

The Man That Corrupted Hadleyburg

by

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DESCRIPTION

An adaptation of the Mark Twain story.

CHARACTERS

- MAN—also plays POSTMAN and CURIOSITIES DEALER
- EDWARD RICHARDS, husband to MARY
- MARY RICHARDS, wife to RICHARD
- UTILITY 1—SCHOOL TEACHER, REV. BURGESS
- UTILITY 2—PUPIL, HADLEYBURGIAN
- UTILITY 3—HADLEYBURGIAN

SET

- Chairs
- Seven hanging wires

NOTE: The action of hanging the letters from the wires can be dispensed with. The play works just as well if BURGESS has the seven letters in his pocket as his speech begins.

* * * * *

On the stage, seated: UTILITY 3, and EDWARD and MARY RICHARDS, dressed in shabby but respectable clothes. In front of them UTILITY 1 as SCHOOL TEACHER and UTILITY 2 as PUPIL.

SCHOOL TEACHER

It is said that if a man says he's from Hadleyburg, he need no other reference—the job is his without question.

Everyone applauds.

SCHOOL TEACHER

And so, in conclusion to Hadleyburg's Old Home Day celebration,
we give you "The Lesson."

SCHOOL TEACHER turns to PUPIL, nods. PUPIL nods back.

SCHOOL TEACHER

—and forgive us our trespasses—

PUPIL

(following)

—and forgive us our thres-passes—

SCHOOL TEACHER

(correcting)

Tres—

PUPIL

Thres—

SCHOOL TEACHER

Tres!

PUPIL

Tres—

SCHOOL TEACHER

As we forgive those who trespass against us—

PUPIL

(catching up)

—forget those who tres[pass]—

SCHOOL TEACHER

Forgive!

PUPIL

Sorry—forgive.

UTILITY 3

I did the same thing!

SCHOOL TEACHER
Good—and lead us not into temptation—

PUPIL
(struggling to catch up)
Temptation—

SCHOOL TEACHER
And deliver us from evil—

PUPIL
(overlapping)
And discover us from evil—

SCHOOL TEACHER
Deliver, not discover!

PUPIL
Sorry.

UTILITY 3
Uh-oh!

SCHOOL TEACHER
Why would you want to discover evil?

PUPIL
Didn't Adam—

SCHOOL TEACHER
To indulge in evil is to corrupt the pride that we in Hadleyburg take
in our incorruptible honesty.

PUPIL
Sorry.

SCHOOL TEACHER
“Sorry” is unacceptable. Stand forward.

PUPIL stands.

UTILITY 3

I know what's coming.

SCHOOL TEACHER canes the student a few times symbolically.

UTILITY 3

That was me!

SCHOOL TEACHER

All right—one last time.

PUPIL

Lead us not into temptation and deliver us from evil. Amen.

SCHOOL TEACHER

Thus we apply the bleach of purity to the stain of human imperfection to keep Hadleyburg's reputation for honesty pure and intact from generation to generation.

MARY, EDWARD, and UTILITY 3 applaud as SCHOOL TEACHER and PUPIL bow. Then SCHOOL TEACHER and PUPIL lead the crowd in the Hadleyburg cheer [sung roughly to the tune of the Marine Corps hymn].

SCHOOL TEACHER & PUPIL

Wherever one may travel
From Hartford to Hong Kong
They all know that Hadleyburg
Is as honest as the day is long.

Everyone else joins in.

ALL

When our guardian angels
Raise their heavenly song
They praise the fact that Hadleyburg
Is as honest as the day is long.

Cheers and applause as all exit except MARY, who moves into the RICHARDS' living room. MARY sits and reads. A second chair is nearby. MAN knocks. He wears an eye-patch. On his shoulder is a heavy burlap bag.

MARY

Come in.

MAN enters and slams the bag down.

MAN
There—good—

MARY
Who are you?

MAN
Mary Richards?

MARY
Yes.

MAN
Have no fear—

MARY
What are you doing?

MAN
The bag—it's quite concealed, don't you think?

The bag is quite visible. MAN hands her an envelope.

MAN
You really can't see it, can you?

MARY looks at the bag, looks at MAN, considers, then moves her head in agreement.

MAN
Good. Please give that letter to your husband—Edward, correct?
Edward Richards, of the Hadleyburg bank?

MARY
Only their best employee.

MAN
Please give that to Mr. Richards when he returns tonight—and
only to him—I can trust you, a good honest Hadleyburgian, to do
that?

MARY again nods yes.

MAN

I thought so. That will explain everything. Good night.

MARY

Who are [you]—

But MAN has moved into the shadows. He removes his eye-patch. MARY puts the letter on the bag, walks away.

MARY

That man scared me so—polite, handsome even—but in his face—that one eye—

MARY stops, hesitates, then walks back, handles the letter, puts it down, picks it up, all the time muttering to herself.

MARY

But we are, after all, married—share everything—he frightened me so, I have a right to learn what—no, no, he said it was for Edward—but still—stop it, you promised—well, I didn't actually promise—I only moved my head in a sort of indefinite way—

Finally, temptation cannot be resisted, and she opens the letter. She reads—MAN sees everything, snaps his fingers, exits.

As MARY reads the letter, lights shift. EDWARD enters, stands over the bag. MARY scurries to sit, hands him the letter.

MARY

I was just reading my Missionary Herald when that man [barged]—

EDWARD

(touching bag)

One hundred and sixty pounds, four ounces, of gold coin.

MARY

Is—is that a lot of money, Edward?

EDWARD

Forty thousand dollars, Mary. At the bank I handle gold coin every day, but never—this much—and all at once—

EDWARD moves to the chairs, perusing the letter, sits, then looks up, stunned.

MARY

What is it?

EDWARD

I'm just thinking—it's a rare thing, isn't it? This stranger, out of nowhere, leaves off forty thousand dollars because he wants to make amends by doing a good turn for someone in Hadleyburg who did him a good turn. Isn't that—well, amazing—

MARY joins him.

MARY

I know—"I am grateful to a citizen of Hadleyburg, whose name I do not know, for a kindness done to me a year or two ago"—I remember it because it seems poem-like, to rhyme—

EDWARD

"I am grateful to a citizen of Hadleyburg, whose name I do not know"—you're right!

(reading)

But this odd challenge to find that citizen—didn't you find that odd?

MARY

(distracted)

Yes—odd—

EDWARD

Feels sort of jury-rigged. We have to post a notice in the newspaper, then hold a big meeting at the town hall one month from the day it appears in the newspaper. Anyone claiming the money hands Reverend Burgess an envelope with the words inside, and the Reverend compares that envelope to an envelope in the bag that has the original words of advice. If they match—bam! that someone is forty thousand dollars richer.

MARY

But who, Edward?

EDWARD

My question exactly.

(half-laughing)

Who would have loaned a stranger in Hadleyburg twenty dollars—
my salary for almost two weeks!—not like strangers are very
welcomed here—

MARY

About as welcome as a skunk on the Sabbath—

EDWARD

But then not only giving it but being convincing enough to give the
man along with the money the advice to go and reform his life—
and the man would have thought highly enough of the advice-
giver and the advice to follow it—

MARY

It wasn't us.

EDWARD

No, Mary, not us—

MARY

(gazing at the bag)

When have we ever had the money—

EDWARD

That's true, Mary dear, but we have our health, I have a job, we
have our honesty, our probity—

MARY

You can't eat honesty or probity. You can't go on a vacation
with— I'm sorry—

EDWARD

Being poor tires me out as well, Mary, you know it does.

For a moment, they are tired together by their poverty.

MARY

Well, Edward, if not us, then who?

EDWARD

That's what I'm cracking my brain on—of those who could afford to give away twenty dollars, I can't think of a one who would do it, much less chase it with any advice worth following: Pinkerton, the banker, my boss, I know him too well—Wilson, the lawyer—

MARY

Billson, the accountant—

EDWARD

Especially not him—in fact, none of our Pillars of the Community would have done it—Harkness, Yates, Whitworth, Baskerville—they'll pinch a penny 'til it cries "Aunt" and "Uncle."

MARY and EDWARD look at each other and say the name at the same time.

MARY & EDWARD

Barclay Goodson.

EDWARD

Who else?

MARY

But he died last year.

EDWARD
(laughing)

Maybe he faked it—

MARY

We saw him in his grave!

EDWARD

That man had enough piss—

MARY

Edward!

EDWARD

—and vinegar in him to preserve him against mortality and the worm! Well, he did!

MARY

I reckon he did.

EDWARD

(shifting voice)

“Some day, for your sins, you will die and go to Hell or Hadleyburg—try to make it Hell!”

(back to his own voice)

No need to embalm Barclay Goodson!

MARY drifts over to the bag, caresses it.

EDWARD

He’s the only one I can think of who would have had the twenty dollars and the force of character to make his advice stick in a stranger. What are you doing?

MARY

If Goodson did it—

EDWARD

Which we don’t know that for sure—don’t touch the bag like [that]—

MARY

And Goodson has no heirs—

EDWARD

Mary!

MARY

Wouldn’t it be finders-keepers?

MARY moves quickly to EDWARD.

MARY

Who else knows about this but us? We signed no receipt—if the man returned asking how things turned out, we’d laugh in his face—“Fool! What bag?”

Suddenly, MARY has a violent reaction to her own words, and EDWARD has to catch her before she swoons.

EDWARD

You see—so strong is the honesty in us that our very bodies—

MARY

(holding up her hand)

Stop it!

(calmer)

Stop it.

MARY catches her breath.

MARY

And so our honesty—and so our honesty makes us fools again.
Go post the challenge—go now—get it out of [here]—

EDWARD

I don't want to leave you [like this]—

MARY

Go! And make sure that bag goes with you—stick it in the bank,
away from—but tell me one thing before you leave me. No, we
can't just steal it—as rational as that would be—as any normal
person [would]—

(catches herself)

—but since no one else can claim it except Goodson
resurrected—

EDWARD

We don't know—

MARY

We know!—tell me if you have also thought what I have just
thought—married as we are.

They look at one another.

MARY

You have, haven't you?

EDWARD

Yes—I hate to admit it—

MARY

Go on.

EDWARD

If we could only guess the advice in the envelope.

MARY

That's at least an honest honesty, Edward, not a Hadleyburg honesty. Now go before I—

EDWARD

Let's not think on this.

MARY

Might as well say, "Don't breathe." Go.

EDWARD stares at MARY. MARY contemplates the bag. Lights out. Bag and banner are taken off. Transition: the Marine Hymn

* * * * *

Lights up. MARY and EDWARD in their living room, rocking, distraught: they are no closer to figuring out the advice. MAN steps into the shadows, now a postman holding an over-sized letter, and knocks. Neither stirs. MAN knocks again. Then a third time. Finally, EDWARD gets up, goes to the door.

MAN

(rapidly)

Letter for Mr. Edward Richards, are you Edward Richards, sure, good, sign here, and here, and here, thanks, let a smile be your umbrella, good day.

As EDWARD opens the letter, MAN moves upstage to the hanging wires. As EDWARD reads the letter, MAN holds up for the audience exactly the same over-sized letter, then clips that letter to a wire. He does this for seven letters. Each letter bears the name, in bold letters, of a Community Pillar: Pinkerton, Wilson, Billson, Harkness, Yates, Whitworth, Baskerville.

MAN then turns and watches.

EDWARD skims the letter—then, with a jolt, devours it. MARY notices the change, rises, reads over his shoulder. Their despair turns to joy.

EDWARD

“You are far from being a bad man: go, and reform”—that’s the phrase—that’s the phrase! Apparently, it was Barclay Goodson who gave away the money and advice—

MARY rips the letter out of EDWARD’s hand and skims it.

MARY

I knew it! I knew it was Goodson!

EDWARD takes it back.

EDWARD

Seems the letter comes from someone who was with Goodson the night he gave the money to the stranger—overheard the remark. Unsigned, though—that’s odd—whoever spent time with Goodson—like hugging a hedgehog—
(looks at MARY)
Goodson didn’t have a friend in Hadleyburg—

MARY looks in astonishment and admiration at EDWARD.

MARY

He had a friend in you. You never told me, married as we are.

EDWARD

What?

MARY

That Goodson had always wanted to pay you back for something you had done that was a service to him—

MARY takes back the letter.

MARY

It says it right there. What had you done for that bilious old man?

EDWARD takes back the letter.

EDWARD

(murmuring)

“Possibly without knowing the full value of it”—

MARY

I can't hear you—

EDWARD

I—I—

MARY

Come on, out with it!

EDWARD

Well, Mary, it also says that if you hadn't done such a service to Goodson, find the man who did because he is Goodson's rightful heir—"I know that I can trust to your honor and honesty."

MARY

You did the service to Goodson, didn't you?

EDWARD nods and shakes his head, shrugs, all in a non-committal, indefinite way, gives a sickly sort of smile. MAN exits.

MARY

(much heartened)

You should have told me, Edward, that you had done such a fine thing for such an unfine man.

EDWARD

I—I—couldn't have told you.

MARY

Even to me?

EDWARD

I—promised him—that was it—I promised him I wouldn't tell a soul.

MARY scrutinizes EDWARD.

EDWARD

Do you think I would lie to you?

MARY relents.

MARY

I have wandered far from our bearings—in all your life you have never uttered a lie. Enough. Enough. Let us be happy—you, the legitimate heir to Barclay Goodson.

EDWARD

Yes—

MARY

We shall be poor no more!

MARY sits.

MARY

Now, let's see—

MARY rocks, contented. EDWARD moves into a separate light.

EDWARD

What was it that I had done for him? I don't remember doing anything for him—our paths rarely—well, maybe never—crossed—maybe it was—no, it couldn't have been that—

While EDWARD continues miming his struggle, UTILITY 1, UTILITY 2, and UTILITY 3 come out with a fine hat, a shawl, a tea cup, and other paraphernalia of the rich and, as MARY's dream, dress her out and refine her. Perhaps music with this as well.

Finally, EDWARD manages to convince himself of a story that convinces himself.

EDWARD

Yes, that must have been it! That's the ticket.

At the same moment, MARY's dream ends, leaving her blissed and blessed. EDWARD returns, sits next to MARY, and together they rock contentedly.

MARY

Are we all right?

EDWARD

We are all right.

MARY

Do you have your envelope ready for tomorrow?

EDWARD

It will be ready in the morning.

MARY

And so will I.

They rock. Lights out. Carnival music.

* * * * *

Lights up on REV. BURGESS upstage. The bag sits next to him. MARY is seated downstage right, empty seat next to her. Off to one side is EDWARD, an envelope in his hand.

EDWARD sidles up to BURGESS with his envelope.

BURGESS

Edward, what are you doing?

EDWARD

Just take it, Rev. Burgess—please.

BURGESS

Even though your heart may have wanted to give it, I know you never had twenty extra dollars to give anyone.

EDWARD

Just take—

BURGESS

You don't know everything that is going on here—I can't take—I shouldn't take—

EDWARD

You have to—

BURGESS

Edward. Edward! When you helped me out of that delicate situation a year ago, I swore I would find a way to repay your kindness—your courage—to help a man whom others believed the worst of—that could not have been easy—

EDWARD

I did what I did because you had always been kind to Mary and me—now, take the envelope!

BURGESS

This is an Edward I have never seen.

BURGESS takes the envelope.

EDWARD

We shall see what we shall see.

EDWARD sits next to MARY.

UTILITY 3 plays a snare drum in a military tattoo, then stops, and, blowing on a kazoo, trumpets a call to order. MAN, in disguise, slips in. UTILITY 2 enters as a HADLEYBURGIAN. As he speaks, BURGESS fidgets, as if his skin is two sizes too small.

BURGESS

Today we meet a stranger's challenge to Hadleyburg's old reputation for spotless honesty. Today we have before us a—test—for we know that there is not a person in this community who would be beguiled to touch a penny not his own. We must see to it that this grace is never betrayed.

(a nervous pause)

Is there anything that anyone wishes to say before we begin? Perhaps from the Pillars of the Community? If there is anything the Pillars of the Community wish to say before we begin, now would be your best time to say it.

SILENCE. UTILITY 3 begins a drum roll as BURGESS pulls the first envelope from the hanging wire and opens it.

BURGESS

"The remark which I made to the stranger was this: 'You are far from being a bad man: go, and reform.'"

UTILITY 2

Who signed it?

BURGESS

Signed Malcolm Billson.

UTILITY 2 & UTILITY 3

Then he's the one!

(look of puzzlement)

He's the one? Skinflint Billson?

UTILITY 2

If Billson could do it, he'd charge you a water tax for your tears!

UTILITY 3

His wallet is as tight as bark on a tree!

UTILITY 2

He's so stingy that he charges his parents rent to visit!

UTILITY 3

Reverend, that can't be right.

BURGESS

Well—

As he speaks, BURGESS pulls down the rest of the letters.

BURGESS

I don't know if I have better, but I do have—four, five, six—more.

UTILITY 2

Six kind people in Hadleyburg?

UTILITY 3

We got us some pretenders to the throne!

BURGESS proceeds to open the letters.

BURGESS

“You are far from free being a bad man—”

UTILITY 2 & UTILITY 3

“Go, and reform”—we knew it!

UTILITY 2

Who says?

BURGESS

Lawyer Wilson.

UTILITY 2

Buffalo chips. Next.

BURGESS

“You are far—”

UTILITY 3

We got it. Who says?

BURGESS

Banker Pinkerton.

UTILITY 2

The man who tried to buy up real estate in Heaven? Don't think so!

UTILITY 3

Just give us a quick run-down of the rest, Reverend.

BURGESS goes through the letters. UTILITY 2 and UTILITY 3 whoop and holler after each name or ad-lib a comment.

BURGESS

Harkness, Yates, Whitworth, and Baskerville.

UTILITY 3

Seven claiming to be the one.

UTILITY 2

Even Jesus only tried to put three into one!

BURGESS

Everyone, please—

UTILITY 2

The stranger made out well—twenty dollars times seven—

EDWARD

(holding MARY's hand)

We're the eighth, Mary—doomed.

BURGESS

Please, enough! It appears that those seven letters are all I have.

UTILITY 2

Look at all—

UTILITY 3

The Pillars fall!

MARY

We're saved!

EDWARD

I cannot stand this.

MARY

But Edward—

EDWARD

Not for another second.

UTILITY 2

They all look like they're sucking lemons—

EDWARD

Not until we confess, Mary—

MARY

Don't be fool[ish]—

UTILITY 3

And sucking 'em from both ends!

EDWARD

—not until we confess.

EDWARD stands.

MARY

Oh, don't—

EDWARD

My friends, you have known us two—

MARY

(harsh whisper)

Sit down!

UTILITY 2 & UTILITY 3

Hurray and huzzah for that honest man and woman!

BURGESS

Mr. Richards, I agree with them—this town does know you two, it honors and loves you—

UTILITY 2 & UTILITY 3

Huzzah and hurray for that honest woman and man!

EDWARD

What I was going to say—

BURGESS

We know your good heart, but this is not a time for the exercise of charity toward offenders.

EDWARD

That wasn't what—

MARY stands, clamps his arm in her hands.

MARY

(harsh whisper)

Take the gift!

BURGESS

I see the generous purpose in your face, but I cannot allow you to plead for these men.

(with meaning)

Edward and Mary, with our thanks, you may sit yourselves down.

UTILITY 2 & UTILITY 3

All stand up as the good man and good woman sit down.

EDWARD sits, half-pulled by MARY, half-falling. Defeated.

UTILITY 2

What's in the sack?

UTILITY 3

Yeah, Reverend, let's let that cat out of the bag!

UTILITY 3 does a drum roll as BURGESS undoes the sack and takes out a folded note. As he scans it, a dark cloud passes over his face.

BURGESS

Well—well—

UTILITY 3

“Well” is a deep subject, Reverend.

UTILITY 2

Pull up the bucket, Reverend.

BURGESS

Well—you're right—there's nothing to do but pull up the bucket.

(holds up note)

It says on the outside, “To be read only if anyone submits a response.”

UTILITY 3

You got seven reasons to read it.

BURGESS

And so I must. “There is no test remark—nobody made one.”

UTILITY 2

Yowser.

UTILITY 3

Yowser.

BURGESS

“No stranger, no twenty-dollar contribution, no advice—all these were my invention. And why? One of your prominent Pillars once insulted me. Built as I am, normally I would have killed the man and been done with it. But something in me wanted a deeper damage—but what could be a deeper damage than death? Something that would make the living want to die—and I knew I had it: the vaulted vanity of Hadleyburg. I decided to probe your reputation for honesty to see if it held as much water as you say it does. If you are now reading or hearing this, your reputation has failed the examination, as I knew it would. Because there is nothing easier than to make liars and thieves out of those who have never really had their virtue tested in the fire.”

Silence descends.

UTILITY 2

Reverend, what else is in the bag?

BURGESS reaches in and pulls out a couple of coins, examines them.

BURGESS

As is only appropriate—a thin layer of guilt over a lead plug.

UTILITY 3

Hoooo—now ain't that symbolical.

MAN steps out of the shadows.

MAN

There are two, however, who do not deserve the tar brush the Pillars have earned.

BURGESS

And who are you?

MAN

I deal in the buying and selling all sorts of curiosities.

BURGESS

How convenient.

MAN

I am a moth, and this is a flame, so here I am. You cannot imagine what people will spend their money on—but I can. Which is why I come bearing a deal. You have two rare people among you—people who are actually honest—Edward and Mary Richards touched the sack and did not come away corrupted. And they should be rewarded.

MAN pulls a checkbook out of his inner pocket.

MAN

(to EDWARD and MARY)

I am willing to write you both a check for forty thousand dollars for that bag of gilded lead. Believe me, I will be able to sell them for much more than that once the results of your contest spread throughout the wire services. Do you accept? A reward for your honesty?

Everyone waits for EDWARD and MARY to decide.

EDWARD

It is probably best if we keep the bag—as a reminder. A lesson.

MAN

Is there any amount I can offer?

EDWARD

No.

MAN

Going once, going twice—

MAN puts away his checkbook.

MAN

Gone.

(to BURGESS)

Treasure them—they're the best your town has to offer.

Lights shift as MAN, UTILITY 2, and UTILITY 3 exit. BURGESS joins EDWARD and MARY.

BURGESS

I told you I swore to find a way to repay your kindness to me. A small lie but well worth telling it. I believe we are now square.

MARY

And so what do we do now?

EDWARD

Yes—what do we do now?

BURGESS

That is entirely up to your consciences.

BURGESS exits. MARY and EDWARD stare at the bag, then move their chairs upstage to make their living room. The bag remains in shadow. They sit. They say nothing.

EDWARD

Our consciences? What do you think he meant by that?

MARY

I don't know, Edward—I am too tired to think anymore—too tired to feel anymore.

EDWARD

I think—I think he was being sarcastic, Mary.

MARY

Reverend Burgess?

EDWARD

I think he wanted to—
(with a twisting motion)
—stick in the knife and—

MARY

He saved our repu[tations]—

EDWARD

Ah, but—but—did you notice?—he didn't give us back the note we gave him—did you note that? He's holding on to it for a purpose!

MARY

Stop agitating yourself—what purpose could he [have]—

EDWARD

To expose us—I'll bet you he has already done that to one or a few—didn't you observe the queer looks—

MARY

What looks?

EDWARD

—we got in church—the way people congratulated us—

MARY

They were—

EDWARD

Didn't you sense the little edge they gave to their congratulations—a little sneer—

MARY

I saw nothing like that—

EDWARD

—a little nod and wink—

MARY

Edward—

EDWARD

You saw nothing?

MARY

Well—

EDWARD

Nothing? Come on!

MARY

Now—now that you mention it—

EDWARD

Hah! You saw it, didn't you?

MARY

Well, perhaps a little [edge]—

EDWARD

Hah!

MARY

Maybe—

EDWARD

I knew it!

MARY

Edward, we are over-tired—let's just rest—

EDWARD

How can I rest? How can I rest when my soul weighs one hundred and sixty pounds?

MARY

And four ounces.

EDWARD

And four ounces. Doesn't your soul weigh that much?

MARY

I confess it weighs even heavier.

EDWARD

How can we carry that around?

EDWARD rises, moves to the bag, circles it.

EDWARD

Burgess knows. And if he knows, then others will know—they'll all be against us—the Pillars will drag us down, too—Burgess will tell them that I am the man that corrupted Hadleyburg and they will not take it kindly—

MARY joins him.

EDWARD

No more—I cannot abide the presence of—

With a heave, EDWARD manages to get the bag up onto his shoulder, though his frame can barely hold the weight.

EDWARD

Into the river with this—

MARY

Edward, you'll [hurt yourself]—

EDWARD

Let—me—pass—by—

But before he can take another step, EDWARD crumples under—and he falls in such a way that the bag covers his head. MARY tries to move the bag as he struggles against suffocating, but she can't, and he dies.

MARY reaches into the bag and takes out two coins. She leans her head back, places a coin on each closed eye.

BLACKOUT