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W. P. Drury, *The Porter of Hell*, 1918

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THE PORTER OF HELL

A Drama of 1914

by

Lt.-Col. W.P. Drury, Royal Marines

Author of "The Flag Lieutenant" etc

R.M. Barracks

Plymouth

CHARACTERS

EUGÈNE,

Comte de Beaucourt

GABRIELLE, His Wife

HIS MOTHER

MAJOR KARL DER PFÖRTNER VON DER HÖLLE ("The Porter of Hell")

SCENE

HALL OF A DEVASTED CHÂTEAU IN BELGIUM AT
TWILIGHT.

INCIDENTAL MUSIC BY MR P.S.G. O'DONNELL,
Mus. Bac. (Oxon), etc., Royal Marines

SCENE

THE INVADING HUNS HAVE JUST SWEEPED THROUGH
THE DISTRICT, LEAVING AN ARMY OF OCCUPATION
BEHIND THEM. THE ROOM SHOWS EVERY SIGN OF
RUTHLESS DESTRUCTION. IT HAS BEEN LOOTED OF
NEARLY EVERYTHING BUT A HEAVY, BARE TABLE
(C.) AND ONE OR TWO WRECKED CHAIRS. A
SMASHED PORTRAIT OF THE ABSENT COMTE HANGS
CROOKEDLY FROM THE WALL. A LARGE PHOTOGRAPH
OF THE KING OF THE BELGIANS, IN A BATTERED
SILVER FRAME WITH CRACKED GLASS, STANDS
FORLORNLY ON THE CHIMNEY PIECE R. UP L.C.
IS A GREAT MULLIONED WINDOW, FROM WHICH THE
CURTAINS HAVE BEEN TORN. THROUGH THE GLASS,
SMASHED IN SEVERAL PLACES, STREAMS THE LURID
REFLECTION OF BURNING BUILDINGS. UP R. IS
THE ENTRANCE DOOR; DOWN L. A SMALLER ONE,
LEADING TO THE INTERIOR OF THE CHÂTEAU. THE
RUMBLE OF DISTANT GUNS AND AN OCCASIONAL
TRUMPET CALL ARE HEARD AT INTERVALS
THROUGHOUT THE PLAY, AND THE INCIDENTAL
MUSIC AIDS THE GENERAL SUGGESTION OF THE
DESOLATION, DESPAIR AND TERROR OF A WAR OF
INVASION.

ON THE RISE OF THE CURTAIN THE HALL IS SEEN
TO BE OCCUPIED BY TWO WOMEN - MADAME LA
COMTESSE AND HER MOTHER-IN-LAW. THE MIND OF
THE LATTER, WHOSE AGE IS ANYTHING BETWEEN
FIFTY AND SIXTY, HAS BEEN COMPLETELY
UNHINGED BY THE HORRORS THROUGH WHICH SHE
HAS LATELY PASSED. IT APPEARS FROM THE

DIALOGUE THAT ALL RECOLLECTION OF THEM HAS BEEN MERCIFULLY EFFACED FROM HER MEMORY. SHE LIVES IN THE PEACEFUL PAST, AND IS QUITE OBLIVIOUS TO HER PRESENT SURROUNDINGS. SHE IS SEATED DOWN R. PLAYING PATIENCE AND CROONING OVER THE CARDS, AND SHE IS OBVIOUSLY QUITE HAPPY.

IN VIOLENT CONTRAST IS THE TRAGIC FIGURE OF HER DAUGHTER-IN-LAW, THE COMTESSE. SHE IS DRESSED IN BLACK, UNRELIEVED SAVE FOR A SILVER CRUCIFIX, AND IN FACE, ATTITUDE AND VOICE, EXPRESSES THE DEPTHS OF STONY HORROR AND DESPAIR. HAMMER IN HAND, AND WITH A TRAY OF LONG NAILS BESIDE HER, SHE IS LISTLESSLY EMPLOYED IN REFIXING THE TORN CURTAINS OVER THE WINDOW.

MOTHER: But, Gabrielle, why shut out the pretty rose light?

COMTESSE: Rose light! Hell's light, you mean - the colour of blood! Shall I ever see any other colour again?

MOTHER: (RETURNING INCONSEQUENTLY TO HER GAME) See, Gabrielle, I've won!

COMTESSE: (COMING DOWN R. AND TENDERLY KISSING HER) Clever little Mother! Le bon Dieu has been merciful to you. (ASIDE) She remembers - nothing, while I - God, those German beasts!

MOTHER: Germans? By the way, Gabrielle, what has become of our delightful German friends we used to see so much of?

COMTESSE: (TENSELY) Fools that we were!

MOTHER: There was that charming man we all thought you meant to marry - before you met my Eugène, of course. Let me see, what was his name? Dear, dear, my memory must be going!

COMTESSE: You may thank God for it.

MOTHER: (WITH SUDDEN RECOLLECTION) But, of course! It was Karl - Karl - ?

COMTESSE: (SHUDDERINGLY) Don't speak of him! A vile spy, who betrayed the hospitality of Belgium!

MOTHER: (BEWILDERED) Spy?

COMTESSE: Oh, how could I have given him a thought! But - (GAZING AT PORTRAIT ON THE WALL) I had not met Eugène then. My husband! And now he's a prisoner in their foul hands!

MOTHER: No, no. The Germans are a cultured people.

COMTESSE: (IN A SUDDEN BURST OF FRENZY) Cultured? I've seen their culture - on the bodies of my own children, mutilated before my eyes! Cultured! Fiends who have crucified helpless wounded - poured petrol on a little lad and - set him alight! (SHE COVERS HER EYES WITH HER HANDS, THEN, WITH A GESTURE OF DESPAIR) But there. You don't understand.

MOTHER: No. My head! All this dreadful talk of war - my son, Eugène? Is it - that he is - a prisoner?

COMTESSE: Yes.

MOTHER: And François, the woodcutter - yes, I begin to remember. But he escaped, so why not Eugène? (PROUDLY) The de Beaucourts have courage.

COMTESSE: His spirit will never fail. But strength? When François saw him just before his escape, Eugène was starving! (SHE LEAPS TO HER FEET AND HOLDS ALOFT THE CRUCIFIX SHE IS WEARING) By the living God, the next German I meet, I - will - kill!

MOTHER: (NERVOUSLY) But, Gabrielle, you - ?

COMTESSE: I! Those beasts have made me hateful to myself. I shall welcome death! But, first - an eye for an eye, a life for a life -

THERE IS A FUMBLING AT THE LATCH, AND BOTH WOMEN TURN APPREHENSIVELY TOWARDS THE DOOR. IT OPENS SLOWLY, REVEALING A BEARDED PRUSSIAN SOLDIER LEANING FOR SUPPORT AGAINST THE DOORPOST. AFTER A MOMENT'S PAUSE, HE TOTTERS INTO THE ROOM, STUMBLES ACROSS THE FLOOR, AND COLLAPSES INTO A CHAIR, HIS HEAD FALLING ON HIS OUTSTRETCHED ARMS UPON THE TABLE. WITH UTTER LOATHING THE COMTESSE REGARDS HIM FOR A MOMENT IN SILENCE.

COMTESSE: They're all the same, though this - thing seems more drunk than most.

THE LIGHT OF MURDER AND REVENGE SUDDENLY
LEAPS INTO HER EYES. STEALTHILY REACHING
FOR A LONG NAIL FROM THE TRAY BESIDE HER SHE
PLACES HER FOREFINGER ON THE NAPE OF THE
MAN'S NECK.

MOTHER: (WITH VAGUE DISQUIET) What are you doing?

COMTESSE: (WITH THE CUNNING OF MADNESS) I'm feeling for -
the spine.

MOTHER: (RISING) Gabrielle! I'm - I'm frightened!

COMTESSE: (LEADING HER TOWARDS THE DOOR DOWN L.) Leave me,
Mother. Go to the chapel. Our good priest will
take care of you.

MOTHER: But you?

COMTESSE: I have work to do. (LOOKING AT CLOCK) 'Tis the
hour of the Angelus - pray for me.

EXIT MOTHER

WITH A STEALTHY MOVEMENT THE COMTESSE
RETURNS TO THE TABLE. AS SHE PLACES THE
NAIL IN POSITION BETWEEN HER FINGER AND
THUMB AND RAISES THE HAMMER, THE EVIL FACE
OF A SECOND GERMAN, LIT BY THE LURID
REFLECTION WITHOUT, FURTIVELY APPEARS AT THE
HALF-CURTAINED WINDOW. A LEER OF GRATIFIED
REVENGE PASSES OVER IT, AS THE HAMMER
DESCENDS AND THE NAIL IS DRIVEN HOME. AFTER
ONE CONVULSIVE SPASM OF THE LIMBS, THE MAN
AT THE TABLE BECOMES MORE STILL AND INERT
THAN HE WAS BEFORE. A MOMENT LATER THE
NEWCOMER, WHO IS SEEN TO BE A PRUSSIAN
OFFICER, ENTERS BY THE DOOR.

COMTESSE: (WITH TENSE HORROR) Karl!

KARL: So! Karl - Karl Henkel, the student of happier
days. (HE LAUGHS, AND CLICKS HIS HEELS) Now
Karl der Pförtner von der Hölle, Major in the
Prussian Guards and still the cher ami, shall we
say? - of Madame la Comtesse de Beaucourt.

COMTESSE: (WITH WITHERING SCORN) Karl the spy!

KARL: For ten years given every facility for his work by trusting fools. But that's as it may be. To you and me I am the Karl you once would have married.

COMTESSE: Never!

KARL: I think yes - if a certain Eugène de Beaucourt hadn't appeared on the scene. But he won't appear this time - at least (HE GLANCES WITH A GRIN AT THE STILL FIGURE AT THE TABLE) not in the role of dangerous rival!

COMTESSE: (STIFFENING) What do you mean?

KARL: (WITH AN INSOLENT LAUGH, FLINGING HIMSELF INTO A CHAIR) Listen, and I will tell you a story. It will take no more than a minute, but I think you will find it interesting and - long enough.

COMTESSE: (FAINTLY) No - no.

CONTROLLING HER GROWING WEAKNESS WITH OBVIOUS EFFORT, SHE UNCONSCIOUSLY LEANS HER HAND FOR SUPPORT ON THE SHOULDER OF THE DEAD MAN BESIDE HER.

KARL: A prisoner was brought into our lines - a Belgian officer. He had forgotten me, but I knew him at once. We Germans are good haters, Madame la Comtesse.

COMTESSE: Fiend!

KARL: So my name implies. He escaped. I knew that you lived in the district, but you do not seek publicity, Madame, and you were not easy to trace. Then the Devil - who looks after his own - gave me this chance. I knew the escaped prisoner would unconsciously lead me to you. Besides, it was necessary that he should be recaptured and shot. I combined business with pleasure. I followed him.

COMTESSE: Then, thank God, he has not come here!

KARL: I wonder. At all events, I came in the nick of time to see Madame la Comtesse de Beaucourt murder a - shall we say a unit of the German Imperial Army in his sleep?

COMTESSE: In a drunken stupor, if you will.

KARL: (LAUGHING) You wrong his memory, Madame. He'd collapsed from utter exhaustion. (WITH SUDDEN GRIMNESS) But we are at war, and the soldier was killed by treachery. We do not appreciate these up-to-date versions of the story of Jael and Sisera. The penalty to the author is death.

COMTESSE: (FERVENTLY) I should welcome it.

KARL: Perhaps. Yet even the "Porter of Hell" is loth to open the gates where a charming woman is concerned. But - he would be a fool not to exact a price for keeping them shut. Hein?

COMTESSE: (RIGID WITH SCORN) Coward! You wouldn't dare to insult me like this if Eugène were here.

KARL: (WITH A SHRUG OF THE SHOULDERS) Who knows? Perhaps he is.

COMTESSE: Search the house, then.

KARL: There may be no need to search - even this room.

COMTESSE: (PANIC-STRICKEN) What do you mean?

HE RISES, CROSSES TO TABLE, ROUGHLY TURNS THE DEAD MAN'S FACE UPPERMOST, AND PULLS AWAY THE FALSE BEARD WHICH HAD HELPED TO DISGUISE IT. AFTER A MOMENT'S FROZEN HORROR, THE COMTESSE STAGGERS BACKWARDS WITH A STIFLED SCREAM, HER HANDS BEFORE HER EYES.

KARL: (TAUNTINGLY) You did your work well, Madame, though your victim was not a hated German. But don't reproach yourself, you've only anticipated my firing squad by a few hours. You see, he killed one of our sentries to obtain this uniform, and we are not very tender with that sort of prisoner.

COMTESSE: (TRIUMPHANTLY, SUDDENLY TEARING HER HANDS FROM HER FACE AND STANDING ERECT) I'm glad I killed him - yes, glad! I've saved him at least from your devilries, and your - "Culture" had already made it unthinkable that I should ever meet him again in this life. In the next, dear love, (GAZING AT HER DEAD HUSBAND) you will understand!

KARL: (WITH A COARSE LAUGH) The next! You and I haven't done with this one yet. With you own fair hands you have cleared the one obstacle from

our path to - pleasure. Come, Gabrielle! Let me forgive you for depriving me of a pleasant duty (INDICATING THE DEAD MAN) I had reserved for myself.

WITH OUTSTRETCHED ARMS HE GOES TOWARDS HER. DIVINING HIS PURPOSE, SHE SWIFTLY SWOOPS AND DRAWS THE BAYONET FROM THE SCABBARD WORN BY HER DEAD HUSBAND. WITH A SNARL THE PRUSSIAN STEPS BACK AND COVERS HER WITH HIS REVOLVER. SUDDENLY BENDING, SHE KISSES THE DEAD MAN'S FACE.

COMTESSE: (WITH A SOB) Dear heart, I'm coming, I'm coming!

BEFORE THE PRUSSIAN REALISES HER INTENTION, SHE SPRINGS ERECT, AND, RAISING THE BAYONET, POINT DOWNWARDS, AT THE FULL EXTENT OF HER CLASPSED HANDS, WITH ONE SWIFT STROKE SHE PLUNGES IT INTO HER OWN BREAST, WITHDRAWING IT IN THE SAME MOVEMENT. AS THE NAKED BLADE CLATTERS TO THE FLOOR, SHE COLLAPSES, HER OUTSTRETCHED ARMS FALLING ACROSS THE BODY OF HER HUSBAND.

AFTER A MOMENT'S PAUSE, THE PRUSSIAN LOWERS HIS REVOLVER, AND, WITH A CALLOUS SHRUG OF THE SHOULDERS, TURNS AND FLINGS OPEN THE DOOR UP R. THE HALL IS FLOODED WITH THE RED LIGHT FROM THE BURNING BUILDINGS, AND HIS SINISTER FORM IS STRONGLY SILHOUETTED AGAINST IT. AS HE STANDS IN THE OPENING, THE CHAPEL BELL BEGINS TO RING. WITH A LAST EFFORT THE DYING WOMAN LIFTS HER FACE AND SMILES.

COMTESSE: (FAINTLY) The Angelus!

AS HER HEAD FINALLY DROPS UPON HER HUSBANDS'S BREAST, THE CURTAIN SLOWLY FALLS.

CURTAIN