

THE INTERROGATION OF RICHARD MANSFIELD, ACTOR
(INSPIRED BY AN ACTUAL LETTER)

by
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Characters

Richard Mansfield – about 30 years old, American accent

Detective Inspector Edmund Reid – about 40 years old, standard English accent

Linwood – late 20s to early 30s, Cockney accent, ideally brawny

Set

An interrogation room in London's Scotland Yard, October of 1888. The main features are a desk (for which a table can be substituted) and a chair tucked behind it on SR. Another chair sits in front of this for witnesses or suspects at SC.

AT RISE:

LINWOOD aggressively escorts
MANSFIELD onstage from SL. Seated
behind the desk, REID slowly raises his
head to watch LINWOOD manhandle
MANSFIELD into the empty chair. After
doing so, LINWOOD stands guard US.

REID

(once MANSFIELD has accepted his situation)

Mr. Mansfield, correct? Mr. Richard Mansfield, the actor?

MANSFIELD

Yes?

REID

My name is Detective Inspector Edmund Reid. I wish to thank you very much for accompanying
Officer Linwood here for this little visit.

MANSFIELD

(with a sneer at LINWOOD)

My. Pleasure.

REID

Was Officer Linwood good enough to inform you of how you might be of service to us today?

MANSFIELD

Officer Linwood seems to be a man of very few words. Perhaps you might be good enough to
tell me *what the hell* I'm doing here.

REID

Can I assume that you've heard about that awful business in Whitechapel. The murders of at
least *four* prostitutes. Their horrible—*disfigurement*.

MANSFIELD

Jack the Ripper? You've dragged me in here—You honestly think that I—
(stands)

I can assure you, sir! I know *nothing* about these Jack the Ripper murders!

LINWOOD

(forces MANSFIELD down into the chair)

REID

We've received a letter.

(calmly stands as he picks up the letter and moves to the front of the desk)

It's an anonymous letter, mind you. But a very, very *curious* one. It regards your recent performance. A drama, if I'm not mistaken. At the Lyceum Theater, isn't it?

MANSFIELD

Yes. I am currently engaged at the Lyceum.

REID

Be so good as to remind me of the title?

MANSFIELD

(slowly, as if beginning to grasp the connection)

The Strange Case of Dr. Jekyll and—

(beat)

Mr. Hyde.

REID

Yes. Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde. And what a strange case it is. I've read Mr. Stevenson's book. It's quite gripping, though a bit *grisly* at times. I'm sorry to say I've not attended your stage adaptation, Mr. Mansfield. Linwood? Have you had an opportunity to attend Mr. Mansfield's play?

LINWOOD

I have not, sir. I favor Gilbert and Sullivan over Jekyll and Hyde, sir.

REID

(chuckles)

MANSFIELD

Perhaps we could return to the letter you mentioned, Inspector? You *did* mention a letter?

REID

As you seem a bit impatient, let me relate the most salient passages to you.

(with a bit of a flourish, reads the letter)

"Dear Sir, now that these horrible murders are being committed, I think it the duty of everyone to let the police know if they suspect anyone. What I am going to say seems almost impossible—but still strange things have happened at times."

(lowers the letter)

We've seen strange things happen at times, haven't we, Linwood?

LINWOOD

Oh, yes, sir. Strange things do indeed happen at times, sir.

REID

(resumes reading)

“I have a great liking for—

(glances at MANSFIELD)

actors, so that I should be the last to think, because a man take a dreadful part, he is therefore *bad*. But when I went to see Mr. Mansfield take the part of Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde, I felt at once that he was *the man wanted*. . . . I thought the truthful manner he works himself up in his part—it might be possible to work himself up so that he would do it in *reality*. ”

(lowers the letter)

Fancy that, Mr. Mansfield. Is your portrayal of a brutal murderer so convincing as to make a man wonder if the role persists after the curtain falls?

MANSFIELD

(beat, then laughs)

Well, I accept this letter as undue praise of my talents as an actor. But surely, you don't give any credence to—

REID

(interrupting)

If I may continue!

(resumes reading)

“I do not think there is a man living so well able to disguise himself in a moment as he does in front of the public. Who so well able to baffle the police? He could be a dark man—fair man—short man or tall in five seconds—”

MANSFIELD

(interrupting)

If *I* may interrupt.

REID

(gestures that MANSFIELD may have his say)

MANSFIELD

(inching forward in his chair)

In the final scene in the play, the audience—before their very eyes—witnesses the stunted, twisted form of Mr. Hyde transform—*ah!* May I stand? I want to show you what your letter writer is describing. And how it's all a matter of *theatrics*. All very innocent.

REID

(nods his consent first to LINWOOD and then more graciously to MANSFIELD)

MANSFIELD

(stands and then enacts the process he describes)

Playing Hyde is really quite simple. I hunch down. I pivot my shoulders at an angle to my waist. With my hands like claws, I retract my arms, holding them as if ready to strike! I drop my voice to a raspy and sinister hissssss.

(instantly dropping the Hyde character)

There's only one scene in which the audience actually sees me transform onstage. The final scene, when it's revealed that Hyde and Jekyll are two sides of but *one* man.

(quickly resuming character, he turns away from REID and LINWOOD—but faces the audience)

I drink the transformation potion, and with terrible convulsions—excruciating agony—I rise to my natural height. Raise my voice to a pleasant timbre. Brush the hair from my brow. And *voilà*. I am once again the good Dr. Jekyll. Oh, there are a few added stage effects. Some shifts in the lights—*perhaps*. Some have even speculated that there's an elaborate rubber mask involved.

(spinning to face REID and LINWOOD)

But I hardly think you've dragged me here simply to expose *that* little secret of the stage.

REID

No. No, but we *are* interested in the secrets of the *actor*.

REID signals to LINDWOOD that he return MANSFIELD to the chair. The officer and the actor obey.

REID

There is a concern regarding—the timing.

(repeats his flourish as he returns to the letter)

“I thought it strange this play should commence *before* the murders for it is really something after *the same style*.”

MANSFIELD

Oh, now, Inspector! The play debuted in the U.S. a *year* ago. It played in Boston. It played in New York. *Then* it opened here at the Lyceum back in *early August*. When was the first report of a Ripper attack? It wasn't around early August, was it?

REID

Linwood is my man for details.

LINWOOD

Martha Tabram was discovered with 39 stab wounds in Whitechapel in—*early August*.

MANSFIELD

But—but surely. Surely, that's entirely coincidental! You must surely see that that's—*pure coincidence!*

REID

(resuming reading)

“The murders take place on Saturday nights. Mr. M. never has a performance on Saturday. The murders once took place on Friday. And once Mr. M. was too ill at the Saturday morning performance. But whether it was at this time, I don’t know.”

MANSFIELD takes a moment to ponder this. He rises. LINWOOD begins to intervene, but REID gestures for him to halt.

MANSFIELD

(pacing as he thinks aloud)

I imagine you’re aware that certain journalists have already connected my play with the Ripper murders. Of course, they’ve argued that the lunatic has been inspired by *seeing* the play, not by *starring* in it. But if we borrow that theory and posit that my portraying Mr. Hyde somehow *enflames* my killer instincts, then wouldn’t I *need* to have performances on Saturday evenings? How else would I become frenzied enough to go out and commit murder?

(stands still)

Your letter writer sounds less confident about the Friday attack. But let’s consider the premise. That these women are being brutally knifed to death—*makes the killer ill*? Does Jack the Ripper strike you as being *sickened* by his deplorable actions? Based on what I’ve read in the press, your *Saucy Jacky* finds *delight* in his nightly escapades!

REID exchanges a look with LINWOOD. One rubs his neck as the other fiddles with his cuffs. MANSFIELD confidently returns to lean against the back of the chair.

REID

(another flourish before resuming reading)

“I read in the *Globe* the other night that the same dreadful murders took place in America and were never discovered. Mr. M. is, I think, an American. But whether he came from there, I don’t know.”

LINWOOD

(to REID)

Sir? If I may.

(to MANSFIELD)

A moment ago, you admitted that the play was performed in Boston and New York before arriving here? Clearly, you *did* come from America. And you certainly *sound* like an American.

MANSFIELD

(sighs before sitting again)

I was born in Germany. My mother was an opera singer, and she traveled a good deal. She brought me here to *England* when I was a boy to attend school up in Derby. She next took me to the States when I was fifteen—but I returned *here* when I was twenty. My accent changes with the weather.

(with another sneer at LINWOOD)

And Oy kin sound loyke ‘ooever Oy wan-uh sound loyke.

(beat)

But having recently come from the States, I’m curious about the so-called *same dreadful murders* there that were never solved. Can you enlighten me here?

REID

Would you be able to prove that you were *not* in a city called Houston?

LINWOOD

Uh, that’s *Austin*, sir.

REID

Thank you. In the state of—

(turns to LINWOOD)

LINWOOD

Texas.

REID

During the years of 1884 and 1885, that city suffered a series of murders that bear striking similarities to these in Whitechapel. And the killer—if it *were* one man acting alone—was never apprehended. I imagine you would have some difficulty finding evidence of where you were three years ago, yes?

MANSFIELD

No difficulty at all. I’ve never been to Texas. I can prove it because I collect newspaper clippings of *all* my plays. Have you never heard of the vanity of an actor? I suppose accounting for each and every day of those years would be a chore. But is the theory that I occasionally traveled from America’s eastern coast all the way to Texas to commit a random murder—then traveled all the way back? Do you suppose your letter writer has any idea of the sheer distance between Texas and the East Coast? He doth speculate too much, methinks!

REID

Very clever. *Hamlet*.

LINWOOD

Queen Gertrude.

REID

(with suppressed irritation)

I meant the play, Linwood. Do not overstep your duties.

MANSFIELD

(rising)

Gentlemen. Perhaps we could save time by allowing me to face my accuser directly. May I *see* the letter? I could then expose its patchwork of outlandish claims far more handily.

REID

Well—of course, I can't allow you to tamper with evidence. However—

(he holds the letter up so that MANSFIELD can read it)

MANSFIELD steps closer, but all of a sudden, LINWOOD intervenes.

LINWOOD

Sir, I don't believe you want to allow that!

(grabs MANSFIELD and pulls him away from the letter, then continues to restrain him)

MANSFIELD

(still grappling with LINWOOD)

Reid! Why are the words "*Not acknowledged*" scrawled across the top of that letter? It's in red ink! "Not—acknowledged"? *What the hell is going on here?*

After a jolt, REID skulks back to his desk chair. LINWOOD releases MANSFIELD, who then wanders for a time, straightening his clothes and collecting his thoughts. Suddenly, he moves the other chair farther US but angles it to face the audience.

MANSFIELD

Officer Linwood? Won't you please have a seat?

LINWOOD looks to REID, who nods his consent. The bear-of-a-man sheepishly takes the seat.

MANSFIELD

It occurs to me that police detectives and actors have a common interest. We both focus our attention on *motives*. Human *motivation*—be it civilized, savage, or insane.

(moving farther DS)

Now, it's become apparent that your motive behind this interrogation has very little to do with solving these murders. Clearly, you or some other man deemed this cockeyed suggestion that I'm Jack the Ripper *not worthy of acknowledgment*. Instead, you've used it as a flimsy excuse to motivate me—or, rather, to *coerce* me—to comply with something. Gentlemen, the time has arrived. What is it you *truly* want from me?

REID looks at LINWOOD, who cocks his head and bites his lip.

MANSFIELD

Are you hoping to pressure me into *closing* the play? If so, you needn't bother. That's already being discussed. The fear that's drifting through London these days is undercutting our ticket sales. The Ripper drama has proven far more sensational than Jekyll and Hyde's. Is that what's lurking behind this?

REID then pulls a hefty manuscript from out of one of the drawers in the desk (or from an attaché case if a table is used). He stands to hold the manuscript out toward MANSFIELD, who approaches it with some trepidation. With his back to the audience, the actor flips through the manuscript—and then slumps.

LINWOOD

(rising, he's almost giddy)

The Detective Inspector says there might be a role in it for *me!*

REID

(also excited)

Now. Now, of course, it needs some—*polish*. I'm not especially confident about the technicalities of my stage directions. And Linwood says too many of my characters keep saying "Golly!" But I rather like the word "Golly." "Golly," I think, lightens the mood. And it *is* a murder mystery, isn't it? We mustn't make things too gloomy, since nobody really liked the uncle who's poisoned. You see? That's the thing. *Nobody* cared for Uncle Wentworth. The culprit could be *anyone!*

REID and LINWOOD take notice as MANSFIELD crouches lower and lower. Still facing away from the audience, the actor stumbles backward. His arms rise at contorted angles, and his head shakes with sudden spasms. The policemen express growing astonishment at the transformation. They step closer to one another. MANSFIELD drops the manuscript, the pages spilling across the floor, and he begins to grunt and growl. REID and LINWOOD grab one another's arms in fear.

(BLACK OUT.)