

"The Quick and the Dead"

By Musette Morell

CHARACTERS:

HUMBUG, A FRENCH AUTHOR
a magistrate. A GREEK AUTHOR
FORCE, a policeman. A CHINESE AUTHOR

SCENE: A Courthouse.

TIME: The Past, Present, and —?

At rise of curtain HUMBUG, pompous and prim, replete in wig, gown and pince nez, is seated at his bench, which is loaded with books, with FORCE stolidly fat and rosy, on his left. Their jerky gestures and monotonous voices suggest mechanical rather than human beings, and at the final black out they are revealed as marionettes. (This is effected by the use of luminous paint.)

HUMBUG: This is the court. I'm Humbug, the magistrate.

FORCE: . . . I'm Force, I guard the court.
(At each climax of their duet they nod stiffly to each other.)

HUMBUG:—

I uphold all the taboos of my place,
and of my time and of my race;
who don't approve shall know disgrace.

FORCE: Serve 'em right, Sir, if they get caught.

HUMBUG: I'm orthodox through and through.

FORCE: I'm a Tory, too.

BOTH: We're both all we should be.

HUMBUG: For the god we revere,
and the god we venerate
is Re-spec-ta-bil-i-ty.

FORCE: Yes, Re-spec-ta-bil-i-ty.

HUMBUG: We've abolished all tolerance.

FORCE: . . . What's more we've abolished
sanity.

HUMBUG: And to-day we'll abolish litera-
ture—

FORCE: Before we go home to tea.

(Force goes to door and beckons, while Humbug waves his hands over books and chants:)

HUMBUG:—

Abracadabra, Mumbo Jumbo, Fe Fo FUM,
Hocus Pocus, Form and Fuss, Pan-de-mo-ni-
UM.

I stand for cant and prejudice,

I uphold things as they are,

I deny all things that are not nice—

(Enter French Author.)

FRENCH A: Blah! Blah! Blah!

(Humbug reverses the glasses on his nose—the better to see him with; picks up ear-trumpet—the better to hear him with.)

(The French author wears French costume of the seventeenth century; the Greek Author the Chlamys; the Chinese Author the flowing Chinese robes of the fifth century B.C.)

GREEK A: It's cold in here and clammy.

FRENCH A: . . . H'm, draughty, don't you find?

CHINESE A: This chill is not terrestrial—it comes from empty spaces of the mind.

(Turns his head slowly and looks at Humbug.)

GREEK A: The physical is immaterial.

FRENCH A: Not when it is magisterial. *(Bows mockingly to Humbug.)*

HUMBUG:

We've called you here to-day to pay for your transgression

for having written with base intent these books in my possession.

Your style lacks all sobriety,

you've outraged nice propriety,

all the taboos of society,

what's more—

FORCE: They've outraged Mother Grundy.

(French Author winks.)

HUMBUG: (Shocked) Er-er-er all and sundry—

it's a scandal to deplore.

With frenzied volubility,

with facetious imbecility,

disreputable virility,

devilish versatility,

peccability,

agility,

scurrility—

you have written books of shame.

You have shocked my high gentility,

perturbed my fine tranquillity,

my profound complete puerility—

er—I MEAN—my sweet nobility!

Now you must take the blame.

FORCE: Yes, you must take the blame.

FRENCH A: Who are you to bestow the blame?

CHINESE A: Who are you to say what is shame?

HUMBUG: Don't you know me? I'm Humbug the magistrate.

FORCE: . . . I'm Force, I guard the court.

HUMBUG:

I uphold all the taboos of my place,
and of my time and of my race;
who don't approve shall know disgrace.

FORCE: Serve 'em right, sir, if they get caught.

CHINESE A: So!

FRENCH A: Some insignificant tyro.

HUMBUG: Tyro? I'm ordained. My best credential—

FRENCH A: Is entirely providential!

HUMBUG: Stop! This is pestilential! . . .

The first and great essential
Is that I—Humbug Esquire—
Am all one could desire;
I'm orthodox through and through.

FORCE: I'm a Tory, too.

BOTH: We're both all we should be.

HUMBUG: For the god we revere,
and the god we venerate
Is Re-pec-ta-bil-i-ty.

FORCE: Yes, Re-spec-ta-bil-i-ty.

FRENCH A: Then there'll be small justice I can see.

HUMBUG: I'm Censor, I'm Veto,
I'm Stricture, I'm Ban.

FORCE: And what he says is what will go—
he's the Abolition Man.

HUMBUG: Now look!
this book—

FRENCH A: Ah!

HUMBUG: It's yours?

FRENCH A: I've recognised it.
(*Aside*) A philistine!
this will be fine.

HUMBUG:

I've supervised it.
It's an obscene spectacle of lust that you've
committed,
No detail you've omitted.

FRENCH A: (*Cynically*) Then why the fuss?

HUMBUG: Fuss? Fuss? It's scandalous!

FRENCH A: (*To others*) I find
Officialdom has a most suspicious
mind.

HUMBUG: Sex has got you hypnotised.
Each kiss is psycho-analysed:
is it erotic, exotic,
or neurotic?
Do they kiss with hips
or just with lips?
Is it French? Or merely flat—

FRENCH A: And *English*? Well—and after
that?

HUMBUG: Crude!

Lewd!

Nude!

FRENCH A:

Now, now, that's rude!

Remember there's Geography in morals.

What's moral in Peru

is immoral in Timbuctoo,

and simply sacrosanct in black Karoo.

My book is glad; it's frank; diverting!

HUMBUG: It's bad; it's rank, perverting.

Such elation
about sensation;
such effervescence
of adolescence!
It's vicious,
Pernicious!

FRENCH A: Vicious? Well—it accepts the
natural.

HUMBUG: The natural is not statural.

FRENCH A: My book is true.

HUMBUG: . . . That's not the issue.

FRENCH A: It's sincere in form and tissue.
it's honest as the day.

HUMBUG: With us that does not weigh.

FRENCH A:

Then if I write a true and honest verse or any-
thing,
and you—as arbiter—
take away my character,
I say you're a slanderer,
or—worse—
a hireling.

HUMBUG: (*To Force*) What does he say. Tell
me.

FORCE: He says you ban good books from
policy.

HUMBUG: Take him away!
(*Force takes French Author by arm*)

GREEK A: Wait,
let reason dissipate
this hate.

HUMBUG: Stay! Let him stay. I'll take away
his good name.

FRENCH A: Take it—I'll still have fame!

HUMBUG: You will learn
within your turn
that reputation is a goodly thing.

FRENCH A:

Providing it's a goodly reputation;
though many great men have dispensed with it
or lost it in the course of education.

HUMBUG:

Great men! Fame! Truth! Honesty!—
just idealistic chatter!—
the only thing to matter
is Re-spec-ta-bil-i-TY
that's ME.

The truth is what I SAY;
Virtue is what I DO;
I'm upheld by the Law, the Church and the
State—

while nobody listens to you.
GREEK A: Time listens.

HUMBUG:

... O Time may say you are prophets,
wise seers and poets, too;
but I'm Humbug, I'm louder and bigger
and of more importance than you.

GREEK A: Men would destroy the grace they
can't possess.

FRENCH A: If we are prophets he must be the
wilderness!

CHINESE A:

There would be no prophets if all men were
wise;
compared to mental pigmies any brain must
top the skies.

(*French Author points to Humbug*)

HUMBUG: (*Furiously to French A.*)

You'll see
the degeneracy
of this generation
deserves and gets damnation.

FRENCH A: And virtue—what does virtue get,
my lord?

HUMBUG: Virtue is its own reward.

FRENCH A: (*Laughing*) It has to be, it seems,
it gets no other.

GREEK A: Brother, brother!
That's misleading.

HUMBUG: Be assured
you'll get your reward;
(*French Author blows him a kiss.*)
what's more—what's MORE—(*is
speechless with rage.*)

FORCE: (*To fill the pause*) PRO-CEED-ING!

FRENCH A: It's a comedy!

GREEK A: I cannot bear to see
man make of himself a travesty.
(*Humbug has grabbed a book and opened it at
random.*)

HUMBUG (*Reading*)

"A fig for those by law protected,
Liberty's a glorious feast,...

Courts for cowards were erected,
Churches built to please the priest."
Did you write THAT?

FRENCH A: No. But I take off my hat to the
poet!

FORCE: (*Hurriedly looks at book*) Oh! (*Whis-
pers*) It's Robert Burns!

HUMBUG: Burns?

FORCE: Yes; he's DEAD you know.

HUMBUG: (*Pats book.*) A sterling fellow; I've
always said so.

GREEK A: I'm glad to hear you say it. I agree
with him most heartily.

HUMBUG: Oh, you DO, do you?

FRENCH A: (*Slyly.*) But it seems you do, too.

HUMBUG: With Burns? Oh, yes, of course,
he's dead.

but YOU—

FORCE: He's still alive and can be bled.

HUMBUG: (*Glaring at French A.*) Yes.

FRENCH A: My gentle treasure!

HUMBUG: You just wait.

FRENCH A: (*Bowing*) At your DISpleasure.
CHINESE A:

Be you purer than the snow, be you just and
wise and good;
it is enough to make vile men howl for your
blood.

HUMBUG: What's that he says? I didn't hear.
I'm reading.

FORCE: We don't agree, so it's of no account.
PRO-CEED-ING.

HUMBUG: Yes. The NEXT case. (*Selects
book.*) Did you write: (*Reads*): "War is the
statesman's game, the priest's delight,
the lawyer's jest, the hired assassin's trade."

CHINESE A: No.

(*Force hurriedly looks at book.*) *Whispers.*
FORCE: That verse the English poet, Shelley,
made.

HUMBUG: (*Fussing.*) I've got the wrong book.
It has been mislaid. I think I recall—

FRENCH A: I'm very glad to hear you THINK
at all!

CHINESE A:

No man holds a brief for war
Who is not in his soul an inferior.

HUMBUG: (*To Chinese A*) Then you AP-
PROVE of that verse?

CHINESE A: By Shelley? Oh yes.

FRENCH A: (*Wagging finger at Humbug.*)
Worse and worse!

HUMBUG: (*To Force.*)—

What I want to know is what his writings SAY
What does the Chink's philosophy convey?

FORCE:

He writes that he would heal the criminal with
the sick,
mend the crime of poverty;
he would share the bounty of the earth,
enthroned humanity.

HUMBUG: I see—Communism!

FRENCH A: (*Quickly to H.*) No; your Christianity!

(*Humbug fusses. Picks up third book and turns again to Chinese Author.*)

HUMBUG: No doubt you wrote: (*Reads with incredulity and disapproval.*)

"If the spirit of the ruler rise up against thee,
lose not thy place; for yielding pacifieth great offences. There is an evil which I have seen under the sun as an error which proceedeth from the ruler. Folly is set in great dignity."

FRENCH A: (*Aside.*) I hear a voice cry from the wilderness!

HUMBUG: (*Furiously to Chinese A.*) This writing is rank insubordination; lawlessness; degeneracy run to seed!

CHINESE A: It is not my writing.

(*Force looks at book. Whispers*)

FORCE: . . . Sir, it's from the BIBLE you read!
(*French Author laughs. The Greek Author approaches the Bench, arm raised.*)

GREEK A: I would not, sir, oppose your authority but might I, now for Justice, make a plea?

FRENCH A: Make it while you have the chance!

FORCE: SILENCE!

GREEK A:

Is there anything that one of us might write
no matter how profound or erudite,
rebellious, irreverent, be it said,
that has not been wrung from the just and tortured hearts

of our immortal dead?

(*Force takes notes.*)

FRENCH A: (*To Greek A.*) The eternal comedy—we but repeat the part.

HUMBUG: (*To Greek A.*) This is blasphemy!

FRENCH A: (*To Humbug*) Well, if you are morality give me debauchery!

HUMBUG: (*To Greek A.*) What have you written—er?

GREEK A: I have taught a little, sir.

HUMBUG: Whom have you taught?

GREEK A: . . . Why, youth.

HUMBUG: And what?

GREEK A:

. . . Just truth.

I have pointed out the flower from the weed,
the true from false; I have made the book of life

grow simple once again so all may read;
not stumble on its meaning into strife.

HUMBUG: So! You have made men seek for freedom and for joy?

(*Greek Author nods.*)

Your teachings are abhorrent. They annoy.
For—in this beautiful estate that you envision,
in this vale of ecstasy,
this elysium of the free—
there is simply no provision
made for me.

FORCE: . . . And none for me.

GREEK A: Will you show me where I falter in my teachings? Truth and justice are my passion.

HUMBUG:

You may be true and just in all your preachings,

but such things are not in fashion.

And what never seems to strike you
is why I could never like you;

For consider: put yourselves here in my place;
if I allowed you artists have your way—
said nothing when you said your say,
let your books and ideas circulate apace—
don't you SEE

Soon nobody would give a thought to ME!

FRENCH A: (*Ironically.*) Humanity could never bear the loss!

HUMBUG: But luckily

I'm BOSS!

(*Puts on black cap. Clears his throat.*)

The court finds evil in the writings of the aforesaid.

Therefore they ALL must be dePORTed.

FORCE: Do you hear that—you three aforesaid?

HUMBUG: That is the Law's convention.

(*Greek Author approaches.*)

Well, what is your contention?

GREEK A: For my attempt to teach youth justice and moderation, and render the rest of my countrymen more happy, let me be maintained at the public expense the remaining years of my life; an honour which I deserve more than the victors of the Olympic games. They have made their countrymen more happy in appearance, but I have made them so in reality.

HUMBUG: This effusive and abusive

repartee is most conclusive.
 In YOU and YOU and YOU we look upon,
 sirs,
 three of the world's worst monsters.
 (*Points to French Author.*) Your eroticism!
 FRENCH A: (*Quickly*) My virility.
 HUMBUG: (*Points to Chinese A.*) Your communism!
 CHINESE A: My humanity.
 HUMBUG: (*Points to Greek A.*) Your insurrection!
 GREEK A: My philosophy.
 HUMBUG: (*Continuing*)
 are a disgrace, a menace to my power,
 a foul and filthy fungi
 on the pure and unstained flower
 of Re-spec-ta-bil-i-TY
 that's ME.
 Your books are BANNED, and as before
 reported,
 You are ALL deported.
 GREEK A: What, again?
 HUMBUG: . . . What do you mean—again?
 GREEK A: My meaning's plain.
 HUMBUG: You have been deported before?
 GREEK A:
 Yes, lord,
 and flung in prison, bound in chain
 and forced to drink hemlock for my reward.
 HUMBUG: What is your name?
 GREEK A: Socrates.
 HUMBUG: (*Startled*) Socrates? (*Beams.*) The
 wise? The great?
 GREEK A: The defamed, the perjured, the murdered.
 HUMBUG: You overstate.
 And who are YOU?
 FRENCH A: Molière, the playwright.
 HUMBUG: Molière? (*Beams.*) The glorious?
 FRENCH A: The traduced, the notorious.
 HUMBUG: The French Academy's most illustrious name?
 FRENCH A: (*Ironically.*) As they say, "To our shame!"
 HUMBUG: And you?
 CHINESE A: I am Confucius.
 HUMBUG: (*As before*) . . . Confucius, the good?
 CHINESE A: The exiled. The misunderstood.
 HUMBUG: (*Faunting.*) O to have such genius here. You are all revered; you are all acclaimed.
 ALL: Now.
 HUMBUG: You are immortal, you are famed.

ALL: Now.
 HUMBUG:
 Why, everyone who writes or speaks your tongue but repeats in limping numbers what your flying pens have sung.
 There are statues, academies and churches ALL built FOR you.
 ALL: Now.
 HUMBUG: You are culture; you are wisdom; you are truth; we adore you.
 ALL: And . . . how.
 (*Humbug ceases to flatter and becomes suddenly suspicious.*)
 HUMBUG: But wait! It's not possible . . . It's cyclonic! It's ironic!
 FRENCH A: . . . All truth is ironic!
 HUMBUG: But I mean you're not YOU . . .
 Don't you see . . . Don't you see . . .
 FRENCH A: We see you deny all reality.
 HUMBUG: But you were born so long ago—
 CHINESE A: Four hundred B.C.
 GREEK A: And I!
 FRENCH A: . . . Sixteen hundred, A.D.
 HUMBUG:
 Ah, I KNOW
 it's imposture, it's treason—
 It's guile without reason.
 (*Taps forehead.*) You must think that Justice is out of its mind.
 FRENCH A: *Non compos mentis* and half deaf and half blind.
 HUMBUG: (*Furiously to French A.*) But you'll see, you can't escape ME!
 FRENCH A: WhenEVER we live—that's our tragedy; (*Aside*) from which we make wise comedy!
 HUMBUG: Confucius, and Molière; Socrates! —Bah! They are immortal and dead. You're not they.
 ALL: Yes we ARE.
 (*The Immortals break into deep laughter and disappear.*)
 HUMBUG: Come back! Come back! Did you hear what I said? You are living, and they are dead. They are DEAD!
 ALL: (*Off*). No; YOU are dead!
 (*Humbug and Force stare at each other, startled. Then their faces jerk front again; their heads and arms swing slowly into their sockets and stiffen. They are counted out by the phrase "You are dead!" reiterated rhythmically and at intervals as the lights begin to fade.*)

CURTAIN.