

HE WHO GETS SLAPPED

by LEONID ANDREYEV

adapted by WALTER WYKES

CHARACTERS

PAULIE, a clown

WALLY, a clown

PAPA BRIQUET, manager of the circus

COUNT MANCINI, an aristocrat

XENA, a lion tamer

HE, a clown

JACKSON, a clown

CONSUELO, a bareback rider

BEZANO, a bareback rider

BARON REGNARD, an aristocrat

A GENTLEMAN

USHER #1

USHER #2

USHER #3

OTHER PERFORMERS

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HE WHO GETS SLAPPED

ACT I

[A circus. Backstage. Posters everywhere. Enter PAULIE and WALLY, two clowns marching and playing kazoos.]

Stop! PAULIE

What? WALLY

You're off! PAULIE

I'm off? WALLY

Yes! PAULIE

I'm not off! You're off! WALLY

I'm off?! PAULIE

That's right. WALLY

How can I be off—it's my song! PAULIE

But you keep changing it! WALLY

No! PAULIE

WALLY
Yes!

PAULIE
No! Listen!

[He stands close to WALLY and plays into his face. When he is finished, WALLY shrugs.]

WALLY
From the top?

PAULIE
From the top!

[As the clowns resume their march, PAPA BRIQUET storms toward them. The ringmaster and manager of the circus, he is red in the face.]

PAPA BRIQUET
You make me sick!
[The clowns freeze, astonished.]

WALLY
What did we do?

PAULIE
We're just rehearsing.

WALLY
March of the ants.

PAPA BRIQUET
Not you! Him!
[Enter COUNT MANCINI. He carries himself with an aristocratic air, and, when he laughs, his thin sharp face takes on a marked resemblance to a satyr.]

MANCINI
I beg your pardon?
[PAULIE and WALLY quietly retreat.]

PAPA BRIQUET

You heard me! You stick your nose where it doesn't belong and provoke the artists while they're trying to work! Someday you'll get a beating, and I promise you, I won't interfere!

MANCINI

You can't really expect a man of my station to treat the performers as equals. I speak with *you* quite familiarly—what more do you expect?

PAPA BRIQUET

Now you're really asking for it!

MANCINI

And if they did attack me—

[He produces a derringer from the handle of his cane and aims it at PAPA BRIQUET.]

Useful little thing.

PAPA BRIQUET

Put that gun away.

MANCINI

By the way, you wouldn't believe the little treasure I dug up on the subway yesterday. What a beauty! Eyes like sunshine and legs that—

[He laughs.]

Well, I know you don't approve of such sport. Look, give me a hundred dollars, and I'll relieve you of my unpleasant company.

PAPA BRIQUET

Not a dime.

MANCINI

All right, Briquet. You leave me no choice. I'll have to take Consuelo.

PAPA BRIQUET

Your daily threat!

MANCINI

What would you do in my position? You know I have to keep up appearances. Family reputation and all that. Is it my fault I've had a run of bad luck that's forced me to make my daughter a bareback rider in your silly circus? We can't be allowed to starve! Fifty dollars.

PAPA BRIQUET

I won't contribute to your depravities.

MANCINI

My depravities?

PAPA BRIQUET

You're a predator! You chase young girls half your age!

MANCINI

They know what they're doing.

PAPA BRIQUET

They don't have any choice! They're desperate for their next meal!

MANCINI

Which I'm happy to provide.

PAPA BRIQUET

You prey on their unfortunate circumstances! And just because they consent to your perverted little games doesn't mean you're free and clear! Mark my words, Mancini—you'll end up in jail one of these days!

MANCINI

Jail? Don't be ridiculous! I have to uphold the family name—don't I? The Mancinis are known for their love of young girls! It's a family tradition! Is it my fault I have to pay for what my ancestors got free of charge? I don't drink, I stopped playing cards after that unfortunate incident with the police—there's no reason to laugh—now if I give up girls, what will be left of Mancini?! A coat of arms?! Fifty dollars, and I'm on my way.

PAPA BRIQUET

I told you no.

[Enter XENA, a lion tamer.]

MANCINI

Madame Xena!

[He takes her hand and kneels.]

This barbarian may murder me in my sleep, but I cannot suppress my feelings for you one moment longer! You are a goddess! A queen among women! Come away with me! Leave this brute to his clowns and his jugglers! He can never appreciate your radiant beauty!

XENA
And you can?

MANCINI
I am an expert in such matters.

XENA
[To PAPA BRIQUET.]
Money?

PAPA BRIQUET
Yes.

XENA
Don't give him any.

MANCINI
Ah! Such cruelty from one so beautiful—it isn't natural. I'm not one of your beasts to be whipped before the crowd!

XENA
Jackson tells me you've hired a tutor for Consuelo. What for?

MANCINI
What for?! She's the daughter of a Count! Shouldn't she have the finest education?

PAPA BRIQUET
If I were the government, I'd forbid all artists to read books. It ruins them.

XENA
I like a good book every now and then.

PAPA BRIQUET
I'm not talking about the kind of books you read.

MANCINI
You surprise me, Briquet. Are you really an enemy of enlightenment?

PAPA BRIQUET
Why not? What has education ever done for anybody? It just makes them restless!

MANCINI

How do you expect improvement without education?

PAPA BRIQUET

I don't expect anything. You're an educated man, Mancini. You've read all the important books. What has it taught you—how to strip young girls of their dignity? How to live like a parasite off your own daughter?

MANCINI

I resent that remark. I would do anything for Consuelo. In fact, I have a little something in the works right now.

XENA

The Baron, you mean?

PAPA BRIQUET

Don't get any ideas. Remember—I have her under contract.

MANCINI

Such base formalities.

XENA

Give him ten dollars and make him go away.

MANCINI

Ten! Never! Twenty at least! I simply can't do with any less—even the dirtiest street urchin costs that much.

XENA

Disgusting.

PAPA BRIQUET

[Gives MANCINI a twenty dollar bill.]

Here. Get out of my sight.

MANCINI

Much obliged.

[Enter PAULIE and WALLY.]

PAULIE

Papa Briquet—

WALLY
—there’s someone here to see you.

PAULIE
I think he’s drunk.

WALLY
Drunk or crazy.

PAPA BRIQUET
What does he want?

PAULIE
[Shrugs.]
Didn’t say.

WALLY
But he looks important.

PAULIE
Looks loaded.

PAPA BRIQUET
Loaded as in booze—or money?

PAULIE
Both.

WALLY
And a little crazy to boot.

PAPA BRIQUET
Send him back.

*[PAULIE and WALLY exit. PAPA BRIQUET turns to
MANCINI.]*
Why are you still here?

MANCINI
I want to see your mysterious guest.

XENA
The red lion’s nervous today.

What?
PAPA BRIQUET

The red lion. He's restless.
XENA

What do you want me to do?
PAPA BRIQUET

I'm just telling you.
XENA

I don't like that damn animal. He's too unpredictable.
PAPA BRIQUET

Do you want me to cut him?
XENA

No. He's the best part of your act.
PAPA BRIQUET
[Enter a STRANGER in formal attire, escorted by the two clowns.]

Excuse me ... are you the manager?
STRANGER

Papa Briquet. What can I do for you?
PAPA BRIQUET

And these are your artists?
STRANGER
[Indicating XENA and MANCINI.]

No, no! I'm Count Mancini.
MANCINI
[Laughs.]

Count?
STRANGER

That's right. And who might you be?
MANCINI

STRANGER

Well ... I'm not really sure yet. I mean, I haven't chosen a name. I thought you might offer some advice. I have a few ideas, but they don't have the right ring—too literary, you know.

PAPA BRIQUET

Too literary?

STRANGER

Yes. Too sophisticated. I'm looking for something ... I don't know ... a little more straightforward.

[Indicating PAULIE and WALLY.]

Are these your clowns?

PAPA BRIQUET

That would seem obvious.

STRANGER

[To PAULIE and WALLY.]

And what are your names?

PAULIE

I'm Paulie.

WALLY

And I'm Wally.

STRANGER

[Smiles.]

They rhyme! Your names, I mean.

XENA

He's a quick one.

PAPA BRIQUET

What exactly can I do for you? Are you looking to rent the place out? A special engagement maybe?

STRANGER

Oh, no—it's not what you can do for me, but what I can do for you!

PAPA BRIQUET

And what can you do for me?

STRANGER

I want to be one of your performers!

PAPA BRIQUET

One of my performers?

STRANGER

Yes!

PAPA BRIQUET

Are you drunk?

STRANGER

I don't drink.

PAULIE

Not at all?

WALLY

Not even a little bit?

STRANGER

No.

PAPA BRIQUET

Are you crazy?

STRANGER

[Laughs.]

Perhaps. Nevertheless, I would like to be a performer.

PAPA BRIQUET

Do you have any experience?

STRANGER

What do you mean?

PAPA BRIQUET

Experience. In the circus.

STRANGER

Well ...

MANCINI

You look like a society man.

STRANGER

Unfortunately, yes. But I'd like to be a clown.

MANCINI

[Laughs.]

A clown!

PAULIE

What's so funny?

WALLY

Yeah—what's wrong with being a clown?!

MANCINI

He's joking! He's obviously pulling your leg! Is there a hidden camera?

STRANGER

This is no joke. I'm very serious.

PAPA BRIQUET

But what can you do? Do you have any skills?

STRANGER

[Laughs.]

No! None! Isn't that funny! I can't do anything!

WALLY

That is funny.

PAULIE

He's got something there.

PAPA BRIQUET

I'm afraid all our positions are filled.

STRANGER

There must be something I could do! We can invent something! Maybe a nice little speech on politics or religion! Something like a ... a debate among clowns!

Is he joking?
WALLY

Sounds hilarious.
MANCINI

Get Jackson.
PAPA BRIQUET

Jackson! Jackson!
PAULIE AND WALLY
[Enter JACKSON, another clown.]

This is Jackson. Our most famous clown.
PAPA BRIQUET

Oh! It's a pleasure to finally meet you! Really! You're a genius! A real genius!
STRANGER
[Shaking JACKSON'S hand.]

I like him.
JACKSON

I've watched you perform! So many nights!
STRANGER

He wants to be a clown.
PAPA BRIQUET

A clown?
JACKSON

Yes!
STRANGER

What do you think?
PAPA BRIQUET

JACKSON

Well, let me take a look.

[The STRANGER excitedly removes his coat and prepares for the examination.]

Hmmm ... turn around. That's it. Now smile. Wider. Broader. Do you call that a smile? Big! That's more like it. I don't suppose you can do a cartwheel.

STRANGER

[Sighs.]

No.

JACKSON

Somersault?

STRANGER

I'm afraid not.

JACKSON

How old are you?

STRANGER

Thirty-nine. Too late?

[JACKSON moves away with a whistle. Silence.]

XENA

Take him.

PAPA BRIQUET

What?! What the hell do you think I'm going to do with him?! He can't even do a somersault! Besides, he's drunk!

STRANGER

Honestly, I'm not.

[Enter CONSUELO and BEZANO, two bareback riders.]

CONSUELO

Daddy!

[She kisses MANCINI on the cheek.]

Are you staying for the show?

MANCINI

No, not tonight—I've been watching the show backstage.

[To the STRANGER.]

This is my daughter, Countess Veronica. But her stage name is—

STRANGER

Consuelo! Yes, I know! I've enjoyed her work! It's marvelous! Really amazing!

CONSUELO

There's nothing to it, really.

MANCINI

Oh, don't be so modest. She is remarkable. Everyone says so. In fact, don't you think she's due for a raise, Briquet?

PAPA BRIQUET

Don't start.

STRANGER

Everyone here is so interesting! I really would like to stay! There must be something I could do ... something unique ... something that doesn't require any real talent ...

[He thinks.]

I've got it!

WALLY

He's got it!

STRANGER

I shall be he who gets slapped!

[General laughter.]

You see! I made you laugh!

JACKSON

"He Who Gets Slapped." That's not bad.

XENA

I like it. Straightforward. Not too literary.

[JACKSON suddenly steps forward and gives a circus slap to the STRANGER who is somewhat startled.]

HE

[Rubbing his cheek.]

What was that?

JACKSON

He Who Gets Slapped. That's the bit, right?

[The others laugh.]

HE

How funny ... it didn't really hurt at all ... although my cheek burns a little.

WALLY

He says he'd like another.

[JACKSON gives HE another slap. More laughter. This time, HE laughs along with the others.]

JACKSON

[To PAPA BRIQUET.]

Take him. I think we can do something with him after all.

PAPA BRIQUET

All right, but he's your responsibility.

WALLY

Congratulations!

PAULIE

Welcome to the circus!

[WALLY and PAULIE march around HE, playing their kazoos.]

HE

Thank you! Thank you!

JACKSON

Do you like music? I can teach you how to play a Beethoven sonata on a broom, or Mozart on a bottle?

HE

I'm not very good with music, but I'd love to learn. A clown! My childhood dream! When all my friends were thinking of sports and literature and science—I dreamed of clowns. Beethoven on a broom! Mozart on a bottle! This is what I've wanted all my life! Oh! I need a costume!

JACKSON

Yes, a costume must be chosen very carefully. Have you seen my Sun here?

[He displays a sun emblazoned on his posterior.]

It took me two years to come up with this.

HE

It's wonderful. I'll start thinking right away.

MANCINI

Well, this has been thoroughly entertaining, but I'm afraid I have a pressing engagement that I simply cannot miss. Goodbye.

[MANCINI exits, followed by PAULIE and WALLY playing a funeral march on their kazoos. HE and JACKSON laugh.]

BEZANO

[To CONSUELO.]

We'd better get back to work.

CONSUELO

All right.

[To HE.]

Congratulations.

[Exit BEZANO and CONSUELO.]

JACKSON

Give that costume some thought, HE. I'll think it over, too. Be here at ten o'clock tomorrow morning. And don't be late, or you'll get another slap!

[He laughs. Exit JACKSON.]

PAPA BRIQUET

Well, I suppose we should talk money then.

HE

Oh, you don't have to pay me. I've got enough money.

PAPA BRIQUET

He does have potential!

[To XENA.]

Draw up the contract! Get that in writing!

XENA

[Producing an official-looking book.]

We have to put down the names of all our performers, you know—government regulations. Just in case of an accident. So ... what's yours?

HE

[Smiling.]

HE. I just chose it—didn't you hear?

XENA

No, your real name. Do you have a passport?

HE

A passport? No. I mean, yes, but ... I had no idea the rules would be strictly enforced here. What do you need my name for?

[XENA and PAPA BRIQUET exchange a glance.]

PAPA BRIQUET

Is there some reason you don't want to give us your name?

HE

Yes. There is.

PAPA BRIQUET

Then we can't take you. I'm sorry.

XENA

We don't want any trouble with the police.

PAPA BRIQUET

You might get hurt or kill yourself doing something stupid. Personally, I don't care. A corpse is just a corpse. It's up to God and the Devil to sort out. But the police—they're curious. They want names.

HE

I ... I thought here, of all places, I could lose my past.

PAPA BRIQUET

Something to hide, eh?

HE

Can't you just pretend I have no name? That I've lost it—like I might lose my hat or a shoe? Or let someone else take it by mistake? When a stray dog shows up at the door, you don't ask his name—you just give him another. Let me be that dog.

[Laughs.]

HE—the dog!

XENA

Why don't you just tell us your name—just the two of us. Nobody else needs to know.

PAPA BRIQUET

Unless you happen to break your neck.

[HE hesitates.]

XENA

Whatever your secret—it's safe with us.

[Pause.]

HE

All right.

[HE produces a passport. XENA takes it and looks it over. Surprised, she passes it on to PAPA BRIQUET.]

PAPA BRIQUET

Is this really true? Are you really—

HE

Please ... this person no longer exists. It's just a name—a check for an old hat. Forget it, as I have. I am He Who Gets Slapped—nothing more.

[Pause.]

PAPA BRIQUET

Are you sure you're not drunk?

XENA

It's his business. Leave him alone.

PAPA BRIQUET

[Shrugs.]

You're a strange man, HE. But who am I to question? All right, come on. I'll show you the dressing room.

HE

Thank you. I'm so happy. I really feel like I belong here. But it still seems like a dream. I won't believe it until I feel the sawdust under my feet—until I stand in the ring where I will get my slaps!

XENA

Send Bezano in, will you? I need to settle an account with him.

[HE and PAPA BRIQUET exit. XENA studies her book. After a moment, BEZANO appears in the doorway.]

BEZANO

You wanted to see me?

XENA

Sit.

BEZANO

I'm in the middle of a rehearsal.

XENA

With Consuelo?

BEZANO

Yeah.

XENA

Do you love her?

BEZANO

What?

XENA

Are you in love with the little witch?

[Pause.]

BEZANO

No.

XENA

No?

BEZANO

I don't love anybody. How can I? Who am I? An acrobat. A bareback rider. She's the daughter of a count. He could take her away tomorrow.

XENA

He will, you know. One of these days.

BEZANO

I know.

XENA

He's trying to marry her off to a rich baron.

BEZANO

Have you seen the man? He's a pig.

XENA

And what about me? Do you love me, Bezano?

BEZANO

No. I told you before.

XENA

Still no? Not even a little?

BEZANO

[Pauses.]

How could I love you? I'm afraid of you.

XENA

Am I really so terrifying? Am I such a monster?

BEZANO

You're beautiful. Almost as beautiful as Consuelo.

XENA

Almost?

BEZANO

But I don't like your eyes. They command me to love you—and I don't like to take orders.

XENA

Do I command? Or do I only implore?

BEZANO

You look at me like you look at your lions.

XENA

My red lion loves me—

BEZANO

If he loves you, why is he so restless?

XENA

Yesterday, he licked my hand like a dog.

BEZANO

Do you want me to lick your hand too—like a dog?

XENA

No. I want to lick your hand. Give it to me.

[She takes BEZANO'S hand—tries to put it in her mouth.]

BEZANO

Stop!

[HE appears in the doorway.]

XENA

Why do you torture me like this, Bezano? You know I love you.

BEZANO

Let go of me! Stop it! Let go!

[As BEZANO pulls away, they become aware of HE standing in the doorway. There is an awkward pause. BEZANO rushes out of the room. Silence.]

HE

I'm sorry. I ... I forgot my coat.

[Pause.]

I didn't hear anything.

XENA

I don't care what you heard.

HE

I ... I thought you and Papa Briquet—

XENA

It's none of your business.

[HE turns to go.]

Look at me, HE. Look at my body. My legs. My face. My breasts. Now, tell me—what do you think of a man who would turn all this down?

HE

I ... I really don't know.

XENA

Is he really a man, or just a stupid beast?

HE

I'm not sure I understand.

XENA

Oh, HE ... what can I do to make my lions love me?

* * *

ACT II

[CONSUELO and BARON REGNARD sit backstage. She wears her stage costume. He wears a tuxedo. The sound of the evening performance can be heard in the background—laughter, shrieks, music, and applause.]

CONSUELO

It was nice of you to come tonight, Baron.

BARON

I didn't have much choice. Your father made it very clear that if I didn't come he would transfer the invitation to a certain Marquis Justi.

CONSUELO

Oh, he's only trying to make you jealous. I've heard him speak of the Marquis, but I've never even seen him.

BARON

He's a very rich man. And your father is very clever.

CONSUELO

Why do you say that?

[Pause.]

BARON

Did you like the jewels I sent?

CONSUELO

They were beautiful.

BARON

Then why did you return them?

CONSUELO

Father made me. I didn't want to. I even cried a little.

BARON

It was clever of him to return them. He's positioning himself for a bigger prize.

CONSUELO

But they were so beautiful—your jewels.

BARON

Not as beautiful as you, Consuelo.

CONSUELO

You're going to make me blush.

BARON

Everyone is in love with you, you know. They all want to kiss that pretty little mouth of yours.

CONSUELO

Do you want to kiss my pretty little mouth, Baron?

BARON

I'd like to do more than that.

CONSUELO

Well ... talk it over with father.

BARON

Your father won't be satisfied unless I marry you. And I can't do that.

CONSUELO

Why not? Isn't that what this is all about?

BARON

Don't be absurd. I couldn't possibly.

CONSUELO

Then why are you here?

BARON

I love you, Consuelo!

CONSUELO

But you just said—

BARON

I can't marry you, but I still want you!

Are you suggesting—
CONSUELO

Yes!
BARON

I'm not your plaything, Baron—a toy to do with as you please.
CONSUELO

And if I were that other acrobat—what's his name? Bezano? Would you refuse me then?
BARON

Bezano's all right, but he's more interested in his horses than he is in me. Still, HE says that Bezano and I are the most beautiful couple in the world. HE calls us Adam and Eve.
CONSUELO

Who is this HE?
BARON

The new clown.
CONSUELO

Ahh, yes.
BARON

He's so funny! He got fifty-two slaps yesterday! We counted them. Imagine, fifty-two slaps!
CONSUELO

I don't like him. I've seen the way he looks at you.
BARON

Oh, don't be ridiculous. HE only likes to talk. Half the time I don't know what he's talking about. It's almost as if he was drunk.
CONSUELO

I'm drunk! With love!
BARON

But if you won't marry—
CONSUELO

BARON

What if I shoot myself? Would you believe I love you then?

CONSUELO

Only if you leave a tragic note behind proclaiming your eternal devotion and calling me all kinds of pretty names.

BARON

Consuelo, you little minx, it's unbearable! I've had hundreds of women—beautiful women, every which way! But I never saw them! You are the first woman I have ever seen! Let me kiss you!

CONSUELO

No.

[The BARON grabs her roughly.]

BARON

Consuelo—

CONSUELO

Don't. Get up. Let go of my hand!

BARON

Consuelo!

CONSUELO

Get up! It's disgusting! You're so fat!

[The BARON pulls away from her, his face red. Voices are heard approaching. The clowns enter, talking excitedly. HE leads them in his new costume and painted face.]

WALLY

A hundred slaps!

PAULIE

Bravo, HE!

JACKSON

Not bad! Not bad at all!

WALLY

He was the professor today, and we were the students. Here goes another!

[WALLY gives HE a clown's slap. HE feigns surprise. Laughter. Everyone pats HE on the back. BEZANO rushes in, looking around anxiously.]

BEZANO

Consuelo! We're on!

[CONSUELO rushes out with BEZANO. MANCINI enters and makes his way towards the BARON.]

MANCINI

What a success! How the crowd loves slaps!

[Whispering.]

Your knees are dusty, Baron. Brush them off. The floor is dirty in here.

[The BARON dusts himself off and exits.]

JACKSON

I'm an old clown, HE, and I know the crowd. But today, you have eclipsed me—the clouds have covered my Sun.

[He strikes the Sun on his posterior.]

HE

But why didn't you let me finish my speech? I was just getting started.

JACKSON

The crowd doesn't want speeches! They want slaps! Believe me, I cut you off just in time!

PAPA BRIQUET

He's right. This isn't a church or a debate hall. It's a circus. You forget yourself, HE.

HE

But they loved me!

PAPA BRIQUET

You were lucky. Your performance was sloppy. A good slap must be clean—right side, left side, and done with it. They will laugh and love you. Don't muddy the effect with cheap theatrics—politics, religion, that sort of nonsense.

[A buzzer sounds.]

To the ring! To the ring!

[The clowns rush back to the stage. PAPA BRIQUET stops HE.]

Not you, HE. Take a break.

[PAPA BRIQUET exits. Silence. MANCINI produces a flask of whiskey and drinks.]

HE

Drinking tonight, Count?

MANCINI

Might as well.

HE

Trouble with one of your girls?

MANCINI

How did you know?

HE

Just a guess.

MANCINI

You should see her. Little temptress. Black hair. Eyes as dark as night. And her smile! So ... bewitching! Like the devil's bride! Like Eve, holding the apple! Her eyes sparkling! Just daring you! Laughing! Begging you to take a bite! Promising untold pleasures if you just have the courage to grasp it—to take her in your arms! How can a man be expected to resist such temptation?!

[Pause.]

You're the only one who understands me, HE. Why don't I like things which aren't forbidden? Why should I always, even at the moment of ecstasy, be reminded of some stupid law?! This passion, I'm telling you, it'll turn my hair gray and lead me to the grave—or prison.

[Pause.]

Is it really my fault if she's a few years younger than the law allows? I mean, how was I to know? Eh? Besides, it's only our society, you know, that makes it such a crime. In the old days, it was quite normal. It was expected. Everybody did it. Mary and Joseph even. She was only thirteen, you know. Nobody judges *them*. And you can't tell me she didn't know exactly what she was doing! This girl—not the virgin mother. I didn't teach her anything, if you know what I mean. But her parents don't see it that way. And they know they've got me by the throat.

[Pause.]

I can't go to jail, HE. I wouldn't last a month. I'm an intellectual—a man of refinement. The jails in this country ... they don't discriminate between men of my kind and real criminals. They'd eat me alive.

HE

Isn't there any way of settling the matter out of court?

MANCINI

Sure. Money. They want money. Which I haven't got.

HE

And the Baron won't help you?

MANCINI

The Baron knows all about my predicament! He knows he'll get what he's after, so he's looking for a bargain. Trying to drive down the price. But what can I do? I've got my head in the noose. Sooner or later, I'll be forced to give him Consuelo for a song. Twenty thousand. Maybe ten.

HE

That's quite a bargain. For him, I mean.

MANCINI

Did I say it was anything else? I don't want to do it. But if this girl's family doesn't drop the charges soon, I'll spend a good number of years in a prison cell, and I'm fairly certain I won't find anything to my liking there!

HE

Give Consuelo to the acrobat.

MANCINI

Bezano? Are you joking? He doesn't have any money. And besides, he doesn't care for her any more than the Baron does.

HE

Then give her to me.

MANCINI

To you?!

[Laughs.]

Do you have some hidden fortune? Some magic lamp that can erase my troubles?

HE

I'm not joking.

[Pause.]

MANCINI

I'll never get used to those faces. I don't care what they say, clowns aren't funny—they're scary as all hell!

HE

He won't marry her. Play it however you like. He's only looking for a little fun.

MANCINI

He'll marry her, all right. As long as she doesn't give him the milk for free.

HE

Consuelo isn't educated. Any decent housemaid has better manners.

MANCINI

What use does a woman have for education? Put her in a pretty dress and what does it matter? Consuelo is an unpolished jewel, and only a real ass doesn't notice her sparkle. Do you know what happened? I tried to polish her—

HE

Yes, you hired a tutor. What happened?

MANCINI

I got frightened. It was going too fast. Another month or two and she would have realized she didn't need me at all. So I dismissed him.

[Laughs.]

The clever old diamond merchants keep their precious stones unpolished to fool the thieves. My father taught me that.

HE

The sleep of a diamond. So ... she's only sleeping then.

[Pause.]

You're wiser than I thought, Count.

MANCINI

Do you know what blood flows through the veins of an Italian woman? The blood of Hannibal and Corsini! Of a Borgia—and of a dirty Lombardi peasant! All possibilities, all forms are included in her, as in our national sculpture! Do you understand? Strike here—and out springs a washerwoman or a cheap street whore. Strike there—but carefully and gently, and out springs a queen, a goddess, the Venus of the Capitol, who sings like a Stradivarius and makes you cry with her beauty! An Italian woman—

HE

But what kind will the Baron make of her?

MANCINI

What kind? A baroness! What else?

[HE laughs.]

Why are you laughing? I don't understand you.

[Listening.]

Why is it so quiet out there?

HE

Out there, it may be quiet. But in here—

[HE taps MANCINI'S forehead.]

—a whirlwind!

[An USHER enters with a letter.]

USHER #1

Excuse me ... Count Mancini? The Baron asked me to give you this letter.

MANCINI

[Taking the letter.]

The Baron? Where is he?

USHER #1

He left.

MANCINI

Left?

[The USHER nods.]

The devil take him! And his money!

[As MANCINI tears open the letter, the USHER turns to go.]

HE

Wait. Why is there no music? What's going on out there?

USHER #1

It's the act with Madame Xena and her lions.

[The USHER goes. MANCINI reads the BARON'S note for a second time.]

MANCINI

I can't believe it!

HE
What?

MANCINI
It's decided! He's going to marry her! He's going to marry Consuelo! My prayers have been answered! Congratulate me, HE! The Baron has swooped in with his fortune, and I'm saved!

[PAPA BRIQUET stumbles in, his face ashen.]

PAPA BRIQUET
Oh!

HE
Papa Briquet?

PAPA BRIQUET
Oh!

HE
What's wrong?

PAPA BRIQUET
I ... I can't ...

MANCINI
Has something happened? Has there been some sort of accident?

PAPA BRIQUET
I can't watch! She's insane! I think she really is! I can't watch! They'll tear her to pieces! Her lions—

MANCINI
Oh, come on, Briquet. She's always like that. What's wrong with you?

PAPA BRIQUET
No! Today she's really mad! She gone over the edge! Something's snapped. The crowd—they watch like dead people. They're not even breathing. Listen.
[They listen. Silence.]

HE
[Disturbed.]
I'll go and see.

PAPA BRIQUET

No! I don't want to know! The red lion—you should see his eyes! It's terrible!

HE

Get him something to drink.

PAPA BRIQUET

I don't want anything! Oh, if only it were over!

[Suddenly the silence breaks, like a huge stone wall crashing—shouts, wild screams—half bestial, half human—mixed with music and applause. The men sigh, relieved.]

MANCINI

There! You see! I told you it was nothing, you old fool.

[Enter XENA, alone. She looks like a madwoman, or a drunken bacchante. Her hair falls over her shoulders, disheveled. She walks unseeing, though her eyes are afire. Behind her, the other performers slowly appear, pale and silent. They watch XENA, afraid to speak—as if the slightest sound might snap her sanity.]

PAPA BRIQUET

You're crazy! You're a madwoman!

XENA

[Smiles, drunken with victory.]

Did you see? Did you?! They do love me!

JACKSON

Get her a chair.

[BEZANO fetches a chair. XENA sits.]

XENA

Did you see, Bezano? My lions love me!

[BEZANO exits without answering.]

WALLY

[To XENA.]

Do you want some music?

[He plays his kazoo.]

PAPA BRIQUET

Get away from her! She doesn't need music—she needs to go home! She needs a doctor! Come on, I'll take you.

PAULIE

You can't go, Papa—there's still your number.

PAPA BRIQUET

To hell with my number.

CONSUELO

She ... she didn't feed them today.

PAPA BRIQUET

What?

CONSUELO

She didn't feed them. The lions. I told her it was dangerous, but—

XENA

I wanted them ravenous. I wanted to test them. And I did!

PAPA BRIQUET

You are insane! They're wild animals! They could have eaten you alive!

XENA

They love me—didn't you see?

PAPA BRIQUET

Talk to her, HE. You're a man of the world. Maybe she'll listen to you.

HE

I ... I don't—

PAPA BRIQUET

Explain it to her! Who is it possible for those hairy beasts to love?!

HE

Well ... their own kind, I should think.

PAPA BRIQUET

Exactly! Their own kind! There! Do you hear!

JACKSON

Take it easy, Briquet. She isn't herself tonight.

[XENA rises, trembling now, but still maintaining her queen-like composure.]

XENA

Take me home.

PAPA BRIQUET

Fine. Let's go.

XENA

Not you. Finish the show. Mancini will take me.

PAPA BRIQUET

Mancini?

MANCINI

Of course. I would be honored, Madame Xena.

[To PAPA BRIQUET.]

Have no fear Briquet, I shall conduct her safely home.

[MANCINI guides XENA toward the door. The other performers drift slowly back to the ring. PAPA BRIQUET is the last to go, leaving only HE and CONSUELO. From the ring, music, shrieks, and laughter are again audible.]

CONSUELO

It's so sad.

HE

Why did she do it?

CONSUELO

Because she isn't happy.

HE

But to take such a chance—

CONSUELO

If one isn't happy ... maybe it's the best thing.

HE

Do you really believe that?

CONSUELO

I don't know. Maybe.

[Pause.]

HE
She's in love with Bezano?

CONSUELO
Bezano? My Bezano?

HE
Yes.

CONSUELO
But she's so old.
[HE Laughs.]
I like your costume, HE. Did you come up with it yourself?

HE
Jackson helped.

CONSUELO
Jackson is nice. All clowns are nice.

HE
I am wicked.

CONSUELO
[Laughs.]
You? You're the nicest of them all!

HE
On the outside. But on the inside ...
[HE makes a scary face. She laughs.]

CONSUELO
Are you going to watch me perform tonight?

HE
I always do.

CONSUELO
I can see you. In the wings.

HE
You're so beautiful.

CONSUELO

[Smiles.]

Little Eve?

HE

Yes. But is Little Eve happy?

CONSUELO

Sure.

HE

What if the Baron asks you to marry him—will you?

CONSUELO

Of course. I don't love him. But I'll be his honest, faithful wife. What else am I going to do—work in the circus all my life?

HE

Are those your words—"his honest, faithful wife"?

[Pause.]

CONSUELO

Who painted the laughter on your face?

HE

This? I did it myself.

CONSUELO

How do you do it—all of you? I tried once, but it was awful.

HE

I could teach you.

CONSUELO

That would be nice. Why are there no women clowns? Why is that?

HE

I don't know.

[Pause.]

Give me your hand—I want to see what it says.

CONSUELO

A palm reading? Do you know how?

HE
Of course.

CONSUELO
You're a man of many talents, HE.
[HE studies her hand.]
Will I be rich?

HE
No.

CONSUELO
No?
[Laughs.]
I'm not sure I like your palm reading!

HE
Shhh!

CONSUELO
What's wrong?

HE
The stars are talking.

CONSUELO
Oh. You're taking this very seriously.

HE
It's a serious matter. When the stars talk, you must listen. Their voices are distant and terrible.

[HE studies her hand.]
You stand at the door of Eternity, Consuelo.

CONSUELO
What does that mean? Will I live a long time?

HE
Yes. This line—see how far it goes? You will live forever.

CONSUELO
Forever?

HE
For all eternity!

CONSUELO
[Smiles.]
Now I think you're only telling me what I want to hear.

HE
No, it's written here. And here. See. You have eternal life, love, and glory—but listen closely ... you must not belong to anyone born of earth. If you marry the Baron, Consuelo, you'll die.

CONSUELO
[Laughs.]
Will he eat me?

HE
Don't laugh at the stars, Consuelo. They're far away, their rays are pale, we can barely see their sleeping shadows, but their sorcery is stern and dark. You stand at the gates of eternity. Your die is cast. You are doomed. And Bezano, who you love in your heart even though you don't know it, he can't save you. He's doomed too. He, too, is a stranger on this earth, submerged in a deep sleep—a little god who has lost himself. Forget Bezano—

CONSUELO
You're scaring me, HE. Why are you saying this?

HE
I'm trying to save you! I'm the only one who can!

CONSUELO
[Laughs.]
You?

HE
Yes! Don't laugh! Look. Here is the letter H. And the E. HE.

CONSUELO
He Who Gets Slapped? Is the whole thing written there on my palm?

HE

Yes! The stars know everything! Like the strings of a divine harp, spreading their golden rays! Like the hand of God, giving harmony, light, and love to the world! Forget the boy! I love you, Consuelo!

CONSUELO

Let go of my hand.

HE

I speak the language of your awakening! Accept your god, who was thrown down from the summit like a stone! Accept your god who fell to the earth in order to live with you in the drunkenness of joy! Of ecstasy! I love you! I—

[CONSUELO slaps HE hard across the face. He steps back.]

What was that?

CONSUELO

A slap! You forget who you are. You are He Who Gets Slapped! Some god!

[Pause.]

HE

Slap me again.

CONSUELO

What?

HE

I need it for my play. Slap!

CONSUELO

For your play?

HE

Yes.

CONSUELO

Then ... you were only playing? HE ... I'm so sorry. Why did you play so seriously that I believed you? Here, then.

[She touches his cheek with her fingertips.]

HE

You are a queen, and I am the fool who is in love with you. Didn't you know, Consuelo, that every queen has a fool, and he is always in love with her, and they always beat him for it. He Who Gets Slapped.

CONSUELO

No. I didn't know.

HE

Yes. Every queen. Beauty has her fool. Oh, how many fools she has! Her court is crowded with them, and the sound of slaps never ends, even through the night! But I never received such a sweet slap as the one given just now by my little queen.

[The USHER enters, followed by a GENTLEMAN from the audience, dressed in black, very respectable. The USHER points at HE.]

USHER #2

[To the GENTLEMAN.]

Is he the one?

GENTLEMAN

Yes, thank you.

CONSUELO

[To HE.]

You have a visitor?

HE

Apparently.

CONSUELO

I'll leave you alone, then. Thank you for cheering me up.

[HE nods. CONSUELO exits along with the USHER. Silence as the two men stare at one another.]

GENTLEMAN

Is it really you under all that makeup?

HE

There's no use pretending. You've already figured it out.

GENTLEMAN

I almost don't believe my eyes.

HE

What do you want?

GENTLEMAN
You haven't forgiven me, I see.

HE
Is she here? My wife?

GENTLEMAN
Oh, no! No. I'm all alone.

HE
Have you left her already?

GENTLEMAN
No.

[Pause.]
We have a son.
[Pause.]
After your disappearance ... when you left that insulting letter—

HE
Insulting? Are you still able to feel insults?
[Losing his patience.]
Why are you here?! What do you want?!

GENTLEMAN
There are things we need to talk over—

HE
Talk over?! Do you really believe we have anything to talk about?!

GENTLEMAN
Perhaps we should go somewhere a little more discreet. Your home?

HE
This is my home.

GENTLEMAN
Someone might interrupt us.

HE
Talk fast.

GENTLEMAN

May I sit down?

HE

No.

[Pause.]

GENTLEMAN

I've been looking for you for almost a year. But tonight ... it was a complete accident. I was in town for business. I have no friends here, so I went to the circus of all places. And here you are!

[Pause.]

Everybody thinks you're dead. I'm the only one who didn't believe it. I knew somehow. It just didn't seem possible—

HE

Your son—does he look like me?

GENTLEMAN

Why would he look like you?

HE

Widows often have children by the new husband who resemble the old one. Or did you manage to avoid that misfortune?

GENTLEMAN

He's the spitting image of his father.

HE

And your book is a big success, I hear.

GENTLEMAN

Are you trying to insult me?

HE

[Laughs.]

Touchy, touchy! Why were you trying to find me?

GENTLEMAN

My conscience—

HE

You don't have a conscience.

[Pause.]

You want to know what I think? I think you were afraid you hadn't robbed me of *everything*, so you came back for one more pass—just to make sure.

GENTLEMAN

That's ridiculous.

HE

Would you like my fool's cap with its bells?! Or is it too big for your bald head?!

GENTLEMAN

It isn't my fault if your wife—

HE

The devil take my wife!

[Silence.]

GENTLEMAN

I know you're angry. It's understandable, of course. And I'm sure my success hasn't helped matters.

[HE laughs.]

It wasn't entirely deserved. I admit that.

HE

Not entirely!

GENTLEMAN

But you were always so indifferent to fame and glory. What does it really matter if a rival finally came along who—

HE

[Another burst of laughter.]

Rival! You—a rival!

GENTLEMAN

[Growing pale.]

But my book—

HE

You dare call it that?! *Your* book?! In front of *me*?!

[Pause.]

GENTLEMAN

I'm a very unhappy man.

HE

You're a fake—that's what you are. An impostor. You talk about your book—your great success. And it's true, there isn't a newspaper or journal to be found in which *you* and *your* book aren't favorably mentioned. Everyone loves you. You're the man of the hour! Who remembers *me*? No one. I've been banished to obscurity. And the critics were glad to see me go, too. It was too much effort to extract thought from my heavy abstractions. It overworked their poor little brains. But you—the great vulgarizer! You made my thoughts comprehensible even to pigs and horses! They don't have to think anymore. They don't have to reason. You've absolved them of that. They simply read your words and spout them back like some sort of silly mantra. You dressed my Apollo in a second-hand suit, my Venus in a cheap dress, and gave my principled hero the ears of an ass! But what do you care—your career is made. No one is conscious of the theft. They applaud you wherever you go. Other writers imitate you. You'll be known as the father of an important movement. Meanwhile, I can't pick up the paper without being confronted by faces in which I recognize the traits of my own children. My literary children. The fruit of long years of devotion to my craft. Countless hours, locked away in my study, struggling to unlock the secrets of a new language, a new vernacular, stripping away conventions. And I succeeded. I finally did it! Yet, none of my children recognize me. I'm a stranger. They know only you. It isn't enough that you've stolen my wife—you've stolen my children as well! My legacy! And now you come to me because ... why? You feel *guilty*? You want my *blessing*? You want me to pat you on the back and tell you it's okay?! Fine. It's yours. It's all yours. Take it! My wife! My children! My ideas! Assume all rights! You are my lawful heir!

[Pause.]

It's funny. There was a time when I loved you ... even thought you a little gifted. You—my empty shadow.

[Pause.]

GENTLEMAN

I am your shadow. And I hate you for it.

HE

What a comedy!

GENTLEMAN

I'm respected. Famous. I have your wife, yes ... but she still loves *you*. Our favorite discussion is about your genius. She's aware of it, you see. *We* are aware of it. My son—she'll raise him to be like you. She'll mold him into your image. She'll feed him your thoughts. Even in bed, when I hold her in my arms, when I look into her eyes, we're never alone—you are always there, hovering over us like a ghost. And if I try to bury myself in my work, in my books—there you are again! Everywhere! It's always you! I'm never alone! Never myself! Even in my dreams, I find myself staring at your hateful image, looming, as if in some carnival mirror!

HE

It's beautiful— isn't it? The way things turn out. The victim proves to be the thief, and the thief complains of theft!

[Laughs.]

Listen, I was wrong. You aren't my shadow. You're only the crowd. The audience.

GENTLEMAN

I wish you really had died.

HE

Maybe I did.

[Silence.]

You have nothing to fear from me. I'm never going back. That's why you're here—yes? To make sure?

GENTLEMAN

I ... I suppose so. Yes.

HE

Then you have your answer.

[Pause.]

GENTLEMAN

You won't change your mind?

HE

No. Your secret is safe.

[Pause.]

GENTLEMAN

All right.

[Pause.]

Do you mind if ... if I visit the circus every now and then? Just to watch you—
from the crowd. I won't bother you. I'll keep my distance. I only want to
understand your transformation. Knowing you as I do, I can't believe you're here
without some sort of *idea*—some plan. But what plan? That is what intrigues me.

HE

The circus turns no one away.

GENTLEMAN

All right, then. Thank you.

[The GENTLEMAN offers his hand, but HE does not take it.]

You won't take my hand? We're parting forever.

HE

Not forever. We'll meet again in the next life—in the Kingdom of Heaven. I trust
you'll be there as well?

GENTLEMAN

[Hesitates.]

I hope so.

[The GENTLEMAN goes, leaving HE alone.]

* * *

ACT III

[HE sits alone, motionless. Enter PAULIE and WALLY, playing their kazoos.]

PAULIE

Ah! Morning, HE.

WALLY

We were just rehearsing. For the benefit.

PAULIE

Wally has about as much rhythm as an elephant.

WALLY

I resemble that remark!

HE

Are you preparing something special?

PAULIE

No. The usual.

WALLY

If we'd had more time. But it all happened so fast. You do know it's her last night?

PAULIE

Of course he knows it's her last night. Would she be getting a benefit otherwise?

WALLY

What about you, HE—preparing something special?

HE

Yes.

WALLY

What is it?

HE

You'll have to wait and see.

MANCINI

[Entering.]

There! A true showman! He doesn't give away all his secrets beforehand!

WALLY

[With a look at MANCINI.]

Come on, Paulie. Let's rehearse.

PAULIE

Remember—don't dance like an elephant this time. You're an ant!

[WALLY and PAULIE go off, playing.]

MANCINI

I can hardly believe it, HE! We're finally escaping this second-rate circus! And a benefit performance to boot! No more Papa Briquet! No more stupid posters or silly clowns! No offense.

HE

None taken.

MANCINI

Things are finally taking a turn for the better.

HE

How does Consuelo feel about it?

MANCINI

How should she feel? She'll be the wife of an important man. She'll attend receptions, have butlers—

HE

And the girl?

MANCINI

What girl?

[Off HE'S look.]

Oh—that. It's taken care of. For a small sum, her parents have agreed to drop all charges. The Baron will pay them off after the ceremony.

HE

Then you've managed to wriggle out of your little predicament.

MANCINI

One of the many benefits of wealth—you can get away with anything.

[MANCINI laughs. Enter PAPA BRIQUET.]

Ah! Papa Briquet! I wanted to thank you for this evening's benefit.

PAPA BRIQUET

Don't thank me. It was Xena's idea. If it were up to me, you'd get nothing.

MANCINI

I'm sure your exaggerating.

PAPA BRIQUET

I love Consuelo like a daughter, Mancini. Here she has an honest job, wonderful comrades—what more could she ask for?

MANCINI

I asked you to increase her salary, Briquet. If you'd been more reasonable—

PAPA BRIQUET

Shut up.

[Enter CONSUELO in tears.]

CONSUELO

Daddy!

MANCINI

Consuelo?

HE

What's wrong?

CONSUELO

I can't, Daddy! Tell him! He has no right to yell at me!

MANCINI

Who?

CONSUELO

Bezano! He threatened to hit me with his whip!

PAPA BRIQUET

What?!

CONSUELO

I can't work under these conditions!

MANCINI

What kind of operation are you running here, Briquet!

PAPA BRIQUET

Where is he?

CONSUELO

With the horses.

PAPA BRIQUET

I'll talk to him! Threaten to hit you, will he?!

[Exit PAPA BRIQUET.]

HE

Did he really threaten you?

CONSUELO

Yes.

HE

He's only jealous, you know.

MANCINI

That's no excuse.

HE

He doesn't want you to go.

CONSUELO

Well, he should have said something before now! It's a little late!

MANCINI

Are you all right, child? You seem different today.

CONSUELO

It's nothing. I'm just ... I'm going to miss this place. Everyone. Even Bezano. You should have heard the things he said.

MANCINI

You'll get over it, believe me.

CONSUELO

The Baron promised to make a ring for me to gallop in and buy me the finest horse. Do you think he really means it?

MANCINI

Of course. Barons do not lie.

CONSUELO

I think it will be nice to have money. You can do what you want then.

MANCINI

Exactly!

CONSUELO

But he scares me sometimes. The way he looks at me. Like a spider. Like I'm his fly. You should hear the way he talks. Bezano never talks like that.

MANCINI

Bezano! Bezano is a child—he doesn't dare talk to you like that! The Baron is a real man! You must learn to accept it!

CONSUELO

Why?

MANCINI

All men are like that, child.

CONSUELO

I don't like your advice. You think everyone is as dirty as you.

MANCINI

They are.

HE

Not HE.

MANCINI

Pfff!

CONSUELO

You love me—don't you, HE?

HE

I do, my Queen. I am your fool.

CONSUELO

And when I leave, will you find another queen?

HE

No, I will follow you. I will carry the train of your dress and wipe away your tears.

MANCINI

Idiot!

[Laughs.]

You don't know how sorry I am, HE, that I don't live in the days of my ancestors when we had scores of motley fools to kick and slap around. Now, Mancini is compelled to go to this dirty circus to find a good fool—and then, whose fool is he? Mine? No. He belongs to everyone who pays a few dollars.

HE

We are the servants of those who pay.

MANCINI

A sorry state of affairs. Imagine, HE—we are in my castle, I near the fireplace with my glass of wine, you chattering nonsense at my feet, jingling your little bells, diverting me. Then, after a while, I get sick of you and want another fool, so I give you a good kick ... Ah, HE, how wonderful it would be!

HE

It would be marvelous, Mancini! And when the Count tires of my chattering, I will lie down at the feet of my queen!

MANCINI

Of course, I'd throw you a gold coin every now and then to keep you happy. Well, when I become rich, I'll hire you. It's settled.

[Checks his watch.]

Good lord! It's getting late! I still need to meet with the Baron—we have a few details still to discuss.

[Exit MANCINI.]

CONSUELO

HE, come and lie down at my feet and tell me something cheerful. I'm in a mood.

HE

Are you going to marry the Baron?

CONSUELO

It looks that way.

HE

Do you remember my prediction?

CONSUELO

What prediction?

HE

That if you marry the Baron ...

CONSUELO

Oh—that. But you were just making fun.

HE

Sometimes one makes fun, and it turns out to be true.

CONSUELO

[Laughs.]

Well, I guess I'll have to take my chances.

HE

And if you die?

CONSUELO

What is death, really?

HE

Nobody knows. Like love! Nobody knows. But your little hands will grow cold, and your little eyes will close ... the music will play without you, and without you Bezano will gallop around the ring, Paulie and Wally will play their kazoos, and Madame Xena will try to make the red lion love her ...

CONSUELO

I'm so sad.

HE

Are you crying?

CONSUELO

A little. Why did Bezano yell at me? Is it my fault if I couldn't do anything today?

HE

He loves you, as I love you—only he doesn't know it yet.

CONSUELO

There's something here.

[She presses a hand against her heart.]

I must be sick. It hurts.

HE

It's not sickness. It's the charm of the stars, Consuelo. It's the voice of your fate.

CONSUELO

Don't talk nonsense. Not today. The stars don't care about me. I'm so small.

HE

You're bigger than you imagine.

CONSUELO

No. I'm nothing.

[Pause.]

Tell me another story—about the blue sea and those gods, you know ... who are so beautiful.

HE

Don't go to the Baron.

CONSUELO

Why not?

HE

I don't want you to. I won't allow it.

CONSUELO

Who should I marry then—you?

[She laughs.]

Are you crazy? "I won't allow it." HE! HE will not allow me! What business is it of yours?

HE

I only want you to be happy.
[Pause.]

CONSUELO

I was happy once. I don't remember any details of my childhood—only a feeling ... there was the sea ... and something ... strange faces ...
[She closes her eyes.]

HE

Remember, Consuelo.

CONSUELO

No.

[Opening her eyes.]

It's gone. Everything. I have no early memories of my father. Isn't that strange? Not one. Only a feeling.

[BEZANO appears, confused.]

Bezano! What do you want?

BEZANO

I ... I came to apologize.

CONSUELO

For what?

BEZANO

The way I acted. Before.

CONSUELO

Are you really sorry—or are you only apologizing because they made you?

BEZANO

I don't know why I got so angry. I'm confused. It's your last performance. I ... I wanted it to be perfect.

[Pause.]

Do you forgive me?

CONSUELO

[Smiles.]

Of course. Silly boy!

HE

Look at the two of you! Wait—stand there a moment! Yes! Just like that!

CONSUELO
Like Adam and Eve?
[She laughs.]

BEZANO
We should get back to work.

CONSUELO
Let me change my shoes.
[She exits. Silence.]

HE
Do you love her, Bezano?

BEZANO
What?

HE
Do you love her? Our little Consuelo.
[Pause.]

BEZANO
It's none of your business. I don't know you. You came off the street. Why should I trust you?

HE
You don't know me, but you know the Baron well enough. Listen. It's hard for me to say this—she loves you. Save her from the spider. Or don't you see the web he is weaving? Get out of this vicious circle. Take her away! Steal her! Whatever it takes! Kill her if you have to—take her to heaven or the devil! But don't give her to this man!

BEZANO
Kill her?

HE
Or him! Kill the Baron!

BEZANO
And who will kill those who come after him?

HE
She loves you.

BEZANO

Did she tell you that herself?

HE

What a stupid little god you are! But you *are* a god! Why can't you see it? Go to her! You belong together!

BEZANO

You really are a fool! Present your own face for slaps if you like, but leave mine out of it.

HE

Bezano!

BEZANO

I don't want to hear any more of this! I'm not a god. I'm an acrobat.

[BEZANO goes out angrily. HE is alone. With a tortured expression, he throws his head back and begins to laugh—soundlessly at first, then louder. After a moment MANCINI enters with the BARON.]

MANCINI

HE! What a cheerful fellow! Laughing even when he's alone! How many slaps will you get today, HE? Will they ring you like a gong? A funny profession— isn't it, Baron?

BARON

Very strange. Where is the Countess?

MANCINI

I'll find her. You wait here. HE, would you be so kind as to entertain our guest? You won't be bored in his company, Baron—I guarantee it!

[MANCINI exits. Pause.]

BARON

Don't bother trying to entertain me. I don't like clowns.

HE

I don't like Barons.

[HE puts on his derby hat, takes a chair and, with an exaggerated gesture, puts it down heavily in front of the BARON. HE sits, imitating the pose of the BARON, staring him in the eyes. Silence.]

Can you be silent very long?

BARON

Very long.

HE

And can you wait very long?

BARON

Very long.

HE

Until you get what you came for?

BARON

Until I get it. And you?

HE

I too.

[They stare at each other silently, their heads close together. From the ring one hears the strains of the Tango.]

* * *

ACT IV

[Music in the ring. More disorder backstage than usual. All kinds of costumes are scattered about, hanging on pegs, etc... A huge bouquet of fiery-red roses sits on a table. Three USHERS stand near the door, smoking.]

Ten thousand dollars?!

USHER #1

I'm telling you.

USHER #2

For roses?!

USHER #1

That's right.

USHER #2

I don't believe it.

USHER #3

There's a whole truck-load outside. Stick your head out there—you can smell them a mile away.

USHER #2

Crazy Baron.

USHER #3

What good are that many roses?!

USHER #1

He wants to cover the ring with them—the whole ring.

USHER #2

The whole thing?!

USHER #1

Thousands of roses. Like a carpet. That's what he told them—make it like a carpet.

USHER #1

What a waste!

USHER #3

If I had that kind of money, I wouldn't waste it on roses, I'll tell you that much!
[As XENA enters with HE, all three USHERS suddenly throw away their cigarettes like school boys caught in the act. XENA stares at them.]

XENA

What are you doing here, gentlemen? Your place is at the entrance.

USHER #2

We ... we were just taking a quick break.

XENA

Don't leave your places again.

USHER #2

Yes, Ma'am.

[The USHERS exit quickly. XENA notices the roses.]

XENA

More roses. They're everywhere.

HE

Are you jealous, Madame Xena?

XENA

You're malicious tonight, HE. Don't you approve of Consuelo's marriage?

HE

It's an honest marriage. Even spiders need to improve their stock. Can you imagine what charming spiders this couple will create—with the head of their mother, Consuelo, and the stomach of their father, the Baron! A suitable ornament for any circus ring!

XENA

Why are you out of makeup?

HE

I'm in the third act. I have time.

[Pause.]

Do you approve—of the marriage?

XENA

If you ask me, Consuelo sold herself too cheap. What is the Baron worth—a few million? She could have done much better.

HE

She's doing it for her father.

XENA

The Count, you mean?

[Laughs.]

You haven't guessed yet? Mancini isn't her father.

HE

What! Does she know?

XENA

No. Why should she know? He found her on the street. Adopted her, of course—legally, she's his daughter. But he wanted her for business purposes. She's been supporting him for years.

HE

It's curious, isn't it—there's more blue blood in her little finger than in all of Mancini. One would think she found *him* on the street and not the other way around!

XENA

Let her go, HE. She's already made up her mind.

HE

Diamonds and butlers?

XENA

When did you ever see a beauty like her content to struggle along with the rest of us? If this one doesn't buy her, another one will. The rich buy up everything beautiful and lock it away, out of sight, in their mansions. It's the way of the world, HE. For the first few years, she'll be a sad beauty, loyal to her husband, but sick inside. Later, she'll begin to attract the eyes of strangers on the sidewalk—and finally, she will take—

HE

Her chauffeur or butler as a lover?

XENA

Not a bad guess. You can't fight Fate. Don't be offended, my friend. I like you. But you aren't beautiful, or young, or rich—what does it matter what you “want” or “don't want”? There is only one way for you. To forget.

[Enter PAPA BRIQUET and MANCINI who wears a new suit.]

MANCINI

Madame Xena! You are dazzling, tonight! Your lion would be a fool if he did not kiss your hand as I do!

[He kisses her hand.]

XENA

Congratulations, Count.

MANCINI

Yes, *merci*.

PAPA BRIQUET

Xena, the Count wants to pay immediately for the breach of contract with Consuelo. Do you remember how much it is?

XENA

Three thousand.

MANCINI

Is that all? For Consuelo? I'll tell the Baron.

XENA

You took—

PAPA BRIQUET

[To XENA.]

Don't—

XENA

Count, you drew in advance, I wrote it down, one hundred dollars. Will you pay that too?

MANCINI

Of course. Three thousand one hundred.

[Laughs.]

I never knew I could be so accurate.

[Seriously.]

Listen, Consuelo and the Baron expressed a desire to bid the whole cast farewell.

HE

The Baron, too?

MANCINI

Yes. They want to do it at intermission. So if you could gather everyone—

PAPA BRIQUET

Of course.

MANCINI

And HE, if you could run to the buffet and ask about the champagne, bottles and glasses—that sort of thing?

HE

Your wish is my command.

MANCINI

Wait a minute—is that a new costume? You look like a devil in that outfit!

HE

Not a devil, Count—just a poor sinner who the devils are frying a little.

[HE exits, bowing like a clown.]

MANCINI

That fellow is gifted, but too cunning for his own good.

PAPA BRIQUET

It's the Tango color—in honor of your daughter. He needs it for a new stunt he's doing. Some kind of surprise.

MANCINI

[Sits and looks about the room.]

You know ... I'm actually sorry to leave you, old friend. I know it's hard to believe, destined as I am for high society, castles, the company of noblemen ... but where else could I find such freedom and ... simplicity.

[Pause.]

By the way—how do you like my new suit?

XENA

I like it. You look like a nobleman of the courts of long ago.

MANCINI

You don't think it's too conspicuous—do you? I mean, who wears lace and satin nowadays? Is this jabot out of place?

XENA

No. It's perfect.

[HE returns, carrying a basket of champagne and glasses.]

MANCINI

Ah! Thank you, HE.

[Checking his watch.]

Good lord! The act's about to end! I have to go!

[MANCINI hurries out.]

PAPA BRIQUET

The devil take him!

XENA

Not so loud!

PAPA BRIQUET

High society! Castles! Noblemen! He's a common swindler!

[Enter JACKSON.]

JACKSON

What an audience! No laughter! Nothing! They've forgotten how!

PAPA BRIQUET

A benefit performance crowd.

JACKSON

In the orchestra, I saw some Barons and a few Egyptian mummies, I think. They just stare at you as if you'd stolen their wallet. You'll have to take a good many slaps tonight, HE, if you want any reaction out of *them*.

HE

Don't worry, Jackson. I'll avenge you.

XENA

How is Bezano?

JACKSON

Bezano! A madman! He's going to break his neck tonight!

PAPA BRIQUET

[To XENA.]

You must have inspired him.

XENA

What's eating you?

PAPA BRIQUET

Nothing. I don't like all these Barons in my circus. It makes me feel like a swindler instead of an honest artist.

JACKSON

There's something to that.

PAPA BRIQUET

Let's be honest—the foxes have come to steal our hen.

[Enter PAULIE and WALLY, along with several other performers.]

WALLY

Is it time for champagne yet?

PAPA BRIQUET

No!

WALLY

All right, all right.

PAULIE

HE, did you see how the Count walks in his new suit?

[PAULIE imitates MANCINI. Laughter.]

JACKSON

[Peeking onstage.]

It's almost intermission. Consuelo is galloping now. It's her waltz. They love her!

WALLY

She's so beautiful!

[Suddenly, a crash as if a broken wall were tumbling down: applause, shouting, screaming. The performers begin pouring champagne. More performers enter, in costume, talking and laughing.]

WALLY

They're coming!

JACKSON

What a success!

PAPA BRIQUET

Silence! Silence, please! Here they come!

[Enter CONSUELO, on the arm of the BARON who is stiff and erect. In his button-hole, the BARON wears a fiery-red rose. MANCINI follows, serious and happy. Behind them, more performers enter, crying: "Bravo, bravo!"]

CONSUELO

Friends ... oh, I'm so ... Father, I can't—

[She throws herself into MANCINI'S arms and hides her face on his shoulder. MANCINI looks with a reassuring smile over her head at the BARON. The BARON smiles slightly, but remains stiff and motionless. A new burst of applause.]

PAPA BRIQUET

Enough! Enough!

MANCINI

Calm yourself, child. See how they all love you!

[CONSUELO looks around at everyone. She laughs and cries at the same time.]

Ladies and gentlemen, yesterday Baron Regnard did me the honor to ask for my daughter's hand in marriage—

[Applause.]

—the Countess Veronica, whom you know simply as “Consuelo.” Please take your glasses.

CONSUELO

No, tonight I am still Consuelo! I shall always be Consuelo! Oh, Xena!

[She falls on XENA'S neck. Fresh applause.]

PAPA BRIQUET

Stop it! Silence! Take your glasses! What are you standing there for? If you came, then take your glasses!

[The performers take their glasses. CONSUELO stands near the BARON. In her hand, she holds a glass of champagne, which spills over.]

BARON

Be careful, Consuelo. You're going to spill.

CONSUELO

I'm sorry! I'm so nervous! Aren't you, Father?

MANCINI

Silly child.

PAPA BRIQUET

[Stepping forward and raising his glass.]

Countess! As the manager of this circus, who was happy enough ... to witness ... many times ... your success—

CONSUELO

Stop it! I am Consuelo! What do you want to do—make me cry? Stop with this “Countess” nonsense. Give me a kiss, Briquet!

[PAPA BRIQUET kisses her with tears. Laughter, applause. The clowns cluck like hens. The other performers become more and more lively. In the midst of them, the BARON stands motionless. There is a wide space around him. Others clink glasses with him and quickly move away. With CONSUELO, they clink willingly and cheerfully. She kisses them all. BEZANO appears in the crowd.]

JACKSON

[Raising his glass.]

Consuelo, as of today, I extinguish my sun. Let the dark night come after you leave us. It was a pleasure to work with you. We all love you and will treasure the traces of your little feet on the sand. Nothing else remains to us.

CONSUELO

[Kissing him.]

Oh, Jackson! You are so good! There is no one better!

WALLY

What about me?

CONSUELO

[Laughs.]

Except for you, Wally!

[More laughter. CONSUELO notices BEZANO in the crowd.]

Bezano! Come! I was looking for you!

BEZANO

[Keeping his distance.]

My congratulations, Countess.

CONSUELO

Don't be silly! I am always your Consuelo!

BEZANO

In the ring, yes. But here ... I congratulate you, Countess.

[He steps forward and clinks her glass—then moves away.

CONSUELO stares after him. MANCINI looks at the BARON with a smile. The BARON stands motionless.]

PAPA BRIQUET

Bezano, what's wrong with you? Don't be an ass!

CONSUELO

No, it's all right.

[Silence.]

PAPA BRIQUET

Enough, enough! Intermission is over! Get back to work!

WALLY

Already?

CONSUELO

Not yet! Please? Just a few more minutes!

PAPA BRIQUET

All right. It's fine. They can wait.

[From the ring, a Tango can be heard. Exclamations.]

CONSUELO

My Tango! Oh, I want to dance! Who will dance with me?

[She looks around, towards BEZANO who turns away.]

Who then?

MANCINI

The Baron! Let the Baron dance!

OTHERS

Yes! The Baron!

BARON

All right.

[He takes CONSUELO'S arm.]

I don't know the Tango, but I shall hold tight.

[He stands heavily and awkwardly, still holding CONSUELO'S arm—an expression of the utmost seriousness on his face.]

MANCINI

[Applauding.]

Bravo! Bravo!

[CONSUELO makes a few restless movements—then pulls away.]

CONSUELO

No, I can't! This is stupid! Let me go!

[She runs to XENA and buries her face on the older woman's shoulder. The music continues to play. The BARON moves quietly to the side. There is an uncomfortable silence among the performers.]

MANCINI

[Alone.]

Bravo! Bravo! It's charming! Exquisite!

PAPA BRIQUET

Shut up, Mancini.

[Silence.]

HE

[Holding up his glass.]

Baron, will you permit me to make a toast?

BARON

Make it.

HE

To your dance!

[Slight laughter from the performers.]

BARON

I don't dance!

HE

In that case, let us drink to those who know how to wait longer, until they get it.

BARON

I don't accept toasts I can't understand. Speak plainly.

JACKSON

That's enough, HE. The Baron doesn't like jokes.

HE

But I only want to drink with him.

[As the Tango ends, a buzzer sounds.]

PAPA BRIQUET

[Relieved.]

There! To the ring, ladies and gentlemen! To the ring!

[As the performers make their way back to the ring, MANCINI rushes to the BARON and whispers excitedly into his ear. HE approaches CONSUELO, who sits alone.]

CONSUELO

Don't make him angry, HE. Did you see how he pressed my arm? I wanted to scream.

[With tears in her eyes.]

He hurt me.

HE

It's not too late, Consuelo. Refuse him.

CONSUELO

No. It *is* too late.

HE

Do you want to marry him?

CONSUELO

Don't talk about it. He's watching us.

HE

I'll take you away from here.

CONSUELO

Where?

[Laughs.]

How pale you are! Do you love me too? Don't, HE. Why do they all love me—all the wrong ones?

HE

You are so beautiful!

CONSUELO

I was okay. I had made up my mind. But when everyone started speaking so nicely ... when they said their goodbyes as if I were dying, I thought I would die for real. Don't talk. Don't talk. Drink ... to my happiness.

[With a sad smile.]

To my happiness, HE. What are you doing?

HE

I'm throwing away the glass you drank from with the others. I'll get you another. Wait a minute.

[HE goes to the table and pours another glass of champagne. MANCINI approaches CONSUELO.]

MANCINI

Come. The Baron is waiting.

CONSUELO

Not yet.

MANCINI

It's indecent. The Baron is waiting, and you talk here with this clown. Everyone is watching. They're looking at you.

CONSUELO

[Loudly.]

Leave me alone, Father! HE is my friend! I will come when I'm ready!

BARON

Don't, Count. Let her be.

[To CONSUELO.]

Talk to whomever you please for as long as you like. There's no hurry.

[HE returns with champagne. The BARON and MANCINI give them room.]

HE

Here is your glass. To your happiness. To your freedom, Consuelo.

CONSUELO

Where is yours? You won't drink with me?

HE

Leave half.

CONSUELO

All right.

[She drinks.]

I'm going to be drunk.

HE

No. You won't be drunk. You forget, I'm a magician. I charmed the wine. My witchery is in it. Drink, goddess.

CONSUELO

What kind eyes you have. But why are you so pale?

HE

Because I love you. Look at my kind eyes and drink. Give yourself up to my charms, Consuelo. Sleep. And when you awake, you will see your sky, your ocean, your gods ...

CONSUELO

[Drinking.]

I'll see all that? Really?

HE

Yes! You will emerge from the sky blue waters ... the whisper of foam at your marble feet ...

CONSUELO

There. Exactly half.

[She gives the half-full glass to HE.]

What's wrong with you? Are you laughing or crying?

HE

I am laughing. And crying.

MANCINI

[Pushing HE aside.]

Enough. My patience is exhausted. The Baron has been good enough to allow it, but I am your father, and I have had enough. Your arm, Countess! Step aside, sir.

CONSUELO

I'm tired.

MANCINI

You're not too tired to chatter and drink wine with a clown. Briquet! Ring the bell—it's time.

CONSUELO

I need to sit down.

MANCINI
Come along.

XENA
Don't be cruel, Mancini. Look how pale she is.

BARON
What's wrong?

CONSUELO
Nothing.

XENA
Let her sit. She needs to rest.

MANCINI
Nonsense! She can rest after!

CONSUELO
Are the roses ready?

XENA
Yes, dear. The roses are ready. You'll have such an extraordinary carpet. No one will ever forget.
[Suddenly CONSUELO cries out in pain.]

BARON
What's wrong?

XENA
What is it?

PAPA BRIQUET
Consuelo?

CONSUELO
It hurts!

XENA
What hurts?

MANCINI
Are you sick?

XENA
It's all the excitement.

CONSUELO
It hurts! Here!
[She holds her heart.]

MANCINI
Bring a doctor!

CONSUELO
What is it, Father? I'm afraid! My feet ... I ... I can't stand ...
[CONSUELO collapses. MANCINI carries her to a couch.]

PAPA BRIQUET
What's going on?

BARON
You heard him! A doctor!

HE
It's no use.

BARON
What?

HE
She's dying.

BARON
Dying! Don't be—

HE
You waited too long, Baron. You should have snatched her away when you had the chance.

BARON
What are you saying?

HE
I killed her.

BARON

You—what?!

MANCINI

You're lying! Damned clown! What did you give her? Did you poison her?
Bring a doctor!

HE

It's too late. There's nothing you can do.

[To CONSUELO.]

You're dying, my Queen.

CONSUELO

Are you joking again, HE? Don't frighten me. I'm so frightened. Is this death? I
don't want it. HE, tell me you're joking.

[Pause.]

You ... you said I would live forever.

HE

You will. But sleep first. Sleep.

CONSUELO

Yes ... so tired ...

HE

Can you see the light?

CONSUELO

Yes ... is it the ring? My roses?

HE

No ... it is the sea and the sun ... can you feel the sea foam on your ankles? Can
you feel it?

CONSUELO

Yes ...

HE

You are flying to the sun. You have no body. You are flying higher. I am the sea
foam. It shines ... so strong ...

[CONSUELO dies. The others rush to her.]

MANCINI

Is ... is she sleeping?

XENA

[Holding CONSUELO'S dead hand.]

No.

[The BARON and HE are motionless, each in his place.]

JACKSON

The only thing left is the trace of her little feet in the sand.

[To HE.]

It would have been better if you had never come to us.

[There is music in the ring.]

PAPA BRIQUET

The music! Stop the music! What is happening?!

[The BARON takes the rose from his button-hole and drops it to the ground.]

XENA

[To PAPA BRIQUET.]

Call the police.

MANCINI

[Awakening from his stupor, screams.]

The police! Call the police! It's murder! I am Count Mancini! I am Count Mancini! They will cut off your head! Murderer! Damned clown! Thief! I will kill you myself!

[MANCINI produces the derringer from the handle of his cane and aims it at HE—but before he can fire, the BARON wrestles it from him.]

BARON

No.

[HE collapses with a laugh. A tremor shakes his body.]

JACKSON

It's true, then. He poisoned himself as well.

BARON

I'm going for the police.

[Pause.]

I am a witness. I saw. I saw how he put poison ... I—

[The BARON exits with the derringer. A moment later, a shot is heard in the corridor. JACKSON rushes out.]

JACKSON

[Returning.]

The Baron ... he ...

MANCINI

The Baron? The Baron?! But ... he ... no!

[HE bursts out laughing.]

PAPA BRIQUET

Stop it! What's wrong with you? A man just killed himself! Why are you laughing?

HE

He really did love her! In spite of everything! He loved her after all! It's the last slap! He wants to be ahead of me even *there!* But I won't let him! I'm coming! I'm coming, my queen! I won't let him have you!

[HE clutches his throat and dies. General agitation.]

* * *