

*his hand from behind and breaks from his embrace. Shocked at his behavior, she peers at him with hatred.*)

IRINA. But I loathe— (*She wants to say "you" but succeeds, barely, in sticking to her line.*)—borscht! And that cook of yours appears not to have washed her hands in a month.

NIKOLAI. Obsessive hand-washing, dear heart, is another French affectation. The traces of Russian soil under her nails actually help to impart a marvelous flavoring to her cuisine.

IRINA. But I take lumps of sugar, not clods of earth, in my tea.

NIKOLAI. (*Pointing out window.*) Look! There's Great-Grandfather. He really is quite charming, Irina. And he's steeped in generations of knowledge about farming. Let us take advantage of this opportunity to absorb the rural wisdom gained from his own father and grandfather and great-grandfather and great-great—

*(Zap sound. Blackout. Lights come up on the ENGLISH MYSTERY. CLIFFORD, COL. HARDWICKE, and REV. SMYTHE are standing and chatting.)*

COL. HARDWICKE. First-rate dinner. Can't beat English peas.

REV. SMYTHE. Though where one could find English peas in December is a mystery worthy of Inspector Swift himself.

*(Clap of thunder. BEETON enters.)*

CLIFFORD. Cigars, Beeton. And brandy. Bring us the best the house has to offer.

BEETON. Very good, sir. (*Exits.*)

COL. HARDWICKE. This should be something well worth sipping.

CLIFFORD. And why not? "Let us eat and drink, for tomorrow we shall die."

REV. SMYTHE. (*Looking out window.*) Still coming down hard.

CLIFFORD. How many days has it been raining here?

REV. SMYTHE. Three, isn't it?

COL. HARDWICKE. Four, actually.

CLIFFORD. Hmmm. Thirty-six to go.

REV. SMYTHE. (*Pause.*) Are you suggesting—the forty days and nights?

CLIFFORD. The timing is apt. Let's be honest, Reverend.

Our species has made an absolute mess of things. Why not wipe us all out and start over?

COL. HARDWICKE. Clifford, really.

REV. SMYTHE. But God loves his children.

CLIFFORD. He's got a bloody strange way of showing it. Letting us gas and bayonet and bombard each other, living in mud and filth, smelling the rotting bodies that can't be retrieved for fear of machine-gun fire. (*To COL. HARDWICKE.*) This isn't potting natives in India, Colonel. Not one of you has been to the front! Nor Inspector Swift either, with his putrid optimism. (*BEEETON enters empty-handed, looking shaken.*) Where is Swift, come to think of it? And Beeton, where are the bloody brandy and cigars?

BEEETON. Please forgive me, sir. But Inspector Swift—Inspector Swift, sir, is dead.

(*Clap of thunder. CLIFFORD covers at the sound.*)

COL. HARDWICKE. Dead? Is this some sort of joke?

REV. SMYTHE. Lord protect us.

CLIFFORD. (*To BEEETON.*) Speak, man.

BEEETON. After dining, he used the telephone in the study, sir,

to make an urgent call, so he said. When I knocked, so as to fetch the cigars, there was no answer. I knocked again, then finally looked in. And there he was, slumped on the floor. When I checked his pulse . . . (*He trails off.*)

COL. HARDWICKE. Our foremost detective—himself the victim of murder.

REV. SMYTHE. Murder? We have no knowledge that it was murder.

(*All turn in unison to face COL. HARDWICKE.*)

COL. HARDWICKE. Quite right. Dashed hasty of me. Been reading too many mystery novels of late. (*He forces a laugh.*) Let's have a look at the body. My wife was a nurse. Perhaps there's still hope.

(*ALL exit. Zap sound. Blackout. Lights come up on RICHARD III, act I, midway in scene 2. GLOUCESTER and LADY ANNE face each other across the corpse of King Henry VI—the same male corpse from the AVANT-GARDE PLAY but now with a crown on its head and lying on the couch. GLOUCESTER wears a dagger-bearing scabbard.*)

GLOUCESTER. I did not kill your husband.

LADY ANNE. Why, then he is alive.

GLOUCESTER. Nay, he is dead; and slain by—

*(The phone rings. GLOUCESTER whirls and glares into the wings. It rings again. He whips out his dagger and brings it down onto the telephone table, severing the cord. He lifts up the phone, crosses the room, triumphantly drops it into the wastebasket, and returns.)*

GLOUCESTER. He is dead; and slain by Edward's hand.

LADY ANNE. In thy foul throat thou liest: Queen Margaret  
saw

Thy murderous falchion smoking in his blood;

The which thou once didst bend against her breast,

But that thy brothers—

*(Zap sound. Lights out briefly, then back on. MAN and WOMAN from the AVANT-GARDE PLAY have partially made their entrance. The Shakespearians are still in place. LADY ANNE looks in dismay at GLOUCESTER, then both stare accusingly at the audience. GLOUCESTER sighs, snatches the crown off the corpse's head, and disgustedly rolls the corpse from the couch to the floor with a thud as he and LADY ANNE exit. MAN and WOMAN take their places. WOMAN erases a word in her crossword puzzle. MAN reads a newspaper. After a time, he turns the page. WOMAN gently clears her throat, but no words follow. Zap sound. Blackout. Lights come up on the SOUTHERN PLAY, as before.)*

AARON. *(Continuing his litany of complaints.)* Aunt Cordelia's in the asylum in Tupelo, hoarding the sugar cubes from the dining room and giving 'em to all the young doctors she tries to seduce.

*(Sound of train whistle. CAROLINE drains the last sip of whiskey from her glass and regards it.)*

CAROLINE. Mighty fine breakfast. What's for dinner?

AARON. Everyone's waiting for Grandmammy to die, to hear the twenty-seventh revision to her will—

CAROLINE. Lawyer was here again yesterday.

REGINALD. Twenty-eighth.

AARON. Everyone cozying up to her in the most repulsive fashion, in hopes of getting River Oaks, her twenty-thousand-acre estate—

*(LUKE enters. He's thirty and wildly energetic, caroming around the room, picking up and putting down objects, chuckling to himself—the very opposite of the character Aaron describes. All stare at him in bafflement.)*

AARON. While everyone knows that my stepbrother Luke, here—who's hardly left his room for years, just hunched up in the closet, in the dark, hardly speaking—