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BINYON
BOMBASTES IN THE SHADES



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1914-1915

Hilda In. Dowden

ombastes in the Shades

A Play in one Act by

LAURENCE BINYON

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C H A R A C T E R S

BOMBASTES, a German hero.

SOCRATES.

HEINE.

BAYARD.

QUEEN ELIZABETH.

A CHILD.

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BOMBASTES IN THE SHADES

(The scene disclosed is filled with a kind of dewy light such as promises a clear day. Cool verdure recedes into undefined distances. THE SHADES, of various times and countries, pace to and fro. Among them in the centre SOCRATES sits meditating, with legs crossed, and the knees clasped in his hands. HEINE, passing, hesitates a moment, then standing over SOCRATES, speaks.)

HEINE. Is it Socrates, the wisest of mortals?

SOCRATES. Socrates was my name on earth; I am less ignorant now than then. Who, friend, are you?

HEINE. One that loved Greece, though he never saw it: perhaps because he never saw it. I was a German poet. All Germany sang the songs of Heinrich Heine. But now they praise me no more; they call me a bad German, because I loved France, the land of light: because I loved Germany

so much that I dared to make fun of her, romantic, ridiculous, adorable Germany! They dreamed tremendous dreams about her, but I presumed to raise my eyes and see her as she was.

SOCRATES. Few bear to see things as they are till they come here and are taught. And did they put you to death, Heinrich Heine?

HEINE. They spared me that compliment, Socrates. But the Gods punished me, all the same.

SOCRATES. Well, here in the Shades we learn the truth; both our countrymen and ourselves.

HEINE. It seems you are happy.

SOCRATES. I was ever a devout lover of the truth.

HEINE. Truth hurts and humbles. You have been a long time among the Shades, you are used to it. But I am fresher from earth. And it seems to me that my poor countrymen will suffer bitterly, for I hear from down there cries of rage and the thunder of guns and a sound of raving and madness. And ghosts arrive, bewildered ghosts . . .

SOCRATES. Tell me of your Germany; for we Greeks knew it not.

HEINE. I look down into the mists; the vapours part, and I see it, the old Germany of my youth, the hills and the streams and the green and gold forests. A land of forests, a race of the woodlands. Elves with furry ears danced at night in the woods and whispered to sleeping mortals, and they woke and were haunted with forest dreams, with dreams and music. A simple race; joyous eaters, cordial drinkers; something akin to the brutes at bottom; but when the moon shone and the great trees trembled softly through all their leaves, then their hearts were melted, and wonder was born in them, and the oldest thoughts in the world flowed fresh from their mouths in music.

SOCRATES. Barbarians, it seems, of the milder sort.

HEINE. Ah, Socrates, mild no longer. For this folk has been bitten and poisoned. Those woods hold not only the green elves, but in every cave lurk and glare the spectacled eyes of a professor.

SOCRATES. A professor? Is that a dangerous animal?

HEINE. The most dangerous of animals, Socrates. The pedant is ferocious by nature. From him as from the brutes is withheld the divine gift of laughter. The world to him is but the stinking trail that his nose follows, and one grotesque theory that a breath of fresh air would blow away is more to him than the sun and the stars. I fought to free my country from the professors, but in vain.

SOCRATES. But these professors will not triumph in the end.

HEINE. You have not heard the worst. Scratch a pedant and you find a sentimentalist.

SOCRATES. What is a sentimentalist?

HEINE. One who is afraid of the truth and hugs the darkness in himself. And the sentimentalist in action is blood-thirsty, filled with the rage of the mediocre and the cruelty of the weak. The day of dissertations is over, the day of action has arrived. In every German cupboard is a uniform

In a twinkling the professor turns drill-sergeant, a bulk in buttons and helmet. The officers strut, the sergeants swear, the people tramp. In all the world they see nothing but themselves—ten times larger than life.

SOCRATES. You make my flesh creep. And surely now I smell something—a smell as of sulphur and blood. Can it be one of those dangerous animals you speak of coming here?

HEINE. A candidate for the felicity of disillusion!

(Amid the sound of an explosion BOMBASTES appears, with sword drawn, battle-stained and excited.)

SOCRATES. What a terrifying apparition!

BOMBASTES. Forward, swine! Where are the enemy? *(He looks round dazed.)* That confounded shell burst right at my ear. Or is it the wine, that good Burgundy? *(Seeing SOCRATES and shaking him.)* Thunder and lightning, is it the Zabern cobbler? Where are my men? out with it quick!

HEINE (*coming forward*). This is the other world.

BOMBASTES (*with profound disgust*). Civilians! —Not a gun to be heard! Who are you? What trickery——

HEINE. We of the other world have the honour to salute you.

BOMBASTES. There is no other world. I have said it.

HEINE. In this world, when you have said a thing three times it is not always true.

SOCRATES. Do not provoke him; this person is alarming.

BOMBASTES (*with a grand gesture*). There is no other world. There is no . . .

HEINE. A little doubt arrives?

SOCRATES. Doubt is the beginning of wisdom—— He becomes a little calmer.

HEINE. You will learn in time. You will learn much. This is the really interesting world.

BOMBASTES (*still dazed*). So?

HEINE. Permit me to introduce you. Socrates of Athens—Bombastes of Brandenburg.

BOMBASTES (*affronted, though mechanically clicking his heels*). Bombastes ?

HEINE. The wielder of bombs, the modern Jupiter !

BOMBASTES (*pacified*). Our German bombs are indeed excellent.

HEINE. Like the rain, that falls on the just and the unjust. And so fired with the Prussian genius that they destroy beauty of their own accord. Aimed at a fortress, they fly straight to a cathedral.

BOMBASTES (*who has been staring at SOCRATES*). So this is Socrates the philosopher. We Germans, you must know, are the greatest of philosophers. You Greeks did a little in your time, you prepared the way for us——

SOCRATES. You shall teach me, Bombastes. I am always glad to learn.

BOMBASTES. What do you do here ?

SOCRATES. We learn the truth.

BOMBASTES. Only that ?

SOCRATES. The truth about ourselves, and

about the world. An absorbing occupation. It takes a long time, and is usually rather painful. It is like a slow dawn that gradually lights us up, and we see how small we were. Yet some—just a few—find themselves greater than they knew. And the things we did are burned into us, and we know what we might have done.

HEINE. Yes, Bombastes, we are all found out.

SOCRATES. Illusions are dear, we cling to them long.

HEINE. And the disillusionments that were sometimes even dearer.

BOMBASTES. Then our good German truth will prevail at last over the lies of our enemies.

SOCRATES. Pardon me. The truth that is German is no doubt the best, but we poor folk have to be content with the truth that is merely true.

BOMBASTES. It is the same thing.

SOCRATES. I always loved learning, Bombastes, and I feel I am to learn from you, for your helmet is worthy of Pallas Athene. Only the brave can bear the truth, and I see you are a brave

man. Come now, you are fresh from glorious deeds. Tell me——

BOMBASTES. Glorious indeed! An insolent little state, called Belgium——

HEINE. Caesar found it troublesome, I remember.

BOMBASTES. An insolent little state dared sacrilegiously to oppose our heroic armies. These little states exist but on sufferance. What right have they to say Yes or No? The world is for the great and the strong.

SOCRATES. And justice?

BOMBASTES. Is the will of the stronger.

SOCRATES. I seem to have heard that before. You would say, then, that size is the measure of greatness?

HEINE. Oh, Socrates, forbear. This asking of inconvenient questions——

SOCRATES. Yes, I bored the Athenians with my questions, that is why they made me drink hemlock. They could not endure to be bored. But, Bombastes——

HEINE. You need not ask. He is telling you.

BOMBASTES. Force, I say, and the will to use force to the uttermost, that is the one truth and the only reality. You, Socrates, I remember, were a citizen of a small state, a mere city and a very talkative city. You could not know.

SOCRATES. Then Germany is the strongest of all the nations.

BOMBASTES. The only strong nation. The most powerful nation, the most resolute, the most learned, the most enlightened. The world is for Germany, and by force she will impose her enlightenment, her arts, her freedom on it.

SOCRATES. Happy world! Truly happy! Hark, do I not hear a murmur of rejoicing borne to us from earth even here?

HEINE. To me it sounds rather like groaning and wailing.

BOMBASTES. Benighted fools! They oppose us. It is incredible, but they resist.

SOCRATES. Man is a creature born perverse.

BOMBASTES. With masterly hand we sow

quarrels and discord among the nations. The races they oppress, already inflamed by admirable pamphlets, written in the proper languages, and distributed by our agents, will run to taste the blessings of our German freedom. Meanwhile we have the biggest guns. Our cannon are colossal. Resistance is vain.

SOCRATES. It is thus, then, that the world is enlightened ?

HEINE. Enlightened indeed !

BOMBASTES. Yes, the whole world shall recognize that we are the most conscientious as the most intellectual of peoples ; in our mailed fist we carry the standard of the noblest morality. When with Siegfried-arm we have struck out and the world is at our feet, then our professors will explain.

SOCRATES. Professors ! But Heine here tells me that professors are dangerous animals.

BOMBASTES. Heine ! The Jew, the renegade, the Paris refugee ! It is he ? This is a plot, a conspiracy. You baldhead that call yourself

Socrates, I believe you are the cobbler of Zabern after all. You are laughing at me, both of you.

SOCRATES. We are infinitely serious, I assure you.

BOMBASTES. You are going to laugh at me. I see it in your faces. It is an insult to this sacred uniform. Reptiles, I will teach you how we deal with such rabble.

(He lunges with his sword at HEINE.

The sword crumples up in his hand.)

HEINE. Is a smile permitted?

BOMBASTES. Damnation!—I will not soil myself by chastising you. Civilians!

HEINE. We were soldiers too.

BOMBASTES. Soldiers! Food for powder! What war, then, did you fight in?

HEINE. In the liberation war of humanity.

BOMBASTES. Journalists' cant.

HEINE. It is true we were always defeated.

BOMBASTES. I should think so.

HEINE. But the victory goes on, though we died.

BOMBASTES (*stamping*). Are there no police here? These talkers should be clapped in prison. (*Fuming up and down.*) It is intolerable the impudence of these civilians. They even treacherously take weapons to shoot at armed men, a thousand times their number.

HEINE. O grossly disrespectful!

BOMBASTES. Our glorious Zeppelins, inflated with German genius, fabulously costly, colossal, sailing with eagle pride over land and sea, even on these a miserable civilian, afraid for his wretched roof, has dared to fire. Well may it be said, the age of chivalry is over!

HEINE. Here comes one who can tell you of chivalry,—Bayard, the chevalier without fear and without reproach.

BOMBASTES. At last a soldier!

(BAYARD enters. *His eyes are fixed on certain SHADES who begin to appear from the background; French and Belgian old men, women, and children, dishevelled, with torn clothing and the*

marks of murder on them. Some cling together, immobile with terror at the sight of BOMBASTES; others draw themselves up with proud defiance, others wander with dazed looks. BAYARD moves slowly towards them. They remain mute. The mothers draw their children to them, distrustful of the sight of men.)

HEINE. Chevalier! . . . But who are these? New apparitions from the world of the slain? One would think they had lost their way. What a darkness is in their eyes!

BOMBASTES (*turning round*). Do you follow me here, vermin? Must we exterminate you twice?

HEINE. Chevalier, behold the conqueror and the conquered. Behold Europe's modern hero; the flower of a great nation. It is a flower with an odour of blood.

BAYARD (*deeply moved, to the SHADES*). My children!

BOMBASTES. They presumed to defend their homes, such was their base treachery ; and they were righteously punished.

BAYARD (*ignoring him*). My children. You suffered, you bled, you were tortured, you were trodden down and slain. But yours is the victory. Even now in the hearts of your sons and your brothers you breathe invincible ardour. The fields of France and Flanders are red with a glory that is yours. Courage ! Truth is here.

BOMBASTES. War is war.

BAYARD. And beasts are beasts, but men are men. I fought for France. I fought with brave men, sword to sword. We made no war on women and on children. But now it seems the victors butcher, and applaud themselves for butchery.

BOMBASTES. My heart bleeds for the victims. Truly generous is the German soul. But humanitarian sentiments must yield to the necessity of war. There, he who would be truly merciful must show no mercy. He must strike

down all in his path with the hammer of Thor. Your age of Paladins is over. This is the age of science. France has grown effete, luxurious, pitiful. We Germans alone, the sons of Odin, grasping in firm hand the torch of science, have dared to face reality. We alone dare to be sincere, and make war with ruthless will. It is inexorable Nature that cries, Woe to the vanquished !

BAYARD (*turning for the first time to BOMBASTES*).
Woe to the conqueror rather !

HEINE. Which has he bought dearer, the tears of men and women or the laughter of the Gods ?

BOMBASTES. What, are we to forgo the spoils and the reward of all our sacrifices ? We too have suffered, not as casual victims, but as heroes who knew and braved the worst, prodigal of our utmost efforts because our purpose was of steel, sacrificing all with clear eyes to the sublime will of the State.

BAYARD. We know of no State here. There are but men and women. In all the world there are but men and women. You too are but a man,

though you have forgotten it. You have made an idol of your State to be a traitor to your kind.

(BAYARD *passes out.*)

BOMBASTES (*roaring*). A traitor, I? A puny Frenchman dares to say it!

HEINE. It is time to escape. Now he will explode like one of his beloved bombs. (*Passes out with SOCRATES.*)

BOMBASTES. Traitor! These are the traitors. Miscreants, hirelings of the hypocrite England—England clutching her money-bags in terror of the German name and egging on the world to strike us in the back. England, the detestable, the arch-traitor.

Q. ELIZABETH (*entering, with alert firm steps*). Who speaks of England?

BOMBASTES. I spit upon her name. Civilization disowns her. What woman are you?

Q. ELIZABETH. England's sometime queen. So this is our new Spaniard, but without the Spaniard's manners, it appears. What, then, are England's crimes?

BOMBASTES. The colony-snatcher, dead to every sentiment of honour, mean, calculating, covetous, cold! We hate her, we hate England with our very souls. Our very greetings to each other are a curse on England. Treacherously she seizes our commerce, inhumanly she blockades our coasts and seeks to starve our noble, our highly-educated population.

Q. ELIZABETH. And what will you do to England, O most magnanimous people?

BOMBASTES. We will seize her colonies, we will sink her merchant ships at sight, we will starve her out, the land of cowards.

Q. ELIZABETH. You follow where she leads the way. Fie, to ape inhuman cowards!

BOMBASTES. When the Fatherland is in danger, all is permitted. Away with moral superstitions! Ah, when we get there, when London shrieks and is in flames! We have foreseen everything. Our German organization is irresistible. Neatly, with the fire-engines of the English, we shall pump petroleum into their homes. To warm

one's hands at the blaze, to shoot them down as they run screaming like rabbits from their houses ! We will kill, kill, kill ; we will destroy everything, everything.

Q. ELIZABETH. Fee, fi, fo, fum. This is a pretty devil, to button itself in a panoply of all the virtues. Were we on earth again, I would box those big ears of yours, woman as I am.

BOMBASTES. In my country we listen not to women. When the officer walks the pavement women must take the gutter. What right has England to complain ? The bones of a single German soldier are worth more than all this British Empire. Empire ! An Empire is built of blood and iron. This thing they call an empire, scattered over the globe, without logic, without organization, we will break it in our German hands, we the world-hammers on the anvil of destiny. It transgresses every rule laid down by our professors ; it has no right to exist. We forbid its existence.

Q. ELIZABETH. The things that grow

outlast the things that are built. My adventurers sowed the seeds, and while we slept a great tree branched abroad.

BOMBASTES. Robbers ! But we will take it all ; we will rule it as it should be ruled. Everywhere shall our iron heel be pressed. We will impose on it at last our glorious German freedom.

Q. ELIZABETH. What a plague of big words has this monster got ! Terrify me not with spiked helmet and moustachios : there is a man somewhere within, behind these mouthings—just a man, if we could prick him. A man that has to learn and to unlearn. England has learned and unlearned. The waves and the winds have taught her. Does the sailor who learns to outface the storms set his ignorant will against the ocean ? Does he destroy to subdue, or forbid the winds to blow against him ?

BOMBASTES. I talk of men, not wind and water.

Q. ELIZABETH. The race of men are as

the sea-streams—turbulent, alive. As the captain makes the will of the wind his own, so must he who would be master of men. Free men only are worth the leading. Learn of the sea, our rough cradle, the most glorious of English graves.

BOMBASTES. Ha, ha! England grasps the trident, but we will wrest it from her feeble hand. Then she will use a different speech; then will she learn the way of the true conqueror.

Q. ELIZABETH. The destiny of conquerors is noble, but it is not to conquer; it is to provoke the spirit of the free, and kindle them to burning.

BOMBASTES. What do you know of conquerors, woman of England? We, the race of heroes, will destroy you with the fierce blast of our hate. We hate with a holy hatred.

Q. ELIZABETH. Hate is but rubbish here; the world's old rubbish.

BOMBASTES. Nothing shall tear this hate from me. It is in the violent beat of this heart: it is our health, our blood.

Q. ELIZABETH. Hate is for fools. Would you stick your head in a sack and stumble in darkness? then hate your fill. For he who hates understands nothing: he cannot even see the one he hates. You will be late in learning, but you will learn at last. Here in the Shades we see, we have no need to hate.

BOMBASTES. I will hate, I will hate to the end.

Q. ELIZABETH. Poor conqueror! Having seized all the virtues and the arts, you would conquer truth too.

BOMBASTES. Sublime ambition! To conquer truth! The last and most splendid of all the German conquests! To conquer truth and make it German. To sweep through the Shades—thus!

Q. ELIZABETH. Fill your mouth, strike your attitudes. Be sublime, while you may. (*She passes on.*)

(HEINE and SOCRATES re-enter.)

HEINE. Not yet exploded? Is he turned to stone? Alas, how like a German statue!

(BOMBASTES, *still fixed in heroic attitude, seems to turn pale and shiver. A child stares up at him.*)

CHILD. Why does the big Boche tremble? Is he afraid of us?

SOCRATES. A child's eyes are like the truth. It is the truth he is beginning to see. And truth sometimes is terrible. But it will be a long time before he sees it all.

HEINE. A long, long time. Unfortunate Bombastes! Already his own deeds begin to appear before him, one after one, the deeds he gloried in: not as they used to appear, dazzling in haloes of argument and saluted with boasts and applause, but naked and small and ugly, and stale and evil-smelling. The dawn of the drunkard! It is no use to shut your eyes, Bombastes. Truth is truth, and must be faced. It is your soul that is invaded now. The menacing helmet that made fat grocers in the café quake like a blanc-mange lest they should offend you by their existence; the sabre whose rattlings sent exquisite thrills of

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