

The Haunted Hotel

A one-act play by Rom Watson

Adapted from the novel The Haunted Hotel by Wilkie Collins

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Cast

HENRY WESTWICK, male, 20's to 30's

AGNES WESTWICK, female, 20's to 30's

COUNTESS NARONA, female, 40's, a widow

BARON RIVAR, male, 50's, older brother of Countess Naronna

The location: Venice, Italy.

The time: 1908.

SCENE 1

A hotel lobby. The staircase to the upper floors is partially visible. A woman enters, followed by a man carrying two suitcases. They approach the registration desk or counter. The man sets down their luggage. They kiss. The woman, AGNES, is British; the man, HENRY, is American. She wears a hat with a veil that covers the top half of her face. They look around at the hotel. Henry does not like what he sees. Agnes spots a bell near the hotel guest book. She goes to ring it but Henry reaches out and stops her.

HENRY

What made you pick this hotel?

AGNES

You don't like it?

HENRY

We can afford better. Especially on our honeymoon.

He picks up their suitcases.

AGNES

Please, Henry. I want -- I'm tired. Let's stay here tonight. If we don't like it we can find another hotel in the morning.

HENRY

It's cold and it's creepy.

AGNES

Don't be so picky.

HENRY

Agnes, I have no wish to sleep in a tomb. If that makes me picky, then so be it; I'm picky.

He takes a step or two toward the entrance but Agnes picks up the bell and rings it.

HENRY

No!

He turns around to face Agnes.

AGNES

Please, Henry . . .

HENRY

Why did you do that?

AGNES

I need t--

HENRY

Hurry! Before someone comes!

He starts to hurry away, but Agnes doesn't move. He sets the luggage down, crosses back to her and takes her by the arm.

HENRY (CONT'D)

If we go now we can avoid any awkward unpleasantness about cancelling our reservation.

AGNES

Henry, I want to stay.

HENRY

Why?

AGNES

Because . . .because my brother died here.

Henry stares at her.

HENRY

How do you know that? Did it say that in the guidebook?

AGNES

No, Henry, the Palace Hotel used to be a private mansion. It was the mansion my brother bought after he married and decided to stay in Italy.

HENRY

Why didn't you tell me this before?

AGNES

I was afraid you wouldn't let us stay here.

HENRY

So you deceived me to get your own way.

AGNES

Not deceived, exactly . . .

HENRY

This is not the way to start a marriage.

AGNES

I couldn't risk being honest with you before. But now that we're married I can tell you everything.

HENRY

Oh lord, what have I gotten myself into?

Henry crosses to their luggage and sits on one of the suitcases. He buries his face in his hands.

AGNES

Henry, don't be so dramatic.

HENRY

What haven't you told me? Do you have a sordid past?

AGNES

No.

HENRY

(Envisioning the worst.)

Don't tell me you're a convict.

AGNES

No!

HENRY

Then what?

AGNES

Just that I've been having . . . dreams.

HENRY

Dreams?

AGNES

Some might call them nightmares, but they're really more sad than scary.

HENRY

Nightmares about what?

AGNES

This place.

HENRY

And you want to spend the night here?

AGNES

I think my brother is trying to tell me something.

HENRY

Do you realize how incredible that sounds?

AGNES

It's very credible to me. But this is why I didn't tell you; because I knew you wouldn't understand.

HENRY

Because I'm not British?

AGNES

No. Because you've never been a twin.

A moment of silence. Then they hear someone coming.

NARONA

(From the floor above.)

I'm on my way; I'll be down presently.

Henry crosses to Agnes, takes her arm, and they move away from the staircase.

HENRY

If I had nightmares about a place, I would avoid it like the plague.

AGNES

As would anyone. But I know Arthur needs me to visit this place.

He searches her eyes with his own.

HENRY

We will stay here on one condition.

AGNES

What.

HENRY

We will not hold a seance.

AGNES

Heavens no. I want to say goodbye to the dead; I don't want the dead to talk back.

They cross to the foot of the staircase as Narona descends to meet them. She is a handsome woman in her forties. She has an ambiguous European accent.

NARONA

Thank you for your patience. I set off as soon as I heard the bell, but this place is immense. You cannot imagine how long it takes to get from one end to the other.

HENRY

That's quite all right. It gave my wife and I time to . . .admire the architecture.

NARONA

It is grand, isn't it. If you'll follow me, I will have you sign the guest register.

She crosses to the desk and they follow.

NARONA (CONT'D)

This used to be one of the finest homes in all of Venice. When my husband bought it I couldn't understand why, as it had fallen into such disrepair. But after he started to restore it, I began to see how beautiful it must have been.

She crosses behind the desk or counter and turns the guest book to face them.

NARONA (CONT'D)

Sadly, my husband died of bronchitis within a year of our marriage.

AGNES

What?!

NARONA

Yes. It was tragic. And I did not inherit his fortune due to . . . legal reasons, so to make ends meet I had to turn our home into a hotel.

Agnes is stunned into silence as she realizes Naron is Arthur's widow. Henry takes a pen and signs for both of them. Perhaps Naron gets a key.

HENRY

All by yourself?

NARONA

No, I could not have done it alone. My brother took over the renovation, including the addition of electricity, and he helps me run the hotel. When the renovations are complete it really will be a palace.

HENRY

It looks complete to me.

NARONA

The basements are unfinished, as are the vaults below them.

HENRY

Vaults?

NARONA

I believe they may have been dungeons in centuries past, but now they serve as a workshop for my brother's experiments.

HENRY

What kind of experiments?

NARONA

Chemistry. If you hear an explosion, do not be alarmed. Sometimes his tinkering causes a few minor mishaps. They never affect the guests. Even the horrible smells of the chemicals do not reach us up here.

She turns the guest book around and reads their names.

NARONA (CONT'D)

Mister and missus Henry Westwick.

Agnes takes Henry's arm and squeezes it.

NARONA (CONT'D)

I am Countess Narona. Welcome to the Palace Hotel.

Narona picks up the bell and rings it three times in succession, with a brief pause between each ring.

NARONA (CONT'D)

Newlyweds?

AGNES

(Smiling.)

Yes. We were married one week ago today.

NARONA

I can always tell. You shall have the finest room in the hotel.

HENRY

Thank you.

Narona crosses to the foot of the staircase, followed by Henry and Agnes. Agnes begins to remove her hat and veil.

NARONA

My brother will be here shortly to attend to your luggage. We are understaffed at the moment--

She gasps and stares at Agnes, who has removed her hat and is standing near enough to Narona to give her a good look at her face.

HENRY

What's wrong?

NARONA

Nothing. I will show you to your room.

She turns and begins to ascend the staircase.

HENRY

But our luggage . . . aren't we going to wait for your brother?

NARONA

(Stopping and turning back.)

No. He is not . . . personable with the guests. He prefers his chemicals and experiments to people. He will bring up the luggage alone. Follow me.

She ascends the stairs and they begin to follow. There is a rumbling sound that takes them by surprise. They stop and listen. An apparition is projected onto a wall. It is seen by the audience but not by the actors. Naronia exits up the stairs and they follow.

SCENE 2

Naronia enters their room, followed by Henry and Agnes.

NARONA

This is the room I mentioned. I trust you will be comfortable here. (Suggestively.) The bed is quite firm.

HENRY

Thank you, I'm sure it will be fine.

NARONA

Shall I have some food brought up?

HENRY

No thank you. We had an early dinner.

NARONA

Very good.

AGNES

Countess Naronia, on the staircase you seemed to recognize me.

NARONA

(She pauses.)

You remind me of my late husband, Lord Montbarry.

AGNES

He was my twin brother.

Narona studies Agnes' face.

NARONA

Yes, it's unmistakable. I thought I might be going mad.

AGNES

No, no; though fraternal twins, we always bore a noticeable resemblance, even as children.

NARONA

You are even more beautiful than my husband.

AGNES

Thank you. Though I wish it were under better circumstances, it's lovely to finally meet you.

Agnes extends her hand. Narona takes it, then lets it go. Agnes notices the fireplace.

AGNES (CONT'D)

Look, Henry! It's the fireplace Arthur wrote me about.

HENRY

(Unimpressed.)

How nice.

AGNES

(To Narona.)

I'm sorry I could not attend the wedding. I was in America at the time.

NARONA

There is no need to apologize; it was a simple affair, over in fifteen minutes because the judge had to get back to a trial. That didn't matter to us of course, as we were in love, but it would have disappointed guests, if we'd had any. Even my dress was very plain and unremarkable. But I felt like a queen. And now let me find you another room.

AGNES

Oh but I want to stay here.

HENRY

You said this room is the finest in the hotel.

NARONA

It is. Many visitors request this room. It is also the room in which my husband died.

AGNES

Oh but that's perfect!

HENRY

What?!

AGNES

We must spend the night here!

NARONA

I do not understand. You do not seem the macabre type.

AGNES

It's not macabre, it's . . .

HENRY

Grotesque?

AGNES

No! It's my chance to say goodbye to my twin brother.

NARONA

Would it not be better to visit his grave? He is buried on San Michele Island, a short boat ride from here.

RIVAR

(From offstage.)

Narona?

NARONA

Leave the luggage at the door. I will get it.

BARON RIVAR enters the room carrying their luggage. He too has an ambiguous European accent. He wears gloves. He sees Agnes' face and drops the luggage.

NARONA (CONT'D)

I told you to leave the luggage at the door. (She glowers at him.) This is my brother, Baron Rivar. (To Rivar.) This is my late husband's twin sister. And her husband, Mr. Westwick.

RIVAR

The resemblance is . . .striking. I beg your pardon.

He picks up the suitcases.

AGNES

I'm sorry to have startled you.

RIVAR

No apology necessary.

AGNES

I suppose I should have written and said I was coming, but when I read this place had been turned into a hotel it simply never occurred to me that my brother's widow would still be in residence.

NARONA

Of course.

RIVAR

We must find them another room.

NARONA

I agree.

AGNES

I won't hear of it. I love this room.

HENRY

Agnes, I'm sure the other rooms have fireplaces.

AGNES

(To Henry.)

But that's the fireplace my brother described in his letter.

(To Naron.)

Countess, after Arthur left for Europe, I never saw him again. We were very close growing up. My mother used to say we had our own special language. I feel compelled to stay where he spent his final days.

NARONA

Surely enough time has passed . . .

AGNES

I will not leave this room till morning.

Agnes sits. Henry looks at Naron and Rivar and gives a half-shrug.

HENRY

She's British.

He gestures to their luggage. Rivar looks at Naron. She nods. He sets the luggage down.

NARONA

Very well. Breakfast is served in the dining room between eight and nine. The only telephone is downstairs. The water closet is through there. If you need anything, my own room is just down the hall. I hope you have a pleasant stay. (To Agnes.) And I hope you are able to end grieving for your brother. Not an easy thing to do. I should know.

Naron glances at Rivar, and they exit.

HENRY

Happy now?

AGNES

Always, when I'm with you. And relieved to finally be in this room.

She walks around, exploring the room.

HENRY

What do you think is going to happen here?

AGNES

Nothing is going to happen. I simply want to see what he saw; perhaps feel what he felt. (She takes a letter from her purse or garment. She unfolds it and reads aloud.) "Since writing you last, I am excited to say I have made further improvements. My current project is enlarging the fireplace and hearth in the master bedroom. A difficult task, but one that will be well worth it. I look forward to showing you my "castle" when the improvements are complete. I know you will fall in love, as have I, with the potential of this place, this soon-to-be palace."

She folds the letter and puts it away. Perhaps she has teared up while reading. Henry crosses to her and takes her in his arms.

HENRY

Do you regret it? Not going with him to Europe?

AGNES

No. If I had gone, I might never have met you.

She holds him tight, then releases him.

AGNES (CONT'D)

Let's go to bed. I'm very tired.

HENRY

It has been an exhausting day. I love going to new places, but I hate traveling.

AGNES

I want to get up early tomorrow and explore this entire hotel. (She feels a chill.) That's odd. It suddenly feels much colder.

HENRY

This place has been cold since we got here. Come to bed. I'll warm you up.

AGNES

Yes, you're like an oven. I like having my own personal oven.

He sets their luggage on a bench at the foot of the bed, then opens both suitcases. Agnes reaches into hers and extracts a nightgown, then crosses behind a dressing screen or to the adjoining bathroom. Henry gets a book from his suitcase and sets it on the bed. He takes his jacket off and places it on the back of a chair. He then dims the lights and begins to undress. The sound of footsteps startles them. It is followed by a thudding sound.

AGNES (CONT'D)

(From off.)

Are you alright?

HENRY

Yes. Why?

AGNES

(From off.)

I heard a sound.

HENRY

I thought that was you.

AGNES

(From off.)

No. (Pause.) Did Countess Narona seem odd to you?

HENRY

Odd? No. Though she was older than I expected. Did your brother like older women?

AGNES

(From off.)

Not as a rule. According to his letters he was quite taken with her.

Having laid his pants on top of his suitcase, he gets into bed wearing undergarments suitable for the time period. He opens his book.

HENRY

And if your brother was Lord Montbarry, why does she call herself Countess Narona?

AGNES

(From off.)

When my brother died, the title Lord Montbarry transferred to my other brother. She must have been called Countess Narona before she married him.

HENRY

Oh.

He reads.

AGNES

(From off.)

I thought she seemed . . .dubious. Perhaps even a bit dodgy.

HENRY

(Reading.)

Uh huh.

AGNES

(From off.)

Are you even listening?

HENRY

Of course dear.

A moment of silence, then the sound of footsteps followed by a thudding sound.

AGNES

(From off.)

There it is again.

HENRY

You didn't drop a shoe?

AGNES

(From off.)

No.

HENRY

Must have come from the room above us.

Pause.

AGNES

(From off.)

I thought we were on the top floor.

HENRY

Apparently not.

He starts to read again, then falls asleep.

AGNES

(From off.)

And that brother. What do you make of him? (Pause.) Henry?

She enters wearing a nightgown appropriate for the time period. She crosses to the bed, sees he's asleep, removes his book and sets it aside, then kisses him on the forehead. The sound of footsteps is heard, much louder this time, again followed by a thud. She freezes for a moment in fear, then slowly gets into bed and extinguishes the lamp. All is dark for a moment, then the apparition appears.

The image of a man's headless body is projected onto the wall of the room. Agnes sees it and screams. Henry is immediately awake.

HENRY

What's wrong?

AGNES

Look!

HENRY

I don't believe it. Turn on the light.

Agnes turns on the lamp.

AGNES

...Arthur?

The apparition grows brighter.

HENRY

How do you know it's him?

AGNES

Who else would it be?

HENRY

Perhaps this place was haunted before he bought it.

AGNES

Perhaps, but look at the way he's dressed.

Countess Naron enters.

NARONA

I heard a scream.

She sees the apparition and stifles a scream. She continues to stare at the ghostly presence. The apparition moves a finger to point toward the hearth.

AGNES

Arthur?

The apparition moves near the fireplace.

AGNES (CONT'D)

What is it?

Frustrated, the apparition again points toward the hearth, more urgently this time.

AGNES (CONT'D)

Henry, is he trying to tell us something?

HENRY

Or show us something.

Henry cautiously gets out of bed and perhaps puts on slippers and a robe. He crosses to the hearth, kneels down and examines the area.

HENRY (CONT'D)

That's interesting . . .

AGNES

What?

HENRY

This stone. It looks as though . . . (He makes an adjustment to the stone.) Yes. It comes off somehow.

He works at the stone for a few moments, and then is able to slide it off or lift it off. The apparition grows brighter.

HENRY (CONT'D)

There's a hidden compartment behind it.

AGNES

What's inside?

HENRY

(Peering.)

I can't tell.

AGNES

(To Naron.)

Did you know about this?

NARONA
(Telling the truth.)

No. No.

Henry gingerly reaches into the hidden compartment and feels around.

HENRY
Hmmm. There is something back there. But I can't tell what it is.

He reaches further back. His arm can no longer be seen.

AGNES
Be careful.

HENRY
I can feel it, but I can't get a hold of it. Wait. Yes. There. I think . . . (He slowly pulls out his arm.) Got it.

He finishes extracting his arm from the compartment and looks at the object in his hand. It is a human head or skull. He screams and drops it on the carpet. Agnes screams as well. Narona covers her face and sobs. The apparition slowly fades from view.

AGNES
Goodbye . . . Arthur.

Narona hears this, looks up, and sees the apparition fading away.

NARONA
No! My love! I'm sorry. Forgive me!

The apparition is gone. Narona is distraught. Perhaps she paces the floor. Henry pulls his pants on under his robe, then discards the robe.

AGNES
Where are you going?

HENRY

I'm not going anywhere Agnes, just getting dressed. Might as well, since I'm not going to be able to sleep after that.

Baron Rivar enters.

NARONA

(To Rivar.)

Why? (Pointing to the head on the floor.) Why did you not dispose of him as you promised?

RIVAR

Be silent.

NARONA

No! I will not. I'm sick of you telling me what to do.

RIVAR

Silence!

NARONA

It's no wonder I've never been able to put the past behind me. It's been here all along, waiting for me.

RIVAR

I told you to hold your tongue.

Rivar slaps Narona, then grabs the poker from the fireplace.

NARONA

No more violence, please. Put it down. It is better we go to jail.

HENRY

Wisely spoken.

RIVAR

We'll take them to the vaults.

Agnes is standing near the chair on which Henry's jacket hangs. She reaches into the jacket pocket and pulls out a gun and points it at Rivar.

Agnes! HENRY

Shoot him. NARONA

Shut up. RIVAR

What happened to my brother? AGNES

You carry a gun? RIVAR

I'm an American. HENRY

Of course. RIVAR

And a police officer. HENRY

Not in this country. RIVAR

Agnes, give me my gun. HENRY

Not till I hear what happened. AGNES

Yes, tell her. She deserves to know. Tell her how you cut him up in pieces. NARONA

Shocked, Agnes looks away from Rivar to Naron. Rivar takes this opportunity to knock the gun out of her hand. Henry goes after the gun but Naron grabs it first and shoots Rivar in the shoulder. He drops the poker and falls to the floor. Henry grabs the poker.

Now who is the one in charge. NARONA (CONT'D)

RIVAR

Whore.

NARONA

He needed money to pay his gambling debts. He asked Arthur to loan him the money but he refused.

AGNES

You killed him over money?

RIVAR

Money can be had anywhere.

AGNES

Go on.

RIVAR

It was his reason for refusing me. He had heard a rumor than my sister was not my sister. That we were lovers posing as siblings, and that she married him for his money.

NARONA

But it wasn't true! We are brother and sister. Unfortunately, once the seed of that lie took root in his head, he could not uproot it. He began to treat me badly. Our life here became abominable. I showed him our birth certificates, but even the facts could not dissuade him. He was obstinate. Refused to listen to reason. I simply could not go on with the way things were between us.

AGNES

Where is the rest of my brother?

NARONA

After he died, we took his body down to the vaults. (Pointing the gun at his heart.) Tell her the rest.

RIVAR

I used acid to dissolve his body, one piece at a time. I had only the head left to dispose of, when there was an accident. My hands were burned so severely I could not continue. (He removes his gloves and reveals horribly scarred hands.) I hid the head in a secure place and told no one. Not even my sister.

AGNES

Why did you hide it here?

RIVAR

During renovations, I discovered your brother built a hidden compartment in the hearth. Presumably for his valuables.

HENRY

And what could be more valuable than his head.

NARONA

You left part of him here, to haunt me.

RIVAR

He never haunted you. He never haunted any of the guests. His spirit never stirred until she came here.

NARONA

(To Agnes.)

I should never have let you in. The moment I saw your face I should have thrown you out!

Narona starts to cry and lowers the gun. Henry removes the gun from her hands.

AGNES

I'll find the telephone and ring for the local police.

AGNES puts on a robe and exits.

NARONA

I think prison may be an improvement over this place.

HENRY

The women's prison perhaps, but not the men's.

NARONA

(To Rivar.)

Serves you right. I should never have listened to you.

RIVAR

You will always listen to me.

NARONA

Not anymore.

The lights fade.

SCENE 3

The cemetery on San Michele Island. Agnes and Henry stand gazing down at a grave. She holds a small bouquet of flowers.

HENRY

Why are we visiting the grave of a stranger?

AGNES

Arthur's name is on the headstone.

HENRY

I can see that, but he's not here.

AGNES

None of them are. Look around you. Headstones as far as the eye can see, and not a soul in sight.

HENRY

Just who *is* buried here? Did she tell you?

AGNES

Arthur's servant. He was dying of bronchitis, so they made a deal with him. They agreed to pay his widow a thousand pounds in exchange for pretending his body was Arthur's.

HENRY

I'd say he got the best of the bargain.

AGNES

It is a lovely cemetery, isn't it.

HENRY

It was nice of you to visit Narona in prison.

AGNES

Well, we did put her there. Though I understand perfectly why you wouldn't visit Rivar in prison.

HENRY

How did they kill Arthur?

AGNES

Poison. Slowly, over many months. They started the poison while he was ill with a cold, and he assumed his ailment worsened of its own accord.

HENRY

What else did she tell you?

AGNES

That my brother always spoke very lovingly of me.

HENRY

Of course he did. No surprise there.

AGNES

No, but it was nice to hear. She wasn't obliged to tell me anything.

Agnes sets the small bouquet of flowers on the grave.

HENRY

What are you doing?

AGNES

Paying my respects.

HENRY

To a servant you never met?

AGNES

It's symbolic, Henry.

HENRY

Right.

AGNES

Besides, no one else is ever going to put flowers on his grave. He deserves at least one bouquet, whoever he was.

HENRY

I suppose. What's going to happen to the hotel I wonder?

AGNES

Narona told me the city will take it over. It's rumored they want to use it as an orphanage.

HENRY

Poor kids.

AGNES

It's better than living on the street.

HENRY

If you say so.

AGNES

(Looking at the grave.)

Poor Arthur. (Pause.) Do you think his head will make the trip in one piece?

HENRY

I packed it very well.

AGNES

Thank you, Henry.

HENRY

I must really love you.

AGNES

Yes, you must. Not every husband would agree to a voyage with a severed head.

HENRY

No one will think twice about a woman traveling with a hat box.

AGNES

You're very good to indulge me.

HENRY

Yes, I am. Though we must bury it as soon as we reach England.

AGNES

The family plot is ready and waiting.

HENRY

Good.

AGNES

I'm the luckiest woman in the world.

She kisses him.

HENRY

Agnes, you must promise me one thing.

AGNES

What?

HENRY

From now on, whenever we travel: I make the hotel reservations.

AGNES

Agreed. Where are we staying tonight?

HENRY

Hotel Saturnia. None of your relatives died *there*, did they?

AGNES

Not that I know of.

HENRY

All right then.

Agnes and Henry walk away, joining hands as they walk. The apparition of Arthur, seen by the audience but not the actors, appears, complete with head. It waves goodbye to them. End of play.