

THE TELL-TALE HEART

Adapted as a One-Act Play

By ROBERT BROME

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CAST OF CHARACTERS

JESS STARK: 23, an itinerant hardware peddler.

LORNA STARK: 21, his attractive, sensitive wife.

NATHAN ZOLKA: 70, their half-blind, half-deaf benefactor.

KRISTIN HOLUB: 29, elder niece of Nathan Zolka.

METTI HOLUB: 26, Kristin's sister.

BRANNAMAN: 52, the village constable.

PLACE: The parlor of a decaying house on the edge of a small Eastern village.

TIME: A rainy summer evening, some years ago.

PLAYING TIME: About 20 minutes.

SETTING

The set represents the parlor of a gloomy, run-down residence in a village on the East Coast. In SR wall is an archway leading to kitchen, DSR; stairs are USR. The rear wall contains a fireplace C, with a large window SL of fireplace and a door to the outside SR of it. In SL wall there is a single door DSL leading to a bedroom. Shabby and meager furnishings include a broken-down leather sofa UPS against SL wall, a rocking chair over SR, and a wooden bench DS from fireplace and parallel to it. Coals glow in the fireplace.

PRODUCTION NOTE: The "heartbeats" in final scene may be simulated on timpani (kettledrums) or on a bass drum. This effect might be "live" or tape-recorded, the latter possibly being more satisfactory.

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(AT RISE: The stage is devoid of humanity. Coals in the fireplace cast an eerie HALF-LIGHT upon the desolate room. Blackness beyond window rear SL is disturbed intermittently by LIGHTNING. There is the sound of RAIN, continuing throughout play. A pause. Then JESS, a thin, strangely-behaving young man in wet jacket, enters at arch DSL, a lantern in his hand. He moves UPS furtively to stairs USR and, catlike, ascends two or three steps.)

JESS: *(As HE moves up the stairs; in a low, intense voice.)*
Lorna - ! Lorna - !! *(Halts suddenly; looks with caution toward door DSL. Descends steps and crosses SL and very carefully opens door DSL, peering into the darkness beyond. LORNA, his wife, enters at stairs USR, with candle in her hand.)*

LORNA: *(On steps.)* Jess - ?

JESS: *(Closing door DSL carefully indeed.)* Shshsh!

LORNA: *(In lowered voice.)* I was preparing for bed.

JESS: *(Moving UPS and RS.)* You'd best start preparing to leave.

LORNA: Tonight? In this rain? Why, Jess - ?

JESS: *(Holding a gold coin to the light of the lantern.)* Why? Because of this, dear wife - and hundreds of other little gold mates just like it!

LORNA: *(Descending steps, moving SL of CS.)* Wh-where did you get that gold piece?

JESS: *(Setting lantern on mantel RC, triumphantly.)* It did not take a sharp intellect very long to discover where that old fool *(Nods SL.)* hides his treasure! Had I such wealth, I'd find a better place than the cellar. *(Coming DS.)* He is rich, Lorna. Rich!

LORNA: With this tumble-down house, and a scarcity of food in his kitchen?

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JESS: (*Laughs a bit wildly.*) The proverbial miser, with the proverbial hoardings. And we, the proverbial ones to relieve him of it all!

LORNA: (*Shocked.*) What - ??

JESS: (*Crossing SR.*) Shshsh! We must keep him completely unaware that he changes this very night from a man of means into a beggar, as poor as his houseguests were!

LORNA: Oh, Jess - ! We couldn't take his money.

JESS: (*Whirling.*) You would leave it, for someone else to haul away?

LORNA: The old man gave us shelter from the storm this afternoon, and food -

JESS: (*Scornfully.*) Moldy bread - curdled milk - ! (*Pointing upward.*) And a hayloft filled with spiders and cobwebs!

LORNA: (*Moving toward SLC.*) I am grateful, even for that.

JESS: Would you not be more grateful for a fine city house, and carriages, and splendid horses? And enough fortune to live with servants at hand and foot, the rest of our lives?

LORNA: (*Turning.*) But it is not ours, Jess. We have no right to the gold.

JESS: (*Flaring in anger as HE crosses SL.*) What good does it lying under this house, in two leather sacks? (*Turns.*) Do you, in your wildest imagination, think the old man ever would part with a coin, willingly, even to fend off starvation? Hah! He won't even know it is gone - until we are a safe hundred miles from here. With all that plunder, we can half-circumnavigate the globe!

LORNA: Leave the money where it is - please, Jess!

JESS: (*A step toward HER.*) Do you assume I wish to peddle hardware the rest of my days, traversing the lanes and pikes in that rattling cart, pulled by a spavined nag?

LORNA: (*Turning SR.*) It's an honest living, Jess. One I chose to share, even against my father's wishes, a fortnight ago. (*Old NATHAN ZOLKA, white-haired, bent and trembling, one eye permanently closed and the other staring and unblinking, stands in doorway DSL in his shabby nightclothes. Neither JESS nor LORNA see him, at first.*)

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JESS: *(Loudly in a fit of rage.)* Regardless of your scruples, Madame Pure Heart, I leave with the old fool's hoardings! Both leather sacks! Every solitary, minted coin! *(Seeing look of terror on LORNA'S face as she now beholds ZOLKA!)* Wh-what - ? *(Turns slowly.)*

LORNA: *(Trembling.)* Did - did we - waken you, Master Zolka- ? *(ZOLKA just stares eerily from JESS to LORNA, one hand now cupped at an ear. More loudly.)* Did our - voices - disturb your sleep?

ZOLKA: *(Moving SR - with a limp.)* I possess a great thirst - for water.

LORNA: *(A frightened look at JESS.)* N-no, please. Let me get the water for you. *(Turns and crosses, exiting DSR.)*

(ZOLKA limps feebly to sofa, sinking onto it with a groan, but never once taking his Cyclops eye off JESS! The latter shows both discomfort and resentment to be thus stared upon. But he attempts masking his feelings and the one question that preys on his mind: "Exactly how much did the old man overhear?")

ZOLKA: My thirst is deep. *(Pauses.)* Like that of greedy relatives for an inheritance they do not deserve. *(Still staring at JESS with that one unblinking eye!)* Or a cut-purse ... with an evil thirst ... for money not his ...

JESS: *(Shrewdly but nervously; in a tone for ZOLKA to hear.)* My wife and I - by sheerest coincidence as you entered were debating - money - financial problems - *(Shrugs.)* A bride and groom of but two weeks. *(ZOLKA is grim, silent and unblinking as ever. JESS, seething, speaks viciously and loudly.)* Master Zolka! Why do you behold me thus - with that lone evil eye - ?? Would even a cut-purse waste time on a penniless old hermit, who can scarce afford a crust of bread!

ZOLKA: *(Still eyeing JESS.)* I trust ... no one ...

(LORNA enters DSR, without candle but with a tin cup full of water.)

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LORNA: (*Crossing SL.*) I bring this from the well. The water in the kitchen pail is warm. (*Hands cup to ZOLKA.*) There. (*ZOLKA peers at HER an instant strangely, then starts drinking the water, his lone eye now again feasting upon JESS. Lorna moves UPS uneasily; Jess SR. They exchange significant glances.*)

ZOLKA: (*Rising, handing cup to LORNA, still staring at JESS*) Should all the gold in the world vanish, there would be far less troubles and tribulations. All the thieves would shrivel up and die! (*Exits DSL.*)

LORNA: (*Calling after HIM.*) Good night, M-Master Zolka. (*Pulls door shut; turns to JESS.*) Jess! I fear he heard - !

JESS: (*Grimly.*) Too much - far too much - !

LORNA: (*Tensely.*) He may flee through the window of his bedroom, spread the alarm to the village!

JESS: (*HIS gaze hardens.*) He will not have the opportunity!

LORNA: (*Moving SR.*) What - what do you mean - ?

JESS: Could a dead man spread an alarm?

LORNA: (*Gasping.*) Dead man - ??

JESS: Poor Master Zolka is destined to suffer - mishap - (*Pacing.*) By strange twist of fate, he will die in his bed. The county records will say, "Of apparent heart seizure, due to advancing years." And the villagers will cluck their tongues and shake their heads and sigh and say, "What a peaceful way to go."

LORNA: (*Horrified, SHE moves SR.*) Jess!

JESS: Oh, it will be peaceful - and painless. And quick.

LORNA: (*Grasping HIS arm.*) I won't let you!

JESS: (*In a sudden rage, pulling loose from HER.*) What good is he in the world? I will do him favor to hold that pillow over his face!

LORNA: How could you even think of such a - !

JESS: (*Insistently.*) With him silenced, we can depart with his money in no danger at all! He may not be discovered for days. Where cannot we be by then? A full, rich life before us!

LORNA: (*Sickened.*) Jess - you - could take a - life - ?

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JESS: There is plenty reason - his gold - and (*Hatefully.*)
that Evil Eye - !

LORNA: Wh-what - ?

JESS: (*Moving SR.*) That eye - the old man's vulture eye -
the one which never closes! It pierces my soul! My whole
being! When it fastens upon me, the blood in my veins
runs cold. (*Turns, far SR.*) I must rid the world of that eye!
Forever - !

LORNA: Jess! You - you must be out of your mind!

JESS: (*Tensely, angrily.*) So! You think me mad!

LORNA: I have never heard you speak so - so wildly!

JESS: (*Approaching SL.*) I could not possibly be mad! I am
too shrewd, too calculating, too clever! Would a madman
find his way out of an asylum in three days?

LORNA: (*Gasping.*) Asylum??

JESS: (*Half-raving.*) Those three days, dear wife, only
sharpened my senses - made me wiser - more cautious! It
is that same caution now that directs me to destroy that
gnarled, useless old man! To destroy the wicked, leering
eye!

LORNA: (*In a state of shock.*) Jess, I - I beg you - not to do

JESS: (*Snapping.*) And I beg you not to interfere! (*HE
crosses and opens door DSL; calling in a pleasant voice.*)

Master Zolka! Before you drift into slumber, I wish a word.

ZOLKA'S VOICE: (*Off SL.*) - Wh-what - ?? What's that - ?
Who's there - ??

JESS: (*In doorway DSL.*) Only I. (*Exists DSL.*) Surely you
can spare one moment from a long, peaceful sleep.

LORNA: (*Half-paralyzed; but moving SL to door, calling in
desperation.*) Jess! Come back!

ZOLKA'S VOICE: What is this - ? Why do you interrupt my
rest - ??

JESS' VOICE: It will be my pleasure to allow your rest - very
soon! No need to light the candle, Master Zolka ...

LORNA: (*In terror.*) Jess!

ZOLKA'S VOICE: What do you mean - taking my pillow - ?
Why this intrusion - ??

JESS' VOICE: Do let me return the pillow - at once - !

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