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Almost everyman

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ALMOST EVERYMAN¹

By
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St. Paul Central High School

CAST OF CHARACTERS

JUDGE SEVERE

BLUSTER—Attorney for the Prosecution

SHREWD—Attorney for the Defense

BAILIFF

CLERK OF COURT

MR. O. U. SLANG

MR. I. C. NIT

MISS IDA NIT

MISS MALAPPROPRIATE

MISS BEE CARELESS

} Witnesses

Almost Everyman—The Accused

Miss English Language—A Corpse

The Jury

BAILIFF. Order in the courtroom!

JUDGE. Who opens the case?

BLUSTER. I do, Your Honor.

JUDGE. State the case.

BLUSTER. Ladies and Gentlemen of the Jury: A very cultured and beautiful maiden of a refined and aristocratic family, Miss English Language by name, has been unnecessarily, recklessly, and ruthlessly murdered—

JUDGE. What! Again? Who is the guilty party this time?

BLUSTER. Accused, state your name.

EVERYMAN. (*rising.*) Almost.

JUDGE. Almost! Almost what? Almost crazy?

EVERYMAN. No sir, Almost Everyman.

JUDGE. Same thing. Mr. Bluster, continue with the case.

BLUSTER. As I was about to say, Your Honor, there sits the villain and there sit five of his companions in crime. The noble

¹This sketch was written by Miss Austin, teacher of expression in the Central High School, and produced by the Dramatic Club of that school, in order to promote a "Better English Week."

guardians of our great and glorious commonwealth, the police, found these dangerous brigands lurking in a dark and dismal alley near the scene of the tragedy waiting for more prey. The first witness I will call to the stand is Mr. Slang, a harmless appearing creature whose special haunts are High Schools. He attracts the thoughtless youth and maiden by his airy manner and cheap wit. Mr. Slang, you may take the oath.

(CLERK OF THE COURT *gives the oath.*)

CLERK. I solemnly swear to tell the truth, the whole truth and nothing but the truth.

(SLANG *repeats oath and takes the stand.*)

BLUSTER. What is your full name?

SLANG. My name is Mr. O. U. Slang.

BLUSTER. How old are you?

SLANG. Just turned eighteen and growin' on nineteen.

BLUSTER. Mr. Slang, you may tell us where you were on the evening of December first.

SLANG. I was in—in—Oh, I remember! I was in trouble.

BLUSTER. Tell us what you were doing there on that evening.

SLANG. Well you see, it was this way. I was rubberin' round with a bunch of ginks from "Central" when, all of a sudden, I seen a dizzy blond come floatin' round the corner. She was a peach of a looker, so I sidled up and froze to her side. After spielin' off a bit of hot air about her graceful figger and sich, I asked her would she go to a movie with me.

BLUSTER. And did she go?

SLANG. Did she go? Say, Boss, you should a saw the baby stare she gin me. I could feel the icicles formin' on me spinal column. The North Pole aint got nothin' on her for tempature.

JUDGE. This is not a lesson in geography and we will omit the discussion of the North Pole. Proceed to your story and indulge in less circumlocution.

SLANG. Say now, Judge, chuck it; don't use none of them persiflages on me. I'm just a plain American and I don't understand em.

JUDGE. Then speak English.

SLANG. I didn't say I was English, Judge; I said American.

(*Jury titters.*)

BAILIFF. (*pounding on the table.*) Order in the Court Room!

BLUSTER. Did you see the accused on the night of December first?

SLANG. Well, I kind o' half see'd him. I had one bum lamp (*points to one black eye*) which came from interferin' with a cop—(JUDGE *pounds on desk*.)—I beg your pardon, I should a said “with a noble guardian of our great and glorious commonwealth”—so my vision was somewhat on the blink.

SHREWD. I object, Your Honor. This is incompetent, irrelevant, and immaterial.

JUDGE. Objection sustained.

SLANG. Well, I was only answerin' his question; would you have me lie to him? Judge, I wish you would make that fella stop interruptin'.

JUDGE. Don't you tell me what to do, young man, or I will have you fined for contempt of court.

BLUSTER. What did you see the accused do on that night?

SLANG. Well, after Miss Highbrow gave me the icy mit, Friend Almost Everyman got gay and thought he'd take a try and see what *he* could do.

BLUSTER. And what did he do?

SLANG. Well, he got fresh with her and tried to kid her about being stuck up. He sort of imitated her flossy way of speakin' and asked her if she wouldn't pass out a little “cultyaw.” Finally she got indignant and said she was not accustomed to bein' familiarly addressed by strangers and intimated that he didn't belong to her social class.

BLUSTER. And what happened then?

SLANG. If you know Almost Everyman you know he can't bear to be socially ostrichsized by no one. He plain lost his temper and pulled out his gun and shot her.

BLUSTER. Gentlemen of the Jury, I ask you if you can listen to this woeful tale and not have your hearts touched. He shot her just because she was his superior and resented his impertinence. Such was the tragic end of beautiful Miss English Language.

(*He wipes his eyes and the Jury shows emotion.*)

SLANG. (*Rising.*) Au revoir, Judge. (*Goes to seat, swaggering.*)

BLUSTER. My second witness is Mr. I. C. Nit, an insignificant slayer of pure speech and a very harmful companion for an American youth. He wilfully and intentionally violates all the rules laid down by Gerrish and Cunningham. (*Insert here the name of the grammar used in your particular High School.*) His life has been one continuous social error and it is not to be wondered at that he and

his bosom friend, Almost Everyman, are now treading the "prim-rose path to the everlasting bonfire." (*Points down.*) Mr. Nit, take the stand.

(CLERK *gives oath.*)

What is your full name?

NIT. Mr. I. C. Nit.

JUDGE. (*hand at ear.*) I. Z. Nit?

NIT. Nit! I. C. Nit.

BLUSTER. Did you witness the murder of Miss English Language?

NIT. Yes sir, I seen it.

JUDGE. Talk English.

NIT. Yes sir, I sawed it. I was present when he choked her.

SHREWD. (*rising and walking left center.*) Ah, there seems to be conflicting testimony here. I desire to cross-question the witness. You say he choked her and Mr. Slang says he shot her. Now as a matter of fact, aren't you both lying?

NIT. Yes sir—Oh, no sir. You see when he shot her she screamed so he choked her to make her stop and believe *me*, she stopped.

SHREWD. Ah, you are quite clever at improvising but a bit slow. That is enough and more than enough.

NIT. Good night! (*goes to seat.*)

BLUSTER. Miss Nit will now take the stand. I. C. Nit and Ida Nit are Twins and where one goes the other goes. Tell the Jury your name.

I. NIT. Ida Nit.

BLUSTER. Will you inform us whether any female assisted in the murder of Miss Language?

I. NIT. Yes sir, I done it.

SHREWD. (*Jumping up and speaking sarcastically.*) Why did you "done it"?

I. NIT. Oh, I dunno. I guess I was jealous because Everyman admires her more than me.

SHREWD. Where did you first see the corpse, Miss English Language?

I. NIT. At the Hill School, but she weren't a corpse then.

SHREWD. When did you first get to know her?

I. NIT. At Central High School.

SHREWD. Is Miss English Language popular at Central?

I. NIT. Oh, the teachers all like her but she aint so awful popular with the kids. My pals was never on very familiar terms with her. Of course, at social gatherings she is always the queen bee, and if any pupil is to make a speech in assembly a' course the teachers always select her. In football assemblies though, O. U. Slang usually gets his innings.

SHREWD. How did Miss English Language meet her death?

I. NIT. She was gassed.

SHREWD. Oh, she was gassed, was she? First she was shot, next she was choked, and now she was gassed. Where was the gas procured?

I. NIT. From Baron Von Bernstorff. He had more gas than he could use and he always hated the English Language so he split with us. I guess next time she'll wear a gas mask.

SHREWD. Next time? How often can one person be murdered, pray?

I. NIT. Well it depends. Didn't you hear the Judge say some one is always murderin' the English Language?

SHREWD. You are wiser than you look. That is all.

(BLUSTER *motions for her to take her seat.*)

BLUSTER. One of my witnesses has escaped, Your Honor; Miss Malappropriate was to testify as to the character of the accused.

(*Enter Policeman with MISS MALAPPROPRIATE.*)

POLICE. I got her, Judge.

JUDGE. Where did you find her?

POLICE. Under the desk in Room 35.

MISS MAL. I haven't time to stay, Judge. I am writing an article for the "High School World" on "Simplicity in Speech" and it has to be in by twelve o'clock.

JUDGE. Either take the stand *now* or spend the eighth period in the office for the remainder of the term.

(MISS MALAPPROPRIATE *makes a rush for the stand.*)

BLUSTER. Miss Malappropriate, you may elucidate on the character of the accused.

MISS M. I can't talk, I am positively sterilized with fear.

SHREWD. Why, pray?

MISS M. That is the way Almost Everyman affects me.

SHREWD. You are different from most women then.

JUDGE. Proceed with the testimony.

MISS M. Yes, Your Honor, I consider Almost Everyman a very ubiquitous and metamorphic personage and I cannot panegyrize him too highly. Yet I will not attempt to palpitate his idiosyncrasies. When I first met him, he had just perigranated to this country from England. He has no nostalgic habits and always absconds from spiritual liquors. His disposition is loving and synthetic but never till today have I seen him completely overcome by his emulsions. I presume the accretion of events has thrown him into this catamouse condition. I never—

A JURYMEN. Have a heart, we don't get your drift.

(During MISS M's speech, a long whiskered Jurymen leaps to the big dictionary on a stand near by and tries to look up the words but gives up in despair.)

FOREMAN OF JURY. If you please, Judge, the Jury would like an interpreter. She goes so fast the dictionarian can't keep up with her.

BLUSTER. I think that will do, unless Mr. Shrewd wishes to cross-question the witness.

SHREWD. I will deny myself that pleasure and I suggest you procure an alienist at once and engage a padded cell.

MISS M. I was about to state—

JUDGE. Officer, put the witness back where you found her and lock the door.

POLICE. Yes, Your Honor.

(Takes her arm and leads her across the stage. She talks all the way across.)

This is no way to treat a lady of erudition and perspicacity. He invited me to promulgate my ideas and—

(Exit POLICE and MISS M.)

BLUSTER. The last witness for the state is Miss Careless. She is not intentionally bad but her lazy habits constantly get her into trouble.

(Nods to her and she takes the stand after being sworn in by the CLERK.)

What is your full name?

MISS C. Miss B. Careless. *(Yawns)*

BLUSTER. Where were you on the night of December first?

MISS C. Well really, I don't remember.

BLUSTER. Were you near Idlers' Alley?

MISS C. Now that you mention it, I believe I was.

SHREWD. Your Honor, I object to the manner of putting the question.

JUDGE. Objection sustained.

(*Turns to Clerk.*) Scratch that out.

BLUSTER. Miss Careless, do you remember any unusual event which happened on December first?

MISS C. (*Powdering her nose and looking in vanity-box mirror.*) Yes, that was the night Miss English Language was murdered.

BLUSTER. Have you any idea who the villainous culprit was who committed the gruesome deed?

MISS C. A fella called Almost Everyman. He stabbed her with an infected knitting needle.

BLUSTER. How did you know it was Almost Everyman?

MISS C. I recognized him by his pearly teeth and gray spats.

BLUSTER. (*Holding up a gray spat.*) Is this familiar to you?

MISS C. Uhuh! that's one of em, aint it? Is that gore on it?

SHREWD. (*Rising.*) I wish to question the witness. Where did he procure the knitting needle? Gentlemen do not usually carry knitting needles on their persons.

MISS C. Everyman aint no gentleman. As to the needle, I snatched it from the lady's bag when they was interviewin' each other and passed it on to him.

SHREWD. How did the needle happen to be poisoned?

MISS C. Oh, I always carry a little bottle of Paris green around with me for emergencies. If he'd a let *me* manage the business we never would a been caught; just as sure as you let a man handle a delicate job, he's sure to spill the beans.

JUDGE. If we are to continue this case, I must insist upon the witness speaking a language I can understand. Now what have *beans* got to do with this case and *why* were they spilled?

BLUSTER. That is only a figure of speech, Your Honor. The Jury understands the terms so it is unnecessary for Your Honor to comprehend them. The witness is dismissed. (MISS C. *steps down.*) Before turning the case over to the defense, I wish to invite the attention of the Jury to the pathos of the situation. Bailiff, will you and the police officer now bring in the corpse. (*Funeral march played on the piano, corpse, dressed in white with wreath of flowers around her neck and light flowing tresses, brought in on a cot covered with a lavender cloth, and set down, right center.*) This is one of the saddest cases it has ever been my fortune to handle. Here

is all that remains of a beautiful and cultured lady. She was mowed down in the springtime of life, the roses of youth still blooming on her cheeks. Of her, might the poet have said,

Gather ye rosebuds while ye may,
Old time is still a flying.
And this same flower that smiles today,
Tomorrow may be dying.

(*Wipes his eyes, Jury show signs of emotion.*) I will now turn the case over to the defense.

(SHREWD *whispers to* CLIENT.)

SHREWD. Your Honor, and ladies and gentlemen of the Jury: My client has decided to plead guilty. He confesses to having killed the victim in four distinct and different ways but pleads extenuating circumstances. He says he was never brought up to consider the murder of the English Language a serious matter and only now has he come to realize the iniquity of his crime. Ladies and Gentlemen of the Jury, I ask you to look upon this young man with the eyes of a parent. Have you not allowed your *own* sons to grow up with a careless regard for the beautiful English Language, and if so, can you conscientiously consign this young life to perdition? I ask you—

(*Corpse slowly begins to sit up; every one stares in astonishment.*)

ENGLISH LANG. (*Right arm gestures upwards*)

“Truth crushed to earth shall rise again.”

(EVERYMAN *kneels beside the cot.*)

EVERYMAN. Oh beautiful and adorable maiden forgive my hideous crime. My admiration for you now knows no bounds. Pronounce but the magic word, pardon, and henceforth I will serve you with my life.

ENG. LANG. (Almost Everyman, I have received rough treatment at your hands, but I will pardon your evil acts on condition that you go out into the world and preach the gospel of pure speech. (EVERYMAN *takes her hand and kisses it.*)

JUDGE. (*pounding on desk.*) The corpse will please come to order. As the evidence is now all in—

JURYMAN. So are we!

BAILIFF. Order in the court.

JUDGE. I charge the Jury to decide this case solely on the evidence presented. If you decide that Miss English Language is dead and that Almost Everyman killed her in cold blood, I direct you

to bring in a verdict "Guilty of murder in the first degree." If the witnesses have proved her to be dead you must not allow the evidence of your own eyes to influence your decision. This is purely a legal matter and Justice has no place in a murder trial. If you decide on the evidence that Miss English Language was not killed, but only wounded, and that it was an act done, not in cold blood, but on the spur of the minute and due to evil influence, you may recommend clemency. The Jury may now retire.

(Jury consults in pantomime, one of the feminine jurors shakes her head violently and moves away down left, toward footlights; three men surround her, arguing with here and she finally yields. All are again seated but the Foreman.)

FOREMAN. Your Honor, on account of the youth of the offender we recommend that he be given another chance on condition that he promise to keep out of bad company and never again to associate with his old friends, O. U. Slang, I. C. Nit, Ida Nit, Miss Malappropriate and Bee Careless.

JUDGE. Almost Everyman, do you pledge yourself to follow the advice of the Jury? (EVERYMAN rises.)

EVERYMAN. I do, Your Honor. I henceforth abjure all evil companions and will take up the sword for the purest of maidens, the beautiful Miss English Language.

JUDGE. The accused is then acquitted, but let this be a lesson to you, Almost Everyman, to revere Pure Speech and respect her progeny. You are not a law unto yourself and it is your duty to follow the high standards set you by Education. If you offend a second time you will not get off so easily. The court stands adjourned.

(As curtain descends, ENGLISH LANGUAGE places her wreath about the neck of ALMOST EVERYMAN, who is again on his knees to her.)