

Six characters in search of an author – Act II

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*Six characters in search of an author,
Williamstown Theatre Festival, New York,
1975*

Six characters in search of an author

Act II

The stage call-bells ring to warn the company that the play is about to begin again.

The Step-Daughter comes out of the Manager's office along with the Child and the boy. As she comes out of the office, she cries:

The Step-Daughter: Nonsense! nonsense! Do it yourselves! I'm not going to mix myself up in this mess.

(Turning to the Child and coming quickly with her on to the stage): Come on, Rosetta, let's run!

The Boy follows them slowly, remaining a little behind and seeming perplexed.

The Step-Daughter *(stops, bends over the Child and takes the latter's face between her hands):* My little darling! You're frightened, aren't you? You don't know where we are, do you?

(Pretending to reply to a question of the Child): What is the stage? It's a place, baby, you know, where people play at being serious, a place where they act comedies. We've got to act a comedy now, dead serious, you know; and you're in it also, little one.

(Embraces her, pressing the little head to her breast, and rocking the Child for a moment): Oh darling, darling, what a horrid comedy you've got to play! What a wretched part they've found for you! A garden... a fountain... look... just suppose, kiddie, it's here. Where, you say? Why, right here in the middle. It's all pretence you know. That's the trouble, my pet: it's all make-believe here. It's better to imagine it though, because if they fix it up for you, it'll only be painted cardboard, painted cardboard for the rockery, the water, the plants... Ah, but I think a baby like this one would

sooner have a make-believe fountain than a real one, so she could play with it. What a joke it'll be for the others! But for you, alas! not quite such a joke: you who are real, baby dear, and really play by a real fountain that is big and green and beautiful, with ever so many bamboos around it that are reflected in the water, and a whole lot of little ducks swimming about... No, Rosetta, no, your mother doesn't bother about you on account of that wretch of a son there. I'm in the devil of a temper, and as for that lad...

(Seizes boy by the arm to force him to take one of his hands out of his pockets): What have you got there? What are you hiding?

(Pulls his hand out of his pocket, looks into it and catches the glint of a revolver): Ah! where did you get this?

(The Boy, very pale in the face, looks at her, but does not answer): Idiot! If I'd been in your place, instead of killing myself, I'd have shot one of those two, or both of them: father and son.

The Father enters from the office, all excited from his work. The Manager follows him.

The Father: Come on, come on dear! Come here for a minute! We've arranged everything. It's all fixed up.

The Manager *(also excited):* If you please, young lady, there are one or two points to settle still. Will you come along?

The Step-Daughter *(following him towards the office):* Ouff! what's the good, if you've arranged everything.

The Father, Manager and Step-Daughter go back into the office again (off) for a moment. At the same time, The Son followed by The Mother, comes out.

The Son *(looking at the three entering office):* Oh this is fine, fine! And to think I can't even get away!

The Mother attempts to look at him, but lowers her eyes immediately when he turns away from her. She then sits down. The Boy and The Child approach her. She casts a glance again at the Son, and speaks with humble tones, trying to draw him into conversation.

The Mother: And isn't my punishment the worst of all?

(Then seeing from the Son's manner that he will not bother himself about her): My God! Why are you so cruel? Isn't it enough for one person to support all this torment? Must you then insist on others seeing it also?

The Son *(half to himself, meaning the Mother to hear, however):* And they want to put it on the stage! If there was at least a reason for it! He thinks he has got at the meaning of it all. Just as if each one of us in every circumstance of life couldn't find his own explanation of it!

(Pauses): He complains he was discovered in a place where he ought not to have been seen, in a moment of his life which ought to have remained hidden and kept out of the reach of that convention which he has to maintain for other people. And what about my case? Haven't I had to reveal what no son ought ever to reveal: how father and mother live and are man and wife for themselves quite apart from that idea of father and mother which we give them? When this idea is revealed, our life is then linked at one point only to that man and that woman; and as such it should shame them, shouldn't it?

The Mother hides her face in her hands. From the dressing-rooms and the little door at the back of the stage the Actors and Stage Manager return, followed by the Property Man, and the Prompter. At the same moment, The Manager comes out of his office, accompanied by the Father and the Step-Daughter.

The Manager: Come on, come on, ladies and gentlemen! Heh! you there, machinist!

Machinist. Yes sir?

The Manager: Fix up the white parlor with the floral decorations. Two wings and a drop with a door will do. Hurry up!

The Machinist runs off at once to prepare the scene, and arranges it while The Manager talks with the STAGE Manager, the Property Man, and the Prompter on matters of detail.

The Manager (to Property Man): Just have a look, and see if there isn't a sofa or divan in the wardrobe...

Property Man: There's the green one.

The Step-Daughter: No no! Green won't do. It was yellow, ornamented with flowers – very large! and most comfortable!

Property Man: There isn't one like that.

The Manager: It doesn't matter. Use the one we've got.

The Step-Daughter: Doesn't matter? it's most important!

The Manager: We're only trying it now. Please don't interfere.

(To Property Man): See if we've got a shop window – long and narrowish.

The Step-Daughter: And the little table! The little mahogany table for the pale blue envelope!

Property Man (to Manager): There's that little gilt one.

The Manager: That'll do fine.

The Father: A mirror.

The Step-Daughter: And the screen! We must have a screen. Otherwise how can I manage?

Property Man: That's all right, Miss. We've got any amount of

them.

The Manager (to the Step-Daughter): We want some clothes pegs too, don't we?

The Step-Daughter: Yes, several, several!

The Manager: See how many we've got and bring them all.

Property Man: All right!

The Property Man hurries off to obey his orders. While he is putting the things in their places, the Manager talks to the Prompter and then with the Characters and the Actors.

The Manager (to Prompter): Take your seat. Look here: this is the outline of the scenes, act by act.

(Hands him some sheets of paper): And now I'm going to ask you to do something out of the ordinary.

Prompter: Take it down in shorthand?

The Manager (pleasantly surprised): Exactly! Can you do shorthand?

Prompter: Yes, a little.

The Manager: Good!

(Turning to a Stage Hand): Go and get some paper from my office, plenty, as much as you can find.

The Stage Hand goes off, and soon returns with a handful of paper which he gives to the Prompter.

The Manager (to Prompter): You follow the scenes as we play them, and try and get the points down, at any rate the most important ones.

(Then addressing the Actors): Clear the stage, ladies and gentlemen! Come over here *(Pointing to the left)* and listen

attentively.

Leading Lady: But, excuse me, we...

The Manager (*guessing her thought*): Don't worry! You won't have to improvise.

Leading Man: What have we to do then?

The Manager: Nothing. For the moment you just watch and listen. Everybody will get his part written out afterwards. At present we're going to try the thing as best we can. They're going to act now.

The Father (*as if fallen from the clouds into the confusion of the stage*): We? What do you mean, if you please, by a rehearsal?

The Manager: A rehearsal for them. (*Points to the Actors*):

The Father: But since we are the characters...

The Manager: All right: "characters" then, if you insist on calling yourselves such. But here, my dear sir, the characters don't act. Here the actors do the acting. The characters are there, in the "book" (*Pointing towards Prompter's box*) – when there is a "book"!

The Father: I won't contradict you; but excuse me, the actors aren't the characters. They want to be, they pretend to be, don't they? Now if these gentlemen here are fortunate enough to have us alive before them...

The Manager: Oh this is grand! You want to come before the public yourselves then?

The Father: As we are...

The Manager: I can assure you it would be a magnificent spectacle!

Leading Man: What's the use of us here anyway then?

The Manager: You're not going to pretend that you can act? It makes me laugh!

(The Actors laugh): There, you see, they are laughing at the notion. But, by the way, I must cast the parts. That won't be difficult. They cast themselves.

(To the Second Lady Lead): You play the Mother.

(To the Father): We must find her a name.

The Father: Amalia, sir.

The Manager: But that is the real name of your wife. We don't want to call her by her real name.

The Father: Why ever not, if it is her name?... Still, perhaps, if that lady must...

(Makes a slight motion of the hand to indicate the Second Lady Lead): I see this woman here *(Means the Mother)* as Amalia. But do as you like.

(Gets more and more confused): I don't know what to say to you. Already, I begin to hear my own words ring false, as if they had another sound...

The Manager: Don't you worry about it. It'll be our job to find the right tones. And as for her name, if you want her Amalia, Amalia it shall be; and if you don't like it, we'll find another! For the moment though, we'll call the characters in this way.

(To Juvenile Lead): You are the Son.

(To the Leading Lady): You naturally are the Step-Daughter...

The Step-Daughter *(excitedly):* What? what? I, that woman there? *(Bursts out laughing)*

The Manager (*angry*): What is there to laugh at?

Leading Lady [*indignant*): Nobody has ever dared to laugh at me. I insist on being treated with respect; otherwise I go away.

The Step-Daughter: No, no, excuse me... I am not laughing at you...

The Manager (*to Step-Daughter*): You ought to feel honored to be played by...

Leading Lady [*at once, contemptuously*): "That woman there"...

The Step-Daughter: But I wasn't speaking of you, you know. I was speaking of myself – whom I can't see at all in you! That is all. I don't know... but... you... aren't in the least like me...

The Father: True. Here's the point. Look here, sir, our temperaments, our souls...

The Manager: Temperament, soul, be hanged! Do you suppose the spirit of the piece is in you? Nothing of the kind!

The Father: What, haven't we our own temperaments, our own souls?

The Manager: Not at all. Your soul or whatever you like to call it takes shape here. The actors give body and form to it, voice and gesture. And my actors – I may tell you – have given expression to much more lofty material than this little drama of yours, which may or may not hold up on the stage. But if it does, the merit of it, believe me, will be due to my actors.

The Father: I don't dare contradict you, sir; but, believe me, it is a terrible suffering for us who are as we are, with these bodies of ours, these features to see...

The Manager (*cutting him short and out of patience*): Good heavens! The make-up will remedy all that, man, the make-up...

The Father: Maybe. But the voice, the gestures...

The Manager: Now, look here! On the stage, you as yourself, cannot exist. The actor here acts you, and that's an end to it!

The Father: I understand. And now I think I see why our author who conceived us as we are, all alive, didn't want to put us on the stage after all. I haven't the least desire to offend your actors. Far from it! But when I think that I am to be acted by... I don't know by whom...

Leading Man (*on his dignity*): By me, if you've no objection!

The Father (*humbly, melliflously*): Honored, I assure you, sir.

(*Bows*): Still, I must say that try as this gentleman may, with all his good will and wonderful art, to absorb me into himself...

Leading Man: Oh chuck it! "Wonderful art!" Withdraw that, please!

The Father: The performance he will give, even doing his best with make-up to look like me...

Leading Man: It will certainly be a bit difficult! (*The Actors laugh*):

The Father: Exactly! It will be difficult to act me as I really am. The effect will be rather – apart from the make-up – according as to how he supposes I am, as he senses me – if he does sense me – and not as I inside of myself feel myself to be. It seems to me then that account should be taken of this by everyone whose duty it may become to criticize us...

The Manager: Heavens! The man's starting to think about the critics now! Let them say what they like. It's up to us to put on the play if we can. (*Looking around*): Come on! come on! Is the stage set?

(*To the Actors and Characters*): Stand back – stand back! Let

me see, and don't let's lose any more time!

(To the Step-Daughter): Is it all right as it is now?

The Step-Daughter: Well, to tell the truth, I don't recognize the scene.

The Manager: My dear lady, you can't possibly suppose that we can construct that shop of Madame Paccius piece by piece here?

(To the Father): You said a white room with flowered wall paper, didn't you?

The Father: Yes.

The Manager: Well then. We've got the furniture right more or less. Bring that little table a bit further forward.

The Stage Hands obey the order.

The Manager *(To Property Man):* You go and find an envelope, if possible, a pale blue one; and give it to that gentleman.
(indicates Father)

Property Man: An ordinary envelope?

Manager and Father. Yes, yes, an ordinary envelope.

Property Man: At once, sir.

Exit.

The Manager: Ready, everyone! First scene – the Young Lady.

(The Leading Lady comes forward): No, no, you must wait.

I meant her *(indicating the Step-Daughter)* You just watch –

The Step-Daughter *(adding at once):* How I shall play it, how I shall live it!...

Leading Lady *(offended):* I shall live it also, you may be

sure, as soon as I begin!

The Manager (*with his hands to his head*): Ladies and gentlemen, if you please! No more useless discussions! Scene I: the young lady with Madame Pace: Oh!

(*Looks around as if lost*): And this Madame Pace, where is she?

The Father: She isn't with us, sir.

The Manager: Then what the devil's to be done?

The Father: But she is alive too.

The Manager: Yes, but where is she?

The Father: One minute. Let me speak!

(*Turning to the Actresses*): If these ladies would be so good as to give me their hats for a moment...

The Actresses (*half surprised, half laughing, in chorus*): – What?

– Why?

– Our hats?

– What does he say?

The Manager: What are you going to do with the ladies' hats?

The Actors laugh.

The Father: Oh nothing. I just want to put them on these pegs for a moment. And one of the ladies will be so kind as to take off her mantle...

The Actors: – Oh, what d'you think of that?

– Only the mantle?

– He must be mad.

Some Actresses: – But why?

– Mantles as well?

The Father. To hang them up here for a moment. Please be so kind, will you?

The Actresses (*taking off their hats, one or two also their cloaks, and going to hang them on the racks*):

– After all, why not?

– There you are!

– This is really funny.

– We've got to put them on show.

The Father: Exactly; just like that, on show.

The Manager: May we know why?

The Father: I'll tell you. Who knows if, by arranging the stage for her, she does not come here herself, attracted by the very articles of her trade?

(*Inviting the Actors to look towards the exit at back of stage*): Look! Look!

The door at the back of stage opens and Madame Pace enters and takes a few steps forward. She is a fat, oldish woman with puffy oxygenated hair. She is rouged and powdered, dressed with a comical elegance in black silk. Round her waist is a long silver chain from which hangs a pair of scissors. The Step-Daughter runs over to her at once amid the stupor of the actors.

The Step-Daughter (*turning towards her*): There she is! There she is!

The Father (*radiant*): It's she! I said so, didn't I? There she

is!

The Manager (*conquering his surprise, and then becoming indignant*): What sort of a trick is this?

Leading Man (*almost at the same time*): What's going to happen next?

Juvenile Lead: Where does she come from?

L'Ingénue: They've been holding her in reserve, I guess.

Leading Lady: A vulgar trick!

The Father (*dominating the protests*): Excuse me, all of you! Why are you so anxious to destroy in the name of a vulgar, commonplace sense of truth, this reality which comes to birth attracted and formed by the magic of the stage itself, which has indeed more right to live here than you, since it is much truer than you – if you don't mind my saying so? Which is the actress among you who is to play Madame Pace? Well, here is Madame Pace herself. And you will allow, I fancy, that the actress who acts her will be less true than this woman here, who is herself in person. You see my daughter recognized her and went over to her at once. Now you're going to witness the scene!

But the scene between the Step-Daughter and Madame Pace has already begun despite the protest of the actors and the reply of The Father.

It has begun quietly, naturally, in a manner impossible for the stage. So when the actors, called to attention by The Father, turn round and see Madame Pace, who has placed one hand under the Step-Daughter's chin to raise her head, they observe her at first with great attention, but hearing her speak in an unintelligible manner their interest begins to wane.

The Manager: Well? well?

Leading Man: What does she say?

Leading Lady: One can't hear a word.

Juvenile Lead: Louder! Louder please!

The Step-Daughter (*leaving Madame Pace, who smiles a Sphinx-like smile, and advancing towards the actors*): Louder? Louder? What are you talking about? These aren't matters which can be shouted at the top of one's voice. If I have spoken them out loud, it was to shame him and have my revenge.

(*indicates Father*): But for Madame it's quite a different matter.

The Manager: Indeed? indeed? But here, you know, people have got to make themselves heard, my dear. Even we who are on the stage can't hear you. What will it be when the public's in the theatre? And anyway, you can very well speak up now among yourselves, since we shan't be present to listen to you as we are now. You've got to pretend to be alone in a room at the back of a shop where no one can hear you.

The Step-Daughter coquettishly and with a touch of malice makes a sign of disagreement two or three times with her finger.

The Manager: What do you mean by no?

The Step-Daughter (*sotto voce, mysteriously*): There's someone who will hear us if she (*indicating Madame Pace*) speaks out loud.

The Manager (*in consternation*): What? Have you got someone else to spring on us now?

The Actors burst out laughing.

The Father: No, no sir. She is alluding to me. I've got to be here – there behind that door, in waiting; and Madame Pace

knows it.

In fact, if you will allow me, I'll go there at once, so I can be quite ready. (*Moves away*)

The Manager (*stopping him*): No! Wait! wait! We must observe the conventions of the theatre. Before you are ready...

The Step-Daughter (*interrupting him*): No, get on with it at once! I'm just dying, I tell you, to act this scene. If he's ready, I'm more than ready.

The Manager (*shouting*): But, my dear young lady, first of all, we must have the scene between you and this lady... (*indicates Madame Pace*) Do you understand?...

The Step-Daughter: Good Heavens! She's been telling me what you know already: that mamma's work is badly done again, that the material's ruined; and that if I want her to continue to help us in our misery I must be patient...

Madame Pace (*coming forward with an air of great importance*): Yes indeed, sir, I no wanta take advantage of her, I no wanta be hard...

Note. Madame Pace is supposed to talk in a jargon half Italian, half English.

The Manager (*alarmed*): What? What? She talks like that?

The Actors burst out laughing again.

The Step-Daughter (*also laughing*): Yes yes, that's the way she talks, half English, half Italian! Most comical it is!

Madame Pace. Itta seem not verra polite gentlemen laugha attame eef I trya best speaka English.

The Manager: *Diamine!* Of course! Of course! Let her talk like that! Just what we want. Talk just like that, Madame, if you please! The effect will be certain. Exactly what was wanted to

put a little comic relief into the crudity of the situation. Of course she talks like that! Magnificent!

The Step-Daughter: Magnificent? Certainly! When certain suggestions are made to one in language of that kind, the effect is certain, since it seems almost a joke. One feels inclined to laugh when one hears her talk about an “old signore” “who wanta talka nicely with you.” Nice old signore, eh, Madame?

Madame Pace. Not so old my dear, not so old! And even if you no lika him, he won't make any scandal!

The Mother (*jumping up amid the amazement and consternation of the actors who had not been noticing her. They move to restrain her*): You old devil! You murderess!

The Step-Daughter (*running over to calm her Mother*): Calm yourself, Mother, calm yourself! Please don't...

The Father (*going to her also at the same time*): Calm yourself! Don't get excited! Sit down now!

The Mother: Well then, take that woman away out of my sight!

The Step-Daughter (*to Manager*): It is impossible for my mother to remain here.

The Father (*to Manager*): They can't be here together. And for this reason, you see: that woman there was not with us when we came... If they are on together, the whole thing is given away inevitably, as you see.

The Manager: It doesn't matter. This is only a first rough sketch – just to get an idea of the various points of the scene, even confusedly...

(*Turning to the Mother and leading her to her chair*): Come along, my dear lady, sit down now, and let's get on with the scene...

Meanwhile, the Step-Daughter, coming forward again, turns to Madame Pace.

The Step-Daughter: Come on, Madame, come on!

Madame Pace (*offended*): No, no, grazie. I not do anything witha your mother present.

The Step-Daughter: Nonsense! Introduce this “old signore” who wants to talk nicely to me.

(*Addressing the Company imperiously*): We’ve got to do this scene one way or another, haven’t we? Come on!

(*To Madame Pace*): You can go!

Madame Pace. Ah yes! I go’way! I go’way! Certainly!

Exits furious.

The Step-Daughter (*to the Father*): Now you make your entry. No, you needn’t go over here. Come here. Let’s suppose you’ve already come in. Like that, yes! I’m here with bowed head, modest like. Come on! Out with your voice! Say “Good morning, Miss” in that peculiar tone, that special tone...

The Manager: Excuse me, but are you the Manager, or am I?

(*To the Father, who looks undecided and perplexed*): Get on with it, man! Go down there to the back of the stage. You needn’t go off. Then come right forward here.

The Father does as he is told, looking troubled and perplexed at first. But as soon as he begins to move, the reality of the action affects him, and he begins to smile and to be more natural. The Actors watch intently.

The Manager (*sotto voce, quickly to the Prompter in his box*): Ready! ready? Get ready to write now.

The Father (*coming forward and speaking in a different tone*):

Good afternoon, Miss!

The Step-Daughter (*head bowed down slightly, with restrained disgust*): Good afternoon!

The Father (*looks under her hat which partly covers her face. Perceiving she is very young, he makes an exclamation, partly of surprise, partly of fear lest he compromise himself in a risky adventure*): Ah... but... ah... I say... this is not the first time that you have come here, is it?

The Step-Daughter (*modestly*): No sir.

The Father: You've been here before, eh?

(*Then seeing her nod agreement*): More than once?

(*Waits for her to answer, looks under her hat, smiles, and then says*): Well then, there's no need to be so shy, is there? May I take off your hat?

The Step-Daughter (*anticipating him and with veiled disgust*): No sir... I'll do it myself.

Takes it off quickly.

The Mother, who watches the progress of the scene with the Son and the other two children who cling to her, is on thorns; and follows with varying expressions of sorrow, indignation, anxiety, and horror the words and actions of the other two. From time to time she hides her face in her hands and sobs.

The Mother: Oh, my God, my God!

The Father (*playing his part with a touch of gallantry*): Give it to me! I'll put it down.

(*Takes hat from her hands*): But a dear little head like yours ought to have a smarter hat. Come and help me choose one from the stock, won't you?

L'Ingénue (*interrupting*): I say... those are our hats you know.

The Manager (*furious*): Silence! silence! Don't try and be funny, if you please... We're playing the scene now I'd have you notice.

(*To the Step-Daughter*): Begin again, please!

The Step-Daughter (*continuing*): No thank you, sir.

The Father: Oh, come now. Don't talk like that. You must take it. I shall be upset if you don't. There are some lovely little hats here; and then – Madame will be pleased. She expects it, anyway, you know.

The Step-Daughter: No, no! I couldn't wear it!

The Father: Oh, you're thinking about what they'd say at home if they saw you come in with a new hat? My dear girl, there's always a way round these little matters, you know.

The Step-Daughter (*all keyed up*): No, it's not that – I couldn't wear it because I am... as you see... you might have noticed...

Showing her black dress.

The Father:... in mourning! Of course: I beg your pardon: I'm frightfully sorry...

The Step-Daughter (*forcing herself to conquer her indignation and nausea*): Stop! Stop! It's I who must thank you. There's no need for you to feel mortified or specially sorry. Don't think any more of what I've said.

(*Tries to smile*): I must forget that I am dressed so...

The Manager (*interrupting and turning to the Prompter*): Stop a minute! Stop! Don't write that down. Cut out that last bit.

(*Then to the Father and Step-Daughter*): Fine! it's going fine!

(To the Father only): And now you can go on as we arranged.

(To the Actors): Pretty good that scene, where he offers her the hat, eh?

The Step-Daughter: The best's coming now. Why can't we go on?

The Manager: Have a little patience!

(To the Actors): Of course, it must be treated rather lightly.

Leading Man: Still, with a bit of go in it!

Leading Lady: Of course! It's easy enough!

(To Leading Man): Shall you and I try it now?

Leading Man: Why, yes! I'll prepare my entrance.

Exit in order to make his entrance.

The Manager *(to Leading Lady)*: See here! The scene between you and Madame Pace is finished. I'll have it written out properly after. You remain here... oh, where are you going?

Leading Lady: One minute. I want to put my hat on again. *(Goes over to hat-rack and puts her hat on her head)*:

The Manager: Good! You stay here with your head bowed down a bit.

The Step-Daughter: But she isn't dressed in black.

Leading Lady: But I shall be, and much more effectively than you.

The Manager *(to Step-Daughter)*: Be quiet please, and watch! You'll be able to learn something.

(Clapping his hands): Come on! come on! Entrance, please!

The door at rear of stage opens, and the Leading Man enters

with the lively manner of an old gallant. The rendering of the scene by the Actors from the very first words is seen to be quite a different thing, though it has not in any way the air of a parody. Naturally, the Step-Daughter and the Father, not being able to recognize themselves in the Leading Lady and the Leading Man, who deliver their words in different tones and with a different psychology, express, sometimes with smiles, sometimes with gestures, the impression they receive.

Leading Man: Good afternoon, Miss...

The Father (*at once unable to contain himself*): No! no!

The Step-Daughter noticing the way the Leading Man enters, bursts out laughing.

The Manager (*furious*): Silence! And you please just stop that laughing. If we go on like this, we shall never finish.

The Step-Daughter: Forgive me, sir, but it's natural enough. This lady (*indicating Leading Lady*) stands there still; but if she is supposed to be me, I can assure you that if I heard anyone say "Good afternoon" in that manner and in that tone, I should burst out laughing as I did.

The Father: Yes, yes, the manner, the tone...

The Manager: Nonsense! Rubbish! Stand aside and let me see the action.

Leading Man: If I've got to represent an old fellow who's coming into a house of an equivocal character...

The Manager: Don't listen to them, for Heaven's sake! Do it again! It goes fine.

(Waiting for the Actors to begin again): Well?

Leading Man: Good afternoon, Miss.

Leading Lady: Good afternoon.

Leading Man (*imitating the gesture of the Father when he looked under the hat, and then expressing quite clearly first satisfaction and then fear*): Ah, but... I say... this is not the first time that you have come here, is it?

The Manager: Good, but not quite so heavily. Like this.

(*Acts himself*): "This isn't the first time that you have come here"...

(*To Leading Lady*): And you say: "No, sir."

Leading Lady: No, sir.

Leading Man: You've been here before, more than once.

The Manager: No, no, stop! Let her nod "yes" first. "You've been here before, eh?"

The Leading Lady lifts up her head slightly and closes her eyes as though in disgust. Then she inclines her head twice.

The Step-Daughter (*unable to contain herself*): Oh my God!

Puts a hand to her mouth to prevent herself from laughing.

The Manager (*turning round*): What's the matter?

The Step-Daughter: Nothing, nothing!

The Manager (*to Leading Man*): Go on!

Leading Man: You've been here before, eh? Well then, there's no need to be so shy, is there? May I take off your hat?

The Leading Man says this last speech in such a tone and with such gestures that the Step-Daughter, though she has her hand to her mouth, cannot keep from laughing.

Leading Lady: (*indignant*): I'm not going to stop here to be made a fool of by that woman there.

Leading Man: Neither am I! I'm through with it!

The Manager (*shouting to Step-Daughter*): Silence! for once and all, I tell you!

The Step-Daughter: Forgive me! forgive me!

The Manager: You haven't any manners: that's what it is! You go too far.

The Father (*endeavouring to intervene*): Yes, it's true, but excuse her...

The Manager: Excuse what? It's absolutely disgusting.

The Father: Yes, sir, but believe me, it has such a strange effect when...

The Manager: Strange? Why strange? Where is it strange?

The Father: No, sir; I admire your actors – this gentleman here, this lady; but they are certainly not us!

The Manager: I should hope not. Evidently they cannot be you, if they are actors.

The Father: Just so: actors! Both of them act our parts exceedingly well. But, believe me, it produces quite a different effect on us. They want to be us, but they aren't, all the same.

The Manager: What is it then anyway?

The Father: Something that is... that is theirs – and no longer ours...

The Manager: But naturally, inevitably. I've told you so already.

The Father: Yes, I understand... I understand...

The Manager: Well then, let's have no more of it!

(*Turning to the Actors*): We'll have the rehearsals by ourselves, afterwards, in the ordinary way. I never could stand rehearsing with the author present. He's never satisfied!

(*Turning to Father and Step-Daughter*): Come on! Let's get on with it again; and try and see if you can't keep from laughing.

The Step-Daughter: Oh, I shan't laugh any more. There's a nice little bit coming for me now: you'll see.

The Manager: Well then: when she says "Don't think any more of what I've said. I must forget, etc.," you (*Addressing the Father*): come in sharp with "I understand, I understand"; and then you ask her...

The Step-Daughter (*interrupting*): What?

The Manager: Why she is in mourning.

The Step-Daughter: Not at all! See here: when I told him that it was useless for me to be thinking about my wearing mourning, do you know how he answered me? "Ah well," he said, "then let's take off this little frock."

The Manager: Great! Just what we want, to make a riot in the theatre!

The Step-Daughter: But it's the truth!

The Manager: What does that matter? Acting is our business here. Truth up to a certain point, but no further.

The Step-Daughter: What do you want to do then?

The Manager: You'll see, you'll see! Leave it to me.

The Step-Daughter: No sir! What you want to do is to piece together a little romantic sentimental scene out of my disgust, out of all the reasons, each more cruel and viler

than the other, why I am what I am. He is to ask me why I'm in mourning; and I'm to answer with tears in my eyes, that it is just two months since papa died. No sir, no! He's got to say to me; as he did say: "Well, let's take off this little dress at once." And I; with my two months' mourning in my heart, went there behind that screen, and with these fingers tingling with shame...

The Manager (*running his hands through his hair*): For Heaven's sake! What are you saying?

The Step-Daughter (*crying out excitedly*): The truth! The truth!

The Manager: It may be. I don't deny it, and I can understand all your horror; but you must surely see that you can't have this kind of thing on the stage. It won't go.

The Step-Daughter: Not possible, eh? Very well! I'm much obliged to you – but I'm off!

The Manager: Now be reasonable! Don't lose your temper!

The Step-Daughter: I won't stop here! I won't! I can see you've fixed it all up with him in your office. All this talk about what is possible for the stage... I understand! He wants to get at his complicated "cerebral drama," to have his famous remorse and torments acted; but I want to act my part, my part!

The Manager (*annoyed, shaking his shoulders*): Ah! Just your part! But, if you will pardon me, there are other parts than yours: His (*indicating the Father*) and hers! (*indicating the Mother*) On the stage you can have a character becoming too prominent and overshadowing all the others. The thing is to pack them all into a neat little framework and then act what is actable. I am aware of the fact that everyone has his own interior life which he wants very much to put forward. But the difficulty lies in this fact: to set out just so much as is

necessary for the stage, taking the other characters into consideration, and at the same time hint at the unrevealed interior life of each. I am willing to admit, my dear young lady, that from your point of view it would be a fine idea if each character could tell the public all his troubles in a nice monologue or a regular one hour lecture.

(Good humoredly): You must restrain yourself, my dear, and in your own interest, too; because this fury of yours, this exaggerated disgust you show, may make a bad impression, you know. After you have confessed to me that there were others before him at Madame Pace's and more than once...

The Step-Daughter *(bowing her head, impressed)*: It's true. But remember those others mean him for me all the same.

The Manager *(not understanding)*: What? The others? What do you mean?

The Step-Daughter: For one who has gone wrong, sir, he who was responsible for the first fault is responsible for all that follow. He is responsible for my faults, was, even before I was born. Look at him, and see if it isn't true!

The Manager: Well, well! And does the weight of so much responsibility seem nothing to you? Give him a chance to act it, to get it over!

The Step-Daughter: How? How can he act all his "noble remorse," all his "moral torments," if you want to spare him the horror of being discovered one day – after he had asked her what he did ask her – in the arms of her, that already fallen woman, that child, sir, that child he used to watch come out of school?

She is moved.

The Mother at this point is overcome with emotion, and breaks out into a fit of crying.

All are touched.

A long pause.

The Step-Daughter (*as soon as the Mother becomes a little quieter, adds resolutely and gravely*): At present, we are unknown to the public. Tomorrow, you will act us as you wish, treating us in your own manner. But do you really want to see drama, do you want to see it flash out as it really did?

The Manager: Of course! That's just what I do want, so I can use as much of it as is possible.

The Step-Daughter: Well then, ask that Mother there to leave us.

The Mother (*changing her low plaint into a sharp cry*): No! No! Don't permit it, sir, don't permit it!

The Manager: But it's only to try it.

The Mother: I can't bear it. I can't.

The Manager: But since it has happened already... I don't understand!

The Mother: It's taking place now. It happens all the time. My torment isn't a pretended one. I live and feel every minute of my torture. Those two children there – have you heard them speak? They can't speak any more. They cling to me to keep up my torment actual and vivid for me. But for themselves, they do not exist, they aren't any more. And she (*indicating the Step-Daughter*) has run away, she has left me, and is lost. If I now see her here before me, it is only to renew for me the tortures I have suffered for her too.

The Father: The eternal moment! She (*indicating the Step-Daughter*) is here to catch me, fix me, and hold me eternally in the stocks for that one fleeting and shameful moment of my life. She can't give it up! And you sir, cannot either fairly

spare me it.

The Manager: I never said I didn't want to act it. It will form, as a matter of fact, the nucleus of the whole first act right up to her surprise. (*indicates the Mother*)

The Father: Just so! This is my punishment: the passion in all of us that must culminate in her final cry.

The Step-Daughter: I can hear it still in my ears. It's driven me mad, that cry! – You can put me on as you like; it doesn't matter. Fully dressed, if you like – provided I have at least the arm bare; because, standing like this.

(*She goes close to the Father and leans her head on his breast*): with my head so, and my arms round his neck, I saw a vein pulsing in my arm here; and then, as if that live vein had awakened disgust in me, I closed my eyes like this, and let my head sink on his breast.

(*Turning to the Mother*): Cry out mother! Cry out!

(*Buries head in Father's breast, and with her shoulders raised as if to prevent her hearing the cry, adds in tones of intense emotion*): Cry out as you did then!

The Mother (*coming forward to separate them*): No! My daughter, my daughter!

(*And after having pulled her away from him*): You brute! you brute! She is my daughter! Don't you see she's my daughter?

The Manager (*walking backwards towards footlights*): Fine! fine! Damned good! And then, of course – curtain!

The Father (*going towards him excitedly*): Yes, of course, because that's the way it really happened.

The Manager (*convinced and pleased*): Oh, yes, no doubt about it. Curtain here, curtain!

At the reiterated cry of The Manager, The Machinist lets the curtain down, leaving The Manager and The Father in front of it before the footlights.

The Manager: The darned idiot! I said “curtain” to show the act should end there, and he goes and lets it down in earnest.

(To the Father, while he pulls the curtain back to go on to the stage again): Yes, yes, it.'s all right. Effect certain! That's the right ending. I'll guarantee the first act at any rate.

Curtain

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A comedy in the making in three acts

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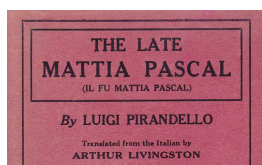
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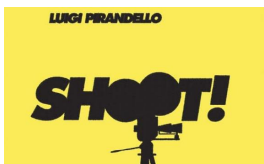
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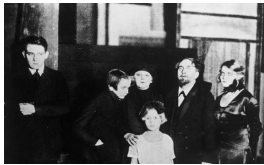
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