ring up there since you had affairs so well in hand down here.

ABEL

And did you happen to find it?

LUDOVIC

No. It wasn't in the priest's hole. And I ransacked Basil's room but it's not there
either.

TRISTRAM

Do you feel that you have done enough for one night, or is there anything else
you'd care to damage before you go?

LUDOVIC

Me?! Who overturned all this furniture, I should like to know? I didn't! Don't
keep on pushing me to the window!

TRISTRAM

If you don't go, you'll find yourself in difficulties again, and this time I won't
help.

ABEL

Nor I.

LUDOVIC

Didn't I tell you to save yourself? Instead, you started a mill, and my cousin had
to make a wreck of the place. That's not the sort of thing he likes. He's a cautious
man--aren't you, Tristram?

TRISTRAM

My love of caution isn't going to stop me knocking you on the head if you don't
go immediately!

LUDOVIC

By the way, nice shot with those candles.

TRISTRAM

Wasn't it? Gregg thought you must have fired it.

LUDOVIC

The devil he did. You shouldn't listen to flattery.

(Exit ALL, enter BUTLER.)

BUTLER

Sir Tristram, I've put him to--

(confused by the absence of people)

Sir Tristram?

(Exit BUTLER.)

SCENE 15

(LIGHT change. The Red Lion, with SARAH by the fire. Enter TRISTRAM.)

TRISTRAM

Ah, Miss Thane.

SARAH

Sir Tristram.

TRISTRAM

Well. This is a day of triumph for you.

SARAH

How so?

TRISTRAM

Did you not guess that at last you have succeeded in making me feel grateful towards you?

(beat)

By sending me off after Ludovic.

SARAH

Odious creature. I had a mind to go myself to rescue him.

TRISTRAM

You would have been very much in the way. How is the boy this morning?

SARAH

He is a little in the dumps. Tell me, have you any real hope of finding his ring?

TRISTRAM

I have every hope of clearing his name. His adventure last night will at least serve to convince Basil that we mean to bring him to book.

SARAH

You think he may betray himself? But one must not forget that last night's affair must surely have betrayed you.

TRISTRAM

Certainly. But Basil's situation is awkward. He will hardly admit to having laid a trap for the man whose heir he is. He will be obliged to pretend to accept my story. Where is Ludovic?

SARAH

Eustacie has persuaded him to stay in bed this morning. Do you care to go up?

You will find her with him. And Hugh as well.

TRISTRAM

(HE begins to exit and see SHE is not following. Stops.)

You do not mean to secede from our councils, I hope?

SARAH

You are not used to be so civil. Fighting must have a mellowing effect upon you.

TRISTRAM

(seriously)

Have I been uncivil?

SARAH

Well, perhaps not uncivil, just disapproving.

TRISTRAM

I wish you will rid yourself of this nonsensical notion that I disapprove of you.

SARAH

But you do not?

TRISTRAM

Sometimes.

(Enter EUSTACIE, followed by LUDOVIC.)

SARAH

Ludovic! You should be in--

EUSTACIE

He is here!

SARAH

Who is here?

EUSTACIE

That wicked man--that abominable--

LUDOVIC

Basil!

SARAH

What audacity!

TRISTRAM

He probably wants to convince us that he was really in London last night. Let us see him, Eustacie.

EUSTACIE

But what shall I say?

TRISTRAM

Whatever you please--so long as it does not concern Ludovic.

(to SARAH)

Do you think you can contrive to be as stupid as you were when he last saw you?

SARAH

Oh, am I to be allowed to take part? Certainly I can be stupid. To what purpose?

TRISTRAM

I think it is time we frightened Basil a little.

LUDOVIC

But what do you expect him to do?

TRISTRAM

I haven't a notion. But I am reasonably certain that he will do something.

SARAH

Tell me what you want me to say.

(MUSIC up, as they confer. Enter BASIL. SARAH calls to him.)

Oh, Mr. Lavenham!

BASIL

What luck! You are all of you here. You behold me on my way home from a most tedious, disagreeable sojourn in town. I could not resist the opportunity of paying a morning call upon you.

SARAH

Oh, Mr. Lavenham--we are so delighted! I do hope your journey has not worn you away--after all the conditions of the roads--

TRISTRAM

So you've not yet been home, Basil?

BASIL

No, not yet.

(beat)

Why do you ask me so oddly? Is something amiss?

SARAH

Have you not heard of the shocking attempt to rob you last night? I declare I shall not know how to go to bed this evening!

BASIL

My house...broken into?

TRISTRAM

Exactly. If your servants are to be believed, a band of desperate ruffians broke into the library.

SARAH

Yes and only fancy, Mr. Lavenham! Sir Tristram had been dining with us here and was riding back home when he heard shots coming from the Dower House. He, of course, instantly rode up to the house.

BASIL

What a fortunate chance. I suppose none of these rogues was apprehended?

TRISTRAM

I fear not. There was a prodigious struggle in your library--quite a mill. Your butler welcomed my advent with profound relief.

BASIL

No doubt.

SARAH

Oh, that poor butler! He must feel you to be his preserver, Sir Tristram. He will be doubly glad to exchange masters!

BASIL

I beg your pardon, ma'am?

SARAH

I only meant, since he is about to enter Sir Tristram's service--

TRISTRAM

You are mistaken, Miss Thane.

SARAH

Oh! But you were saying to Eustacie that you had found Mr. Lavenham's butler and she asked whether his memory--

EUSTACIE

(cutting SARAH off)

I hope so much that nothing has been stolen from your house, Basil.

BASIL

So do I hope it, my dear cousin. But pray let Miss Thane continue.

SARAH

(as EUSTACIE frowns at her meaningfully)

Ooooh. Indeed it was nothing. I confused one thing for another. My brother tells me I am a sad shatterbrain.

TRISTRAM

I am making no attempt to steal your butler from you, I assure you, Basil.

SARAH

Of course not! The stupidest mistake--it is not your present butler, Mr. Lavenham, but one you used to employ.

(beat)

Have I said something I ought not?

BASIL

A butler I once employed? Are you thinking of taking him into service, Tristram?

TRISTRAM

You have no objection, I trust?

BASIL

Why should I? I doubt, though, whether you will find him so useful as you expect. I am afraid I must take my leave of you--and ascertain what losses, if any, I have sustained. Good day.

(Exit BASIL.)

EUSTACIE

He was *bouleverse* and I think--frightened.

SARAH

He was certainly frightened. He forgot to smile. It has suddenly occurred to me that that very unpleasant person probably knows Ludovic is occupying the back bedchamber.

EUSTACIE

Oh Sarah--you do not think he will come to murder Ludovic, do you?

SARAH

I should not be at all surprised--and since Ludovic made my room uninhabitable with perfume, well...I am occupying the back bedchamber!

(beat)

I just mention it, you know.

EUSTACIE

(looking relieved)

So you are. It is of all things the most fortunate!

SARAH

That is a matter of opinion.

EUSTACIE

But no, Sarah! If Basil come to murder Ludovic, he will not find him, but you!
And that will be a good thing.

SARAH

A good thing for whom?!

EUSTACIE

For Ludovic, of course!

(beat)

You said that you wanted to have an adventure.

SARAH

I never said that I wanted to be murdered in my bed!

EUSTACIE

Of course he would not murder you!

TRISTRAM

Unless he regarded it as a good opportunity to rid the world of a chattering female. A risk that we shall have to run. But in all seriousness, Miss Thane, I do not think there is any danger. If you are afraid, share Eustacie's bed.

SARAH

No. I prefer that my blood shall be upon your heads.

(SARAH, EUSTACIE, and TRISTRAM exit.)

SCENE 16

(LIGHT change. Night sinister MUSIC up. Lights up on Sir HUGH, sleeping in the parlour with a book in his hand. Suddenly, BASIL appears, disguised with a half-mask. HE holds a knife aloft.)

(BASIL sneaks about, then perceives HUGH. HE moves away from HUGH, but the sudden CRY of an owl wakes HUGH.)

HUGH

Who's there?

(BASIL strikes at HUGH with a dagger. THEY struggle. The dagger falls. BASIL escapes. Enter SARAH and EUSTACIE, with candles.)

EUSTACIE

What is it?! What is it?!

HUGH

It's only I. Don't start screeching, for Lord's sake.

SARAH

Hugh! Are you alright? What in the world are you doing up?

HUGH

Never mind that.

SARAH

My dear, you sound very cross.

(noticing with alarm)

Where did you get that knife?

HUGH

I fell asleep reading, but something woke me--

SARAH

An owl. I heard it.

HUGH

--then a demmed fellow in a loo-mask tried to stab me. No, it's no use looking round for him--he's gone!

EUSTACIE

Ludovic! Ludovic, are you safe?

(EUSTACIE exits quickly.)

HUGH

French. All alike. What the devil does she want to fly into a pucker for?

(Enter NYE.)

NYE

Is the whole house awake? What's amiss now?

SARAH

Mr. Nye! There's been an intruder. You must send for Sir Tristram at once--

NYE

(to HUGH)

You didn't get a sight of him, did you?

HUGH

I keep telling you he wore a mask! If there's one thing above others that I hate, it's a lot of demmed theatrical nonsense!

NYE

(to SARAH)

I'll send Clem for his lordship at once.

HUGH

What was the fellow playing at? Highwayman?

SARAH

(tactfully)

Perhaps he did not wish to run the risk of being recognized.

HUGH

It's my belief that you know who he was, Sally. It has seemed to me that there's a good deal going on here which is devilish unusual.

SARAH

Yes, dear. I think your masked man was Ludovic's wicked cousin come to murder him in his bed with that horrid-looking knife you have in your hand.

NYE

(reentering)

There ain't a doubt of it. Look.

(HE holds up Basil's quizzing glass.)

Have you ever seen that before?

HUGH

No, I haven't. And what's more, I don't like it. Too much filagree.

SARAH

(taking glass)

It's Basil's. He must be feeling desperate indeed to have taken this risk.

(Enter LUDOVIC and EUSTACIE.)

EUSTACIE

(pointing at knife)

Look! You see, just as I said!

LUDOVIC

To think of Basil daring to come and tackle me with nothing better than his medieval weapon. It's a damned impertinence, upon my soul it is!

SARAH

Thank goodness that owl woke Hugh. Perhaps it was the one you missed. How fortunately things do turn out.

HUGH

(to LUDOVIC)

Do you mean to tell me it was really your cousin here tonight?

LUDOVIC

Oh, devil a thought.

HUGH

A cousin of your masquerading about in a loo-mask?

(LUDOVIC nods.)

Come here to murder you in your bed?

(LUDOVIC holds up the dagger.)

I'll tell you what it is--he's a demmed scoundrel!

EUSTACIE

Yes, and if he does not go to the scaffold I myself will kill him! I will make a sacred vow to kill him!

HUGH

No, don't do that. You can't go about England killing people, whatever you may do in your own country!

EUSTACIE

I can and I will!

(Enter TRISTRAM.)

Oh, *mon cousin*--Basil has tried to kill Ludovic! He came through a window in the night and--

TRISTRAM

Yes, yes--Clem has told me.

EUSTACIE

(almost hysterical)

This is a very good adventure, and of course I am enjoying it--but do you think that Basil will again try to come and kill Ludovic?

TRISTRAM

And you're sure it was Basil?

(to HUGH)

Did you get a good look at him?

HUGH

Of course not--I told you he wore a mask. This is the queerest inn I've ever stayed at in my life!

SARAH

But it was certainly Basil. Look what we found.

(SHE hands TRISTRAM the quizzing glass.)

TRISTRAM

Have you ever found it odd that Basil seems to attached to this piece?

SARAH

I've never thought of it. But it's true. He carries it with him everywhere.

EUSTACIE

And how he touches it! It makes on feel so--

(SHE shudders.)

LUDOVIC

Well, I never saw him with it. Not that I'm disputing he carries it about. I dare say he bought it since my time.

TRISTRAM

That is precisely what I think he did do.

(HE examines the quizzing glass closely.)

HUGH

Myself, I like 'em thinner.

LUDOVIC

Yes, the shaft's too thick. Very clumsy.

TRISTRAM

I think there's a reason.

(HE touches a groove on the handle. The RING rolls out.)

The talisman ring.

LUDOVIC

My ring! My ring.

HUGH

Well, upon my soul, that's a devilish cunning device. You see, Sally? The ring fitted into the circlet at the end of the shaft.

SARAH

Yes, dear. I see it did.

LUDOVIC

There is nothing I can say to you, Tristram, except that I could kiss your feet for what you have done for me.

TRISTRAM

I beg you won't, however.

(TRISTRAM and LUDOVIC embrace.)

SARAH

It has been under our very noses. The audacity of it! And we owe its discovery all to Hugh. I shall not easily recover from the shock.

EUSTACIE

(disgusted)

And everything--but everything--we did was quite useless!

TRISTRAM

I do not know why you should complain. You have had a great deal of adventure, which is what I understood you both to want.

EUSTACIE

That is true. But some of it was not very comfortable. And I must say that I am not at all pleased that it is you who have found the ring, because you did not want to have an adventure, or to do anything romantic.

SARAH

Yes, it is quite odious, my love, for who could have been more disagreeable. Really it would have been better in some ways had we insisted upon his remaining the villain.

TRISTRAM

(abstracted)

It's very well, but we are not yet out of our difficulties. Let me have the ring, Ludovic--it is true that we have found it, but we did not find it in Basil's possession. Oh, don't look so dubious, my dear boy! I shan't lose it.

LUDOVIC

For God's sake be careful with it.

SARAH

I don't fault you for being nervous. I dare say it is all a plot.

TRISTRAM

(putting the ring back into the quizzing glass)

I think our best course is--

(HE pauses. There is the SOUND of a carriage drawing up.)

NYE

Beg pardon, sir, but I'll have to go. That'll be the night-mail.

TRISTRAM

Do you mean it's the London mail, Joe?

NYE

Ay, that's the one, sir.

TRISTRAM

That's it! Joe, I'm getting on that carriage.

NYE

If that's what you mean to do, sir, you'd better make haste. If don't take them more than two minutes to change the horses.

TRISTRAM

Tell them to wait!

(HE exits.)

EUSTACIE

(calling after HIM)

But what are you going to do?

TRISTRAM

(over his shoulder)

I've no time to waste explaining that now!

SARAH

I said it was a plot. It's my belief he is--

(calling out after TRISTRAM))

ABSCONDING WITH THE TALISMAN RING!

(discovering TRISTRAM is already out of earshot)

How provoking. That remark was quite wasted. Who would have supposed that the wretched creature would be taken with such a frenzy?

(Re-enter TRISTRAM with coat.)

TRISTRAM

I hope to return tomorrow if all goes well. For God's sake take care of yourself, Ludovic.

(HE exits.)

SARAH

If only we had a horse ready and saddled. I am persuaded we should have seen him ride off *ventre a terre*.

LUDOVIC

And I'm stuck here as usual, missing all the sport.

EUSTACIE

We must wait and see what my cousin intends.

SARAH

Which cousin do you mean, my dear?

(LIGHT down. ALL exit.)