

Black Orchid

The Murder Trial of Libby Holman

by
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Logline:

Did America's sweetheart shoot her wealthy husband in the head to elope with her equally wealthy mistress?

Synopsis:

Sultry swooner Libby Holman is a beloved Broadway sensation. Her adoring fans include Noel Coward, Cole Porter, and Tallulah Bankhead. This dazzling entourage of brilliance carouses endless nights away at the thrill of the day, Harlem's Cotton Club.

Amongst her most ardent admirers are two denizens of America's uberwealthy elite, the nineteen-year-old, pioneer air-pilot Smith Reynolds, heir to the immense Reynolds tobacco fortune, and the foxhunting, heir to the vast Dupont empire, Louisa Jenney.

Alternating, Libby takes both of them to her bed.

Obsessed with the Great White Way's 'purple menace of the blues,' Smith hounds Libby across the night clubs and craziness of roaring twenties New York. He repeatedly begs Libby to marry him. Despite the thrill of having Smith, an expert pilot, fly her in his personal plane, and being lavished with extravagant gifts, Libby's heart lies with Louisa.

The catch?

Louisa is married. She has no great loyalty for her accountant husband, but if she runs off to a Boston marriage with Libby, she risks being cut off from her Dupont fortune. Above that, Louisa wants a child, which Libby cannot give her.

Passionately, on her knees, Louisa begs the songstress not to leave her when the heiress shuns Libby's plan for them to elope together to France.

Jilted, and deeply wounded, Libby - refusing to comprehend Louisa's practical logic - lashes back. In a heartbeat, she marries Smith. Together, they fly off to Hong Kong for their honeymoon, leaving a distraught Louisa.

Very quickly Libby discovers Smith's dark secret; he's bipolar, with a penchant for putting a pistol to his head and threatening to off himself.

Upon return from their eye-opening soiree in Asia, at Reynolda, Smith's extravagant estate in Winston Salem, the newly-weds entertain the elegant elite of North Carolina, and the fabulous wits of New York, unaware that the decade of excess is about to come crashing down.

When Libby's parents visit, from her hometown of Cincinnati, Smith is horrified to uncover that his American beauty is a Jewess. He refuses to be intimate with his wife ever again. Smith now frequents the local brothel with his best friend, and rumoured paramour, the dashing handsome Albert Walker. During frequent visits to the brothel, Smith pours his heart out to a beautiful, mulatto prostitute, now his mistress.

Black Thursday hits with hurricane force. The stock market tumbles and begins its agonizing slide, losing 90 percent of its value.

Though Broadway is hit hard, and Libby can no longer sing and dance with her beloved Clifford Webb, in Winston-Salem the Reynolds party on, oblivious to the starving, bereft America now surrounding them.

Gossip spreads that Libby and Albert have become more than just friends. Through it all, Libby pines for Louisa. During one of their famous 'Gatsbian' cocktail bashes, Libby and Smith, as inevitably happens, end up fighting in their bedroom. A resounding bang rings out. The next thing Libby is screaming down the stairs, "My God! It's Smith! He's shot himself!"

Rushed to the hospital, by Albert and a blood-splattered Libby, Smith dies on the operating table. One attending doctor believes it is suicide, the other does not. The mystery begins.

The entire town believing Libby did it, she is arrested.

It is the trial of the century.

All of America is glued to the proceedings, as a horde of press descend on Winston and report on the daily motions of the court. Libby's picture is on the front page of every newspaper in America.

Hiding away in Connecticut, Louisa seeing the pictures and realizing that her previous paramour, whom she still deeply loves, could be facing the death penalty, Louisa drives to Winston. With Libby jumping bail, the songstress and the heiress make a run for it.

The whole country scrambles to learn where they are hiding.

In Winston, the trial judge yells at Libby's attorney, "If she is not standing before me in this courtroom, within three days, I will send her to the chair."

The hunt is on.

A message is gotten to Louisa. She must find a way get Libby back to the Winston courtroom undetected by the North Carolina police as they intend to detain her and guarantee her conviction.

Libby and Louisa start their 'Thelma & Louise' dash across the country. After a number of close-calls, with minutes to spare, Libby, the star that she is, steps out of the car, glides past the mass of amazed and admiring press and onlookers, and enters the courtroom.

The trial continues. Still, it does not look good for Libby.

Then in the middle of the proceedings, Smith's elder brother, R.J. Reynolds Jr., struts into the court and, before a stunned throng, orders the judge to drop all charges.

Libby is free to go.

She runs to the arms of Louisa, who, it is revealed made a deal with Smith's brother. She offered to save R.J.'s crashing Reynolds stock from bankruptcy - using a small fortune in gold she made upon the advice of her bean-counting husband - if R.J. agreed to drop the murder charges.

R.J. hesitates to take the offer until Louisa also reveals she has discovered Smith was sleeping with his own niece. It turns out the mulatto mistress at the brothel is R.J.'s illegitimate child. Reynolds agrees to go to the judge.

The trial over, Libby and Louisa run off to Connecticut and live their lives as a married couple, raising the son that Libby was carrying at the time of the trial; a child many believe was Albert's, though Libby always insisted he was Smith's.

By presenting the tale of the triangle of lovers - Smith, Louisa, and Libby - *Black Orchid* examines what did happen in that bedroom that night?