

The Bone in the Throat



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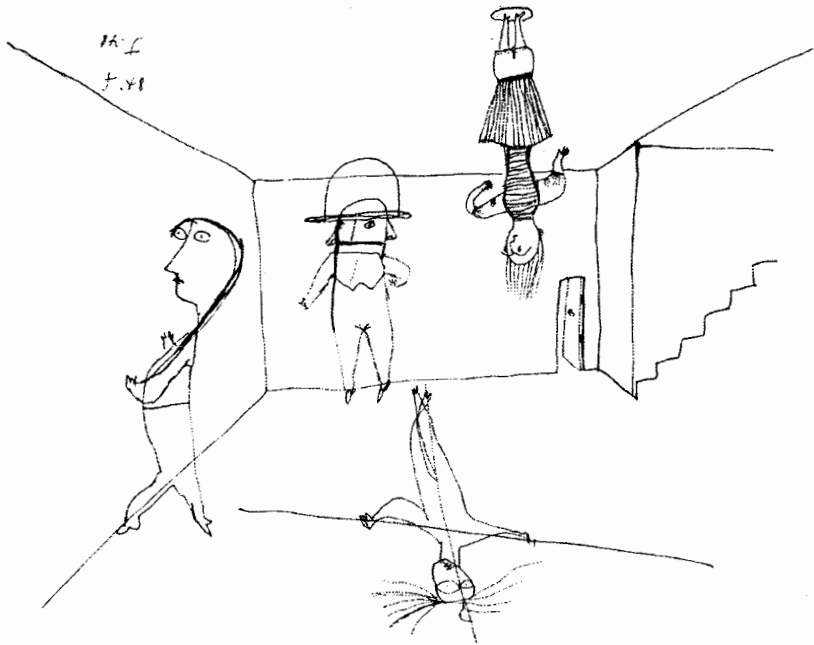
Stefan Themerson wrote *The Bone in the Throat*, his only work in dramatic form, in 1959. An excerpt was published that year in *New Departures*, an English literary magazine. Despite being called “a tremendously intelligent and clever and often very funny and original play” by London play agent Peggy Ramsay, the complete work remained unpublished until now. The text of this OP edition is a 1964 revision considered to be “final.”

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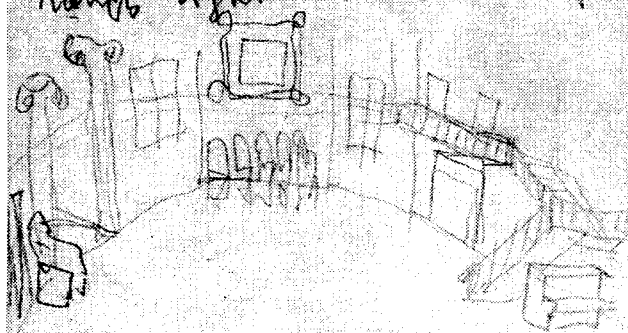
The Bone in the Throat



Stefan Themerson

Obscure Publications - 2007

structure. An immense chandelier
hangs right in the centre of the hall.



SCENE ONE

Before the curtain rises, – a single note on the piano. A large hall in a country house. The house must be standing on the slope of a hill, as you can see treetops through the window on the left, but the garden through the window on the right. In the middle of the wall, between the windows, a portrait of a judge. It is probably a portrait of Cecil Fahrenheit himself. There are seven chairs beneath the portrait.

On the left, an opening – perhaps between two columns or under an arch – leading to further rooms. Nearer the footlights, a door. On the right, half the height of the stage, a gallery, or shall we call it a balcony. There are two doors there: to Steve's room, upstage, and to Mary's room, downstage. The staircase to the gallery runs along the wall. It consists of two flights, the upper flight facing the audience, the lower flight facing away from the audience. There is a piano beneath the lower flight. John is sitting at it, his back to the audience. He is about 18. The entrance door is on the right, half hidden by the staircase. An immense chandelier hangs right in the centre of the hall.

Diana comes in through the door on the right. She is a few years over, but looks just under forty. She is in riding breeches, jacket, and long, muddy boots, and she carries a double-barrelled gun. Her costume suits her. As she enters, she steps on two square pieces of felt that have been placed by the door for the purpose, and skates on them across the parquet floor.

DIANA: Glorious Day!

She moves across the room on the felt.

John strikes one, single note, listens to it attentively, after a while, strikes another.

DIANA: The wind and the sun.

Puts the gun in the corner by the left window, and skates back.

DIANA: The sun bakes you while the wind blows the heat off your skin. Like those gadgets at the hairdresser's, you know.

She sits in the armchair, rings the bell.

John strikes a Weberian chord.

Nelson enters, kneels in front of Diana, ready to help her take her boots off.

DIANA: *(Stands up)* John! Listen to me, John. You know, if your Father could see you there, sitting in that dark corner doing nothing, he would turn in his grave three times. That's to say, if he were dead and buried.

JOHN: Will you please leave Father alone.

DIANA: *(Mockingly)* Will you please leave Father alone!
(She sits down again and gives her boot to Nelson)

DIANA: As if it were not *he* who left *me* alone!
(Sarcastically) Alone! With you, and Mary, and Steve!

JOHN: Mary? Who's Mary?

DIANA: What did you say?

JOHN: I said: Who is Mary? Is she somebody one should know? And . . . incidentally, who is Steve? Is he somebody worth talking about?

DIANA: *(Kicks her boot across the room, it hits the piano)*
John!

NELSON: *(Going to fetch the boot)* Cook said that the bird was shot right through the heart. It must have fallen like a stone. She asks whether she shall prepare it for tomorrow's dinner.

DIANA: No. I don't want to see it. Tell her to keep it for the kitchen. *(To John)* "Who is Steve? Who is Mary?"! Indeed! *(Calling)* Steve! Mary! *(Nelson pulls off her other boot and gives her her slippers)* Steve! Mary!

The doors on the balcony open – Steve appears in one, Mary and the Rev. Fred Oosky in the other. Mary is 19, Steve 17. The Rev. Fred Oosky belongs to their generation rather than to Diana's, but his status makes him her contemporary, almost.

STEVE: Is the house on fire?

MARY: Shut up, Steve. *(To Diana)* Did you have a nice time?

DIANA: It doesn't matter now. *(To Nelson)* That will be all, Nelson, thank you.

Exit Nelson. Mary comes down the stairs, Mr. Oosky follows her.

Steve sits on the balcony, his legs dangling in the air.

DIANA: I wanted to talk to you about John. He has invented a new method to drive *me* mad.

JOHN: Now we're going to start all over again. Hell! Can't one ever have any peace here? *(To Diana)* You like an open air aloneness. I like to be alone within four walls. You have already had your peace in the woods this morning, shooting the bird right through the heart. You always shoot them right through the heart. Why can't I have my peace here, under the stairs?

DIANA: Be reasonable, John, I didn't disturb your peace. I came in, bright and happy, and said: What a glorious day. Whereupon you asked: Who is Mary, and who is Steve? It's idiotic!

STEVE: Why did you ask who I am?

JOHN: I didn't ask it like that . . . She . . .

DIANA: John!

JOHN: Mother . . .

DIANA: *(Stamping her foot)* John!

JOHN: All right – *Diana* . . . said something about Steve and Mary, and you aren't the only Steve and Mary in the world, are you? So I asked . . .

STEVE: *(To Diana)* What did you say about us?

DIANA: Nothing. I don't remember.

MARY: Then try to remember.

DIANA: Oh, leave me alone.

JOHN: She said she was left alone with me and you, so, naturally I asked her who you were.

STEVE: You're crazy!

JOHN: I don't see why. Absolutely anybody can be Steve or Mary. How could I know she . . .

DIANA: John!

JOHN: How could I know you were not talking about your horses. Come on, Steve! Come on, Mary! Or about your hounds? Or about your lovers?

Mary drops down on to her knees as if she wanted to say a prayer.

Mr. Oosky impatiently pulls her up.

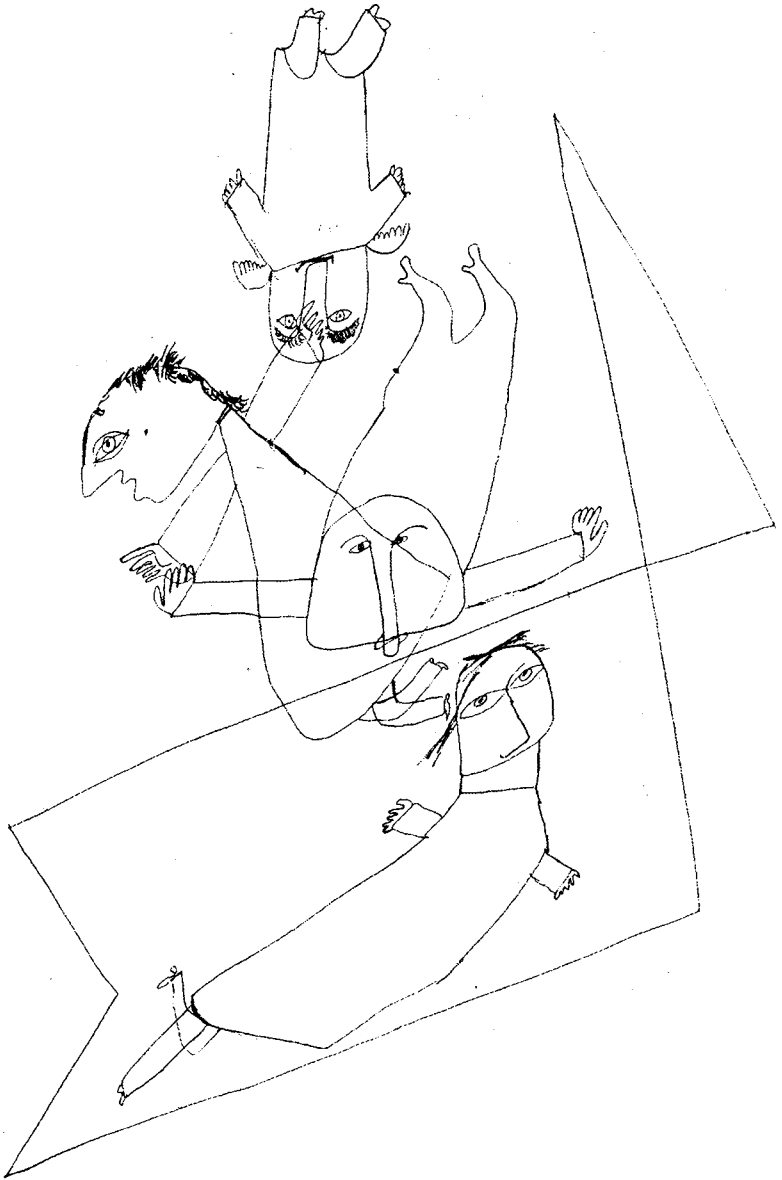
DIANA: *(Silvery, uninhibited laughter)* Hahaha! You all seem to be deeply shocked, "lovers," hahaha! You know, my dears, at moments like this I always feel as if I were standing in front of my grandparents, and not my own children. I'm not talking about you, Mr. Oosky, but these sensitive, dried-up flowers, . . . if Father could see you now, he would turn . . .

JOHN: I asked you to leave Father alone.

DIANA: All right, all right, my pet. I suppose it's modern education that makes you all so priggish. I suppose that three immature, weakly creatures must be considered more important than a grown-up, healthy woman. *(She seems to grow taller)* I have been left alone with my lovers. *(She takes off her riding jacket)* My body, the same body which produced you, the three of you, is not a factory. It is not a chemical factory. A part of the I.C.I. combine. *(She puts on the red gown that has been brought by Nelson with her slippers)* My body is an animal. And I like animals. I look after animals. I will allow no one to deprive them of the sustenance they need. *(She takes off her riding breeches, under her gown, and puts them beside the jacket on the armchair)* I give it what it needs, and I don't let it pine away and adulterate the clarity of my vision. And if you don't like it, you can go and psychoanalyse yourselves. *(To Mr. Oosky)* Do you approve?

OOSKY: I approve of half of what you say. But I admire it in its entirety. *(He moves towards her. He is now in the centre of the room. Right under the chandelier.)* You are great, Diana. However, you don't realise, perhaps, how difficult it is for your children to live in a world dominated by your personality . . .

DIANA: I am as much a part of the world they find around them as they are a part of the world I find around me. But . . . But perhaps I'm blind. Perhaps I don't see what I'm doing. If that is so, please tell me. Am I a bad mother?



Johnson.

STEVE: No, Mummy . . .

DIANA: Steve!

STEVE: No, Diana. You are wonderful. But you are so old-fashioned.

DIANA: Old-fashioned? I?

MARY: You don't believe in God.

DIANA: *(Reluctantly)* Yes . . . ? *(Turns to Steve)*

STEVE: You say Russian Sputniks are progress.

DIANA: *(Turning to John)* You have already made your accusation.

John shuts the piano with a bang. Steve puts his legs through the banister rails and starts swinging them. Mary, facing Mr. Oosky, silently tries out some twisting.

DIANA: Well, if you say so, I am old-fashioned. I got up at dawn, when you were still ruminating the ancient vapours of your modern dreams, I cooked myself a nice, smelly breakfast of eggs and bacon, (it was too early to wake Mrs. Shepherd up) and, yes, you may think it shocking to do such a thing at that hour, but I poured myself a glass of old-fashioned whiskey instead of sucking your coca cola through a double-barrelled plastic straw. By that time I had finished with my copy of The Times, and with the Daily Mirror as well. You may not know that the Daily Mirror is delivered to our house every morning, for Cook; her husband is a

candidate for the rural council, I don't know if you are aware of it, a very left-wing candidate, and I am going to vote for him. Not that his sympathies are mine, but I feel loyal to Cook, if you see what I mean. No, you don't. Anyway, at the time when your modern sub-consciousness was turning your earthly desires into silly symbols, I was writing instructions to Miss Penfold to renew my subscription to the New Statesman; to send a cheque to Father Huddleston; and to write to Earl Russell asking him to add my signature to his open letter against the H-Bomb. After which I took my horse and rode across the fields to The Brambles; the sun by then was just on top of . . . – however, a description of the scenery would bore you (beyond measure), it's enough to say that, when on the other side of the lake, I had a . . . Revelation. Suddenly, without any premonition, I *saw* what to answer my stockbroker who has been pestering me for a decision about my Anglo-Iranian shares. After that I recited to myself, from memory, a poem I had read in the Evergreen Review, a poem by a plaintive San Francisco beatnik-monk, then I shot the bird, I shot it straight through the heart, it dropped like a . . .

MARY: Mummy, please . . .

DIANA: . . . a stone. I inhaled the morning air, I rode back home, took the bird to the kitchen, apologised to the staff for the mess you left after your last night's party, came here, said old-fashionedly: 'What a glorious day!', upon which you dragged me into an idle modern conversation which is

nothing but neurotic nonsense.

MARY: If we are neurotics, it is your fault.

DIANA: Mine?

STEVE: She means: your generation's.

JOHN: You didn't prevent the war.

DIANA: Quite so. I'm sorry. I, Diana Fahrenheit, didn't prevent the war. It was very negligent of me, and I apologise . . . Incidentally, are you of the opinion that I should have tried to prevent the war by being *against* it or by being *for* it? Some people think that being *for* would have prevented the last war. What do you think? Nothing? Do you know that when war was approaching I was your present age? Why don't you do something to prevent the next one?

JOHN: It's different.

DIANA: Yes, I suppose it is. When I was a child, I thought I was what I would have become. So I looked towards the future to see what I was. And so every moment of my life became the dawn of a tomorrow. I expected things to happen, and still do. It's different with you. You seem to think that you are what you have become; so in order to find out who you are, you look backwards and treat the present moments of your lives as if they were sunsets of yesterday. At your age!

MARY: Mummy! If you say another word, I shall scream.

Sunsets or not sunsets, you know that if something in a machine has got into a mess, the first thing you have to do is put it right.

DIANA: A mended machine is a second-hand machine.

JOHN: You hate us! You simply hate us!

DIANA: No, John. But one doesn't mend a biological machine. One lets it grow. And you are wrong if you think that I hate you. I don't. I love you. I love you as you are. And I want you to grow into the future from where you are now, as you are. Why don't you come into the open, John, and make love to a pretty country girl? No, you sit at your piano, strike solitary notes, and indulge in the pleasure of hearing the vibrations of a single string. Interesting, but somewhat disappointing. *(She turns to Mary)* And you Mary, your Christian faith is like John's music. It is thin. Why don't you ask Mr. Oosky to rape you? Your virginity...

OOSKY: You misunderstand both Mary's feelings and my intentions.

DIANA: Perhaps . . .

STEVE: You haven't yet preached to me, Diana. Not that I particularly . . .

DIANA: To you, Steve, but you simply don't exist. You don't exist except in your gang. There, yes, I admit. I saw you roaring on your motorbike. In your gang you're brave and quite somebody. Without your pals, however, you are nothing.

Alone with the Universe, you don't know what to do with your hands and your legs. Why? Why can't you break something and take the consequences when you are without your pals? Well, I'm going to have a hot bath now.

Exit Diana, through the door on the left. Pause.

Mary, followed by Mr. Oosky, goes up the stairs to her room. Then Steve gets up and goes to his room. John alone. He gets up, crosses the room, stops at the armchair, picks up Diana's riding breeches with his left hand, her jacket with his right. Pause. Puts down the breeches. Lifts the jacket and smells it. As if he wants to check whether something he has read in his books is true or not. It seems not to have the expected effect on him. He puts it down. Walks to the window. Looks out. Sits down on one of the seven chairs at the back wall. Gets up and sits on another. Ditto and ditto. And again, slowly and methodically. He tries all the chairs. Parlour maid, a puzzled expression on her face, enters through the door on the right. She had the puzzled expression before she noticed John. John gets up and tries to embrace her.

MAID: Not now. I'm busy. Is your mother expecting anybody, do you know? There's a gentleman there who looks as if he has been invited to stay.

JOHN: Mother is in her bath. Go and ask her.

Clock strikes noon. Exit maid through door on left. John walks up and down. Stops under the chandelier. Walks back to the piano. Sits down. Opens the lid.

MAID: *(Re-entering)* She doesn't remember, but says she can't be sure.

She crosses the stage. John catches her, smells her hair, she frees herself, climbs the stairs, knocks on the first door (Mary's), and then goes straight to the second door and knocks. Steve opens it, she asks him about the visitor, inaudibly; he evidently doesn't know anything about it. The first door opens, Mary in it – ditto. Both doors shut, Maid goes down, John is now at the piano, Maid crosses the stage and exits through the door on the left. John strikes one note on the piano and listens to its sound attentively for a long while. Maid comes back, crosses the stage quickly, disappears through the door on the right and at once appears again, letting in Mr. Barnum. He is Diana's age. It is not known whether he has ever served with the R.A.F., but he has that kind of moustache and manner. Maid feels awkward about the two suitcases he is carrying, but he doesn't let her touch them. He stands right under the chandelier.

SCENE TWO

MAID: Madam says would you excuse her, sir; she will be with you in a moment. *(Exit)*

Mr. Barnum throws a short glance at the chandelier. After a while, lifts his head again and looks at it pensively, when suddenly John strikes another note.

BARNUM: *(Startled)* How do you do, sir! I apologise, I didn't notice your presence. My name is Barnum, Joshua Hieronymous Barnum.

Diana has entered during this sentence. She is in tweeds now, but her hair is still as it was when she was in her bath.

DIANA: *(Who has evidently heard the name, comes towards Mr. Barnum, her arm extending to shake hands)* I hope you have had a nice journey, Mr. Barnum.

BARNUM: *(Very rapidly)* I have indeed. Admirable! I love travelling by country buses. Though sometimes I miss one. As I did this morning. Which is the reason for my arriving half an hour later . . .

JOHN: Later than what?

BARNUM: Later than I would have done otherwise. How strange! N'est-ce pas? Whenever somebody misses a bus, I ask myself: How many subsequent events would have taken a different course if he had caught it? So much of the fate of so many people is the outcome of such simple things as misread bus timetables, n'est-ce pas? And I missed mine just by a split second. My foot was already on the step. But with these heavy things to carry . . .

DIANA: I must call Nelson to take care of your suitcases, Mr. Barnum. I am . . .

She turns towards the bell, but stops eagerly when Mr. Barnum protests.

BARNUM: Oh no no no no! It's quite all right. Besides, they are not suitcases. Not really. Though what I intended to say was something different. Suppose I lift my foot *(he demonstrates)* at a certain moment, and suppose it is the very last moment in which I can board the bus. Now, suppose I lift my

foot again, and suppose it is the very first moment in which I am bound to miss it. Do you follow me?

DIANA: I follow you with pleasure.

BARNUM: Well, how big do you think is the split second between those two moments? It cannot be nothing, because then the two moments would be one and the same moment, which is not possible, because we cannot at the same time both board a bus and miss it. On the other hand, the distance between the two moments cannot be so big that we could divide it in two. Because if there were room for us to be in between, we should be both too late to board the bus and too early to miss it.

Mary, who a short while before entered through her door and is now coming down the stairs, followed by Mr. Oosky, as previously, misses her step and stumbles. At that moment Steve enters, looks round anxiously, then sits down on the floor of the balcony, his legs dangling in the air as before.

MARY: *(To nobody)* Damn!

OOSKY: *(To nobody)* High heels!

DIANA: Mr. Barnum, the young lady who has just fallen down the stairs and is reclining now on the floor is my daughter Mary. The shadow you see behind her is the Reverend Fred Oosky. The rubber soles dangling in the air belong to my son Steve. And you have already met, I think, my other son John and his musical box. *(They howdoyou do each other)* Mr. Barnum was just telling us about his

idea of time. Were you not, Mr. Barnum? He thinks Time is not a River, but a String of Pearls. Very minute pearls. But unbreakable.

OOSKY: How very interesting!

BARNUM: Thank you . . .

MARY: *(To Diana)* Unbreakable! I might have broken my leg and you wouldn't even have noticed.

BARNUM: *(To Diana)* You put it in a nutshell.

DIANA: *(To Mary)* I would, darling.

BARNUM: *(To Diana)* Take, for instance, Matter.

DIANA: *(To Mary)* But you wouldn't have broken your leg. Nothing ever happens to you.

MARY: *(To Mr. Barnum)* I am *not* interested in Matter.

BARNUM: Exactly. We divide Matter into atoms. But as soon as we try to divide atoms, they become something else: waves, energy, linguistic problems. Anything but Matter. So why be interested in it?

DIANA: *(To Mary)* Sometimes I wish you *would* break your leg and grow up.

BARNUM: In my humble opinion, something very similar happens to Time. You can divide it into a String of Pearls. *(He bows to Diana)* But if you try to cut a single pearl in two, it ceases to be a pearl of Time and becomes something else.

DIANA: What?

BARNUM: I don't know. It's up to the scientists to find out.

MARY: Pooh!

STEVE: *(To Mr. Barnum)* Are you a scientist?

DIANA: *(Reproach)* Steve!

Steve stops dangling his legs and draws them back.

OOSKY: I have already said that your theory is interesting. Yet, before I subscribe to it, I need to know what is its bearing on Eternity and the Immortality of the soul.

Steve sticks his legs out and starts swinging them again.

BARNUM: I'm afraid I couldn't commit myself as far as that. But I *can* tell you why wolves howl at the full moon.

DIANA: How exciting! Won't you sit down, Mr. Barnum?
(She sits in her armchair)

BARNUM: *(Sits on his two cases)* Thank you.

John strikes E flat on the piano.

BARNUM: *(Listens attentively, then says)* E flat.

JOHN: Correct.

He strikes G.

BARNUM: *(As before)* G.

John approves, and strikes F and F sharp simultaneously three times.

BARNUM: F and F sharp!

DIANA: John! Can't we have a single second without being disturbed by an excerpt from Webern? Mr. Barnum is going to tell us how his theory of Time and Mr. Oosky's Immortality of the soul combine to make wolves howl at the full moon. It must be extremely interesting.

BARNUM: Precisely. You've put my point in a nutshell, Mrs. ffahrenheit. N'est-ce pas?

STEVE: Are you French?

BARNUM: No, why?

MARY: Shut up, Steve.

STEVE: Are you a Jew?

DIANA: Steve, how can you? There has never been a single Jew in this house. I wouldn't know one if I saw one. *(To Mr. Barnum)* You mustn't pay any attention to my children, Mr. Barnum. They are so Aristotelian, or is it Platonic? Steve thinks that everything one talks about exists. Especially if it is talked about in the newspapers. Mary thinks that everything she can feel exists, especially if it

comes from her glands. John thinks that everything he does exists, especially if it is something of short duration and which dissolves, like his music, in the air. They have read neither Earl Russell nor Count Korzybski, Mr. Barnum. All they read is Wittgenstein and Sartre. "Intimacy," you know. People say that there is more depth in Sartre, but I know all the gossip about Professor Ayer and I think he is more bottomless. Are you comfortable where you are, Mr. Barnum?

BARNUM: I am, thank you.

DIANA: Then pray continue

BARNUM: *(Draws out the end of an electric wire from a side compartment of his white suitcase and goes with it to an electric socket in the wall)* Two hundred and forty?

STEVE: Yeah!

Mr. Barnum inserts the plug. The sound of an electric motor swells and then fades as Mr. Barnum pulls out the plug.

BARNUM: *(Coiling up the wire and putting it back into the compartment of the suitcase)* This is, more or less, how the wolf howls. *(Pause)* The point is, you see, that dead bodies smell.

OOSKY: They do.

BARNUM: And neither men nor wolves like the smell of dead bodies.

OOSKY: A slight whiff of the smell men *may* like, especially if it is mixed with the smell of incense. But I don't know about wolves.

BARNUM: I know about wolves. I know everything about wolves. They just simply hate it. Look how they *eat*. They don't eat, they shut their eyes and they *devour*. To get rid of the bloody delicious flesh as fast as possible. And not to leave a trace to go bad. The very expectation of smelling the smell of dead bodies makes them sick. The anaerobic process of decomposing proteins . . .

MARY: Mr. Barnum, if you say another word I shall scream!

BARNUM: Precisely. That is precisely how *they* feel. You see, it is all right when they are really hungry. When they are really hungry, nothing will stop them from killing and eating. It is also all right when their stomachs are full; nothing prevents them then from going away from the smell they don't like. It is only somewhere in between, when they are hungry enough to want to eat but not hungry enough to ignore the expectation of the smell, that they are torn by their own nervous system into two opposite directions; the result is that their whole inside begins to tremble and vibrate, and this trembling and vibration focuses on their larynx, and when a gasp of air passes through it, it is given the shape of this vibration, and it is this shape, this column of trembling air, that we call the wolf's howling. (*Pause*) We could as well call it a hymn, a psalm, or a prayer.

OOSKY: *(Reproachfully)* Mr. Barnum!

BARNUM: *(Confidentially, or conspiratorially, to Mr. Oosky)*
It's all right, Mr. Oosky.

He is standing now. He glances at his wrist watch. He has made a long journey, and hasn't yet heard any indication that he'll be invited to lunch. He is evidently hungry. He swallows, sniffs the air, looks at the door. Then resumes his talk. He is an old actor playing Hamlet, but only for a fraction of a second.

BARNUM: For wolves, it is: to kill, or not to be. *(Pause)* Yet "to kill" means: decomposed proteins – and decomposed proteins mean the smell they hate. This particular smell to the wolf is like the word "death" to us. And the smell "death" for a wolf, like the word "death" for us, spells "not to be, or not to be," and the wolf feels baffled by this, his own, particular physiological linguistics; he feels trapped by this language of smells and actions; he neither knows a logical positivist who would tell him that the smell is *not* the thing it represents, nor has he a priest to teach him when it is moral to suppress one's nausea and kill, and when it is not. It is not too bad during the day time. In day time there are so many things going on in the wood to detract his attention from this conflict. *(With sudden depth of feeling)* But when the night has come, the wolf sits on his hind legs and doesn't understand; or, if you prefer it, feels that something is wrong, feels some lack of logic. If he has been created a carnivorous animal, as he has, why is he endowed with that dislike of the smell of decomposed proteins, the smell of death? And

if he is created allergic to the smell, why can't he survive on grass, or minerals? He can't answer the question. Who could? He feels he is *the bone in the throat* of God, he feels he is the marrow of Universal Tragedy, the centre of Eternal Conflict, and when the full moon rises in the black sky and pulls his eyes toward her pale face, his throbbing larynx produces the howl which, for him, replaces what, for us, would be a doleful lay, or a philosophical treatise, or a theological dissertation.

MARY: *(Who for some time now has been cruising around the suitcases, trying to find out what they are, stops and says sweetly)* Mr. Barnum, wouldn't you be more comfortable on one of those chairs?

BARNUM: *(Gets up, becoming himself again)* Oh? Thank you.

While he moves upstage, Mary lightly kicks the cases, and finds they are very heavy. She is now standing between them, and right below the chandelier.

MARY: *(To herself)* Good heavens!

OOSKY: What is it?

MARY: I don't know. My intuition told me something, but I seem to have become too civilized to understand what it was.

DIANA: *(To Mr. Barnum, rather sternly)* Mr. Barnum, I must ask you a question.

BARNUM: *(To Diana)* Please do *not*. It isn't that I don't want

to answer it. I will. But . . .

MARY: *(To Mr. Barnum)* I don't believe w . . .

DIANA: But?

STEVE: *(To Diana)* Ask him if he's a zoo-keeper.

DIANA: But?

BARNUM: *(Continuing)* You see, my wife . . .

DIANA: *(To Mr. Barnum)* Your wife . . . ?

MARY: *(Louder)* Mr. Barnum, I don't believe w . . .

BARNUM: *(Continuing)* I'm sure my wife is . . .

DIANA: Oh, you should have been asked to come with your wife; I'm so sorry.

BARNUM: I'm sure my wife is now sitting in her room in Dolphin Square, dreaming of a mink coat, as usual, . . . and

DIANA: *(Shocked)* A mink coat? No!

BARNUM: You see? And my child is playing with her hula-hoop, and they are waiting . . .

MARY: *(Shouting)* Mr. Barnum, I don't believe wolves dislike killing.

BARNUM: *(To Mary)* I beg your pardon?

MARY: You said wolves don't like killing. I don't believe it.

BARNUM: I didn't say they don't like killing. I said they don't like smelling.

DIANA: Hula-hoop . . .

OOSKY: Mr. Barnum, you clearly implied that the root of the flower of ethics springs from some physiological contradictions. That may be so, so far as your wolves are concerned. *Our* ethics, however, *human* ethics, begin with a Revelation, which is as it should be. Because without a revelation, nothing is really ever intellectual. Without a revelation, everything turns in solipsist hula-hoops, round and round and round . . . (*He demonstrates*)

DIANA: (*Provokingly*) And with . . . ?

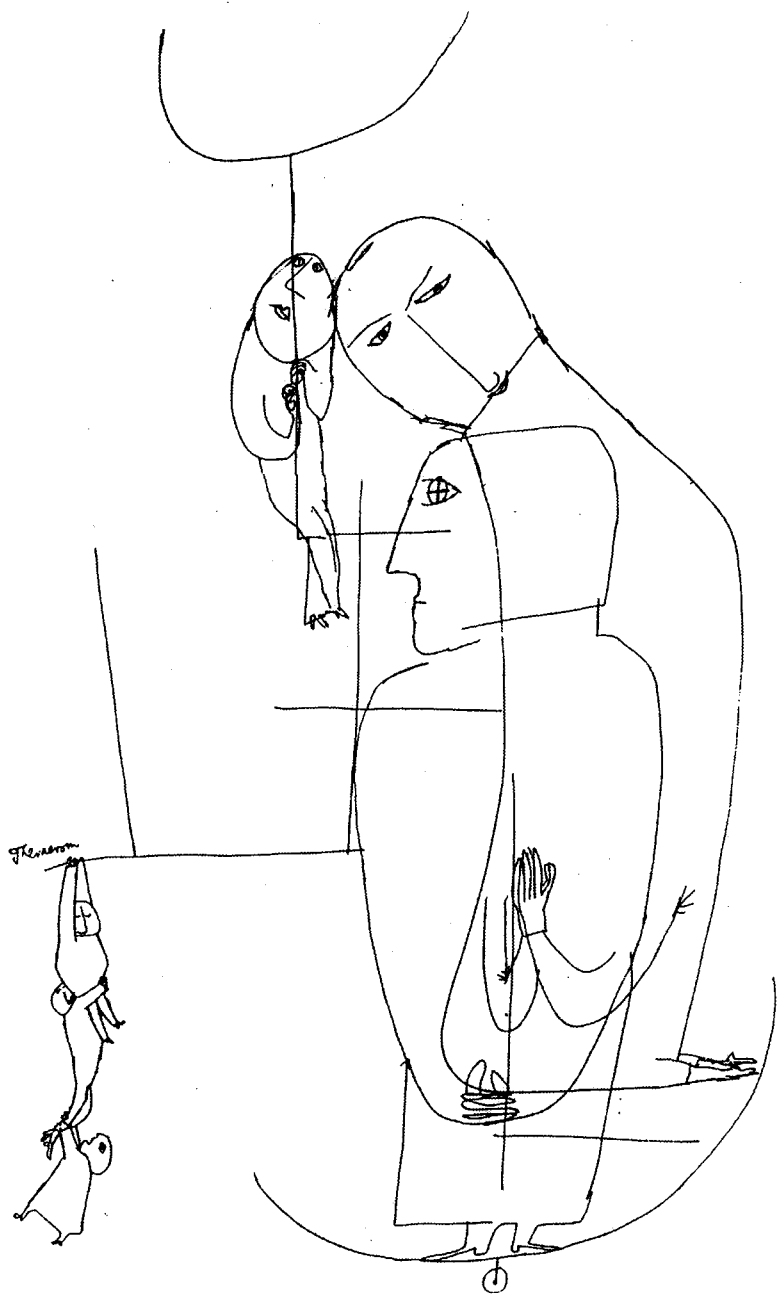
JOHN: (*Promptly*) And with a revelation, everything is straight and straight and straight, like a . . . Ha ha ha!

MARY: (*Gaily*) John! That's the first time I've ever heard you laugh!

DIANA: What a happy sight! Look, John is laughing!

OOSKY: You are not an atheist, John! I hope . . .

JOHN: Don't be frightened of atheists, Mr. Oosky. Your arch adversary is the devil, not the atheist. And he could not afford to be an atheist. He would lose



his raison d'être.

OOSKY: The Devil is not an atheist. But atheism is his work.

MARY: What do you think about Love, Mr. Barnum? Have you ever considered . . .

DIANA: Leave Mr. Barnum alone, Mary. He must be allowed a quiet moment to think about his beautiful wife, and his child who is playing with her hula-hoop.

STEVE: He didn't say his wife was beautiful.

MARY: . . . have you ever considered Love as the basic concept, the golden key for the understanding of the Universe?

DIANA: What a bore you are.

MARY: Let *him* answer.

DIANA: Good manners are more important than Love. I'm sure Mr. Barnum would prefer to be left alone by a wolf who hates his smell, than be killed by a Christian who loves his soul.

OOSKY: Such preference may be acceptable as a matter of expediency. Not as a principle. Love is divine. Therefore ethic without God . . .

JOHN: If Mr. Barnum's theory is correct, and the origin of all our ethics is the conflict between our need for flesh and our dislike of its decomposed smell,

then your enemies, Mr. Oosky, are called not 'atheists' but 'deodorisers'! Remove the smell of death, and the foundation of ethics vanishes into thin air. Ha ha ha!

BARNUM: *(Who has ignored Mary's oration, moves towards John and repeats his last words)* Precisely! Just as you said. "Remove the smell of death!" Ladies and gentlemen! An air of putrefaction encircles us. Whether we are aware of it or not, it enters our nostrils and plays havoc with our nervous system. Do you think it is a coincidence that all the great religions were born in warm countries, where the anaerobic process of decomposing proteins is quick, and the effect enormous? No. It isn't a coincidence. The Kings of Egypt tried to embalm their bodies, the funeral pyres of India oxidized them in the flames, grave-diggers hurried to bury the proteins in graves, medical men kept them in formalin, cooks salted them, boiled them, braised them, grilled them, invented a hundred methods of keeping the odour of death away from the nutritive cells, but it is still hovering around us. *(He sniffs)* Don't I feel the smell of a dead bird in this house? Does it not ooze into this room and poison your mind, your feelings, your life? And it is so easy to get rid of it irrevocably. Ladies and gentlemen! *(He lifts, or points to the white case)* Here is a really effective, reliable and compact piece of modern equipment designed to produce and utilise both sound energy and refrigeration for the disintegration of contamination and disruption of micro-organisms, lysis of red blood corpuscles, depolymerisation of molecules, dispersion of solid and liquid particles – you put your bird in, and the

breeze of death is removed from it instantly and for ever. Ladies and gentlemen, this is a portable, (I have carried it myself in one hand) ultra-sonic disintegrator-cum-refrigerator. And this, ladies and gentlemen, (*He points to the black case*) is an equally portable, self-contained, constant feedback temperature-controlled deep-wave cooker, browning your decontaminated, death-free sustenance from the very inside . . .

JOHN: (*Turning on him wildly*) Shut up.

Mr. Barnum is never out of his depth. He scrutinizes the others, one by one.

DIANA: (*Half-dreamily, to herself*) Mink coat . . . hula-hoop . . .

STEVE: Good show, Mr. Barnum.

OOSKY: I should like to see you helping us at the Church Bazaar, Mr. Barnum.

MARY: I think you are sweet, Mr. Barnum. You know, a short while ago I wanted to ask you to take your shoe off.

They look at her enquiringly.

MARY: To see whether he hasn't got a cloven hoof, you sillies.

DIANA: (*To herself*) Hula-hoop and mink coat. (*To Mr. Barnum*) Does your wife really dream of having a mink coat?

BARNUM: Oh no. She isn't as foolish as that.

DIANA: How does she dress?

STEVE: Mr. Barnum, what do you think of the future of the world?

BARNUM: *(Scrutinizes Diana from the top to toe)* She dresses exactly like you do. *(Pause)* I didn't tell you that before, because . . .

DIANA: Never mind why you didn't tell me. Mr. Barnum, you are a marvellous salesman, and I . . .

STEVE: Mr. Barnum, would you consider becoming our public relations officer? You must have heard about our group.

DIANA: Steve, haven't I been asking you, since you were one year old, not to interrupt me when I am busy? I am discussing business with Mr. Barnum. I am in possession of something which I am confident Mr. Barnum will be able to sell for me at a considerable profit. *(Mr. Barnum is speechless. Diana turns to him:)* Mr. Barnum, I offer you a commission of 20%, provided it is sold at or above the price it cost at the time it was manufactured, taking into consideration the devaluation of the pound during the last 20 years, and . . .

MARY: *(With suspicion)* What are you going to sell?

DIANA: I am going to sell your father's coffin.

BARNUM: *(Stupified)* A coffin? Is your husband dead?

DIANA: Of course not, Mr. Barnum. How can you? The coffin is quite empty. You will see it in a moment. *(She goes to the wall and rings the bell)* It is heavily built, approximately your size, quite decent, no silly ornaments . . .

JOHN: Diana, you can't sell Daddy's coffin, you simply can't!

DIANA: It is not I, it is Mr. Barnum who is going to sell it for me, John. And there is no reason for you . . . *(She notices the parlour maid who has just entered by the door on the left)* Peggy, please go to my bedroom and bring your master's coffin. Mr. Barnum wishes to see it.

PEGGY: *(Unconcerned)* Did you say: coffin, Madam?

DIANA: Yes, Peggy. Ask Nelson to help you.

PEGGY: Very well, Madam *(Exit)*.

STEVE: And what will Daddy do if you sell his coffin and he has to pronounce another sentence of guilty?

DIANA: He will have to spend the night in my bed instead. And it may do his soul a lot of good, Steve. *(Turning to Mr. Barnum)* You may not know, Mr. Barnum, that my husband is a hopelessly moral man, who insists on paying his debts. Psychological debts. He hasn't any others. And so, whenever the jury's verdict obliges him to put

on the black cap and pronounce the usual formula, he comes here and spends the night in his coffin. These are about the only occasions when he comes home. When you come to think of it, we do not see him here very often . . . Fortunately! . . . or unfortunately? *(Reflectively)* You know, Mr. Barnum, sometimes I feel like one of your howling wolves, I feel the stress of two contradictory directives, and become quite hysterical about it. I want my husband to come home, and at the same time I *don't* want him to come home. I want him to come because I can't stand the sight of the empty coffin. And at the same time I dread his coming, because he snores, and it is grotesque to see a judge snoring in a coffin when each sound reminds you that at that very moment, somewhere, in a prison, there is a man, a criminal, who is going to be hanged by the neck until he is dead.

BARNUM: *(Overcome)* Mrs. Fahrenheit, I . . . *(He was going to say that he would do his best, but he stops suddenly, as if forcing himself out of a spell)* What the devil! I came here to sell, not to buy! A coffin! You were pulling my leg, Madam.

DIANA: *(Promptly)* Were you not with your hula-hoop!

BARNUM: *(Startled)* Hula-hoop?

DIANA: Hula-hoop!

BARNUM: *(Rapidly)* I am not selling any hula-hoops! I am giving you a unique chance of acquiring a portable ultrasonic disintegrator-cum-refrigerator

and an equally portable diathermic short wave deep-penetration cooker and baker.

JOHN: *(Turning on him, firmly)* We are not interested.

BARNUM: *(Attacking)* Neither am I!

JOHN: *(Taken aback)* You sounded as if you were . . .

BARNUM: *(Energetically)* Nonsense, my dear sir. I don't care a damn. Why should I? They bore me to death. They make me feel sick. Why should I be interested in these pitiful gadgets wherein the marvels of modern science have been dishonoured by being applied to trivial domestic purposes? I am interested in orders, not in cookers! Give me your order, sir, and you may do with these two boxes whatever you wish. *(He kicks the boxes. He takes two sheets of paper out of his pocket and a fountain pen).* The boxes are of no importance. Sign these two orders, and you can throw the boxes out of the window.

JOHN: *(With determination)* All right. *(He signs one of the papers)*

Mr. Barnum gives him the second paper.

JOHN: *(After having signed the other paper)* And now help me to throw them out of the window.

John lifts the white box and gestures to Mr. Barnum to lift the other. They go to the left window. Without hesitating, John throws his box out. Howling voices outside. But John has already taken the black box from Mr. Barnum's hands and thrown it too. At the

same moment Steve, who is sitting on the balcony, opposite the window, gives a shout. But it is too late.

STEVE: (As indicated above) Stop it, John.

Long, dead silence. Steve jumps up, rushes along the gallery, down the stairs, and disappears through the door on the right. After a moment Diana approaches the window, looks out, takes a step backwards; covers her face with her hands, then crosses the stage and goes out through the same door. The others follow her, all except Mr. Barnum.

At this moment the door on the left opens and Peggy, the parlour maid, enters, followed by Nelson, both carrying the coffin. They look round, puzzled at seeing the hall empty; they take no notice of Mr. Barnum. They put the coffin down, parallel to the footlights, right under the chandelier. Peggy goes to the window on the left and shuts it, without looking out. Puzzled, they exit through the door on the right. Mr. Barnum crosses the stage towards the piano. He has to go round the coffin. He stands at the piano. Sits down on the piano stool. Turns round. He takes the two sheets of paper out of his breast pocket, looks at the signatures, and puts them back again. He turns on the piano stool in the opposite direction, He strikes one note on the piano; he takes a sandwich out of his side pocket. Unwraps it. Has a bite. He puts the sandwich on top of the piano. He crosses the stage and disappears through the door on the left.

After a moment he comes back carrying a glass of water, obviously taken from the bathroom, in his right hand and, absentmindedly, a toothbrush in his left. When he is in the middle of the room, going towards the piano, the maid appears hurriedly through the door on the right, rushing towards the door on the left. She notices, however, the glass of water in Mr. Barnum's hand, snatches it from him and runs out through the door on the right. Mr. Barnum

approaches the piano, puts the toothbrush by the side of the sandwich. Takes the sandwich and sits down, but gets up immediately, puts the sandwich back on top of the piano, crosses the stage, disappears through the door on the left and, after a moment, comes back carrying another glass of water in his right hand and another toothbrush in his left. He puts the toothbrush on top of the piano, picks up the sandwich, sits down, has another bite. Drinks some water.

He gets up, puts the sandwich and the glass on top of the piano.

He walks upstage, looks at the portrait of the Judge hanging on the wall there. Looks out of the window, looks at the portrait again. While he is doing that, the maid and Nelson come in through the door on the right, take the coffin and carry it out through the same door.

Mr. Barnum turns round, stops at the place where the coffin was, goes to the piano, sits on the piano stool, turns round. Takes the two sheets of paper out of his breast pocket, refolds them differently, and puts them back again. He turns on the stool in the opposite direction, then, with one finger, tries a few notes. He plays them almost staccato, with very long pauses between the notes.

Through the door on the right John appears, in a state of utter despair, running in and across the stage towards the door on the left, through which he disappears. Mr. Barnum gets up, undecided. He stands under the chandelier, goes back to the piano, takes another bite of the sandwich and a sip of water. Puts the sandwich and glass back on top of the piano, sits down and waits.

The clock strikes one.

SCENE THREE

Through the door on the right the "cortege" enters. Mr. Oosky and Steve in front, Nelson and the chauffeur at the back, carrying the coffin on their shoulders. Mary walks on one side, Diana on the other. Peggy, with a large parcel in brown paper in her arms, follows.

In the coffin the Judge sits stiffly, his chin haughtily lifted, implacable. He holds a stick with a gold knob in his right hand.

JUDGE: So that is how I am received in my own home. *(Pause)* And the photographers will be here any minute now.

DIANA: Photographers? To do what?

JUDGE: To photograph. *(Pause)* To take a picture of me resting serenely in the bosom of my family, and publish it in the glossy magazines you read in Harley Street. *(Pause. He touches Mr. Oosky shoulder with his stick.)* It is all your doing, Mr. Oosky.

OOSKY: *(Astonished, but he cannot possibly turn round because of the coffin he is carrying)* My doing, Sir?

JUDGE: In the Civil Service Hierarchy, the Cabinet Minister who sits at the top of the ladder is responsible for the clerk who makes a nuisance of himself at its foot. I understand that in your establishment, it is the footstool that is responsible

for the headgear.

OOSKY: It may be so, though I have never thought about it. Do you mean to say, sir, that I am responsible for the Archbishop?

JUDGE: I do. You are.

OOSKY: Well, I am sorry, Sir. And I should like to know what he has done.

JUDGE: He found it to be his pastoral duty to tell the Prime Minister that according to certain information which had been brought to his attention, I had not spent a night in my country home for almost two years, which fact, according to him, is damaging to my reputation. Well, I could hardly tell the Prime Minister that I see my wife every first Sunday after Hilary, after Easter, after Trinity and after Michaelmas at a Brighton hotel, which is nearer, and where we are far more comfortable than here.

MARY: Oh, Father!

JUDGE: *(To the coffin bearers)* Try to keep still, if you can.

MARY: *(To Diana)* Oh, Diana!

DIANA: *(To the Judge)* Let me call the doctor, please Cecil.

MARY: *(To the Judge)* Oh, I am so happy! I am so happy!

JUDGE: We are all glad to hear that you feel happy, Mary, and would like to know why.

DIANA: Wouldn't you be more comfortable if they put you down on the floor, Cecil? You must feel giddy up there.

JUDGE: I am perfectly comfortable as I am, Diana. I enjoy this position, which gives me a new view of the whole situation.

MARY: Oh, Daddy!

JUDGE: (*Admonitorily*) Mary!

MARY: Oh, Father! . . .

STEVE: Diana doesn't like us to call her Mother, and Father doesn't like us to call him Dad.

JUDGE: I do not see any inconsistency in that, Sir. Do you?

STEVE: I don't know. I suppose there isn't any, Father.

OOSKY: I hope you didn't mean to say, Sir, that I have been providing the Archbishop with information concerning your private life.

JUDGE: Certainly not, Mr. Oosky. Certainly not. I know that you are incapable of doing anything that could better your position in this world. (*To Mary*) I believe, Mary, you wished to tell us why you feel happy.

MARY: *(Candidly)* I feel happy, Father, because you said you had come home to be photographed. Because I had been thinking that you had come as you used to, Father, because you had condemned a man and wanted to . . .

JUDGE: *(To Diana, stiffly)* Diana.

DIANA: Yes, Cecil.

JUDGE: I thought it was tacitly understood between us that that subject was not to be discussed in this house, ever. Since she was a little girl, Mary has been forbidden to make any mention of it. Has she not?

DIANA: She is no longer a little girl, Cecil.

MARY: I resent being talked about as if I were miles away. All I said was . . .

JUDGE: You misinterpreted what I told you. I said that photographers were coming to photograph me. I did not say I came to be photographed. I have come to celebrate. *(To Diana)* Did you remember that today is our silver anniversary?

DIANA: Yes. I read about it in The Times this morning.

JUDGE: Dear old Times. Always there with the news on the breakfast table.

OOSKY: *(Without turning his head)* Congratulations, Sir. All my best wishes, Diana.

DIANA: Thank you.

OOSKY: 't's all right.

JUDGE: If you open the parcel I have brought, you will find something in it that I hoped might please you. *(The maid takes the parcel over to Diana)* I am sorry if it looks a little as if it has been trampled on by a mad elephant, but when the first incredible box fell from the window and shattered my big toe, I showed, I think, great presence of mind by putting the parcel on my head and thus protecting it from the second. I must confess that that rainfall of boxes still remains a mystery to me.

DIANA: *(Who has opened the parcel)* A mink coat! *(She holds the coat in front of her and will put it on presently)*

BARNUM: *(Who, unseen by the Judge, has all this time been standing by the piano)* A mink coat! Ha!

JUDGE: Who is that? *(To Mr. Oosky and Steve, touching them with his stick)* Turn round, please, gentlemen. Turn round.

The coffin turns round so that the Judge can now face Mr. Barnum.

JUDGE: *(Calmly)* Are you one of my wife's lovers, Sir?

BARNUM: Not at all, Sir, I'm afraid . . .

JUDGE: *(Interrupting)* I do not wish to hear any details.

BARNUM: I have none to . . .

JUDGE: *(Noticing the sandwich on top of the piano)* You shouldn't let her feed you on sandwiches. You should ask for a proper meal. It is luncheon time, is it not? May I see the glass, if you don't mind.

Mr. Barnum passes the glass to him. He sniffs at it and gives it back.

JUDGE: Water! How absurd! And unexpected, Mr. . .

BARNUM: Barnum is the name. Joshua Hieronymous Barnum. A travelling salesmann who has just chanced to pay his first visit here this morning, if it pleases your Lordship.

JUDGE: Mr. Barnum, I am "my Lordship" only for criminals . . . and barristers. *(He chuckles)* For my friends I am Mr. Fahrenheit.

BARNUM: Sir, you force me to disclose that I am Mr. Barnum only for my clients. For my friends I am Mr. Straker.

JUDGE: *(After having searched in his memory)* Straker, Sir? The name sounds familiar . . .

BARNUM: I believe it might . . .

DIANA: Cecil, I insist on sending for the doctor. The mink coat might have protected your head, but your big toe was black and swollen . . .

JUDGE: *(Ignoring her)* You are not . . . What was the name? . . . *David* Straker?

BARNUM: No. How could I be? Unless I were his ghost.

DIANA: Mr. Barnum, I apologise for not having offered you any whiskey or asked you to share our meal with us, but as you see . . .

BARNUM: *(Ignoring her)* He died two years ago. As you may remember.

JUDGE: Are you . . . a relation . . . Mr. Barnum?

BARNUM: That is so, your Lordship.

JUDGE: I asked you not to address me thus, Mr. Barnum.

BARNUM: I'm sorry. But you see, I have been addressing you that way so many times in my dreams . . .

MARY: *(Her voice is very strong and clear; there is an authority in it; it cannot be ignored)* What were you saying to my father in your dreams, Mr. Barnum?

BARNUM: Night after night, asleep or in sleepless dreams, all through the long trial, I knelt again and again in front of your berobed and bewigged father, saying: "Why do you not believe him, My Lord? I *am* my brother's keeper, My Lord, and I know that he is innocent. You see, My Lord, don't you, every word he says condemns him and brings him nearer to his grave, but it is because he is innocent that he says them, an imbecile, but an innocent, who does not see where blind adherence to the truth is leading him. If you believe him when he

condemns himself, My Lord, why do you not believe him when he says that he is innocent?"
(Pause) That was, more or less, what I was saying to your father whenever he came into my dreams, Miss Fahrenheit.

Silence

JUDGE: Mr. Barnum, would I be right if I were to say that your presence here is not due to pure coincidence?

BARNUM: I think you would be right if you were to say that, Sir.

JUDGE: Perhaps you may judge that I am entitled to know what its purpose is?

BARNUM: A river rises not in order to make a breach in its banks, but because too much water has accumulated in it. What has accumulated in me can be called, I think, . . . *(He looks for a word)* – curiosity.

JUDGE: Pray continue.

DIANA: Please, Cecil, you can't ask them to carry that weight any longer.

The Judge lifts his hand to silence her.

DIANA: And I think we should ask the doctor to come . . .

JUDGE: *(Ignoring her)* You said: curiosity.

BARNUM: Curiosity! Yes, curiosity. I wanted to know, to see

with my own eyes, how he looks, without his robe and wig, in the privacy of his home, the man who killed David Straker.

JUDGE: I will not allow that expression in this c . . . (*He coughs*) It seems to me strange that you do not know the working of the law. The man in question was found guilty by the jury. When that is done, there remains nothing for the judge but the formality of putting the black cap on his head and pronouncing the sentence. After which, the course of justice proceeds along the road provided for it by the law of the land.

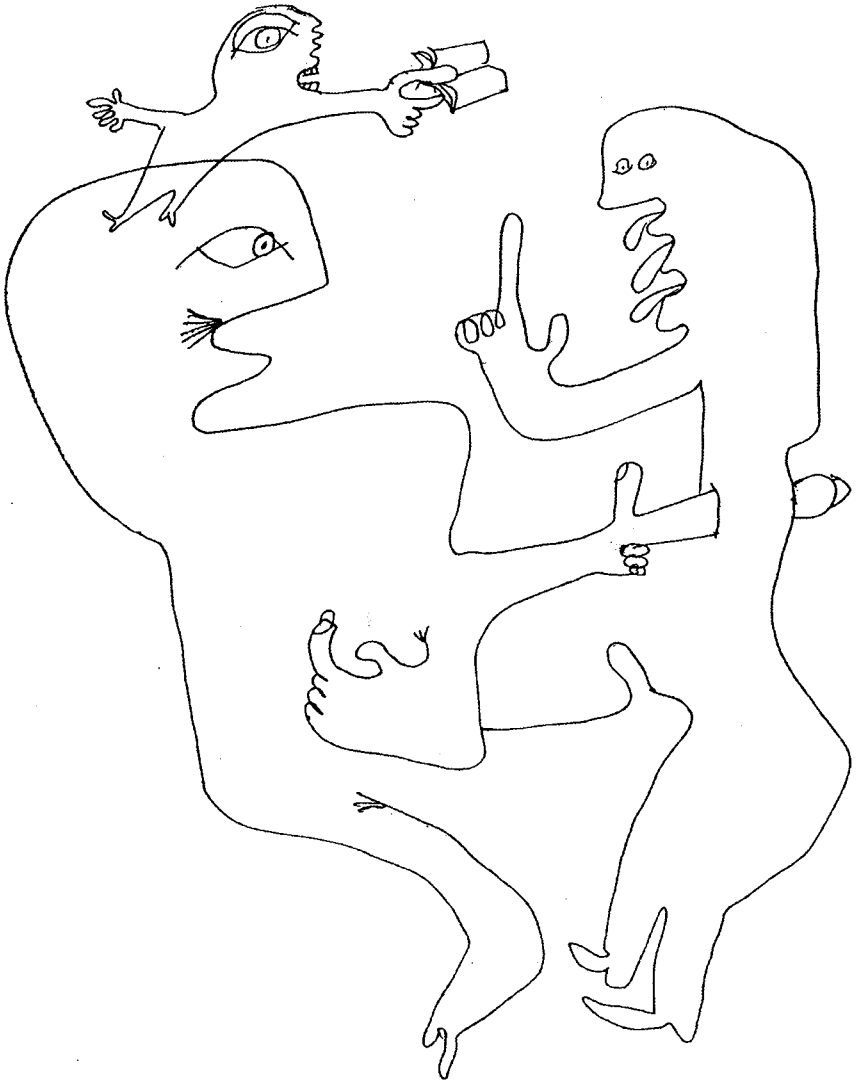
BARNUM: And the word “killing” is not used. You cannot pin it on to anybody’s clothes. Neither to the Sunday jackets of the twelve gentlemen of the jury, who are told to answer only one question: Guilty, or Not Guilty, nor to your ermine into which you retract like a snail into its shell, nor to the apron of the executioner who is nothing more than the final prolongation of this anonymous mechanism. My goodness! I am glad I came. Look – what a picture! (*He points to the coffin*) What a picture!

JUDGE: If your curiosity is now satisfied, Mr. Barnum . . .

STEVE: Mr. Barnum, you’re a fine guy!

JUDGE: Steve, *I* am talking to Mr. Barnum.

STEVE: With your permission, Father, I wanted to ask Mr. Barnum whether he has also visited the jurymen...



BARNUM: I have. I have visited 10 gentlemen of the jury in their homes. The remaining two unfortunately happened to die in the meantime.

STEVE: And . . . ?

BARNUM: I sold them seven refrigerators, five vacuum cleaners, one kitchen table, one electric fan and two washing machines.

STEVE: Good show!

BARNUM: Life must go on, you know!

DIANA: Steve, keep still. You'll make your Father seasick if you go on fidgeting.

MARY: *(Who has been crumpling a bit of brown paper in her hands, tears it in two)* Mr. Barnum, if you say another word, I shall scream! I asked you before, but you weren't listening. Did you never consider Love as the key that solves all problems . . .

DIANA: *(She is in her mink coat now)* Be careful, Mary. Love is a wild animal that must be kept on a lead. And a very complicated lead it is. It must be short enough to allow the butcher to kill the lamb, but it must be long enough to prevent us from destroying each other.

BARNUM: I agree, Madam.

JUDGE: Mr. Barnum, I was saying that if you curiosity is now satisfied, we shall take leave of you and

proceed.

BARNUM: There is still one thing I should like to know.

JUDGE: Yes?

BARNUM: *(Slowly)* Where is John?

JUDGE: John? Who is John?

BARNUM: Your son, John. *(He strikes one note on the piano)*

DIANA: John! Where is John!

MARY: John!

Mary and Diana exit. Mr. Barnum exits. The coffin moves off. The Judge looks at the chandelier as they pass under it. Then he stops the bearers.

JUDGE: Stop for a moment, will you. Go back two paces. I knew there was something wrong with that chandelier. Look, the chain isn't on the hook. All it is hanging on is two thin electric wires. It must be put right at once. Will you see to it, Nelson?

NELSON: Yes Sir.

JUDGE: Then let us move.

The coffin moves slowly towards the opening on the left, through which they disappear. The maid collects the brown paper, the gun that was left under the window, then Diana's riding breeches and jacket that were left on the armchair and, loaded with all these she goes out through the door on the left.

The stage is empty for a full 10 seconds. The chandelier falls down with a bang.

Curtain

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