

THE CALL GIRL OF VASSAR

TEN MINUTE PLAY

By Matt Thompson

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SYNOPSIS: In the genre of film noir, Jack Moran, private detective, gets a visit from a poor sap named Larry Scrabbleton, a lonely door to door magic salesman. Whenever Larry gets an urge for some academic conversation he contacts a local literary Madame, Lady Lemon, and she sends over a brainy call girl to discuss 19th century comparative literature. Now he's being blackmailed and he needs Moran's help. The hard nosed detective is on the case as he attempts to bust open a brothel of bright and brainy women, in the intellectual sting of the century!

CAST OF CHARACTERS

(3 MEN, 2-3 WOMEN)

JACK MORAN (m).....Hard-boiled private detective. Very smart and knowledgeable. Can read people very well

LARRY SCRABBLTON (m).....Door to door magic salesman, looking for an intellectual good time.

NORA (f).....The call girl of Vassar. With both brains and looks, she intellectually duels with Jack Moran.

LADY LEMON (m).....The ringleader of the intellectual brothel. With a high pitched voice she fools us into believing he's a woman, but he's revealed at Charles Moogan in the last scene.

DENISE (f).....May double with Sherry.

SHERRY (f).....Physical Education major at a community college. Speaks to Moran about a case.

SCENE 1

AT RISE:

1939. We are in the office of JACK MORAN, private detective. He wears an overcoat and fedora. We embrace the ambiance of a hot and humid afternoon in the big city. In the dark, a slow jazz rift fades up as the lights begin to rise. We find JACK leaning back in a chair with his feet on his desk. The slow jazz rift begins to fade out as MORAN speaks.

MORAN: (*Aside.*) I'll let you in on a secret: go with your instincts. Spiders. Itches. That creepy crawly feeling ya get when you accidentally drink curdled milk. Always go with your gut.

LARRY enters and looks around.

MORAN: (*Aside.*) So when a quivering gelatin mold of a man named Larry Scrabblton stepped into my office and laid his cards on the table, I should have listened to that tingling sensation that crawled up my spine.

LARRY: (*Very nervous.*) Moran? Are you Jack Moran?

MORAN: That's what it says on my driver's license.

LARRY: I uh... It's like this, see... I...

MORAN: (*Aside.*) The guy was shaking like the lead singer in a salsa band. (*To LARRY.*) Why don't you relax and tell me what's on your mind.

LARRY: You can't let my wife know any of this.

MORAN: Give it to me straight. I'll do my best to keep it under wraps.

LARRY: Okay... Well, here's the scoop: I work on the road a lot. Away from home. Door-to-door sales.

MORAN: What do ya sell?

LARRY: Magic kits. Invisible ink. Funny coins. Saws to cut people in half, that sort of thing.

MORAN: I'm listening.

LARRY: Corporate types love 'em. Set it up. Have a couple of drinks, ya know?

MORAN: Get to the point.

LARRY: See, Moran, I'm an intellectual. Sure, a fella can find a bimbo on the road, but the real brainy women... they're not so easy to come by on short notice.

MORAN: Keep talking.

LARRY: Well... I heard of this girl. Nineteen years old. A Vassar student. For a price, I meet her in a library study room and we discussed subjects - Virgil, Shaw, Shelly, Browning! An exchange of ideas, you see what I'm getting at?

MORAN: Not quite.

LARRY: My wife is fantastic, don't get me wrong. But she won't discuss Machiavelli with me or Proust. I didn't know that when we got hitched. I need a woman to mentally stimulate me, Moran. And I'm willing to pay through the nose for it. (*Starting to break down.*) I want a quick academic experience, and then I want the girl to leave. I'm a happily married man!

MORAN: How long have you been on the hook with this gig?

LARRY: Four months. Whenever I get the craving, I call Lemon.

MORAN: Lemon?

LARRY: That's the code. Rumors are that she's a madam with a Master's degree in Comparative Literature. I call the number, ask for Lemon, and then I give her the address. Within the hour, she sends me over an intellectual. You get what I'm driving at?

MORAN: I'm beginning to.

LARRY: Now she's threatening to tell my wife!

MORAN: Who?

LARRY: Lady Lemon! They've bugged the library reading room and got me on tape discussing *Paradise Lost* and *Prometheus Unbound* and really getting into some hypothetical theories on existentialism! They want five grand or they go to my wife! You've got to help me, Moran!

MORAN: (*Aside.*) So he was one of those guys who got knocky in the knees for a really bright woman. I felt sorry for the poor sap. I figured there must be a lot of jokers in his position who were starved for a little intellectual communication with the opposite sex. I heard the boys down at the precinct were on to something involving a group of educated dames, but so far, they were stumped. (*To LARRY.*) Get this Lady Lemon on the ringer for me. I'll take your case. But I get forty dollars a day plus expenses.

LARRY: You bet.

MORAN turns the phone on his desk so LARRY can dial.

MORAN: Dial the number. You're gonna have to sell a lot of magic to cover this up. And so will I.

MORAN takes the phone from LARRY. A very dim red spot comes up on one corner of the stage. It's LADY LEMON, but we can barely see her.

LADY LEMON: (*In a very feminine voice.*) What's tart but sweet when you squeeze it?

MORAN: A lemon.

LADY LEMON: How can I help you today?

MORAN: I understand that you can help me set up an hour of great chat.

LADY LEMON: What did you have in mind?

MORAN: I'd like to discuss D.H. Lawrence.

LADY LEMON: You want a short story or one of his novels?

MORAN: What's the difference?

LADY LEMON: The price, that's all.

MORAN: What'll it run me?

LADY LEMON: Fifty bucks for *The Rocking-Horse Winner*. Seventy-five for *The Rainbow*. A Benjamin Harrison for *Lady Chatterly's Lover*.

MORAN: The dough's fine. Have her meet me in one hour. Suite 3D at the Grace Empire Building. Make sure she's on time.

LADY LEMON: Want do you want? Blonde, brunette, redhead?

MORAN: Surprise me.

MORAN hangs up the phone as the lights go out. Jazz plays in the dark.

SCENE TWO

AT RISE:

As the lights fade up, one hour has passed. MORAN is now alone in his office. He is reading various Cliff Note versions of classical texts. After a moment, there is a knock at the door.

MORAN: It's open.

*NORA saunters in. She is extremely attractive. Dressed to the nines, she carries a bag over her shoulder. In her hand, she holds a copy of **Lady Chatterly's Lover**, dangling it seductively.*

MORAN: *(Aside.)* She was snuggled into her outfit like the perfect lasagna. Every layer was eye catching. This was no lemon, by gad. She was a peach, with brains to boot.

NORA: *(In a suave, sultry voice.)* Hi, I'm Nora.

MORAN: *(Aside.)* Make that a tart. *(To NORA.)* I'm surprised you weren't stopped walking into the building dressed like that. The doorman can usually spot an intellectual.

NORA: A ten spot cools him.

MORAN: Shall we get started?

NORA: I'm ready when you are.

MORAN: Good.

NORA: *(Very seductively, she pulls some books out of her bag.)* I think that we could start by discussing the ostracizing effects of Lawrence's early poetry in relation to *Odour of Chrysanthemums* and its effect on main stream late Edwardian society.

MORAN: You think so? Even though Edmund Wilson later expanded upon that philosophy?

NORA: Lawrence shared Wilson's interpretation of literary insight into symbolism, the New England Transcendentalism, and a Puritan sensibility. Of course all of these elements were a significant factor in the revival of Melville.

MORAN: Obviously.

NORA: Obviously.

MORAN: (*Aside.*) I let her ramble on. She was a tick shy of her twentieth birthday but already she had developed the rigorous faculties of a tenured literature professor. After a couple rounds of patty cake, we got to play doctor. The only problem was that I could see through her like an x-ray machine. Whenever I offered an intellectual insight, she faked a mechanical response: "Oh, yes, Moran, that's it. Melville was a master of rhetoric. I just never saw it before!"

NORA begins to leave.

NORA: Thanks, honey.

MORAN: There's plenty more where that came from.

NORA: What are you saying, sugar?

MORAN: Suppose I wanted to have a little soiree.

NORA: You mean like a party?

MORAN: Something like that.

NORA: That could be interesting.

MORAN: Suppose I wanted Noam Chomsky explained to me...by two girls.

NORA: Noam Chomsky? You mean the author of *Synactic Structures*, *The Knowledge of Language*, and *Cartesian Linguistics: A Chapter in the History of Rational Thought*? (*She sighs deeply.*) Oh, wow! It'll cost you.

MORAN: I see.

MORAN pulls out a wallet with his detective badge.

MORAN: This is a bust!

NORA: What?!

MORAN: I'm the fuzz, sugar, and discussing Melville for money is an 802. You can do time.

NORA: You rat!

MORAN: Better come clean, baby. Unless you want to tell your story down at headquarters.

Beat.

NORA: (*Breaking down.*) Don't turn me in, Moran! I only needed the dough to finish my degree. I was denied a grant! Oh!

MORAN: (*Aside.*) Like a faucet flows, the whole story poured out. She was a lonely kid. Typical upbringing: born with a book in her nose. Her parents only wanted a normal, middle-class upbringing, but she excelled, far beyond anyone else's capabilities: Mathlete Winner, Shakespeare Summer Camp, and then finally Vassar. She was every dame you saw penciling the words, "tabula rasa" into the margin of any article by John Locke. Only somewhere along the line, she had made a wrong turn.

NORA: I needed the cash. A girlfriend of mine said she heard of a guy whose wife wasn't very fundamental. He was into Hawthorne. So I said sure, I'd talk Hawthorne with him for a price. I was nervous at first, but I got through it. My friend said there were others. Don't turn me in Moran, please!

MORAN: Then help me track down Lady Lemon.

A beat. She takes out a pencil and paper from her bag.

NORA: (*Writing.*) Call this number. Tell Lady Lemon that you want "An Extravagant Evening with Eliot." She can't resist discussing *The Waste Land*. She'll do the job herself.

MORAN eyes her for a moment, then picks up the phone.

MORAN: Cancel the 802. She spilled her soup. Okay...yeah. (*He hangs up the phone.*) Alright sweetheart, you're off the hook. But don't leave town.

NORA: (*Affectionately.*) Thanks. You want an interpretive dance of *Great Expectations*? No charge.

MORAN: Some other time.

Lights to black. Jazz music.

SCENE THREE

AT RISE:

It is now the following evening. MORAN is on the phone.

MORAN: I'm about to raise the tent on the Intellectual Bust. You want in, Chief? Then have three black and whites downstairs in five minutes.

He hangs up the phone.

MORAN: (*Aside.*) Using the pseudonym of Thomas Moore, I followed up with a phone call to get more information. It was Lady Lemon, alright. After a short debate on the phone with her about Nietzsche's conception of art versus nature, I learned that she wasn't just peddling intellectual experiences but emotional ones too. For sixty bucks you could "have an open and frank discussion without getting emotionally connected." For one-fifty, a girl would pretend to be the head curator of the Natural History Museum. After a little chat about the Protodynastic period of Egypt, there'd be a table waiting for you at some posh Italian cafe. As you sucked down a double shot of espresso, you would discuss Marx's concept of capitalism. For two bills, you got the cream of the crop. A curly-haired redhead would come over to your place, play Beethoven's Fifth Symphony on the trumpet, and cook you a French dinner of braised lamb with Tarragon sauce where the portions are as small as your pinky finger. Then over a glass of port wine, she'd let you read her Master's thesis, and to top it off, you could write your own personal notes in the margins. Maybe even make a correction or two before she turns it in for review.

The perfect night out...for some fellas. Nice racket. And Lady Lemon was laughing all the way to the bank.

LADY LEMON enters. She is actually a man.

LADY LEMON: *(In his regular male voice.)* You Moran?

MORAN: Look, pal, I'm a little busy right now. Could you come back later?

LADY LEMON: *(Pulling out a gun and pointing it.)* I might say the same thing to you.

MORAN: Who are you?

LADY LEMON: Don't you recognize me? *(With the high pitched female voice.)* How can I ever resist "An Extravagant Evening with Eliot?"

MORAN: Lady Lemon.

LADY LEMON: More precisely...Charles Moogan. You won't believe this, but I never even graduated from high school. I couldn't pass algebra.

MORAN: So what's with the racket?

LADY LEMON: I opened up a bookstore on Fillmore and Robinson, specializing in 19th Century English Literature. One day, a fella came in and started flapping his gums about Goethe's *Faust*. He went on and on, like a broken record. I couldn't keep up with him. I couldn't tell which adaptation he was quoting from. During the discussion, I felt small. Then he asked me, "You know what Faust translated into Latin means?" I was stumped. I felt inadequate. That's when I started working the other side of the law. I felt like a louse.

MORAN: Looks like you've got it all figured out. Except for the meaning of Faust.

LADY LEMON: I suppose you've got a pulse on the answer, huh?

MORAN: Any knucklehead knows it means "Luck."

LADY LEMON: *(Irritated.)* From where I'm standing, big shot, your luck has just run out.

MORAN: If you read your own books rather than holding that gun, you would have known that.

LADY LEMON: (*Getting very upset.*) One more smart remark, and you're gonna be full of lead. So unless you wanna resemble Swiss cheese, I'd keep that trap shut. (*He waves the gun at Moran as he starts to move.*) Now, nice and slow, you and I are gonna take a little walk.

They start to move towards the door.

MORAN: You and me.

LADY LEMON: What's that?

MORAN: You said you and I. It's you and me.

LADY LEMON: No, it's not. The sentence is conjugated as you and me, so *you and I* isn't proper for-

MORAN smacks the gun out of his hand and punches him across the face. He's out cold on the floor.

MORAN: You're right, Moogan. It is just you and I.

Lights fade out as jazz music plays.

SCENE FOUR

AT RISE:

Lights up. LADY LEMON is gone. LARRY is in the office.

LARRY: So what's going to happen to Lady Lemon?

MORAN: He'll be going to jail quicker than you can say Abra-Cadabra!

LARRY: Thanks again, Moran.

MORAN: See ya around, bub.

He exits. DENISE enters. She's very attractive. She may be played by the same actress that played NORA. She may have a wig on and look a little different.

MORAN: Can I help you?

DENISE: Mr. Moran, I need your help. My name is Denise Johnson. And I think I'm being framed.

MORAN: What do ya know about early 19th Century Deconstructionism?

DENISE: Gee pal, gimme a break. I don't know about that stuff. I'm only studying badminton at the local community college.

MORAN: Right. *(A smile spreads across his face as he sighs relief.)* Why don't you tell me what happened.

DENISE: Well, it's like this...

DENISE talks to MORAN in lip sync. MORAN turns and addresses the audience.

MORAN: *(Aside.)* This is gonna be easier than eating pudding with a spoon.

He turns back to listen to her as music drowns them out and lights fade to black.

THE END