**Chapter Two**

*The Merry War*

Bernardo delighted in playing the ribald suitor to Ophelia’s barbed flirt, whether on stage in The Barn or off-stage in a corner table of the Pig and Whistle, whether courting her in the guise of the cowgirl, Nell, in the *Tenderfoot Thriller* serial, or as the dammed and doomed maiden of Elsinore.

“You aim your mouth at my loins,” he said, speaking to the red head in the bleachers, “like a brazon cannon . . . whose balls would end where mine now hang!”

Ophelia looked up from her sides, tilted her head forward, and speaking over the top of her mock-imperious eyes, said “Good thing my five year-old daughter is no longer here to hear that. Might give her a life-long case of stage fright!”

“THE PLAY’S THE THIIIIIIIING! . . . WHERE WE’LL CATCH THE CONSCIENCE OF THE WEE LITTLE THING!” he said, goose-stepping around the stage like a Fascist Frankenstein. “IT’S LIVE! IT’S LIVE!” He dropped the impersonation and addressed himself to the actress in the bleachers. “What child doesn’t like make believe? Doesn’t like being scared by a ghost?”

“A ghost with a potty mouth!”

He swept his cowboy hat from his head in a deep bow . . . then dropped to a knee, venturing a ploy that played on her love of Yeats.

Come away o stolen child

 where words are waters that run wild . . .

and the Guinness is dark under froth!”

Ophelia could do naught by smile at his endearing silliness.

 “Where to and fro we LEAP . . . onto a table . . . !”

Ophelia interrupted him. “Like animals that belong in a stable!”

 “Only so that we might SLEEP like babes in a manger!”

“You compare my bed to a stall in a barn! What a way to woo! And you would have me believe in this fable?”

 “As I would have you believe that this barn was made for making hay!”

 “And you, dear sir, are stuffed with it . . . Bernardo the Scare Crow!”

 He snatched the flashlight from a trouser pocket, placed it under his chin, and pressed the button, producing the ghoulish face that had enlivened the ghost scene.

“That, sir, is no face for a daughter’s eyes! I rest my case.”

Bernardo leapt into the air, a leg shooting out in a flying kick, Cossack style, arms crossed over his chest, executing a pirouette in the midair, before landing on one knee, his arms flung apart.

“And I mine!” His roguish eyes were accentuated by the blue kerchief knotted at his throat.

“A circus act! This is how you would woo a girl?”

“Yes, with a twirl and a dance . . . and the pearl of a glance!”

Ophelia was tickled by his comic gallantry. Taking this as his cue, Bernardo pressed his cause.

“Let’s you and I, fair Ophelia, move instead . . . with *sweaty* haste to make this night *joint labor* with the day!” He made an “O” with thumb and forefinger and aiming his other forefinger at it, was about to pantomime his meaning of “joint labor” until a look from Opehlia froze his blood.

She reared on her wooden seat, while yet remaining seated. “Woo with *sweaty* haste between MY sheets!” she said, “and you will ne-ver taste my cream-filled sweets!” She licked a forefinger (as if she had used it to collect chocolate from the inside rim of a mixing bowl), then mimed flicking a speck in Bernardo’s face. From under a red bang, she treated him to a look of profane candor.

“Ah,” he said, in a high girlish voice, “I am *pricked* by a *most* emulate pride!”

Hearing these words, Isabel smiled to herself while scribbling them into the “script”.

Bernardo exhaled, as if turning his chest into a balloon, while the air escaped between his lips as if from a fast leak. “So . . . must I then proceed by *back* channels,” he asked, as if merely wanting to know. His voice suddenly dropped into a very deep register.

“TIL ALL YOUR LANDS ARE FOREFEIT . . . TO THESE HANDS!” He looked from one hand to the other, as if they belonged to someone else. Suddenly, one hand began moving with a spastic life of its own, prompting the other hand to try and control it—as if he had improvised a puppet-show with his hands. “And your *fair* kingdom,” he said, a hand opening wide in tribute to her beauty, “*merrrrrrged* with mine?”

Thus, Bernardo treated Ophelia and his fellow players on stage and in the bleachers to a taste of the old vaudevillian—toward whom he still felt a deep attachment.

“Not ‘til kingdom come . . . will your will be done!” said Ophelia.

“I would stake my claim on every hill and valley of your fair kingdom . . . with kisses! Come, fair dragon . . . take my quill,” he said, plucking a plume from his cowboy hat and offering it to her, quill first . . . . “Come play in my sandbox . . . and let us erect castles of sand together . . . me dribbling mud on your fortifications!”

“Your words have all the charm of sand thrown in my eyes.”

“Nay, they are star-dust, fair dragon!”

“You think I’m a reptile!”

“With angel wings . . . and a tongue dipped in heart-fire.”

“Guarding a treasure of jewels from thieving hands! Stake your claim elsewhere than these fair hills!”

“My stake and your hills were made to be conjoined!”

“Like two dogs . . . hind to hind!”

Isabel arched an eyebrow, her pencil pausing in mid-air.

“And as but one of two, I can think of no better place to be than to be behind you!”

“You sir, must go and speak to The Hamlet. He has given much thought to this question, whether ‘to be or not to be?’ As for me, I already know the answer to that riddle! NOT!”

“Then my plea is all for naught!” He held up thumb and foreigner in the shape of an “O.”

“And in pursuing it, you would possess naught by the “O” between your thumb and forefinger. If you would woo in signs, than you would better court my sad sister, Lavinia, who lacking hands and tongue draws signs in the dirt to speak her heart. Dirt perhaps being the proper medium for your signs of woo! You may as well try and thread your quill through the eye of a needle, as thread me with your suit.”

“It’s a threadbare one indeed!”

“One that would see me bare of my last thread!”

Bernardo’s eyebrows arched in comic anticipation of such a spectacle. “I blush to think of it.” He lowered his head and covered it with his cowboy hat.

Ophelia’s guffaw filled The Barn. “You and a blush, dear sir, wouldn’t recognize one another if you met face to face.”

Bernardo answered with his cowboy hat clamped to his heart, as if swearing an oath upon it. “On this small sandbox . . . our humble stage . . . we might billow the sheets of yon bunk-bed.” He used his dented hat to indicate the stage bed of the *Tenderfoot Thriller* set at the far end of The Barn, and continued--“until our merry labor is joint and . . . ”

Ophelia interrupted him. “In sweaty haste, no doubt!”

“Nay, not haste . . . but a moonlit gallop through the hills . . . .”

“You neigh like a horse kicking at a barn door!”

He smiled as this jibe as if his face was stuck through a wooden hole in a carnival booth before a tomato throwing girlfriend who had an arm like Dizzy Dean, and continued. “Through the hills, I say . . . ‘til the un-weeded wilds YIELD . . . to the furrows of my plow!”

 “So, you would farm me?”

“A dear husband to your sod!”

“Spoken with the clod-hopping grace of a Clydesdale! ‘Un-weeded wilds!’ Way-ul, Tenderfoot, sew your seed in some other plot! You, my fair cowpoke, are but an upstart breeze in my skirts!”

“Would that I were free to go where the breeze goes . . . to caress what it caresses . . . your cheek . . . your neck . . . your . . . .”

“Groped by a wind!”

To his daughter, Walter whispered an aside: “Are you getting this?”

Isabel nodded, her pencil racing to keep abreast of this war of wits between Bernardo and Ophelia. “Could you ask ‘em to back up . . . ‘to all your lands be forfeit!’ That’s where the script went off the rails!”

“Like Mr. Toad’s mad ride. Galloping through their own script . . . like Tenderfoot and Nell on a pair of runaway horses!” Walter turned to Bernardo. “Can we take that again . . . from the bit about ‘brazon cannon and balls?”

Bernardo and Ophelia looked at him, as if brought up short by his question.

 “Walter, we’re not dialoging!” she said. “This is just for sport. It’s what we do . . . to make the time pass. It’s all barnyard noise!”

“It keeps us on our improvisational toes.” Bernardo added. “Never know when that might be needed!”

“’Sides, Walter, it’s a kind o’ private, you know?” said Ophelia.

Walter looked around, trying to reconcile the word “private” with the “audience” in the bleachers and around the barn. “Really? Just the same, I want you to memorize it for tomorrow’s show.”

“Memorize it? How?”

“Isabel will give you your lines!”

“She’s writing this down?” she said.

 “Yes, as we have many of tonight’s ad-libs. We are doing a send-up of the play, you recall. We have the script for *Hamlet;* what need is one for *I, Ophelia*—which is a work in progress, as you see.”

“But those ad-libs happened on stage! And besides, how would we stage it? Plant me in the audience . . . god forbid?”

“Where an old dowager might mistake her shoulder for a pillow and begin snoring on it!” said Bernardo.

Something about venturing beyond the Fourth Wall of the proscenium frightened Ophelia. She had always acted as if the “bubble” of their make-believe universe ended at the edge of the stage. She gave no thought of the audience till bowing to their applause—for only then did she dare to acknowledge its existence. The thought of this living thing dwelling out there in the darkness, beyond the glare of the stage lights gave her a kind of stage fright. It would be like finding herself outside the kingdom walls in the days of Chaucer, where she might be fallen upon by brigands or wolves.

“Hmmm,” was all Walter said.

Upon hearing this, Ophelia and Bernard exchanged an alarmed look. Walter mercifully cut short their nervous suspense. “You could begin your lines seated in the audience . . . beside the aisle . . . and continue them as you move down the aisle, mounting the steps to the stage, as if prompted to have a face-to-face, tete de tete with your gallant nemesis.”

Bernardo took a bow at these last words, cowboy hat in hand.

Ophelia had turned white on hearing these words. Bernardo came to her rescue.

“That’s assuming she doesn’t vomit on the way down the aisle . . . though come to think of it, that might be just desserts for all the hacks, coughs, sneezes, and snoring we must endure from these living cadavers! What if instead of sitting in the audience, she says her lines from the wings.”

The blood flowed back into Ophelia’s cheeks hearing these words.

The next voice they heard was that of the sixteen year-old Isabel. “Yes, when you ask ‘who’s idea was the blindfold,” she said to the Director at her side. “She steps out of the dark waving her hand like a white flag . . . and then withdrawing back into the wings . . . until Francisco says his line about her ‘star being aligned with his pole.’”

There it is,” said Walter. “Problem solved. I thank you all for your contribution to our script.”

“I’ll be looking for my check in the mail!” said Bernardo.

A blue flicker startled everyone.

“One one-thousand . . . two one-thous . . . .

A thunder-crack detonated overhead.

“And so . . . proceed you,” said Walter.

“I think this night portends some strange eruption in the barn!” said Ophelia, with an anxious glance toward the rafters.

Bernardo joined her. “In these rains . . . ‘I hear the sheeted dead . . . quake and gibber . . . . This evening augurs stars . . . with trains of fire . . . and dews of blood!’”

“Most gothic!” said Francisco. “Have you both been reading Poe!”

From the rafters came an eerie screeeech! Ophelia jumped, as if given an electric shock by a hand-shake. Her eyes grew wide as cue-balls.

“Screech owl” Bernardo said, noticing the look on Ophelia’s face. “It lives in here . . . with a colony of mice. Unlike most owls, he dines in every night!”

“It gives me the wee-willies!” said Ophelia.

“Perhaps all our talk of ghosts and sheeted dead has wakened its appetite! Adds to the atmosphere, dontcha’ think!”

“Brilliant!” she said. “So here we are playing between the gaze of two owls . . . one in the rafters and one in the bleachers!”

“Our ears ringing with the words of one . . . and the screech of the other!”

“I’d rather hear fingernails drawn over a chalkboard then hear that screech again!” she lamented. “Why such a screech? It seems more suited to the graveyard than the barnyard!”

Bernardo pressed the button of his flashlight, his ghoulish face under-lit by its beam. “It is a grave sound indeed . . . if you are a mouse!” He continued, taking his cue from the sulfur-charged air. “I see your face has the look of a moist star,” he said to Ophelia, “sick almost to doomsday with eclipse.”

She looked at him as if momentarily forgetting where she was . . . or who she was. A superstitious fear crossed her face, known to every actor who had ever stepped from the wings onto the stage. Bernardo gave no quarter.

“And even the like precurse of fear’d events . . . as harbingers preceding still . . . the fates and prologues to this omen.”

Ophelia’s face shone briefly in the flash—as if it was she who now held the flashlight to her chin. She blinked twice and looked at him.

“What, Mistress O? You look like you just saw the ghost!”

She shook her head. “I just remembered this nightmare I had last night. It woke me up. I’ve been having it since I was a child.”

“About what?”

She looked at him as if deciding whether to take him into her confidence, then decided

against it. “It’s nothing, really. I wouldn’t give it a second thought except . . . this morning as I was leaving to come here . . . mom said something very strange to me . . . ”

Bernardo saw a vacant fear in her eyes. “Yes?”

Ophelia blinked free of her thoughts. “It’s nothing. All this lightning and thunder just has me a little spooked is all. Let’s just go on, shall we?”

“I see. And here we are in an old barn . . . with a screech owl” said Bernardo.

“And you with that flashlight under your chin,” she said. “impersonating Frankenstein!”
 “With bats in the rafters!” Leo called from the hay loft.

Francisco whispered to Bernardo. “Quasimodo in the belfry!”

 “And . . . COCKS crooooooowing when the clock stook twelf!” Bernardo added in an Irish brogue.

“Rehearsing a scene with a ghost!” said Francisco.

Meanwhile, Walter’s owlish eyes were scanning The Bible cradled in Isabel’s lap. A reading light clamped to its top projected a halo onto the white page and his huge brow, which a hand rhythmically massaged, trying to conjure further stage directions from it—as if intent on pressing from a vat of old-vine zinfandel grapes a few more drops of a signature vintage.

“It’s just the old Irish midlands in me!” said Ophelia. “You have to understand, we’re all a little daft!”

“Aren’t we indeed!” said Walter, without taking his eyes from The Bible.

“Daft from the windy draft of all these words!” said Bernardo.

A silence filled the barn. The downpour sounding on the roof intensified. Walter turned toward an actor standing atop a far bleacher and nodded. The First Player cupped both hands around his mouth. “Cock-a-doodle-doooooo!”

“Can we have a more . . . robust . . . cock, please?” said Bernardo.

“Shall I strike it with my partisan?” said Francisco, raising his pike.

“Only if it’s a Republican cock!” said Bernardo.

“I’ve known a cock to stop a mouth before!” said Francisco.

Ophelia rolled her eyes. “Let’s pray it was neither a maid’s nor a man’s.”

“I’ve heard it said,” Bernardo continued, “that the worthy cock is the strumpet of the morn”

“Trumpet!” corrected Walter, who despite his fixation with The Bible had not ceased listening to their improvised banter, as vigilant for comic nuggets with which to fortify the script of *I, Ophelia* as a beach-comber for seashells to slip into his pocket.

“Ooops! Freudian slip. Sorry, Walter.”

“Proceed you!”

“I have heard the cock that *trumpets* to the morn with his lofty and shrill throat,” Bernardo said, lapsing into a high girlish voice, “doth give much offense to the Gods,” he added, half turning to Francisco at his side. “This extravagant and erring soul,” he said, aiming the brim of his cowboy hat at The First Player, “this bird of an exotic feather, this cock-a-doodle-doo, doth singeth all-night-long . . . But look now, the moon in russet mantle clad walks o’er the dew on yon high Eastward hill” he said, aiming an arm in that direction, “our own Sherwood Forest . . . of mid-summer dreams . . . where puck sews his love-struck mischief in stage stuck ears . . . so that each actor loves the face to which he first awakes . . . whether it be of damsel or donkey,” he said, gesturing to Ophelia and Francisco respectively. “And woos his ‘love’ with his cock . . . . a doodle dooo . . . as if he were The Bard with a quill dipped in baby goo!”

“Oh, this is most splendid!” said Ophelia. “Must we stop our ears against this noisome cock . . . whose doodle-doo would penetrate any ear turned its way . . . even that of a sow!”

 “Most bridle-some!” said The First Player. “She gallops from under his spurs!”

“Allow me, fair-eared one, a word,” said Bernardo, sweeping his white cowboy hat from his head, as he took a knee on stage, “to set things right . . . which are in arrears between us, as we break this, our night-watch, up. Let us drink until dawn’s early light our fellowship from a bottomless cup at the P and W.”

“What, again? Have you grown a beard in your ears?”

Bernardo raised his voice to everyone in The Barn. “Let us speak with toasts . . . and no more with Ghosts!”

Walter merely smiled to himself, then whispered to Isabel. “I sense a rebellion stirring in the ranks. It’s been a long day.”

“All these words have made us thirsty!” said Bernardo.

“And me wish I were deaf!” said Ophelia.

“I feel like I’m being browbeaten with a Funk and Wagnalls!” said Francisco. “Words! Words! Where is a word’s worth . . . midst so many noisome tongues?”

 “Who knows what might shake from the sieve’” said Ophelia, “if we threw poor words away . . . and were content to live!”

“Yeats again!” said Bernardo, in mock protest. “Does your mother feed you nothing for lunch but alphabet soup?”

 “Yes, and the only letter in it is ‘O’! But if I would tongue our language, I would tongue it not as a soup, but as a thick Irish stew. I stand by Goethe! ‘Give me a ragout!’ Not this thin BROTH of limp syllables . . . that run from the spoon on its way to the lips. That is better sipped than chewed . . . leaving *nothing* for the belly to digest,” she said, forming an “O” with her fingers.

“Ah, now there’s an “O” worthy of being threaded by a needle!”

“Needle, indeed!” she said.

“Heed this, my midnight epistle,” said Francisco. “It’s all downhill to the Pig n Whistle!”

“To the horses! My scrotum for a mount!” said The First Player from high atop the bleachers.

“Down . . . down . . . from our barn in the hills,” said Bernardo, “ to our watering trough in the valley . . . where we may crow cock-a-doodle doo with the whistling pigs . . . belly-up to troughs overtopped with the liquid oats . . . of our golden-headed brew!”

“Quite mad!” said Ophelia. “Quite quite down! What an ignoble mind is here overblown! The clown’s, the rake’s, the lecher’s eye, the gossip’s tongue. The expectoration and belch of the fair state!”

“The glass of fashion,” said The First Player with a stylized pirouette.

“The very form of mold!” said Francisco.

“At what point,” Walter whispered to Isabel, “did I lose control of this scene”

Francisco and Bernardo continued to talk under their breath.

“I see, Bernardo, from the way you woo her in rhymes that you’ve been drinking with the poets at the P and W again!”

“No, just Ophelia! She has the soul of one!” He found himself staring at the top of the red head, whose face was buried in the script.

*Flashback/ Interior*

*The Pig and Whistle Pub*

“The other night we had a contest . . . to see who could recite the most poetry . . . one poem per pint. The lass knows her poets . . . especially Yeats . . . AND her Wordsworth . . . AND her Kipling . . . AND her Tennyson. When she recited ‘Leda and the Swan’ a little Guinness rose appeared in her cheek, a stray lock of her red hair plastered to her forehead. My gawd, it was almost religious . . . As soon as I heard that Irish lilt reciting. . . ‘her thighs caressed by dark webs’ . . . I thought I was going to propose on the spot.”

“Propose what? A midnight picnic at Malibu?”

“Something like that raced through my head!”

“What is it with Irish girls and red hair!”

“And soap-soft skin. Her lilt gets even thicker when she’s quaffing a pint of the DL with the BH!”

“Ah, the “Dark Lady with the Blonde Head!”

“As if the two were made for each other.”

 “A worthy muse.”

 “I swear, Ed, I almost thought she was deliberately putting ideas into my head . . . . ‘And how can body*, laid* in a white rooosh, but *feeeel* the strange heart beating where it *lies?’* I blinked my eyes to make sure I wasn’t hearing things . . . that such suggestive . . . almost profane words had actually come from the same tongue that receives the heavenly host every Sunday! I can still here the emphasis she laid on those three little words . . . as if it was just a few minutes ago. I think what I like is the mix of naughtiness and good naturedness in her guffaws. Some cocktail!”

“Just so long as you don’t end up like a cock chasing its tail!”

“I’d get tired listening to the combers at Malibu before I’d weary of her guffaw! I think I tickle her wit just so I can hear it again!”

Still gazing at Ophelia, Bernardo chuckled to himself. “And so I asked her to say those lines again . . . pretending I couldn’t hear her over the noise.”

“You deviant bastard!”

“To prolong our little bout . . . and my perhaps not-so-secret pleasure . . . I played the inebriated Director to her inebriated actress, urging her to say it again . . . only slower. ‘Her looooooosening thiiiiighs . . . laaaaaaid in a white roosh!’ she says.”

“Stop! I-don’t-beleeeeeeve you!,” I said, in my best imitation of the ol’ Barn Owl. Pretend you’re on a rolling deck in high seas!”

“And about to vomit my eggs Florentine!” she said.

“Yes, vomit up Yeats . . . I’ll happily wipe the undigested egg from my face!”

“With your fingers!”

“And yours!”

“Then I will happily disgorge for George the contents of my Irish soul! Are you sure you don’t want a bib?”

“Only if I can have the pleasure of seeing you in one . . . and nothing else!”

“Ooooh, wouldn’t we make a picture! The Bibsy Twins!”

“Our mascot could be a baby’s bib covered with regurgitated Gerbers!”

“My loins shudder at the thought!”

Bernardo spit his Guinness so hard, Ophelia blinked from the foam that struck her face. It had been an unusually free-spirited drinking bout, which brought a lingering smile of remembrance to his face.

“Ohmygawd! I’m sorry.” I didn’t do that! Here,” he said, reaching a napkin to dab it from her eyes.

“Nonono! When you go to the sea you expect to get a little spray in the face.”

“That’s me! Ol’ Spray in the Face!”

“What next? Are you going to hose me down?”

“Most disarming!”

‘I’m sorry. The sauce makes me a wee saucy!’”

“I won’t tell anyone!”

“My very own Guinness whisperer!”

“I’ve mastered the art of drooling sweet nothings on a girl’s face!”

“Some in this town would say a beautiful face is made more so by a drooling head!”

“No wonder you skin is soft as soap!”

“Listen to us! I think we should keep it down. I hear these walls have ears!”

“The whole damn town has ears! It’s wired for dirt! Here, the high and flirty and the down and dirty are always hopping into bed together!”

“Guess it’s what keeps Louella’s typewriter clacking.”

“Yes! Clickety-clack, clickety-clack . . . down the track . . . on a scandal train built for one!”

“Tossing poison bouquets from her caboose!”

Their steins clinked in the air.

“Wonder which came first . . . her loose lips or her loose hips?” Bernardo mused over the head of his Guinness.

 “I hear William Randolph has his own ‘director’s couch.’”

“Do you think it’s yellow?” he wondered aloud to himself. “A columnist of gossip!”

“You make it sound like an infectious social disease!”

“The salmon-lou-ella virus! Kind o’ like filling a Waterford goblet with bilge from the bottom of a tanker!”

“I’d like to stuff her mouth with cocktail sausages . . . you know, those little Winchell Weenies! Wonder who she has on her payroll in here?”

“In here, it’s a fire-able offense! Not so much at Mussos.”

A shadow fell upon Ophelia’s face. “Really?”

Bernardo nodded. “I have it on good authority at least one waiter there is part of her network of paid gossips . . . and a valet. Always ask for Vincenzo, the head waiter. Your secrets are safe with him! Anything he overhears stays at the table . . . and I’m sure his memoir would curl the hair of a Hollywood hairdresser if he ever decided to write one. Just sayin.”

“Thank you. I’ll remember that!”

“In this town, even in this pub, where our secrets and our sins are fairly safe, I speak as if the walls are listening!”

Any residue of comic energy that found no outlet in The Barn found a ready stage in the Pig ‘n Whistle, prompted by the Guinness, multiple toasts, recollected “banana peel” moments from rehearsals and shoots, and the spectacle of George (aka Bernardo/ Tenderfoot) doing his Russian gypsy kick-dance on a table top, while the rest drummed it with their steins to the percussive hand-clap of the crowd. Their antics were urged on by all these, as earlier they had been urged into character by the lights, costumes, make-up, props, and directorial sleight-of-hand of the old Barn Owl, Walter. One “send-up” had merely spilled over into a second, extending the madcap spirit of The Barn to that of the bar. Bernardo blinked free of this Pig and Whistle flashback. He chuckled to himself, refilling his thermos cup with coffee.

*Interior*

*The Barn*

“What?” said Francisco.

“After the fourth pint, she began reciting Yeats with a lisp. ‘Her loooooothening thighs.’”

“BANANA PEEL!”

“We shouted it at the same time, Francisco! Then our eyes met . . . wide as the salad saucers at Mussos . . . and she burst into laughter. Know what she calls that laugh . . . her Belly Glutton!”

 “And you’re a glutton for it!”

“AND her red hair . . . AND her creamy skin . . . AND her freckles . . . AND those game blue eyes . . . And . . . and if you ever breathe a word of this, I will never buy you another pint!”

Bernardo chuckled and shook his head.

“As soon as I hear that guffaw, I’m a goner. I’m bouncing down a rutted road on a buckboard . . . seated beside this Calamity Jane . . . who’s lashing a team of frothing horses across these Hollywood hills! . . . . There is magic in them thar hills whenever we’re on a shoot together!”

“I think you’ve done one too many *Tenderfoot* serialstogether.”

 “Five ‘n counting! Don’t know which I like more . . . her laugh or her lilt! When she says ‘a shudder in the loins . . . engenders there the broken wall!” My lord. I had to wipe the sweat from my forehead . . . check to make sure I hadn’t drooled on my shirt! But then I caught this strange look on her face . . . as if something in those words had spooked her.”

“Her teenage marriage to GS?”

“Imagine if Louella had gotten hold of THAT one.”

“Probably did . . . but who knew the kid six years ago? The old scandal monger had her sights set on bigger game! Our fair Ophelia was under everyone’s radar then.”

“Not so much now!”

“Something like that happens now . . . her name’ll be on everyone’s lips . . . thanks to Cru-ella!”

“Think she’s gun shy?”

“I do. But hey . . . if God wanted our hearts to just pump blood, he’d have made ‘em so they couldn’t be broken!”

“She’s trying to keep things with her new sedan-man on the down-lo . . . but in this fish-bowl of a town, good luck with that!”

“I think she still thinks about GS. I’m sure their paths cross now and then . . . same garden parties, same restaurants, same premiers. Ciros, Chasens, the Polo Lounge, Coconut Grove, Mussos, The Chateau M . . . It’s still a small town!”

“His rise through the ranks of Lett and Janns real estate empire was meteoric.”

“Ah yes, the Founding Fathers of Westwood.”

“Hitched his star to the fortunes of these first families . . . and vroom . . . off it took.”

Didn’t Arthur Lett buy the old ranch from a Spanish noble, who inherited it as a gift from the Governor of Mexico for his soldiering during the Spanish colonial era?”

“Don Maximo Alanis. All 4, 438 acres! Rancho San Jose de Buenos Ayres. His vision was to subdivide the northern hilly acreage into estate parcels and the lower, southern acres into middle-class parcels. Also part of that vision was a Provence-like, Mediterranean village, Westwood. Another part of his vision was the Pacific Electric Railway . . . the Red Cars . . . which linked Hollywood, Westwood, and Santa Monica all the way to the sea . . . and linked them all to downtown Los Angeles to the south. He was part of that new breed for whom the machine was indeed the “New Messiah”—cut from the same cloth as Ford, Flagler, and Huntington. These were the “egg n butter boys” GS ran with, was mentored by, and in whose image he molded himself. Just happened to be in the right business at the right time in the right place. With his Errol Flynn mustache, those almond-green eyes, and his Hollywood client list, it’s not too hard to see why our fair Ophelia took such a fall!”

“She was only what . . . eighteen?”

“Just. And just off the train from the Midwest.”

“Her fate was no doubt sealed at one of those early estate clambakes in the Westwood Hills, a tradition that goes back to the very origins of the place. No doubt with an able assist from her favorite blackberry and pepper champagne!”

“Ah, the trouble with the bubbles!”

 “Still, what’s bad for the heart is good for the art!”

Bernardo nodded to himself. “She’s starting to hit her stride. Growing into her glass slippers. Feeling more and more comfortable in her favorite role . . . Hollywood starlet-on-her-way-to-stardom! All part of Mr. L’s master plan. Gaynor, Wray, Hill, Swanson, Crawford . . . what a class!”

“And Garbo!”

 “And the silver screen is big enough for all of ‘em!”

“Enough wattage there to keep the search-lights tracking these skies for a while longer!”

Bernardo said this while looking at the silhouetted head at the make-up table, backlit by a row of bulbs. Walter’s voice interrupted these bleacher confidences.

“Okay, let’s take it from ‘has this thing appeared again tonight?’ Horatio, your line, I believe.”

 Bernardo and Francisco took their places on the “parapet.”

“How now friend! You look pale!” said Horatio.

“This bodes some strange eruption!” Bernardo said, as if barely stifling an urge to vomit.

“It rises in my gorge!”

“STOP!”

Walter was already moving onto the stage in his loose-fitting trousers and un-tucked shirt--a monochromatic ensemble that reminded Ophelia of Yeats’ “The Fisherman,” “in grey Connamara cloth, climbing up to a grey place . . . .” Like her beloved Irish poet, she too desired to honor him, not with a poem, but with a performance as “cold and passionate as the dawn.”

 “What if try this . . . ?”