

**The Library of America • Story of the Week**

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*Headnote by James Shapiro.*

This text of Locke's play is taken from a 1920 edition printed in Philadelphia.

## Belle Marshall Locke

(1867–1933)

### *The Hiartville Shakespeare Club*

Belle Marshall Locke, a New Hampshire native, was already writing for popular publications as a teenager. Though she married young, she continued to write ballads, operas, and comedies, including “A Modern Desdemona,” studied under Edna Chaffee Noble (famous for her Detroit Training School of Elocution and English Literature), taught drama and speech, directed plays and operas, and published her work, including *The Hiartville Shakespeare Club* (regrettably, “A Modern Desdemona” does not appear to have survived). In the two decades before Locke wrote this farce about a women’s reading and acting group, set in an imaginary Hiartville, Shakespeare clubs, most of them run by and for women, had begun to spread across the country. Her skit, for performance by seven young women, depended on her female readers’ easy familiarity with these groups and, no doubt, with the pretensions of some of them (signaled in the pun on “High Art” in her title and the name she gives to the club’s president, Maria Knowitall). By the early twentieth century there were more than five hundred Shakespeare clubs across the country, in rural as well as urban areas, and they played a significant role in the popularization of Shakespeare in middle-class America. These clubs forged intellectual communities, promoted self-education, supported libraries, encouraged performance, and often chronicled their activities (gently parodied in Locke’s story when Maria mistakenly reads from a cookbook instead of the “secretary’s book”). By the end of World War II, as more women entered the workplace and universities, the clubs’ cultural moment had passed and, until recently, when scholars like Katherine West Scheil turned their attention to it, their part in the story of Shakespeare in America had been largely forgotten.



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## A FARCE IN ONE ACT FOR GIRLS.

## CHARACTERS.

CAROLINE GUSHINGTON, the hostess.

MARIA KNOWITALL, president of the club.

DAISY LIGHTHEART,

MERRIE WEATHERVANE,

ROSE BUDD,

NAN GIDDY,

NORA O'BRIEN, a servant

} members of the club.

SCENE.—*Miss Gushington's parlor. Small table with pictures and books upon it; larger table with writing materials; couch with pillows and afghan; large and small screen, chairs, etc. Nora discovered with carpet-sweeper sweeping.*

NORA O'BRIEN. Sure the Shak-a-spear class is comin' here to-day and Miss Caroline says for me to fix the room. (*Sets carpet-sweeper off the stage.*) "Don't set the chairs back stiff," says she, "but kind o' careless loike." (*Takes two chairs from up stage, and arranges at center, backs together.*) I wonder will that suit her. "Give the room an air of aise and comfort," says she. Faith, I don't know what that manes, but I'll thry an' toss things up in an aisy-lookin' fashion. (*Throws two books on floor and pulls table-cover awry.*) Maybe this Shak-a-spear class wants their room to luk as if there had been a scrimmage. (*Turns chair over, at larger table, and throws sofa-pillow on floor.*)

*Enter Caroline Gushington.*

CAROLINE. For mercy's sake, Nora, what are you doing?

NORA. Fixin' things careless loike, miss (*pushing couch out*).

CAROLINE. Stop, instantly! You are the stupidest girl I ever knew. Re-arrange everything in place. You do not understand me; (*sentimentally*) so few do! I wanted an air of unstudied grace about the room, not a Pandemonium effect.

NORA (*aside*). Phat's that she's sayin' (*arranging furniture*)!

CAROLINE. But you have no soul!

NORA (*dropping chair*). Oh, my!

CAROLINE. Figuratively speaking, I mean.

NORA (*helplessly, aside*). She'll drive me clane mad wid those big words. No soul, is it?

CAROLINE. Do not stand there, conversing with yourself! It is a bad fashion. I would rid myself of it.

NORA (*aside*). There she goes agin!

CAROLINE. *Will you cease?* My nerves are sensitive to-day and your voice has a discordant tone that grates upon them horribly. You may go now. I would be alone.

NORA (*looking at her pityingly, aside*). She's losin' her wits, poor thing! [Exit.

CAROLINE (*sitting at larger table*). What a world we live in! If I could create a place for mortals to abide, I'd set apart a little corner for the delicate, highly-organized beings like myself, where they could dwell in an intellectual atmosphere, undisturbed by the common herd. (*Looks at watch.*) Two o'clock; quite time for the Shakspeare class to arrive.

NORA (*looking in at door*). Miss Knowitall is here, miss!

CAROLINE. Show her in.

*Enter Maria Knowitall preceded by Nora. Exit Nora.*

CAROLINE (*rising and extending hand*). My dear Marie! how do you do?

MARIA (*shaking hands heartily*). In perfect health, Caroline, but I do wish you would drop that absurd fashion of calling me Marie! M-a-r-i-a spells Maria.

CAROLINE. But the French is so much softer, *chérie*.

MARIA. I haven't the slightest idea what that last word means and, as there is nothing soft in my nature, the English language is quite good enough for me.

CAROLINE. Ah! you are such a practical girl!

MARIA (*seating herself at table*). Yes, practical to the ends of my fingers! (*Looks at watch.*) I am exactly on time, the *others* are late. 'Tis a detestable habit to keep people waiting! Don't you think so?

CAROLINE (*seating herself as before*). Detestable is a harsh word, my dear!

MARIA. Well, it means something, and I detest many people!

CAROLINE. I could never do that. It must be very fatiguing.

NORA (*at door*). The rist of the Shak-a-spear class is come, miss.

CAROLINE. Bid them enter, Nora, and assist the young ladies to remove their wraps.

NORA. Yis, miss. [*Exit.*]

MARIA (*looking at Caroline*). I wish I could shake some life into that girl!

*Enter Daisy Lightheart, Merrie Weathervane, Rose Budd and Nan Giddy.*

CAROLINE (*rising and shaking hands*). Welcome, ladies, to our intellectual feast! (*Girls go up stage arranging hair, looking about, chatting etc.*)

DAISY. Are we late? You see the girls called for me and we met Dick Generous at the corner, and he treated us to soda. Now there being two s's awaiting us, namely, Shakspeare, and soda, I took the soda first, as that wouldn't keep, and I knew Shakspeare would. Hope we haven't kept you waiting.

MARIA. Indeed you have!

DAISY. So sorry, but couldn't help it, you see. (*Maria starts to speak, Daisy interrupting.*) Now don't scold, but let's to work! We are in downright earnest, to-day, aren't we girls? (*Girls coming down exclaim in chorus: "Yes!" "Yes indeed!" "Just try us!"*)

CAROLINE. Pray be seated.

*Caroline, as before, at table. Girls bring chairs down near couch and exclaim in chorus: "Let me sit next you!" "Come over here!" "Don't pull my dress so!" Rose Budd and Nan Giddy, in chairs, right of couch. Merrie Weathervane and Daisy Lightheart, on couch.*

MARIA (*rapping on table*). Will the meeting please come to order! We will first listen to the reading of the secretary's report.

MERRIE (*going to table with book, opening it*). Angel Cake—good gracious! I've brought my cook-book. (*Girls giggle.*)

MARIA (*rapping on table*). Order! As none of us are ambitious to become dyspeptics, we will not take time to listen to your receipts.

MERRIE. They're better than yours! My cake was just lovely at the fair, the other night.

DAISY. That's so, Merrie! I ate two pieces and——

MARIA (*rapping*). Order! (*Merrie resumes seat.*) As this is to be an informal meeting, we shall enter at once into the discussion of the Shakspearean entertainment that we are to produce for the benefit of crippled foot-ball players. Those who have selected their scenes will demonstrate the fact by raising the right hand. (*All raise hands.*) That enables us to make out the programme (*taking pencil and paper*). Miss Lightheart, what is your selection?

DAISY. Miss Weathervane and myself are to do the balcony scene from "Romeo and Juliet." (*Maria writes.*)

MARIA. Miss Budd?

ROSE. Miss Giddy and myself have arranged a scene from the "Taming of the Shrew." (*Maria writes.*)

MARIA. And you, Miss Gushington?

CAROLINE. I have culled and arranged a few of Ophelia's mad sayings and shall endeavor to render them. (*M. writes.*)

MARIA. Which, with a selection by myself, will make quite a neat Shakspearean programme. And now that we are together, I propose that we have an impromptu rehearsal. What do you say?

*Girls clap hands and exclaim in chorus: "Oh, lovely! How nice! By all means!"*

MARIA (*rapping on table*). Order! Miss Budd, you and Miss Giddy may begin by rehearsing your scene.

NAN (*rising*). I am to impersonate Katharine, the shrew, and Miss Budd, my sister Bianca. We begin with *Act II. Scene I.* where Katharine has tied Bianca's hands.

ROSE (*rising*). I think, Miss Giddy, that you should explain that Bianca was a handsome, generous girl, and Katharine ugly in mind and body, else the motive for tying Bianca's hands might be misconstrued.

NAN. I shall do nothing of the sort. I do not intend to play Katharine in that manner; I shall make her a handsome, spirited young woman, or I shall not play the part.

ROSE. But Shakspeare represents her——

NAN. That has nothing to do with the case! *I* am to represent her this time, and if you think I am going on the stage looking old and wrinkled, you are mistaken!

MARIA (*rapping on table*). Order! Go on with your scene.

ROSE. Of course if you intend to make a guy of yourself——

NAN. Excuse me, that is just what I refuse to do.

MARIA. *Will you proceed? (Girls come center.)*

NAN. Hold out your hands (*taking handkerchief*).

ROSE. Now don't tie them so tight that they will look red as beets!

NAN. If you thought less of how you look, you'd get on much better with your part.

MARIA. Order! Go on with your selection.

NAN (*to Rose*). You begin.

ROSE (*as Bianca*). "Good sister, wrong me not, nor wrong yourself, to make a bondmaid and a slave of me. Unbind my hands!"

NAN (*as Katharine*). "Of all thy suitors, here I charge thee, tell whom thou lovest best: see thou dissemble not."

ROSE (*as Bianca*). "Believe me, sister, of all the men alive I never yet beheld that special face which I could fancy more than any other."

NAN (*as Katharine, seizing her by the shoulders*). "Minion, thou liest!"

ROSE. Hark (*turning head quickly*)! Oh, oh, dear! I've got a crick in my neck! This is terrible! (*Holds side of neck with both hands.*) I can't move my head an inch.

NAN. That's a pretty thing for you to do! You cut me out of my best speech. What if you had done that on the stage? Here, let me straighten it for you. (*Reaches out right arm, Rose throws out left arm quickly, hitting Nan in the face.*)

ROSE. Get away!

NAN (*holding on to nose*). Oh, you've hurt my nose! you've made it bleed! (*Takes handkerchief from pocket, on which has been put something to imitate blood, and holds it to nose.*) Oh! oh! oh!

MARIA (*rapping*). Order! As you both seem disabled, you had better retire and give some one else a chance.

*Caroline pushes chair from table up right, and assists Rose into it then rings bell. Enter Nora.*

CAROLINE. Bring some liniment and a roll of cotton, that you will find on my bureau, and bathe Miss Budd's neck.

NAN. No matter about my nose, I presume. (*Sits left.*)

NORA. Faith, I'll bathe that, too! (*Exit Nora, returning at once, with liniment and cotton. Nora runs from one to the other, bathes Rose's neck, and wets a large bunch of cotton, placing it on Nan's nose.*)

MARIA. It seems rather unfortunate that our first number should end in this way.

ROSE. It all came about in striving to be true to nature. The sentiment required the pose of listening. I gave a quick turn of the head, as I should, and I got a crick in my neck. Oh! Oh!

NAN. And your arm being muscular, which is not required, I got a bloody nose.

CAROLINE. But we must not mind such trifles when we are pursuing the road to high art. We must expect to meet obstacles and to overcome them. We should revel in the fact that we are students of nature and that we are studying the only true system. All others are base impositions and we must not hesitate to proclaim the fact.

MARIA. Stop talking and let us proceed with our programme. Miss Lightheart your number is next.

DAISY. But what will I do for a balcony?

MERRIE. I have an idea!

MARIA. Is it possible!

MERRIE. We will put a chair on the table and a screen around it, and another screen on the floor, and lo, you have your balcony! (*Arranges table, at which Maria has been seated, up L. C. with small screen around chair, which she places on table, and larger screen in front of table, or one large screen on floor can be used.*) But I can never do Romeo in this costume!

DAISY. I brought your moustache (*Gives box to her.*)

CAROLINE. Nora, bring my brother's mackintosh and the military hat he left in the hall. [*Exit Nora.*]

DAISY. Oh, Caroline, you're a genius!

CAROLINE. So I've oft been told.

*Enter Nora, with hat and coat, Merrie takes them and retires.*

DAISY. Now for the balcony! (*Mounts to chair assisted by Caroline.*) Oh, this is real cosy! Where is Merrie? (*Calls.*) I say, Romey!

MERRIE (*outside.*) Wait until I get fixed, can't you?

DAISY. Well, make haste! You must not keep your audience waiting.

*Enter Merrie with mackintosh, hat and moustache on. She carries a good-sized dry-goods box; placing it a short distance from table, she mounts it.*

MERRIE. Here I am, begin!

DAISY. You begin first, you know.

MERRIE. Oh, yes! (*as Romeo.*) "But soft, what light through yonder window breaks! It is the east and Juliet is the sun!"

DAISY (*as Juliet.*) "Oh, Romeo! Romeo! wherefore art thou Romeo?"

MERRIE (*as Romeo.*) "Shall I hear more, or shall I speak at this?"

DAISY (*as Juliet.*) "'Tis but thy name that is my enemy thou are thyself though, not a Montague. Oh, be some other name! What's in a name? that which we call a rose, by any other name would smell as sweet; so Romeo would, were he not Romeo called. Romeo, doff thy name and for that name, which is no part of thee, take all myself." Your moustache is crooked.

MERRIE (*as Romeo.*) "I take thee at thy word." (*Fixes moustache.*) Bother the thing! "Call me but love, and I'll be new baptized. Henceforth I never will be Romeo." I tell you I won't wear this moustache!

DAISY (*as Juliet.*) "What man art thou, that, thus bescreened in night, so stumblest on my counsel?"

MERRIE (*as Romeo.*) "By a name I know not how to tell thee who I am. My name, dear saint, is hateful to myself, because it is an enemy to thee. Had I it written, I would tear the word."

DAISY (*as Juliet.*) "My ears have not yet drunk a hundred words of that tongue's utterance, yet I know the sound. Art thou not Romeo and a Montague?"

MERRIE (*as Romeo.*) "Neither, fair saint, if either thee dislike."

DAISY (*as Juliet.*) "How cam'st thou hither, tell me? and wherefore? The orchard walls are high and hard to climb, and the place death, considering who thou art, if any of my kinsmen find thee here."

*Daisy rises, looks back, pushes chair off table and falls behind it, being hidden by screen. She screams violently. Merrie jumps off box to assist her and falls.*

MERRIE (*holding foot with both hands*). Oh, I've sprained my ankle! Oh, dear! Oh, dear!

DAISY. Oh! Oh! Oh!

*Maria pulls away screen and discovers Daisy on floor; her fore head has a red mark, made with grease-paint, while she was behind screen. She is crying hysterically. Caroline and Maria assist her to rise.*

CAROLINE. Place her on the couch. (*They do so.*)

NORA. Niver moind, there's plinty of liniment. (*She bathes Daisy's head, and goes from one to another as they groan, attending them.*)

MERRIE (*on floor*). Somebody pick me up! A sprained ankle is more serious than a scratched face!

DAISY. You hit the table!

MERRIE. I did not!

ROSE. If you had a neck like mine——

NAN. Or a nose like mine——

MARIA. Silence! all of you.

*Nora and Caroline assist Merrie into chair. Nora removes her boot, placing foot in chair, and bathes it. The girls are all at back of stage; Rose at right, Merrie next, Nan next, and Daisy on couch, left.*

MARIA (*solemnly, after a pause*). There are only a few of us left!

CAROLINE (*surprised*). Is that slang?

MARIA. Certainly not! It is the plain, unvarnished truth.

CAROLINE. As we have made the injured as comfortable as possible, let us hear your selection, Maria.

MARIA. I had thought of giving an impersonation of Lady Macbeth. I have arranged a little scene but——

CAROLINE. Try it.

MARIA (*rising and reciting tragically*). "That which hath made them (*nods left*) drunk——

DAISY. Excuse me, Miss Knowitall, but do not nod towards me; it is too suggestive.

MARIA (*resuming*). "That which hath made them (*nods right*) drunk——"

ROSE. Don't call attention to me, please!

MARIA (*impatiently*). Will some one suggest a way?

CAROLINE. Excuse me, Maria, but I would suggest that you nod front. The football boys will sit there and they will not object to such a trifling allusion.

MARIA (*again reciting*). "That which hath made them (*nods front*) drunk hath made me bold. What hath quenched them hath given me fire. Hark! (*Listens. Nora strikes same attitude with bottle in one hand.*) Peace! it was the owl, that shrieked! Hark! I laid their daggers ready. (*Nora drops in fright behind Merrie's chair, who reassures her and Nora rises touching her forehead and pointing to Maria, as if she were mad.*) He could not miss them. Had he not resembled my father as he slept, I had done 't!" Macbeth did show a sickly womanish fear of blood; and when at last he nerved his hand to do the deed, horror took possession of his soul and, frenzied, he cried out: "Whence is that knocking? (*Nora tip-toes down and looks off.*) How is't with me when every noise appalls me? What hands are here? Ha! they pluck out mine eyes! (*Nora stands near with open mouth shaking bottle and listening.*) Will all great Neptune's ocean wash this blood clean from off my hand?" And then the feast that followed, when Banquo's spirit—— Banquo's spirit——(*Strikes attitude of fear, Nora the same pose.*)

CAROLINE (*excitedly*). Go on! Go on!

MARIA. I don't believe I'll give that. (*Girls groan.*) I think I'll costume my brother's little boy and let him play Prince Arthur to my Hubert. Nora, you stand there and be the attendant. I want to see how it begins. What can we use for irons? You know we must be realistic.

CAROLINE. Nora, get my curling-tongs.

NORA (*aside*). Sure I'm goin' to be a member of the Shak-a-spear class, too! (*Exit, and returns with curling-irons.*)

MARIA (*as Hubert*). "Heat me these irons hot, and look you, stand within the arras and when I strike my foot upon the bosom of the ground, rush forth and bind the boy which you will find with me, fast to the chair."

NORA. Which b'y?

MARIA. Never mind! Now you can exit with the irons.

NORA. I can phwat?

MARIA. Exit! disappear! fly! and when I strike my foot so, you can return with the irons. (*Exit Nora.*) I wonder if we could fix Nora up and let her do the attendant. Let me see if she knows enough to come in when I give the cue. After Arthur says, "If an angel should have come to me and told me Hubert should put out mine eyes, I would not have believed him; no tongue, but Hubert's." (*Stamps.*) "Come forth!"

*Enter, Nora, with curling-irons.*

MARIA. "Do as I bid you do!"

NORA. Sure I have.

MARIA. Then Arthur says, "Oh, save me, Hubert! my eyes are out even with the fierce looks of these bloody men." Then my words are, "Give me the irons, I say!" (*Takes irons, drops them and screams.*) Heavens! they are red-hot! (*Girls giggle.*)

NORA. Sure, you told me to hate thim!

MARIA. Fool! you have burned my fingers to a blister! (*Walks, blowing fingers, etc.*)

CAROLINE. Nora, how could you be so stupid!

NORA. Niver moind! there's plinty of liniment. (*Assists Maria to seat at table, and wraps her fingers in cotton, putting liniment on them.*)

CAROLINE. It's a burning shame!

MARIA. Don't try to say funny things! If *you* had this hand—

ROSE. Or my neck—

NAN. Or my nose—

DAISY. Or my head—

MERRIE. Or my foot—

MARIA. You would be unconscious!

CAROLINE. Indeed, I am very sorry!

MARIA. You are dying to laugh! but go on with the programme. We'll finish it, or die. (*Sits.*)

CAROLINE. Do you mean it?

MARIA. Certainly. (*Holds hand up blowing it, etc.*)

NORA (*aside*). It's the finest scrimmage I ever saw!

[*Exit.*

MARIA. Begin, Caroline.

CAROLINE (*as Ophelia, reciting*). "Where is the beauteous majesty of Denmark (*saluting*):?"

(*Sings.*) "How should I your true love know  
From another one?  
By his cockle hat and staff,  
And his sandal shoon."

"Say you? nay, pray you, mark."

"He is dead and gone, lady,  
He is dead and gone;  
At his head, a grass-green turf,  
At his heels a stone."

"I hope all will be well. We must be patient; but I cannot choose but weep, to think they should lay him i' the cold ground."

"They bore him bare faced on the bier:  
Hey no nonny, nonny, hey nonny;  
And in his grave rained many a tear——"

(*Takes bunch of flowers from table.*) "There's rosemary, that's for remembrance; pray you, love, remember; and there are pansies, that's for thoughts. There's fennel for you and columbines; there's rue, for you; and here's some for me. There's a daisy, I would give you some violets, but they withered all, when my father died. They say he made a good end."

"For bonny, sweet Robin is all my joy——"

(*Changing air.*) "And will he not come again?  
And will he not come again?  
No, no he is dead,  
Go to thy death-bed,  
He will never come again."

NORA (*entering, screaming*). Oh, dear, oh, dear, phwat will I do! phwat will I do!

CAROLINE. What is it?

NORA. Sure while I was puttin' on the liniment, some burglar walked in an' stole all the spoons!

*Girls scream in chorus: "A burglar!"*

CAROLINE (*tragically*). Ye gods, the spoons! my grandma's spoons (*fainting*)!

*Caroline falls on floor. Nora rushes to her with liniment and in a confused manner bathes the soles of her boots, then bathes her head, places liniment to her nose, etc.*

MARIA (*rapping*). Order! Ladies, I move that this meeting be adjourned, sine die; those in favor of the motion may signify it by saying, aye. (*Girls feebly say: "Aye."*)

MARIA. 'Tis a vote. Nora! (*Nora steps over Caroline.*) Call the ambulance and see that the members of the Shakspeare Club are conveyed to their respective homes. (*Nora steps over Caroline again, and exits.*) Football may be dangerous, but it is a baby's game compared with Shakspeare (*rising*). But, ladies, we should feel proud (*gesticulating with hand wrapped in cotton*), for, in spite of disaster we have finished our programme! (*Girls try to rise but drop into chairs exclaiming, "Oh! Oh!"*)

CURTAIN.

(1896)