A Shadow On The Wall

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CHARACTERS: WILLIAM BENNET, late 20s, newlywed and new detective at Scotland Yard.
NORA BENNET, mid 20s, his wife. Avid reader.
MILDRED PARKER, 40s-50. The Bennet's landlady.
CHIEF INSPECTOR BERNERD HARRIS: 40s-50s, WILLIAM's supervisor. Loquacious.
EVA GIBSON, mid 20s. WILLIAM's cousin; NORA's best friend.
ALBERT DAVIES, late 20s. Medical doctor. William's best friend.

SETTING: A Victorian flat, partially furnished with a loveseat, a table beside it, and a larger table for dining. Trunks and crates are stacked around the room. Three doors: on one side, the entrance to the flat; opposite is the door to the kitchen; on the upstage wall is the door to the bedroom. Almost center on the upstage wall is a framed silhouette of a young woman.

AT RISE: NORA is standing at a table, unpacking a crate of kitchen supplies.

Scene One

WILLIAM
(*yelling from outside the door)* Nora, can you get the door! (*NORA goes over to the door, opens it and in comes WILLIAM carrying up a trunk*) I think this is the last of it.

NORA
(*looking around*) Put it over there. I'll tend to it later. It's coming along nicely, I think. (*exits into kitchen)*

WILLIAM
I agree. Be it ever so humble, there's no place like home. (*opening a crate*)

NORA
I do wish we could move out some of the pieces of furniture that were left here.

WILLIAM
Ah, well, you must remember our dear landlady's list of rules. All the furnishings are to remain as we found them.

NORA
(*calling from offstage*) Will, have you seen the kettle?

WILLIAM
What kettle?

NORA
(*entering*) I thought we were bringing the one from the old flat?

WILLIAM
Oh no, that one was old and filthy. I thought we were bringing your family heirloom?

NORA
No, Dad is terribly attached. It was Mum's.

WILLIAM
Well, I'll be sure to pick one up on the way home tomorrow. Wait, damn.

NORA
What?

WILLIAM
It's just that the Detective Chief Inspector is stopping by later.

NORA
What? Here? The place is a mess. So am I, at that.

WILLIAM
The place is perfect, Nora. (*grabbing her*) And so are you.
(WILLIAM and NORA embrace. As they do so, MILDRED PARKER- the landlady- enters through the still-open door, unseen)

NORA
(*pointing to the silhouette on the wall)* I do wish we could move that old thing. I can't say I'm fond of it.

PARKER
(*shocked at what she's heard*) Begging your pardon, my dears, but I'll ask you to remember the terms of the flat. And especially with that piece. It stays exactly as it is.

WILLIAM
Ah, Mrs. Parker. We didn't hear you come in. I assure you, we have no intention of moving any of the furnishings- just as you asked. And certainly not this silhouette.

PARKER
Please see to it, Mr. Bennet. (*softening*) I hope you are content with the flat. You're such a lovely couple. Oh, and please keep the noise down after 8pm; a good night's rest is so very important to us all, don't you think? I believe that's it. I think you two are shaping up to be my favorite tenants.

WILLIAM
Thank you so much for your hospitality, Mrs. Parker.

PARKER
Of course, I'll let you settle in. Let me know if you need anything else, I'm just downstairs. (*she exits*)

NORA
Well, she seems lovely.

WILLIAM
Yes, I think we'll do just fine here.

NORA
(*They embrace*) A new flat for us, a new promotion for you, and a new bookstore for me.

WILLIAM
(*looks around)* It's beautiful, everything we've dreamed about. (*Moves to chair)* You can read your books here.

NORA
And here's where you'll drink your morning tea.

WILLIAM
And yours. (*Chuckles*)

NORA
(*Looks for something else)* Oh, I do hate that dreadful silhouette! Why don't we take it down? We could put it back up when we know Mrs. Parker will be stopping by.

WILLIAM
Now, Nora, we've promised not to move it. Besides, we don't want to lose our status as Mildred's favorite tenants, do we?

NORA
Help me with the china, would you, Will?

WILLIAM
Of course, love.

(Begins to unpack boxes but doesn't get very far before there's a knock on the door)

WILLIAM
Come in!

(HARRIS enters, carrying a barely-wrapped bottle)

WILLIAM
Chief Inspector!

HARRIS
Mr. Bennet, I figured I would stop by to congratulate you on your promotion. It certainly is a scintillating opportunity. I look forward to working with you for the foreseeable future.

WILLIAM
Absolutely, Chief. Care for some tea?

NORA
(Shakes her head no -- They have no teapot.)

HARRIS
No. I only came over to hand you a gift, a simple show of my gratitude for the work our newest detective constable has done so far. (*hands over the bottle*)

NORA
Well. Thank you, Chief Inspector Harris.

HARRIS
Anything for a lovely lady such as yourself. (*he stares intently at her bosoms*) You know, you two could come over anytime.

NORA
Yes, that is very kind of you, Detective Chief Inspector Harris.

HARRIS
Please, call me… Inspector.

NORA
Thank you, Inspector.

WILLIAM
Thank you, guv.

HARRIS
William, I have some details to fill you in on the Whitechapel murders.

WILLIAM
Nora dear, why don't you go find something for Inspector Harris to… erm, eat.

(*NORA exits to the kitchen*)

WILLIAM
Sorry, guv. I don't want her to be riled up.

HARRIS
Of course, of course. I forget about the delicate sensibilities of the womenfolk. We found a bloodstained apron at the Spitalfields murder site. It might well be a lead.

WILLIAM
Brilliant. Do we know where the apron came from?

HARRIS:
Not yet, we're looking into it.

WILLIAM
Where, exactly, in Spitalfields?

HARRIS
Miller's Court. Off Dorset Street.

WILLIAM
Dorset Street. Mostly tailor shops there. There are a couple of cabinet makers with shops still there. A cobbler, too. Any of them would wear leather aprons.

HARRIS
Already proving your worth, eh, Bennet? Check into them tomorrow, would you. (*pulling a few folded papers from coat pocket)* Here. Why don't you keep these notes. You might pick up on something I've missed.

WILLIAM
Will do. I think I'm going to enjoy this job, guv.

HARRIS
Don't get too excited. This city hasn't had one moment of quiet since the Romans placed the first brick in the mud. It'll wear on you soon enough. London's the largest city in the world, which means we have more than our fair share of dirty secrets.

WILLIAM
Well, then I certainly hope we can make it just a little better.

HARRIS
Now more than ever, everyone has something they're hiding from the world. But in this business, there are no secrets. We see the truth most people turn away from. The average Londoner doesn't want to think about how the sausage is made. They just want their comfortable lives. It's our job to make sure that ugly truth stays hidden from the public. Our responsibility, to face down the ugly truth and make the difficult decisions others can't. Think about your lovely Nora. It's your duty to keep that ugliness away from her, correct? Wouldn't you do anything to protect her? It's our job as police to protect the public in just the same way.

NORA
(*entering; as she does, WILLIAM stashes the papers in his coat pocket*) Here, I found some biscuits in one of our boxes.

(*HARRIS takes a biscuit and takes a bite*)

HARRIS
(*While chewing)* Well, Bennet. It's been a pleasure. I'll see you tomorrow, then? And Nora, it's a pleasure to finally meet you in person.

NORA
Likewise, Inspector.

WILLIAM
Good evening, guv.
(*HARRIS exits*.)

NORA
Well, he's certainly a character. (*WILLIAM fails to respond, lost in thought. She moves to him*.)
Everything alright, dear?

WILLIAM
(*snapping out of it*) Ah, yes. Of course. Sorry. What say we leave off the unpacking tonight? (*embracing her*) I believe a nice stroll in the gardens nearby would do us both a world of good.

NORA
Oh, Will. I couldn't possibly. Look at me- I'm a fright.

WILLIAM
You're anything but, Nora. Grab your hat- it's a beautiful evening.

NORA
Alright, then. Give me a moment to put myself together. (*exits into bedroom*)

(WILLIAM remains onstage; he removes the papers and begins to look at them, troubled by what he reads.)

Scene Two

OPEN NORA sitting in the house reading a nearly finished book. She does not seem to notice as common voices begin to be heard, she keeps reading, as the voices get louder she closes the book and slowly walks towards to door, curiously putting her ear to the frame, and reaches for the handle when suddenly WILLIAM ENTERS the house joyously, home from work, carrying a brown parcel.

NORA
William! You scared me half to death!

WILLAM
Oh! I'm sorry my dear! What were you doing at the front door?

NORA
I just thought I heard the neighbors across the way talking. I believe they have a baby.

WILLIAM
Oh?

NORA
Yes, I thought I heard the dear thing crying.

WILLAM
Well to my knowledge, that's a common occurrence for infants.

NORA
It just sounded distressed was all, ah well. Women's intuition I suppose.

WILLAM
I can't argue with that, my love. I invited Albert over for chess later.

NORA
(Hesitantly) Eva will be over as well. I'm lending her a novel. You don't think that will be a problem.

WILLIAM
What? Oh, that. No, shouldn't be a problem.
(Hands NORA a parcel) For you.

NORA
Oh aren't you thoughtful!
(Unwraps the parcel to find a small book)
Oh, thank you! I've nearly finished my current one.

WILLAM
I thought you almost had.

NORA
The Seen and the Unseen. Margaret Oliphant. I don't believe I've read anything by her.

WILLAM
Mr. Parsons at the shop thought you'd enjoy it. Said it's rather hair raising.

NORA
Yes, I believe you've done alright. Just the sort of story I love.
(They share a brief kiss)

WILLAM
You're made of sterner stuff than I. Can't stomach those ghost stories. *(Pause)* You say our neighbors have a child? I'm actually rather excited to hear that.

NORA
Oh? How so?

WILLIAM
Well, our little one might have a playmate right next door when they arrive.

NORA
William, please..

WILLIAM
And we'll invite the neighbors over and watch the children play on the floor.

NORA
You really think so?

WILLAM
Of course, my dear. I'm sure, sooner than you think.

NORA
Do you think we're ready?

WILLIAM
I cannot picture anyone more suited to be a mother than you.

NORA
I love you, William.

WILLIAM
I love you, Nora.

NORA
I think I'll open that bottle the inspector gave us.

WILLIAM
That sounds wonderful, thank you.
(NORA walks over to fetch the wine, EVA enters abruptly after knocking)
My dear cousin!

EVA
Hello William! Ah, Nora dear, how are you?!

NORA
Eva!
(They hug)
I've just opened up a housewarming gift from William's boss, won't you stay a while?

EVA
Oh, I'd love to!

WILLIAM
Excellent! Here, sit down.

(They all sit at the table)

EVA
Why thank you, Will.

NORA
I'll get you that copy of *Frankenstein*.

EVA
Splendid.

WILLIAM
Wine, Eva?

EVA
Yes please! I'm right used up.

WILLIAM
Oh?*(pouring a glass of wine)*

EVA
Up with the children all night. You know how they are.

WILLIAM
Not yet.

EVA
Oh! Of course, I'm- yet, William? Is there something you should be sharing with your favorite cousin?

NORA
Not quite yet Eva, but when there is something to report, you'll be the first to know.

WILLIAM
What, not me, my love?

NORA
All in good time! Or perhaps you'd like to know what women talk about behind closed doors…

WILLIAM
I wouldn't dare.

EVA
Wise choice, cousin.

WILLAM
How's old Jeffery?

EVA
Oh, the same. He's doing very well this season in the salt trade, although I'm sure the children wish they were seeing more of their father.

NORA
And his wife is missing him too?

EVA
Yes. Of course.

WILLIAM
We all wish we were seeing more of him. He's a good chap. Cheers!

NORA/EVA
Cheers.

(ALBERT ENTERS with a scarf wrapped around his face and a mighty hat to beat back the cold, he begins taking these articles off as he enters cheerfully)

WILLIAM
Albert, my good man!

ALBERT
William! Daft as ever!
(They firmly shake hands)
What a cozy place! Congratulations, a flat, a promotion, a bride- now all you need is a son and you'll be the very pinnacle of a man my friend!

WILLAM
And what does that make you?

ALBERT
A handsome bachelor free from woes of course!

WILLIAM
Of course Albert.

ALBERT
Yes my friend, you are talking to a man unbound by the ways of women, why I- Eva!

EVA
Good evening Doctor Davies.

ALBERT
Good evening, yes. I was just- I mean, do you suppose-

EVA
Oh, don't let me interrupt you! As you said, women have no sway over you, hmm?

ALBERT
Indeed.
(WILLIAM claps ALBERT on the back)
None at all!

NORA
If you say so, Albert.

ALBERT
Hello, Nora dear.

NORA
Hello!

WILLIAM
Always the playboy, eh Bertie?

NORA
I figured you'd be married by now, in all honesty.

WILLIAM
Nora!

NORA
Oh apologies Bertie, I didn't mean-

ALBERT
Think nothing of it Nora. I prefer the bachelor’s lifestyle is all, makes it easier to continue my practice.

WILLIAM
Ah yes! How is physicianship?

ALBERT
I won’t bore the ladies with details of my work. Although, actually, these Whitechapel- or Jack the Ripper murders have raised more curious discussion in the community as of late.

NORA
Truly? In what way?

WILLIAM
Nora, I don't think you should-

EVA
It’s just so terrible what happened to that girl.

NORA
I know, I think it-

ALBERT
I was wrong to bring it up.

EVA
Albert…

WILLIAM
It’s really not the right time to be talking about it.

EVA
William, really?

NORA
Come Eva, there’s another book I want to lend you before you go. I finished it last week. It’s in the bedroom.
(NORA stands and leads EVA to the BEDROOM offstage)

ALBERT
Sorry about that, old chap.

WILLIAM
It’s alright. Let’s set up for chess, eh?
(WILLIAM AND ALBERT sit down and set up the game)

WILLIAM
I just don’t want to upset her, it’s awful business.

ALBERT
It’d be upsetting to anyone.

WILLIAM
My chief was there.

ALBERT
There?

WILLIAM
The night of the first killing, he saw the body.

ALBERT
Good lord.

WILLIAM
I’m sure I’ll have some role in investigating the killings, it's- well, it’s not something I linger on.

ALBERT
Of course.

WILLIAM
Nora’s just so happy here, and with the prospect of starting a family-

ALBERT
No. Of course, Will, I understand.

WILLIAM
I know you do, my friend.

ALBERT
This is just a passing chaos, I'm sure.

WILLIAM
Thank you, my friend, for being here, I mean. For the both of us. And Eva.

ALBERT
Anytime, Will, think nothing of it. - Your move.
(The two men continue to play as BLACKOUT)

Scene Three

Lights open on WILLIAM and NORA, NORA has just woken up, WILLIAM is off to work.

WILLIAM
Oh good, you're awake, I can't seem to find my coat.

NORA
Leaving for work dear?

WILLIAM
Yes, I'm already late as it is.

NORA
I invited Eva over today, I hope you don't mind.

WILLIAM
Of course not. Give her and Jeffery my best wishes!

NORA
I will. Here-

(NORA finds coat and puts it on WILLIAM)

NORA
Be well at work, don't tire yourself out too much, constable. (*They embrace*)

WILLIAM leaves. NORA begins making breakfast. Suddenly, a baby begins to cry in the background, sounds of the baby being put to sleep, perhaps a lullaby. NORA stops what she's doing and starts listening to the wall. EVA enters loudly and sits down at the table.

EVA
Sorry I'm late, Jeffery needed me to attend to breakfast for the twins whilst Mrs Baker and Mrs Davies prepared for his charity ball later today. It's such a bore, I envy your afternoon-

NORA
Shhh, the baby next door is being put to sleep, listen.

EVA
What? I don't hear anything.

NORA
Oh, he must have fallen asleep, the dear thing.

EVA
If only putting the twins to bed was that easy.

NORA
How are the children?

EVA
Just marvelous, you know how one year olds are.

NORA
Oh, I couldn't imagine.

EVA
They're at home with Ethel, thank God.

NORA
And how do they like the new governess?

EVA
They're children, Nora. They'll trust anyone who pays attention to them. So long as I can take a moment of rest to visit you here, the price is more than worth it. Have you had the chance to seek out a governess for you and William?

NORA
Not yet.

EVA
Oh, I know of a wonderful woman who just became available. *(NORA looks sad)* What's wrong, Nora?

NORA
All this talk of a governess.. It's just William and I - we've wanted a child for such a long time now, and now that we're ready I'm beginning to worry I won't be able to provide us with one.

EVA
What do you mean?

NORA
We've been trying for almost three months now, and… well, I'm starting to believe myself… what if I'm not able to conceive a child, Eva?.

EVA
Nora, dear, don't be ridiculous.

NORA
This isn't a joke, Eva. I’m serious.

EVA
I won't hear of it Nora. You always assume the worst. You’ve been married only four and a half months and you already think a child is outside of the realm of possibility. I imagine you need to calm down and think rationally for once in your life.

NORA
I don’t always assume the worst.

EVA
Nora, do you remember the old story your mother used to read to us?

NORA
The Ugly Duckling.

EVA
We would beg her to read it to us everytime I came over. The ugly duckling felt alone and scared, just as you are feeling now. He wandered into the woods and got lost. But remember, the duckling eventually found his family and was alright once again because he never gave up hope.

NORA
Eva-

EVA
I know you’re scared and feel lost right now but I promise you are going to be alright. Have hope, Nora.

NORA
But you have to remember Eva, that was a fairytale. Made up. Not real life.

EVA
But Nora-

NORA
Please, Eva. Please, just… listen to me.

(EVA nods)

NORA
I just don't know what to do, Eva. I'm so afraid I'm letting him down. After the wedding I felt like I was walking on air. I was just so happy and William was so excited about the new house and the promotion, it was like everything was how it was meant to be! I want to be a mother more than anything, and I love Will so much, he'd be such an amazing father. But now I'm just ruining everything. And now it's all my fault.

(NORA gets up from the table and starts to pace back and forth)

EVA
Nora!
(EVA gets up and grabs ahold of NORA's shoulders)
Just breathe dear, here, sit down.
(EVA helps NORA onto the chaise)
It's alright, just breathe. Have you told William?

NORA
How can I?

EVA
He doesn't know?!

NORA
No! Of course not. I would have no idea how to tell him.

EVA
It's too early to know for sure. He doesn't need to know, not yet.

NORA
But Eva-

EVA
Let's not jump to any conclusions. Everything's going to be alright.

NORA
Eva- I'm frightened.

EVA
I know dear, just breathe.

(EVA and NORA turn to the sound of a knock on the door. It opens to show MRS. PARKER, carrying a small package)

PARKER
Good morning. This parcel was left for your husband, but I wasn't able to catch him on his way out. You don't mind if I barge in do you?

NORA
Not at all, Mrs. Parker. Eva, this is our landlady, Mrs. Mildred Parker.

PARKER
A pleasure my dear.

EVA
It's lovely to meet you too, Mrs. Parker. Nora tells me that the flat is quite comfortable thanks to you.

PARKER
Oh well, that's too kind of Mrs. Bennet. Something troubling you, dear?

EVA
Nora was just telling me about her concerns about (*looking to NORA*)... about well…

NORA
About having a child, Mrs. Parker. Will and I would like to start a family.

PARKER
Oh, I see. My daughter was so excited when she found out she was with child. But the pregnancy was such a difficult one. She really did struggle with it.

NORA
Oh, I'm so sorry.

EVA
Well, I'm sure Nora will do just fine.

PARKER
Of course, dear. I have no doubt she will, someone so young and healthy. *(PARKER reaches to take NORA's hand and squeezes it)* Now make sure you are eating enough and getting good rest. Oh, you know what I love? Naming them. I wish I had the opportunity to think of a good name again.

NORA
Honestly, I've just been so preoccupied with wanting a child that I haven't stopped to consider that yet. I'm sure William's got many names for a little boy already in consideration.

EVA
Well you should definitely get started on that. It took me and Jeffery months to agree on a name.

NORA
I'm sure I'll like almost anything that William chooses, although he has mentioned the name Bartholomew and I simply must put my foot down. Poor lad would get bullied in school.

(EVA, NORA, and MRS. PARKER all laugh)

EVA
Imagine! "Bartholomew Bennet." He'd certainly be remembered.

PARKER
Have you thought about any girl names?

NORA
Well, there are a couple that would be just lovely, but I feel that we are getting ahead of ourselves.

EVA
Nora, I'm sure everything will be fine. You have Mrs. Parker and I to help you along the way.

NORA
Yes, and I'm ever so grateful for that.

PARKER
Of course dear, let me know if you need anything. Well, I should be on my way.. Have a good day.

NORA
Oh, you as well Mrs. Parker. Goodbye.

(PARKER exits)

EVA
Nora, you have to believe me now. Mrs. Parker's daughter was fine, I was fine, and you will be too. You're going to be a wonderful mother.

NORA
Thank you Eva. Now let's talk about you, I need to think of something else for a while.

EVA
Well there's not much to tell. The children are good. Jeffery is doing well at work I believe, and the charity ball this afternoon should raise his standings among the press.

NORA
I'm glad to know Jeffery and the children are well. Have you seen Albert lately?

EVA
(Crossing back to her tea) Nora!

NORA
What? I'm just asking. You do still keep in touch do you not?

EVA
Not since my wedding. (*pause*) I do miss him.

NORA
I remember the way you used to be when you were with him. You were terribly happy. It was actually quite nauseating. Was the other night the first time you'd seen him since my wedding?
(Eva looks away blushing)
Eva! The poor lad.

EVA
Nora, it was time to move on from childish things. Staying in touch with Albert would not be proper. I am content with Jeffrey.

NORA
Content is not happy, Eva.

EVA
Like I said, Nora, it's not proper. Albert will live.

NORA
Oh I know, but he clearly still fancies you. You should see him blush when we merely mention your name, it's really quite sweet.

EVA
Enough already.

NORA
Alright, I just haven't any good scuttlebut. I mean I barely know anyone, just Mrs. Parker. She is quite the nosey parker, however. I do get a good share of gossip from her. Tell me what the rich gossip about, Eva.
(EVA gives her a look) Please, just a small scandal!

EVA
Nora you're horrible.

(Lights fade out on the two of them)