

LOVE & LARCENY

An Almost True Musical

Book and Lyrics by
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Music and Lyrics by
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PRE SHOW: As the audience is entering we hear a teletype CLACKING, see a loop of three or four slides projected on a scrim -- sensational newspaper headlines, circa 1900.

"DID MYSTERY WOMAN SWINDLE MILLIONS!?"
"BANKERS DUPED -- HUGE FORGERIES RUMORED"
"MYSTERY VEILS CHADWICK CASE"
"ALL LIES, SAYS MRS. CHADWICK", etc...

ACT ONE, SCENE ONE -- (A NEW YORK CITY STREET, 1900)

(Note: Scene is UNDERSCORED by a SHADOWY CHORUS -- men in hats and dark overcoats, perhaps entering through the audience.)

CHORUS

(suggesting the rhythm of typewriters)

**Teletype, ticker tape, telegraph
Typewriter, telephone, phonograph
All the news, fit to print, listen well,
Rumors swirl, scandal breaks, papers sell --**

A couple of REPORTERS, and a PHOTOGRAPHER with an old box camera, disengage from the chorus and wait downstage in front of the scrim. (The chorus moves to the wings or behind the scrim and remains a shadowy presence.)

REPORTER 1

I heard she swindled over a million.

REPORTER 2

I heard two million.

PHOTOGRAPHER

They say she has hypnotic powers.

REPORTER 2

Hypnotic powers!

REPORTER 1

One look into her ebony eyes and men whip open their pocketbooks.

REPORTER 2

Maybe she lets them look into more than her "ebony eyes".

PHOTOGRAPHER

Maybe they whip open more than their pocketbooks.
(opens his coat suggestively, prompting knowing, lascivious chuckles)

REPORTER 1

But how did she do it? They're bankers, tightfisted bastards.

REPORTER 2

Here's one of them now -- Mr. Reynolds! --

REYNOLDS

(marches through grimly)

No comment!

Another BANKER (NEWTON) marches through.

REPORTERS

Mr. Newton! --

NEWTON (keeps going)

No comment! --

(about to exit, stops)

Except to say that she's a shameless hussy --

REYNOLDS (also stops)

A vile vixen --

NEWTON

And one of the most cunning --

REYNOLDS

Corrupt --

NEWTON

Conniving --

REYNOLDS

Contemptible --

NEWTON

Craven --

REYNOLDS

Crooked --

(pause, both struggle to find another "c" word)

NEWTON

Crinoline-wearing! --

REYNOLDS & NEWTON

Criminals!!

CHORUS

She's really bad.

REYNOLDS & NEWTON

In the history of mankind!

CHORUS

These guys were had.

BETSY (enters)

Or womankind?

She approaches, escorted by a MAN (KLOBITZ).
She's 40ish, cuts a striking, glamorous figure,
swathed in mink and jewels, carrying a fur muff.

REYNOLDS

And she deserves to be locked up till she -- putrefies!

REPORTER 2

So why did you do business with her?

NEWTON and REYNOLDS (a beat)

No comment!!

They exit. The reporters turn to Betsy. She
fixes them with a piercing stare.

REPORTER 2

(nudges the others, sotto voce)
See -- ebony eyes.

CHORUS

We've got the Times.

REPORTER 1

(start firing questions, scribbling in
notebooks)
Mrs. Chadwick! Are the rumours true?!

CHORUS

We've got the Sun.

REPORTER 2

Did you really swindle millions from those bankers?

Betsy assumes a confident, haughty air -- a bit
playful as well, enjoying the attention.

CHORUS

We'll get the scoop.

REPORTER 1

Where's the money, Mrs. Chadwick? Have you spent it?

CHORUS

The presses run.

PHOTOGRAPHER

Is it true you bought 27 diamond rings from Tiffany's and gave them all away?

BETSY

Don't be ridiculous -- I only gave 26 of them away.

REPORTER 2

What about this Englishman you were supposedly married to --?

BETSY

An English Lord. Poor dear Charles, yes -- He was trampled to death while riding to hounds.

REPORTER 2 (scribbling)

When did this happen?

BETSY

Very shortly after he fell off his horse.

CHORUS (softly, a bit ominously)

The jig is up.

REPORTER 1

Were you arrested for fraud in Cleveland? --

CHORUS

You cannot hide.

REPORTER 1

-- under the name of Madame Pelvina de Vere?

CHORUS

The mask is off.

BETSY

Really! Where I come from we wouldn't tolerate such impertinence.

CHORUS

Your luck is done.

REPORTER 2

Where do you come from, Mrs. Chadwick?

CHORUS (softly, ominously)

You can't fool us.

BETSY

I come from Paris -- France.

CHORUS

Ooh, ooh! La la!

REPORTER 1

What about the rumour that you grew up on a farm? --

CHORUS

Moo, moo -- baa baa!

BETSY

A farm!!

REPORTER 1

In Canada.

BETSY

Canada?!! Really, that's the last spike.

REPORTER 1 (checks his notes)

A place called -- Wood-stick?

BETSY

Don't be absurd! Do I look -- Canadian?!
(strikes a regal pose, smiling like a queen)
Pulleeeeeease!!

PHOTOGRAPHER

(through his box camera)

Freeze!!

CHORUS

The truth will out!!

They all FREEZE --

Downstage, REUBEN, LESTER and MARY enter. (The others are oblivious to them.) Lester has a guitar, (Reuben a quirky assortment of instruments -- tin whistle, ukelele, etc.) Reuben grins at the audience, visibly nervous.

REUBEN

We're matadors!

(Mary pokes him, hisses -- "troubador")

Troubadors -- and she's a -- troubadess!

MARY

You see, all sorts of legends -- and lies have grown up about Betsy.

LESTER

She weren't no vile vixen, for starters.

REUBEN

Though she was purty darn foxy --

MARY

(shuts him up with a look)

She was just a girl whose dreams were too big for her boots. So we're here to make sure nobody sullies her name --

REUBEN

Sullies?

MARY

-- and to keep her story straight.

REUBEN

Cause sometimes it gets downright complicated, and when it does --

LESTER

We'll skip that part.

MARY

Just start.

**SONG -- "The Ballad of Betsy B." -- Reuben,
Lester and Mary**

LESTER

One, two three four --

REUBEN

Well, we've all heard tales of -- uh --
(forgets)

MARY

Joan of Arc

LESTER

And Florence -- um?

MARY

Nightingale

REUBEN

Yeah, and that curvy Cleopatra

LESTER

And Mary Queen of Hearts --

MARY

Scots actually --

And those were --

REUBEN

Mighty fine stories -- ah, but --

ALL

Betsy

REUBEN

Purty Betsy --

She set my heart aflame --

(Mary gives him a whack)

LESTER

Mine too -- and not just my heart!

REUBEN

That poor orphan girl --

MARY

Orphan?!

LESTER

Went off to shake the world --

REUBEN

Betsy Bigley --

ALL

-- don't forget that name!

Betsy Bigley -- don't forget that name!

Betsy Bigley -- don't forget that name!

POP and smokey FLASH from the camera. Betsy and reporters UNFREEZE --

REPORTER 1

Mrs. Chadwick, is it true you went about claiming to be Andrew Carnegie's daughter?!

Betsy just smiles inscrutably.

REPORTER 2 (writing)

She smiled -- inscrutably.

PHOTOGRAPHER

One more please, Mrs. Chadwick.

Betsy strikes a flamboyant pose, but this causes her muff to slip -- and we see that she's been using it to hide a pair of handcuffs. She quickly covers them up -- but this punctures her mood, brings her sharply back to reality.

CHORUS

This fish is hooked.

Klobitz, who we now realize is a cop, takes her arm, starts to lead her off --

COP (KLOBITZ

Your trial starts in ten minutes, ma'am.

CHORUS

Her goose is cooked.

REPORTER 1

Will you plead guilty, Mrs. Chadwick?!

CHORUS

Her dinner's done.

REPORTER 2

How many years do you think you'll get, Mrs. Chadwick?!

CHORUS

Her time has come!!...

Betsy just gives them a baleful look -- exits.

REPORTER 2 (writing)

She stared balefully with her -- how many b's in ebony?

The reporters follow Betsy off -- as Reuben,
Lester and Mary step forward again.

LESTER

Two, dummy.

MARY

**Now while we wait on Betsy's fate
We'll pass on what we know --**

REUBEN

The butt-naked truth!

(a look from Mary)

So to speak.

MARY and LESTER

Cause we were right beside her

REUBEN

To hold her -- hand and guide her

ALL

All those years ago.

MARY

So here's her story, listen well

REUBEN

It's ripping

MARY

Gripping

LESTER

True!

REUBEN

It's full of factuality

MARY

It ripples with reality

REUBEN (aside)

A dash of illegality

(Mary pokes him)

LESTER

This tale of femme fatale-ity

MARY

And all of it --

REUBEN

And most of it --

LESTER AND REUBEN

And some of it --

REUBEN

-- actually happened.

ALL

Betsy

REUBEN & LESTER

Purty Betsy

Now millions sing her fame --

MARY

Millions?

REUBEN

Well, us --

LESTER & REUBEN

That poor orphan girl

Went off to shake the world --

ALL

Betsy Bigley, don't forget that name!

Betsy Bigley, don't forget that name!

Betsy Bigley -- you won't forget that name!

MARY (to audience)

She wasn't an orphan.

As they move off to one side, she gestures as if to say -- see for yourself -- and (through the scrim?) a soft POOL OF LIGHT comes up on --