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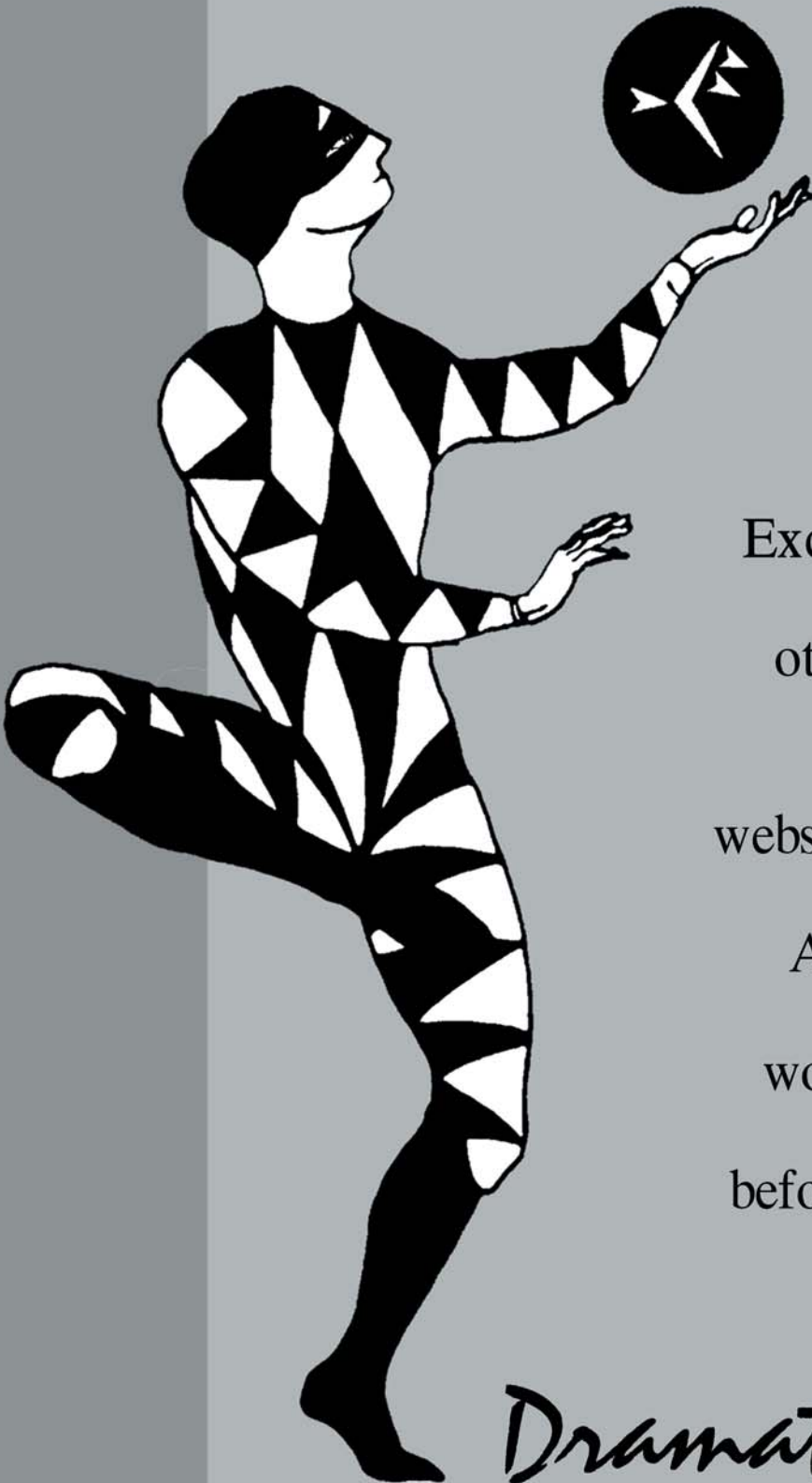
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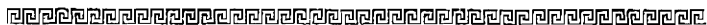
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Dramatic Publishing





A Play in One Act

HERMAN MELVILLE'S

The Court Martial of
Billy Budd

by

JAMES M. SALEM



THE DRAMATIC PUBLISHING COMPANY



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(THE COURTMARTIAL OF BILLY BUDD)

THE COURT MARTIAL OF BILLY BUDD

A Play in One Act

For Eleven Men (Eight with Doubling)

CHARACTERS

CAPTAIN VERE..... *Captain of the Indomitable*
ALBERT..... *cabin boy*
JOHN CLAGGART..... *master-at-arms*
DR. MATTHEW CORES..... *the ship's surgeon*
LT. RATCLIFFE..... *a commissioned officer*
JONES..... *forecastleman*
DANSKER..... *mainmastman*
BILLY BUDD..... *foretopman*
LT. DAVIS..... *a commissioned officer*
MR. MORTON..... *Commander of the Marines*
CHAPLAIN..... *the Ship's chaplain*

PLACE: *Captain Vere's quarters on the Indomitable,
a British man-of-war, somewhere in the
Mediterranean.*

TIME: *1797.*

The following "news item" may be either given members of the audience as they take their seats or printed in the program; or it may be read aloud before the curtain rises.

NEWS FROM THE MEDITERRANEAN

September 1, 1797

Mutinous Sailor Kills Officer in Cold Blood

On the tenth of August a deplorable occurrence took place aboard H. M. S. *Indomitable*.

John Claggart, Master-At-Arms, uncovered a mutiny plot among an inferior section of the ship's company, led by one William Budd. In the act of arraigning the man before the Captain, Claggart was fatally stabbed in the heart by the same William Budd.

The enormity of the crime and the extreme depravity of the criminal appear the greater in view of the character of the victim. He was a middle-aged man, patriotic, respectable, and discreet, who belonged to the group of petty officers upon whom the efficiency of His Majesty's Navy depends.

The criminal promptly paid the penalty for his crime. Nothing amiss is now anticipated aboard H. M. S. *Indomitable*.

DESCRIPTION OF CHARACTERS

VERE: Vere is Captain of the *Indomitable*. He is bookish, pedantic, a strict disciplinarian, used to giving orders and having them obeyed. A dedicated public servant, he is willing to let his head rule his heart. He is old enough to be Billy Budd's father.

ALBERT: Albert is a young cabin boy.

CLAGGART: John Claggart is a petty officer, the *Indomitable's* Master-At-Arms. He is dark, with ruddy complexion, and has piercing eyes. His hatred for Billy Budd can only be explained as a disorder in his very being. He is cruel to his men but subservient to his superior officers.

CORES: Cores, the ship's physician, is sensitive, compassionate, tough. He is well educated in both medicine and the liberal arts.

RATCLIFFE: Ratcliffe is a young, idealistic, very human, commissioned officer. The strict rules and regulations of wartime naval service are acceptable to him only as generalizations and not as they affect personalities. He has the courage of his convictions, as when he stubbornly defends Billy Budd.

JONES: Jones is the forecastleman, a petty officer.

DANSKER: Dansker is the mainmastman. He is an old, bearded, sea-weary sailor. He has long learned to see and hear only what he cannot avoid, and not to interfere with other people's lives.

BILLY BUDD: Billy Budd is young, handsome, blond. In appearance he is a perfect contrast to Claggart. But most of all, Budd is naive and innocent. It is difficult for him even to conceive of

evil lurking in the hearts of men. He is a man of actions rather than of words. His only real flaw is that he suffers from a speech hesitancy.

DAVIS: Davis is the First Lieutenant. He is quite at home with strict naval regulations and is willing to carry them out to the letter. Much of what he does is done for the sake of his career. He is most anxious to please Captain Vere.

MORTON: Morton is Commander of the Marines on board the *Indomitable*. He is anxious always to do the right thing, regardless of the consequences. At the trial he gives in to the execution not because he fears Captain Vere but because he fears mutiny.

CHAPLAIN: He is a sensitive clergyman who, nevertheless, sees the ship's business as one thing, his service as something separate.

PROPERTIES

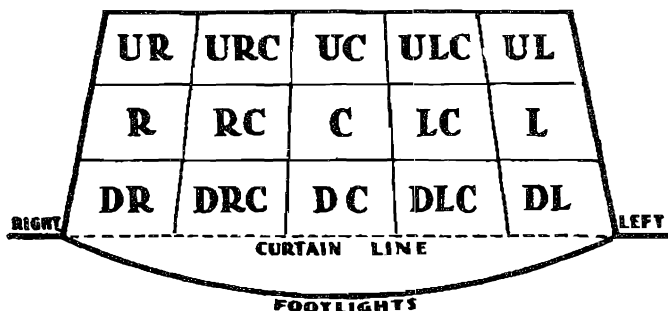
GENERAL: Large table, with five chairs; two stuffed chairs; small table with lamp; desk and chair; globe; large map; one or two large books.

VERE: Book.

BUDD: Length of rope long enough to tie hands.

CORES: Glass of water.

CHART OF STAGE POSITIONS



STAGE POSITIONS

Upstage means away from the footlights, *downstage* means toward the footlights, and *right* and *left* are used with reference to the actor as he faces the audience. R means *right*, L means *left*, U means *up*, D means *down*, C means *center*, and these abbreviations are used in combination, as: UR for *up right*, RC for *right center*, DLC for *down left center*, etc. A territory designated on the stage refers to a general area, rather than to a given point.

NOTE: Before starting rehearsals, chalk off your stage or rehearsal space as indicated above in the *Chart of Stage Positions*. Then teach your actors the meanings and positions of these fundamental terms of stage movement by having them walk from one position to another until they are familiar with them. The use of these abbreviated terms in directing the play saves time, speeds up rehearsals, and reduces the amount of explanation the director has to give to his actors.

The Court Martial of Billy Budd

SCENE: The Captain's quarters. At C is a large table, with five chairs about it. At DR are two easy chairs, separated by a small table and a lamp. At UL are a desk, a chair, and a globe. A large map hangs on the wall L. On the table are one or two large books. There are three entrances to the cabin: At URC, access to the rest of the ship, and at R and L, entrances to staterooms.

AT RISE OF CURTAIN: CAPTAIN VERE sits in chair R, reading. A knock on the door is heard.

VERE (curtly). Enter!

(ALBERT enters URC.)

ALBERT (sheepishly). Excuse me, Captain Vere.
But the Master-At-Arms wishes to see you.

He says it's an emergency.

VERE (shutting the book, annoyed). Send him in.

(ALBERT leaves and returns immediately.)

ALBERT. Mr. Claggart, sir.

(CLAGGART enters, hat in hand. ALBERT exits.)

VERE (sharply). Well? What is it, Claggart?

CLAGGART. Captain Vere, sir? I hate to be the bearer of bad tidings, but there's something you must know. We have a dangerous sailor aboard. One who did not enlist in His Majesty's service.

VERE (rising). You mean an impressed man?

CLAGGART (bowing slightly). Yes, sir. Impressed man. Lately I've sensed unrest, but it was only suspicion until today. Now I'm convinced that . . . the individual I refer to is the leader of the movement. (CLAGGART waits for VERE to speak. VERE paces nervously about. Pause.) I am aware, sir, of the serious responsibility I assume in making this report to you. (VERE still paces about, not offering to speak. CLAGGART watches him closely.) But in view of the recent outbreaks . . . mutiny on the---- (A quick gesture from VERE cuts the sentence off. Taking a deep breath.) God forbid, your honor, that the Indomitable should be faced with a ---

VERE (turning, angrily). Never mind that! (Moves next to CLAGGART.) You say there's a dangerous man aboard. Name him.

CLAGGART (looking away). William Budd, a foretopman, your honor.

VERE. Billy Budd!

CLAGGART (coolly). He has sought the good will of his shipmates. (Pointing for emphasis.) He knows he may need their good words in a pinch. Budd has shown his resentment from the first day on board. Even when he was taken off the Rights of Man!

VERE. I was informed the opposite.

CLAGGART. Men only note Budd's good looks!

VERE (impatiently). 'A foggy tale! Give me some evidence. An act, a spoken word. (Coming closer to him.) Be careful what you say. In a

case like this there's a yardarm for the false witness!

CLAGGART (shaking his head in reaction to Vere's severe tone; standing erect). There is Budd's resentment over impressment. Less than a week after that he had a vicious fight with the man they call Red Whiskers. The night before last he was seen meeting an unknown sailor near the lee-forechains. There is the rumor of conspiracy among the impressed men, with Budd as leader. (Pause.)

VERE (not convinced). Go on. (Paces back and forth.)

CLAGGART. Last night he stirred up the men by protesting the ship's food. He deliberately threw his soup on the floor. This morning he broke ranks during ship punishment. (Pause.)

VERE (impatiently). Go on.

CLAGGART (uneasily). Begging the Captain's pardon, isn't that enough?

VERE (moving toward CLAGGART). It's all circumstantial and hearsay!

CLAGGART. Forgive my persistence, but I think the evidence is all but conclusive. If I spent any more time gathering a case we might all be victims of a mu----(Vere's hard and angry stare cuts the sentence off.) Of the kind of unpleasantness experienced at Spithead and Nore.

VERE. These are serious charges.

CLAGGART. So are the consequences of treason.

VERE (sitting at chair R, deep in thought). You seem convinced that Budd is guilty.

CLAGGART (walking toward VERE). In my mind there is no doubt. I've watched that man since he set foot on the Indomitable.

VERE (nervously biting the side of his index finger). Have you mentioned this to anyone else?

CLAGGART. No, sir.

VERE (rising). Wait in your cabin until I send for you. Speak to no one. The situation is too grave for rumors to begin.

CLAGGART (bowing slightly). Very good, sir. (He exits URC.)

VERE (hitting his fist into his palm). Damn! (He goes to stateroom door R and knocks once.)
Dr. Cores!

(CORES enters P.)

CORES. Yes, Captain? (Noticing Vere's worried look; anxiously.) What's wrong?

VERE (sinking into his chair). John Claggart's just been here. He claims we have a dangerous man aboard.

CORES (sitting down beside him). Dangerous?

VERE. Yes. A man engaged in a conspiracy among the impressed men.

CORES. Who?

VERE (looking squarely at CORES). Billy Budd.

CORES (shocked). Absurd! Billy's the last man on earth, much less on ship, to engage in conspiracy. I doubt if he knows what the word means!

VERE (a pause). I'm sure he doesn't.

CORES. What did Claggart say?

VERE. A number of things. None of them very convincing alone, but piled up as they were . . .
(His hands stretched out in a "who knows" gesture.)

CORES (slightly impatient). What are the charges?

VERE (staring hard at CORES). I don't think I should say.

CORES (angrily). What do you mean, you don't think you should say? The only decent crewman on board's been slandered and you don't think you...

VERE (officially, cutting him off). Dr. Cores! No one speaks to me in that tone!

CORES (rubbing his forehead). Sorry, Captain.

VERE (a pause). This is a very delicate matter. And because it's so delicate I want you out of it. Your sympathies are too obviously with the accused.

CORES (quietly). The accused? (Pause, shaking his head.) Hardly a term suited to Baby Budd.

VERE (a loud sigh). My personal feelings run something like yours. Professionally, though, Budd is the accused. (Rising suddenly.) Damn Claggart! (Pacing L.) He reminded me of a bondsman I heard once. A man who perjured himself in a land court-martial I sat on.

CORES (relieved somewhat). Then you don't believe the charges.

VERE (returning to C). It's not a matter of believing or disbelieving the charges. What I must do now is investigate them. (Pause.) I can't ignore charges made by a chief petty officer against a common sailor.

CORES. Billy Budd is no common sailor.

VERE (snapping at him). You know very well what I mean. (CORES rises in anger. VERE motions him to sit back down.)

CORES (taking a deep breath.) What do you plan to do?

VERE. Prove Claggart a liar. (Pause.) If I can. I have to test the accuser in a quiet way. (He walks to door URC, opens it, and speaks to Albert offstage.) Tell Lt. Ratcliffe he's wanted here. (Shuts the door.)

CORES. Do you wish me to leave?

VERE. For the present, yes. But I'd like you to be available for consultation. Naturally this business is highly confidential.

CORES (rising). No rally. (He walks toward door URC.) Good luck.

VERE. Thank you. (Sits. CORES exits URC. VERE taps his fingers on the table.) Damn! (He pounds his fist on the table. There is a knock on the door URC.)

(ALBERT enters URC.)

ALBERT. Lt. Ratcliffe, sir.

VERE (eagerly). Send him in. (ALBERT starts to leave.) And, Albert! I wish to see Jones, the forecandleman, next. Bring him here discreetly. (ALBERT nods and exits.)

(LT. RATCLIFFE enters and salutes.)

LT. RATCLIFFE. Good day, sir.

VERE (returning salute). Good day. (Indicating the chair at R.) Please sit down. (He sits.) Lt. Ratcliffe, was it you who impressed Billy Budd some months ago?

RATCLIFFE (smiling). Indeed I did, sir. Off the Rights of Man. And a King's bargain he was.

VERE (nonchalantly). Tell me the particulars of the impressment.

RATCLIFFE (smiling still). There's nothing much to tell. I picked Budd out from the ship's company. The Rights' Captain and Master-At-Arms tried to persuade me to take a different man, but I insisted on Budd. (Thinking.) It was strange, in a way. They didn't seem to mind giving up a man, but they wanted to keep Budd.

VERE. Their reasons?

RATCLIFFE. The Captain said before Budd came along his forecandle was a rat pit of quarrels.

VERE. And after Budd came?

RATCLIFFE. He said Budd sugared all the sour ones.

VERE. Very interesting. (Pause.) I suppose Budd felt resentment at being plucked away?

RATCLIFFE. None at all. He came along willingly and smiling. He even bade farewell to his old ship.

VERE (interested). Farewell? How?

RATCLIFFE. Well, sir, it was most unusual. We were in the cutter, midway between the two ships and all of a sudden Budd jumped up from the bow; waved his hat, and yelled: "And good-bye to you too, old Rights of Man!" I ordered him to sit down, but I had to hide my smile.

VERE (a pause). Nothing else?

RATCLIFFE (puzzled). No, sir.

VERE. How do you regard Billy Budd?

RATCLIFFE. Very highly, sir. In fact, I was going to suggest Budd as excellent material for promotion to petty officer.

VERE (clearing his throat). I'll keep that in mind, Lieutenant. (Rises and walks to table.) Wasn't Billy involved in a fight shortly after he came aboard. And didn't he viciously beat a man?

RATCLIFFE (laughingly). With Red Whiskers? (Laughingly.) Hardly a vicious beating. Billy only hit him once, and after much provocation. They're the best of friends now.

VERE (approaching RATCLIFFE; officially). Why is it, Lieutenant, that you make light of such a serious matter? You are aware, I hope, that a fight can escalate.

RATCLIFFE (becoming very serious). This one couldn't have, sir. Billy had won all of the men's affections except for Red Whiskers, who's always been a problem. He rode Budd unmercifully and one day, for no reason, hit him in

the ribs. I saw it all. Then he stood there laughing at Billy. Budd tried to say something, but couldn't. He has a speech hesitancy when he's upset . . . can't seem to get words out. So he hit Red Whiskers. One blow. Knocked him out for a full ten minutes.

VERE. You wouldn't call it a vicious beating then?

RATCLIFFE. Hardly, sir. Most of the men didn't even see the punch land, it came so fast.

VERE. How did they react?

RATCLIFFE. They cheered. Everyone felt that justice had been rendered by the blow. All except Billy himself.

VERE (interested). Oh?

RATCLIFFE. Billy was sorry for what he had done. He's the one who nursed the man back to consciousness.

VERE. I see. (He sits in the chair.)

RATCLIFFE. May I ask why the captain is so curious about Billy Budd?

VERE (snapping a bit). You'll know soon enough. (RATCLIFFE is embarrassed.) Two more questions. Are you aware of a meeting Budd had with some other crewmen the night before last? Near the lee-forechains?

RATCLIFFE. No, sir. But Jones might know, sir. It would have been his watch.

VERE. Thank you. Last, who among the men knows Budd best?

RATCLIFFE (thinking hard). That's difficult to say, sir. All the men know him. And like him for that matter. (Pause.) Maybe Old Dansker knows him best. I've often seen them talking.

VERE (rising). Thank you, Lieutenant. (RATCLIFFE rises.) I must ask you not to reveal our conversation.

RATCLIFFE (puzzled). Very good, sir. (He salutes

and exits URC. VERE sits at the table and nervously drums his fingers. Then he shouts:) VERE. Albert!

(ALBERT enters URC.)

ALBERT. Yes, sir? (VERE moves his head to indicate the door should be closed. ALBERT does so.)

VERE. Is Jones outside?

ALBERT. Yes, sir.

VERE. Send him in and have the mainmast man ready for me. Old Dansker they call him. Tell him simply that he's wanted aft.

ALBERT. Yes, sir. (He exits URC. Offstage.) The Captain will see you now.

(JONES enters URC.)

JONES (saluting). Jones reporting, sir.

VERE (returning the salute). Close the door, please. (JONES shuts the door.) The questions I'm about to ask you are confidential and are not to be repeated. Clear?

JONES. Yes, sir.

VERE. What kind of sailor is Billy Budd?

JONES (smiling). Ah, sir. A beauty! I'd give up a shore leave to have a crew like him.

VERE (nodding). Most flattering. (Pause.) Was it your watch the night before last?

JONES. It was, sir.

VERE. Was Budd on deck that night?

JONES (thinking). Come to think of it, sir, he was. He found an afterguardsman in our part of the ship and sent him back where he came from.

VERE. Did you see the man?

JONES. No, sir. I found Budd near the lee-fore-

chains. He was stuttering, and I knew something was the matter.

VERE (interested). How did you know?

JONES. Because of Billy. When he's angered he stutters. Can't seem to speak at all.

VERE. Are you sure there was only one afterguardsman?

JONES. I have Billy's word, sir. (Pause.) Once he calmed down and got it out. It's a lucky break for the afterguardsman he left so quickly.

VERE. Why do you say that?

JONES. The last man to take Billy's words away was Red Whiskers. And he was out cold two seconds afterwards. (Throws an imaginary punch.)

VERE (nodding). I know of the incident.

JONES. If your questions concern the promotion, sir, I think Budd deserves promotion.

VERE (cleverly). I'll keep your recommendations in mind. (Rises.) That'll be all, Jones.

JONES (rising and saluting). Good day, sir.

VERE (returning the salute). Good day. (He follows JONES to door URC. JONES exits. VERE motions Old Dansker to enter.)

(DANSKER enters, obviously not very much at home in the Captain's quarters. He quickly pulls his cap off and salutes. VERE returns the salute.)

DANSKER. Begging the captain's pardon, but what is wanted from an old man like Dansker?

VERE (walking to chair R and sitting; evasively). Must something be wanted, old man?

DANSKER (nodding). There always is, sir. There always is. After forty years the Dansker knows.

VERE. I see. (Pause.) I want to talk about Billy Budd.