CHARACTERS

OLD MAN, Hummel, a company director
STUDENT, Arkenholz
MILKMAID, an apparition
COLONEL, married to the Mummy, engaged to the FIANCEE
MUMMY, the COLONEL’s wife
JOHANSSON, slave to the OLD MAN
BENGTSSON, servant to the COLONEL
THE FIANCEE, a white-haired old woman, once betrothed to the OLD MAN now engaged to the COLONEL, the daughter of the CARETAKER’s WIFE and the dead man
THE COOK
DEAD MAN

[Scene I]

Outside the house. The corner of the façade of a modern house, showing the ground floor above, and the street in front. The ground floor terminates on the right in the Round Room, above which, on the first floor, is a balcony with a flagstaff. The windows of the Round Room face the street in front of the house, and at the corner look on to the suggestion of a side-street running towards the back. At the beginning of the scene the blinds of the Round Room are down. When, later, they are raised, the white marble statue of a young woman can be seen, surrounded with palms and brightly lighted by rays of sunshine.

To the left of the Round Room is the Hyacinth room; its window filled with pots of hyacinths, blue, white and pink. Further left, at the back, is an imposing double front door with laurels in rubs on either side of it. The doors are wide open, showing a staircase of white marble with a banister of mahogany and brass. To the left of the front door is another ground-floor window, with a window-mirror. On the balcony rail in the corner above the Round Room are a blue silk quilt and two white pillows. The windows to the left of this are hung with white sheets.

In the foreground, in front of the house, is a green bench; to the right a street drinking-fountain, to the left an advertisement column.

It is a bright Sunday morning, and as the curtain rises the bells of several churches, some near, some far away, are ringing.

On the staircase, the LADY IN BLACK stands motionless.

The CARETAKER’S WIFE sweeps the doorstep, then polishes the brass on the door and waters the laurels.

In a wheelchair by the advertisement column sits the OLD MAN, reading a newspaper. His hair and beard are white and he wears spectacles.

The MILKMAID comes round the corner on the right, carrying milk bottles in a wire basket. She is wearing a summer dress with brown shoes, black stockings and a white cap. She takes off her cap and hangs it on the fountain, wipes the perspiration from her forehead, washes her hands and arranges her hair, using the water as a mirror.

A steamship bell is heard, and now and then the silence is broken by the deep notes of an organ in a nearby church.

After a few moments, when all is silent and the MILKMAID has finished her toilet, the STUDENT enters from the left. He has had a sleepless night and is unshaven. He goes straight up to the fountain. There is a pause before he speaks.

STUDENT
May I have the cup?

The MILKMAID clutches the cup to her.
STUDENT
Can I borrow the cup? Please?

_The MILKMAID doesn’t comply._

STUDENT
Aren’t you done with it?

_The MILKMAID looks at him with horror._

OLD MAN (to himself)
Who on earth is he - ? I don’t see anyone! Out of his mind, I tell you, he must be -

_The OLD MAN continues to stare at them in amazement._

STUDENT (to the MILKMAID)
What are you staring at? Am I really that frightening? What am I, a murderer? Far from it. I’ve had no sleep.

_Pause._

STUDENT
You must think I’ve been out all night - carousing, making a time of it…

_The MILKMAID stays just as she is._

STUDENT
Think I’ve been drinking, don’t you? Do I smell like whiskey?

_The MILKMAID does not change._

STUDENT
I haven’t shaved, I know. Come on now. Let me have a drink of water. I’ve earned it.

_Pause._

STUDENT
Why? Glad you asked. All night I was bandaging wounds and tending to injured people. You see, I was there when that house collapsed last night. Now you know.

_The MILKMAID rinses the cup and gives him a drink._

STUDENT
Thanks.

_The MILKMAID stands motionless._

STUDENT
Can I ask you to do me a favor?
Pause.

STUDENT
The thing is, my eyes are inflamed – as you can see. My hands have been all over wounds, corpses – practically bathed in them - so I don’t want to risk putting them near my eyes. Will you take my handkerchief – it’s quite clean – and dip it in the fresh water and bathe my eyes? Would you do this? Will you be a God Samaritan?

The MILKMAID hesitates, but does as he bids.

STUDENT
Thank you. I really appreciate it. Let me give you something for -

He takes out his purse. She makes a gesture of refusal.

STUDENT
Forgive my stupidity, but I’m only half-awake…

The MILKMAID disappears.

OLD MAN
Forgive my intrusion, but I could not help overhearing you say you were at the scene of the terrible accident last night.

STUDENT
I’ve only just left.

OLD MAN
I was just reading about it in the paper.

STUDENT
How is that - ? It’s in the paper already?

OLD MAN
The whole story! A picture of you, too. But they regret that they didn’t know the name of that self-less young student…

STUDENT
Really?

The STUDENT looks at the paper.

STUDENT
That’s me. Strange. Exciting nonethe-

OLD MAN
Whom were you talking to just now?

STUDENT
Who?

OLD MAN
Yes, who.

STUDENT
Didn’t you see?

Pause.

OLD MAN
Would it be impertinent to inquire – what in fact your name is?

STUDENT
Why? I mean, what would be the point. I don’t care for publicity; that’s more than enough. If you get any praise, there’s always disapproval too. First they laud you, then denounce you. Slandering people has become one of the fine arts these days… Besides, I’m not interested in any reward.

OLD MAN
You’re well off, then?

STUDENT
Not at all. The exact opposite.

OLD MAN
Do you know – strange, but your voice – it’s – there’s something familiar in it – like I’ve heard it before. When I was a young man, I had a friend who couldn’t pronounce window, he always said winder. I’ve never met anyone else with that pronunciation. Only him – and now you. Are you, by any chance, related to Mr. Arkenholtz, the merchant?

STUDENT
He was my father.

OLD MAN
How fates are intertwined! I have seen you - when you were an infant - under very unpleasant circumstances.

STUDENT
Yes, I understand I came into the world in the middle of bankruptcy proceedings.

OLD MAN
Indeed.

STUDENT
Perhaps I might ask your name.

OLD MAN
I am Mr. Hummel.

STUDENT
Hummel? Are you the…? I remember that…
OLD MAN
You’ve heard my name mentioned before?

STUDENT
Yes.

OLD MAN
In your family?

STUDENT
Yes.

OLD MAN
And mentioned, perhaps, with a certain aversion?

_The STUDENT is silent._

OLD MAN
Yes, I can well imagine it. You were told, no doubt, that I was the man who ruined your father? Not so. All who ruin themselves through foolish speculations consider they were ruined by the one they couldn’t fool. The truth of the matter is your father robbed me of seventeen thousand crowns – every bit of my savings at that time.

STUDENT
It’s truly remarkable how the same story can be told in two such different ways.

OLD MAN
You surely don’t believe I’m telling you what isn’t true?

STUDENT
What do you think? My father didn’t lie.

OLD MAN
That is true. A father never lies. But I too am a father, and so it follows…

STUDENT
What is your point?

OLD MAN
I saved your father from disaster – financial and otherwise - and he repaid me with all the despicable hatred of a man who feels obliged to be grateful. He taught his family to speak ill of me.

STUDENT
Perhaps you made him ungrateful by poisoning your help with unnecessary humiliation.

OLD MAN
All help is humiliating.

STUDENT
What do you want from me?

OLD MAN
Don’t worry, I’m not asking for the money, but if you would render me a few small services, I will consider myself well repaid. I am a cripple. Some say it is my own fault; others blame my parents or my genes. I prefer to blame existence. Life is not if not for its hazards. In evading one, you’ll fall recklessly into another. I am unable to climb stairs – I can barely move my arms. And that is why I am asking you to help me.

STUDENT
What can I do?

OLD MAN
To begin with, push my chair so that I can peruse those posters. I want to see what’s playing tonight.

STUDENT (pushing his chair)
Don’t you pay someone to – you haven’t got an attendant?

OLD MAN
Yes, I do, but he has gone. On an errand. He’ll be back soon. You’re a medical student?

STUDENT
No, I’m studying languages, but I have no idea what I’m to become.

OLD MAN
Aha! Are you good at mathematics?

STUDENT
Fairly.

OLD MAN
Fine. Would you like a job?

STUDENT
Why not?

OLD MAN
Splendid.

OLD MAN studies the posters.

OLD MAN
They are doing a matinee of The Valkyrie. That means the Colonel will be there with his daughter, and since he always sits on the aisle of the sixth row, I’ll put you next to him. Go to that telephone over there and reserve a ticket for seat eighty-two in the sixth row.

STUDENT
My job is to go to the Opera in the middle of the day?

OLD MAN
Precisely. Do that. Do as I say and you won’t regret it. Things will go well with you. I want to see you happy, rich and respected. Your debut last night as the valiant rescuer has made you famous overnight. Your name will be your greatest asset.

STUDENT (going to the telephone kiosk)
Is this - This is an amusing adventure.

OLD MAN
Are you a gambler?

STUDENT
Yes, unfortunately. I rarely win.

OLD MAN
I’ll see to it that your luck changes. Go on now: telephone!

The STUDENT goes. The OLD MAN reads his paper. The LADY IN BLACK comes out on to the pavement and talks to herself. The OLD MAN listens, but the audience hears nothing. The STUDENT returns.

OLD MAN
All set?

STUDENT
It’s done.

OLD MAN
You see this house.

STUDENT
Yes. I’ve been watching it – very carefully. I passed by here yesterday when the sun was blazing on the windows, and I dreamt of all the beauty and elegance there must be inside. I said to myself: “Imagine having an apartment up there – four flights up - and a beautiful young wife, two pretty little children and twenty thousand crowns a year.”

OLD MAN
So that’s what you said. That’s what you said. Well, well!! I too am very fond of this house.

STUDENT
Do you speculate in houses?

OLD MAN
Mm – yes. But not in the way you mean.

STUDENT
Do you know the people who live here?

OLD MAN
Every single one. At my age you know everybody, and their parents and grandparents too, and you always discover you’re related to them in some way or other. I’ve just turned eighty, but no one knows me – not really. Yet I have a great interest in human destiny.
The blinds of the Round Room are drawn up. The COLONEL is seen, wearing mufti. He looks at the thermometer outside one of the windows, then turns back into the room and stands in front of the marble statue.

OLD MAN
Look, that’s the Colonel. You’ll be sitting next to him this afternoon.

STUDENT
Is he – the Colonel? I don’t understand any of this. It’s like an odd children’s story.

OLD MAN
My whole life’s like a book of fairy tales, young man. And although the stories are different, they are held together by one thread; the main theme constantly recurs – like clockwork.

STUDENT
Who is that marble statue of?

OLD MAN
His wife, naturally...

STUDENT
Was she such a wonderful person?

OLD MAN
Er...yes. Yes, of course.

STUDENT
What?

OLD MAN
It’s not for us to judge other people, my boy. If I were to tell you that she left him, that he beat her viciously, that she returned and married him a second time, and that now she is sitting inside there entombed like a mummy, worshipping her own statue – then you would think me crazy.

STUDENT
...I don’t understand.

OLD MAN
Doesn’t surprise me. Well, then we have the hyacinths – in the window over there. That’s where his daughter lives. She’s out riding, but she will be home soon.

STUDENT
And who is the lady in black?

OLD MAN
Well, that’s a bit complicated, but it is connected with the dead man, up there where you see the white sheets.

STUDENT
How, who was he?
OLD MAN
A human being like you or me, but the most conspicuous thing about him was his vanity. Now if you were a Sunday child, you would soon see him come out of that door to look at the Consulate flag flying at half-mast. It’s flying for him. He was, you understand, a Consul, and he reveled in coronets and lions, plumed hats and colored ribbons.

STUDENT
Sunday child, you say? I’m told I was born on a Sunday.

OLD MAN
No! Are you – really? I should have known it. From the color of your eyes. But – well, then you can see what others can’t. Haven’t you noticed that?

STUDENT
I can’t know what others see - but at times, I - …I suppose there are some things one shouldn’t discuss.

OLD MAN
I knew it. But you can talk to me, you know. I understand – things like that.

STUDENT
Yesterday, for instance… I was pulled to that obscure little street where the house collapsed. In my life I had never been in that part of town, but I went there and stopped in front of that building which I had never seen before. Then I noticed a crack in the wall… I heard the floor boards snapping… I leaped forward and picked up a child who was walking under the wall… The next moment the house collapsed. I escaped, but in my arms, where I thought I had the child, there was nothing at all.

OLD MAN
Amazing. Just as I thought. Tell me something. Why were you gesturing like that just now by the fountain? And why were you talking to yourself?

STUDENT
Didn’t you see the milkmaid I was talking to?

OLD MAN (in horror)
Milkmaid?

STUDENT
Yes, of course. The one who handed me a cup.

OLD MAN
Really? So that’s what was going on. Very well, I may not be able to see like you, but there are other things I can do.

The FIANCEE is now seen to sit down by the window which has the window-mirror.

OLD MAN
Look at that old woman in the window – the woman in black. Can you see her? Well, she was my fiancée once upon a time - sixty years ago. I was twenty. Don’t be afraid. She can’t recognize me. We see one another every day; but I feel nothing even though we once vowed to love one another eternally. Eternally!
Ghost Sonata by August Strindberg
Translation by Katarina Carlson, Patrick Scheid, & Zach Trebino
Adaptation by Zach Trebino & the ensemble

STUDENT
How foolish you were in those days! We wouldn’t ever talk to our girls like that now.

OLD MAN
Forgive us, young man. We didn’t know any better! But can you see that that old woman was once young and beautiful?

STUDENT
It doesn’t show. And yet there’s some charm in her looks. I like the way she turns her head; I can’t see her eyes.

The fiancée comes out with a basket of chopped fir branches.

OLD MAN
That dark lady – my former fiancée - is the daughter of the dead man. That’s why her mother’s new husband was given the job of caretaker. In his death, she’d have to pick up the slack - but the dark lady now has a suitor, very aristocratic and set to inherit a fortune. He is in the process of getting a divorce from his present wife, you understand. She’s presenting him with that statue just to be rid of him. This aristocratic suitor is the son-in-law of the dead man. You can see his bedclothes being aired on the balcony upstairs. It is complicated, as I said.

STUDENT
What – this is – it’s damned complicated.

OLD MAN
Yes, that it is, inside and out, although it’s made to look quite simple

STUDENT
But then who was the dead man?

OLD MAN
You just asked me, and I told you. If you could see around the corner, where the service entrance is, you would notice a lot of poor people whom he used to help – when he felt like it.

STUDENT
He was a kind man then?

OLD MAN
Yes – sometimes.

STUDENT
Not always?

OLD MAN
No, but that’s how people are! Now, will you give me a little push – to over there, in the sun? I’m horribly cold. When you’re never able to move about, the blood congeals. I’m going to die soon, I know that. But before I do, there are a few things I want to take care of. Take my hand; feel how cold I am.

STUDENT (taking it)
Yes. It’s unbelievable.
OLD MAN
Don’t leave me! I am tired, I’m lonely, but I haven’t always been like this. I have an enormously long life behind me, infinitely long. I have made people unhappy and people have made me unhappy – the one cancels out the other – but before I die I want to make you happy. Our destinies are tangled together through your father – and other things.

STUDENT
Let go, let go of my hand. You are taking all my strength. You’re freezing me. What do you want of me?

OLD MAN (letting go)
Patience. You shall see. And understand. There she comes.

They watch the GIRL approaching, though the audience cannot yet see her.}

STUDENT
The Colonel’s daughter?

OLD MAN
Yes. His daughter – yes. Just look at her. Have you ever seen such a masterpiece?

STUDENT
She is like the marble statue in there.

OLD MAN
That’s her mother.

STUDENT
Incredibly beautiful. Never have I seen such a woman of woman born. Happy the man whose luck it is to bear her home to wedded bliss.

OLD MAN
You can see it. Not everyone recognizes her beauty. So, then, it is written.

The GIRL enters, wearing an English riding habit. Without noticing anyone she walks slowly to the door, where she stops to say a few words to the CARETAKER’S WIFE. Then she goes into the house. The STUDENT covers his eyes with his hand.

OLD MAN
Are you crying?

STUDENT
In the face of what’s hopeless, there can only be despair.

OLD MAN
I can open doors and hearts, if only I find an arm to do my will. Serve me and you shall be a lord of creation.

STUDENT
Is this some kind of pact? You want my soul?

OLD MAN
Sell nothing. Listen. Don’t you understand - all my life I have taken. Now I crave to give – give. But no one will accept what I offer. I am rich, very rich – and without any heirs. Yes, I have a good-for-nothing son who torments the life out of me. Become my son. Inherit me while I am still alive. Enjoy my life while I’m here to see it – even if only from afar.

STUDENT
What do you want me to do?

OLD MAN
First go to *The Valkyrie*.

STUDENT
As good as done. What else?

OLD MAN
This evening you must be in there – in the Round Room.

STUDENT
How am I to get there?

OLD MAN
By the way of *The Valkyrie*.

STUDENT
Why have you picked me for your – your medium? Did you know me before?

OLD MAN
Of course, of course. I have had my eye on you for a long time. Ah, look, up there on the balcony! She’s hoisting the flag to half-mast for her dead father. And now she is turning the bedclothes. Do you see that quilt? It was made for two to sleep under, but now it covers only one.

*The GIRL,* having changed her dress, appears in the window and waters the hyacinths.

OLD MAN
There is my little girl. Look at her, just look! She is talking to the flowers. Isn’t she like that blue hyacinth herself? She gives them drink – just ordinary water, and they transform the water into color and perfume. And now, the Colonel with the newspaper. He is showing her the bit about the house that collapsed; he’s pointing to your portrait! She’s not indifferent. She’s reading of your brave deed… I believe it’s clouding over. If it turns to rain I shall be in a mess, if Johansson doesn’t comes back soon.

*It grows cloudy and dark.* *The FIANCEE* at the window-mirror closes her window.

OLD MAN
Now my fiancée is closing the window. Seventy-nine years old. The window-mirror is the only mirror she uses, because in it she sees not herself, but the world outside – and in two directions. But the world can see her – she didn’t think of that. All the same, a handsome old lady though.
Now the DEAD MAN, wrapped in a winding sheet, comes out of the door.

STUDENT
Oh my god -

OLD MAN
What’s the matter?

STUDENT
Don’t you see? There – don’t you see? - the dead man!

OLD MAN
I see nothing, but I expected this. Tell me, exactly what is -

STUDENT
He is coming out into the street.

Pause.

STUDENT
Now he is turning his head and looking up at the flag.

OLD MAN
What did I tell you? Watch. He will count every wreath and read every card. I pity whoever’s is missing.

STUDENT
Now he’s turning the corner.

OLD MAN
He’s gone to count the poor at the back door. The poor add such a nice touch to any obituary. “Received the blessings of the populace in life and death.” Well, he’s not going to have my blessing. Between us, he was a great scoundrel.

STUDENT
But charitable.

OLD MAN
A charitable scoundrel. Always thinking of his grand funeral. When he knew his end was near, he cheated the State out of fifty thousand crowns. Now his daughter is running around with another woman’s husband, wondering if she’s in the will. Yes, the scoundrel can hear every word we’re saying, and I hope his ears overflow. Ah, here comes Johansson!

JOHANSSON enters. JOHANSSON speaks, but the audience does not hear.

OLD MAN
Report! What do you mean, “not home yet”? You are an ass. And the telegram? Nothing? Go on, go on! …At six this evening? That’s good. Special edition, you say? With all the details - his name in full. Arkenholtz, a student, born…parents…That’s splendid…I think it’s beginning to rain…What did he say about it? Well, well. He wouldn’t? He must. Here comes the Colonel. Push me round the corner,
Johansson, so I can hear what the poor are saying. And, Arkenholtz, don’t go. Wait for me here. Understand? Well, come on, come on, what are you waiting for?

JOHANSSON wheels the chair round the corner. The STUDENT remains watching the GIRL, who is now loosening earth round the hyacinths. The COLONEL, wearing mourning, comes in and speaks to the FIANCEE, who has been walking to and fro on the pavement.

COLONEL
But what can we do about it? We simply have to wait.

FIANCEE
I don’t want to - I can’t wait.

COLONEL
You can’t? Well if that’s so, you’d better leave town for the time being.

FIANCEE
I don’t want to do that.

COLONEL
Come over here or they will hear what we are saying.

They move towards the advertisement column and continue their conversation inaudibly. JOHANSSON returns.

JOHANSSON
My master asks you not to forget that other thing, sir.

STUDENT
Look here…I – tell me something first. Who is your master really?

JOHANSSON
It’s not that easy. He’s lots of things, and he has been everything.

STUDENT
Is he a wise man?

JOHANSSON
Well…

STUDENT
Is he sane?

JOHANSSON
Yes – well – what is that, huh? Depends how you define. He says all his life he’s been looking for a Sunday child. Who knows? He might be making it up.

STUDENT
What’s he after? Money?

JOHANSSON
Power. The whole day long he rides around in his chariot like the god Thor himself. He keeps his eye on houses, tears them down, widens streets, builds public squares… But he breaks into houses too, crawls in through windows, ravages human destinies, kills his enemies – and forgives nothing. Can you imagine it, sir? This miserably mangled cripple was once a Don Juan. Although he could never manage to stick it out with any of them.

STUDENT
Perhaps he suffered from a lack of interest.

JOHANSSON
Oh, no. You see he’s so cunning he coerces the women to leave him when he’s tired of them, makes them believe it’s their own idea. Now, he’s more like a horse thief at a slave market. He steals people – in more than one way. He literally stole me out of the clutches of the law. I’d made a slip – got caught with my pants down, so to speak – that’s all – and only he knew about it. Instead of getting me put in prison, he turned me into a slave. I slave – for my food alone. And that is no better than hog slop.

STUDENT
What is it he means to do in this house? Why here?

JOHANSSON
The story is – I wouldn’t know where to begin! It’s too complicated.

STUDENT
I’m getting away. Before I can’t.

The GIRL drops a bracelet out the window.

JOHANSSON
Look! The young lady has dropped her bracelet.

The STUDENT goes slowly over, picks up the bracelet and returns it to the GIRL, who thanks him stiffly. The STUDENT goes back to JOHANSSON.

JOHANSSON
So you mean to get away? It isn’t as easy as it seems – not once he has dug his claws into you. And he’s afraid of nothing between heaven and earth. Well, of one thing – of one person rather…

STUDENT
I think I know.

JOHANSSON
How can you know?

STUDENT
Could it be… it’s a little milkmaid he’s afraid of?

JOHANSSON
He turns his head the other way whenever he sees a milk cart – never mind a wet-nurse! Sometimes, he talks in his sleep. It seems he was once in Hamburg…
STUDENT
Can anyone trust this man?

JOHANSSON
You can trust him – to do anything.

STUDENT
What’s he up to over there?

JOHANSSON
Eavesdropping. Planting a word here and there, loosening one stone at a time, till the house falls down and his tree stands in its stead – metaphorically speaking. He’s a true disestablishmentarian. Oh yes, I’m an educated man. I was once a book-seller…Do you still mean to go away?

STUDENT
I don’t like to be ungrateful. He said he saved my father once, and now he only asks a small service in return.

JOHANSSON
What is that?

STUDENT
He wants me to The Valkyrie.

JOHANSSON
That’s beyond me. But he’d be a good pro, always up to new tricks. He is always thick with the powerful, seduces them into his business, baits them with false promises and expectations, while all the time he’s draining them. You’ll see that before the day is over he’ll be received in the Round Room.

STUDENT
What does he want there? What’s he got to do with Colonel?

JOHANSSON
Not sure. But I’ve got my ideas. You can see for yourself when you’re there.

STUDENT
I shall never be in there.

JOHANSSON
That depends on you. Go to The Valkyrie.

STUDENT
Is that the way?

JOHANSSON
Yes, if he said so. Look. Look at him riding his war chariot, drawn in triumph by the beggars, who get nothing for their pains but the hint of a treat at his funeral.

The OLD MAN appears standing up in his wheelchair, drawn by one of the beggars and followed by the rest.

OLD MAN
Hail the noble youth who, at the risk of his own life, saved so many in yesterday’s accident. Hail Arkenholtz the savior!

The BEGGARS bare their heads but do not cheer. The GIRL at the window waves her handkerchief. The COLONEL gazes from the window of the Round Room. The OLD WOMAN rises at her window. The CARETAKER’S WIFE on the balcony hoists her flag to the top.

OLD MAN
Clap your hands, my fellow citizens. It is true; it is Sunday, but the ass in the pit and the ear in the field will grant us absolution. And although I may not be a Sunday child, I have the spirit in me; I have gift of prophecy and I can heal the sick. Once I brought a drowned soul back from her premature demise. That was on the day of our lord - a glorious Sunday morning just like this…

The MILKMAID enters, seen only by the STUDENT and the OLD MAN. She raises her arms like one who is drowning and gazes fixedly at the OLD MAN. He sits down, then crumples up, stricken with horror.

OLD MAN
Johansson! Take me away! Quick! …Arkenholtz, don’t forget The Valkyrie.

STUDENT
What is all this?

JOHANSSON
We shall see. We shall see!

[Scene II]

Inside the Round Room. At the back is a white porcelain stove. On either side of it are a mirror, a pendulum clock and candelabra. On the right of the stove is the entrance to the hall beyond which is a glimpse of a room furnished in green and mahogany. On the left of the stove is the door to a cupboard, papered like the wall. The statue, shaded by palms has a curtain which can be drawn to conceal it.

A door on the left leads into the Hyacinth room, where the GIRL sits reading.

The back of the COLONEL can be seen, as he sits in the Green Room, writing.

BENGTSSON, the COLONEL’s servant, comes in from the hall. He is wearing livery, and is followed by JOHANSSON, dressed as a waiter.

BENGTSSON
Now you’ll have to serve the tea, Johansson, while I take the coats. Have you ever done this before?

JOHANSSON
It’s true I man a war chariot in the daytime, as you know, but in the evenings I work as a waiter at receptions. It’s always been my dream to get into this house. They’re queer people here, aren’t they?

BENGTSSON
Yes. Though I believe the preferred nomenclature is out of the ordinary.

JOHANSSON
Is it to be a musical party or what? What’s the occasion?

BENGTSSON
The usual ghost supper, as we call it. They drink tea, without uttering a word. Or the Colonel does all the talking. And they gnaw their biscuits, in unison, like a chorus of rats in the attic.

JOHANSSON
Why do you call it the ghost supper?

BENGTSSON
They all look like ghosts. And they’ve kept this up for twenty years, always the same people saying the same things or saying nothing at all for fear of being found out.

JOHANSSON
Where’s the lady of house? Isn’t she around?

BENGTSSON
Oh yes, but she’s crazy. She sits in a cupboard because her eyes can’t bear the light.

BENGTSSON points to the papered door.

BENGTSSON
She sits in there right now.

JOHANSSON
In there?

BENGTSSON
I told you they were a bit out of the ordinary.

JOHANSSON
But then – what does she look like?

BENGTSSON
Like a mummy. Do you want to have a look at her?

BENGTSSON opens the door.

BENGTSSON
There she is.

The figure of the MUMMY is seen, white and shriveled into a MUMMY.

JOHANSSON
Holy mother of god!

MUMMY (babbling)
Why do you open the door? Haven’t I told you to keep it closed?

BENGTSSON (in a wheedling tone)
Ta, ta, ta. Is my little chickadee going to be nice? Yes? Only good little chickadees get treats. Pretty polly.

**MUMMY** *(parrot-like)*
Pretty polly. Are you there, Jacob? Jacob? Currrr!

**BENGTSSON**
She thinks she’s a parrot. Who knows - maybe she’s right. Whistle for us, Polly. Come on.

*The MUMMY whistles.*

**JOHANSSON**
Well, I've seen a few freak shows in my day, but this beats them all.

**BENGTSSON**
You see, when a house gets old, it grows moldy, and when people are together too long and torment each other too long, they crack. Take the lady of the house – shut up, Polly! – this mummy has been living here for forty years – same husband, same furniture, same relatives, same friends…

BENGTSSON closes the papered door.

**BENGTSSON**
And think of the goings-on in this house – They’re beyond me; even I don’t know the whole story. Look at that statue – that’s her when she was young.

**JOHANSSON**
Sweet baby jesus! Is that the mummy?

**BENGTSSON**
Yes. It’s enough to make one weep. And somehow, carried away by her own imagination or something, she’s acquired the peculiarities of a prating parrot – the way she talks! She’s talk-sick,; she’s got nothing to say – no one does – and she’s tired of it but she can’t stop - afflicted with word-vomit. And the way she can’t stand cripples or sick people. She can’t even tolerate the sight of her own daughter.

**JOHANSSON**
The young lady’s sick?

**BENGTSSON**
Yes. Didn’t you know?

**JOHANSSON**
No. And the Colonel, who is he?

**BENGTSSON**
Wait a bit and you’ll see!

**JOHANSSON**
It’s horrible to think that…How old is she now?

**BENGTSSON**
Who knows? But it’s said that when she was thirty-five she looked nineteen and made the Colonel believe she was—here in this very house. Do you know what that screen is for? They call it the death screen, and when someone’s going to die, they put it round—same as in a hospital.

JOHANSSON
What a horrible house! And that student is itching to get in, as if it were paradise.

BENGTSSON
That student? Oh, yes, of course. The one who’s coming here this evening. The Colonel and the young lady happened to meet him at the opera, and both of them took a fancy to him. Hm. Who is your master—the man in the wheelchair?

JOHANSSON
Well, he er…is he coming here too?

BENGTSSON
He’s not invited.

JOHANSSON
That doesn’t stop him.

The OLD MAN appears in the hall on crutches, wearing a frock-coat and top-hat. He steals forward and listens.

BENGTSSON
He’s a regular old devil, isn’t he?

JOHANSSON
The epitome.

BENGTSSON
He looks like the spawn of Quasimodo.

JOHANSSON
And he must be a black magician too. He can go through locked doors.

The OLD MAN comes forward and takes bold of JOHANSSON by the ear.

OLD MAN
Rascal—hold your rabid tongue. Announce me to the Colonel.

BENGTSSON
But we are expecting guests.

OLD MAN
I know. And my visit is not unexpected—though undesired.

BENGTSSON
Is that so?. What was the name? Mr. Hummel?

OLD MAN
BENGTSSON crosses the hall to the Green room, the door of which he closes behind him.

OLD MAN (to JOHANSSON)
Make yourself invisible.

JOHANSSON hesitates.

OLD MAN
Disappear.

JOHANSSON disappears into the hall. The OLD MAN inspects the room and stops in front of the statue in much astonishment.

OLD MAN
Amelia! It is she – oh, she!

MUMMY (from the cupboard)
Prrrr-etty Polly.

The OLD MAN starts.

OLD MAN
What the – who is - Is there a bird in the house?

MUMMY
Are you there, Jacob?

OLD MAN
Place is haunted.

MUMMY
Jacob!

OLD MAN
It’s enough to frighten one to - so these are the kind of secrets they guard in this house.

With his back turned to the cupboard, the OLD MAN stands looking at a portrait.

OLD MAN
There he is – the Colonel himself!

MUMMY
Bawk! Bawk! Bawk! Are you dumb? Bawk!

OLD MAN (jumping out of his skin)
God in heaven. Who are you?

MUMMY (in a natural voice)
Is it you, Jacob?

OLD MAN
Yes, my name is Jacob.

MUMMY *(with emotion)*
And my name is Amelia.

OLD MAN
No, no, no…Oh my god!

MUMMY
This is how I look. Yes. And that’s how I *did* look. Life lets you see more clearly, doesn’t it? Most of mine I’ve spent in a closet, to avoid seeing and being seen. But you – what do you see here?

OLD MAN
My child. Our child.

MUMMY
There she is.

OLD MAN
Where?

MUMMY
There – in the Hyacinth Room.

OLD MAN
Yes, there she is. And what does her father – the Colonel, I mean – your husband – think of her?

MUMMY
Once, during a quarrel, I told him everything.

OLD MAN
And…?

MUMMY
He didn’t believe me. He just said: “That’s what all wives say when they want to castrate their husbands.” It was a terrible crime none the less. It has falsified his whole life – even his past. When I think of his family tree, I say to myself: she’s no better than an émigré servant girl, going about with a false birth certificate. People get jailed for that.

OLD MAN
Many do it. I seem to remember that even you falsified the date of your birth.

MUMMY
My mother made me do that. I can’t be held accountable. And in our crime, you played the biggest part.

OLD MAN
No. Your husband provoked me when he took my fiancée. I was conceived unable to forgive until I have punished. It has always been an imperative duty – and is so still.

MUMMY
What are you expecting to find in this house? What do you want? How did you get in? It’s to do with my daughter! If you touch her, I warn you, you’ll die.

OLD MAN
I wish her nothing but the best.

MUMMY
Then you must spare her father.

OLD MAN
No.

MUMMY
Then you will die. In this room. Behind that screen.

OLD MAN
Be that as it may. I can’t let go once I’ve got my teeth into a thing.

MUMMY
You want to marry her to that student. Why? He is nothing; he has nothing.

OLD MAN
He will be rich, through me.

MUMMY
Have you been invited here tonight?

OLD MAN
No, of course, but I’ve decided to invite myself to this ghost supper.

MUMMY
Do you know who is coming?

OLD MAN
Not exactly.

MUMMY
The Colonel. My husband.

OLD MAN
Do you know – he’s pursuing a divorce to marry the daughter of the dead man…who used to be – your lover.

MUMMY
And another guest will be my husband’s new cadaver - your former fiancée.

OLD MAN
What a select gathering.

MUMMY
Oh god, if we might die, if only we could die!

OLD MAN
Then why have you stayed together?

MUMMY
Crime and secrets hold us - guilt binds us together. We have broken our bonds and gone our own ways, too many times, but we are always drawn together again.

OLD MAN
I think I hear footsteps.

MUMMY
It must be my husband. I will go in to Adele. Jacob, don’t do anything foolish. Spare him.

Pause. She goes into the Hyacinth Room and disappears. The COLONEL enters, cold and reserved, with a letter in his hand.

COLONEL
Sit down. Please.

Slowly, the OLD MAN sits down. Pause. The COLONEL stares at him.

COLONEL
Sir, are you the one who wrote this letter?

OLD MAN
I am.

COLONEL
Your name is Hummel?

OLD MAN
It is.

Pause.

COLONEL
As I understand, you have paid all of my outstanding debts. It appears that I am at your mercy. What do you want?

OLD MAN
I want to be paid - in one way or another.

COLONEL
In what way?
OLD MAN
A very simple one. Let us not mention money. Just bear with me in your house as a guest.

COLONEL
If that’s all that’s necessary to satisfy you -

OLD MAN
Thank you.

COLONEL
Anything else?

OLD MAN
Fire Bengtsson.

COLONEL
Why? He is my devoted servant – been with me during my whole career; who wears a government medal for long and faithful service. On what grounds should I dismiss him?

OLD MAN
All his beautiful virtues exist only in your imagination. He is not the man he appears to be.

COLONEL
Who is?

OLD MAN (taken aback)
Fair enough. But Bengtsson must go.

COLONEL
You’re going to give orders in my home?

OLD MAN
Yes. Since I own everything here – furniture, curtains, dinner service, linen…and other things…

COLONEL
How do you mean – other things?

OLD MAN
Everything. I own everything. It is all mine.

COLONEL
Fine. It’s yours. But my family honor – my coat of arms and my good name are things that you cannot possess.

OLD MAN
Neither can you.

   Pause.

OLD MAN
You are not a nobleman.

COLONEL
Watch your words.

OLD MAN *(producing a document)*
If you read this extract from the *Armorial Gazette*, you will see the blood-line of the family whose name you are using has been extinct for over a century.

COLONEL
I have heard rumors of this before, but my the name I bear was my father’s… *(Reads.*) It is true. You are right. I am not a nobleman. Not even that… Then I must take off my signet ring – oh, yes, of course, excuse me; it too belongs to you. There you are.

OLD MAN
Now, let us continue. You are not a Colonel either.

COLONEL
Am I not?

OLD MAN
No. You were a former temporary Colonel in the American Volunteer Force, but when the army was reorganized at the end of the Spanish American war, all such titles were abolished.

COLONEL
Is that true?

OLD MAN
Do you want to read it?

COLONEL
No, that’s not necessary. Who are you, that you feel entitled to sit there stripping me naked in this fashion?

OLD MAN
We’ll see. But as far as stripping goes…do you really want to know who you are?

COLONEL
Have you no decency?

OLD MAN
Take off that wig and have a look at yourself in the mirror. While you’re at it, take out your false teeth and shave your moustache. Let Bengtsson unlace your corset and perhaps a certain Mr. X.Y.Z, a lackey, a servant, will recognize himself. The fellow who was a cupboard lover in a certain kitchen, who flirted with maids so he could scrounge for food…

*The COLONEL reaches for the bell on the table but the OLD MAN checks him.*

OLD MAN
I wouldn’t do that if I were you. If you call Bengtsson I’ll have him arrested.
OLD MAN
And now it seems your guests are arriving. Keep your composure and I'll let us continue to play our old roles for the time being.

COLONEL
Who are you? I recognize your eyes and your voice...

OLD MAN
No more questions. Be silent and do as you’re told.

_The STUDENT enters and bows to the COLONEL._

STUDENT
Good evening, sir.

COLONEL
Welcome to my home, young man. Your heroism at that horrific accident has brought your name to everybody’s lips. It is an honor to receive you as a guest in my home.

STUDENT
My humble descent, sir… The great honor is mine – I’ve never expected to – well, my modest birth… but your illustrious name and noble birth…

COLONEL
May I introduce you – Mr. Arkenholtz, Mr. Hummel. The ladies are in there, Mr. Arkenholtz – if you care to join them. I must conclude my conversation with Mr. Hummel.

_He shows the STUDENT into the Hyacinth Room, where he remains visible, talking shyly to the GIRL._

COLONEL
A superb young man – musical, sings, writes poetry. If he only had blue blood in him, a nobleman, I don’t think I should object.

OLD MAN
To what?

COLONEL
Having my daughter…

OLD MAN
Your daughter! Why does she always sit in there?

COLONEL
She insists on being in the Hyacinth room whenever she’s inside the house. A peculiar habit of hers. Ah, here comes Miss Beatrice von Holsteinkrona. Charming woman, a pillar of the Church, with just enough money of her own to suit her circumstance.

OLD MAN
My fiancée. And your mistress.

_The FIANCEE enters, looking a little crazy._

**COLONEL**
Miss Holsteinkrona – Mr. Hummel.

_The FIANCEE curtseys and takes a seat. He wears mourning and looks mysterious._

**OLD MAN**
Well. It looks like we might be nearing capacity. Bring the mummy in, and the party can begin.

**COLONEL**
Polly!

**MUMMY**
Currr…!

**COLONEL**
Shall we invite the young people, as well?

**OLD MAN**
No, not the young people. Let us spare them

_They all sit silent in a circle._

**COLONEL**
Shall we have some tea, yes?

**OLD MAN**
Why bother? No one here likes tea. Why play games?

**COLONEL**
Then. Perhaps we should start a conversation?

**OLD MAN**
Talk of what? - the weather, which we know? About each other’s health, which we also know? I prefer silence – then you can hear thoughts, see the past. In silence, you cannot hide anything – which is more than one can say for words. I read the other day that differences in languages originated among savages who sought to keep their secrets from other tribes. Therefore, on the basis of origin, languages are codes, and he who finds the key can understand all the world’s languages. But there are certain secrets that can be exposed without a key. Especially in cases where there is a question of paternity. Proof in a Court of Law is another matter. Two false witnesses suffice to prove anything about which they are agreed. But on the kind of escapades I have in mind, witnesses are not taken along. Nature herself has instilled in human beings a blushing sense of shame, which seeks to hide what should be hidden. But we slip into certain situations unintentionally, and chance thus confronts us with moments of revelation - the mask is torn from the impostor, the villain exposed…

_Pause. All look at each other in silence._
OLD MAN
What silence there is now!

Long silence.

OLD MAN
Here, for instance – take this house. In this elegant home, where beauty, wealth, and culture are united…

Long silence.

OLD MAN
All of us sitting here know who we are – do we not? I don’t have to tell you. And you know me, although you feign ignorance.

The OLD MAN indicates the Hyacinth Room.

OLD MAN
Sitting there – in that room - is my daughter. Mine – yes, you know that too. She had lost the desire to live, without knowing why. She was withering away in this air – the acrid odor of crime and deceit – deceptions of every kind. That is why I had to secure a friend for her whose very presence would bring the warmth of noble deeds.

Long silence.

OLD MAN
And so my mission in this house was to pull up the weeds, to expose the crimes, to settle all accounts, so that those young people might have a chance to beat fate, to start anew in a home that I have given them.

Long silence.

OLD MAN
I am willing to grant safe-conduct, to each of you in his and her proper turn. Whoever stays I shall have arrested.

Long silence.

OLD MAN
Listen to the ticking of the clock - like a death-watch beetle in the wall. Do you hear what it says? “It’s time, it’s time, it’s time.” When it strikes, in a few moments, your time will be up. Then you may go, but not before. It’s sounds like a threat before it strikes. Listen! Hear it? It’s warning you. “The clock can strike.” And I can strike too.

He strikes the table with one of his crutches.

OLD MAN
Do you hear?

Silence. The MUMMY goes up to the clock and stops it, then speaks in a normal and serious voice.

MUMMY
But I can stop time in its course. I can wipe out the past and undo what has been done. Not with bribes, not with threats – but through suffering and repentance.

_The MUMMY_ goes up to the OLD MAN.

MUMMY

We are wretched creatures – us human beings. We know that. We have erred, we have sinned - we like all the rest. We are not what we seem. For at the core we are better than ourselves, since we detest our sins. But when you, Jacob Hummel, with your false name, choose to sit in judgment over us, you prove to be more contemptible than us miserable sinners. You are not what you seem. You are a slave trader, a trafficker of human souls. You once stole me with false promises. You murdered the Consul who was buried today; you strangled him with debts. You have stolen the student and shackled him with an imaginary debt of his father’s, who never owed you a penny.

_Having tried to rise and speak, the OLD MAN sinks back in his chair and crumples up more and more as she goes on._

MUMMY

But there is one dark spot in your life. I’ve long suspected what it is. I think Bengtsson can help us…

_She rings the bell on the table._

OLD MAN

No, not Bengtsson, not him.

MUMMY

So he does know.

_She rings again. The MILKMAID appears in the hallway door, unseen by all but the OLD MAN, who shrinks back in horror. The MILKMAID vanishes as BENGTLSSON enters._

MUMMY

Do you know this man, Bengtsson?

BENGTLSSON

Yes, I know him and he knows me. Life, as you all know, has its ups and downs. I have been in his service, and once he was in mine. For two whole years he was a lowly parasite in my kitchen – a cupboard lover, used to flirt with a cook. Since he had to be out of the house by three, the dinner was be ready by two, so we had to eat the warmed-up leavings of that ox. He drank the soup stock, which the cook then diluted with water. He sat there like a vampire, sucking the marrow out of the house, so that we all became skeletons. And he nearly succeeded in putting us in prison when we accused the cook of thievery. Years later I met this man in Hamburg under a different name. He was a usurer then, a blood-sucker. And it was there that he stood, charged with having lured a young girl out onto the ice to drown her, because she the sole witness to one of his crimes.

_The MUMMY passes her hand over the OLD MAN’s face._

MUMMY

That is you. Now empty your pockets of the notes and the will.
JOHANSSON appears in the hallway door and watches the scene with great interest, knowing he is now to be freed from slavery. The OLD MAN produces a bundle of papers and throws it on the table. The MUMMY goes over and strokes his back.

MUMMY
Pretty bird. Are you there Jacob?

OLD MAN (like a parrot)
Jacob is here. Pretty bird. Curr!

MUMMY
Can the clock strike?

OLD MAN (with a clucking sound)
Clocks can strike. Cuckoo, cuckoo, cuckoo…

The MUMMY opens the cupboard door.

MUMMY
Now the clock has struck. Stand up and enter the closet where I have spent twenty years, repenting our misdeeds. A rope is hanging there. Allow it to represent the one with which you strangled the Consul, and with which you meant to strangle your benefactor…Go!

The OLD MAN goes in to the cupboard. The MUMMY closes the door.

MUMMY
Bengtsson! Put up the screen – the death screen.

BENGTTSSON places the screen in front of the door.

MUMMY
It is over. God have mercy on his soul.

ALL
Amen.

Long silence. The GIRL and the STUDENT appear in the Hyacinth Room. She has a harp, on which he plays a prelude and then accompanies the STUDENT’s recitation.

STUDENT
I saw the sun. To me it seemed that I beheld the Hidden.
Men must reap what they have sown; blest is he whose deeds are good.
Deeds which you have wrought in fury, cannot in evil find redress.
Comfort him you have distressed with loving-kindness – this will heal.
No fear has he who does no ill.
Sweet is innocence.
[Scene III]

Inside the Hyacinth Room. The general effect of the room is exotic and oriental. There are hyacinths everywhere, of every color, some in pots, some with bulbs in glass vases and the roots going down into the water.

On top of the tiled stove is a large seated Buddha, in whose lap rests a bulb from which rises the stem of a shallot (allium ascalonicum), bearing its globular cluster of white, starlike flowers.

On the right is an open door, leading into the Round Room, where the COLONEL and the MUMMY are seated, inactive and silent. A part of the death screen is also visible.

On the left is a door to the pantry and kitchen.

The STUDENT and the GIRL (Adele) are beside the table; he standing, she seated with her harp.

GIRL
Sing to my flower.

STUDENT
Is the hyacinth the flower of your soul?

GIRL
The one and only. Don’t you love the hyacinth?

STUDENT
I love it above all other flowers – its virginal figure rising so slim and straight from the bulb, floating on the water and stretching its rare white roots down into the colorless nothingness. I love its colors: the snow-white innocence, the honey-sweet yellow, the shy pink of youth, the ripe red, but best of all the blue – the blue of deep-eyes, of dewy morning mist, of faithfulness. I love them all, more than gold or pearls. Have loved them ever since I was a child, have worshipped them because they have all the virtues I lack… But still -

GIRL
What?

STUDENT
My love is not returned. These beautiful blossoms hate me.

GIRL
How do you mean?

STUDENT
Their fragrance, strong and clear as the first winds of spring sweeping down from fields of melting snows – it confuses my senses. Deafens me. Blinds me. Turns my head inside out. Impales me with poisoned arrows that stab my heart and set my head ablaze. Don’t you know the legend of the flower?

GIRL
Tell it to me.

STUDENT
First its meaning. The bulb is the earth, - resting on the water or buried in the ground. Then the stalk shoots up, straight as the axis of the world, and at the top are the six-pointed star-flowers – the globe of heaven.

GIRL
Above the earth – the stars. How sublime! How did you learn to see this way?

STUDENT
I don’t know. …In your eyes. So you see, it is a microcosm of the Cosmos. This is why Buddha sits holding the earth-bulb, his eyes brooding as he watches it grow, outward and upward, transforming itself into a heaven. This wretched earth aspires to be a heaven. That is what Buddha is waiting for.

GIRL
Of course! I see it now. And don’t the snowflakes have six points – like the hyacinth?

STUDENT
Yes! Snowflakes must be falling stars.

GIRL
And the snowdrop is a snow-star, grown out of snow.

STUDENT
But the largest and most beautiful of all the stars in the firmament, the golden-red Sirius, is the narcissus with its gold and red chalice and its six white rays.

GIRL
Have you seen the shallot burst into bloom?

STUDENT
Yes, indeed I have! It obscures its blossoms within a ball, a glove like the celestial globe, strewn with white stars.

GIRL
Oh how magnificent! Whose thought was that?

STUDENT
Yours!

GIRL
Yours!

STUDENT
Ours! We have given birth to something together. We are wedded.

GIRL
Not yet.

STUDENT
What’s still to do?

GIRL
Time – ordeals - patience.

STUDENT
Fine! Put me to the test.

Pause.

STUDENT
So silent… Tell me, why do your parents sit in there without saying a single word?

GIRL
Because they have nothing to say to each other, because neither believes what the other says. I’ve heard my father say, “What’s the point of talking, when neither of us can fool the other?”

STUDENT
It sickens me to hear things like that…

GIRL
Look, the cook is coming. She’s so big – and fat.

They watch the COOK, although the audience cannot yet see her.

STUDENT
What does she want?

GIRL
To ask me about dinner. I have to do the housekeeping because my mother’s ill.

STUDENT
What have we to do with the kitchen?

GIRL
We have to eat, don’t we? Look at her, look at her. It’s – I can’t bear to -

STUDENT
Who is that ogress?

GIRL
She belongs to the Hummel family of vampires. She’s devouring us.

STUDENT
Why don’t you get rid of her?

GIRL
She won’t go. We can’t control her. She’s punishment for our sins. Can’t you see that we are withering, wasting away?

STUDENT
Don’t you get enough to eat?
GIRL
We get course after course but nothing nourishing. She boils the meat until there’s nothing left of it and serves us the sinews swimming in water, while she drinks the stock herself. And when there’s a roast, she cooks out the marrow, eats the gravy and drinks the juices herself. Everything she touches loses its flavor; she desiccates our food. It’s as if she sucks it out with her eyes. We get the grounds when she finishes her coffee. She drinks the wine and fills the bottles with water.

STUDENT
Drive her out of here!

GIRL
We can’t.

STUDENT
Why not?

GIRL
We don’t know. She won’t go! No one has any control over her. She has consumed our strength.

STUDENT
I’ll get rid of her for you.

GIRL
No. It must be as it is. Now, she’s here. She will ask me what we’re having for dinner. I could tell her anything; she’ll object and we must suffer her decree.

STUDENT
Then let her decide in the first place.

GIRL
She won’t do that.

STUDENT
This house. It’s bewitched.

GIRL
Yes. – She’s turning back now; she saw you!

THE COOK
Hah. That’s not why.

_The COOK grins, showing all her teeth._

STUDENT
Get out, woman!

COOK
Only when I’m good and ready.

_Pause._
COOK
I’m good and ready.

_She disappears._

GIRL.
Don’t lose your temper. Practice patience. She is one of the ordeals we must endure in this house. We must clean up after her too!

STUDENT
I am done for. _Cor in aethere_. Music!

GIRL.
Wait.

STUDENT
Music!

GIRL.
Don’t lose your temper. I call this room the room of ordeals. It looks beautiful, but it is full of imperfections.

STUDENT
Really? Well, such things should simply be ignored. It is beautiful, but a little cold. Why don’t we start a fire?

GIRL.
Because smoke will fill the room.

STUDENT
Then have the chimney swept.

GIRL.
It doesn’t help. Don’t you see? That writing-desk there!

STUDENT
An unusually fine piece.

GIRL.
It wobbles. Every day I put a piece of cork under that leg, and every day she takes it away when she sweeps, and I have to cut a new piece. The penholder is covered with ink every morning and so is the inkstand. I have to clean them up after that woman, as sure as the sun rises.

_Pause._

GIRL.
What chore do you hate the most?

STUDENT
To do laundry!

GIRL
That I have to do.

STUDENT
What else?

GIRL
Be awakened in the dead of night to lock a window, which she had left banging.

STUDENT
What else?

GIRL
Get up on a ladder and tie the cord on the damper after she has torn it off.

STUDENT
What else?

GIRL
Sweep up after her, dust after her, light a fire in the stove - after all she’s done is throw in some wood. Adjust the damper, dry the glasses, set the table over and over again, uncork the wine bottles, open the windows to air the rooms, remake my bed, rinse the water-bottle when its green with sediment, buy matches and soup which we’re always out of, wipe the lamp chimneys and trim the wicks to keep the lamps from smoking, and so that they don’t go out when we have company, I have to fill them myself…

STUDENT
Let us have music!

GIRL
Wait. You must wait. The drudgery comes first. The drudgery of keeping the filth of life at a distance.

STUDENT
But you are wealthy. You have two servants.

GIRL
It doesn’t help. Even if we had three. Living is just too difficult; sometimes I am so tired.

Pause.

GIRL
And imagine, if there were a nursery and a crib as well.

STUDENT
The greatest joy of all.

GIRL
And the costliest. Is life really worth so much hardship?
STUDENT
That depends on what you want in return. But there’s nothing I wouldn’t do to win your hand.

GIRL
Don’t talk like that. You can never have me.

STUDENT
Why not?

GIRL
You mustn’t ask.

Pause.

STUDENT
But you dropped your bracelet out of the window…

GIRL
Because my hand has grown so thin.

Pause. The COOK appears with a Japanese bottle in her hand.

GIRL
It’s she. She’s the one who’s eating me – and the rest of us.

STUDENT
What’s that in her hand?

GIRL
The Japanese bottle – its letters look like scorpions. It is the soy she uses to turn water into broth. It takes the place of gravy when she cooks cabbage and makes mock-turtle soup.

STUDENT
Get out!

COOK
You suck the sap from us and we from you. We take the blood and give you back water – colored water. …I am going now, but I’ll stay in this house as long as I want.

She goes out.

STUDENT
Why did Bengtsson get a medal?

GIRL
For his great merits.

STUDENT
Has he no faults?
GIRL
Yes, great ones. But you don’t get medals for them.

They smile.

STUDENT
You have a lot of secrets in this house.

GIRL
Like all others. Let us keep ours.

STUDENT
Do you admire frankness?

GIRL
Yes – within reason.

STUDENT
Sometimes I’m seized by a raging desire to say everything I think. But I know the world would collapse completely if people were completely candid.

Pause.

STUDENT
I went to a funeral the other day…in church. Very solemn, very beautiful.

GIRL
Was it Mr. Hummel’s?

STUDENT
My false benefactor’s – yes. At the head of the coffin stood an old friend of the deceased. He carried the mace. The priest – his dignified manner and moving words impressed me. I cried. We all cried. Afterwards we went to a tavern, and there I learned that the man with the mace had been in love with the dead man’s son…

The GIRL stares at him, trying to understand.

STUDENT
And that the dead man had borrowed money from his son’s admirer.

Pause.

STUDENT
Next day they arrested the priest for embezzling the church funds. A pretty story.

GIRL
Oh…!

STUDENT
Do you know what I’m thinking about you now?

GIRL
Don’t tell me, or I shall die.

STUDENT
I must, or I shall die.

GIRL
It is only in asylums that people say everything they think.

STUDENT
Exactly. That’s where my father ended up – in a madhouse.

GIRL
Was he ill?

STUDENT
No, he was quite healthy, but he was mad. It just came over him. Like all of us, he had a circle of acquaintances; whom he called friends for convenience’s sake. They were a gloomy bunch, of course, as most people are, but he had to have some connections – he couldn’t get on all alone. Well, ordinarily, my father didn’t tell people what he thought of them – no more than anyone else. He knew perfectly well what frauds they were – he’d saw to the depths of their deceits – but he was a wise and prudent man. Well-bred, too, so he was always courteous. Then one day he gave a big party. It was in the evening and he was tired by the day’s work and tired by the strain of forcibly holding his tongue while having to talk rubbish with his guests…

The GIRL is frightened.

STUDENT
Well, at the dinner table he rapped for silence, raised his glass, and began to talk. Then something loosed the trigger, and in an enormous speech he stripped naked every single person there, one after the other, and told them of all their treachery. Then, exhausted, he sat down on the table and told them all to go to hell.

GIRL
Oh!

STUDENT
I was there. I heard it all. And I shall never forget what happened after that. Father and Mother fought, the guests rushed for the door…my father was taken to a madhouse, where he died.

Pause.

STUDENT
If you keep silent too long… It’s like stagnant water – when it starts to form, everything rots. That’s what’s happening in this house. Something’s rotten here. And yet I thought it was paradise itself that first time I saw you come here. It was a Sunday morning. I stood there – gazing into these rooms. I saw a Colonel who was no Colonel. I had a magnanimous benefactor who was really a thief and had to hang himself. I saw a mummy who was not a mummy and a maiden who – what of maidenhood, by the way? Where is virginity – where is beauty to be found? In nature, and in my own mind, when it is dressed up in its Sunday best.
Where do honor and faith exist? In fairy-tales and children’s fantasies. Where is anything that fulfills its promise? In my imagination. Do you see? Your flowers have poisoned me and I have given the poison back to you. I begged you to be my wife in my home. We played and we sang. We made poetry together. Then came the cook...Sursum Corda! Try once more to strike fire and majesty out of the golden harp. Try, I beg you, I implore you on my knees.

Pause.

STUDENT
Fine. Then I will do it myself.

He picks up the harp, but the strings give no sound.

STUDENT
It is dumb and deaf. Why is it that the most beautiful flowers are poisonous, the most deadly? Why? Damnation hangs over the whole of creation – all that lives – is damned. Why will you not be my bride? Because the life-core within you is rancid and dry... I can feel that vampire in the kitchen beginning to drain me. She must be a Lamia, one of those that suck the blood of children. It is always in the kitchen that children are nipped in the bud – the growth stunted - if it has not already happened in the bedroom. There are poisons that seal the eyes and poisons that open them. I must have been born with the latter kind, for I cannot see beauty in ugliness or call evil good. I can’t. They say Christ harrowed hell. That was his pilgrimage on this earth. What they mean was that he descended to this penal colony – to this mad house, this morgue of a world. And the inmates crucified Him when He tried to set them free; but the robber they let roam free. Robbers always win sympathy. Come back to us! Come back, savior of the world. Come back before we perish. We are expiring.

And now the GIRL has drooped, and it is seen that she is dying. She rings. BENGTSSON enters.

GIRL
Bring the screen. Quick. I am dying.

BENGTSSON comes back with the screen, opens it, and arranges it in front of the GIRL.

STUDENT
The Liberator is coming. Welcome, pale and gentle one. Sleep, my lovely, innocent, doomed creature – blameless in your suffering. Sleep. Sleep a dreamless sleep. And when you wake again...may you be greeted by a sun that doesn’t scorched, in a home without dust, by friends who cause no pain, and by a love without flaw. Buddha, wise and gentle Buddha, grant us purity of will and patience in our ordeals. Let this hope not be in vain.

The strings of the harp hum softly and a white light fills the room.

STUDENT
I saw the sun. To me it seemed that I beheld the Hidden.
Men must reap what they have sown,
blest is he whose deeds are good.
Deeds which you have wrought in fury,
cannot in evil find redress.
Comfort him you have distressed.
with loving-kindness – this will heal.
No fear has he who does no ill.
Sweet is innocence.

_A faint moaning is heard behind the screen._

**STUDENT**
You poor little child, child of this world of illusion, guilt, suffering and death; this world of endless change, disappointment, and pain. May the Lord of Heaven be merciful to you on your journey.

_The room disappears. Bocklin’s picture THE ISLAND OF THE DEAD is seen in the distance, and from the island comes music, soft, sweet, and melancholy._