EXTRACT

The letter H girl

a one act play

by

Alex Broun

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Characters

Lillian Millicent “Peg” Entwistle (5 February 1908 – 16 September 1932)
Welsh-born English actress of stage and screen. She came to the USA when she was just eight years old. She began acting in Boston before being brought to New York by the New York Theatre Guild. She appeared regularly on Broadway from 1926 – 32 including in the long running hit “Tommy”. In 1932 she was brought to Hollywood where she acted in just one film - Thirteen Women.

Thomas Chatterton (20 November 1752 – 24 August 1770)
English poet and forger of pseudo-medieval poetry. He is the subject of The Death of Chatterton, 1856, by Henry Wallis and after his death he was commemorated by many poets including Shelley, Wordsworth, Coleridge, Dante Gabriel Rossetti and John Keats' sonnet "To Chatterton". Keats also inscribed Endymion "to the memory of Thomas Chatterton".

Setting

The top of the letter “H” in the “Hollywoodland” sign overlooking Hollywood, California.

Time

Evening, Friday September 16th, 1932

Brief description of the play

Based on the tragic true story of Lillian Millicent "Peg" Entwistle, known as the "Hollywood Sign Girl", who jumped to her death off the Hollywood sign in 1932. In Peg’s final moments she has a very unexpected visitor – the ghost of English romantic poet, Thomas Chatterton.

The letter H girl

The top of the letter “H” in the Hollywoodland sign overlooking Hollwood, California. A warm evening, Friday September 16th, 1932

LIGHTS COME UP ON **PEG**. SHE IS LYING ON THE FLOOR, WRITING A NOTE. BESIDE HER ARE A PAIR OF SHOES.

SHE FINISHES WRITING. SHE TAKES UP A SMALL BROWN AND TAKES A LARGE GULP. SHE PLACES THE BOTTLE ON THE NOTE.

SHE STANDS AND WALKS TO EDGE. SHE STANDS GAZING OVER THE CITY.

CHATTERTON ENTERS.

CHATTERTON: Magnificent view. (BEAT) A wonderful panoramic. (BEAT That’s the word isn’t it? Panoramic.

PEG: (STILL LOOKING OUT FRONT) It’s panorama. (BEAT) How did you get up here?

CHATTERTON: Same way as you I imagine. Up the stepping ladder.

PEG: We just call it a ladder.

CHATTERTON: That’s … simpler. (BEAT) What are you doing?

PEG: I’m not sure. I told my Uncle I was going to the drugstore and ended up here.

CHATTERTON: Wavering on the edge. It’s very dramatic.

PEG: I am an actress.

CHATTERTON: An actress. Would I have seen you in anything?

PEG: I’m not very famous. Not here anyways.

CHATTERTON: That’s not a bad thing.

PEG: Is that so?

CHATTERON: At least you’re famous - somewhere.

BEAT.

CHATTERTON: (LOOKING AT THE NOTE) What’s that?

PEG: My shoe.

CHATTERTON: Beside.

PEG: A note.

CHATTERTON: A love letter perchance. For moir? Will you read it to me?

PEG: No.

CHATTERTON: What if I stand like this?

HE ADOPTS A DRAMATIC POSE.

PEG: (BEAT) Who are you?

CHATTERTON: Thomas Chatterton.

PEG: Who?

CHATTERON: Chatterton – poet, romanticist, lover.

PEG: Of what?

CHATTERTON: Too cruel.

PEG: I don't know you.

CHATTERTON: I am infamous rather than famous. I forged masterpieces.

PEG: I thought you said you were a poet.

CHATTERTON: I forged poems.

PEG: (SHE TURNS AWAY FROM THE EDGE) Can you forge poems?

CHATTERTON: Apparently so.

PEG: So you stole the words of others?

CHATTERTON: I did not *plagiarize*. I *forged*.

PEG: There's a difference?

CHATTERTON: A plagiarist uses other people's words. I used my own words and forged them into a masterpiece.

PEG: So then they were original?

CHATTERTON: After a fashion. But I was labeled a fake, a forger, a fraud.

PEG: By who?

CHATTERTON: The literary elite. My penchant was medieval poems.

PEG: Which you forged using your own words?

CHATTERTON: Thusly.

PEG: That is not forgery.

CHATTERTON: No?

PEG: We call that parody. Or in the style of. Today you would be praised. If you did it well.

CHATTERTON: Oh I did it well. Very well.
(RECITING GRANDLY) “Oure woes alyche, alyche our dome shal bee.
Mie sonne, mie sonne alleyn, ystorven ys;
Here wylle I staie, and end mie lyff with thee”

PEG: I’ll wait for the movie. (BEAT.) You’re pretty young for a poet.

CHATTERTON: I’m seventeen. And you’re not one to boast seniority.

PEG: Oh I’m old.

CHATTERTON: Twenty four … and a half … is hardly old.

PEG: Old enough to miss the boat.

CHATTERTON: I’m not sure to which boat you refer.

BEAT.

PEG: Who are you again?

CHATTERTON: Thomas Chatterton. Poet, romanticist –

PEG: I got it. And how did you get up here?

CHATTERTON: To be truthful, I’m not. I’m a waking vision. A dream.

PEG: You’re a dream?

CHATTERTON: So I’ve been told.

PEG: But I don’t know you. How can I dream you if I don’t know you?

CHATTERTON: Perhaps you saw my portrait. It really is quite famous. More famous than my poems. Painted by the great HenryWallis. He also painted another great man of words.

CHATTERTON: (CONT) Shakespeare. Or at least the room in which he was born. John Keats wrote me a sonnet: “To Chatterton”. Samuel Taylor Coleridge even wrote a poem about me. “Monody on the Death of Chatterton.”

PEG: What’s a Monody?

CHATTERTON: A poem in which the poet – in this case Coleridge – laments the death of another – in this case – me. I also influenced Wordsworth. He called me The Marvelous Boy.

PEG: Marvelous for what?

CHATTERTON: He didn’t say.

BEAT.

PEG: Coleridge? I know him.

CHATTERTON: But not …

PEG: The painting. Where does it hang?

CHATTERTON: The original painting was first exhibited at the Royal Exhibition of Arts, in London, in the year 1856. The following year in Manchester my portrait excited such frenzy it had to be protected by a Policeman.

PEG: Only one?

CHATTERTON: I believe he was a very big policeman. Perhaps as a child you saw a print displayed in a bookshop and my image was so powerful it was emblazoned into your memory.

PEG DOES NOT REPLY.

CHATTERTON: Of course. It’s not me in the painting. It’s George Meredith. Another poet. With red hair. He looks nothing like me. Wallis only chose him because he wanted to have an affair with his wife. That Wallis was a dirty old -

PEG: Were you called Chatterton or Chatterbox?

CHATTERTON: I’m your dream.

PEG: But I’m awake – aren’t I?

CHATTERTON: A far better poet than me said “All life is a dream”

PEG: Are you here to stop me or make sure I go through with it?

CHATTERTON: That's up to you.

CHATTERTON LOOKS AT THE NOTE.

CHATTERTON: May I read it?

PEG: I'm pretty sure you already have.

CHATTERTON: (RECITES) "I am afraid, I am a coward. I am sorry for everything. If I had done this a long time ago, it would have saved a lot of pain. P.E."

PAUSE. **CHATTERTON** LOOKS AT **PEG**.

PEG: What?

CHATTERTON: It's not very good.

PEG: It's a suicide note.

CHATTERTON: Even as a suicide note. It's not very good.

PEG: Read me yours then.

CHATTERTON: I can't seem to recall it.

PEG: Or maybe I never read it.

CHATTERTON: No one did. I tore it up. It's pieces lie strewn in the bottom right hand corner of the painting. Or was that one of my poems? (BEAT) So why do you want to do it? Fall so ungraciously from the cruel letter 'H'.

PEG: I'm a failure.

CHATTERTON: But why choose 'H'? Such a nasty letter. All those vicious intersecting lines.

PEG: "F" wasn't available.

CHATTERTON: Why not something more aesthetic such as 'O', the shape your body will make when it hits the rocks below, or even 'D' as in -

PEG: 'H' is for hopeless, which is how I feel. Or it could have been 'O' for "oblivion". Or "L" for "loser" or "lonely"

CHATTERTON: There is a time for all things - except marriage my dear.

PEG: I was a failure at that too. He was …

CHATTERTON: Unfaithful?

PEG: Worse.

CHATTERTON: You could always try ‘Y’ for “Yellow” – because you clearly are a coward to give up like this. Or “d” for drunk, dramatic, depressed -

PEG: It’s the Depression. Everyone’s depressed.

CHATTERTON: You more than most.

PEG: And we can’t even get a drink.

CHATTERTON: You managed to procure something. (PICKING UP THE BOTTLE, READING LABEL) “Phanodorn” Arsenic?

PEG: A modern equivalent. I bought it at the drugstore.

CHATTERTON: You can buy it at a store?

PEG: These days you can buy everything at a store.

CHATTERTON: I died with the taste of arsenic on my lips.

PEG: I was in Hamlet once. I carried the poisoned chalice. Like I have my whole life.

CHATTERTON: Actually I was trying to cure a nasty case of gonorrhea but suicide sounds so much grander.

PEG: A lover.

CHATTERTON: To the end.

PEG: Which brings us to “W” – for “Why” would I pretend I wasn’t a failure?

CHATTERTON: Or ‘O’ for “oblong” – the shape of the coffin they will scrape you into. Or ‘D’ for ‘dunderhead’ which is the kindest word I can think of for what you are about to do.

PEG: I’m not sure ‘Dunderhead’ was in use in the 18th century.

CHATTERTON: I’m borrowing one of yours.

BEAT.

CHATTERTON: "I would rather play roles that carry conviction. Maybe it is because they are the easiest and yet the hardest things for me to do. But if I fail I feel that I am cheating myself."

PEG: Is that something you wrote?

CHATTERTON: I think it's something you said.

PEG: Your point being?

CHATTERTON: Isn't that precisely what you are about to do – "Cheat yourself?" Look below you. Hollywoodland. Fantastic realm of hopes and dreams. A star and starlet on every corner.

PEG: Then they won't miss one.

CHATTERTON: And soon your name will be up in lights.

PEG: Page seventeen at least. I made one film. Thirteen Women. The title should have clued me in. The studio had to cut it in half it's so bad. I've been edited out almost completely.

CHATTERTON: Isn't that fortuitous?

PEG: How?

CHATTERTON: If it is as woeful as you say – the less you appear in it the better.

PEG: That's one way of looking at it. Another is – I am so terrible I even get cut out of bombs.

CHATTERTON: Permit me to be rational –

PEG: You're a romantic poet!

CHATTERTON: Out of character I know but may I? (BEAT) You made yourself a success on Broadway. Why can't a similar fate unfold here?

PEG: This isn't Broadway.

CHATTERTON: Very true. Then go back there, where they love you.

PEG: And admit I couldn't make it on the silver screen.

CHATTERTON: All that glitters is not … silver. You were a big hit in New York. There was "Hedvig" in The Wild Duck.

PEG: Maybe that's why I chose 'H'.

CHATTERTON: You acted alongside George M. Cohan and Dorothy Gish. J. Brooks Atkinson wrote, "Peg Entwistle gave a performance considerably better than the play warranted."

PEG: You know what I say about critics? "All critics are idiots -

CHATTERTON: and some are greater idiots than others." Spoken like someone who's never had a good review.

PEG: Says the 18th century poet who killed himself because he wasn't adored.

CHATTERTON: You went on tour with the Theater Guild. You changed characters every week. You were written up in the Sunday edition of the New York Times and the Oakland Tribune. The next big –

PEG: Flop! You're omitting the failures. What about that dreadful Barrie play. Closed two weeks early. We didn't even get paid.

CHATTERTON: It's not your fault Laurette Taylor was a drunk. Then those two nice men –

PEG: I'd hardly call Edward Belasco and Homer Curran nice.

CHATTERTON: They brought you out here to star in that play

PEG: The Mad Hopes. Another apt title.

CHATTERTON: Sixteen hundred seats – standing room only.

PEG: They all came to see him. "He'll never amount to anything with a name like that."

CHATTERTON: And you got another rave review. "Entwistle gives a fine, serious performance."

PEG: It was meant to be a comedy. A charming picture of youth by the name of Hope. Delightful.

CHATTERTON: You were going back to New York but that horrid studio –

PEG: It was R.K.O.!

CHATTERTON: Called about that awful film and that stupid role. If they'd never called you'd be back in New York now. Waking up late for brunch at Jimmy Kelly's.