Caligula

ALBERT

CAMUS

TWO PLAYS

Cross Purpose

Caligula and Cross Purpose, Albert Camus

Caligula, Albert Camus

Contents

Caligula

A PLAY IN FOUR ACTS

To my friends of the THÉÂTRE DE L’ÉQUIPE

CHARACTERS IN THE PLAY

CALIGULA

CÆSONIA

HELICON

SCIPIO

CHEREA

THE OLD PATRICIAN

METELLUS

LEPIDUS

INTENDANT

MEREIA

MUCIUS

MUCIUS' WIFE

PATRICIANS, KNIGHTS,

POETS, GUARDS, SERVANTS

CALIGULA was presented for the first time at the THÉÂTRE-HÉBERTOT, Paris, in 1945.

ACT I

A number of patricians, one a very old man, are gathered in a state room of the imperial palace. They are showing signs of nervousness.

FIRST PATRICIAN: Still no news.

THE OLD PATRICIAN: None last night, none this morning.

SECOND PATRICIAN: Three days without news. Strange indeed!

THE OLD PATRICIAN: Our messengers go out, our messengers return. And always they shake their heads and say: “Nothing.”

SECOND PATRICIAN: They’ve combed the whole countryside. What more can be done?

FIRST PATRICIAN: We can only wait. It’s no use meeting trouble halfway. Perhaps he’ll return as abruptly as he left us.

THE OLD PATRICIAN: When I saw him leaving the palace, I noticed a queer look in his eyes.

FIRST PATRICIAN: Yes, so did I. In fact I asked him what was amiss.

SECOND PATRICIAN: Did he answer?

FIRST PATRICIAN: One word: “Nothing.”

[A short silence. HELICON enters. He is munching onions.]

SECOND PATRICIAN [in the same nervous tone]: It’s all very perturbing.

FIRST PATRICIAN: Oh, come now! All young fellows are like that.

THE OLD PATRICIAN: You’re right there. They take things hard. But time smooths everything out.

SECOND PATRICIAN: Do you really think so?

THE OLD PATRICIAN: Of course. For one girl dead, a dozen living ones.

HELICON: Ah? So you think that there’s a girl behind it?

FIRST PATRICIAN: What else should there be? Anyhow—thank goodness!—grief never lasts forever. Is any one of us here capable of mourning a loss for more than a year on end?

SECOND PATRICIAN: Not I, anyhow.

FIRST PATRICIAN: No one can do that.

THE OLD PATRICIAN: Life would be intolerable if one could.

FIRST PATRICIAN: Quite so. Take my case. I lost my wife last year. I shed many tears, and then I forgot. Even now I feel a pang of grief at times. But, happily, it doesn't amount to much.

THE OLD PATRICIAN: Yes, Nature's a great healer.

[CHEREA enters.]

FIRST PATRICIAN: Well …?

CHEREA: Still nothing.

HELICON: Come, gentlemen! There's no need for consternation.

FIRST PATRICIAN: I agree.

HELICON: Worrying won't mend matters—and it's lunchtime.

THE OLD PATRICIAN: That's so. We mustn't drop the prey for the shadow.

CHEREA: I don't like the look of things. But all was going too smoothly. As an emperor, he was perfection's self.

SECOND PATRICIAN: Yes, exactly the emperor we wanted; conscientious and inexperienced.

FIRST PATRICIAN: But what's come over you? There's no reason for all these lamentations. We've no ground for assuming he will change. Let's

say he loved Drusilla. Only natural; she was his sister. Or say his love for her was something more than brotherly; shocking enough, I grant you. But it's really going too far, setting all Rome in a turmoil because the girl has died.

CHEREA: Maybe. But, as I said, I don't like the look of things; this escapade alarms me.

THE OLD PATRICIAN: Yes, there's never smoke without fire.

FIRST PATRICIAN: In any case, the interests of the State should prevent his making a public tragedy of … of, let's say, a regrettable attachment. No doubt such things happen; but the less said the better.

HELICON: How can you be sure Drusilla is the cause of all this trouble?

SECOND PATRICIAN: Who else should it be?

HELICON: Nobody at all, quite likely. When there's a host of explanations to choose from, why pick on the stupidest, most obvious one?

[Young SCIPIO enters. CHEREA goes toward him.]

CHEREA: Well?

SCIPIO: Still nothing. Except that some peasants think they saw him last night not far from Rome, rushing through the storm.

[CHEREA comes back to the patricians, SCIPIO following him.]

CHEREA: That makes three days, Scipio, doesn't it?

SCIPIO: Yes … I was there, following him as I usually do. He went up to Drusilla's body. He stroked it with two fingers, and seemed lost in thought for a long while. Then he swung round and walked out, calmly enough.… And ever since we've been hunting for him—in vain.

CHEREA [shaking his head]: That young man was too fond of literature.

SECOND PATRICIAN: Oh, at his age, you know …

CHEREA: At his age, perhaps; but not in his position. An artistic emperor is an anomaly. I grant you we've had one or two; misfits happen in the best of empires. But the others had the good taste to remember they were public servants.

FIRST PATRICIAN: It made things run more smoothly.

THE OLD PATRICIAN: One man, one job—that's how it should be.

SCIPIO: What can we do, Cherea?

CHEREA: Nothing.

SECOND PATRICIAN: We can only wait. If he doesn't return, a successor will have to be found. Between ourselves—there's no shortage of candidates.

FIRST PATRICIAN: No, but there's a shortage of the right sort.

CHEREA: Suppose he comes back in an ugly mood?

FIRST PATRICIAN: Oh, he's a mere boy; we'll make him see reason.

CHEREA: And what if he declines to see it?

FIRST PATRICIAN [laughing]: In that case, my friend, don't forget I once wrote a manual of revolutions. You'll find all the rules there.

CHEREA: I'll look it up—if things come to that. But I'd rather be left to my books.

SCIPIO: If you'll excuse me.…

[Goes out.]

CHEREA: He's offended.

THE OLD PATRICIAN: Scipio is young, and young people always hang together.

HELICON: Scipio doesn't count, anyhow.

[Enter a member of the imperial bodyguard.]

THE GUARDSMAN: Caligula has been seen in the palace gardens.

[All leave the room. The stage is empty for some moments. Then CALIGULA enters stealthily from the left. His legs are caked with mud, his garments dirty; his hair is wet, his look distraught. He brings his hand to his mouth several times. Then he approaches a mirror, stopping abruptly when he catches sight of his reflected self. After muttering some unintelligible words, he sits down on the right, letting his arms hang limp between his knees. HELICON enters, left. On seeing CALIGULA, he stops at the far end of the stage and contemplates him in silence. CALIGULA turns and sees him. A short silence.]

HELICON [across the stage]: Good morning, Caius.

CALIGULA [in quite an ordinary tone]: Good morning, Helicon.

[A short silence.]

HELICON: You're looking tired.

CALIGULA: I've walked a lot.

HELICON: Yes, you've been away for quite a while.

[Another short silence.]

CALIGULA: It was hard to find.

HELICON: What was hard to find?

CALIGULA: What I was after.

HELICON: Meaning?

CALIGULA [in the same matter-of-fact tone]: The moon.

HELICON: What?

CALIGULA: Yes, I wanted the moon.

HELICON: Ah.… [Another silence. HELICON approaches CALIGULA.] And why did you want it?

CALIGULA: Well … it's one of the things I haven't got.

HELICON: I see. And now—have you fixed it up to your satisfaction?

CALIGULA: No. I couldn't get it.

HELICON: Too bad!

CALIGULA: Yes, and that's why I'm tired. [Pauses. Then] Helicon!

HELICON: Yes, Caius?

CALIGULA: No doubt, you think I'm crazy.

HELICON: As you know well, I never think.

CALIGULA: Ah, yes.… Now, listen! I'm not mad; in fact I've never felt so lucid. What happened to me is quite simple; I suddenly felt a desire for the impossible. That's all. [Pauses.] Things as they are, in my opinion, are far from satisfactory.

HELICON: Many people share your opinion.

CALIGULA: That is so. But in the past I didn't realize it. Now I know. [Still in the same matter-of-fact tone] Really, this world of ours, the scheme of things as they call it, is quite intolerable. That's why I want the moon, or happiness, or eternal life—something, in fact, that may sound crazy, but which isn't of this world.

HELICON: That's sound enough in theory. Only, in practice one can't carry it through to its conclusion.

CALIGULA [rising to his feet, but still with perfect calmness]: You're wrong there. It's just because no one dares to follow up his ideas to the end that nothing is achieved. All that's needed, I should say, is to be logical right through, at all costs. [He studies HELICON'S face.] I can see, too, what you're thinking. What a fuss over a woman's death! But that's not it. True enough, I seem to remember that a woman died some days ago; a woman whom I loved. But love, what is it? A side issue. And I swear to you her death is not the point; it's no more than the symbol of a truth that makes the moon essential to me. A childishly simple, obvious, almost silly truth, but one that's hard to come by and heavy to endure.

HELICON: May I know what it is, this truth that you've discovered?

CALIGULA [his eyes averted, in a toneless voice]: Men die; and they are not happy.

HELICON [after a short pause]: Anyhow, Caligula, it's a truth with which one comes to terms, without much trouble. Only look at the people over there. This truth of yours doesn't prevent them from enjoying their meal.

CALIGULA [wth sudden violence]: All it proves is that I'm surrounded by lies and self-deception. But I've had enough of that; I wish men to live by the light of truth. And I've the power to make them do so. For I know what they need and haven't got. They're without understanding and they need a teacher; someone who knows what he's talking about.

HELICON: Don't take offense, Caius, if I give you a word of advice.… But that can wait. First, you should have some rest.

CALIGULA [sitting down. His voice is gentle again]: That's not possible, Helicon. I shall never rest again.

HELICON: But—why?

CALIGULA: If I sleep, who'll give me the moon?

HELICON [after a short silence]: That's true.

CALIGULA [rising to his feet again, with an effort]: Listen, Helicon … I hear footsteps, voices. Say nothing—and forget you've seen me.

HELICON: I understand.

CALIGULA [looking back, as he moves toward the door]: And please help me, from now on.

HELICON: I've no reason not to do so, Caius. But I know very few things, and few things interest me. In what way can I help you?

CALIGULA: In the way of … the impossible.

HELICON: I'll do my best.

[CALIGULA goes out. SCIPIO and CÆSONIA enter hurriedly.]

SCIPIO: No one! Haven't you seen him?

HELICON: No.

CÆSONIA: Tell me, Helicon. Are you quite sure he didn't say anything to you before he went away?

HELICON: I'm not a sharer of his secrets, I'm his public. A mere onlooker. It's more prudent.

CÆSONIA: Please don't talk like that.

HELICON: My dear Cæsonia, Caius is an idealist as we all know. He follows his bent, and no one can foresee where it will take him.... But, if you'll excuse me, I'll go to lunch.

[Exit HELICON.]

CÆSONIA [sinking wearily onto a divan]: One of the palace guards saw him go by. But all Rome sees Caligula everywhere. And Caligula, of course, sees nothing but his own idea.

SCIPIO: What idea?

CÆSONIA: How can I tell, Scipio?

SCIPIO: Are you thinking of Drusilla?

CÆSONIA: Perhaps. One thing is sure; he loved her. And it's a cruel thing to have someone die today whom only yesterday you were holding in your arms.

SCIPIO [timidly]: And you …?

CÆSONIA: Oh, I'm the old, trusted mistress. That's my role.

SCIPIO: Cæsonia, we must save him.

CÆSONIA: So you, too, love him?

SCIPIO: Yes. He's been very good to me. He encouraged me; I shall never forget some of the things he said. He told me life isn't easy, but it has consolations: religion, art, and the love one inspires in others. He often told me that the only mistake one makes in life is to cause others suffering. He tried to be a just man.

CÆSONIA [rising]: He's only a child. [She goes to the glass and scans herself.] The only god I've ever had is my body, and now I shall pray this god of mine to give Caius back to me.

[CALIGULA enters. On seeing CÆSONIA and SCIPIO he hesitates, and takes a backward step. At the same moment several men enter from the opposite side of the room: patricians and the INTENDANT of the palace. They stop short when they see CALIGULA. CÆSONIA turns. She and SCIPIO hurry toward CALIGULA, who checks them with a gesture.]

INTENDANT [in a rather quavering voice]: We … we've been looking for you, Cæsar, high and low.

CALIGULA [in a changed, harsh tone]: So I see.

INTENDANT: We … I mean …

CALIGULA [roughly]: What do you want?

INTENDANT: We were feeling anxious, Cæsar.

CALIGULA [going toward him]: What business had you to feel anxious?

INTENDANT: Well … er … [He has an inspiration.] Well, as you know, there are points to be settled in connection with the Treasury.

CALIGULA [bursting into laughter]: Ah, yes. The Treasury! That's so. The Treasury's of prime importance.

INTENDANT: Yes, indeed.

CALIGULA [still laughing, to CÆSONIA]: Don't you agree, my dear? The Treasury is all-important.

CÆSONIA: No, Caligula. It's a secondary matter.

CALIGULA: That only shows your ignorance. We are extremely interested in our Treasury. Everything's important: our fiscal system, public morals, foreign policy, army equipment, and agrarian laws.

Everything's of cardinal importance, I assure you. And everything's on an equal footing: the grandeur of Rome and your attacks of arthritis.... Well, well, I'm going to apply my mind to all that. And, to begin with … Now listen well, Intendant.

INTENDANT: We are listening, sir.

[The patricians come forward.]

CALIGULA: You're our loyal subjects, are you not?

INTENDANT [in a reproachful tone]: Oh, Cæsar …!

CALIGULA: Well, I've something to propose to you. We're going to make a complete change in our economic system. In two moves. Drastic and abrupt. I'll explain, Intendant … when the patricians have left. [The patricians go out. CALIGULA seats himself beside CÆSONIA, with his arm around her waist.] Now mark my words. The first move's this. Every patrician, everyone in the Empire who has any capital—small or large, it's all the same thing—is ordered to disinherit his children and make a new will leaving his money to the State.

INTENDANT: But Cæsar …

CALIGULA: I've not yet given you leave to speak. As the need arises, we shall have these people die; a list will be drawn up by us fixing the order of their deaths. When the fancy takes us, we may modify that order. And, of course, we shall step into their money.

CÆSONIA [freeing herself]: But—what's come over you?

CALIGULA [imperturbably]: Obviously the order of their going has no importance. Or, rather, all these executions have an equal importance—from which it follows that none has any. Really all those fellows are on a par, one's as guilty as another. [To the INTENDANT, peremptorily] You are to promulgate this edict without a moment's delay and see it's carried out forthwith. The wills are to be signed by

residents in Rome this evening; within a month at the latest by persons in the provinces. Send out your messengers.

INTENDANT: Cæsar, I wonder if you realize …

CALIGULA: Do I realize …? Now, listen well, you fool! If the Treasury has paramount importance, human life has none. That should be obvious to you. People who think like you are bound to admit the logic of my edict, and since money is the only thing that counts, should set no value on their lives or anyone else's. I have resolved to be logical, and I have the power to enforce my will. Presently you'll see what logic's going to cost you? I shall eliminate contradictions and contradicters. If necessary, I'll begin with you.

INTENDANT: Cæsar, my good will can be relied on, that I swear.

CALIGULA: And mine, too; that I guarantee. Just see how ready I am to adopt your point of view, and give the Treasury the first place in my program. Really you should be grateful to me; I'm playing into your hand, and with your own cards. [He pauses, before continuing in a flat, unemotional tone] In any case there is a touch of genius in the simplicity of my plan—which clinches the matter. I give you three seconds in which to remove yourself. One …

[The INTENDANT hurries out.]

CÆSONIA: I can't believe it's you! But it was just a joke, wasn't it?—all you said to him.

CALIGULA: Not quite that, Cæsonia. Let's say, a lesson in statesmanship.

SCIPIO: But, Caius, it's … it's impossible!

CALIGULA: That's the whole point.

SCIPIO: I don't follow.

CALIGULA: I repeat—that is my point. I'm exploiting the impossible. Or, more accurately, it's a question of making the impossible possible.

SCIPIO: But that game may lead to—to anything! It's a lunatic's pastime.

CALIGULA: No, Scipio. An emperor's vocation. [He lets himself sink back wearily among the cushions.] Ah, my dears, at last I've come to see the uses of supremacy. It gives impossibilities a run. From this day on, so long as life is mine, my freedom has no frontier.

CÆSONIA [sadly]: I doubt if this discovery of yours will make us any happier.

CALIGULA: So do I. But, I suppose, we'll have to live it through.

[CHEREA enters.]

CHEREA: I have just heard of your return. I trust your health is all it should be.

CALIGULA: My health is duly grateful. [A pause. Then, abruptly] Leave us, Cherea. I don't want to see you.

CHEREA: Really, Caius, I'm amazed …

CALIGULA: There's nothing to be amazed at. I don't like literary men, and I can't bear lies.

CHEREA: If we lie, it's often without knowing it. I plead Not Guilty.

CALIGULA: Lies are never guiltless. And yours attribute importance to people and to things. That's what I cannot forgive you.

CHEREA: And yet—since this world is the only one we have, why not plead its cause?

CALIGULA: Your pleading comes too late, the verdict's given.… This world has no importance; once a man realizes that, he wins his

freedom. [He has risen to his feet.] And that is why I hate you, you and your kind; because you are not free. You see in me the one free man in the whole Roman Empire. You should be glad to have at last among you an emperor who points the way to freedom. Leave me, Cherea; and you, too, Scipio, go—for what is friendship? Go, both of you, and spread the news in Rome that freedom has been given her at last, and with the gift begins a great probation.

[They go out. CALIGULA has turned away, hiding his eyes.]

CÆSONIA: Crying?

CALIGULA: Yes, Cæsonia.

CÆSONIA: But, after all, what's changed in your life? You may have loved Drusilla, but you loved many others—myself included—at the same time. Surely that wasn't enough to set you roaming the countryside for three days and nights and bring you back with this … this cruel look on your face?

CALIGULA [swinging round on her]: What nonsense is this? Why drag in Drusilla? Do you imagine love's the only thing that can make a man shed tears?

CÆSONIA: I'm sorry, Caius. Only I was trying to understand.

CALIGULA: Men weep because … the world's all wrong. [She comes toward him.] No, Cæsonia. [She draws back.] But stay beside me.

CÆSONIA: I'll do whatever you wish. [Sits down.] At my age one knows that life's a sad business. But why deliberately set out to make it worse?

CALIGULA: No, it's no good; you can't understand. But what matter? Perhaps I'll find a way out. Only, I feel a curious stirring within me, as if undreamed of things were forcing their way up into the light—and I'm

helpless against them. [He moves closer to her.] Oh, Cæsonia, I knew that men felt anguish, but I didn't know what that word anguish meant. Like everyone else I fancied it was a sickness of the mind—no more. But no, it's my body that's in pain. Pain everywhere, in my chest, in my legs and arms. Even my skin is raw, my head is buzzing, I feel like vomiting. But worst of all is this queer taste in my mouth. Not blood, or death, or fever, but a mixture of all three. I've only to stir my tongue, and the world goes black, and everyone looks … horrible. How hard, how cruel it is, this process of becoming a man!

CÆSONIA: What you need, my dear, is a good, long sleep. Let yourself relax and, above all stop thinking. I'll stay by you while you sleep. And when you wake, you'll find the world's got back its savor. Then you must use your power to good effect—for loving better what you still find lovable. For the possible, too, deserves to be given a chance.

CALIGULA: Ah but for that I'd need to sleep, to let myself go—and that's impossible.

CÆSONIA: So one always thinks when one is overtired. A time comes when one's hand is firm again.

CALIGULA: But one must know where to place it. And what's the use to me of a firm hand, what use is the amazing power that's mine, if I can't have the sun set in the east, if I can't reduce the sum of suffering and make an end of death? No, Cæsonia, it's all one whether I sleep or keep awake, if I've no power to tamper with the scheme of things.

CÆSONIA: But that's madness, sheer madness. It's wanting to be a god on earth.

CALIGULA: So you, too, think I'm mad. And yet—what is a god that I should wish to be his equal? No, it's something higher, far above the

gods, that I'm aiming at, longing for with all my heart and soul. I am taking over a kingdom where the impossible is king.

CÆSONIA: You can't prevent the sky from being the sky, or a fresh young face from aging, or a man's heart from growing cold.

CALIGULA [with rising excitement]: I want … I want to drown the sky in the sea, to infuse ugliness with beauty, to wring a laugh from pain.

CÆSONIA [facing him with an imploring gesture]: There's good and bad, high and low, justice and injustice. And I swear to you these will never change.

CALIGULA [in the same tone]: And I'm resolved to change them … I shall make this age of ours a kingly gift—the gift of equality. And when all is leveled out, when the impossible has come to earth and the moon is in my hands—then, perhaps, I shall be transfigured and the world renewed; then men will die no more and at last be happy.

CÆSONIA [with a little cry]: And love? Surely you won't go back on love!

CALIGULA [in a wild burst of anger]: Love, Cæsonia! [He grips her shoulders and shakes her.] I've learned the truth about love; it's nothing, nothing! That fellow was quite right—you heard what he said, didn't you?—it's only the Treasury that counts. The fountainhead of all. Ah, now at last I'm going to live, really live. And living, my dear, is the opposite of loving. I know what I'm talking about—and I invite you to the most gorgeous of shows, a sight for gods to gloat on, a whole world called to judgment. But for that I must have a crowd—spectators, victims, criminals, hundreds and thousands of them. [He rushes to the gong and begins hammering on it, faster and faster.] Let the accused come forward. I want my criminals, and they all are criminals. [Still striking the gong.] Bring in the condemned men. I must have my public. Judges, witnesses, accused—all sentenced to death without a hearing. Yes, Cæsonia, I'll show them something they have never seen before,

the one free man in the Roman Empire. [To the clangor of the gong the palace has been gradually filling with noises; the clash of arms, voices, footsteps slow or hurried, coming nearer, growing louder. Some soldiers enter, and leave hastily.] And you, Cæsonia, shall obey me. You must stand by me to the end. It will be marvelous, you'll see. Swear to stand by me, Cæsonia.

CÆSONIA [wildly, between two gong strokes]: I needn't swear. You know I love you.

CALIGULA [in the same tone]: You'll do all I tell you.

CÆSONIA: All, all, Caligula—but do, please, stop.…

CALIGULA [still striking the gong]: You will be cruel.

CÆSONIA [sobbing]: Cruel.

CALIGULA [still beating the gong]: Cold and ruthless.

CÆSONIA: Ruthless.

CALIGULA: And you will suffer, too.

CÆSONIA: Yes, yes—oh, no, please … I'm—I'm going mad, I think! [Some patricians enter, followed by members of the palace staff. All look bewildered and perturbed. CALIGULA bangs the gong for the last time, raises his mallet, swings round and summons them in a shrill, half-crazy voice.]

CALIGULA: Come here. All of you. Nearer. Nearer still. [He is quivering with impatience.] Your Emperor commands you to come nearer. [They come forward, pale with terror.] Quickly. And you, Cæsonia, come beside me. [He takes her hand, leads her to the mirror, and with a wild sweep of his mallet effaces a reflection on its surface. Then gives a sudden laugh.] All gone. You see, my dear? An end of memories; no

more masks. Nothing, nobody left. Nobody? No, that's not true. Look, Cæsonia. Come here, all of you, and look …

[He plants himself in front of the mirror in a grotesque attitude.]

CÆSONIA [staring, horrified, at the mirror]: Caligula! [CALIGULA lays a finger on the glass. His gaze steadies abruptly and when he speaks his voice has a new, proud ardor.]

CALIGULA: Yes … Caligula.

CURTAIN

ACT II

Three years later.

A room in Cherea's house, where the patricians have met in secret.

FIRST PATRICIAN: It's outrageous, the way he's treating us.

THE OLD PATRICIAN: He calls me "darling"! In public, mind you—just to make a laughingstock of me. Death's too good for him.

FIRST PATRICIAN: And fancy making us run beside his litter when he goes into the country.

SECOND PATRICIAN: He says the exercise will do us good.

THE OLD PATRICIAN: Conduct like that is quite inexcusable.

THIRD PATRICIAN: You're right. That's precisely the sort of thing one can't forgive.

FIRST PATRICIAN: He confiscated your property, Patricius. He killed your father, Scipio. He's taken your wife from you, Octavius, and forced her

to work in his public brothel. He has killed your son, Lepidus. I ask you, gentlemen, can you endure this? I, anyhow, have made up my mind. I know the risks, but I also know this life of abject fear is quite unbearable. Worse than death, in fact. Yes, as I said, my mind's made up.

SCIPIO: He made my mind up for me when he had my father put to death.

FIRST PATRICIAN: Well? Can you still hesitate?

A KNIGHT: No. We're with you. He's transferred our stalls at the Circus to the public, and egged us on to fight with the rabble—just to have a pretext for punishing us, of course.

THE OLD PATRICIAN: He's a coward.

SECOND PATRICIAN: A bully.

THIRD PATRICIAN: A buffoon.

THE OLD PATRICIAN: He's impotent—that's his trouble, I should say.

[A scene of wild confusion follows, weapons are brandished, a table is overturned, and there is a general rush toward the door. Just at this moment CHEREA strolls in, composed as usual, and checks their onrush.]

CHEREA: What's all this about? Where are you going?

A PATRICIAN: To the palace.

CHEREA: Ah, yes. And I can guess why. But do you think you'll be allowed to enter?

THE PATRICIAN: There's no question of asking leave.

CHEREA: Lepidus, would you kindly shut that door? [The door is shut. CHEREA goes to the overturned table and seats himself on a corner of it. The others turn toward him.] It's not so simple as you think, my friends. You're afraid, but fear can't take the place of courage and deliberation. In short, you're acting too hastily.

A KNIGHT: If you're not with us, go. But keep your mouth shut.

CHEREA: I suspect I'm with you. But make no mistake. Not for the same reasons.

A VOICE: That's enough idle talk.

CHEREA [standing up]: I agree. Let's get down to facts. But, first, let me make myself clear. Though I am with you, I'm not for you. That, indeed, is why I think you're going about it the wrong way. You haven't taken your enemy's measure; that's obvious, since you attribute petty motives to him. But there's nothing petty about Caligula, and you're riding for a fall. You'd be better placed to fight him if you would try to see him as he really is.

A VOICE: We see him as he is—a crazy tyrant.

CHEREA: No. We've had experience of mad emperors. But this one isn't mad enough. And what I loathe in him is this: that he knows what he wants.

FIRST PATRICIAN: And we, too, know it; he wants to murder us all.

CHEREA: You're wrong. Our deaths are only a side issue. He's putting his power at the service of a loftier, deadlier passion; and it imperils everything we hold most sacred. True, it's not the first time Rome has seen a man wielding unlimited power; but it's the first time he sets no limit to his use of it, and counts mankind, and the world we know, for nothing. That's what appalls me in Caligula; that's what I want to fight. To lose one's life is no great matter; when the time comes I'll have the

courage to lose mine. But what's intolerable is to see one's life being drained of meaning, to be told there's no reason for existing. A man can't live without some reason for living.

FIRST PATRICIAN: Revenge is a good reason.

CHEREA: Yes, and I propose to share it with you. But I'd have you know that it's not on your account, or to help you to avenge your petty humiliations. No, if I join forces with you, it's to combat a big idea—an ideal, if you like—whose triumph would mean the end of everything. I can endure your being made a mock of, but I cannot endure Caligula's carrying out his theories to the end. He is converting his philosophy into corpses and—unfortunately for us—it's a philosophy that's logical from start to finish. And where one can't refute, one strikes.

A VOICE: Yes. We must act.

CHEREA: We must take action, I agree. But a frontal attack's quite useless when one is fighting an imperial madman in the full flush of his power. You can take arms against a vulgar tyrant, but cunning is needed to fight down disinterested malice. You can only urge it on to follow its bent, and bide your time until its logic founders in sheer lunacy. As you see, I prefer to be quite frank, and I warn you I'll be with you only for a time. Afterward, I shall do nothing to advance your interests; all I wish is to regain some peace of mind in a world that has regained a meaning. What spurs me on is not ambition but fear, my very reasonable fear of that inhuman vision in which my life means no more than a speck of dust.

FIRST PATRICIAN [approaching him]: I have an inkling of what you mean, Cherea. Anyhow, the great thing is that you, too, feel that the whole fabric of society is threatened. You, gentlemen, agree with me, I take it, that our ruling motive is of a moral order. Family life is breaking

down, men are losing their respect for honest work, a wave of immorality is sweeping the country. Who of us can be deaf to the appeal of our ancestral piety in its hour of danger? Fellow conspirators, will you tolerate a state of things in which patricians are forced to run, like slaves, beside the Emperor's litter?

THE OLD PATRICIAN: Will you allow them to be addressed as "darling"?

A VOICE: And have their wives snatched from them?

ANOTHER VOICE: And their money?

ALL TOGETHER: No!

FIRST PATRICIAN: Cherea, your advise is good, and you did well to calm our passion. The time is not yet ripe for action; the masses would still be against us. Will you join us in watching for the best moment to strike—and strike hard?

CHEREA: Yes—and meanwhile let Caligula follow his dream. Or, rather, let's actively encourage him to carry out his wildest plans. Let's put method into his madness. And then, at last, a day will come when he's alone, a lonely man in an empire of the dead and kinsmen of the dead.

[A general uproar. Trumpet calls outside. Then silence, but for whispers of a name: "CALIGULA!" CALIGULA enters with CÆSONIA, followed by HELICON and some soldiers. Pantomime. CALIGULA halts and gazes at the conspirators. Without a word he moves from one to the other, straightens a buckle on one man's shoulder, steps back to contemplate another, sweeps them with his gaze, then draws his hand over his eyes and walks out, still without a word.]

CÆSONIA [ironically, pointing to the disorder of the room]: Were you having a fight?

CHEREA: Yes, we were fighting.

CÆSONIA [in the same tone]: Really? Might I know what you were fighting about?

CHEREA: About … nothing in particular.

CÆSONIA: Ah? Then it isn't true.

CHEREA: What isn't true?

CÆSONIA: You were not fighting.

CHEREA: Have it your own way. We weren't fighting.

CÆSONIA [smiling]: Perhaps you'd do better to tidy up the place. Caligula hates untidiness.

HELICON [to the OLD PATRICIAN]: You'll end by making him do something out of character.

THE OLD PATRICIAN: Pardon … I don't follow. What have we done to him?

HELICON: Nothing. Just nothing. It's fantastic being futile to that point; enough to get on anybody's nerves. Try to put yourselves in Caligula's place. [A short pause.] I see; doing a bit of plotting, weren't you now?

THE OLD PATRICIAN: Really, that's too absurd. I hope Caligula doesn't imagine …

HELICON: He doesn't imagine. He knows. But, I suppose, at bottom, he rather wants it.… Well, we'd better set to tidying up.

[All get busy. CALIGULA enters and watches them.]

CALIGULA [to the OLD PATRICIAN]: Good day, darling. [To the others] Gentlemen, I'm on my way to an execution. But I thought I'd drop in at your place, Cherea, for a light meal. I've given orders to have food brought here for all of us. But send for your wives first. [A short

silence.] Rufius should thank his stars that I've been seized with hunger. [Confidentially] Rufius, I may tell you, is the knight who's going to be executed. [Another short silence.] What's this? None of you asks me why I've sentenced him to death? [No one speaks. Meanwhile slaves lay the table and bring food.] Good for you! I see you're growing quite intelligent. [He nibbles an olive.] It has dawned on you that a man needn't have done anything for him to die. [He stops eating and gazes at his guests with a twinkle in his eye.] Soldiers, I am proud of you. [Three or four women enter.] Good! Let's take our places. Anyhow. No order of precedence today. [All are seated.] There's no denying it, that fellow Rufius is in luck. But I wonder if he appreciates this short reprieve. A few hours gained on death, why, they're worth their weight in gold! [He begins eating; the others follow suit. It becomes clear that CALIGULA'S table manners are deplorable. There is no need for him to flick his olive stones onto his neighbors' plates, or to spit out bits of gristle over the dish, or to pick his teeth with his nails, or to scratch his head furiously. However, he indulges in these practices throughout the meal, without the least compunction. At one moment he stops eating, stares at LEPIDUS, one of the guests, and says roughly] You're looking grumpy, Lepidus. I wonder, can it be because I had your son killed?

LEPIDUS [thickly]: Certainly not, Caius. Quite the contrary.

CALIGULA [beaming at him]: "Quite the contrary!" It's always nice to see a face that hides the secrets of the heart. Your face is sad. But what about your heart? Quite the contrary—isn't that so, Lepidus?

LEPIDUS [doggedly]: Quite the contrary, Cæsar.

CALIGULA [more and more enjoying the situation]: Really, Lepidus, there's no one I like better than you. Now let's have a laugh together, my dear friend. Tell me a funny story.

LEPIDUS [who has overrated his endurance]: Please …

CALIGULA: Good! Very good! Then it's I who'll tell the story. But you'll laugh, won't you, Lepidus? [With a glint of malice.] If only for the sake of your other son. [Smiling again.] In any case, as you've just told us, you're not in a bad humor. [He takes a drink, then says in the tone of a teacher prompting a pupil] Quite … quite the …

LEPIDUS [wearily]: Quite the contrary, Cæsar.

CALIGULA: Splendid! [Drinks again.] Now listen. [In a gentle, faraway tone] Once upon a time there was a poor young emperor whom nobody loved. He loved Lepidus, and to root out of his heart his love for Lepidus, he had his youngest son killed. [In a brisker tone] Needless to say, there's not a word of truth in it. Still it's a funny story, eh? But you're not laughing. Nobody's laughing. Now listen! [In a burst of anger] I insist on everybody's laughing. You, Lepidus, shall lead the chorus. Stand up, every one of you, and laugh. [He thumps the table.] Do you hear what I say? I wish to see you laughing, all of you. [All rise to their feet. During this scene all the players, CALIGULA and CÆSONIA excepted, behave like marionettes in a puppet play. CALIGULA sinks back on his couch, beaming with delight, and bursts into a fit of laughter.] Oh, Cæsonia! Just look at them! The game is up; honor, respectability, the wisdom of the nations, gone with the wind! The wind of fear has blown them all away. Fear, Cæsonia—don't you agree?—is a noble emotion, pure and simple, self-sufficient, like no other; it draws its patent of nobility straight from the guts. [He strokes his forehead and drinks again. In a friendly tone] Well, well, let's change the subject. What have you to say, Cherea? You've been very silent.

CHEREA: I'm quite ready to speak, Caius. When you give me leave.

CALIGULA: Excellent. Then—keep silent. I'd rather have a word from our friend Mucius.

MUCIUS [reluctantly]: As you will, Caius.

CALIGULA: Then tell us something about your wife. And begin by sending her to this place, on my right. [MUCIUS' WIFE seats herself beside CALIGULA.] Well, Mucius? We're waiting.

MUCIUS [hardly knowing what he says]: My wife … but … I'm very fond of her.

[General laughter.]

CALIGULA: Why, of course, my friend, of course. But how ordinary of you! So unoriginal! [He is leaning toward her, tickling her shoulder playfully with his tongue.] By the way, when I came in just now, you were hatching a plot, weren't you? A nice bloody little plot?

OLD PATRICIAN: Oh, Caius, how can you …?

CALIGULA: It doesn't matter in the least, my pet. Old age will be served. I won't take it seriously. Not one of you has the spunk for an heroic act.… Ah, it's just come to my mind, I have some affairs of state to settle. But, first, let the imperious desires that nature creates in us have their way.

[He rises and leads MUCIUS' WIFE into an adjoining room. MUCIUS starts up from his seat.]

CÆSONIA [amiably]: Please, Mucius. Will you pour me out another glass of this excellent wine. [MUCIUS complies; his movement of revolt is quelled. Everyone looks embarrassed. Chairs creak noisily. The ensuing conversation is in a strained tone. CÆSONIA turns to CHEREA.] Now, Cherea, suppose you tell me why you people were fighting just now?

CHEREA [coolly]: With pleasure, my dear Cæsonia. Our quarrel arose from a discussion whether poetry should be bloodthirsty or not.

CÆSONIA: An interesting problem. Somewhat beyond my feminine comprehension, of course. Still it surprises me that your passion for art should make you come to blows.

CHEREA [in the same rather stilted tone]: That I can well understand. But I remember Caligula's telling me the other day that all true passion has a spice of cruelty.

CÆSONIA [helping herself from the dish in front of her]: There's truth in that. Don't you agree, gentlemen?

THE OLD PATRICIAN: Ah, yes. Caligula has a rare insight into the secret places of the heart.

FIRST PATRICIAN: And how eloquently he spoke just now of courage!

SECOND PATRICIAN: Really, he should put his ideas into writing. They would be most instructive.

CHEREA: And, what's more, it would keep him busy. It's obvious he needs something to occupy his leisure.

CÆSONIA [still eating]: You'll be pleased to hear that Caligula shares your views; he's working on a book. Quite a big one, I believe.

[CALIGULA enters, accompanied by MUCIUS' WIFE.]

CALIGULA: Mucius, I return your wife, with many thanks. But excuse me, I've some orders to give.

[He hurries out. MUCIUS has gone pale and risen to his feet.]

CÆSONIA [to MUCIUS, who is standing]: This book of his will certainly rank among our Latin Classics. Are you listening, Mucius?

MUCIUS [his eyes still fixed on the door by which CALIGULA went out]: Yes. And what's the book about, Cæsonia?

CÆSONIA [indifferently]: Oh, it's above my head, you know.

CHEREA: May we assume it deals with the murderous power of poetry?

CÆSONIA: Yes, something of that sort, I understand.

THE OLD PATRICIAN [cheerfully]: Well anyhow, as our friend Cherea said, it will keep him busy.

CÆSONIA: Yes, my love. But I'm afraid there's one thing you won't like quite so much about this book, and that's its title.

CHEREA: What is it?

CÆSONIA: Cold Steel.

[Caligula hurries in.]

CALIGULA: Excuse me, but I've some urgent public work in hand. [To the INTENDANT] Intendant, you are to close the public granaries. I have signed a decree to that effect; you will find it in my study.

INTENDANT: But, sire …

CALIGULA: Famine begins tomorrow.

INTENDANT: But … but heaven knows what may happen—perhaps a revolution.

CALIGULA [firmly and deliberately]: I repeat; famine begins tomorrow. We all know what famine means—a national catastrophe. Well, tomorrow there will be a catastrophe, and I shall end it when I choose. After all, I haven't so many ways of proving I am free. One is always free at someone else's expense. Absurd perhaps, but so it is. [With a keen glance at MUCIUS] Apply this principle to your jealousy—and you'll understand better. [In a meditative tone] Still, what an ugly thing is jealousy! A disease of vanity and the imagination. One pictures one's wife.... [MUCIUS clenches his fists and opens his mouth to speak. Before he can get a word out, CALIGULA cuts in] Now, gentlemen, let's go on with our meal.... Do you know, we've been doing quite a lot of work,

with Helicon's assistance? Putting the final touches to a little monograph on execution—about which you will have much to say.

HELICON: Assuming we ask your opinion.

CALIGULA: Why not be generous, Helicon, and let them into our little secrets? Come now, give them a sample. Section Three, first paragraph.

HELICON [standing, declaims in a droning voice]: "Execution relieves and liberates. It is universal, tonic, just in precept and in practice. A man dies because he is guilty. A man is guilty because he is one of Caligula's subjects. Now all men are Caligula's subjects. Ergo, all men are guilty and shall die. It is only a matter of time and patience."

CALIGULA [laughing]: There's logic for you, don't you agree? That bit about patience was rather neat, wasn't it? Allow me to tell you, that's the quality I most admire in you … your patience. Now, gentlemen, you can disperse. Cherea doesn't need your presence any longer. Cæsonia, I wish you to stay. You too, Lepidus. Also our old friend Mereia. I want to have a little talk with you about our National Brothel. It's not functioning too well; in fact, I'm quite concerned about it.

[The others file out slowly. CALIGULA follows MUCIUS with his eyes.]

CHEREA: At your orders, Caius. But what's the trouble? Are the staff unsatisfactory?

CALIGULA: No, but the takings are falling off.

MEREIA: Then you should raise the entrance fee.

CALIGULA: There, Mereia, you missed a golden opportunity of keeping your mouth shut. You're too old to be interested in the subject, and I don't want your opinion.

MEREIA: Then why ask me to stay?

CALIGULA: Because, presently, I may require some cool, dispassionate advice.

[MEREIA moves away.]

CHEREA: If you wish to hear my views on the subject, Caius, I'd say, neither coolly nor dispassionately, that it would be a blunder to raise the scale of charges.

CALIGULA: Obviously. What's needed is a bigger turnover. I've explained my plan of campaign to Cæsonia, and she will tell you all about it. As for me, I've had too much wine, I'm feeling sleepy.

[He lies down and closes his eyes.]

CÆSONIA: It's very simple. Caligula is creating a new order of merit.

CHEREA: Sorry, I don't see the connection.

CÆSONIA: No? But there is one. It will be called the Badge of Civic Merit and awarded to those who have patronized Caligula's National Brothel most assiduously.

CHEREA: A brilliant idea!

CÆSONIA: I agree. Oh, I forgot to mention that the badge will be conferred each month, after checking the admission tickets. Any citizen who has not obtained the badge within twelve months will be exiled, or executed.

CHEREA: Why "or executed"?

CÆSONIA: Because Caligula says it doesn't matter which—but it's important he should have the right of choosing.

CHEREA: Bravo! The Public Treasury will wipe out its deficit in no time

[CALIGULA has half opened his eyes and is watching old MEREIA who, standing in a corner, has produced a small flask and is sipping its contents.]

CALIGULA [still lying on the couch]: What's that you're drinking, Mereia?

MEREIA: It's for my asthma, Caius.

CALIGULA [rises, and thrusting the others aside, goes up to MEREIA and sniffs his mouth]: No, it's an antidote.

MEREIA: What an idea, Caius! You must be joking. I have choking fits at night and I've been in the doctor's hands for months.

CALIGULA: So you're afraid of being poisoned?

MEREIA: My asthma …

CALIGULA: No. Why beat about the bush? You're afraid I'll poison you. You suspect me. You're keeping an eye on me.

MEREIA: Good heavens, no!

CALIGULA: You suspect me. I'm not to be trusted, eh?

MEREIA: Caius!

CALIGULA [roughly]: Answer! [In a cool, judicial tone] If you take an antidote, it follows that you credit me with the intention of poisoning you. Q.E.D.

MEREIA: Yes … I mean … no!

CALIGULA: And thinking I intend to poison you, you take steps to frustrate my plan. [He falls silent. Meanwhile CÆSONIA and CHEREA have moved away, backstage. LEPIDUS is watching the speakers with an

air of consternation.] That makes two crimes, Mereia, and a dilemma from which you can't escape. Either I have no wish to cause your death; in which case you are unjustly suspecting me, your emperor. Or else I desire your death; in which case, vermin that you are, you're trying to thwart my will. [Another silence. CALIGULA contemplates the old man gloatingly.] Well, Mereia, what have you to say to my logic?

MEREIA: It … it's sound enough, Caius. Only it doesn't apply to the case.

CALIGULA: A third crime. You take me for a fool. Now sit down and listen carefully. [To LEPIDUS] Let everyone sit down. [To MEREIA] Of these three crimes only one does you honor; the second one—because by crediting me with a certain wish and presuming to oppose it you are deliberately defying me. You are a rebel, a leader of revolt. And that needs courage. [Sadly] I've a great liking for you Mereia. And that is why you'll be condemned for crime number two, and not for either of the others. You shall die nobly, a rebel's death. [While he talks MEREIA is shrinking together on his chair.] Don't thank me. It's quite natural. Here. [Holds out a phial. His tone is amiable.] Drink this poison. [MEREIA shakes his head. He is sobbing violently. CALIGULA shows signs of impatience.] Don't waste time. Take it. [MEREIA makes a feeble attempt to escape. But CALIGULA with a wild leap is on him, catches him in the center of the stage and after a brief struggle pins him down on a low couch. He forces the phial between his lips and smashes it with a blow of his fist. After some convulsive movements MEREIA dies. His face is streaming with blood and tears. CALIGULA rises, wipes his hands absent-mindedly, then hands MEREIA'S flask to CÆSONIA.] What was it? An antidote?

CÆSONIA [calmly]: No, Caligula. A remedy for asthma.

[A short silence.]

CALIGULA [gazing down at MEREIA]: No matter. It all comes to the same thing in the end. A little sooner, a little later.…

[He goes out hurriedly, still wiping his hands.]

LEPIDUS [in a horrified tone]: What … what shall we do?

CÆSONIA [coolly]: Remove that body to begin with, I should say. It's rather a beastly sight.

[CHEREA and LEPIDUS drag the body into the wings.]

LEPIDUS [to CHEREA]: We must act quickly.

CHEREA: We'll need to be two hundred.

[Young SCIPIO enters. Seeing CÆSONIA, he makes as if to leave.]

CÆSONIA: Come.

SCIPIO: What do you want?

CÆSONIA: Come nearer. [She pushes up his chin and looks him in the eyes. A short silence. Then, in a calm, unemotional voice] He killed your father, didn't he?

SCIPIO: Yes.

CÆSONIA: Do you hate him?

SCIPIO: Yes.

CÆSONIA: And you'd like to kill him?

SCIPIO: Yes.

CÆSONIA [withdrawing her hand]: But—why tell me this?

SCIPIO: Because I fear nobody. Killing him or being killed—either way out will do. And anyhow you won't betray me.

CÆSONIA: That's so. I won't betray you. But I want to tell you something—or, rather, I'd like to speak to what is best in you.

SCIPIO: What's best in me is—my hatred.

CÆSONIA: Please listen carefully to what I'm going to say. It may sound hard to grasp, but it's as clear as daylight, really. And it's something that would bring about the one real revolution in this world of ours, if people would only take it in.

SCIPIO: Yes? What is it?

CÆSONIA: Wait! Try to call up a picture of your father's death, of the agony on his face as they were tearing out his tongue. Think of the blood streaming from his mouth, and recall his screams, like a tortured animal's.

SCIPIO: Yes.

CÆSONIA: And now think of Caligula.

SCIPIO [his voice rough with hatred]: Yes.

CÆSONIA: Now listen. Try to understand him.

[She goes out, leaving SCIPIO gaping after her in bewilderment. HELICON enters.]

HELICON: Caligula will be here in a moment. Suppose you go for your meal, young poet?

SCIPIO: Helicon, help me.

HELICON: Too dangerous, my lamb. And poetry means nothing to me.

SCIPIO: You can help me. You know … so many things.

HELICON: I know that the days go by—and growing boys should have their meals on time … I know, too, that you could kill Caligula … and he wouldn't greatly mind it.

[HELICON goes out. CALIGULA enters.]

CALIGULA: Ah, it's you, Scipio. [He pauses. One has the impression that he is somewhat embarrassed.] It's quite a long time since I saw you last. [Slowly approaches SCIPIO.] What have you been up to? Writing more poems, I suppose. Might I see your latest composition?

SCIPIO [likewise ill at ease, torn between hatred and some less defined emotion]: Yes, Cæsar, I've written some more poems.

CALIGULA: On what subject?

SCIPIO: Oh, on nothing in particular. Well, on Nature in a way.

CALIGULA: A fine theme. And a vast one. And what has Nature done for you?

SCIPIO [pulling himself together, in a somewhat truculent tone]: It consoles me for not being Cæsar.

CALIGULA: Really? And do you think Nature could console me for being Cæsar?

SCIPIO [in the same tone]: Why not? Nature has healed worse wounds than that.

CALIGULA [in a curiously young, unaffected voice]: Wounds, you said? There was anger in your voice. Because I put your father to death?…

That word you used—if you only knew how apt it is! My wounds! [In a different tone] Well, well, there's nothing like hatred for developing the intelligence.

SCIPIO [stiffly]: I answered your question about Nature.

[CALIGULA sits down, gazes at SCIPIO, then brusquely grips his wrists and forces him to stand up. He takes the young man's face between his hands.]

CALIGULA: Recite your poem to me, please.

SCIPIO: No, please, don't ask me that.

CALIGULA: Why not?

SCIPIO: I haven't got it on me.

CALIGULA: Can't you remember it?

SCIPIO: No.

CALIGULA: Anyhow you can tell me what it's about.

SCIPIO [still hostile; reluctantly]: I spoke of a … a certain harmony …

CALIGULA [breaking in; in a pensive voice]:… between one's feet and the earth.

SCIPIO [looking surprised]: Yes, it's almost that … and it tells of the wavy outline of the Roman hills and the sudden thrill of peace that twilight brings to them …

CALIGULA: And the cries of swifts winding through the green dusk.

SCIPIO [yielding more and more to his emotion]: Yes, yes! And that fantastic moment when the sky all flushed with red and gold swings round and shows its other side, spangled with stars.

CALIGULA: And the faint smell of smoke and trees and streams that mingles with the rising mist.

SCIPIO [in a sort of ecstasy]: Yes, and the chirr of crickets, the coolness veining the warm air, the rumble of carts and the farmers' shouts, dogs barking …

CALIGULA: And the roads drowned in shadow winding through the olive groves …

SCIPIO: Yes, yes. That's it, exactly.… But how did you know?

CALIGULA [drawing SCIPIO to his breast]: I wonder! Perhaps because the same eternal truths appeal to us both.

SCIPIO [quivering with excitement, burying his head on CALIGULA'S breast]: Anyhow, what does it matter! All I know is that everything I feel or think of turns to love.

CALIGULA [stroking his hair]: That, Scipio, is a privilege of noble hearts—and how I wish I could share your … your limpidity! But my appetite for life's too keen; Nature can never sate it. You belong to quite another world, and you can't understand. You are single-minded for good; and I am single-minded—for evil.

SCIPIO: I do understand.

CALIGULA: No. There's something deep down in me—an abyss of silence, a pool of stagnant water, rotting weeds. [With an abrupt change of manner] Your poem sounds very good indeed, but, if you really want my opinion.…

SCIPIO [his head on CALIGULA'S breast, murmurs]: Yes?

CALIGULA: All that's a bit … anemic.

SCIPIO [recoiling abruptly, as if stung by a serpent, and gazing, horrified, at CALIGULA, he cries hoarsely]: Oh, you brute! You loathsome brute! You've fooled me again. I know! You were playing a trick on me, weren't you? And now you're gloating over your success.

CALIGULA [with a hint of sadness]: There's truth in what you say. I was playing a part.

SCIPIO [in the same indignant tone]: What a foul, black heart you have! And how all that wickedness and hatred must make you suffer!

CALIGULA [gently]: That's enough.

SCIPIO: How I loathe you! And how I pity you!

CALIGULA [angrily]: Enough, I tell you.

SCIPIO: And how horrible a loneliness like yours must be!

CALIGULA [in a rush of anger, gripping the boy by the collar, and shaking him]: Loneliness! What do you know of it? Only the loneliness of poets and weaklings. You prate of loneliness, but you don't realize that one is never alone. Always we are attended by the same load of the future and the past. Those we have killed are always with us. But they are no great trouble. It's those we have loved, those who loved us and whom we did not love; regrets, desires, bitterness and sweetness, whores and gods, the celestial gang! Always, always with us! [He releases SCIPIO and moves back to his former place.] Alone! Ah, if only in this loneliness, this ghoul-haunted wilderness of mine, I could know, but for a moment, real solitude, real silence, the throbbing stillness of a tree! [Sitting down, in an access of fatigue.] Solitude? No, Scipio, mine is full of gnashings of teeth, hideous with jarring sounds and voices. And when I am with the women I make mine and darkness falls on us and I think, now my body's had its fill, that I can feel myself my own at last, poised between death and life—ah, then my solitude is fouled by the stale smell of pleasure from the woman sprawling at my side.

[A long silence. CALIGULA seems weary and despondent. SCIPIO moves behind him and approaches hesitantly. He slowly stretches out a hand toward him, from behind, and lays it on his shoulder. Without looking round, CALIGULA places his hand on SCIPIO'S.]

SCIPIO: All men have a secret solace. It helps them to endure, and they turn to it when life has wearied them beyond enduring.

CALIGULA: Yes, Scipio.

SCIPIO: Have you nothing of the kind in your life, no refuge, no mood that makes the tears well up, no consolation?

CALIGULA: Yes, I have something of the kind.

SCIPIO: What is it?

CALIGULA [very quietly]: Scorn.

CURTAIN

ACT III

A room in the imperial palace.

Before the curtain rises a rhythmic clash of cymbals and the thudding of a drum have been coming from the stage, and when it goes up we see a curtained-off booth, with a small proscenium in front, such as strolling players use at country fairs. On the little stage are CÆSONIA and HELICON, flanked by cymbal players. Seated on benches, with their backs to the audience, are some patricians and young SCIPIO.

HELICON [in the tone of a showman at a fair]: Walk up! Walk up! [A clash of cymbals.] Once more the gods have come to earth. They have

assumed the human form of our heaven-born emperor, known to men as Caligula. Draw near, mortals of common clay; a holy miracle is taking place before your eyes. By a divine dispensation peculiar to Caligula's hallowed reign, the secrets of the gods will be revealed to you. [Cymbals.]

CÆSONIA: Come, gentlemen. Come and adore him—and don't forget to give your alms. Today heaven and its mysteries are on show, at a price to suit every pocket.

HELICON: For all to see, the secrets of Olympus, revelations in high places, featuring gods in undress, their little plots and pranks. Step this way! The whole truth about your gods! [Cymbals.]

CÆSONIA: Adore him, and give your alms. Come near, gentlemen. The show's beginning.

[Cymbals. Slaves are placing various objects on the platform.]

HELICON: An epoch-making reproduction of the life celestial, warranted authentic in every detail. For the first time the pomp and splendor of the gods are presented to the Roman public. You will relish our novel, breathtaking effects: flashes of lightning [slaves light Greek fires], peals of thunder [they roll a barrel filled with stones], the divine event on its triumphal way. Now watch with all your eyes. [He draws aside the curtain. Grotesquely attired as Venus, CALIGULA beams down on them from a pedestal.]

CALIGULA [amiably]: I'm Venus today.

CÆSONIA: Now for the adoration. Bow down. [All but SCIPIO bend their heads.] And repeat after me the litany of Venus called Caligula.

"Our Lady of pangs and pleasures …"

THE PATRICIANS: “Our Lady of pangs and pleasures …”

CÆSONIA: “Born of the waves, bitter and bright with seafoam …”

THE PATRICIANS: “Born of the waves, bitter and bright with seafoam …”

CÆSONIA: “O Queen whose gifts are laughter and regrets …”

THE PATRICIANS: “O Queen whose gifts are laughter and regrets …”

CÆSONIA: “Rancors and raptures …”

THE PATRICIANS: “Rancors and raptures …”

CÆSONIA: “Teach us the indifference that kindles love anew …”

THE PATRICIANS: “Teach us the indifference that kindles love anew …”

CÆSONIA: “Make known to us the truth about this world—which is that it has none …”

THE PATRICIANS: “Make known to us the truth about this world—which is that it has none …”

CÆSONIA: “And grant us strength to live up to this verity of verities.”

THE PATRICIANS: “And grant us strength to live up to this verity of verities.”

CÆSONIA: Now, pause.

THE PATRICIANS: Now, pause.

CÆSONIA [after a short silence]: “Bestow your gifts on us, and shed on our faces the light of your impartial cruelty, your wanton hatred; unfold above our eyes your arms laden with flowers and murders …”

THE PATRICIANS: “… your arms laden with flowers and murders.”

CÆSONIA: “Welcome your wandering children home, to the bleak sanctuary of your heartless, thankless love. Give us your passions

without object, your griefs devoid of reason, your raptures that lead nowhere …"

THE PATRICIANS: "… your raptures that lead nowhere …"

CÆSONIA [raising her voice]: "O Queen, so empty yet so ardent, inhuman yet so earthly, make us drunk with the wine of your equivalence, and surfeit us forever in the brackish darkness of your heart."

THE PATRICIANS: "Make us drunk with the wine of your equivalence, and surfeit us forever in the brackish darkness of your heart." [When the patricians have said the last response, CALIGULA, who until now has been quite motionless, snorts and rises.]

CALIGULA [in a stentorian voice]: Granted, my children. Your prayer is heard. [He squats cross-legged on the pedestal. One by one the patricians make obeisance, deposit their alms, and line up on the right. The last, in his flurry, forgets to make an offering. CALIGULA bounds to his feet.] Steady! Steady on! Come here, my lad. Worship's very well, but almsgiving is better. Thank you. We are appeased. Ah, if the gods had no wealth other than the love you mortals give them, they'd be as poor as poor Caligula. Now, gentlemen, you may go, and spread abroad the glad tidings of the miracle you've been allowed to witness. You have seen Venus, seen her godhead with your fleshly eyes, and Venus herself has spoken to you. Go, most favored gentlemen. [The patricians begin to move away.] Just a moment. When you leave, mind you take the exit on your left. I have posted sentries in the others, with orders to kill you.

[The patricians file out hastily, in some disorder. The slaves and musicians leave the stage.]

HELICON [pointing a threatening finger at SCIPIO]: Naughty boy, you've been playing the anarchist again.

SCIPIO [to CALIGULA]: You spoke blasphemy, Caius.

CALIGULA: Blasphemy? What's that?

SCIPIO: You're befouling heaven, after bloodying the earth.

HELICON: How this youngster loves big words!

[He stretches himself on a couch.]

CÆSONIA [composedly]: You should watch your tongue, my lad. At this moment men are dying in Rome for saying much less.

SCIPIO: Maybe—but I've resolved to tell Caligula the truth.

CÆSONIA: Listen to him, Caligula! That was the one thing missing in your Empire—a bold young moralist.

CALIGULA [giving SCIPIO a curious glance]: Do you really believe in the gods, Scipio?

SCIPIO: No.

CALIGULA: Then I fail to follow. If you don't believe, why be so keen to scent out blasphemy?

SCIPIO: One may deny something without feeling called on to besmirch it, or deprive others of the right of believing in it.

CALIGULA: But that's humility, the real thing, unless I'm much mistaken. Ah, my dear Scipio, how glad I am on your behalf—and a trifle envious, too. Humility's the one emotion I may never feel.

SCIPIO: It's not I you're envious of; it's the gods.

CALIGULA: If you don't mind, that will remain our secret—the great enigma of our reign. Really, you know, there's only one thing for which I might be blamed today—and that's this small advance I've made upon the path of freedom. For someone who loves power the rivalry of the gods is rather irksome. Well, I've proved to these imaginary gods that any man, without previous training, if he applies his mind to it, can play their absurd parts to perfection.

SCIPIO: That, Caius, is what I meant by blasphemy.

CALIGULA: No, Scipio, it's clear-sightedness. I've merely realized that there's only one way of getting even with the gods. All that's needed is to be as cruel as they.

SCIPIO: All that's needed is to play the tyrant.

CALIGULA: Tell me, my young friend. What exactly is a tyrant?

SCIPIO: A blind soul.

CALIGULA: That's a moot point. I should say the real tyrant is a man who sacrifices a whole nation to his ideal or his ambition. But I have no ideal, and there's nothing left for me to covet by way of power or glory. If I use this power of mine, it's to compensate.

SCIPIO: For what?

CALIGULA: For the hatred and stupidity of the gods.

SCIPIO: Hatred does not compensate for hatred. Power is no solution. Personally I know only one way of countering the hostility of the world we live in.

CALIGULA: Yes? And what is it?

SCIPIO: Poverty.

CALIGULA [bending over his feet and scrutinizing his toes]: I must try that, too.

SCIPIO: Meanwhile many men round you are dying.

CALIGULA: Oh, come! Not so many as all that. Do you know how many wars I've refused to embark on?

SCIPIO: No.

CALIGULA: Three. And do you know why I refused?

SCIPIO: Because the grandeur of Rome means nothing to you.

CALIGULA: No. Because I respect human life.

SCIPIO: You're joking, Caius.

CALIGULA: Or, anyhow, I respect it more than I respect military triumphs. But it's a fact that I don't respect it more than I respect my own life. And if I find killing easy, it's because dying isn't hard for me. No, the more I think about it, the surer I feel that I'm no tyrant.

SCIPIO: What does it matter, if it costs us quite as dear as if you were one?

CALIGULA [with a hint of petulance]: If you had the least head for figures you'd know that the smallest war a tyrant—however levelheaded he might be—indulged in would cost you a thousand times more than all my vagaries (shall we call them?) put together.

SCIPIO: Possibly. But at least there'd be some sense behind a war; it would be understandable—and to understand makes up for much.

CALIGULA: There's no understanding fate; therefore I choose to play the part of fate. I wear the foolish, unintelligible face of a professional god. And that is what the men who were here with you have learned to adore.

SCIPIO: That, too, Caius, is blasphemy.

CALIGULA: No, Scipio, it's dramatic art. The great mistake you people make is not to take the drama seriously enough. If you did, you'd know that any man can play lead in the divine comedy and become a god. All he needs do is to harden his heart.

SCIPIO: You may be right, Caius. But I rather think you've done everything that was needed to rouse up against you a legion of human gods, ruthless as yourself, who will drown in blood your godhead of a day.

CÆSONIA: Really, Scipio!

CALIGULA [peremptorily]: No, don't stop him, Cæsonia. Yes, Scipio, you spoke truer than you knew; I've done everything needed to that end. I find it hard to picture the event you speak of—but I sometimes dream it. And in all those faces surging up out of the angry darkness, convulsed with fear and hatred, I see, and I rejoice to see, the only god I've worshipped on this earth; foul and craven as the human heart. [Irritably] Now go. I've had enough of you, more than enough. [In a different tone] I really must attend to my toenails; they're not nearly red enough, and I've no time to waste. [All go, with the exception of HELICON. He hovers round CALIGULA, who is busy examining his toes.] Helicon!

HELICON: Yes?

CALIGULA: Getting on with your task?

HELICON: What task?

CALIGULA: You know … the moon.

HELICON: Ah yes, the moon.… It's a matter of time and patience. But I'd like to have a word with you.

CALIGULA: I might have patience; only I have not much time. So you must make haste.

HELICON: I said I'd do my utmost. But, first, I have something to tell you. Very serious news.

CALIGULA [as if he has not heard]: Mind you, I've had her already.

HELICON: Whom?

CALIGULA: The moon.

HELICON: Yes, yes.… Now listen, please. Do you know there's a plot being hatched against your life?

CALIGULA: What's more, I had her thoroughly. Only two or three times, to be sure. Still, I had her all right.

HELICON: For the last hour I've been trying to tell you about it, only—

CALIGULA: It was last summer. I'd been gazing at her so long, and stroking her so often on the marble pillars in the gardens that evidently she'd come to understand.

HELICON: Please stop trifling, Caius. Even if you refuse to listen, it's my duty to tell you this. And if you shut your ears, it can't be helped.

CALIGULA [applying red polish to his toenails]: This varnish is no good at all. But, to come back to the moon—it was a cloudless August night. [HELICON looks sulkily away, and keeps silence.] She was coy, to begin with. I'd gone to bed. First she was blood-red, low on the horizon. Then she began rising, quicker and quicker, growing brighter and brighter all the while. And the higher she climbed, the paler she grew, till she was like a milky pool in a dark wood rustling with stars. Slowly, shyly she approached, through the warm night air, soft, light as gossamer, naked in beauty. She crossed the threshold of my room, glided to my bed, poured herself into it, and flooded me with her smiles and sheen.... No, really this new varnish is a failure.... So you see, Helicon, I can say, without boasting, that I've had her.

HELICON: Now will you listen, and learn the danger that's threatening you?

CALIGULA [ceasing to fiddle with his toes, and gazing at him fixedly]: All I want, Helicon, is—the moon. For the rest, I've always known what will kill me. I haven't yet exhausted all that is to keep me living. That's why I want the moon. And you must not return till you have secured her for me.

HELICON: Very well.... Now I'll do my duty and tell you what I've learned. There's a plot against you. Cherea is the ringleader. I came across this tablet which tells you all you need to know. See, I put it here.

[He places the tablet on one of the seats and moves away.]

CALIGULA: Where are you off to, Helicon?

HELICON [from the threshold]: To get the moon for you.

[There is a mouselike scratching at the opposite door. CALIGULA swings round and sees the OLD PATRICIAN.]

THE OLD PATRICIAN [timidly]: May I, Caius …

CALIGULA [impatiently]: Come in! Come in! [Gazes at him.] So, my pet, you've returned to have another look at Venus.

THE OLD PATRICIAN: Well … no. It's not quite that. Ssh! Oh, sorry, Caius! I only wanted to say.… You know I'm very, very devoted to you—and my one desire is to end my days in peace.

CALIGULA: Be quick, man. Get it out!

THE OLD PATRICIAN: Well, it's … it's like this. [Hurriedly] It's terribly serious, that's what I meant to say.

CALIGULA: No, it isn't serious.

THE OLD PATRICIAN: But—I don't follow. What isn't serious?

CALIGULA: But what are we talking about, my love?

THE OLD PATRICIAN [glancing nervously round the room]: I mean to say.… [Wriggles, shuffles, then bursts out with it.] There's a plot afoot, against you.

CALIGULA: There! You see. Just as I said; it isn't serious.

THE OLD PATRICIAN: But, Caius, they mean to kill you.

CALIGULA [approaching him and grasping his shoulders]: Do you know why I can't believe you?

THE OLD PATRICIAN [raising an arm, as if to take an oath]: The gods bear witness, Caius, that …

CALIGULA [gently but firmly pressing him back toward the door]: Don't swear. I particularly ask you not to swear. Listen, instead. Suppose it were true, what you are telling me—I'd have to assume you were betraying your friends, isn't that so?

THE OLD PATRICIAN [flustered]: Well, Caius, considering the deep affection I have for you …

CALIGULA [in the same tone as before]: And I cannot assume that. I've always loathed baseness of that sort so profoundly that I could never restrain myself from having a betrayer put to death. But I know the man you are, my worthy friend. And I'm convinced you neither wish to play the traitor nor to die.

THE OLD PATRICIAN: Certainly not, Caius. Most certainly not.

CALIGULA: So you see I was right in refusing to believe you. You wouldn't stoop to baseness, would you?

THE OLD PATRICIAN: Oh, no, indeed!

CALIGULA: Nor betray your friends?

THE OLD PATRICIAN: I need hardly tell you that, Caius.

CALIGULA: Therefore it follows that there isn't any plot. It was just a joke—between ourselves, rather a silly joke—what you've just been telling me, eh?

THE OLD PATRICIAN [feebly]: Yes, yes. A joke, merely a joke.

CALIGULA: Good. So now we know where we are. Nobody wants to kill me.

THE OLD PATRICIAN: Nobody. That's it. Nobody at all.

CALIGULA [drawing a deep breath; in measured tones]: Then—leave me, sweetheart. A man of honor is an animal so rare in the present-day world that I couldn't bear the sight of one too long. I must be left alone to relish this unique experience. [For some moments he gazes, without moving, at the tablet. He picks it up and reads it. Then, again, draws a deep breath. Then summons a palace guard.]

CALIGULA: Bring Cherea to me. [The man starts to leave.] Wait! [The man halts.] Treat him politely. [The man goes out. CALIGULA falls to pacing the room. After a while he approaches the mirror.] You decided to be logical, didn't you, poor simpleton? Logic for ever! The question now is: Where will that take you? [Ironically] Suppose the moon were brought here, everything would be different. That was the idea, wasn't it? Then the impossible would become possible, in a flash the Great Change come, and all things be transfigured. After all, why shouldn't Helicon bring it off? One night, perhaps, he'll catch her sleeping in a lake, and carry her here, trapped in a glistening net, all slimy with weeds and water, like a pale bloated fish drawn from the depths. Why not, Caligula? Why not, indeed? [He casts a glance round the room.] Fewer and fewer people round me; I wonder why. [Addressing the mirror, in a muffled voice] Too many dead, too many dead—that makes an emptiness.… No, even if the moon were mine, I could not retrace my way. Even were those dead men thrilling again under the sun's caress, the murders wouldn't go back underground for that. [Angrily] Logic, Caligula; follow where logic leads. Power to the uttermost; willfulness without end. Ah, I'm the only man on earth to know the secret—that power can never be complete without a total self-surrender to the dark impulse of one's destiny. No, there's no return. I must go on and on, until the consummation.

[CHEREA enters. CALIGULA is slumped in his chair, the cloak drawn tightly round him.]

CHEREA: You sent for me, Caius?

CALIGULA [languidly]: Yes, Cherea.

[A short silence.]

CHEREA: Have you anything particular to tell me?

CALIGULA: No, Cherea.

[Another silence.]

CHEREA [with a hint of petulance]: Are you sure you really need my presence?

CALIGULA: Absolutely sure, Cherea. [Another silence. Then, as if suddenly recollecting himself] I'm sorry for seeming so inhospitable. I was following up my thoughts, and—Now do sit down, we'll have a friendly little chat. I'm in a mood for some intelligent conversation. [CHEREA sits down. For the first time since the play began, CALIGULA gives the impression of being his natural self.] Do you think, Cherea, that it's possible for two men of much the same temperament and equal pride to talk to each other with complete frankness—if only once in their lives? Can they strip themselves naked, so to speak, and shed their prejudices, their private interests, the lies by which they live?

CHEREA: Yes, Caius, I think it possible. But I don't think you'd be capable of it.

CALIGULA: You're right. I only wished to know if you agreed with me. So let's wear our masks, and muster up our lies. And we'll talk as fencers fight, padded on all the vital parts. Tell me, Cherea, why don't you like me?

CHEREA: Because there's nothing likable about you, Caius. Because such feelings can't be had to order. And because I understand you far

too well. One cannot like an aspect of oneself which one always tries to keep concealed.

CALIGULA: But why is it you hate me?

CHEREA: There, Caius, you're mistaken. I do not hate you. I regard you as noxious and cruel, vain and selfish. But I cannot hate you, because I don't think you are happy. And I cannot scorn you, because I know you are no coward.

CALIGULA: Then why wish to kill me?

CHEREA: I've told you why; because I regard you as noxious, a constant menace. I like, and need, to feel secure. So do most men. They resent living in a world where the most preposterous fancy may at any moment become a reality, and the absurd transfix their lives, like a dagger in the heart. I feel as they do; I refuse to live in a topsy-turvy world. I want to know where I stand, and to stand secure.

CALIGULA: Security and logic don't go together.

CHEREA: Quite true. My plan of life may not be logical, but at least it's sound.

CALIGULA: Go on.

CHEREA: There's no more to say. I'll be no party to your logic. I've a very different notion of my duties as a man. And I know that the majority of your subjects share my view. You outrage their deepest feelings. It's only natural that you should … disappear.

CALIGULA: I see your point, and it's legitimate enough. For most men, I grant you, it's obvious. But you, I should have thought, would have known better. You're an intelligent man, and given intelligence, one has

a choice: either to pay its price or to disown it. Why do you shirk the issue and neither disown it nor consent to pay its price?

CHEREA: Because what I want is to live, and to be happy. Neither, to my mind, is possible if one pushes the absurd to its logical conclusions. As you see, I'm quite an ordinary sort of man. True, there are moments when, to feel free of them, I desire the death of those I love, or I hanker after women from whom the ties of family or friendship debar me. Were logic everything, I'd kill or fornicate on such occasions. But I consider that these passing fancies have no great importance. If everyone set to gratifying them, the world would be impossible to live in, and happiness, too, would go by the board. And these, I repeat, are the things that count, for me.

CALIGULA: So, I take it, you believe in some higher principle?

CHEREA: Certainly I believe that some actions are—shall I say?—more praiseworthy than others.

CALIGULA: And I believe that all are on an equal footing.

CHEREA: I know it, Caius, and that's why I don't hate you. I understand, and, to a point, agree with you. But you're pernicious, and you've got to go.

CALIGULA: True enough. But why risk your life by telling me this?

CHEREA: Because others will take my place, and because I don't like lying.

[A short silence.]

CALIGULA: Cherea!

CHEREA: Yes, Caius?

CALIGULA: Do you think that two men of similar temperament and equal pride can, if only once in their lives, open their hearts to each other?

CHEREA: That, I believe, is what we've just been doing.

CALIGULA: Yes, Cherea. But you thought I was incapable of it.

CHEREA: I was wrong, Caius. I admit it, and I thank you. Now I await your sentence.

CALIGULA: My sentence? Ah, I see. [Producing the tablet from under his cloak.] You know what this is, Cherea?

CHEREA: I knew you had it.

CALIGULA [passionately]: You knew I had it! So your frankness was all a piece of play acting. The two friends did not open their hearts to each other. Well, well! It's no great matter. Now we can stop playing at sincerity, and resume life on the old footing. But first I'll ask you to make just one more effort; to bear with my caprices and my tactlessness a little longer. Listen well, Cherea. This tablet is the one and only piece of evidence against you.

CHEREA: Caius, I'd rather go. I'm sick and tired of all these antics. I know them only too well, and I've had enough. Let me go, please.

CALIGULA [in the same tense, passionate voice]: No, stay. This tablet is the only evidence. Is that clear?

CHEREA: Evidence? I never knew you needed evidence to send a man to his death.

CALIGULA: That's true. Still, for once I wish to contradict myself. Nobody can object to that. It's so pleasant to contradict oneself occasionally; so restful. And I need rest, Cherea.

CHEREA: I don't follow … and, frankly, I've no taste for these subtleties.

CALIGULA: I know, Cherea, I know. You're not like me; you're an ordinary man, sound in mind and body. And naturally you've no desire for the extraordinary. [With a burst of laughter] You want to live and to be happy. That's all!

CHEREA: I think, Caius, we'd better leave it at that.… Can I go?

CALIGULA: Not yet. A little patience, if you don't mind—I shall not keep you long. You see this thing—this piece of evidence? I choose to assume that I can't sentence you to death without it. That's my idea … and my repose. Well! See what becomes of evidence in an emperor's hands. [He holds the tablet to a torch. CHEREA approaches. The torch is between them. The tablet begins to melt.] You see, conspirator! The tablet's melting, and as it melts a look of innocence is dawning on your face. What a handsome forehead you have, Cherea! And how rare, how beautiful a sight is an innocent man! Admire my power. Even the gods cannot restore innocence without first punishing the culprit. But your emperor needs only a torch flame to absolve you and give you a new lease of hope. So carry on, Cherea; follow out the noble precepts we've been hearing, wherever they may take you. Meanwhile your emperor awaits his repose. It's his way of living and being happy.

[CHEREA stares, dumfounded, at CALIGULA. He makes a vague gesture, seems to understand, opens his mouth to speak—and walks abruptly away. Smiling, holding the tablet to the flame, CALIGULA follows the receding figure with his gaze.]

CURTAIN

ACT IV

A room in the imperial palace.

The stage is in semidarkness. CHEREA and SCIPIO enter. CHEREA crosses to the right, then comes back left to SCIPIO.

SCIPIO [sulkily]: What do you want of me?

CHEREA: There's no time to lose. And we must know our minds, we must be resolute.

SCIPIO: Who says I'm not resolute?

CHEREA: You didn't attend our meeting yesterday.

SCIPIO [looking away]: That's so, Cherea.

CHEREA: Scipio, I am older than you, and I'm not in the habit of asking others' help. But, I won't deny it, I need you now. This murder needs honorable men to sponsor it. Among all these wounded vanities and sordid fears, our motives only, yours and mine, are disinterested. Of course I know that, if you leave us, we can count on your silence. But that is not the point. What I want is—for you to stay with us.

SCIPIO: I understand. But I can't, oh, no, I cannot do as you wish.

CHEREA: So you are with him?

SCIPIO: No. But I cannot be against him. [Pauses; then in a muffled voice] Even if I killed him, my heart would still be with him.

CHEREA: And yet—he killed your father!

SCIPIO: Yes—and that's how it all began. But that, too, is how it ends.

CHEREA: He denies what you believe in. He tramples on all that you hold sacred.

SCIPIO: I know, Cherea. And yet something inside me is akin to him. The same fire burns in both our hearts.

CHEREA: There are times when a man must make his choice. As for me, I have silenced in my heart all that might be akin to him.

SCIPIO: But—I—I cannot make a choice. I have my own sorrow, but I suffer with him, too; I share his pain. I understand all—that is my trouble.

CHEREA: So that's it. You have chosen to take his side.

SCIPIO [passionately]: No, Cherea. I beg you, don't think that. I can never, never again take anybody's side.

CHEREA [affectionately; approaching SCIPIO]: Do you know, I hate him even more for having made of you—what he has made.

SCIPIO: Yes, he has taught me to expect everything of life.

CHEREA: No, he has taught you despair. And to have instilled despair into a young heart is fouler than the foulest of the crimes he has committed up to now. I assure you, that alone would justify me in killing him out of hand.

[He goes toward the door. HELICON enters.]

HELICON: I've been hunting for you high and low, Cherea. Caligula's giving a little party here, for his personal friends only. Naturally he

expects you to attend it. [To SCIPIO] You, my boy, aren't wanted. Off you go!

SCIPIO [looking back at CHEREA as he goes out]: Cherea.

CHEREA [gently]: Yes, Scipio?

SCIPIO: Try to understand.

CHEREA [in the same gentle tone]: No, Scipio.

[SCIPIO and HELICON go out. A clash of arms in the wings. Two soldiers enter at right, escorting the OLD PATRICIAN and the FIRST PATRICIAN, who show signs of alarm.]

FIRST PATRICIAN [to one of the soldiers, in a tone which he vainly tries to steady]: But … but what can he want with us at this hour of the night?

SOLDIER: Sit there. [Points to the chairs on the right.]

FIRST PATRICIAN: If it's only to have us killed—like so many others—why all these preliminaries?

SOLDIER: Sit down, you old mule.

THE OLD PATRICIAN: Better do as he says. It's clear he doesn't know anything.

SOLDIER: Yes, darling, quite clear. [Goes out.]

FIRST PATRICIAN: We should have acted sooner; I always said so. Now we're in for the torture chamber.

[The SOLDIER comes back with CHEREA, then goes out.]

CHEREA [seating himself. He shows no sign of apprehension]: Any idea what's happening?

FIRST PATRICIAN AND THE OLD PATRICIAN [speaking together]: He's found out about the conspiracy.

CHEREA: Yes? And then?

THE OLD PATRICIAN [shuddering]: The torture chamber for us all.

CHEREA [still unperturbed]: I remember that Caligula once gave eighty-one thousand sesterces to a slave who, though he was tortured nearly to death, wouldn't confess to a theft he had committed.

FIRST PATRICIAN: A lot of consolation that is—for us!

CHEREA: Anyhow, it shows that he appreciates courage. You ought to keep that in mind. [To the OLD PATRICIAN] Would you very much mind not chattering with your teeth? It's a noise I particularly dislike.

THE OLD PATRICIAN: I'm sorry, but—

FIRST PATRICIAN: Enough trifling! Our lives are at stake.

CHEREA [coolly]: Do you know Caligula's favorite remark?

THE OLD PATRICIAN [on the verge of tears]: Yes. He says to the executioner: "Kill him slowly, so that he feels what dying's like!"

CHEREA: No, there's a better one. After an execution he yawns, and says quite seriously: "What I admire most is my imperturbability."

FIRST PATRICIAN: Do you hear …?

[A clanking of weapons is heard off stage.]

CHEREA: That remark betrays a weakness in his make-up.

THE OLD PATRICIAN: Would you be kind enough to stop philosophizing? It's something I particularly dislike.

[A slave enters and deposits a sheaf of knives on a seat.]

CHEREA [who has not noticed him]: Still, there's no denying it's remarkable, the effect this man has on all with whom he comes in contact. He forces one to think. There's nothing like insecurity for stimulating the brain. That, of course, is why he's so much hated.

THE OLD PATRICIAN [pointing a trembling finger]: Look!

CHEREA [noticing the knives, in a slightly altered tone]: Perhaps you were right.

FIRST PATRICIAN: Yes, waiting was a mistake. We should have acted at once.

CHEREA: I agree. Wisdom's come too late.

THE OLD PATRICIAN: But it's … it's crazy. I don't want to die.

[He rises and begins to edge away. Two soldiers appear, and, after slapping his face, force him back onto his seat. The FIRST PATRICIAN squirms in his chair. CHEREA utters some inaudible words. Suddenly a queer music begins behind the curtain at the back of the stage; a thrumming and tinkling of zithers and cymbals. The patricians gaze at each other in silence. Outlined on the illuminated curtain, in shadow play, CALIGULA appears, makes some grotesque dance movements, and retreats from view. He is wearing ballet dancer's skirts and his head is garlanded with flowers. A moment later a SOLDIER announces gravely: "Gentlemen, the performance is over." Meanwhile CÆSONIA has entered soundlessly behind the watching patricians. She speaks in an ordinary voice, but none the less they give a start on hearing it.]

CÆSONIA: Caligula has instructed me to tell you that, whereas in the past he always summoned you for affairs of state, today he invited you to share with him an artistic emotion. [A short pause. Then she continues in the same tone] He added, I may say, that anyone who has

not shared in it will be beheaded. [They keep silent.] I apologize for insisting, but I must ask you if you found that dance beautiful.

FIRST PATRICIAN [after a brief hesitation]: Yes, Cæsonia. It was beautiful.

THE OLD PATRICIAN [effusively]: Lovely! Lovely!

CÆSONIA: And you, Cherea?

CHEREA [icily]: It was … very high art.

CÆSONIA: Good. Now I can describe your artistic emotions to Caligula.

[CÆSONIA goes out.]

CHEREA: And now we must act quickly. You two stay here. Before the night is out there'll be a hundred of us.

[He goes out.]

THE OLD PATRICIAN: No, no. You stay. Let me go, instead. [Sniffs the air.] It smells of death here.

FIRST PATRICIAN: And of lies. [Sadly] I said that dance was beautiful!

THE OLD PATRICIAN [conciliatingly]: And so it was, in a way. Most original.

[Some patricians and knights enter hurriedly.]

SECOND PATRICIAN: What's afoot? Do you know anything? The Emperor's summoned us here.

THE OLD PATRICIAN [absent-mindedly]: For the dance, maybe.

SECOND PATRICIAN: What dance?

THE OLD PATRICIAN: Well, I mean … er … the artistic emotion.

THIRD PATRICIAN: I've been told Caligula's very ill.

FIRST PATRICIAN: He's a sick man, yes....

THIRD PATRICIAN: What's he suffering from? [In a joyful tone] By God, is he going to die?

FIRST PATRICIAN: I doubt it. His disease is fatal—to others only.

THE OLD PATRICIAN: That's one way of putting it.

SECOND PATRICIAN: Quite so. But hasn't he some other disease less serious, and more to our advantage?

FIRST PATRICIAN: No. That malady of his excludes all others.

[He goes out. CÆSONIA enters. A short silence.]

CÆSONIA [in a casual tone]: If you want to know, Caligula has stomach trouble. Just now he vomited blood.

[The patricians crowd round her.]

SECOND PATRICIAN: O mighty gods, I vow, if he recovers, to pay the Treasury two hundred thousand sesterces as a token of my joy.

THIRD PATRICIAN [with exaggerated eagerness]: O Jupiter, take my life in place of his!

[CALIGULA has entered, and is listening.]

CALIGULA [going up to the SECOND PATRICIAN]: I accept your offer, Lucius. And I thank you. My Treasurer will call on you tomorrow. [Goes to the THIRD PATRICIAN and embraces him.] You can't imagine how

touched I am. [A short silence. Then, tenderly] So you love me, Cassius, as much as that?

THIRD PATRICIAN [emotionally]: Oh, Cæsar, there's nothing, nothing I wouldn't sacrifice for your sake.

CALIGULA [embracing him again]: Ah, Cassius, this is really too much; I don't deserve all this love. [CASSIUS makes a protesting gesture.] No, no, really I don't! I'm not worthy of it. [He beckons to two soldiers.] Take him away. [Gently, to CASSIUS] Go, dear friend, and remember that Caligula has lost his heart to you.

THIRD PATRICIAN [vaguely uneasy]: But—where are they taking me?

CALIGULA: Why, to your death, of course. Your generous offer was accepted, and I feel better already. Even that nasty taste of blood in my mouth has gone. You've cured me, Cassius. It's been miraculous, and how proud you must feel of having worked the miracle by laying your life down for your friend—especially when that friend's none other than Caligula! So now you see me quite myself again, and ready for a festive night.

THIRD PATRICIAN [shrieking, as he is dragged away]: No! No! I don't want to die. You can't be serious!

CALIGULA [in a thoughtful voice, between the shrieks]: Soon the sea roads will be golden with mimosas. The women will wear their lightest dresses. And the sky! Ah, Cassius, what a blaze of clean, swift sunshine! The smiles of life. [CASSIUS is near the door. CALIGULA gives him a gentle push. Suddenly his tone grows serious] Life, my friend, is something to be cherished. Had you cherished it enough, you wouldn't have gambled it away so rashly. [CASSIUS is led off. CALIGULA returns to the table.] The loser must pay. There's no alternative. [A short silence.] Come, Cæsonia. [He turns to the others] By the way, an idea

has just waylaid me, and it's such an apt one that I want to share it with you. Until now my reign has been too happy. There's been no world-wide plague, no religious persecution, not even a rebellion—nothing in fact to make us memorable. And that, I'd have you know, is why I try to remedy the stinginess of fate. I mean—I don't know if you've followed me—that, well [he gives a little laugh], it's I who replace the epidemics that we've missed. [In a different tone] That's enough. I see Cherea's coming. Your turn, Cæsonia. [CALIGULA goes out. CHEREA and the FIRST PATRICIAN enter. CÆSONIA hurries toward CHEREA.]

CÆSONIA: Caligula is dead.

[She turns her head, as if to hide her tears; her eyes are fixed on the others, who keep silence. Everyone looks horrified, but for different reasons.]

FIRST PATRICIAN: You … you're sure this dreadful thing has happened? It seems incredible. Only a short while ago he was dancing.

CÆSONIA: Quite so—and the effort was too much for him. [CHEREA moves hastily from one man to the other. No one speaks.] You've nothing to say, Cherea?

CHEREA [in a low voice]: It's a great misfortune for us all, Cæsonia.

[CALIGULA bursts in violently and goes up to CHEREA.]

CALIGULA: Well played, Cherea. [He spins round and stares at the others. Petulantly] Too bad! It didn't come off. [To CÆSONIA] Don't forget what I told you.

[CALIGULA goes out. CÆSONIA stares after him without speaking.]

THE OLD PATRICIAN [hoping against hope]: Is he ill, Cæsonia?

CÆSONIA [with a hostile look]: No, my pet. But what you don't know is that the man never has more than two hours' sleep and spends the best part of the night roaming about the corridors in his palace. Another thing you don't know—and you've never given a thought to—is what may pass in this man's mind in those deadly hours between midnight and sunrise. Is he ill? No, not ill—unless you invent a name and medicine for the black ulcers that fester in his soul.

CHEREA [seemingly affected by her words]: You're right, Cæsonia. We all know that Caius …

CÆSONIA [breaking in emotionally]: Yes, you know it—in your fashion. But, like all those who have none, you can't abide anyone who has too much soul. Healthy people loathe invalids. Happy people hate the sad. Too much soul! That's what bites you, isn't it? You prefer to label it a disease; that way all the dolts are justified and pleased. [In a changed tone] Tell me, Cherea. Has love ever meant anything to you?

CHEREA [himself again]: I'm afraid we're too old now, Cæsonia, to learn the art of love-making. And anyhow it's highly doubtful if Caligula will give us time to do so.

CÆSONIA [who has recovered her composure]: True enough. [She sits down.] Oh, I was forgetting.… Caligula asked me to impart some news to you. You know, perhaps, that it's a red-letter day today, consecrated to art.

THE OLD PATRICIAN: According to the calendar?

CÆSONIA: No, according to Caligula. He's convoked some poets. He will ask them to improvise a poem on a set theme. And he particularly wants those of you who are poets to take part in the competition. He specially mentioned young Scipio and Metellus.

METELLUS: But we're not ready.

CÆSONIA [in a level tone, as if she has not heard him]: Needless to say there are prizes. There will be penalties, too. [Looks of consternation.] Between ourselves, the penalties won't be so very terrible.

[CALIGULA enters, looking gloomier than ever.]

CALIGULA: All ready?

CÆSONIA: Yes. [To a soldier] Bring in the poets.

[Enter, two by two, a dozen poets, keeping step; they line up on the right of the stage.]

CALIGULA: And the others?

CÆSONIA: Metellus! Scipio!

[They cross the stage and take their stand beside the poets. CALIGULA seats himself, backstage on the left, with CÆSONIA and the patricians. A short silence.]

CALIGULA: Subject: death. Time limit: one minute.

[The poets scribble feverishly on their tablets.]

THE OLD PATRICIAN: Who will compose the jury?

CALIGULA: I. Isn't that enough?

THE OLD PATRICIAN: Oh, yes, indeed. Quite enough.

CHEREA: Won't you take part in the competition, Caius?

CALIGULA: Unnecessary. I made my poem on that theme long ago.

THE OLD PATRICIAN [eagerly]: Where can one get a copy of it?

CALIGULA: No need to get a copy. I recite it every day, after my fashion. [CÆSONIA eyes him nervously. CALIGULA rounds on her almost savagely] Is there anything in my appearance that displeases you?

CÆSONIA [gently]: I'm sorry.…

CALIGULA: No meekness, please. For heaven's sake, no meekness. You're exasperating enough as it is, but if you start being humble … [CÆSONIA slowly moves away. CALIGULA turns to CHEREA.] I continue. It's the only poem I have made. And it's proof that I'm the only true artist Rome has known—the only one, believe me—to match his inspiration with his deeds.

CHEREA: That's only a matter of having the power.

CALIGULA: Quite true. Other artists create to compensate for their lack of power. I don't need to make a work of art; I live it. [Roughly] Well, poets, are you ready?

METELLUS: I think so.

THE OTHERS: Yes.

CALIGULA: Good. Now listen carefully. You are to fall out of line and come forward one by one. I'll whistle. Number One will start reading his poem. When I whistle, he must stop, and the next begin. And so on. The winner, naturally, will be the one whose poem hasn't been cut short by the whistle. Get ready. [Turning to CHEREA, he whispers] You see, organization's needed for everything, even for art.

[Blows his whistle.]

FIRST POET: Death, when beyond thy darkling shore …

[A blast of the whistle. The poet steps briskly to the left. The others will follow the same procedure, these movements should be made with mechanical precision.]

SECOND POET: In their dim cave, the Fatal Sisters Three …

[Whistle.]

THIRD POET: Come to me death, beloved …

[A shrill blast of the whistle. The FOURTH POET steps forward and strikes a dramatic posture. The whistle goes before he has opened his mouth.]

FIFTH POET: When I was in my happy infancy …

CALIGULA [yelling]: Stop that! What earthly connection has a blockhead's happy infancy with the theme I set? The connection! Tell me the connection!

FIFTH POET: But, Caius, I've only just begun, and … [Shrill blast.]

SIXTH POET [in a high-pitched voice]: Ruthless, he goes his hidden ways …

[Whistle]

SEVENTH POET [mysteriously]: Oh, long, abstruse orison …

[Whistle, broken off as SCIPIO comes forward without a tablet.]

CALIGULA: You haven't a tablet?

SCIPIO: I do not need one.

CALIGULA: Well, let's hear you. [He chews at his whistle.]

SCIPIO [standing very near CALIGULA, he recites listlessly, without looking at him]:

Pursuit of happiness that purifies the heart,

Skies rippling with light,

O wild, sweet, festal joys, frenzy without hope!

CALIGULA [gently]: Stop, please. The others needn't compete. [To SCIPIO] You're very young to understand so well the lessons we can learn from death.

SCIPIO [gazing straight at CALIGULA]: I was very young to lose my father.

CALIGULA [turning hastily]: Fall in, the rest of you. No, really a sham poet is too dreadful an infliction. Until now I'd thought of enrolling you as my allies; I sometimes pictured a gallant band of poets defending me in the last ditch. Another illusion gone! I shall have to relegate you to my enemies. So now the poets are against me—and that looks much like the end of all. March out in good order. As you go past you are to lick your tablets so as to efface the atrocities you scrawled on them. Attention! Forward! [He blows his whistle in short rhythmic jerks. Keeping step, the poets file out by the right, tonguing their immortal tablets. CALIGULA adds in a lower tone] Now leave me, everyone.

[In the doorway, as they are going out, CHEREA touches the FIRST PATRICIAN'S shoulder, and speaks in his ear.]

CHEREA: Now's our opportunity.

[SCIPIO, who has overheard, halts on the threshold and walks back to CALIGULA.]

CALIGULA [acidly]: Can't you leave me in peace—as your father's doing?

SCIPIO: No, Caius, all that serves no purpose now. For now I know, I know that you have made your choice.

CALIGULA: Won't you leave me in peace!

SCIPIO: Yes, you shall have your wish; I am going to leave you, for I think I've come to understand you. There's no way out left to us, neither to you nor to me—who am like you in so many ways. I shall go away, far away, and try to discover the meaning of it all. [He gazes at CALIGULA for some moments. Then, with a rush of emotion] Good-by, dear Caius. When all is ended, remember that I loved you. [He goes out. CALIGULA makes a vague gesture. Then, almost savagely, he pulls himself together and takes some steps toward CÆSONIA.]

CÆSONIA: What did he say?

CALIGULA: Nothing you'd understand.

CÆSONIA: What are thinking about?

CALIGULA: About him. And about you, too. But it amounts to the same thing.

CÆSONIA: What is the matter?

CALIGULA [staring at her]: Scipio has gone. I am through with his friendship. But you, I wonder why you are still here.…

CÆSONIA: Why, because you're fond of me.

CALIGULA: No. But I think I'd understand—if I had you killed.

CÆSONIA: Yes, that would be a solution. Do so, then.… But why, oh, why can't you relax, if only for a moment, and live freely, without constraint?

CALIGULA: I have been doing that for several years; in fact I've made a practice of it.

CÆSONIA: I don't mean that sort of freedom. I mean—Oh, don't you realize what it can be to live and love quite simply, naturally, in … in purity of heart?

CALIGULA: This purity of heart you talk of—every man acquires it, in his own way. Mine has been to follow the essential to the end.… Still all that needn't prevent me from putting you to death. [Laughs.] It would round off my career so well, the perfect climax. [He rises and swings the mirror round toward himself. Then he walks in a circle, letting his arms hang limp, almost without gestures; there is something feral in his gait as he continues speaking.] How strange! When I don't kill, I feel alone. The living don't suffice to people my world and dispel my boredom. I have an impression of an enormous void when you and the others are here, and my eyes see nothing but empty air. No, I'm at ease only in the company of my dead. [He takes his stand facing the audience, leaning a little forward. He has forgotten CÆSONIA'S presence.] Only the dead are real. They are of my kind. I see them waiting for me, straining toward me. And I have long talks with this man or that, who screamed to me for mercy and whose tongue I had cut out.

CÆSONIA: Come. Lie down beside me. Put your head on my knees. [CALIGULA does so.] That's better, isn't it? Now rest. How quiet it is here!

CALIGULA: Quiet? You exaggerate, my dear. Listen! [Distant metallic tinklings, as of swords or armor.] Do you hear those thousands of small sounds all around us, hatred stalking its prey? [Murmuring voices, footsteps.]

CÆSONIA: Nobody would dare.…

CALIGULA: Yes, stupidity.

CÆSONIA: Stupidity doesn't kill. It makes men slow to act.

CALIGULA: It can be murderous, Cæsonia. A fool stops at nothing when he thinks his dignity offended. No, it's not the men whose sons or fathers I have killed who'll murder me. They, anyhow, have understood. They're with me, they have the same taste in their mouths. But the others—those I made a laughingstock of—I've no defense against their wounded vanity.

CÆSONIA [passionately]: We will defend you. There are many of us left who love you.

CALIGULA: Fewer every day. It's not surprising. I've done all that was needed to that end. And then—let's be fair—it's not only stupidity that's against me. There's the courage and the simple faith of men who ask to be happy.

CÆSONIA [in the same tone]: No, they will not kill you. Or, if they tried, fire would come down from heaven and blast them, before they laid a hand on you.

CALIGULA: From heaven! There is no heaven, my poor dear woman! [He sits down.] But why this sudden access of devotion? It wasn't provided for in our agreement, if I remember rightly.

CÆSONIA [who has risen from the couch and is pacing the room]: Don't you understand? Hasn't it been enough to see you killing others, without my also knowing you'll be killed as well? Isn't it enough to feel you hard and cruel, seething with bitterness, when I hold you in my arms; to breathe a reek of murder when you lie on me? Day after day I see all that's human in you dying out, little by little. [She turns toward

him.] Oh, I know. I know I'm getting old, my beauty's on the wane. But it's you only I'm concerned for now; so much so that I've ceased troubling whether you love me. I only want you to get well, quite well again. You're still a boy, really; you've a whole life ahead of you. And, tell me, what greater thing can you want than a whole life?

CALIGULA [rising, looks at her fixedly]: You've been with me a long time now, a very long time.

CÆSONIA: Yes.… But you'll keep me, won't you?

CALIGULA: I don't know. I only know that, if you're with me still, it's because of all those nights we've had together, nights of fierce, joyless pleasure; it's because you alone know me as I am. [He takes her in his arms, bending her head back a little with his right hand.] I'm twenty-nine. Not a great age really. But today when none the less my life seems so long, so crowded with scraps and shreds of my past selves, so complete in fact, you remain the last witness. And I can't avoid a sort of shameful tenderness for the old woman that you soon will be.

CÆSONIA: Tell me that you mean to keep me with you.

CALIGULA: I don't know. All I know—and it's the most terrible thing of all—is that this shameful tenderness is the one sincere emotion that my life has given up to now. [CÆSONIA frees herself from his arms. CALIGULA follows her. She presses her back to his chest and he puts his arms round her.] Wouldn't it be better that the last witness should disappear?

CÆSONIA: That has no importance. All I know is: I'm happy. What you've just said has made me very happy. But why can't I share my happiness with you?

CALIGULA: Who says I'm unhappy?

CÆSONIA: Happiness is kind. It doesn't thrive on bloodshed.

CALIGULA: Then there must be two kinds of happiness, and I've chosen the murderous kind. For I am happy. There was a time when I thought I'd reached the extremity of pain. But, no, one can go farther yet. Beyond the frontier of pain lies a splendid, sterile happiness. Look at me. [She turns toward him.] It makes me laugh, Cæsonia, when I think how for years and years all Rome carefully avoided uttering Drusilla's name. Well, all Rome was mistaken. Love isn't enough for me; I realized it then. And I realize it again today, when I look at you. To love someone means that one's willing to grow old beside that person. That sort of love is right outside my range. Drusilla old would have been far worse than Drusilla dead. Most people imagine that a man suffers because out of the blue death snatches away the woman he loves. But his real suffering is less futile; it comes from the discovery that grief, too, cannot last. Even grief is vanity.

You see, I had no excuses, not the shadow of a real love, neither bitterness nor profound regret. Nothing to plead in my defense! But today—you see me still freer than I have been for years; freed as I am from memories and illusion. [He laughs bitterly.] I know now that nothing, nothing lasts. Think what that knowledge means! There have been just two or three of us in history who really achieved this freedom, this crazy happiness. Well, Cæsonia, you have seen out a most unusual drama. It's time the curtain fell, for you.

[He stands behind her again, linking his forearm round CÆSONIA'S neck.]

CÆSONIA [terrified]: No, it's impossible! How can you call it happiness, this terrifying freedom?

CALIGULA [gradually tightening his grip on CÆSONIA'S throat]: Happiness it is, Cæsonia; I know what I'm saying. But for this freedom I'd have been a contented man. Thanks to it, I have won the godlike enlightenment of the solitary. [His exaltation grows as little by little he strangles CÆSONIA, who puts up no resistance, but holds her hands half opened, like a suppliant's, before her. Bending his head, he goes on speaking, into her ear] I live, I kill, I exercise the rapturous power of a destroyer, compared with which the power of a creator is merest child's play. And this, this is happiness; this and nothing else—this intolerable release, devastating scorn, blood, hatred all around me; the glorious isolation of a man who all his life long nurses and gloats over the ineffable joy of the unpunished murderer; the ruthless logic that crushes out human lives [he laughs], that's crushing yours out, Cæsonia, so as to perfect at last the utter loneliness that is my heart's desire.

CÆSONIA [struggling feebly]: Oh, Caius …

CALIGULA [more and more excitedly]: No. No sentiment. I must have done with it, for the time is short. My time is very short, dear Cæsonia. [CÆSONIA is gasping, dying. CALIGULA drags her to the bed and lets her fall on it. He stares wildly at her; his voice grows harsh and grating.] You, too, were guilty. But killing is not the solution. [He spins round and gazes crazily at the mirror.] Caligula! You, too; you, too, are guilty. Then what of it—a little more, a little less? Yet who can condemn me in this world where there is no judge, where nobody is innocent? [He brings his eyes close to his reflected face. He sounds genuinely distressed] You see, my poor friend. Helicon has failed you. I won't have the moon.

Never, never, never! But how bitter it is to know all, and to have to go through to the consummation! Listen! That was a sound of weapons. Innocence arming for the fray—and innocence will triumph. Why am I not in their place, among them? And I'm afraid. That's cruelest of all,

after despising others, to find oneself as cowardly as they. Still, no matter. Fear, too, has an end. Soon I shall attain that emptiness beyond all understanding, in which the heart has rest. [He steps back a few paces, then returns to the mirror. He seems calmer. When he speaks again his voice is steadier, less shrill.]

Yet, really, it's quite simple. If I'd had the moon, if love were enough, all might have been different. But where could I quench this thirst? What human heart, what god, would have for me the depth of a great lake? [Kneeling, weeping] There's nothing in this world, or in the other, made to my stature. And yet I know, and you, too, know [still weeping, he stretches out his arms toward the mirror] that all I need is for the impossible to be. The impossible! I've searched for it at the confines of the world, in the secret places of my heart. I've stretched out my hands [his voice rises to a scream]; see, I stretch out my hands, but it's always you I find, you only, confronting me, and I've come to hate you. I have chosen a wrong path, a path that leads to nothing.

My freedom isn't the right one.… Nothing, nothing yet. Oh, how oppressive is this darkness! Helicon has not come; we shall be forever guilty. The air tonight is heavy as the sum of human sorrows. [A clash of arms and whisperings are heard in the wings. CALIGULA rises, picks up a stool, and returns to the mirror, breathing heavily. He contemplates himself, makes a slight leap forward, and, watching the symmetrical movement of his reflected self, hurls the stool at it, screaming] To history, Caligula! Go down to history! [The mirror breaks and at the same moment armed conspirators rush in. CALIGULA swings round to face them with a mad laugh. SCIPIO and CHEREA, who are in front, fling themselves at him and stab his face with their daggers. CALIGULA'S laughter turns to gasps. All strike him, hurriedly, confusedly. In a last gasp, laughing and choking, CALIGULA shrieks] I'm still alive!

CURTAIN

The End

THE MISUNDERSTANDING

A PLAY IN THREE ACTS

To my friends of the THÉÂTRE DE L'ÉQUIPE

CHARACTERS IN THE PLAY

THE OLD MANSERVANT

MARTHA

THE MOTHER

JAN

MARIA

Cross Purpose, LE MALENTENDU (THE MISUNDERSTANDING) was presented for the first time at the THÉÂTRE DES MATHURINS, Paris, in 1944

ACT I

Noon. The clean, brightly lit public room of an inn.

Everything is very spick and span.

THE MOTHER: He'll come back.

MARTHA: Did he tell you so?

THE MOTHER: Yes.

MARTHA: Alone?

THE MOTHER: That I can't say.

MARTHA: He doesn't look like a poor man.

THE MOTHER: No, and he never asked what our charges were.

MARTHA: A good sign, that. But usually rich men don't travel alone. Really it's that makes things so difficult. You may have to wait ages when you're looking out for a man who is not only rich but quite alone.

THE MOTHER: Yes, we don't get so many opportunities.

MARTHA: It means, of course, that we've had many slack times these last few years. This place is often empty. Poor people who stop here never stay long, and it's mighty seldom rich ones come.

THE MOTHER: Don't grumble about that, Martha. Rich people give a lot of extra work.

MARTHA [looking hard at her]: But they pay well. [A short silence.] Tell me, mother; what's come over you? For some time I've noticed that you weren't quite … quite your usual self.

THE MOTHER: I'm tired, my dear, that's all. What I need is a long rest.

MARTHA: Listen, mother. I can take over the household work you're doing now. Then you'll have your days free.

THE MOTHER: That wasn't quite the sort of rest I meant. Oh, I suppose it's just an old woman's fancy. All I'm longing for is peace—to be able to relax a little. [She gives a little laugh.] I know it sounds silly, Martha, but some evenings I feel almost like taking to religion.

MARTHA: You're not so very old, mother; you haven't come to that yet. And, anyhow, I should say you could do better.

THE MOTHER: Of course I was only joking, my dear. All the same … at the end of one's life, it's not a bad idea to take things easy. One can't be always on the go, as you are, Martha. And it isn't natural for a woman of your age, either. I know plenty of girls who were born the same year as you, and they think only of pleasure and excitements.

MARTHA: Their pleasures and excitements are nothing compared to ours, don't you agree, mother?

THE MOTHER: I'd rather you didn't speak of that.

MARTHA [thoughtfully]: Really one would think that nowadays some words burn your tongue.

THE MOTHER: What can it matter to you—provided I don't shrink from acts? But that has no great importance. What I really meant was that I'd like to see you smile now and again.

MARTHA: I do smile sometimes, I assure you.

THE MOTHER: Really? I've never seen you.

MARTHA: That's because I smile when I'm by myself, in my bedroom.

THE MOTHER [looking closely at her]: What a hard face you have, Martha!

MARTHA [coming closer; calmly]: Ah, so you don't approve of my face?

THE MOTHER [after a short silence, still looking at her]: I wonder … Yes, I think I do.

MARTHA [emotionally]: Oh, mother, can't you understand? Once we have enough money in hand, and I can escape from this shut-in valley; once we can say good-by to this inn and this dreary town where it's always raining; once we've forgotten this land of shadows—ah, then, when my dream has come true, and we're living beside the sea, then you will see me smile. Unfortunately one needs a great deal of money to be able to live in freedom by the sea. That is why we mustn't be afraid of words; that is why we must take trouble over this man who's come to stay here. If he is rich enough, perhaps my freedom will begin with him.

THE MOTHER: If he's rich enough, and if he's by himself.

MARTHA: That's so. He has to be by himself as well. Did he talk much to you, mother?

THE MOTHER: No, he said very little.

MARTHA: When he asked for his room, did you notice how he looked?

THE MOTHER: No. My sight's none too good, you know, and I didn't really look at his face. I've learned from experience that it's better not to look at them too closely. It's easier to kill what one doesn't know. [A short silence.] There! That should please you. You can't say now that I'm afraid of words.

MARTHA: Yes, and I prefer it so. I've no use for hints and evasions. Crime is crime, and one should know what one is doing. And, from what you've just said, it looks as if you had it in mind when you were talking to that traveler.

THE MOTHER: No, I wouldn't say I had it in mind—it was more from force of habit.

MARTHA: Habit? But you said yourself that these opportunities seldom come our way.

THE MOTHER: Certainly. But habit begins with the second crime. With the first nothing starts, but something ends. Then, too, while we have had few opportunities, they have been spread out over many years, and memory helps to build up habits. Yes, it was force of habit that made me keep my eyes off that man when I was talking to him, and, all the same, convinced me he had the look of a victim.

MARTHA: Mother, we must kill him.

THE MOTHER [in a low tone]: Yes, I suppose we'll have to.

MARTHA: You said that in a curious way.

THE MOTHER: I'm tired, that's all. Anyhow, I'd like this one to be the last. It's terribly tiring to kill. And, though really I care little where I die—beside the sea or here, far inland—I do hope we will get away together, the moment it's over.

MARTHA: Indeed we shall—and what a glorious moment that will be! So, cheer up, mother, there won't be much to do. You know quite well there's no question of killing. He'll drink his tea, he'll go to sleep, and he'll be still alive when we carry him to the river. Some day, long after, he will be found jammed against the weir, along with others who didn't have his luck and threw themselves into the water with their eyes open. Do you remember last year when we were watching them repair the sluices, how you said that ours suffered least, and life was crueler than we? So don't lose heart, you'll be having your rest quite soon and I'll be seeing what I've never seen.

THE MOTHER: Yes, Martha, I won't lose heart. And it was quite true, what you said about "ours." I'm always glad to think they never

suffered. Really, it's hardly a crime, only a sort of intervention, a flick of the finger given to unknown lives. And it's also quite true that, by the look of it, life is crueler than we. Perhaps that is why I can't manage to feel guilty. I can only just manage to feel tired.

[The OLD MANSERVANT comes in. He seats himself behind the bar and remains there, neither moving nor speaking, until JAN'S entrance.]

MARTHA: Which room shall we put him in?

THE MOTHER: Any room, provided it's on the first floor.

MARTHA: Yes, we had a lot of needless trouble last time, with the two flights of stairs. [For the first time she sits down.] Tell me, mother, is it true that down on the coast the sand's so hot it scorches one's feet?

THE MOTHER: As you know, Martha, I've never been there. But I've been told the sun burns everything up.

MARTHA: I read in a book that it even burns out people's souls and gives them bodies that shine like gold but are quite hollow, there's nothing left inside.

THE MOTHER: Is that what makes you want to go there so much?

MARTHA: Yes, my soul's a burden to me, I've had enough of it. I'm eager to be in that country, where the sun kills every question. I don't belong here.

THE MOTHER: Unfortunately we have much to do beforehand. Of course, when it's over, I'll go there with you. But I am not like you; I shall not have the feeling of going to a place where I belong. After a certain age one knows there is no resting place anywhere. Indeed there's something to be said for this ugly brick house we've made our home and stocked with memories; there are times when one can fall asleep in it. But, naturally it would mean something, too, if I could have sleep and forgetfulness together. [She rises and walks toward the

door.] Well, Martha, get everything ready. [Pauses.] If it's really worth the effort.

[MARTHA watches her go out. Then she, too, leaves by another door. For some moments only the OLD MANSERVANT is on the stage. JAN enters, stops, glances round the room, and sees the old man sitting behind the counter.]

JAN: Nobody here? [The old man gazes at him, rises, crosses the stage, and goes out. MARIA enters. JAN swings round on her.] So you followed me!

MARIA: Forgive me—I couldn't help it. I may not stay long. Only please let me look at the place where I'm leaving you.

JAN: Somebody may come, and your being here will upset all my plans.

MARIA: Do please let us take the chance of someone's coming and my telling who you are. I know you don't want it, but—[He turns away fretfully. A short silence. MARIA is examining the room.] So this is the place?

JAN: Yes. That's the door I went out by, twenty years ago. My sister was a little girl. She was playing in that corner. My mother didn't come to kiss me. At the time I thought I didn't care.

MARIA: Jan, I can't believe they failed to recognize you just now. A mother's bound to recognize her son; it's the least she can do.

JAN: Perhaps. Still, twenty years' separation makes a difference. Life has been going on since I left. My mother's grown old, her sight is failing. I hardly recognized her myself.

MARIA [impatiently]: I know. You came in; you said "Good day"; you sat down. This room wasn't like the one you remembered.

JAN: Yes, my memory had played me false. They received me without a word. I was given the glass of beer I asked for. I was looked at, but I wasn't seen. Everything was more difficult than I'd expected.

MARIA: You know quite well it needn't have been difficult; you had only to speak. On such occasions one says "It's I," and then it's all plain sailing.

JAN: True. But I'd been imagining—all sorts of things. I'd expected a welcome like the prodigal son's. Actually I was given a glass of beer, against payment. It took the words out of my mouth, and I thought I'd better let things take their course.

MARIA: There was nothing to take its course. It was another of those ideas of yours—and a word would have been enough.

JAN: It wasn't an idea of mine, Maria; it was the force of things. What's more, I'm not in such a hurry. I have come here to bring them my money, and if I can, some happiness. When I learned about my father's death I realized I had duties toward these two women and now, as a result, I'm doing what it's right for me to do. But evidently it is not so easy as people think, coming back to one's old home, and it takes time to change a stranger into a son.

MARIA: But why not let them know the truth at once? There are situations in which the normal way of acting is obviously the best. If one wants to be recognized, one starts by telling one's name; that's common sense. Otherwise, by pretending to be what one is not, one simply muddles everything. How could you expect not to be treated as a stranger in a house you entered under false colors? No, dear, there's something … something morbid about the way you're doing this.

JAN: Oh, come, Maria! It's not so serious as that. And, mind you, it suits my plan. I shall take this opportunity of seeing them from the outside. Then I'll have a better notion of what to do to make them happy. Afterwards, I'll find some way of getting them to recognize me. It's just a matter of choosing one's words.

MARIA: No, there's only one way, and it's to do what any ordinary mortal would do—to say "It's I," and to let one's heart speak for itself.

JAN: The heart isn't so simple as all that.

MARIA: But it uses simple words. Surely there was no difficulty in saying: "I'm your son. This is my wife. I've been living with her in a country we both love, a land of endless sunshine beside the sea. But something was lacking there to complete my happiness, and now I feel I need you."

JAN: Don't be unfair, Maria. I don't need them; but I realized they may need me, and a man doesn't live only for himself.

[A short silence. MARIA looks away from him.]

MARIA: Perhaps you are right. I'm sorry for what I said. But I have grown terribly suspicious since coming to this country where I've looked in vain for a single happy face. This Europe of yours is so sad. Since we've been here, I haven't once heard you laugh, and, as for me, I feel my nerves on edge all the time. Oh, why did you make me leave my country? Let's go away, Jan; we shall not find happiness here.

JAN: It's not happiness we've come for. We had happiness already.

MARIA [passionately]: Then why not have been satisfied with it?

JAN: Happiness isn't everything; there is duty, too. Mine was to come back to my mother and my own country. [MARIA makes a protesting

gesture and is about to answer. JAN checks her. Footsteps can be heard.] Someone's coming. Do please go, Maria.

MARIA: No, I can't, I can't! Not yet, anyhow!

JAN [as the footsteps approach]: Go there. [He gently pushes her toward the door at the back. The OLD MANSERVANT crosses the room without seeing MARIA, and goes out by the other door.] Now, leave at once. You see, luck is on my side.

MARIA: Please, let me stay. I promise not to speak a word, only to stay beside you till you're recognized.

JAN: No. You'd give me away.

[She turns away, then comes back and looks him in the eyes.]

MARIA: Jan, we've been married for five years.

JAN: Yes, almost five years.

MARIA [lowering her eyes]: And this will be the first night we spend apart. [He says nothing and she looks up, gazing earnestly at him.] I've always loved everything about you, even what I didn't understand, and I know that really I wouldn't wish you to be other than you are. I'm not a very troublesome wife, am I? But here I'm scared of the empty bed you are sending me to, and I'm afraid, too, of your forsaking me.

JAN: Surely you can trust my love better than that?

MARIA: I do trust it. But besides your love there are your dreams—or your duties; they're the same thing. They take you away from me so often, and at those moments it's as if you were having a holiday from me. But I can't take a holiday from you, and tonight [She presses herself to him, weeping], this night without you—oh, I shall never be able to bear it!

JAN [clasping her tightly]: But this is childishness, my dear!

MARIA: Of course it's childish. But … but we were so happy over there, and it's not my fault if the nights in this country terrify me. I don't want to be alone tonight.

JAN: But do try to understand, my dear; I've a promise to keep, and it's most important.

MARIA: What promise?

JAN: The one I made to myself on the day I understood my mother needed me.

MARIA: You've another promise to keep.

JAN: Yes?

MARIA: The promise you made me on the day you joined your life to mine.

JAN: But surely I can keep both promises. What I'm asking of you is nothing very terrible. Nor is it a mere caprice. Only one evening and one night in which to take my bearings here, get to know better these two women who are dear to me, and to secure their happiness.

MARIA [shaking her head]: A separation always means a lot to people who love each other—with the right kind of love.

JAN: But, you romantic little creature, you know quite well I love you with the right kind of love.

MARIA: No, Jan. Men do not know how real love should be. Nothing they have can ever satisfy them. They're always dreaming dreams, building up new duties, going to new countries and new homes. Women are different; they know that life is short and one must make haste to love, to share the same bed, embrace the man one loves, and dread every separation. When one loves one has no time for dreams.

JAN: But, really, dear, aren't you exaggerating? It's such a simple thing I'm doing; trying to get in touch again with my mother, to help her and bring her happiness. As for my dreams and duties, you'll have to take them as they are. Without them I'd be a mere shadow of myself; indeed you'd love me less, were I without them.

MARIA [turning her back to him abruptly]: Oh, I know you can talk me round, you can always find good reasons for anything you want to do. But I refuse to listen, I stop my ears when you start speaking in that special voice I know so well. It's the voice of your loneliness, not of love.

JAN [standing behind her]: Let's not talk of that now, Maria. All I'm asking is to be left here by myself, so that I can clear up certain things in my mind. Really it's nothing so very terrible, or extraordinary, my sleeping under the same roof as my mother. God will see to the rest and He knows, too, that in acting thus I'm not forgetting you. Only—no one can be happy in exile or estrangement. One can't remain a stranger all one's life. It is quite true that a man needs happiness, but he also needs to find his true place in the world. And I believe that coming back to my country, making happy those I love, will help me to do this. I don't look any farther.

MARIA: Surely you could do it without all these … these complications? No, Jan, I'm afraid you are going the wrong way about it.

JAN: It's the right way, because it's the only way of finding out whether or not I did well to have those dreams.

MARIA: I hope you'll find that you did well. But I have only one dream—of that country where we were happy together; and only one duty—toward you.

JAN [embracing her]: Let me have my way, dear. I'll find the things to say that will put everything right.

MARIA [in an access of emotion]: Then follow your dream, dear. Nothing matters, if only I keep your love. Usually I can't be unhappy when you hold me in your arms. I bide my time, I wait till you come down from the clouds; and then my hour begins. What makes me so unhappy today is that, though I'm quite sure of your love, I'm no less sure you will not let me stay with you. That's why men's love is so cruel, so heart-rending. They can't prevent themselves from leaving what they value most.

JAN [holding her face between his hands, and smiling]: Quite true, my dear. But come now! Look at me! I'm not in any danger, as you seem to fear. I'm carrying out my plan, and I know all will be well. You're entrusting me for just one night to my mother and my sister; there's nothing so alarming about that, is there?

MARIA [freeing herself]: Then—good-by! And may my love shield you from harm. [She goes to the door, and holds out her hands.] See how poor I am; they're empty! You—you're going forward to adventure. I can only wait.

[After a momentary hesitation she goes out. JAN sits down. MARTHA enters.]

JAN: Good afternoon. I've come about the room.

MARTHA: I know. It's being made ready. But, first, I must enter you in our register.

[She goes out and comes back with the register.]

JAN: I must say, your servant is a very queer fellow.

MARTHA: This is the first time we've had any complaint about him. He always carries out his duties quite satisfactorily.

JAN: Oh, I wasn't complaining. I only meant that he seemed a bit of a character. Is he dumb?

MARTHA: It’s not that.

JAN: Ah! then he does speak.

MARTHA: As little as possible and only when really necessary.

JAN: Anyhow, he doesn’t seem to hear what one says.

MARTHA: It’s not so much that he doesn’t hear; only he hears badly. Now I must ask you for your name and Christian names.

JAN: Hasek, Karl.

MARTHA: Only Karl?

JAN: Yes.

MARTHA: Date and place of birth?

JAN: I’m thirty-eight.

MARTHA: Yes, but where were you born?

JAN [after a brief hesitation]: Oh, in … in Bohemia.

MARTHA: Profession?

JAN: None.

MARTHA: One has to be very rich, or very poor, to travel, when one does no work.

JAN [smiling]: I’m not very poor and, for several reasons, I’m glad it’s so.

MARTHA [in a different tone]: You’re a Czech, I suppose?

JAN: Certainly.

MARTHA: Your usual residence?

JAN: In Bohemia.

MARTHA: Have you come from there?

JAN: No, I've come from the south. [She looks at him questioningly.] From across the sea.

MARTHA: Ah, yes. [A short silence.] Do you go there often?

JAN: Fairly often.

MARTHA [she seems lost in thought for some moments before continuing]: And where are you going?

JAN: I've not decided. It will depend on a lot of things.

MARTHA: Then do you propose to stay here?

JAN: I don't know. It depends on what I find here.

MARTHA: That doesn't matter. Is no one here expecting you?

JAN: No, I couldn't say anyone's expecting me.

MARTHA: You have your identity papers, I suppose?

JAN: Yes, I can show you them.

MARTHA: Don't trouble. I've only got to write down whether you have an identity card or a passport.

JAN [producing a passport from his pocket]: I've a passport. Here it is. Will you have a look at it? [She takes it, but her thoughts are obviously elsewhere. She seems to be weighing it in her palm; then she hands it back.]

MARTHA: No, keep it. When you're over there, do you live near the sea?

JAN: Yes.

[She gets up, seems about to put the book away; then, changing her mind, holds it open in front of her.]

MARTHA [with sudden harshness]: Ah, I was forgetting. Have you a family?

JAN: Well, I had one once. But I left them many years ago.

MARTHA: No, I meant, are you married?

JAN: Why do you ask that? I've never had the question put to me in any other hotel.

MARTHA: It's one of the questions on the list given us by the police.

JAN: You surprise me.… Yes, I'm married. Didn't you notice my wedding ring?

MARTHA: No, I didn't. It's none of my business to look at your hands; I'm here to fill in your registration form. Your wife's address, please.

JAN: Well, she … as a matter of fact, she's stayed behind, in her country.

MARTHA: Ah! Very good. [Closes the book.] Shall I bring you a drink now, while your room's being made ready?

JAN: No, thanks. But, if you don't mind, I'll stay here. I hope I won't be in your way.

MARTHA: Why should you be in my way? This is a public room, for the use of our customers.

JAN: Yes, but someone by himself can be more of a nuisance than a crowd of people.

MARTHA [busying herself about the room]: Why? I presume you don't intend to waste my time with idle chatter. I've no use for people who come here and try to play the fool—and you should have guessed that. The people hereabouts have learned it, anyhow, and you'll very soon see for yourself that this is a quiet inn, and you'll have all the calm you want. Hardly anybody comes here.

JAN: That can't be very good for business.

MARTHA: We may lose some, but we make up for it in peace, and peace is something for which you can't pay too high a price. And don't forget that one good customer is better than a roaring trade; so that's what we are out for—the right kind of visitor.

JAN: But.... [He hesitates.] Isn't your life here a bit dull at times? Don't you and your mother find it very lonely?

MARTHA [rounding on him angrily]: I decline to answer such questions. You had no business to ask them, and you should have known it. I can see I'll have to warn you how things stand. As a guest at this inn you have the rights and privileges of a guest, but nothing more. Still, don't be afraid, you will have every attention you're entitled to. You will be very well looked after and I shall be greatly surprised if you ever complain of your reception here. But I fail to see why we should go out of our way to give you special reasons for satisfaction. That's why your questions are out of place. It has nothing to do with you whether or not we feel lonely; just as you need not trouble yourself whether you cause us inconvenience or ask too much of us. By all means stand upon your rights as a guest. But do not go beyond them.

JAN: I beg your pardon. Nothing was further from my intention than to offend you; I only wanted to show my good will. I had a feeling that perhaps we weren't quite so remote from each other as you seem to think; no more than that.

MARTHA: I can see I must repeat what I was saying. There can be no question of offending me or not offending me. Since you seem determined to adopt an attitude that you have no right to adopt, I prefer to make things clear. I can assure you I'm not in the least vexed.

Only it is in our interest, yours and mine, that we should keep our distance. If you persist in talking in a manner unbecoming a guest, there's no alternative; we must refuse to have you here. But if you will understand, as I cannot doubt you will, that two women who let you a room in their hotel are under no obligation to treat you as a friend into the bargain, all will go smoothly.

JAN: I quite agree; and it was inexcusable, my giving you an impression that I failed to understand this.

MARTHA: Oh, there's no great harm done. You are not the first who's tried to take that line. But I always made it pretty clear how we felt about such matters, and that settled it.

JAN: Yes, you certainly have made it clear, and I suppose I'd better say no more—for the present.

MARTHA: Not at all. There's nothing to prevent your talking as a guest should talk.

JAN: And how should a guest talk?

MARTHA: Most of our guests talk about all sorts of things: politics, their travels, and so forth. Never about my mother or myself—and that is as it should be. Some of them even talk about their private lives or their jobs. And that, too, is within their rights. After all, one of the services for which we're paid is listening to our customers. But it goes without saying that the charges made for board and lodging don't oblige hotelkeepers to answer personal questions. My mother may do so sometimes, out of indifference; but I make a principle of refusing. Once you've grasped this, we shall not only be on excellent terms, but you'll discover you have many things to tell us, and that sometimes it's quite pleasant to be listened to when one's talking about oneself.

JAN: I'm afraid you won't find me much good at talking about myself. But, really, that won't be necessary. If I stay here only a short time, there will be no point in your getting to know me. And if I make a long stay, you'll have plenty of opportunity of knowing who I am, without my speaking.

MARTHA: I hope you will not bear me any malice for what I've told you. There'd be no reason for it, anyhow. I've always found it better to be quite frank, and I had to stop your talking in a tone that was bound to lead to strained relations. Really, I'm asking nothing out of the way. Until today there was nothing in common between us, and some very special reasons would be needed for our suddenly becoming intimate. And you must forgive me if I fail to see, so far, anything in the least resembling a reason of that kind.

JAN: I'd forgiven you already. Indeed, I quite agree that intimacy isn't come by at a moment's notice; one has to earn it. So, if you now consider that everything's been cleared up between us, I can only say I'm very glad of it.

[The MOTHER enters.]

THE MOTHER: Good afternoon, sir. Your room is ready now.

JAN: Thanks very much, madame.

[The MOTHER sits down.]

THE MOTHER [to MARTHA]: Have you filled in the form?

MARTHA: Yes, I've done that.

THE MOTHER: May I have a look? You must excuse me, sir, but the police here are very strict.… Yes, I see my daughter's not put down whether you've come here on business, or for reasons of health, or as a tourist.

JAN: Well, let's say as a tourist.

THE MOTHER: To see the monastery, no doubt? It's very highly thought of, I'm told.

JAN: Yes, indeed; I've heard a lot about it. Also I wanted to see this place again. It has very pleasant memories for me.

THE MOTHER: Did you ever live here?

JAN: No, but a long time ago I happened to come this way, and I've never forgotten that visit.

THE MOTHER: Still, this is just an ordinary little country town.

JAN: That's so. But I'm much attached to it. In fact, ever since I came here I've been feeling almost at home.

THE MOTHER: Will you be staying long?

JAN: Really, I don't know. I imagine that surprises you, but it's the truth. I don't know. To stay in a place you need to have reasons—friendships, the presence of people you are fond of. Otherwise there'd be no point in staying there rather than elsewhere. And since it's hard to know if one will be made welcome, it's natural for me to be uncertain about my plans.

THE MOTHER: That sounds a little vague, if I may say so.

JAN: I know, but I can't express myself better, I'm afraid.

THE MOTHER: Anyhow, I expect you'll soon have had enough of this place.

JAN: No, I've a faithful heart, and I soon build up memories and attachments, if I'm given a chance.

MARTHA [impatiently]: A faithful heart, indeed! Hearts count for mighty little here!

JAN [seeming not to have heard her; to the MOTHER]: You seem terribly disillusioned. Have you been living long in this hotel?

THE MOTHER: For years and years. So many years that I have quite forgotten when it began and the woman I was then. This girl is my daughter. She's kept beside me all through those years, and probably that's why I know she is my daughter. Otherwise I might have forgotten her, too.

MARTHA: Really, mother! You've no reason to tell him all that.

THE MOTHER: You're right, Martha.

JAN [hastily]: Please don't say any more. But how well I understand your feelings, madame; they're what one comes to at the end of a long, hard-working life. Yet perhaps it might have been quite different if you'd been helped, as every woman should be helped, and given the support of a man's arm.

THE MOTHER: Oh, once upon a time I had it—but there was too much work to do. My husband and I, together, could hardly cope with it. We didn't even have time to think of each other; I believe I had forgotten him even before he died.

JAN: That, too, I can understand. But [He hesitates for a moment.]—perhaps if a son had been here to give you a helping hand, you wouldn't have forgotten him?

MARTHA: Mother, you know we've a lot of work to do.

THE MOTHER: A son? Oh, I'm too old, too old! Old women forget to love even their sons. Hearts wear out, sir.

JAN: That's so. But he, I'm sure, doesn't forget.

MARTHA [standing between them; peremptorily]: If a son came here, he'd find exactly what an ordinary guest can count on: amiable indifference, no more and no less. All the men we have had here received that, and it satisfied them. They paid for their rooms and were given a key. They didn't talk about their hearts. [A short silence.] That simplified our work.

THE MOTHER: Don't talk about that.

JAN [reflectively]: Did they stay here long?

MARTHA: Some of them, a very long time. We did all that was needed for them to stay. Those who weren't so well off left after the first night. We didn't do anything for them.

JAN: I've plenty of money and I propose to stay some little time in this hotel—if you're willing to keep me. I forgot to mention that I can pay you in advance.

THE MOTHER: Oh, we never ask people to do that.

MARTHA: If you are rich, so much the better. But no more talk about your heart, please. We can do nothing about that. In fact your way of speaking got so much on my nerves that I very nearly asked you to go. Take your key and make yourself comfortable in your room. But remember you are in a house where the heart isn't catered to. Too many bleak years have passed over this little spot of Central Europe, and they've drained all the warmth out of this house. They have killed any desire for friendliness, and, let me repeat it, you won't find anything in the least like intimacy here. You will get what the few

travelers who lodge with us are used to getting and it has nothing to do with sentiment. So take your key and bear this well in mind: we're accepting you as a guest, in our quiet way, for interested motives, and if we keep you it will be in our quiet way, for interested motives.

[JAN takes the key and watches her go out.]

THE MOTHER: Don't pay too much attention to what she says. But it's a fact there's some things she never could bear talking about. [She starts to rise. He comes forward to help her.] Don't trouble, my son; I'm not a cripple yet. Look at my hands; they're still quite strong. Strong enough to hold up a man's legs. [A short silence. He is gazing at the key.] Is it what I just said that you're thinking about?

JAN: No. I'm sorry, I hardly heard it. But, tell me, why did you say "my son" just now?

THE MOTHER: Oh, I shouldn't have done that, sir. I didn't mean to take liberties. It was just … a manner of speaking.

JAN: I understand. Now I'll have a look at my room.

THE MOTHER: Certainly, sir. Our old manservant is waiting for you in the passage. [He gazes at her, on the brink of speaking.] Is there anything you want?

JAN [hesitantly]: Well … no, madame. Except that I'd like to thank you for your welcome.

[He goes out. Left to herself, the MOTHER sits down again, lays her hands on the table, and contemplates them.]

THE MOTHER: That was a queer thing I did just now, talking about my hands. Still, if he had really looked at them, perhaps he'd have guessed what he refused to understand in Martha's words. But why must this man be so much bent on dying, and I so little on killing? If only he'd

leave—then I could have another long night's rest! I'm too old. Too old to lock my hands again on a man's ankles and feel the body swaying, swaying, all the way down to the river. Too old for that last effort when we launch him into the water. It will leave me gasping for breath, and every muscle aching, with my arms hanging limp, without even the strength to wipe off the drops that splash up when the sleeping body plunges into the eddies. Too old, too old!… Well, well, since I must, I must! He is the perfect victim and it's for me to give him the sleep I wanted for my own night. And so …

[MARTHA enters abruptly.]

MARTHA: There you are, daydreaming again! And yet—we've much to do.

THE MOTHER: I was thinking of that man. No, really I was thinking of myself.

MARTHA: You'd do better to think about tomorrow. What good was it, not looking at that man, if you can't keep your thoughts off him? You said yourself, it's easier to kill what one doesn't know. Do be sensible.

THE MOTHER: That was one of your father's favorite words, I remember. But I'd like to feel sure this is the last time we'll have to be … sensible. It's odd. When your father used that word it was to drive away the fear of being found out, but when you tell me to be sensible it's only to quench the little spark of goodness that was kindling in my heart.

MARTHA: What you call a spark of goodness is merely sleepiness. But, only postpone your languor till tomorrow, and then you'll be able to take things easy for the rest of your days.

THE MOTHER: You're right, I know. But why should chance have sent us a victim who is so … so unsuitable?

MARTHA: Chance doesn't enter into it. But I admit this traveler is really too confiding, his innocence is too much of a good thing. What would the world come to if condemned men started unbosoming their sentimental troubles to the hangman? It's unsound in principle. But it aggravates me, too, and when I'm dealing with him, I'll bring to bear some of the anger I always feel at the stupidity of men.

THE MOTHER: That, too, is unsound. In the past we brought neither anger nor pity to our task; only the indifference it needed. But tonight I am tired, and you, I see, are angered. Are we really obliged to go through with it under these conditions, and to override everything for the sake of a little more money?

MARTHA: Not for money, but for a home beside the sea, and forgetfulness of this hateful country. You may be tired of living, but I, too, am tired, tired to death of these narrow horizons. I feel I couldn't endure another month here. Both of us are sick of this inn and everything to do with it. You, who are old, want no more than to shut your eyes and to forget. But I can still feel in my heart some of the absurd desires I had when I was twenty, and I want to act in such a way as to have done with them forever—even if, for that, we must go a little further with the life we want to leave. And really it's your duty to help me; it was you who brought me into the world in a land of clouds and mist, instead of a land of sunshine.

THE MOTHER: Martha, I almost wonder if it wouldn't be better for me to be forgotten, as I've been forgotten by your brother, than to hear you speaking to me in that tone, the tone of an accuser.

MARTHA: You know well I did not mean to wound you. [A short silence; then passionately] What could I do without you? What would become

of me if you were far away? I, anyhow, could never, never forget you, and if at times the strain of this life we lead makes me fail in the respect I owe you, I beg you, mother, to forgive me.

THE MOTHER: You are a good daughter, Martha, and I can well believe that an old woman is sometimes hard to understand. But, I feel this is the moment to tell you what I've been trying all this time to say: "Not tonight."

MARTHA: What! Are we to wait till tomorrow? You know quite well you've never had such an idea before; and it would never do for him to have time to meet people here. No, we must act while we have him to ourselves.

THE MOTHER: Perhaps. I don't know. But not tonight. Let him be for this one night. It will give us a reprieve. And perhaps it's through him we shall save ourselves.

MARTHA: Save ourselves? Why should we want to do that, and what an absurd thing to say! All you can hope for is to gain by what you do tonight the right to sleep your fill, once it's over.

THE MOTHER: That's what I meant by "saving ourselves." To retain the hope of sleep.

MARTHA: Good! Then I swear it's in our hands to work out our salvation. Mother, we must have done with indecision. Tonight it shall be; or not at all.

CURTAIN

ACT II

A bedroom at the inn. Dusk is falling. JAN is gazing out of the window.

JAN: Maria was right. This evening hour tells on the nerves. [A short pause.] I wonder what her thoughts are, what she is up to, in that other hotel bedroom. I picture her huddled up in a chair; she's not crying, but her heart's like ice. Over there the nightfall brought a promise of happiness. But here.… [Looks round the room.] Nonsense! I've no reason for feeling this uneasiness. When a man starts something, he has no business to look back. It's in this room everything will be settled.

[A sharp rap on the door. MARTHA comes in.]

MARTHA: I hope I'm not disturbing you. I only wanted to change the towels and fill your jug.

JAN: Oh, I thought it had been done.

MARTHA: No. The old man who works for us sometimes forgets things like that.

JAN: They're only details, anyhow.… But I hardly dare to tell you that you're not disturbing me.

MARTHA: Why?

JAN: I'm not sure that's allowed for in our … our agreement.

MARTHA: You see! You can't answer like any ordinary person, even when you want to make things easy.

JAN [smiling]: Sorry. I shall have to train myself. Only you must give me a little time.

MARTHA [busy with the room]: Yes, that's the whole point. [He turns and looks out of the window. She studies him. His back is to her. She continues speaking as she works.] I'm sorry, sir, that this room is not as comfortable as you might wish.

JAN: It's spotlessly clean, and that is something one appreciates. Unless I'm much mistaken, you had it done up not very long ago.

MARTHA: Quite true. But how can you tell that?

JAN: Oh, by some details.

MARTHA: Anyhow, many of our guests grumble because there isn't running water, and I can hardly blame them. Also, there should be a lamp above the bed; for some time we've been meaning to have one installed. It must be rather a nuisance for people who're used to reading in bed to have to get up to switch the light off.

JAN [turning toward her]: That's so. I hadn't noticed. Still it's not a very serious drawback.

MARTHA: It's kind of you to take it like that. I am glad the defects of our hotel don't trouble you; in fact you seem to notice them less than we do. I've known people whom they'd have been enough to drive away.

JAN: I hope you'll let me make a remark that goes beyond our pact—and say that you're a very surprising person. One certainly doesn't expect hotelkeepers to go out of their way to point out defects in the accommodation. Really it almost looks as if you wanted to make me leave.

MARTHA: That wasn't quite what I had in mind. [Coming to a sudden decision.] But it's a fact that mother and I are rather reluctant to have you here.

JAN: I must say I noticed that you weren't doing much to keep me. Still, I can't imagine why. You have no reason to doubt my solvency, and I hardly think I give the impression of someone with a crime on his conscience.

MARTHA: Certainly not. If you must know, not only don't you look in the least like a criminal, but you produce the opposite effect—of complete innocence. Our reasons were quite different from what you think. We intend to leave this hotel shortly and we've been meaning every day to close down, so as to start preparing for the move. That had no difficulties, as we get so few visitors. But we could never quite make up our minds. It's your coming that has made us realize how thoroughly we'd abandoned any idea of going on with the business.

JAN: Am I to understand you definitely want to see me go?

MARTHA: As I said, we can't decide; I, especially, can't decide. Actually everything depends on me and I haven't made up my mind yet, one way or the other.

JAN: Please remember this; I don't want to be a burden on you and I shall behave exactly as you wish. However, I'd like to say that it will suit me if I can stay here for one or two days. I have some problems to thrash out before moving on, and I counted on finding here the peace and quietness I need.

MARTHA: I quite understand your desire, I assure you, and, if you like, I'll reconsider the matter. [A short silence. She takes some steps hesitantly toward the door.] Am I right in thinking you'll go back to the country from which you've come?

JAN: Yes—if necessary.

MARTHA: It's a pretty country, isn't it?

JAN [looking out of the window]: Yes, a very pretty country.

MARTHA: Is it true that there are long stretches of the coast where you never meet a soul?

JAN: Quire true. There's nothing to remind you that men exist. Sometimes at dawn you find the traces of birds' feet on the sand. Those are the only signs of life. And in the evenings …

MARTHA [softly]: Yes? What are the evenings like?

JAN: Marvelous, indescribable! Yes, it's a lovely country.

MARTHA [in a tone she has not used before]: I've thought of it, often and often. Travelers have told me things, and I've read what I could. And often, in the harsh, bleak spring we have here, I dream of the sea and the flowers over there. [After a short silence, in a low, pensive voice] And what I picture makes me blind to everything around me.

[After gazing at her thoughtfully for some moments, JAN sits down facing her.]

JAN: I can understand that. Spring over there grips you by the throat and flowers burst into bloom by thousands, above the white walls. If you roamed the hills that overlook my town for only an hour or so, you'd bring back in your clothes a sweet, honeyed smell of yellow roses.

[MARTHA, too, sits down.]

MARTHA: How wonderful that must be! What we call spring here is one rose and a couple of buds struggling to keep alive in the monastery garden. [Scornfully] And that's enough to stir the hearts of the men in

this part of the world. Their hearts are as stingy as that rose tree. A breath of richer air would wilt them; they have the springtime they deserve.

JAN: You're not quite fair; you have the autumn, too.

MARTHA: What's the autumn?

JAN: A second spring when every leaf's a flower. [He looks at her keenly.] Perhaps it's the same thing with some hearts; perhaps they'd blossom if you helped them with your patience.

MARTHA: I've no patience for this dreary Europe, where autumn has the face of spring and the spring smells of poverty. No, I prefer to picture those other lands over which summer breaks in flame, where the winter rains flood the cities, and where … things are what they are. [A short silence. JAN gazes at her with growing interest. She notices this and rises abruptly from the chair.] Why are you looking at me like that?

JAN: Sorry. But since we seem to have dropped our convention for the present, I don't see why I shouldn't tell you. It strikes me that, for the first time, you've been talking to me with—shall I say?—some human feeling.

MARTHA [violently]: Don't be too sure of that. And even if I have been, you've no cause for rejoicing. What you call human feeling is not the nicest part of me. What is human in me is what I desire, and to get what I desire, I'd stick at nothing, I'd sweep away every obstacle on my path.

JAN: I can understand that sort of violence. And I have no cause to let it frighten me, as I'm not an obstacle on your path, and I've no motive for opposing your desires.

MARTHA: Certainly you have no reason to oppose them. But it's equally true you have no reason for furthering them, and, in some cases, that might bring things to a head.

JAN: Why be so sure I have no reason for furthering them?

MARTHA: Common sense tells me that; also my wish to keep you outside my plans.

JAN: Ah! That means, I take it, that we've returned to our conventions?

MARTHA: Yes, and we did wrong to depart from them—you can see that for yourself. Now it remains for me to thank you for having spoken of that country where you lived, and I must excuse myself for having, perhaps, wasted your time. [She is on her way to the door.] Still, let me tell you, the time was not wholly wasted. Our talk roused desires in me that were beginning to fall asleep. If you're really bent on staying here you've won your case without knowing it. When I entered this room I had almost decided to ask you to leave, but, as you see, you've played on my human feelings; now I hope you'll stay. And so my longing for the sea and sunshine will be the gainer by it.

[He gazes at her without speaking for a moment.]

JAN [thoughtfully]: You have a very strange way of talking. Still, if I may, and if your mother, too, has no objection, I'll stay on.

MARTHA: My mother's desires are weaker than mine; that's only natural. She doesn't think enough about the sea and those lonely beaches to make her realize you have got to stay. So she hasn't the same motives for wanting to keep you. But, at the same time, she hasn't any really strong motive for opposing me; and that will settle it.

JAN: So, if I've not misunderstood, one of you will let me stay for the sake of money, and the other through indifference.

MARTHA: What more can a traveler expect? But there's truth in what you said.

[She opens the door.]

JAN: Well, I suppose I should be glad of that. Still perhaps you'll let me say that everything here strikes me as very strange; the people and their way of speaking. Really this is a queer house.

MARTHA: Perhaps that's only because you are behaving queerly in it.

[She goes out.]

JAN [looking toward the door]: Maybe she's right. I wonder, though. [Goes to the bed and sits down.] Really the one wish that girl has given me is the wish to leave at once, to return to Maria and our happiness together. I've been behaving stupidly. What business have I to be here?… No, I have a reason, a good reason; I owe a duty to my mother and sister. I've neglected them too long. It's up to me to do something for them, to atone for my neglect. It's not enough in such cases to declare oneself: "It's I." One has to make oneself loved, as well. [He rises.] Yes, this is the room in which all will be decided. A wretchedly cold room, by the way. I can't recognize anything in it. Everything's been changed, and now it might be a bedroom in any one of those commercial hotels where men by themselves stay a night in passing. I've had experience of them, and I always used to think there was something they had to say—something like an answer or a message. Perhaps I shall get the answer here, tonight. [He looks out of the window.] Clouding up, I see. It's always like this in a hotel bedroom; the evenings are depressing for a lonely man. I can feel it again, that vague uneasiness I used to feel in the old days—here, in the hollow of my chest—like a raw place that the least movement irritates.… And I know what it is. It's fear, fear of the eternal loneliness, fear that there is no answer. And who could there be to answer in a hotel bedroom? [He has moved to the bell; after some hesitation he puts his finger on the bell push. For a while there is silence; then one hears approaching

footsteps, a knock. The door opens. The OLD MANSERVANT is standing on the threshold. He neither moves nor speaks.] It's nothing. Sorry to have disturbed you. I only wanted to see if the bell was working and anyone would answer. [The old man stares at him, then closes the door. Receding footsteps.] The bell works, but he doesn't speak. That's no answer. [He looks at the sky.] The clouds are banking up still. A solid mass of darkness that will burst and fall upon the earth. What should I do? Which is right: Maria or my dreams? [Two knocks on the door. MARTHA enters with a tray.] What's this?

MARTHA: The tea you ordered.

JAN: But—I didn't order anything.

MARTHA: Oh? The old man must have heard wrong. He often understands badly. Still, as the tea is here, I suppose you'll have it? [She puts the tray on the table. JAN makes a vague gesture.] It won't go on the bill.

JAN: No, it isn't that. But I'm glad you brought me some tea. Very kind of you.

MARTHA: Please don't mention it. What we do is in our interests.

JAN: I can see you're determined not to leave me any illusions! But frankly I don't see where your interest comes in, in this case.

MARTHA: It does, I assure you. Sometimes a cup of tea's enough to keep our guests here.

[She goes out. JAN picks up the cup, stares at it, puts it down again.]

JAN: So the prodigal son's feast is continuing. First, a glass of beer—but in exchange for my money; then a cup of tea—because it encourages

the visitor to stay on. But I'm to blame, too; I cannot strike the right note. When I'm confronted by that girl's almost brutal frankness, I search in vain for the words that would put things right between us. Of course, her part is simpler; it's easier to find words for a rebuff than those which reconcile. [He picks up the cup, is silent for some moments, then continues in a low, tense voice] O God, give me the power to find the right words, or else make me abandon this vain attempt and return to Maria's love. And then give me the strength, once I have chosen, to abide by my choice. [He raises the cup to his lips.] The feast of the returning prodigal. The least I can do is to do it honor; and so I shall have played my part until I leave this place. [He drinks. Loud knocking at the door.] Who's there?

[The door opens. The MOTHER enters.]

THE MOTHER: I'm sorry to disturb you, sir, but my daughter tells me she brought you some tea.

JAN: There it is.

THE MOTHER: Have you drunk it?

JAN: Yes. Why do you ask?

THE MOTHER: Excuse me, I've come to fetch the tray.

JAN [smiling]: I'm sorry this cup of tea is causing so much trouble.

THE MOTHER: It isn't quite that. But, as a matter of fact, that tea was not meant for you.

JAN: Ah, there's the explanation. It was brought without my having ordered it.

THE MOTHER [wearily]: Yes, that's it. It would have been better if.… Anyhow that hasn't any great importance, whether you've drunk it or not.

JAN: [in a puzzled tone]: I'm exceedingly sorry, I assure you, but your daughter insisted on leaving it, and I never imagined.…

THE MOTHER: I'm sorry, too. But please don't excuse yourself. It was just a mistake.

[She puts the cup and saucer on the tray and moves toward the door.]

JAN: Madame!

THE MOTHER: Yes?

JAN: I must apologize again. I've just come to a decision. I think I'll leave this evening, after dinner. Naturally I'll pay for the room, for the night. [She gazes at him in silence.] I quite understand your looking surprised. But please don't imagine you are in any way responsible for my sudden change of plan. I have a great regard for you, a very great regard. But, to be candid, I don't feel at ease here, and I'd rather not stay the night.

THE MOTHER: That's quite all right, sir. Of course you can do exactly as you wish. Still, perhaps you may change your mind between now and dinnertime. Sometimes one yields to a passing impression, but later on things settle themselves and one gets used to new conditions.

JAN: I doubt it, madame. However, I would not like you to believe I am leaving because I'm dissatisfied with you. On the contrary, I am very grateful to you for welcoming me as you have done. For, I must say, I seemed to notice you had a certain … friendliness toward me.

THE MOTHER: That was only natural, sir, and I'm sure you understand I had no personal reasons for showing any ill will.

JAN [with restrained emotion]: That may be so—I hope so. But, if I told you that, it is because I want us to part on good terms. Later on,

perhaps, I'll come back. In fact I'm sure I shall. And then things will certainly go better, and I've no doubt we shall find pleasure in meeting again. But just now I feel that I have made a mistake, I have no business being here. In a word—though this may strike you as an odd way of putting it—I have a feeling that this house isn't for me.

THE MOTHER: I know what you mean, sir. But usually one feels that sort of thing immediately; you have been rather slow, it seems to me, to discover it.

JAN: I agree. But just now I'm rather at sea. I've come to Europe on some urgent business, and it's always a bit disconcerting, returning to a country after years and years of absence. I trust you understand what I mean.

THE MOTHER: Yes, I do understand, and I'd have liked things to turn out as you wished. But I think that, as far as we're concerned, there's nothing more we can do about it.

JAN: So it seems, I admit. Still, really, one never can be sure.

THE MOTHER: Anyhow, I think we have done everything needed to have you stay with us.

JAN: Indeed you have, and I've nothing to complain of. The truth is that you are the first people I have met since my return, so it's natural my first taste of the difficulties ahead should come when I'm with you. Obviously I alone am to blame for this; I haven't found my feet yet.

THE MOTHER: It's often like that in life; one makes a bad start, and nobody can do anything about it. In a way it's quite true that what has happened vexes me as well. But I tell myself that, after all, I've no reason to attach importance to it.

JAN: Well, it's something that you share my discomfort and that you try to understand me. I can hardly tell you how touched I am by your attitude, and how much I appreciate it. [He stretches his hand toward her.] Really I …

THE MOTHER: Oh, what you call my attitude's quite natural, really. It's our duty to make ourselves agreeable to our guests.

JAN [in a disappointed tone]: That's so. [A short silence.] So it comes to this: all I owe you is an apology and, if you think fit, some compensation. [He draws his hand over his forehead. He seems exhausted and is speaking less easily.] You may have made preparations, gone to some expense; so it's only fair.…

THE MOTHER: The only preparations we've made are those we always make in such cases. And I can assure you that you owe us no compensation. It was not on our account that I was regretting your indecision, but on yours.

JAN [leaning against the table]: Oh, that doesn't matter. The great thing is that we understand each other and I won't leave you with too bad an impression of myself. Personally I shall not forget this house—be sure of that—and I hope that when I return I'll be in a better mood to appreciate it. [She goes to the door without speaking.] Madame! [She turns. He speaks with some difficulty, but ends more easily than he began.] I'd like.… Excuse me, but my journey's tired me. [Sits on the bed.] I'd like anyhow to thank you for the tea, and for the welcome you have given me. And I'd also like you to know that I won't leave this house feeling like a stranger.

THE MOTHER: Really, sir, being thanked for something due to a mistake is always embarrassing.

[She goes out. JAN watches her, makes as if to move, but one can see he is feeling limp. Then, leaning his elbow on the pillow, he seems to abandon himself to his growing lethargy.]

JAN: Yes, I must handle it quite simply, quite straight forwardly. Tomorrow I'll come here with Maria and I shall say "It's I." There's nothing to prevent my making them happy. Maria was right; I can see that now. [He sighs and leans back on the pillow.] I don't like the feel of this evening; everything seems so far away. [He stretches himself full-length on the bed, murmuring almost inaudibly.] Yes, or no? [After tossing about a little, JAN falls asleep. The room is in almost complete darkness. A long silence. The door opens. The two women enter with a lamp.]

MARTHA [after holding the lamp above the sleeping man; in a whisper]: All's well.

THE MOTHER [in a low voice at first, but gradually raising it]: No, Martha! I dislike having my hand forced like this. I'm being dragged into this act; you began it so that I'd have no chance of drawing back. I don't like your way of riding roughshod over my reluctance.

MARTHA: It is a way that simplifies everything. If you had given me any clear reason for your reluctance, I'd have been bound to consider it. But as you couldn't make up your mind, it was right for me to help you by taking the first step.

THE MOTHER: I know, of course, that it does not greatly matter; this man or some other, today or some later day, tonight or tomorrow—it had to come to that. None the less, I don't feel pleased about it.

MARTHA: Come, mother! Think of tomorrow instead, and let's get busy. Our freedom will begin when this night ends.

[She unbuttons JAN'S coat, extracts his wallet, and counts the notes.]

THE MOTHER: How soundly he's sleeping!

MARTHA: He's sleeping as they all slept.... Now let's start.

THE MOTHER: Wait a little, please. Isn't it strange how helpless and defenseless men look when they're asleep?

MARTHA: It's an attitude they assume. They always wake up eventually....

THE MOTHER [meditatively]: No, men aren't quite so remarkable as you seem to think. But of course you, Martha, don't know what I mean.

MARTHA: No, mother, I don't. But I do know that we are wasting time.

THE MOTHER [with a sort of weary irony]: Oh, there's no such hurry. On the contrary, this is the moment we can relax, now that the main thing's done. Why work yourself up like this? Is it really worth while?

MARTHA: Nothing's worth while, the moment one talks about it. It's better to get on with the work in hand and ask no questions of oneself.

THE MOTHER [calmly]: Let's sit down, Martha.

MARTHA: Here? Beside him?

THE MOTHER: Certainly. Why not? He has entered on a sleep that will take him far, and it's not likely he will wake up and inquire what we're doing here. As for the rest of the world—it stops short at that closed door. Why shouldn't we enjoy this little breathing space in peace?

MARTHA: You're joking, and it's my turn to tell you I don't appreciate your way of talking.

THE MOTHER: You're wrong. I don't feel in the least like joking. I'm merely showing calmness, while you are letting your nerves run wild. No, Martha, sit down [She gives a curious laugh] and look at that man who's even more innocent in sleep than in his talk. He, anyhow, is through with the world. From now on, everything will be easy for him. He will pass from a dreamful sleep into dreamless sleep. And what for others is a cruel wrench will be for him no more than a protracted rest.

MARTHA: Innocence has the sleep that innocence deserves. And this man, anyhow, I had no reason for hating. So I'm glad he is being spared any pain. But I've no reason, either, for looking at him, and I think it a bad idea of yours, staring like that a man whom presently you'll have to carry.

THE MOTHER [shaking her head; in a low voice]: When the hour comes we shall carry him. But we still have time in hand and perhaps it won't be such a bad idea—for him at any rate—if we look at him attentively. For it's not too late yet; sleep isn't death. Yes, Martha, look at him. He is living through a moment when he has no say in his fate; when his hopes of life are made over to indifferent hands. Let these hands stay as they are, folded in my lap, until the dawn, and without his knowing anything, he'll have entered on a new lease of life. But if they move toward him and form a hard ring round his ankles, he will lie in an unremembered grave for ever.

MARTHA [rising brusquely]: Mother, you're forgetting that all nights end, and we have much to do. First, we must look through the papers in his pockets and carry him downstairs. Then we'll have to put out all the lights and keep watch in the doorway as long as need be.

THE MOTHER: Yes, there is much for us to do, and that is where we are in a different case from his; he, at least, is free now of the burden of his

life. He has done with the anxiety of making decisions, with thoughts of work that must be done, with strain and stress. A cross is lifted from his shoulders; the cross of that inner life which allows of no repose, no weakness, no relaxing. At this moment he exacts nothing of himself, and old and tired as I am, I almost think that there lies happiness.

MARTHA: We've no time for wondering where happiness lies. When I have kept watch as long as need be, there will still be much to do. We shall have to go down to the river and make sure some drunk man isn't sleeping on the bank. Then we'll have to carry him down there as quickly as we can—and you know the effort that means. We shall have to do it in several stages and, once we are on the bank, swing him out as far as possible into midstream. And let me remind you again that nights don't last for ever.

THE MOTHER: Yes, all that lies before us, and the mere thought of it makes me tired, with a tiredness that has lasted so long that my old blood can't cope with it. And, meanwhile, this man has no suspicion; he is enjoying his repose. If we let him wake he'll have to start life again, and from what I've seen of him, I know he is much like other men and cannot live in peace. Perhaps that is why we must take him there and hand him over to the mercy of the dark water. [She sighs.] But it's a sad thing so much effort should be needed to rid a man of his follies and put him in the way of peace.

MARTHA: I can only think, mother, that your wits are wandering. I repeat, we have much to do. Once he's thrown in, we shall have to efface the marks on the riverbank, blur our footsteps on the path, destroy his clothes and baggage—make him vanish from the face of the earth, in fact. Time's passing and soon it will be too late to carry all this out with the composure that it needs. Really I cannot understand what has come over you, to be sitting at that man's bedside and staring at

him, though you can hardly see him, and persisting in this absurd, useless talk.

THE MOTHER: Tell me, Martha. Did you know that he meant to leave this evening?

MARTHA: No, I didn't. But if I'd known, it wouldn't have changed anything, once I had made up my mind.

THE MOTHER: He told me that just now, and I didn't know how to answer him.

MARTHA: Ah! So you had a talk with him?

THE MOTHER: Yes, when you said you'd brought his tea, I came here. I'd have stopped him from drinking it, if I had been in time. As it was, once I knew the beginning had been made, I felt we'd better let things take their course; really it hadn't much importance.

MARTHA: If you still feel like that, there's no reason for dawdling here. So please get up from that chair and help me finish off this business—which is getting on my nerves.

THE MOTHER [rising]: Yes, I suppose I'll end by helping you. Only you might allow a few minutes more to an old woman whose blood doesn't flow as fast as yours. You've been on the rush ever since this morning, and you expect me to keep pace with you! Even that man there couldn't manage it; before he had framed the thought of leaving, he'd drunk the tea you gave him.

MARTHA: If you must know, it was he who made up my mind for me. You talked me into sharing your reluctance. But then he started telling me about those countries where I've always longed to go, and by working on my feelings hardened my heart against him. Thus innocence is rewarded.

THE MOTHER: And yet he'd come to understand. He said he felt that this house was not his home.

MARTHA [violently and impatiently]: Of course it is not his home. For that matter it is nobody's home. No one will ever find warmth or comfort or contentment in this house. Had he realized that sooner, he'd have been spared, and spared us, too. He would have spared our having to teach him that this room is made for sleeping in, and this world for dying in. Come, mother, and for the sake of the God you sometimes call on, let's have done with it.

[The MOTHER takes a step toward the bed.]

THE MOTHER: Very well, Martha, we'll begin. But I have a feeling that tomorrow's dawn will never come.

CURTAIN

ACT III

The public room. The MOTHER, MARTHA and the MANSERVANT are on the stage. The old man is sweeping and tidying up the room; MARTHA, standing behind the bar, is drawing back her hair. The MOTHER is walking toward the door.

MARTHA: Well, you see that dawn has come and we've gotten through the night without mishap.

THE MOTHER: Yes. And tomorrow I'll be thinking it's a good thing to have done with it. But, just now, all I feel is that I'm dead tired and my heart's dried up within me. Ah, it was a hard night indeed!

MARTHA: But this morning is the first for years when I breathe freely. Never did a killing cost me less. I almost seem to hear the waves already, and I feel like crying out for joy.

THE MOTHER: So much the better, Martha. So much the better. As for me, I feel so old this morning that I can't share anything with you. But perhaps tomorrow I'll be in a better way.

MARTHA: Yes, and everything will, I hope, be better. But do please stop complaining and give me a chance of relishing my new-found happiness. I'm like a young girl again this morning; I feel my blood flowing warm, and I want to run about and sing!… Oh, mother, may I ask you something?… [Pauses.]

THE MOTHER: What's come over you, Martha? You're like a different person.

MARTHA: Mother.… [Hesitates; then in a rush.] Tell me, am I still pretty?

THE MOTHER: Yes, I think you're looking really pretty this morning. Some acts seem to have a good effect on you.

MARTHA: Oh, no! Those acts you mean lie on me so lightly. But this morning I feel as if I'd been born again, to a new life; at last I'm going to a country where I shall be happy.

THE MOTHER: No doubt, no doubt. And, once I've got over my tiredness, I, too, shall breathe freely. Even now, it makes up for all those sleepless nights of ours, to know they'll have brought you happiness. But this morning I must rest; all I'm conscious of is that the night has been a hard one.

MARTHA: What does last night matter? Today is a great day. [To the servant.] Keep your eyes open when you're sweeping; we dropped

some of his papers on the way out and I couldn't stop to pick them up. They're on the floor somewhere. [The MOTHER leaves the room. Sweeping under a table, the old man comes on JAN'S passport, opens it, runs his eyes over it, and hands it, open, to MARTHA.] I don't need to see it. Put it with the other things; we'll burn them all together. [The old man goes on holding the passport to MARTHA. She takes it.] What is it? [The old man goes out. MARTHA reads the passport slowly, without showing any emotion; then calls in a voice that sounds completely calm.] Mother!

THE MOTHER [from the next room]: What do you want now?

MARTHA: Come here. [The MOTHER returns. MARTHA gives her the passport.] Read!

THE MOTHER: You know quite well my eyes are tired.

MARTHA: Read!

[The MOTHER takes the passport, sits at the table, spreads it open, and reads. For a long while she stares at the page in front of her.]

THE MOTHER [in a toneless voice]: Yes, I always knew it would turn out like this one day—and that would be the end. The end of all!

MARTHA [coming from behind the bar and standing in front of it]: Mother!

THE MOTHER: No, Martha, let me have my way; I've lived quite long enough. I have lived many years more than my son. That isn't as it should be. Now I can go and join him at the bottom of the river, where the weeds already have covered up his face.

MARTHA: Mother! Surely you won't leave me alone?

THE MOTHER: You have been a great help to me, Martha, and I am sorry to leave you. If such words have any meaning left for us, I can honestly say you were a good daughter, in your fashion. You have always shown me the respect you owed me. But now I am very weary; my old heart, which seemed indifferent to everything, has learned again today what grief means, and I'm not young enough to come to terms with it. In any case, when a mother is no longer capable of recognizing her own son, it's clear her role on earth is ended.

MARTHA: No. Not if her daughter's happiness remains to be ensured. And, no less than my heart, my hopes are shattered when I hear you speaking in this new, amazing way—you who had taught me to respect nothing.

THE MOTHER [in the same listless tone]: It only proves that in a world where everything can be denied, there are forces undeniable; and on this earth where nothing's sure we have our certainties. [Bitterly] And a mother's love for her son is now my certainty.

MARTHA: So you are not sure that a mother can love her daughter?

THE MOTHER: It's not now I'd want to wound you, Martha, but love for a daughter can never be the same thing. It strikes less deep. And how could I now live without my son's love?

MARTHA: A wonderful love—that forgot you utterly for twenty years!

THE MOTHER: Yes, it was a wonderful love that outlasted twenty years of silence. Say what you will, that love is wonderful enough for me—since I can't live without it. [She rises from her chair.]

MARTHA: It's not possible you can talk like that, without any thought for your daughter, without the least stirring of revolt!

THE MOTHER: Hard as it is on you, it is possible. I have no thought for anything; still less any feeling of revolt. No doubt this is my punishment, and for all murderers a time comes when, like me, they are dried up within, sterile, with nothing left to live for. That's why society gets rid of them; they're good for nothing.

MARTHA: I can't bear to hear you talking like that, about crime and punishment; it's … despicable!

THE MOTHER: I'm not troubling to pick my words; I've ceased to have any preference. But it's true that by one act I have ruined everything. I have lost my freedom and my hell has begun.

MARTHA [going up to her mother; fiercely]: You never spoke like that before. During all these years you've stood beside me, and your hands never flinched from gripping the legs of those who were to die. A lot you thought of hell or freedom in those days! It never occurred to you that you had no right to live, and you went on—doing as you did. What change can your son have brought to that?

THE MOTHER: I went on with it; that's true. But what I lived through then, I lived through by dint of habit, which is not so very different from death. An experience of grief was enough to change all that, and my son's coming has brought that change. [MARTHA makes a gesture and seems about to speak.] Oh, I know, Martha, that doesn't make sense. What has a criminal to do with grief? But I'd have you notice that my grief is not the wild grief that mothers feel; I haven't raised my voice as yet. It's no more than the pain of feeling love rekindle in my heart; and yet it's too much for me. I know that this pain, too, doesn't make sense. [In a changed tone.] But then this world we live in doesn't make sense, and I have a right to judge it, since I've tested all it has to offer, from creation to destruction.

[She walks resolutely toward the door. MARTHA slips in front of her and bars the way.]

MARTHA: No, mother, you shall not leave me. Don't forget that it was I who stayed beside you, and he went away. For a whole lifetime I have been with you, and he left you in silence. That must come into the reckoning. That must be paid for. And it's your duty to come back to me.

THE MOTHER [gently]: That's true enough, Martha. But he, my son, was killed by me.

[MARTHA has half turned away and seems to be gazing at the door.]

MARTHA [after a short silence, with rising emotion]: All that life can give a man was given him. He left this country. He came to know far horizons, the sea, free beings. But I stayed here, eating my heart out in the shadows, small and insignificant, buried alive in a gloomy valley in the heart of Europe. Buried alive! No one has ever kissed my mouth and no one, not even you, has seen me naked. Mother, I swear to you, that must be paid for. And now, when at last I am to get what's due to me, you cannot, must not desert me on the vain pretext that a man is dead. Do try to understand that for a man who has lived his life death is a little thing. We can forget my brother and your son. What has happened to him has no importance; he had nothing more to get from life. But for me it's different, and you are defrauding me of everything, cheating me of the pleasures he enjoyed. Why must that man deprive me of my mother's love as well and drag you down with him into the icy darkness of the river? [They gaze silently at each other; MARTHA lowers her eyes. She speaks now in a very low voice.] I ask so little, so very little of life. Mother, there are words I never could bring myself to use, but—don't you think it would be soothing if we started our life again just as it used to be, you and I together?

THE MOTHER: Did you recognize him?

MARTHA: No, I didn't. I had not the slightest recollection of what he looked like, and everything happened as it was bound to happen. You said it yourself; this world doesn't make sense. But you weren't altogether wrong in asking me that question. For I know now that if I'd recognized him, it would have made no difference.

THE MOTHER: I prefer to think that isn't true. No soul is wholly criminal, and the wickedest murderers have moments when they lay down their arms.

MARTHA: I have such moments, too. But I would not have lowered my head to a brother whom I did not know and who meant nothing to me.

THE MOTHER: To whom then would you lower your head?

[MARTHA lowers her head.]

MARTHA: To you.

[A short silence.]

THE MOTHER [quietly]: Too late, Martha. I can do nothing more for you. [Half averting her eyes.] Oh, why did he keep silence? Silence is fatal. But speaking is as dangerous; the little he said hurried it on. [Turns toward her daughter.] Are you crying, Martha? No, you wouldn't know how to cry. Can you remember the time when I used to kiss you?

MARTHA: No, mother.

THE MOTHER: I understand. It was so long ago, and I forgot so soon to hold out my arms to you. But I never ceased loving you. [She gently thrusts aside MARTHA, who gradually makes way for her.] I know it

now; now that your brother's coming has brought to life again that intolerable love which I now must kill—together with myself.

[The doorway is free for her to pass.]

MARTHA [burying her face in her hands]: But what, oh, what can mean more to you than your daughter's grief?

THE MOTHER: Weariness, perhaps … and my longing for rest.

[She goes out. MARTHA makes no effort to detain her. Once her mother has left she runs to the door, slams it to, and presses herself against it. She breaks into loud, fierce cries.]

MARTHA: No, no! What concern of mine was it to look after my brother? None whatever! And yet now I'm an outcast in my own home, there is no place for me to lay my head, my own mother will have none of me. No, it wasn't my duty to look after him—oh, the unfairness of it all, the injustice done to innocence! For he—he now has what he wanted, while I am left lonely, far from the sea I longed for. Oh, how I hate him! All my life was spent waiting for this great wave that was to lift me up and sweep me far away, and now I know it will never come again. I am doomed to stay here with all those other countries, other nations, on my left hand and my right, before me and behind; all those plains and mountains that are barriers to the salt winds blowing from the sea, and whose chatterings and grumblings drown its low, unceasing summons. [In a lower tone] There are places to which, far as they may be from the sea, the evening wind brings sometimes a smell of seaweed. It tells of moist seabeaches, loud with the cries of seagulls, or of golden sands bathed in a sunset glow that has no limit. But the sea winds fail long before they reach this place. Never, never shall I have what's due to me. I may press my ear to the earth but I shall not hear the crash of icy breakers, or the measured breathing of a happy sea. I am too far from all I love, and my exile is beyond remedy. I hate him, yes, I hate him for having got what he wanted! My only home is in this gloomy, shut-in country where the sky has no horizons; for my

hunger I have nothing but the sour Moravian sloes, for my thirst only the blood that I have shed. That is the price one must pay for a mother's love!

There is no love for me, so let her die. Let every door be shut against me; all I wish is to be left in peace with my anger, my very rightful anger. For I have no intention of rolling my eyes heavenward or pleading for forgiveness before I die. In that southern land, guarded by the sea, to which one can escape, where one can breathe freely, press one's body to another's body, roll in the waves—to that sea-guarded land the gods have no access. But here one's gaze is cramped on every side, everything is planned to make one look up in humble supplication. I hate this narrow world in which we are reduced to gazing up at God.

But I have not been given my rights and I am smarting from the injustice done me; I will not bend my knee. I have been cheated of my place on earth, cast away by my mother, left alone with my crimes, and I shall leave this world without being reconciled. [A knock at the door.] Who's there?

MARIA: A traveler.

MARTHA: We're not taking any guests now.

MARIA: But my husband's here. I have come to see him.

[MARIA enters.]

MARTHA [staring at her]: Your husband. Who's that?

MARIA: He came here yesterday evening and he promised to call for me this morning. I can't understand why he didn't come.

MARTHA: He said his wife was abroad.

MARIA: He had special reasons for that. But we'd arranged to meet this morning.

MARTHA [who has kept her eyes fixed on MARIA]: That may be difficult. Your husband's gone.

MARIA: Gone? I don't follow. Didn't he take a room here?

MARTHA: Yes, but he left it during the night.

MARIA: Really, I can't believe that. I know his reasons for wanting to stay in this house. But the way you speak alarms me. Please tell me frankly whatever you have to tell.

MARTHA: I have nothing to tell you, except that your husband is no longer here.

MARIA: I simply cannot understand; he would not have gone away without me. Did he say that he was going for good, or that he'd come back?

MARTHA: He has left us for good.

MARIA: Please listen. I can't bear to be kept in suspense any longer. Since yesterday I've been waiting, waiting, in this strange land, and now my anxiety has brought me to this house. I will not go away before I have seen my husband or been told where I can find him.

MARTHA: Your husband's whereabouts is your concern, not mine.

MARIA: You are wrong. You, too, are concerned in this, and closely. I don't know if my husband will approve of my telling you this, but I'm sick and tired of this futile game of make-believe. The man who came here yesterday is the brother you'd heard nothing of for years and years.

MARTHA: That's no news to me.

MARIA [violently]: Then—what can have happened? If everything has been cleared up, how is it Jan's not here? Did you not welcome him home, you and your mother, and weren't you full of joy at his return?

MARTHA: My brother is no longer here—because he is dead.

[MARIA gives a start and stares at MARTHA for some moments without speaking. Then she takes a step toward her, smiling.]

MARIA: Ah, you're joking, of course. Jan's often told me that when you were little you loved mystifying people. You and I are almost sisters and—

MARTHA: Don't touch me. Stay where you are. There is nothing in common between us. [Pauses.] I can assure you I'm not joking; your husband died last night. So there's no reason for you to stay here any longer.

MARIA: But you're mad, stark staring mad! People don't die like that—when one's arranged to meet them, from one moment to the other, all of a sudden. I can't believe you. Let me see him and then I may believe what I can't even imagine.

MARTHA: That impossible. He's at the bottom of the river. [MARIA stretches her hand toward her.] Don't touch me! Stay there. I repeat; he is at the bottom of the river. My mother and I carried him to the river last night, after putting him to sleep. He didn't suffer, but he is dead sure enough, and it was we, his mother and I, who killed him.

MARIA [shrinking away]: It must be I who am mad. I'm hearing words that have never before been said on this earth. I knew that no good would come to me here, but this is sheer craziness and I will not share

in it. At the very moment when your words strike death into my heart, it seems to me that you are talking of some other man, not of the man who shared my nights, and all this is a tale of long ago, in which my love never had a part.

MARTHA: It's not for me to convince you; only to tell you the truth. A truth which you will have to recognize before long.

MARIA [in a sort of reverie]: But why, why did you do it?

MARTHA: What right have you to question me?

MARIA [passionately]: What right?… My love for him.

MARTHA: What does that word mean?

MARIA: It means—it means all that at this moment is tearing, gnawing at my heart; it means this rush of frenzy that makes my fingers itch for murder. It means all my past joys, and this wild, sudden grief you have brought me. Yes, you crazy woman, if it wasn't that I've steeled my heart against believing, you'd learn the meaning of that word, when you felt my nails scoring your cheeks.

MARTHA: Again, you are using language I cannot understand. Words like love and joy and grief are meaningless to me.

MARIA [making a great effort to speak calmly]: Listen, Martha—that's your name, isn't it? Let's stop this game, if game it is, of cross purposes. Let's have done with useless words. Tell me quite clearly what I want to know quite clearly, before I let myself break down.

MARTHA: Surely I made it clear enough. We did to your husband last night what we had done to other travelers before; we killed him and took his money.

MARIA: So his mother and sister were criminals?

MARTHA: Yes. But that's their business, and no one else's.

MARIA [still controlling herself with an effort]: Had you learned he was your brother when you did it?

MARTHA: If you must know, there was a misunderstanding. And if you have any experience at all of the world, that won't surprise you.

MARIA [going toward the table, her hands clenched on her breast; in a low, sad voice]: Oh, my God, I knew it! I knew this play acting was bound to end in tragedy and we'd be punished, he and I, for having lent ourselves to it. I felt danger in the very air one breathes in this country. [She stops in front of the table and goes on speaking, without looking at MARTHA.] He wanted to make his home-coming a surprise, to get you to recognize him and to bring you happiness. Only at first he couldn't find the words that were needed. And then, while he was groping for the words, he was killed. [Weeping.] And you, like two madwomen, blind to the marvelous son who had returned to you—for marvelous he was, and you will never know the greatheartedness, the noble soul, of the man you killed last night.… He might have been your pride, as he was mine. But, no, you were his enemy—oh, the pity of it!—for else how could you bring yourself to speak so calmly of what should make you rush into the street, screaming out your heart, like a wounded animal?

MARTHA: You have no right to sit in judgment without knowing all. By now my mother's lying with her son, pressed to the sluice-gate, and the current is beginning to gnaw their faces, and buffeting them against the rotting piles. Soon their bodies will be drawn up and buried together in the same earth. But I cannot see what there is even in this to set me

screaming with pain. I have a very different idea of the human heart, and, to be frank, your tears revolt me.

MARIA [swinging round on her fiercely]: My tears are for the joys I've lost for ever; for a life's happiness stolen from me. And this is better for you than the tearless grief I shall have presently, which could kill you without the flutter of an eyelid.

MARTHA: Do not imagine talk like that affects me; really it would make little difference. For I, too, have seen and heard enough; I, too, have resolved to die. But I shall not join them; why, indeed, would I want their company? I shall leave them to their new-found love, to their dark embraces. Neither you nor I have any part in these; all that is ended and they are unfaithful to us—forever. Luckily I have my bedroom and its roof-beam is strong.

MARIA: What does it matter to me that you die or the whole world falls in ruins, if through you I have lost the man I love, and henceforth I am doomed to live in a dark night of loneliness, where every memory is a torture?

[MARTHA comes behind her and speaks over her head.]

MARTHA: Let's not exaggerate. You have lost your husband and I have lost my mother. We are even. But you have only lost him once, after enjoying his love for years and without his having cast you off. My lot is worse. First my mother cast me off, and now she is dead. I have lost her twice.

MARIA: Yes, perhaps I might be tempted to pity you and share my grief with you, if I did not know what was awaiting him, alone in his room last night, when you were plotting his death.

MARTHA [her voice has a sudden accent of despair]: I'm even with your husband, too, for I have suffered as he suffered. Like him, I thought I had made my home sure for always; I thought that crime had forged a bond between me and my mother that nothing could ever break. And on whom in all the world should I rely, if not on the woman who had killed beside me? I was mistaken. Crime, too, means solitude, even if a thousand people join together to commit it. And it is fitting that I should die alone, after having lived and killed alone. [MARIA turns toward her, tears streaming down her cheeks. MARTHA moves back, her voice grows hard again.] Stop! I told you not to touch me. At the mere thought that a human hand could lay its warmth on me before I die; at the mere thought that anything at all resembling the foul love of men is dogging me still, I feel the blood pulsing in my temples in a fury of disgust.

[MARIA has risen to her feet. The two women now are face to face, standing very near each other.]

MARIA: Have no fear. I shall do nothing to prevent your dying as you wish. For with this hideous pain that grips my body like a vise, I feel a sort of blindness falling on my eyes and everything around me is growing dim. Neither you nor your mother will ever be more to me than vague, fleeting faces that came and went in the course of a tragedy which can never end. For you, Martha, I have no hatred and no pity. I have lost the power of loving or hating anybody. [Suddenly she buries her face in her hands.] But then—I have hardly had time to suffer or to rebel. My calamity was … too big for me.

MARTHA [who has taken some steps toward the door, comes back toward MARIA]: But still not big enough; it has left you eyes to weep

with. And I see that something remains for me to do before leaving you for ever. I have yet to drive you to despair.

MARIA [gazing at her, horror-stricken]: Oh, please leave me alone! Go away, and let me be!

MARTHA: Yes, I am going, and it will be a relief for me, as well. Your love and your tears are odious to me. But before I go to die, I must rid you of the illusion that you are right, that love isn't futile, and that what has happened was an accident. On the contrary, it's now that we are in the normal order of things, and I must convince you of it.

MARIA: What do you mean by that?

MARTHA: That in the normal order of things no one is ever recognized.

MARIA [distractedly]: Oh, what do I care? I only know that my heart is torn to shreds, and nothing, nothing matters to it except the man you killed.

MARTHA [savagely]: Be silent! I will not have you speak of that man; I loathe him. And he is nothing to you now. He has gone down into the bitter house of eternal exile. The fool! Well, he has got what he wanted; he is with the woman he crossed the sea to find. So all of us are served now, as we should be, in the order of things. But fix this in your mind; neither for him nor for us, neither in life nor in death, is there any peace or homeland. [With a scornful laugh] For you'll agree one can hardly call it a home, that place of clotted darkness underground, to which we go from here to feed blind animals.

MARIA [weeping]: I can't, oh, no, I can't bear to hear you talk like that. And I know he, too, wouldn't have borne it. It was to find another homeland that he crossed the sea.

MARTHA [who has walked to the door, swings round on her]: His folly has received its wages. And soon you will receive yours. [Laughing as before] We're cheated, I tell you. Cheated! What do they serve, those blind impulses that surge up in us, the yearnings that rack our souls? Why cry out for the sea, or for love? What futility! Your husband knows now what the answer is: that charnel house where in the end we shall lie huddled together, side by side. [Vindictively] A time will come when you, too, know it, and then, could you remember anything, you would recall as a delightful memory this day which seems to you the beginning of the cruelest of exiles. Try to realize that no grief of yours can ever equal the injustice done to man.

And now—before I go, let me give a word of advice; I owe it to you, since I killed your husband. Pray your God to harden you to stone. It's the happiness. He has assigned Himself, and the one true happiness. Do as He does, be deaf to all appeals, and turn your heart to stone while there still is time. But if you feel you lack the courage to enter into this hard, blind peace—then come and join us in our common house. Good-by, my sister. As you see, it's all quite simple. You have a choice between the mindless happiness of stones and the slimy bed in which we are awaiting you.

[She goes out. MARIA, who has been listening in horrified amazement, sways, stretching out her arms in front of her.]

MARIA [her voice rising to a scream]: Oh, God, I cannot live in this desert! It is on You that I must call, and I shall find the words to say. [She sinks on her knees.] I place myself in your hands. Have pity, turn toward me. Hear me and raise me from the dust, O Heavenly Father! Have pity on those who love each other and are parted.

[The door opens. The OLD MANSERVANT is standing on the threshold.]

THE OLD MANSERVANT [in a clear, firm tone]: What's all this noise? Did you call me?

MARIA [gazing at him]: Oh!… I don't know. But help me, help me, for I need help. Be kind and say that you will help me.

THE OLD MANSERVANT [in the same tone]: No.

CURTAIN

The End