

# The Red Lamp Excerpt

## Synopsis

The Red Lamp by Hilliard Booth was chosen to be performed as the grand opening of the Oso Soldiers Hall 100 years ago, in the summer of 1922, so what better play could we choose to honour our new venue and mark our return from COVID.

It is a lively farce, set in the suburban Toronto of one hundred years ago revolving around missed signals, coming of age (and all that goes with it!) and old and new love. Some themes are timeless!

Aunt Matilda fruitlessly tries to control her nephew Harold's dreams of world travel and her young niece Alice Deering's dreams of romance with Archie Clarke a young lawyer with high hopes.

Junior is a rough and tumble man who is not too bright and looking for a bite to eat, while Annie O'Shane is a maid at the Deering's residence who is in Alice's corner. Bill Worth is a traveller with a surprise, looking to get by for the day and get a break on tomorrow ( as well as steal a few things).

The red lamp itself acts as a symbol of three people's plans, from small to life changing and mayhem ensues when the signals are crossed. Annette adds a touch of madness as a woman who had it all and lost it all.

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### TIME

A hundred years ago.

### SETTING

A suburb of Toronto. The living room of the Deerlings.

There is a window upstage, center stager. There is a sofa in the room and a small table beside it with a lamp and a potted plant on it. A cedar chest is on one side of the window. On another small table are some books and a metal vase with some flowers in it and a small box. A carpet is under the sofa. There is an easy chair in a corner of the room. A newspaper is on it. There are two exits. A doorway exit leading to the entrance hall on stage right. A doorway exit on stage left leading to the rest of the house.

It's night. The stage is dim. Through an open window, we see someone entering (JUNIOR). He trips over his feet

and falls. Another person enters (BILL) through the window.

BILL Shhh! (*BILL helps JUNIOR up.*) Quiet. Do you want to wake up the whole house?  
(*They start to search the room.*)

JUNIOR What are we looking for?

BILL Something to steal. And some food if we're lucky.

JUNIOR Right.  
(*They continue searching. JUNIOR knocks over a tray with books, etc. on it.*)

BILL Can't you be quiet?

JUNIOR I'm trying.

BILL Well, try harder

HAROLD (*off*) Who's there?

BILL Quick. Hide.

JUNIOR Where?

BILL I don't know. Just hide!  
(*They look for a place to hide. BILL hides behind the easy chair. JUNIOR runs around, then discovers the cedar chest. BILL sees him opening the lid and getting in. JUNIOR closes lid just as HAROLD enters.*)

HAROLD Who's there? Come on, out with you. You've been caught now.  
(*He turns on the light. He's holding a derringer lighter. BILL sees the gun and stands up.*)

BILL Don't shoot.

HAROLD Who are you?

BILL I'm a robber.

HAROLD I can tell that. But what's your name.

BILL Willian. But my friends call me Bill.

HAROLD But I'm not a friend of yours, William. What are you doing here?

BILL What does it look like? I'm a robber. But ... well, if you must know, I'm new at this game. This is the first place we've tried to rob.

HAROLD *We* 've tried to rob! Where is your accomplice?

BILL (*looking around the room*) I honestly don't know.

HAROLD And why shouldn't I call the police?

BILL That's a question I prefer not to answer. Please, put down the gun. I have a fear of guns. My mother was a sharp shooter with Buffalo Bill's Wild West show. In the

act, she used to shoot an apple off of my head. Ever since then I've been afraid of guns. And apples.

HAROLD How do I know that if I put down my gun, you won't try to get away? Or worse, try to hurt me?

BILL But that's simple. We haven't eaten anything in two days. We haven't the strength to hurt anyone. Bring us some food and you'll have friends for life.

HAROLD There you go again with "we" and "us." What's happen to your accomplice?

BILL (*looks at chest*) I guess he must have left when he heard you.  
(*There is a tense moment of silence.*)

HAROLD How do I know if I leave to get you some food, you'll not steal something and leave?

BILL (*looking around*) Honestly, lad, it doesn't look like you have much to steal. Wait a minute. Where'd you get this lamp?

HAROLD That belonged to my father.

BILL I know that lamp. It came from South America.

HAROLD Yes. How did you know that? My father bought it down there years ago. Have you been to South America?

BILL I'll say. Pretty near all over it! That's before I ended up in the hoosgow for a crime I didn't commit. There's only one place where they make lamps like that. In TerraBara, Peru.

HAROLD That's where father got it.

BILL It's a ... a good-luck lamp.

HAROLD A good-luck lamp? I didn't know that.

BILL You didn't know that? Why the natives down there believe that when you're in trouble all you've got to do is to light one of these lamps, and bingo, your troubles are over. I believe it, too. I've tried it. Why, once down in Terra-Bara I was out of a job, lit one of these lamps, and what d'you think happened?

HAROLD What did happen? (*expectant*)

BILL Well, I was in my room, reading a treatise by Pope and I lit the lamp and the lamp is in the window. Down the street came a man. When he sees the light, he comes up to my room and wouldn't you know it. It's an old buddy of mine. And he remembers he owes me twenty bucks. Now if that isn't good luck, I don't what it is.

HAROLD (*disappointed*) Oh, I thought it would have summoned up a genii at least.

BILL No, this is a *real* good-luck lamp. It isn't Aladdin's lamp, or any other fairy-story one.

HAROLD So you believe that lamp brings good luck? (*BILL nods*) Well, I don't. It never brought me any.

BILL Well ... That's because you've ... you've never lit it. See, the wick's not burned; it's brand new.

HAROLD That's right. Hey, I wonder who put that lamp there on the table. We always keep it in the closet in the hall. Good luck, eh? Well, I'll put it to the test. Hand it over. I'll fill it.

BILL *(Stares at the lamp while he examines it. Then shakes it)* It is filled. It's got oil in it already.

HAROLD That's strange. Now I wonder who filled it!

BILL *(puts lamp back on table)* You won't have to fight me, boy. Or turn me into the police. When I'm looking at that lamp, I feel reformed. Like I've seen the light and the light's seen me. I won't do anything crooked where there's one of these lamps around. Sir, I was not always the poor wretch you see before you. I was once of the nobler class. But, alas, fate dealt me a cruel blow. Actually several cruel lows and I was forced to travel far from my native homeland. But on my honour as befits once was a true gentleman, this is where Billy Worth says goodnight to my miscreant ways.

HAROLD You're superstitious, are you?

BILL That's right. And you know what I believe? Good luck'll come my way just because I found that lamp. Oh, it will. And I sure need some.

HAROLD Wait. I'll get you something to eat before you go. And you don't have to worry about this gun. It's not real. See. *(He activates the lighter.)*

BILL Well, you could've fooled me. We — I won't disappoint you, lad. I won't turn down your offering of food.

HAROLD *(takes up a match)* First, I'm going to try this lamp and see if it brings me good luck.

BILL *(looks around room)* It doesn't look like you need anything luck will bring you. I'd say you've got about everything a gentleman could want. A nice place to live and food to eat. It makes my eyes water from envy.

HAROLD No. All this is not luck. It's bad luck. I'm tied here like a baby. I've been treated like a kid all my life. I want to get out and see the world, I want to travel, I want to go to South America like my father did. *(strikes match)*

BILL Why don't you?

MATILDA *(off stage)* Harold!

HAROLD That's why. My Aunt won't let me travel alone, and she won't travel with me 'til my sister is married. She has control of all the money.

BILL She's got the key to the family the cash box, eh?

HAROLD Yes. Doesn't even let me have cigarette money.

BILL *(taking dirty box of joints from pocket)* Well, seeing as we're friends now, why don't you try one of my wacky tobacky joints? Better than cigarettes.

HAROLD Gosh, thanks. *(takes joint; BILL lights it for him)* Say, my name's Harold Deering.

BILL Mine's Billy Worth. Formally of Rosedale. But now a man of no fixed address.

HAROLD Say, Billy Worth, tell me about South America. Where's the best place for a man like me to go to?

MATILDA *(off stage)* Harold!

HAROLD Yes, Aunt Matilda

MATILDA *(off stage)* Are you in the living room?

HAROLD Yes, I'm coming. *(to BILL, frightened)* If she finds you here, she'll ... call the police. Quick, the window!

BILL *(as he hurries to window)* I could tell you a lot about South America.

HAROLD Come back and tell me. My Aunt's going out; my sister's going with her. When they've gone, come back. I'll have some supper ready for you.

BILL That was the straight goods I gave you about this being my first crooked job.

HAROLD I believe you. Hurry.

BILL *(half through the window)* How will I know when your Aunt's gone?

HAROLD Uh ... the red lamp! As soon as she's gone, I'll light the red lamp and put it here by the window.

BILL Okay! For good luck!

HAROLD Yes, for good luck. When you see that red light in the window, you'll know the coast is clear.

BILL *(nods)* And I'll come in at the front door, and give you some fine pointers on South America. And maybe I could get some food, too. It's been a while.

HAROLD Sure. Great.

MATILDA *(off stage)* Harold!

HAROLD I'm coming Aunt. *(He exits.)*  
*(BILL knocks on the chest's lid. It slowly opens and we see Junior.)*

JUNIOR Come on, let's get out of here while we can.

BILL No, wait. I've got a plan. You stay in there. When I have a chance, I'm going steal that lamp.

JUNIOR What do we want with a dirty old lamp like that?

BILL That's not a dirty old lamp. It's a sacred good-luck lamp of the ancient Incas. Just like one I had that was stolen from me. That was in the Argentine. I'm sure of it. There's one in the *Museo Nacional de Bellas Artes* in Buenos Aires. Another in the British Museum. The others are said to have been sold on the black market. Like the one I had. Good luck, the man says. I'll say it is. It should bring us some

cash we can live on for a while. So you stay put. When we get the chance, we'll take it and run. *(He pushes him back down into the chest and closes the lid.)*

JUNIOR *(pops back up)* How will I know when to get out. I can't stay here all night. I'm hungry.

BILL Don't worry. I'll say something like ... I know. I was born in Niagara Falls. I'll say Niagara Falls. Then you'll know it's me. We get that lamp, Junior, and we'll be in the money. *(He climbs out the window and disappears from sight.)*

JUNIOR Niagara Falls ... Niagara Falls. Then we're in the money.

MATILDA *(off)* What were you doing in the living room, Harold?

*(JUNIOR hears her and ducks down into the chest.)*

*(HAROLD and MATILDA enter. She is wearing her hat and a coat and pulling on her gloves. She carries a handbag. He is holding the joint behind his back)*

HAROLD I ... Nothing at all. That is, I was admiring the night. Such a lovely night! The stars, the moon, such a glorious heaven! *(forgets and gestures with the hand in which he holds joint)*

MATILDA A cigarette! Harold, you've been smoking. Against my wishes! Where did you get that cigarette, Harold? Oh, you needn't answer me. I know. Mr. Clarke gave it to you.

HAROLD Archie Clarke? No, he didn't. Honest, Auntie. It's not a cigarette.

MATILDA I know a cigarette when I see one. *(smells)* It smells funny.

HAROLD It's ... it's incense.

MATILDA Incense! Nonsense. You can't pull the wool over my eyes.

HAROLD *(aside)* That's because you're wearing a cotton sweater.

MATILDA What did you say?

HAROLD Uh ... I'm sweatin'. It's hot in here.

MATILDA Don't change the subject. Now don't deny it. Mr. Clarke gave you that cigarette as a bribe. He's in love with your sister Alice. He's bribed you with that cigarette. What did you promise to do for Mr. Clarke in return for that poisonous weed?

HAROLD Uh ... uh ...

MATILDA Speak up. And don't perjure yourself! He gave you a note to give to your sister. That's it! What was in that note? I bet he's planning to sneak off to Niagara Falls and get married.

*(JUNIOR raises the chest lid, sees HAROLD and MATILDA and closes lid.)*

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HAROLD Look here, Auntie, I want to go to South America.

MATILDA South America! Harold! Never let me hear you speak of that horrible country again. When I went with your father, I met some wild characters there. Rough men! Like your father. Men never to be trusted. Besides your sister and I need your protection. Which reminds me, Alice and I are going over to old Mrs. Terret's this evening for a cup of tea.

HAROLD Want me to see you over?

MATILDA No, it's only a step or two. You can see Mrs. Terret's light from the window there. (*HAROLD looks out the window and nods.*) I want you to remain at home and guard the house. Annie is in, and will answer the doorbell if anyone calls. If you're looking for something to do, you can read this book I got from the library. Niagara Falls and the Seven Wonders of the World. It there on that table.

(*JUNIOR pops up after "Niagara Falls." He has the joint in his mouth. Sees HAROLD and MATILDA and pops back down.*)

HAROLD Oh, I want to get out in the world like dad did, and do something!

MATILDA There is plenty to do here. (*lowering her voice*) Keep a close watch on your sister. Even if Mr. Clarke didn't give you a letter, I still think Mr. Clarke is up to no good. I bet he's trying to find some means to communicate with her in spite of my precautions. Niagara Falls, indeed!

(*JUNIOR pokes his head out of the chest. Sees them and ducks down. He still has the joint in his mouth.*)

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MATILDA I've never seen Mr. Clarke. And I have no desire to see him. He is unsuited to Alice in every way. Full stop and double exclamation marks.

HAROLD Why is he not suitable?

MATILDA A lawyer without a client! Hah! He's as poor as a church-mouse that's just been evicted. Why he's practically penniless! When Alice marries, she will marry a man with a substantial bank account. I'll see to that. Economy is no longer in fashion. Besides, it's very uncomfortable to be poor. No, no, Mr. Clarke is out of the question.

HAROLD He has a rich uncle.

MATILDA Who may live for twenty years yet, and then leave his money to some Orphanage in Niagara Falls. (*JUNIOR pops up. The joint is still in his mouth. He pops down when he sees them.*) I don't believe in speculation. Rich uncles are very uncertain quantities. Um! I wonder how old that Uncle is. If I could arrange a meeting between him and Alice, they might find a great deal in common. (*HAROLD starts to exit.*) Where are you going, Harold?

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ANNIE (*in a hoarse whisper*) Is Mr. Clarke coming to-night?

ALICE Yes. I knew Auntie was going over to Mrs. Terret's. I wrote Archie and told him to come. I told him as soon as Auntie'd gone I'd put that red light lantern in the

window, so he'd know all was safe. I'm going to use that little red lamp that father brought from South America. *(exits; off)* Why, it isn't here in the closet.

ANNIE Here it is on the table, Miss Alice and all filled up.

ALICE *(enters)* That's funny. Harold must have taken it out.

ANNIE So it's to be a signal, is it?

ALICE Yes. A signal to bring Archie to the house. And now Auntie says I've got to go out with her. Weren't *you* ever in love, Annie?

ANNIE I was that.

ALICE Then you'll help me?

ANNIE I will. Lie down on the couch there, Miss Alice, and I'll rub your poor achin', throbbin' schemin' little head. *(ALICE lies down on the couch. ANNIE rubs her head.)* Ah, I remembers the time me and my fella went to Niagara Falls. What a wonderful time we had.

*(JUNIOR pops up. The joint falls out of his mouth. He struggles, then manages to retrieve the joint. He pops back down.)*

Now you just lie back and relax.