

Péter Szirák

*A Grotesque Allegory of Human Dignity*

István Örkény: *Welcoming the Major*

*The age and the author*

In consequence of his experiences in the Second World War István Örkény, who had begun his career as a writer of short stories in the second half of the 1930s, became a convinced communist and devoted his writing to the service of the ever harsher Rákosi dictatorship. He wrote 'production novels' and 'literary reports', but when in 1953, after the death of Stalin, the net of lies burst he was one of the first to acknowledge, with profound self-analysis, that he had taken a wrong path. From then on he wrote in the spirit of his taste and convictions: through his *sense of situation* and his *humour* – heir to Franz Kafka and Dezsô Kosztolányi – he renewed and brought new perspectives to Hungarian short prose and turned grotesque dramaturgy into the self-expression of an age.

Örkény was an enthusiastic supporter of the Hungarian revolution of 1956, which promised national independence and democracy, and he took part in its intellectual rearguard action. In the period of reprisals which followed, the Kádár regime that became established following the Soviet intervention inflicted heavy prison sentences on his fellow writers (such as his close friend Tibor Déry). Under the constant pressure, Örkény was expected to produce work that distanced him from the ideals of 1956. This, however, he was not prepared to do, preferring instead to be neglected, and cultural policy punished his refusal to submit with an indefinite period of silence. Left without income, he had difficulty in finding work; from 1958 to 1963 he was employed at the *Egyesült Gyógyszer és Tápszergyár*<sup>1</sup>. This left him little time for literature and at the same time he was banned from publication, but the relaxation of the previously constant ideological control and the more liberal artistic orientation (for example, the reading of Hemingway, Kafka and Mrozek) enabled him to acquire greater depth as a writer. His return to literary life was then facilitated when, during the so-called Kádár consolidation period in the mid-1960s, Hungarian intellectual life was to some degree *regenerated* and the previous intolerable ideological pressure lifted. He did not as yet – on the whole – approach the variety and the level of genre and tone of the inter-war years, but the work which appeared and its reception were far superior to the level of the fifties. Literature alone, in the social sphere of the time, might undertake, for the most part by means of allegorical transpositions, the raising of the social and moral problems of the post-1956 situation. At the same time, of course, there was no question whatever of the liberation of literary debate, as writing (like other branches of the arts) was subject to the all-pervading ideological control – from publishing policy via critical reaction to literary history. There was no doubt that the intolerable pressure that weighed on literary life, well known from the fifties, had eased, and the situation might best be characterised by saying that writers were no longer told *what to write*, but *what not to write*. The hermetic exclusion from world literature was superseded in the early sixties by the principle of 'limited direction': some of the works previously prohibited might appear, after the customary ideological-political filtering. Sartre, Kafka, Hemingway and other Western writers could now be read in Hungary, with, of course, the required 'ideological' correction of balance<sup>2</sup>. The Kádár regime used Marxist-

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<sup>1</sup> United Medicine and Nutrient Factory. Örkény had qualified as a pharmacist in 1934. (Translator's note.)

<sup>2</sup> For example, the *Kiadói Fôigazgatóság* (Publication Directorate) did not approve the publication of Joyce's *Ulysses* on the grounds of its 'inhumanity'. Musil's *The Man without Qualities* fared similarly. Kafka was

Leninist ideology after a while only to demonstrate its alignment with the Soviet bloc and to reassure its not very numerous convinced adherents. Its real working principle became a pragmatism confined to the strict ideological framework. Cultural policy abandoned the aesthetic doctrine of social realism, tried to return literary publishing to a more flexible framework, and made the so-called bourgeois literary tradition of the inter-war years more accessible. The works of those contemporary writers, however, who could not be accommodated in the somewhat relaxed official canon (for example Géza Ottlik and Iván Mándy) were assigned to the *broken* category, and might on occasion even pass into the *prohibited zone*<sup>3</sup>.

### *The novel and the play.*

From 1962/63 Örkény was once more publishing regularly. He had written *Welcoming the Major*, which became a work emblematic of the period, in the form of a novelette as long before as 1966. The text of the novel opens with a letter from the Tóts' son, in which he asks his parents to accommodate Major Varró, his commanding officer, who is in poor health after long service at the front and is returning to Hungary for a fortnight's sick leave. He also draws their attention to the fact that the exhausted Major 'is suffering from severe insomnia and furthermore is sensitive to smells', so that the quiet house in Mátraszentanna and the 'pine-scented' hill country will be a real restorative for him. According to the letter, Gyula Tót had persuaded the Major to visit his family and had not only promised his commander that he would feel at home, but at the same time he highlighted the *promise* of the visit to his parents and sister: 'You can just think what this means to me!' The Tóts clearly read too much into this vague comment, because they took it to mean that not only their son's well-being but his very life would depend on the fulfilment of the request. They do not simply overestimate, however, but fatally *misunderstand* it in thinking that the tutelage that could be obtained from the Major's visit would guarantee once and for all Gyula Tót's safety, that is, that favour would be an effective counter to the chances of war, the constant loss of life. In the background to the error is the fact that Lajos Tót and his family would dearly like to see their own *patriarchal* order and predictability in the remote, unfamiliar world of the front too.

The parents make feverish preparations to receive the illustrious visitor in suitable fashion. Not only do the Tóts go to extraordinary lengths, but a 'superstitious expectation' is aroused in the majority of the population, and it is as if the mere presence there of the visitor would mean protection for all the serving sons of the community. The Tóts' daughter, the teenage Ági, forms a relationship with the Major's – excessively imagined – figure under the influence of precisely this public opinion. And then, in the first chapter, we can read inserted the Red Cross telegram informing of the death in action of Second Lieutenant Gyula Tót. This does not reach the Tóts because, in his abnormal preoccupation with 'symmetry', that weird Hermes, old Gyuri, the village postman, does not deliver the tragic news to the family.

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'saved' as Sartre spoke appreciatively of his work at the same time. In addition to the ideological bonds of the period and the vicissitudes of the policy of 'on-and-off', the personal taste of György Aczél, who directed culture in person, played a large part in the exclusion and prohibition of experimental literature (absurd literature and theatre and the neo-avantgarde) in Hungary. See Sándor Révész, *Aczél és Korunk* (Aczél and our Time), Sík, Budapest 1997, p.159.

<sup>3</sup> Miklós Mészöly wrote the absurd play *The Window Cleaner* in 1957. Shortly after its 1963 première in Miskolc it was banned. It was next performed on 11 November 1988 at the National Theatre in Pécs . . . Even before then Miklós Mészöly's novel *The Death of the Athlete*, written years before, had been published in Hungary only in 1966, after the appearance of the French translation and at the same time as the German.

A very significant part of the novel consists of lines spoken by the characters (that is, in this regard the book is very close to the later dramatised version) and the direct narrative phraseology to a great extent transmits information on village customs and the role of Welcoming the Major in the life of the community. From this we can learn that Lajos Tót, former railwayman, is both obliging and a pedant in the village and in his family circle alike. The principal indicator of his mindset is that he seeks to defend the *status* that he has achieved in the community. From this angle in particular the Major's visit constitutes an unforeseen danger for him: in his ignorance of things military (and of things outside his own sphere in general) Tót is unprepared to endure the whims, aggressiveness and manipulation of the officer from the front, who is incapable of adapting to local conditions. The Major steadily takes over the role that Tót has filled in the family and the village; Tót becomes more and more superfluous, his village connections are reversed, and not only does he lose his self-esteem but with it his faculty for perception breaks down. Tót becomes the constant victim of *errors* and *misunderstandings*, and as the result of *humiliations*, and the point is reached that his wife and even his daughter turn against him, contributing to the vindication of the Major's despotic acts.

*Withholding and anticipating.*

Örkény wrote the dramatised version of *Welcoming the Major* at the request of Károly Kazimir, principal director of the Thália Theatre. In the revision he kept the familiar basic dramatic formula and motivational sequence: the coming of the Major renders Welcoming the Major compliant in the interests of the better prospects of their son, and as the Postman conceals from them the futility of their actions their behaviour takes on a grotesque-absurd tone. In addition to keeping the basic framework, Örkény modified the action at numerous points, the most important of which is that the reader/spectator is able to learn of the death of young Tót not at the start of the piece but at the close of the first act. The *withholding* of this important dramatic element alters the attitude of the audience to what has happened: the order of events of the novel is so constructed as to place the Tóts' efforts practically from the outset in an ironic (double) perspective, whereas by contrast the dramatised version builds the grotesque-absurd dénouement on the thoroughly comic situation – by *change of key* and *tempo*.

The first act stresses the humorous plans for the visitor's benefit – to the very point of using comic, slapstick forms. The ironic impact of the novel derives in part from the tension between the bizarre proceedings and the tone struck, imitative of straightforward narrative terminology and 'reporterly' detachment. As, with the change of medium, narrative communication had to be rewritten as visible action in the dramatic text, this effect was inevitably lost. In the first act Örkény substitutes *comic* mechanisms to achieve the effect of humour. These include both the quite simple use of *situation comedy* based on misunderstanding and *textual dynamics* which exploit the tension between the topics and styles of speech of the characters. The former is illustrated when the members of the family discuss with the Postman the things that have to be done:

MARI ( . . . ) How understanding! How helpful! Everybody likes you, Lajos my love. What else is there on the list?

TÓT *reads*. Speak to old Mrs Szûcs about her dog.

POSTMAN I've told her it ought to be taken out to the forester's place, but she wouldn't agree.

MARI So what now?  
 POSTMAN Have to be drowned.  
 ÁGI Mrs Szûcs?  
 POSTMAN The dog . . . Should I drown her?  
 MARI Goodness, no!  
 POSTMAN Only too happy to oblige for Mr Tôt.

In the course of removing sources of noise that might irritate the Major – according to the list – Mrs Szûcs’s dog is mentioned. Ági’s linguistically sound misunderstanding is the grotesque match for the Postman’s; he replaces the action originally intended as a polite request by an act of violence, and only heightens the sinister quality of the clumsily misconstrued intent by thinking that ‘removal’ could be extended to include Mrs. Szûcs. In conclusion, he actually explains why this thought-process makes sense: he would do even that out of loyalty to Lajos Tôt. Here situation comedy immediately takes the place of the explanatory scheme which, in the novel, makes the reasons for the regard in which Tôt is held explicitly clear by means of a direct narrative statement; it is also fits into that network of references to past and future contained in the dramatic text, which one by one point to death and the ‘advent’ of death. Here respect for Tôt also receives ominous overtones compared with those in the novel, insofar as the scene foreshadows servility, unbridled despotism and the destructive force of obsequiousness. And all that together with ‘prophesying’ the fatal *dénouement* which exceeds the role perspectives.<sup>4</sup>

The scene in which Tôt and the cesspit-man discuss what more is to be done exploits the tension between what the characters have to say and their style of speech:

CESSPIT-MAN If you like I’ll pump you, if not, I won’t. It’s up to you, fire-chief.  
 TÔT If there’s a smell, let’s have it pumped. Our Gyula’s life might depend on it, doctor.  
 CESSPIT-MAN That’s what any conscientious cesspit-man would do in my position . . . But I’m just thinking. Because suppose I go and pump. What happens? The sediment is disturbed and . . . Fire-chief! Even in the purest mountain lake, if the water is stirred up, it takes time for it to settle, subside, become crystal clear . . . You grasp the similarity?  
 TÔT *uncertain*. You mean we ought to leave it alone, doctor?  
 CESSPIT-MAN *sighs*. You know, I was only too pleased to leave the legal profession, because this job earns me ten times the money . . . But I wouldn’t have thought that I’d encounter thornier problems than ever I did in my career as a lawyer . . . In my view one should opt for the lesser of two evils. The question is, how sensitive is the Major to smells. Hasn’t your son told you anything about that?

In the passage quoted the tension between the elevated form of address and the subject of conversation gives rise to a humorous effect. The *distance* between the cess-pit man’s present profession and the position that he holds in the discussion, together with the style of speech called for by his actual profession contribute to this, as does the logical linking – without

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<sup>4</sup> In Scene 1 Mari reads out from the visitors book: “. . . and one of our lodgers wrote in it: ‘The silence here is as dark and smooth as black velvet . . .’ He works at the slaughterhouse.” and a few lines below Mari reacts to the Postman’s reluctance: Kill somebody else, oh yes . . . but will he get a bit out of breath himself?’ This is followed later by the conversation of the family members:

ÁGI Isn’t it nice and silent.  
 MARI Like black velvet.  
 TÔT Now the Major can come.

change of subject – of topics that are far apart (*Our Gyula's life might depend on it, doctor.*), satirical *exaggeration*. (*I wouldn't have thought that I'd meet thornier problems than ever I did in my career as a lawyer*), and the raising of a comparison that seems incongruous (*Even in the purest mountain lake, if the water is stirred up, it takes time for it to settle, subside, become crystal clear . . .*).<sup>5</sup>

*The arrival of the stranger.*

Both versions of *Welcoming the Major* are in fact based on the creation of a dramatic situation: the arrival of the Major sets in train that series of events which supplants everyday normality by a new set of conditions. The *arrival of a visitor/stranger* is quite a common artistic device from Goldoni (*Il campiello*) by way of Gogol' (*The Government Inspector*) and from Tennessee Williams (*Orpheus Descending*) through Dürrenmatt (*Der Besuch einer alten Dame*) to Harold Pinter (*The Birthday Party*, *The Caretaker*) and Miklós Mészöly's *The Window Cleaner*, which was banned in 1963.<sup>6</sup> In this dramatic situation the worlds of the Major and Tót clash, as the former strives to establish his scale of values and way of life while the latter attempts to defend his bailiwick and suffers a defeat – which, it seems, may bring compensation. This dramatic formula Örkény fills out by anticipation, grotesque-absurd in tone, which exploits the play-language of clowning, and he completes it with another ancient technique, the use of the so-called play within the play. By interfering with the letters the postman also functions in the *common ground* between the other characters and the audience and makes a basic contribution to the movement of the dramatic world. According to Péter P. Müller's researches Örkény brings into play in *Welcoming the Major* and his later plays (*Vérrokonok*, *Kulcskeresők*, *Pisti a vérzivatarban*, *Forgatókönyv*<sup>7</sup>) a variety of the intricate Ferenc Molnár-style 'well-meaning schemer'.<sup>8</sup> The idea that Örkény puts into practice in *Welcoming the Major* is precisely the re-evaluation of the function of this well-meaning schemer: the audience are aware that the postman carries out his activity without informing the other characters when he tries to preserve the real or imagined harmony

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<sup>5</sup> The comparison involving the mountain lake may be read not only as the humorous exploitation of the distance between the two things, as in the motion of 'stirring up' and 'settling down' there is unquestionably a parabolic reference to the possibility of clear-sightedness. At the same time the scene, furthermore – in the play of the literal and abstract senses of the word – calls to mind a high literary quotation ('There's something rotten in the state of Denmark') and a vulgar cliché ('stirring up the mud', 'mudstirrer'), and may also be seen as a discussion on the merits of taking action – a parody of the Hamlet tradition.

<sup>6</sup> See Péter P. Müller op. cit. pp. 141-142. Péter Molnár Gál compares the theatrical role of the Major with the devil-figure of the morality and school plays, at the same time drawing a parallel with the 'ground plan' of *Tartuffe*, in which he refers to the work of Örkény: 'The pious man in his house accepts with hearty openness the arrival of the devil, who casts off his pleasant features to reveal his baleful fire-and-brimstone aspect. But – and this is the innovation in Örkény – this time the devil is not a mind-destroying spirit but the slave of his own situation. Murderer and victim are one, as the quality of executioner is evinced by the victim.' Péter Molnár Gál: *Örkény, a drámaíró* (Örkény the dramatist) in *Tengertánc, in memoriam István Örkény*, ed. Pál Réz, Nap, Budapest, 2004, pp. 237-238. The most significant, perhaps, of the numerous obvious differences is, however, merely that whereas in *Welcoming the Major* the moral content of the visit is the acceptance of sacrifice (from which springs the grotesque tinge) and the Major does not take advantage of the device of error, in *Tartuffe* the rascally mountebank makes use of Orgon's passionate short-sightedness.

<sup>7</sup> These are not available in English translation. The titles mean: *Blood relations*, *Seekers for the Key*, *Pisti in the Storm of Blood*, *The Script*. (Translator's note)

<sup>8</sup> 'Örkény, whom the English reception of his plays is not reluctant to see as heir to Ferenc Molnár, on all occasions in moving along the action – in the said plays – pursues a policy of clothing one of the characters with this function. This technique can only be viewed as 'intrigue' in that the one character's purpose is directed at the others (or the hero). It is not therefore a question of traditional deception, but of a principle that makes the world turn, which for the sake of simplicity I shall call the intrigue drama variant.' P. Müller op. cit p. 97.

(‘symmetry’) of Tót’s world, and this endeavour – to make people happy without the consent of those concerned<sup>9</sup> – immediately has a grotesque emphasis, is an act which from its very beginning prefigures negative consequences. In comparison with the sequence of action in the novel, in the stage version Örkény somewhat delays the revelation of the Postman’s most important piece of interference, the destruction of the telegram informing of Gyula’s death. By this, on the one hand, he advances the strengthening of the comedy mechanisms in the first act, and by an event which constitutes a *turning-point* doubles the perspective of the assessment of things that occur in the second part of the play. On the other hand, the announcement of the sad news also functions as the high point of the sequence of motifs based on the acceleration of the first act, in that it draws a line under the Postman’s previous – less fateful – series of interferences. (Because of the retention of the letters only the audience are aware – as the family are not – of Gyula’s warnings not to look over the Major’s head and that yawning makes him irritable).<sup>10</sup>

Another significant change in the dramatic text compared with the novel is that Örkény deepens the role of *mis-hearings*, portrayed in a series of arguments, which ensure the Major’s gaining of ground and at the same time Tót’s exclusion from his own way of life. Furthermore, the manipulation extends to the senses too: a whole series of *hallucinations* trouble him, and transform the characters’ world of experience. In the first place, these illusions concern the relationship of the familiar and the unexpected: Lajos Tót, in contrast to the cesspit-man, cannot detect any nasty smells because he is excessively accustomed to the ‘scents’ of home, whereas while waiting for the Major he hears a hooting when the members of the family are not aware of any sound.<sup>11</sup> Later the hallucinations one by one are connected to the Major – on arrival his eyes play him tricks, which he explains by the fact that he has come *from darkness*.<sup>12</sup> He constantly imagines enemies in the part of the world that he cannot see, even fires at Mari’s dress-making form, yet something which can actually be seen does

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<sup>9</sup> This clumsy effort of the Postman’s outlines one of the basic features of the political ideologies that are rooted in the Enlightenment and lead into the collectivist experiments of the twentieth century.

<sup>10</sup> ‘Örkény releases these items of news in such a way that the audience is aware a scene beforehand of certain habits of the Major’s, of which the Tóts do not know (. . .), and in this case our awareness becomes an important factor of the situation comedy, or else we learn of something (the death of the Tóts’s son) which has a bearing on the whole assessment of the situation and which belongs to the Postman’s ‘philosophy’. By the latter Örkény in fact likewise makes the audience informed; he provides them with the knowledge of the principles on which, and the means by which, the manipulation of the public works in an irrational system, in a social order which leads to totalitarianism not only in the army but also in peacetime civilian life, and is not only characteristic of the war period fifty years before but also of the present. We must not be surprised that it is easier to this day to identify this situation with the fascist period, as this blindness too was part of the social public organisation of the sixties.’ Péter P. Müller op. cit. p. 38.

<sup>11</sup> TÓT Three o’clock! Oh, I’m so excited I could burst! There’s the bus sounding its horn.

MARI I can’t hear anything.

TÓT There it is again.

ÁGI May I say something? Daddy can’t be hearing the horn because we asked the driver not to sound it at the bend.

The stage text gives no direction as to whether the horn is heard or not. Tót thinks that he hears it twice, Mari hears nothing, whereas Ági ideologically, with regard to the perfection of the preparations which had been thought successful, calls into question the existence of the acoustic effect.

<sup>12</sup> MAJOR . . . I had to have horse manure shovelled up all round outside my quarters, a school or something, so as to get a bit of peace at least at night . . . There it’s dark, of course. *Rubs his eyes*. So my eyes play me tricks.

The Major’s words on the one hand produce a humorous link with the cesspit, and on the other hand allude to those lines of the Tóts’, already mentioned, which bring into connection darkness and silence, conjuring up *mortality*.

not matter to him.<sup>13</sup> The replacement of reality by an imaginary world is achieved through mis-hearings and the ensuing stresses: illusion becomes the most important medium of manipulation and – in comparison with the novel – even compels the past to be re-written. Mis-hearing without acoustic cause suggests the complete unreliability – derivable from subordination and humility – of the senses:

ÁGI I simply daredn't say anything. But I did hear what Daddy said.

MARI What did he say?

ÁGI He didn't say 'gay'. Nothing of the sort. He said 'You carbuncular quiddle'.

MARI *horrified*. What on earth? Quiddle?

ÁGI 'Carbuncular' I understand, but what's a quiddle? Is there such a word? I've heard fiddle . . . it sounds like a swear-word.

MARI What are you saying? What are you hearing? You'll be the ruin of us all, my girl.

ÁGI Is it something bad?

MARI *covers her eyes*. Forget it, forget it, forget it . . .

Compared to the Major's 'gay', Ági's auditory experience is faulty in not relating to what Tót in fact said (. . . *if you're game* . . .) either by acoustic mishearing or on the basis of semantic content, that is, it constitutes an auditory experience completely unrelated to what was said. The series of sounds 'you carbuncular quiddle' may clearly be taken as an expression of derision, but its absurd effect is rather derived from Ági's evident ignorance of 'piddle', which may explain Mari's horrified admonition. Her style of speech in the play – more so than in the novel – features the constant repetition of clichés, that is, the use of commonplaces<sup>14</sup> which similarly become more and more detached, less appropriate to the situation in which they are used, and it is only their 'immutability' (acoustic stability) which guarantees their frequent use.<sup>15</sup> Hallucination first carries only the implication of sensory deception and fallibility, and later manipulation is accompanied by the re-evaluation of the past.<sup>16</sup>

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<sup>13</sup> MARI . . . Yes, here the evenings are the loveliest.

ÁGI It's not so hot then.

MARI Why don't you sit where you can see the view?

MAJOR *doesn't move*. Thank you. I can see it as I am.

<sup>14</sup> E.g. 'You see, you see, Lajos my love, it's wonderful what can be done with a little good will.'

<sup>15</sup> The Major parodies the constant nature of clichés and the frequent use that derives from their generality when he too embarks on stock phrases:

MAJOR . . . Do you know the saying: It's easier to yawn than not to? You haven't heard it? It's one of mine.

ÁGI And how true!

MAJOR I know what I'm talking about . . . At the front, soldiers detailed for sentry duty at night are inclined to yawn, which is not good because anyone that yawns can easily go to sleep, and anyone that goes to sleep is shot .

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The Major's words indicate the basis of his thought process, as they betray the fact that he cannot, or will not, distinguish between conditions at the front and those in the rear. From this it follows that he extends the duties of the battlefield to civilian life; that, however, gives the humorous impression that by his arbitrary interchanging of cause and effect he does not pay attention to dealing with fatigue, but wishes to prevent yawning – its involuntary physiological symptom. The 'saying' which he has invented, therefore, fixes an universal experience into linguistic form, and by that it becomes ominous that he contextualises bodily functioning that exceeds the desirable as the main threat to discipline.

<sup>16</sup> Mari shatters Tót's hitherto invulnerable former authority too by bringing up a 'memory-image' from hearsay. After the tale of his scandalising Victor Emmanuel, Tót says to his wife: Madness! Either you or I or both of us have dreamed up the whole thing!

In the play, the visits to Tomaji, the parish priest, and to Professor Cipriani – in a way similar to that in the novel – exemplify the complete impossibility of Tót's situation. In the play, Örkény somewhat extended the Cipriani scene: he enhanced the humorous effect contained in the parodying of depth-psychological jargon, and at the same time added the function of the fortune-teller who shows the way out of the world of the play. Cipriani on the one hand analyses the historical relationship of the scheme of values of the obviously uncomprehending couple<sup>17</sup>, and in connection with that speaks of the transience of the present regime:

CIPRIANI Dear lady, I told you before that you wouldn't be satisfied with me. Why did you come to me? You know yourself, as does everyone else, that for sixteen years I've been running the clinic for nervous and mental disorders, and that as a result I too . . . *He stands up, in growing agitation.* I am, if you please. That's why I give such pieces of advice. Nevertheless it is my conviction that what is now is not for ever. *Enter servant. Helps Cipriani into a straitjacket. Mari listens with ever greater horror to the professor's prognostications. Her horror gradually spreads to Tót also.* That which is now . . . will one day have an end. This accursed war and this whole accursed world too will have an end!  
MARI *moves to the rocking-horse, becoming indignant.* Do you hear that, Lajos my love?  
CIPRIANI *goes after her.* And then your Major will be hanged. Your Major's commander too will be hanged . . .  
TÓT *alarmed, looks at the professor, gets off the rocking-horse.*  
CIPRIANI The Major's commander's commander too will be hanged . . .  
MARI Come along, Lajos! . . . Help! *Takes her husband by the hand, they hurry off.*  
CIPRIANI *slowly becoming calm, sits on the rocking-horse.* And then everyone will be as tall as they like, people will be able to sleep, yawn, even to have a stretch . . .

On the one hand its banality (mutability with the passage of time, and the inevitability of the end of the world, which will sweep away everything), on the other the building up of the context makes the accuracy of the fortune-telling relative. The Professor is more and more surrounded by the appurtenances of madness, and the Tóts are more and more horrified by his words and actions. The figure of Cipriani itself is a type, in drawing which Örkény put on stage the usual belief: one's environment (in the case of the psychiatrist the patients, of the military officer the army) forms one in its own image. At the same time, however, this characterisation – suitable for a music-hall turn – is connected with the most didactic character in the play, and furthermore in the wake of the Tóts' manifest incomprehension and alarm fulfils most of all a kind of *raisonneur*-function – one which, though grotesque, strikes a chord with the reader/audience.<sup>18</sup>

*The conclusion.*

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<sup>17</sup> . . . every age has its characteristic feature, and ours is conceptual confusion. There was a time when men worshipped dog-headed gods, or foretold the future from entrails, but that didn't make them mentally ill . . .

<sup>18</sup> Perhaps it is not surprising that some foreign productions have cut the character of Cipriani. Anna Földes (*Örkény a színpadon*, Palatinus, Budapest, 2006 p. 90) has noted the dramatic improbability of the Cipriani-style 'solution in advance'. Péter P. Müller has linked Örkény's elaboration of his minor characters with the framework of the 'intrigue-pattern': 'This dramatic formula has never allowed Örkény to break completely with the clichés of the commercial stage. In the development of roles, in addition to the principal characters – and the identity problem constantly and variously articulated and represented by them – the minor characters, such as Cipriani, Spiné or Bodó, are on a number of occasions caricatures suitable for a comic music hall act or thinly drawn.' (op. cit. p. 149).



The conclusion of the dramatic text likewise deviates to a degree from that of the novel. In the latter, after the departure of the Major the undelivered field letter containing the inventory of the personal effects of the fallen Gyula Tót is imposed upon the doubtful family idyll. In the penultimate scene of the play the Postman appears and reads the boy's one letter which has been held back:

POSTMAN *reads*. I remember when our little squirrel Micu escaped . . . We children began to wail, but Daddy said 'Even that stupid squirrel wants to be free. It didn't even want our affection.' What a marvellous thing to say! Since then I too have realised how hard it is to be good, and that you have to expect bad as well as good, because everybody's good and bad at the same time, and whether they're being the one or the other depends on the circumstances. Only I don't know how these circumstances are supposed to turn out. I can't make head or tail of it all, perhaps just because I'm too young and don't know life well enough . . .

In all its confusion, the boy's letter, of which only the reader/audience knows while the family cannot, may in itself actually stand as a very brief summation of the whole play. It evokes the value of childhood memory, affection and freedom which have not failed to leave their combined trace, then hints at the flexibility of the human organism and its dependence on its environment. The appreciation is revealed of the ambivalence that occurs elsewhere too in Örkény with regard to the human condition and the relationships of coexistence. The musing reflection (*Only I don't know how these circumstances are supposed to turn out. I can't make head or tail of it all, perhaps just because I'm too young and don't know life well enough . . .*) to be heard in its youthful naive rambling presents the reader/audience with the continuation of a tragically disrupted set of opinions: if these circumstances are unacceptable, what should they be like...<sup>19</sup>

After the Major's return Tót is much more capable of *dissimulating* than in the book: he speaks 'in an unnatural voice', first turning to his wife as if he did not know where on earth the edge-trimmer was, and then 'obligingly' says where the apparatus is and at once 'refusing to take no for an answer' shows the visitor the way. After the Major has been quartered Örkény leaves out the phrases relating to Tót's restless sleep, but in the final line of the play Mari calls to mind the failure of the willingness to make sacrifices, the consequences that she thinks will follow the revenge taken on the Major: '*In horror*. My son! My son! My only tiny little son!' The stage version does not therefore connect the events of everyday with what Lajos Tót has done, but precisely raises it from that environment, and thus rather emphasises the moral aspect – likewise not lacking in ambiguity – in contrast to the primarily grotesque effect of the closing narrative commentary of the novel which turns on physical automatism (instinct).

### *Grotesque or absurd?*

Örkény's *Welcoming the Major* was first staged in February 1967 at the Thália Theatre, produced by Károly Kazimir. At the première the author wrote the preface entitled *To the Audience*, in which he analyses its central theme and endeavours to place it in the historical contexts of Camus' absurd and Hungarian history. In the opening paragraph he refers to the French writer's celebrated Sisyphus-allegory, and interprets his account of the absurd by referring to his wartime experiences. It is common knowledge that in terms of his philosophy

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<sup>19</sup> The fallen Gyula Tót's words naively overrate the sphere of influence of the will of the individual: they are a sharp reminder of the limits of the plasticity of circumstances.

of life Albert Camus yoked together into interdependence the *absurd*, as the relationship between Man and the world, with the attitude of paradoxically ‘accepting the unacceptable’ and ultimately with the *freedom of lack of purpose and perspective*: ‘the absurd is not in Man (if such a metaphor has any meaning at all), nor yet in the world, but in their joint presence. (. . .) There is no absurd apart from the human intellect. And that is absurd because everything else terminates with death.’<sup>20</sup> Since the absurd cannot be transcended Man has to accept it and engage in the struggle against it, and the struggle has to be hopeful: ‘The absurd only has meaning if we do not accept it.’<sup>21</sup> The absurd deprives me of the chance of eternal freedom, but replaces it with, and ultimately advances, my freedom of action. It deprives me of hope and future, but also relieves me of my bonds. (. . .) The absurd enlightens me that there is no tomorrow. For that reason I am here and now so profoundly free.<sup>22</sup> In Camus’s allegory-commentary Sisyphus is shown to be happy because the – unachievable – struggle towards the heights fills him with joy. In assessing it by his experiences in the Second World War Örkény vividly reduces the validity of the situation conceived by the French author as a condition of human existence. He does not, therefore, in fact rebut Camus’s profoundly melancholy views, but – and in a most disturbing way – transposes them into a scheme of relationships which, in the conflict between the vital instinct and the intellect, and in the triumph of the former, reveals the life-giving illusion:

*What is he thinking then? That he knows what his sentence is. His torture is futile, the rock will roll down, roll down again and again through the infinity of time. That he knows, but his knowledge makes no difference. Man is not only experience. His mind will tell him that all is in vain, but his instincts do not obey his mind. They whisper that this is going to be his final effort, and Sisyphus sets about that slope again and again, always frustrated but always finding new strength.*

In what follows Örkény interprets the dramatic role of Lajos Tót as an allegory of the fate of the national community, obliquely referring to the post-1956 situation:

*If its fate teaches a people to acquiesce, it is naturally hard to brand as a criminal the man who persists to the end in acquiescing. It is harder still to condemn this fire-fighter, because the moment comes when he says ‘enough’ – and hurls the rock into the valley himself. (. . .) There are happy peoples; they are those that rebel when the time is right. We Hungarians are the breed that do not rebel at the right time.*

Örkény considers the possible significance of the play and places great emphasis on his survival of the disaster on the Don, probably for the sake of self-defence (against the censor), which may be explained by the extraordinary subversive power of *Welcoming the Major*, applicable to the communist regime, and its ‘distancing’ as far as possible.<sup>23</sup>

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<sup>20</sup> Albert Camus, *Le Mythe de Sisyphe* in *Sziszüphosz mítosza. Válogatott esszék, tanulmányok* (The Myth of Sisyphus. Selected essays and studies) ed. Pál Réz, Magvető, Budapest, 1990, pp. 220-221.

<sup>21</sup> Ibid. p. 222.

<sup>22</sup> Ibid. pp. 245-247.

<sup>23</sup> The last paragraph alludes not only to the imprinting of the wartime experience but also, through the separation of intention and effect, to the ‘open-endedness’ of the core meaning of the play: The fact that I am alive is only a quite minute fragment of chance. Perhaps that is why their winter, their fate, have since then given me no rest. *Welcoming the Major* is not about them, or not only about them, indeed, perhaps it is about something completely different, but as I wrote it I thought of them constantly. (Letter to the audience.) Otherwise the special interest of this preface to the play is that by directing (manipulating) the audience the *Letter*, so to speak, reduplicates the function of the Postman in the play.

One passage in Örkény's letter to the audience names *fear* as the fundamental factor in the world of the play. It is fear that motivates the Major and holds the Tóts too in check. The play may, as a matter of fact, be also read as an escalation of the terror and humiliation engendered by fear, while fear does not originate in the observation of life but much rather springs from the distortion of the mechanisms of authority and the political system. It arises from the conditions of the world order of wartime (which could also imply the military-totalitarian one of the fifties and even the sixties). That is, the situation in the play may be linked not merely to a permanent absurd situation in reality, but to the world condition which is being ruined more and more *by human relationships and actions*. As we saw earlier, Örkény disagrees with Camus's Sisyphus-allegory because in his view the paradox of hope without hope does not really exist. It does not, according to the moral-didactic reasoning of the *Letter*, because Man is truly incapable of enduring it. In Örkény's observation of that time the world condition is primarily the product of Man in action, and as he sees it, what Man has ruined *he can also set to rights*. Presumably this may explain why 'the dramatic world of *Welcoming the Major* is so formed that the deformation of the scale of values – despite the grotesque capitulation of human dignity – appears in a reversible sequence. Which means that even in an artificially strained, ridiculous situation on the stage the possibility exists of defending the threatened identity. Tót, forced into a series of humiliating situations, is finally liberated from his tragicomic role in such a way that by his drastic action he restores– though not entirely – the shattered relationships to what they are when the play opens.'<sup>24</sup>

The success of *Welcoming the Major* may presumably be based not only on its subversive effect – startlingly at the time in the Hungarian theatre – but also on the allusion to a restoration of normal world order in the circumstances obtaining after the historic trauma of 1956. In addition to the exposure<sup>25</sup> of the mechanisms of the totalitarian systems projected on one another, this variant of allegorical parable is linked to the contemporary context in which the system of allusion of the dramatic text was to be validated with reference to an earlier symbolic order that existed by general agreement.<sup>26</sup> That is, it is not the presence or lack of ridiculous elements in the dramatic text that distinguishes the Hungarian grotesque/absurd play from Western European absurd dramas such as those of Beckett or Ionesco, but the mechanism of 'duplicated publicity' which enforces allegorical language-play in intention and receiving medium alike.

Although no doubt there exists a critical method of characterising absurd drama – from the analysis of causality by way of plasticity of time, space and identity to meaningless dialogue<sup>27</sup> – nevertheless it is futile to regard absurd drama (and especially acting) as a unified whole. There is a great difference between, for example, the Beckett-drama, which renews the tradition of the miracle play, has a brief postlude and brings to the stage the intertextual exploitation of the débris of culture, and the theatre of Ionesco, which takes for its

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<sup>24</sup> Ernő Kulcsár Szabó: *A magyar irodalom története 1945-1991* (History of Hungarian Literature 1945-1991), Argumentum, Budapest, 1993, pp. 121-122.

<sup>25</sup> Péter P. Müller, op. cit. p. 38

<sup>26</sup> '( . . . ) interpretation must keep in view that according to the previous authorial decision there *does exist* some symbolic order in the world. In the most abstract sense the East-European absurd relates to external reality in terms of an order so understood. That being so, Csurka's *Deficit* (1970) and Mészöly's *Bunker* are in that series of plays which anticipate the functions of the grotesque and the absurd, in which one can always sense by what theoretical (ideal, possible, realistic, etc.) order the contents of the theatrical world are confirmed as impossible, ridiculous, dull or tragic.' Ernő Kulcsár Szabó, op. cit. p. 119.

<sup>27</sup> See Martin Esslin: *The concept of the absurd drama*, and Erika Fischer-Lichte: *The History of Drama*.

basis ceremonies of the comedy theatre and carnival.<sup>28</sup> There is also the general feature that leading dramatists of the fifties and sixties – in addition to those already mentioned Genet, Tennessee Williams, Arthur Miller, Max Frisch and Dürrenmatt – staged the ‘suspension of the individuum’<sup>29</sup>, which connects only loosely with *Welcoming the Major* because Örkény’s play links personality crisis with the reversible distortion of the world order. Örkény frequently drew attention to a relationship as dramatist and observer with Slawomir Mrozek, citing in particular the Polish writer’s *Tango* (1964), which he had read in Grácia Kerényi’s translation in 1966, and later – in his travels abroad – saw performed. And indeed it is possible to discover the similarity in the thematisation of personality crisis and the evocation of inversion of values, and at the same time *Tango* (and others of Mrozek’s works) moves the focus of grotesque tragicomedy much more towards the absurd: whereas in Örkény there remains rationality – indeed, a point of comparison with humanism – in the background of the grotesque parable, the Polish writer who emigrated to Italy brought the impossibility of establishing a firm scale of values together not simply with irrational political domination but with the decay of morals and culture.<sup>30</sup>

*Welcoming the Major* preserves linearity of theatrical progression just as it does realism in character-drawing and the motivation of actions. The drama is in fact the exploitation of the situation built on the contrast between the Major and Tót, which – recognised by satirical and grotesque language-play – the author develops by *exaggeration* and transposition into the *ridiculous*, but the ultimate effect of absurd perception of existence which renders impossible language, character and fate is not achieved in it. Örkény’s play was written in the knowledge of the tradition of the bourgeois theatre of illusion – maltreated by the policies of culture and publication that had dominated since the end of the forties – and at the same time it modified Ferenc Molnár’s work towards grotesque allegory. In so doing it became the most successful initiator of the twentieth-century revival of Hungarian theatrical language.

### *On the world stage*

Since its first performance in February 1967 *Welcoming the Major* has been staged on numerous occasions in Hungary and abroad: it has been played in Paris, Moscow, New York, Helsinki, Marosvásárhely, Reykjavik, Berlin, Athens and elsewhere. A wide range of language-play has distinguished serious political allegory from simpler slapstick effects. In Michel Fagadau’s 1968 production at the Théâtre de la Gaîté-Montparnasse Tót was played by the then comic film star of Europe-wide fame Michel Galabru, and the play became a farce.<sup>31</sup> The performance in Leningrad was directed by Georgiy Tostogonov, master of the ‘psychological theatre’ which grew from the tradition of Stanislavski and Meyerhold. The actor playing the Major on that occasion wore an SS uniform<sup>32</sup>, and the production was based on the memory of the cataclysm of the Second World War. The 1976 performance at New York’s Arena Stage – in company with *Waiting for Godot* and *Death of a Salesman* –

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<sup>28</sup> See Jan Kott: *A lehetetlen színház vége* (The end of the impossible Theatre), Országos Színháztörténeti Múzeum és Intézet, Budapest, 1997, pp. 135-155.

<sup>29</sup> Erika Fischer-Lichte, op. cit. p.667.

<sup>30</sup> Whereas in *Welcoming the Major* Örkény portrays the threat to the ‘little man’ existence, a way of life not influenced by high culture (and in *Cat’s Play* thematises serious music from the perspective of the uninitiated art-lover), Mrozek’s *Tango*, by parodically cited ‘fragments’ of high culture (Sophocles, Shakespeare, Camus etc.) refers to its ultimately becoming a memory.

<sup>31</sup> *Örkény-bemutató Párizsban* (Éva Lelkes, *Film, Színház, Muzsika*, 1968), in *Párbeszéd a groteszkról* (Conversation on the grotesque) op. cit p. 205

<sup>32</sup> See Karl-Heinz Müller and Brigitte Soubeyran, Theater der Zeit, 1974.

gave the play an exotic East-European flavour. The Schillertheater in Berlin, which had in the sixties presented plays by Max Frisch, Peter Weiss and Beckett with great success, tried in 1969 to stage *Welcoming the Major* (with the great character actor Ernst Schröder as the Major) so as not to be linked to the East-European political system but to show a more general application, but this kind of reading of the play was a failure.<sup>33</sup>

From its varied use on stage it is at the same time evident that the writing of *Welcoming the Major*, based as it is on a bipolar opposition, is accordingly open to a range of theatrical interpretations. The relationship between Tót and the Major, that is, may be taken rather as a constantly forming, rather than a stable, retrievable, and in that sense ‘firmly drawn’ conflict. The interpretation of the roles of both depends to a great extent on the one hand on the space/time continuum constructed around the text and the mimetic narrative of the context, that is, on whether the person watching the action links the events on stage with the allegory of the totalitarian ruling order which had been in existence since the end of the forties (to a decreasing degree with the passage of time), of the militarised one of the war years, or whether perhaps he distances himself from these historical contexts and explores the concept of the forms of interpersonal dominance hidden in the relationship. On the other hand, the success of the *mise en scène* also depends on the manner in which the actors play out the principal characters’ dramatic textual ‘omissions’. The history of the play on stage may, in this regard, be said to have been extraordinarily fortunate, as in the first production at the Thália Theatre the Major was played by Zoltán Latinovits, whose exceptional performance set the standard for all later stage interpretations. The sweeping power of his portrayal turned on the possibility that the Major’s authority is not given to him at the outset in the dramatic text but develops *in the casual nature of the stage world*, as a transposition of personal relationships.<sup>34</sup> In the mid-seventies Örkény recalled Latinovits’s performance: ‘With a novel and all-embracing vision he put on stage a Major from Hell, whose every feature derived from that infernal region. Latinovits exuded the ‘evil eye’, the command to destroy himself and annihilate others; and this was not the obligatory ‘something more’ with which he captivated us because there was no such construction in the book of the play, as the other Majors whom I managed to see did not even attempt such a transformation of the part.’<sup>35</sup> Furthermore, the grotesque-absurd emphases of the marvellously cast production also – unexpectedly – were not lost on the audience, which, true to the practice of preceding years,

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<sup>33</sup> With regard to its initial successes, the play was acted on stages throughout Europe in such a way that every production directed the language-play to suit the audience’s presuppositions of a symbolic (East-European regional) order, reinforcing the commplaces of familiar convention. The reason for the single failure – that in Berlin – was that that performance alone experimented with the elimination of the symbolic order to be understood – not relying on supposedly experiential referents – behind the play, and tried to evaluate the play as a mouthpiece for a more general human predicament. Deprived of the additional points, however, the play turned out to have nothing to say. Its defects in language and thought were precisely what made it obvious how much the single most admired modern Hungarian play was capable of simply informing about something rather than bringing into being an esthetic dialogue with the audience through its subject.’ Ernő Kulcsár Szabó, op. cit. p. 120.

<sup>34</sup> ‘Latinovits brought out at the same time the villainous power emanating from his personality. His objective position and subjective constitution, his role in the military hierarchy and his personal power over his subordinates sustain from the start his thirst for power. But Latinovits exceeds the generally accepted bounds of human contact only in the total absence of opposition, as a consequence of the ever more extremely manifest servility of the whole Tót family.’ Anna Földes, op. cit. p. 99

<sup>35</sup> István Örkény: *Író és színész. Latinovits Zoltánról (1970)* (Writer and actor. Zoltán Latinovits) in *rkény István*, op. cit. p. 244.

had become accustomed to the homogenous tone of the strongly didactic ‘rhetorical theatre’.<sup>36</sup>

The performance, however, won the all but unanimous acclaim of Hungarian critics, and in 1967 two more Örkény books appeared, and the reception of *Nászutasok a légyapíron* (Honeymooners on the Flypaper), containing the novelette version, and *Welcoming the Major* which published the play celebrated the author as belonging to the first rank of literary life. In the following year the play was staged in many places world-wide – in twenty-five towns in the USSR alone. In 1968 *One Minute Stories* appeared and was snapped up by readers. Because of the impressive domestic and international success the gates of the film studios too opened to Örkény’s work: *Welcoming the Major* was filmed in 1969 under the title *Isten hozta Őrnagy úr* (Welcome, Major), directed by Zoltán Fabri.

The main question for subsequent stagings of *Welcoming the Major* was to what actualisation the potential of the relationships embodied in the text could be brought as the forties and fifties receded further and further and the audience’s experience and attitudes changed significantly. In 1978 the Thália Theatre staged the play, again produced by Károly Kazimir. With the strengthening of the slapstick elements the performance disturbed the previous balance: instead of the grotesque effect, the comic ridiculous came to the fore.<sup>37</sup> In 1984 Imre Csiszár put the play on at the Nemzeti Színház in Miskolc, and instead of the allegorical implication of the totalitarian orders highlighted the motif of the collapse of family bonds.<sup>38</sup> In 1995 the Harmadik Színház in Pécs staged a reduced version of *Welcoming the Major*: the producer, János Vincze, cut the minor characters and at the same time enriched the language-play with actions, such as mime.<sup>39</sup> In 2000 Attila Réthly staged *Welcoming the Major* at the Pesti Színház, altering the central relationship so as to make a twenty-year-old Major play against a Tót old enough to be his father, and so ‘sharpening, actualising the tragicomedy of the defenceless into a kind of generation-gap drama’, that is, altered the quintessence of the play to take into account the globalised culture and scheme of behaviour of the turn of the century (the cult of youth and disregard for the aged). The play became much more abstract, the Postman a marginal intellectual and the Major a real career soldier, his relationship to Ági of a blatantly sexual nature. By contrast, in the 2004 co-production by the Nemzeti Színház in Beregszász and the Várszínház in Gyula, Attila Vidnyánszky’s production restored language-play for the purposes of historical reference: on the one hand he employed wartime propaganda, on the other the everyday communication clichés of socialism. While the Major execrated Tót, on one side of the stage an old-fashioned loudspeaker gave out by turns news of the World War and Karády songs, sounds of marching and Hitler’s hoarse shrieks, a Székely folk song and the requirements of *Your garden*.<sup>40</sup> In Vidnyánszky’s interpretation

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<sup>36</sup> In a letter to Károly Kazimir in autumn 1967 Örkény complains in ironic tone that the play was not filling the house, and added that ‘a lot of people are crossing their fingers that it’s going to be a flop’. Zsuzsa Radnóti writes in a note attached to the letter: ‘In 1967 the grotesque tone was as yet unfamiliar, and so the performance did not meet with real public success.’ (*Örkény István: Egyperces levelek* (One-minute letters), Palatinus, Budapest, 2004, p. 235.

<sup>37</sup> ‘In vain do we see the painful fatigue of the fire-chief, deprived of his rest at night and the opportunity for stretching, if the dramatic affront of humiliation is missing. (. . .) The vengeance, valid and well-deserved in the play and in its surreal quality, taken on the light-weight, comical Major, stripped of authority, seems disproportionate.’ Anna Földes, op. cit. p. 102.

<sup>38</sup> Anna Földes, op. cit. p. 103.

<sup>39</sup> Anna Földes, op. cit. pp. 108-109.

<sup>40</sup> Katalin Karády (1912-1990) was a well-known film star and singer; the Székely are a Hungarian-speaking ethnic minority in Transylvania, and *Your garden* was a radio programme. (Translator’s note)

*Welcoming the Major* need not state that once there was a world in which refined manipulation forced people into unbounded servility, but that this world is always like that, we are in it even now – there is *war* at all times and in all places. In the same year the Radnóti Theatre too revived the play, in Péter Gothár's production, which went back to the reduced version and instead of historical referencing concentrated on the natural history of the brutal change in family life, making use of more abstract language-play. No mention here of the tourist paradise: a ramshackle house, a stinking privy, the usual bathtub and gymnastic rings in the yard, ragged clothing and wine from the jug characterise the set, wardrobe and props of our age. The performance changes the basic relationships so that the drama of Tót's humiliation is placed at the central point and the role of the Postman (as a 'manipulator' influentially brought on stage) is expanded. Gothár cuts the comic scenes: there are no amusing preparations, and altogether no humorous effects. The Major's scarcely, then altogether *un-, concealed* aggressiveness has an unexpected effect on the Tóts as they live in quiet monotony. Mari quarrels with him, but Ági identifies hysterically with the new 'father'-figure. In defence of what esteem remains to him Tót suffers the 'aimed' terror which the Major directs at him to the point of total physiological collapse.<sup>41</sup> In Gothár's production the role of the Postman is of greater significance. The delivery-man, not spectacularly but rather frighteningly mad, does not only interfere with the letters but constantly roams about the stage, playing the roles of 'director' and 'prompter' too. He winds the clock on, that is, rearranges the time-relationship, and on several occasions prompts the actors' lines in advance. He frequently remains 'invisible' as far as Tót and the Major are concerned, but – for the sake of his damaged symmetry – counts himself as a member of the family. He takes the news of Gyula's death badly, but when Tót executes the Major he acknowledges with satisfaction that he has restored the preferred proportion.<sup>42</sup>

That Örkény's play can be played over and over again lies partly in the organisational changes possible in the personal relationship at its centre, but in connection with this in the retuning of the language-play and the variety of options in the construction of the dramatic world. In *Welcoming the Major* Örkény blended renewal and broad effect with a wonderful sense of proportion, meeting in a quite unique way the demands of the audience of the time, who had lived through historic cataclysms. The unveiling of the mechanisms of the totalitarian systems projected on one another – filled with grotesque humour and at once contemptuous and anguished – had a therapeutic effect on an educated public opinion that was struggling with unspoken traumas and severely restricted in its freedom. In its treatment of duplicate openness *Welcoming the Major* set a pattern for years to come for the elaboration of language-play.

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<sup>41</sup> The scene in which the Major wants to make Tót think what he thinks (the replacement of the little edge-trimmer by a bigger one) becomes a scene of the brutal humiliation of the fire-chief. It shows the signs of the well known ritual of interrogation, and the Major also orders all the characters to turn their backs on the defenceless, half crazed, head of the family. At the end of the scene Tót vomits into his fire-chief's helmet.

<sup>42</sup> Frequently invisible to the others, and fulfilling the function of director-prompter, the Postman may be taken as the ironicisation of the *intrigue*-drama, and in such a sense fits into the self-reflecting play-mode of the 'theatre speaking of the theatre'. At the same time it may be detected in the Postman's motivation that he is not satisfied with the role of 'well-wisher', but wishes to be a family member himself: he tries to worm his way in. The Major likewise tries to do that – by means of terror he ousts Tót from his place and to that purpose manipulates Mari and Ági. When in the final scene, after the Major has been quartered, the Postman counts the Tóts again he includes himself in the family and indicates that 'symmetry' has been fully restored: 'One, two, three – four.' (The sentence has, of course, a hidden meaning, as it also alludes to Tót's statement after killing the Major: 'I've cut him into four equal pieces.')

*To the audience*

In *Le Mythe de Sisyphe*<sup>1</sup>, Albert Camus writes: The gods had condemned Sisyphus to roll a rock ceaselessly up to the top of a mountain, whence it rolled back every time under its own weight. They thought, and with some justification, that there was no more terrible punishment than profitless and hopeless toil.

In this victim of the underworld Camus sees the type of the absurd hero whose entire life is spent accomplishing nothing. When he thinks of Sisyphus he always sees him in the situation when the rock has rolled from the summit and he is following it down to the plain, from where he will have to bring it back up once more. ‘What does Sisyphus feel on the way down?’ asks Camus. Sometimes the rock is the stronger, and then grief gains the ascendancy in his heart, but it also happens that joy fills it. ‘The struggle towards the heights is sufficient to fill the heart of man.’

I too have often thought of Sisyphus, especially after coming through the war and serving at the front. Until then, however, I had only seen in him the symbol of a man struggling with his fate, and that I had taken to mean that death was the force of gravity. The war, however, which turned my life and my thought around, taught me all sorts of things, one of which was that Hungarian fate has always been full of Sisyphean situations, periods, centuries, but never, perhaps, so much as in that war. That rock which we trundled by the Don could not fail to roll back both then and later, however often we put our shoulders to it.

I, however, saw my Sisyphus quite differently. For example, in quite a different situation. Not, like Camus, as he set off downwards from the summit; I always saw him on the plain, when he was beginning to strain at the rock and roll it upwards.

What is he thinking then? That he knows what his sentence is. His torture is futile, the rock will roll down, roll down again and again through the infinity of time. That he knows, but his knowledge makes no difference. Man is not only experience. His mind will tell him that all is in vain, but his instincts do not obey his mind. They whisper that this is going to be his final effort, and Sisyphus sets about that slope again and again, always frustrated but always finding new strength.

Such is the paradox in which we live. Only our intellect takes account of the doom that awaits us, while our vital instinct speaks of something else. Sometimes the one persuades us, sometimes the other. If understanding prevails my Sisyphus too is gloomy, but if the voice of vital instinct is the stronger the heart of my Sisyphus too is filled with joy.

Lajos Tót, of course, was not king of Corinth, only a firefighter in a mountain village. He had therefore never offended the gods. What, then, was his crime? Perhaps he had committed none at all, and just lived in an age when there was simply one choice: one could only be either a rebel or a Sisyphus.

History repeats itself in many ways. There has been more than one such age, and so there have been many Tóts. If its fate teaches a people to acquiesce, it is naturally hard to brand as a criminal the man who persists to the end in acquiescing. It is harder still to condemn this firefighter, because the moment comes when he says ‘enough’ – and hurls the rock into the valley himself.

True, he has not picked the moment very well; his rebellion is by now futile, overdue, mindless. But why is he to blame for that? There are happy peoples; they are those that rebel when the time is right. We Hungarians are the breed that do not rebel at the right time.

If it is true that our lives are playthings, oscillating between hope and despair, then existence itself is not absurd, but only may become so in certain situations, at certain periods and points of time. Action is absurd when we act having lost all hope. I maintain – and the

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<sup>1</sup> An essay (1942) on suicide. (Translator’s note.)



Tóts exemplify this – that man’s only way out is action. This is why I ‘allow’ Tót even to commit murder, but that murder is by then superfluous and mindless. In that sense, in the condition of despair, Lajos Tót really becomes an ‘absurd hero’.

Fear is the medium in which this transformation is played out. The play opens in an idyllic situation; I might even say that Lajos Tót is a Miklós Toldi<sup>2</sup>, on whom the dead weight of terror falls. Of course, the major too is afraid, but the source of terror is always fear, and fear always gives rise to more fear, seeks to divide like unicellular animals, to spread like weeds, to infect like viruses. There was a man so capable of fear that his fear distorted a whole great country into moral absurdity. How did he accomplish this? I often think that I cannot explain this intellectually, but then, how hard it is to treat even a Lajos Tót properly, and he is a really defenceless, anonymous ‘little man’, who has no power and not even much by way of brains. It seems, however, that we are susceptible to this infection. ‘Potentially’ I am the major and his victim rolled into one: it would be good if there were no more need to live in fear.

The rock with which the Sisyphean fate of the Hungarian army was decided began its downward course on 13 January 1943, in the Don bend<sup>3</sup>.

A friend of mine, Tibor Cseres<sup>4</sup>, who also lived through it all, once declared that it was impossible for a Hungarian writer to write an account of that war. I could not share that opinion. Sixty thousand men froze to death there, in the shelling, in the icy wind, in the snow.<sup>5</sup>

The fact that I am alive is only a quite minute fragment of chance. Perhaps that is why their winter, their fate, have since then given me no rest. *Welcoming the Major* is not about them, or not only about them, indeed, perhaps it is about something completely different, but as I wrote it I thought of them constantly. Most of them froze at their posts, and as they held their positions, their faces frozen to marble, to this day I can feel their eyes on my back.

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<sup>2</sup> A semi-legendary Hungarian medieval hero, whose mighty deeds are recorded by the sixteenth-century poet Péter Ilosvai and the nineteenth-century poet János Arany. Not one acquainted with fear, Toldi is always modest and self-effacing, but invincible when roused in a just cause. (Translator’s note.)

<sup>3</sup> A reference to the destruction of the comparatively lightly armed Hungarian 2nd Army by the Red Army. The action lasted from 12 January to 9 February. (Translator’s note.)

<sup>4</sup> Author of the famous novel *Cold Days*, set in Újvidék (Novisad), modern Serbia, in January 1942. (Translator’s note.)

<sup>5</sup> I.G. Tóth’s *Concise History of Hungary* (Corvina/Osiris, 2005) gives more detailed, though still approximate, figures: of a force of 200,000 some 40,000 died, 35,000 were wounded, 60,000 were captured and many just vanished. Losses of weapons and equipment were almost 80%. (Translator’s note.)

**WELCOMING THE MAJOR**  
(THE TÓT FAMILY)

*A tragicomedy in two acts*

1967

*DRAMATIS PERSONAE*

The Major  
Tót (Lajos)  
Mrs Tót (Mari)  
Ági (their daughter)  
Postman  
Tomaji (the parish priest)  
Professor Cipriani  
Mrs. Géza Gizi (a woman of easy virtue)  
The cesspit-man  
Lôrincke, a neighbour  
Elegant Major  
Dr. Alfred Eggenberger, a boy of seven  
Servant

The action takes place in a village in northern Hungary, during the Second World War.

First performed in 1967 at the Thália Theatre, Budapest.

# ACT I

## Scene 1

*Outside the Tóts' house. In the background pine-trees, a valley, hills.*

POSTMAN *A grotesque figure, a sort of village idiot, in rags. Wears a postman's cap, bag at his side.* People say I'm half crackers. And they say I spit down the well. And I'm always blowing my nose on underwear that's hanging out to dry. Not a word of truth in any of it. On the other hand: I can kick my backside so hard that I come off the ground and jump over two hats one on top of the other. *Puts his cap on the floor.* For this I usually get a glass of beer. *Does not jump, picks up his cap.* Sometimes I do jump over it. They also say that I interfere with the letters. Now that's true. For instance, Professor Cipriani's never done me any harm, in fact he's treated me in the nerve clinic, but still I can't get to like him. *Takes out an invitation.* If he gets an invitation to the boss's garden party . . . *Tears it up, throws it into a bin.* Why should they enjoy themselves? The teacher's son's been wounded at the front. To this day they don't know. Their daughter, however, has brought triplets into the world. I corrected the telegram to make it twins. I like even numbers; that third child's just trouble. It's good nature that makes me do it, and I don't even get a beer for it . . . And the Tót family here. Them I really like. Why's that? Because there's four of them. Two, four, six . . . That's the way! And they've got a son out at the front as well. God forbid any harm should come to him. Now here's a card from the front. Some I deliver, some I hold back. Some I tear up, because what's not there isn't there. Let's have a look what the last one said. *Produces another card from his cap.* "Regret to tell you I've got food poisoning and diarrhoea . . ." That's one I held back. Food poisoning sometimes clears up by itself, but sometimes turns into something nasty . . . What's he saying this time? *Reads the new card.* "Dear parents and Ági! Pleased to let you know my diarrhoea's cleared up and I'm fighting fit again . . ." There, you see. I spared 'em that. You've got to understand that half crackers isn't completely crackers. *Reads on.* "And I've got a much better piece of news as well. . ." Good news? At last! *Towards the house.* Mr and Mrs Tót! Postman! Good news! *The window opens, MARI and ÁGI lean out in excitement, snatch the letter from the postman's hand. TÓT hurries out as well.*

MARI *Reading excitedly.* Our beloved Major, that I've told you so much about, is suffering from nervous exhaustion because of the constant harassment by the partisans and is being sent home for two weeks' leave . . . I've managed to persuade him . . . *She can bear no more, gives the letter to her daughter.* You read it!

ÁGI . . . to take advantage of my parents' hospitality, and that wasn't easy because in his present nervous condition he doesn't want to be a burden to anyone . . .

MARI Do you hear that, Lajos my love?

TÓT Yes.

ÁGI . . . but I told him about the advantages of the local climate, our lovely glazed veranda, the view over the Bábony and the Bartalapos valley – and just imagine! The Major has accepted the invitation. You can imagine what this means to me!

MARI Christ almighty! Give the postman a glass of wine. *Ági gives him wine, he drinks it, thanks her and exits.*

POSTMAN Here's to young Gyula!

ÁGI Has there ever been a major here? I shouldn't think so.

TÓT Only his nerves are in a bad way.

MARI He'll soon get over it . . . Go on reading, Ági!

ÁGI Our beloved Major, now don't let this bother you, can't stand noise, and furthermore

is very sensitive to certain smells. Some he can't stand, but others, such as the smell of pine trees, really soothe him.

MARI Smell of pine trees, well, we've got plenty of that.

TÓT But what is it that he can't stand?

MARI He doesn't say anything about it. Dear Gyula!

TÓT Wouldn't do any harm to know, all the same . . . *Walks round sniffing. The two women go back in, the window closes. Tót sees someone.* Morning, doctor!

*Enter the cesspit-man, pulling after him a pump mounted on four wheels. He leaves the cart and hurries to Tót.*

CESSPIT-MAN What can I do for you, fire-chief?

TÓT My son's commanding officer's going to be here for a couple of weeks, and he's very sensitive to smells.

CESSPIT-MAN Really? My congratulations. Shall we pump you out?

TÓT I really don't know, doctor, old chap, because I've been used to the smell for so long that I don't know whether it's a stink or not.

CESSPIT-MAN *takes a deep breath.* I'll speak frankly. Just now the Tót privy smells just a bit sharp, but it's not unpleasant.

TÓT So what's best to do?

CESSPIT-MAN If you like I'll pump you, if not, I won't. It's up to you, fire-chief.

TÓT If there's a smell, let's have it pumped. Our Gyula's life might depend on it, doctor.

CESSPIT-MAN That's what any conscientious cesspit man would do in my position . . . But I'm just thinking. Because suppose I go and pump. What happens? The sediment is disturbed and . . . Fire-chief! Even in the purest mountain lake, if the water is stirred up, it takes time for it to settle, subside, become crystal clear . . . You grasp the similarity?

TÓT *uncertain.* You mean we ought to leave it, doctor?

CESSPIT-MAN *sighs.* You know, I was only too pleased to leave the legal profession, because this job brings in ten times the money . . . But I wouldn't have thought that I'd encounter trickier problems than ever I did in my career as a lawyer . . . In my view one should opt for the lesser of two evils. The question is, how sensitive is the Major to smells. Hasn't your son told you anything about it?

TÓT *calls into the house.* Mari! Ági!

*Mrs Tót and her daughter lean out of the window.*

TÓT What exactly did Gyula say about smells?

MARI *taking the letter from her bosom.* All he says is: He's very sensitive to certain smells.

CESSPIT-MAN Bit on the vague side, but no cause for alarm. Why do you think that this particular smell is what he won't like?

MARI Because a lodger of ours once complained about it.

ÁGI And he wasn't even a major, just a sleeping-car attendant.

MARI And a major must have a much more delicate nervous system!

ÁGI It sometimes bothers even me, especially on Sundays, and I'm not a major either.

MARI Run and fetch the neighbours, my dear. *They go inside, she calls back.* Be sensible, Lajos my love.

TÓT What does she mean, be sensible? What's your opinion, doctor?

CESSPIT-MAN It all depends on when the visitor's coming. If I stir up the sediment, it'll be at least a fortnight before it starts to be firm again . . . Have we got that long?

TÓT He'll be here on the first leave train.

CESSPIT-MAN In that case let's forget about pumping, fire-chief.

TÓT You think so? . . . Thank you for your advice.

CESSPIT-MAN Don't mention it.

TÓT May I ask how much I owe you?

CESSPIT-MAN Nothing, Mr Tót.

TÓT Now, I can't have that.

CESSPIT-MAN I only charge for pumping. No charge for advice. *Exit, pulling the apparatus after him.*

*Back come Mrs Tót, Ági and the postman. The two neighbours,  
Mrs Géza Gizi and Mr Lôríncke, hurry on.*

MARI I've called the neighbours in, Lajos my love.

TÓT Pay attention, please. I'll tell you what my son says in his letter.

MARI *reading.* Now that the day of his departure is approaching the Major is showing more and more signs of warmth. The leave train goes from Novioskol, and he has promised that I can go there with him in the squadron car.

LÔRINCKE Well, that's good news.

MRS GIZI That's nice.

MARI I'll draw the attention of you all to one more important thing. Because of the high level of danger from the partisans the Major suffers from insomnia, and so he needs complete peace and quiet. I know that Dad enjoys such respect throughout the village that he will have no difficulty in eliminating harsh noises . . .

POSTMAN Now then.

LÔRINCKE You mean, there's no peace and quiet here?

MARI Course there is! . . . We've got a visitors book, and one of our lodgers wrote in it: 'The peace here is as dark and smooth as black velvet . . .' He works at the slaughterhouse.

ÁGI I often read that, and I go all numb.

MRS GIZI So what's wrong with this peace and quiet?

MARI It seems that people of such senior rank are sensitive to harsh noises . . .

LÔRINCKE But what kind of noises?

TÓT Let's take it that we needn't eliminate the sounds of wind, rain and birdsong.

LÔRINCKE That would be a pity.

TÓT On the other hand, especially from your side, we do occasionally hear a sort of unpleasant sound . . .

LÔRINCKE Not burping?

MARI Something of the sort.

LÔRINCKE To tell you the truth, when I've had a cold beer I always burp . . . But that's the end of it! . . . I'll give the beer up!

MARI Thank you.

TÓT That's good of you, Sándor.

MRS GIZI And what have you called me round for, may I ask? I'm not a drunkard, and I don't entertain disorderly guests. There's a notice to that effect in the most conspicuous place in the house, above the bed.

TÓT Quite so, madam . . . From you we ask a mere trifle. Your gate creaks.

MRS GIZI You call that a trifle?

MARI It only needs a drop of oil.

MRS GIZI Oh, yes . . . but in my line of business that creaking has a certain function. *Sollicitously.* The people that call on me are mostly resin-gatherers. They're very decent people, but a bit on the slow side . . . So when the gate creaks they can tell that the next resin-

gatherer has arrived, and that makes the previous one hurry up. If I oil the gate it will cause me material loss.

TÓT And is there no other way of making them hurry up?

MRS GIZI It's what they've got used to, fire-chief.

TÓT I see. You'd like to be compensated for loss of earnings?

MRS GIZI No, thank you . . . Not at all. I'm even proud that I too have been able to do something for such a man as Mr Tót . . . Good-bye, fire-chief.

TÓT Thank you very much.

*Exeunt Lôrincke and Mrs Gizi*

MARI All the best! *Watching them go.* How understanding! How helpful! Everybody likes you, Lajos my love. What else is there on the list?

TÓT *reads.* Speak to old Mrs Szûcs about her dog.

POSTMAN I've told her she ought to take it out to the forester's place, but she wouldn't agree.

MARI So what now?

POSTMAN Have to be drowned.

ÁGI Mrs Szûcs?

POSTMAN The dog . . . Should I drown her?

MARI Goodness, no!

POSTMAN Only too happy to oblige for Mr Tót.

TÓT Thank you, but that won't be necessary . . . What else was there?

ÁGI I've asked both the bus drivers not to blow the horn at the bend for the next two weeks.

TÓT Good. And what about Mrs Kasztriner and her poppy seed grinder?

MARI She won't do any grinding.

TÓT *listening.* She's grinding now.

MARI She can't be. I helped her do enough for the two weeks.

TÓT What's that I can hear, then? *All listen, then one by one turn towards the postman, go closer and listen.* Is that you grinding something, old chap?

POSTMAN Me?

MARI It is him! He's grinding something!

POSTMAN Oh, that . . . It's my breathing. I've got a barrel chest.

TÓT Listen here, old chap . . . From now on, when you bring the letters, take a deep breath outside Professor Cipriani's and don't let it out till you've passed the Stubenhammers' fence.

POSTMAN That's a long way!

TÓT I'm afraid it is.

POSTMAN And what if I get out of breath?

MARI *a mother tiger.* If you get out of breath, you get out of breath! But while our only son's out there fighting at the front don't you dare let me hear you breathing anywhere near our house . . .

POSTMAN *who has recoiled in alarm.* No way! Not at all! Course not! Anything for Mr Tót! *Exit.*

MARI *crossly.* Kill somebody else, oh yes . . . but will he get a bit out of breath himself?

TÓT Don't excite yourself, Mari my love. He means well enough, he's just not quite right in the head . . . *Listens.* Seems there's silence now.

MARI I think we've done it.

ÁGI It's taken long enough.

MARI *to Ági.* Get your father a cigar . . . *Tót lights a cigar. Mari sits down, shells peas into a pot. All three relax.*

ÁGI This time tomorrow he'll be here.

MARI And nothing's going to disturb him.

TÓT Certainly not.

MARI I feel quite happy about everything now.

TÓT So do I. *Draws on his cigar. Pricks up his ears. Turns his head.* Can't you hear that? There's something dripping somewhere.

MARI Doing what?

TÓT Dripping, plopping . . . I don't quite know.

*They listen.*

ÁGI *brightly.* Shall I tell you what's plopping? It's the peas! *They smile, Mari puts the pot aside, shells the peas into her apron.*

MARI What sharp ears you've got, Lajos, my love.

ÁGI *suddenly.* What's a major, Daddy?

TÓT What d'you mean, what is he?

ÁGI What do we have to call him? Your Honour, like Professor Cipriani? Or Your Grace, like the duke of Luxembourg?

TÓT As far as I know, we just have to call him 'Major'.

MARI Or dear Major.

ÁGI Is a Major lower, then?

TÓT Not at all. Rather the other way round. The duke of Luxembourg's only got forests. The Professor's only got his science . . . A major, now, really is somebody. He gives orders. He's got a gold star. He's an army officer . . .

ÁGI *dreamily.* An army officer . . . An army officer . . . *Slowly rises to her feet, becoming excited.* An army officer. An army officer. an army officer. An army officer.

TÓT Calm down now, my dear.

MARI When there's such a nice silence. I wonder whether he'll notice . . . *Suddenly listening.* Can you hear that?

TÓT What is it this time?

MARI I don't know. *They listen but cannot make out where the sound is coming from.*

ÁGI Don't be angry, will you, if I say something?

TÓT Go on, then, my dear.

ÁGI I've got the feeling that Daddy's cigar's making a sucking noise.

TÓT *frowning.* Cigar's don't make sucking noises. They draw.

ÁGI What if saliva gets into them?

MARI What are you saying, my dear? Your father doesn't dribble.

TÓT *glares at Ági.*

ÁGI *startled by the glare, pulls in her neck.*

*All three again look into space. Tót puffs at his cigar. His face becomes solemn. He takes another puff. Becomes more solemn still. Then, with a perceptible effort stubs it out in the ashtray. The two women pretend to have noticed nothing. Three cheerful faces.*

ÁGI Isn't it nice and silent.

MARI Like black velvet.

TÓT Now the Major can come.

*Reassured, they go into the house. Change of light.*

POSTMAN *reading a letter.* . . . Don't be angry if I keep thinking of something else, but please be very careful when you're talking not to look over the Major's head. As he's rather shorter than average he's inclined to take it amiss . . . *Considers.* That's a big problem. Mr. Tót's taller than average. Why aren't people all the same height? I can't change that, of course. But what if not one but more than one major came, one quite small, one bigger, and another bigger still, the difference would immediately not be so worrying. But what's to be done now? I'll tear this letter up . . . *Tears it up, throws it in a bin and exit.*

*The stage is illuminated from the rear. In front of the trees is a sign saying 'Bus Stop'*

*Enter the minor characters, perhaps a ragged brass band, then the Tót family, excited and dressed in their best. Ági carries flowers.*

TÓT Three o'clock! Oh, I'm so excited I could burst! There's the bus sounding its horn.

MARI I can't hear anything.

TÓT There it is again.

ÁGI May I say something? Daddy can't be hearing the horn because we asked the driver not to sound it at the bend.

MARI You've got a lot to say.

TÓT Poor girl's nervous . . . There's no dust on my helmet, is there?

ÁGI Just a bit . . . *Blows it off dutifully.* Goodness, how handsome Daddy can be!

*The bus is heard approaching.*

TÓT I can hear it. It's here!

MARI I can see it!

ÁGI *steps forward excitedly.* An army officer . . . An army officer . . .

TÓT You stay where you are! He'll do the talking!

*Everyone lines up. Perhaps the band strikes up, very quietly. The sound of the engine stops, and not one but two majors appear on stage. First an elegant, resplendent figure in gleaming boots carrying a swagger stick. Well behind him comes the other, dusty, scruffy, tired; they do not notice him.*

TÓT *steps forward to the elegant major, ceremoniously.* Permit me to present myself, Major. I'm Tót.

ELEGANT MAJOR And in what may I be of service?

TÓT *steps back. Pushes Ági forward.*

ÁGI *scarcely dare approach, proffers the flowers instead. In fluty tones.* We are delighted to welcome you, Major, sir, and it is our wish that you may feel at ease in our humble home . . .

*Meanwhile the Tóts too slowly take stock of the situation.*

ELEGANT Major *looking them over.* Which of you is Leonard, duke of Luxembourg?

*Horrid silence.*

MARI The duke?

ELEGANT Major Come for a spot of shooting at his place, actually.



ÁGI *adaptably*. May I say something? The duke's not one of us, but I saw his carriage over there outside the presbytery.

ELEGANT Major Then why do you pester one? *Exit*.

MARI *looks round, sees the other major, gives a squeal*. Ye gods! . . . *Points to him*. There isn't one, there's two! *Startled, they all slowly move towards the other major*.

TÓT Major . . . Permit me to introduce . . .

MAJOR *squinting, searching*. The Tóts? Where are you?

TÓT Do forgive me . . . We're here.

MAJOR *in another, completely wrong direction*. At long last . . .

TÓT We're over here, deeply respected Major, sir.

MARI Not that way. This way, look . . . We're here! *Pushes Ági forward*.

ÁGI *even more passionately than before*. We are delighted to welcome you, Major, sir, and it is our wish that you may feel at ease in our humble home.

MAJOR *taking the end of the bunch and thus, with Ági's guidance, with great difficulty finding his way to the Tóts*. Thank you, my dear. I can scarcely see. I've got to get used to this sunlight after nine months of darkness, filth and dust . . . I had to have horse manure shovelled up all round my quarters, a school or something, so as to get a bit of peace at least at night . . . There it was dark, of course. *Rub his eyes*. So my eyes play me tricks. Well, at last! That's better. Now I'm starting to see. *Shakes hands with the Tóts one by one*. My dear Mr. Tót? And Mari, isn't it? And this is little Ági? How lovely everything is here! And the marvellous air! This silence! Believe me, after nine months at the front in constant noise and stink . . . *Looks at Tót, then behind his back, breaks off*. What was I saying?

ÁGI *enthusiastically*. About constant noise and stink . . .

MAJOR Ah yes. I can scarcely believe that I'm here in Hungary. But now I can recognise everything the way your son described it. *Looks nervously back*. That's the Bábony. And this is the Bartalapos valley . . . *In a different tone*. Mr Tót, what is there behind my back?

TÓT Only the old Klein beer-garden and the presbytery.

MAJOR That's all right, then. I'm afraid the nightly partisan threat has left me a nervous wreck. *Looks back again*. But don't you give it a thought. Just carry on as if I weren't here. I told your son straight away: only if I'm not a nuisance, only if I'm no trouble to anyone . . . *In a different tone*. Tell me, Tót! Can you see something out of the ordinary behind my back?

TÓT Nothing in particular, deeply respected Major, sir.

MAJOR Because you keep looking that way.

TÓT I'm looking exclusively at the deeply respected Major . . .

MAJOR Look here, Mr and Mrs Tót! It's bad enough that part of the world is always behind one's back. Why should anyone make matters worse by looking that way all the time? Have I said something odd? *The Tóts fidget in perplexity*. Have I not expressed myself clearly?

MARI Yes, of course . . . Just be careful where you're looking, Lajos my love.

TÓT *irritated*. Where am I to look, then?

MAJOR Wherever you like. I said: I have no demands, no extra requirements. *Turns round twice, suddenly*.

TÓT *turns likewise*. Is it all right now?

Major I couldn't say.

TÓT And like this?

MAJOR It was better the previous way. *Tót bows his head completely*. No, not that. You certainly don't like it if someone's glance is, so to speak, slipping under one's feet.

TÓT I don't know what else I can do.

MARI Look up, Lajos my love. *Tót looks up*.

MAJOR No, no. That would be uncomfortable. I won't agree to that. Furthermore, the damage to my nervous system, which is mainly the consequence of the constant disturbance by the partisans, cannot cause imposition on my kind hosts. I alone am to blame.

MARI Don't mention it . . . *To Tót*. Do something, Lajos my love.

TÓT What, though?

ÁGI May I say something? If Daddy pulls his helmet down over his eyes a bit, it will make no difference where he looks!

MAJOR Well done. Your daughter's a clever girl.

MARI It's really nice to hear that . . . Pull your helmet down a bit, Lajos my love.

TÓT *indignantly*. Major! Pull my helmet over my eyes? Apart from the fact that it's against regulations, because under Fire Service Regulations the vertical axis of the fire-fighter and the horizontal axis of the helmet must form a right angle . . . But that's a secondary problem – what would the public say? I need not point out to the deeply respected Major that the fire-fighter has to retain respect. Who would have any regard for a village fire-fighter that went about with his helmet over his eyes, like a drunken wagonner? I might as well go home on all fours!

ÁGI God forbid! There's no way we'd let Daddy crawl about on all fours!

Major Certainly not! I wouldn't agree to it. Indeed, please, regard my person, so to speak, as air. If I notice that I'm disturbing you, I'll be off directly!

MARI *in despair*. D'you hear that, Lajos my love?

TÓT *sighs, in torment*. I can't do it.

MARI You can see how he is . . . So you're only considering yourself?

TÓT *sighs*.

MARI And now that the cold is coming, the freezing Russian cold, and the wind will be blowing . . . *She sobs*.

*Everyone looks at Tót, who still holds firm but then gives on and pulls his helmet over his eyes.*

TÓT There.

MAJOR Marvellous. One could not have dreamed of a better solution.

ÁGI There's nobody in the whole world like my Daddy!

MARI It looks all right.

ÁGI Yes. Daddy's much smarter like that.

MARI *snuggling up to him*. You see, you see, Lajos my love, you can work wonders with a little give and take.

MAJOR *anxiously*. Doesn't prevent you seeing, though, does it?

TÓT Not in the least, deeply respected Major, sir.

MAJOR That's very reassuring . . . May we go?

MARI Of course. This way.

MAJOR *sets off, but stops in alarm*. What's the road like? Not within range of the Russian heavy artillery? *Sees the startled faces, clasps his head*. You see? I can't believe I'm in Hungary. *Sets off, stops*. Won't do any harm, though, to spread out a little. Let's maintain five paces separation. You here, Mr Tót, Ági there. *The Tóts obey uncomprehendingly*. Extended order! Quick march! *They set off keeping their distances*.

MAJOR *startled by something*. Look out! Aircraft! *Flings himself flat*. *The Tóts stand around him in alarm, looking on*. *The Major suddenly begins to snore, goes to sleep*. *The Tóts look at each other*.

MARI Well, do something, Lajos my love!

TÓT What am I supposed to do? *Puts down the visitor's case, then with a joint effort they sit the snoring Major up. Tót takes him in his arms and so carries him homewards, Mari hurries after him with the case.*

ÁGI *alone, wildly excited.* An army officer. An army officer. An army officer. An army officer! *Runs off.*

*Blackout*

Scene 2.

*The Tóts' house, on the glazed veranda. Mari is ironing the Major's tunic. Ági is devotedly polishing his boots. There are also two visitors – Mrs Gizi and Tomaji, the village priest. Conversation takes place in a whisper, as the visitor is sleeping.*

ÁGI *tiptoes to the door and looks inside.* He's still lying on his left side.

TOMAJI That's not healthy, but we can't turn him over.

MRS GIZI Excuse me . . . If the door's already open, would you let me take a quick look at him?

TÓT Help yourself, dear lady.

ÁGI But from here you can only see his left side, and not all of that.

MRS GIZI Even that will mean a lot to me. *Looks through the door, excitedly.* Oh, isn't he handsome! Very handsome! *Looks in again.* My God! He's turned over!

TOMAJI That's very good. That way he won't strain his heart.

MARI Thank the good Lord for that!

MRS GIZI *shuts the door, overcome.* My God, my God, why have I had to see this! . . . *To Tomaji.* Resin-gatherers, resin-gatherers and more resin-gatherers . . . That's the way life goes by! Is it sinful, then, to yearn for something more, your reverence?

TOMAJI *disconcertedly.* I don't know what to say, dear lady . . . But there is much truth in your words.

MRS GIZI Isn't there just . . . *To Tót.* I don't suppose you know whether the Major likes baked apples?

TÓT Why do you ask?

MRS GIZI Because that's a speciality of mine . . . There's a little iron stove at the head of my bed, there are always apples baking there. My visitors just love them.

ÁGI Don't they get burnt?

MRS GIZI Not with me. Even when I'm working I reach behind me, quite mechanically, and turn them over . . . I only mention it in case the visitor might sometime feel like a baked apple.

MARI Thank you very much.

TÓT I'm afraid he's not up to it at present.

MRS GIZI I didn't mean to intrude . . . but one day, when he's back on his feet, I'll be happy to offer him what I've got.

TÓT That's very kind of you.

MRS GIZI See you soon. *Exit.*

MARI All the best.

ÁGI *watching her go.* Well, we can bake apples, can't we?

TOMAJI You're too young to understand, my dear . . . *Notices that Tót's helmet is crooked.* What have you done to your helmet, my son?

TÓT *depressedly.* He wanted that, as well . . . I don't know what's the matter with me.

TOMAJI What's wrong?

ÁGI Oh, poor Daddy! Poor thing, he could hardly stand!

MARI The three of us undressed him . . . He's slept all through the afternoon.

ÁGI And what he must have been dreaming! The way he sometimes tosses and turns . . .

TÓT Whatever I do, nothing's to his liking.

TOMAJI My son, my son . . . You're only thinking of your pride! Put your helmet straight. It's only tiredness that makes him like that . . . You just look at him when he's had his sleep out! Well, the Lord be with you. *Exit.*

ALL And with your spirit . . .

MAJOR *We can still see the priest when the Major emerges from his room, tousled, in pyjamas, alarmed.* Who was that?

MARI Father Tomaji.

MAJOR Do you know him?

MARI Well, of course.

MAJOR You mustn't trust anybody. I always keep my pistol under my pillow. If he dares to set foot here again, Mari, my dear, be so good as to shoot him.

MARI *in alarm.* It's only natural, you know, deeply respected Major, sir.

MAJOR *gives Tót a long look. He understands and pulls his helmet over his eyes. The Major goes back.*

MARI *looking after him.* Poor dear!

ÁGI *passionately.* How he must have suffered!

MARI Who knows what he's been dreaming!

TÓT *in a bad humour.* Did you see the way he looked at me?

MARI He didn't look at you any way at all, Lajos my love.

TÓT Something's bothering him.

MARI Why do you torment yourself? *Goes to him, hugs him.* Here there's peace and quiet, fresh air . . . Be patient! Just let him have a good rest! Put on a couple of kilos! And then, when the door opens, he'll smile straight at you and say 'Dear Mr. Tót' . . . *Falls silent.*

MAJOR *steps through the door, his boots and buttons gleaming, smiles broadly at Tót spreads out his arms.* Dear Mr. Tót! *Tót looks up hopefully.* What a good sleep I've had! *Tót stands up.* Terrible, the things I was dreaming, but now . . . it's as if I were a new man!

MARI You hear that, Lajos my love?

TÓT *scarcely dare believe it, but slowly begins to cheer up and smile.*

MAJOR And the scent of the pines! Of course, you can't guess what it means to me . . . *The Tóts exchange glances.* My second surprise is this silence. There isn't a sound, not a thing to be heard!

*The Tóts smile at one another happily.*

ÁGI It's like black velvet . . . Isn't it? One of our lodgers said that about it.

MAJOR Something of the sort . . . Look, all of you. After nine months, so to speak, of intolerable noise and stink serving at the front I simply can't tell you how pleased I am that I accepted your kind invitation.

MARI And how pleased we are too! And we didn't know what a thoroughly nice commanding officer our son had. *Sighs.* Oh, Gyula!

MAJOR Don't worry about him! He came with me to the train. We had a bath, then a beer in the canteen. I gave strict orders that they were to return before dark, because while it's daylight there's no danger from partisans . . . Never fear! Your Gyula's quite safe! Good night! *Exit.*

*The Tóts look at each other, their faces radiant.*

MARI Had a beer. Had a bath.

ÁGI And set off back in the daylight.

TÓT My God. Perhaps everything will turn out all right. Perhaps he'll take him into the battalion office.

MARI Gyula, Gyula, don't let anything happen to you! Gyula, Gyula, mind you don't freeze!

TÓT *darkness has fallen in the meantime.* It's getting late. Let's go to bed.

ÁGI When is it so beautiful? The resin-gatherers' camp fires are being lit.

MARI Pity the Major's asleep . . .

TÓT My eyes are closing as well . . . Let's go in for a bit, my dear.

ÁGI But when it's so nice to give Daddy a hug . . .

MARI Now then, my girl. Can't you see that your father wants to do a stretch?

TÓT *stretches with great anticipation. Groans appreciatively.* Oh, mother, my poor, dear mother.

MAJOR *coming suddenly out. Nervously.* What's wrong? Somebody wounded?

MARI Nothing's happened, Major.

MAJOR Thought I heard somebody groaning.

TÓT *embarrassed.* That was me.

MAJOR Thought somebody mentioned their mother.

TÓT It's just a bad habit. I like to have a stretch, and while I'm doing it I give a big groan.

MAJOR Like that?

TÓT But it doesn't mean a thing. I just call out when I'm feeling really good.

MAJOR *looks him up and down. Coolly.* I'm very pleased to hear it.

*He goes into his room. The Tóts start to say good night to one another. Tót kisses Ági, switches off the light. For a moment the stage is empty and dark. A cuckoo clock on the wall sounds, the cuckoo comes out. The visitor's room door opens, the Major rushes out, in his right hand a pistol, in the left a pocket torch. In alarm he looks for the source of the sound, colliding with a dressmaker's form on which Mari has hung his freshly ironed white summer tunic. Finally he discovers the clock, fires at the cuckoo with his pistol, and the clock is silent. At this moment, however, a sound is heard from the adjacent room and he takes refuge behind the table, puts out his head and takes aim at the dressmaker's form.*

MAJOR Halt! Who goes there?

*He fires at the dressmaker's form. Startled, now half dressed for bed, wearing long night-shirts the Tót family rush on. They look round perplexed, then on tiptoe steal towards the Major's door.*

MAJOR *emerging calmly from the cover of the table, puts the pistol away, sits down and crosses his legs. Says in conversational tone.* What a lovely evening!

*The Tóts turn on their heels in alarm and force smiles. Tót tries to tuck his night-shirt into his trousers. Ági switches on the light.*

MARI *buttoning her frilly night-dress in alarm.* Yes, here the evenings are the loveliest.

ÁGI It's not so hot then.

MARI Why don't you sit where you can see the view?

MAJOR *doesn't move.* Thank you. I can see it as I am. *The Major is becoming bored, wants some activity, and his nervousness grows constantly. The Tóts sense this. They make feverish attempts to entertain him, but with ever less success. They slowly break off.*

MARI This is the time when you can catch the scent of the pines.

TÓT What you can see here, if you please, these fifty thousand acres of pine forest, is all the property of Leonard, duke of Luxembourg.

Major Really?

MARI Just now it's the resin harvest. If the Major came and sat over here he'd be able to see the camp fires.

MAJOR *looking that way.* I can see them.

ÁGI Where that one's twinkling they dug out a badger more than seven kilos in weight.

MAJOR Really?

ÁGI *enthusiastically.* So they say . . . And I've got a squirrel. Called Micu.

MARI What are you saying, my girl!

ÁGI Oh, that's right. I only used to have one.

TÓT At harvest time people come here from all over Hungary. They gash the trees and tie pots underneath.

MAJOR Interesting.

TÓT The resin trickles into them.

MAJOR Really?

TÓT Yes. *Silence. Tót can think of nothing more to say, but Mari comes with a book with a red cover.*

MARI This is our visitors book, with the comments of our favourite lodgers. *She hands it to him, The Major looks at it, does not even open it, gives it back. Silence.* Would the Major not like to know what it says?

MAJOR Oh, yes.

MARI *gives the book to Ági.*

ÁGI *reads.* My years of lack of appetite and bloated feeling have vanished as if by magic because of the excellence of the buttery food that I've found here. Mrs Gusztáv Morvai. *She looks at the Major expectantly. No response. Hopefully she reads on.* While the nation is fighting for its life against the red Bolshevik nightmare, in this house, like an island of peace, a person that does not care for noise can find repose. Aladár Hiláriusz, timpanist at the Opera. *Again she expects something, but the visitor is frostily silent. Mari sits down, deflated. A painful silence. Then the Major slowly looks at Tót.*

Major Well, what's news, my dear Tót?

TÓT *trembles all over.* Nothing special, deeply respected Major, sir.

MAJOR How are you feeling?

TÓT Well, thank you.

MAJOR You've got a fortunate constitution. *Stands up as if meaning to go to bed. The Tóts also stand, but the Major sits back down. Tót remains standing, while the others sit down disappointedly. The Major stares piercingly at Tót.* So nothing's happened?

TÓT Nothing's happened.

MAJOR But you've stood up, look.

TÓT Oh, so I have. *Sits down.* I forgot to sit down.

MAJOR Still feeling content?

TÓT No reason to complain, deeply respected Major, sir.

MAJOR And what makes you feel content?

TÓT *pondering.* What makes me? I just do.

*Agonising silence. The Major gazes blankly, then looks at Tót again.*

MAJOR And tell me. Do you sit like this every evening?

TÓT Well, almost, deeply respected Major, sir.

MAJOR And what do you actually do here?

TÓT I just take a breath of air.

MAJOR Nothing else?

TÓT *after a brief reflection.* Well, nothing much . . . *Thinks.* That is, I occasionally check that there are no fires anywhere.

MAJOR *leaps up. The Tóts also stand.* Excellent! If you don't mind, I'd gladly come with you.

TÓT There's not much to it. *Goes to the veranda door. Looks out to right and left. Then comes back, sits down.*

MAJOR Is that it?

TÓT Yes.

*The Major sits down disappointedly. The two women also sit back down. Agonising silence.*

MAJOR *still full of energy.* Tell you what. Let's have a game of chess.

TÓT *in distress.* Sorry, Major. I can't play chess.

MAJOR Would you prefer dominoes?

TÓT The fact is, I don't know any board games.

MAJOR Never mind. Then let's play rummy.

TÓT But I don't know any card games either.

MAJOR *stands up, offended, makes for his room.* So, you just sit and sit and sit . . . and you tell me that you feel content. Very well, then. *Shuts his door.*

MARI *almost in tears.* Why didn't you give him a game, Lajos my love?

TÓT *shaking with rage.* If I say I can't!

ÁGI Daddy is a bit awkward at times.

MARI Don't you dare to tell your father what to do, child!

TÓT *tiredly.* Let's get to bed now.

*They all get up, but the door opens and out comes the visitor. All sink back into their chairs.*

MAJOR *suppressing his inner trembling.* My dear Tót, I'll just put one question to you. Aren't you missing something?

TÓT Only my cherry wood cigarette-holder. But it's not worth mentioning.

MAJOR I don't mean in a material sense. I meant to draw attention to the harmful consequences of lack of activity.

*He pauses. The Tóts, however, stand in perplexity, look at one another, waiting for explanations from one another. At this the Major becomes even more irritated, but with great self-possession explains in a friendly tone.*

MAJOR You don't quite see what I mean? Look here. In a dark room the slightest sound seems amplified many times. Now then, inactivity has the same effect on the constitution as darkness has on the sense of hearing. It intensifies internal sounds, gives rise to illusions in the sight, produces buzzing in the brain. When my soldiers have nothing to occupy them I always make them cut off their trouser buttons and sew them back on. That restores their mental equilibrium. I hope you can now see what I was alluding to just now? *The Tóts continue to look at one another in confusion.*

MARI *very uncertainly*. If the deeply respected Major's trouser buttons have come off, Ági and I will sew them back on at once.

MAJOR *collapses into complete lethargy*. You've completely misunderstood what I was saying. *Goes towards his room, stops in the doorway*. Tell me at least whether by any chance there's a bit of string in the house that is thoroughly tangled up?

MARI I should think so . . . Why does the deeply respected Major need that?

MAJOR *quivering*. Because I'll disentangle it! I can't endure sitting doing nothing like you do!

ÁGI *sweetly, after a short pause*. May I say something? We two, Mummy and I, never sit with our hands in our laps.

MAJOR So what do you do?

ÁGI In the evening, if we've nothing better to do, we fold boxes.

MAJOR *still suspicious*. Boxes? What sort of boxes are you talking about?

ÁGI For putting cotton-wool and bandages in.

MARI Here's one.

MAJOR *his interest begins to revive*.

ÁGI And this is the cardboard.

MAJOR *goes over, beginning to like the idea*.

MARI We get the cardboard from the Sanitas bandage factory in Eger.

ÁGI *brightly*. First we cut them with the edge-trimmer, then we fold them round.

MAJOR *curiously*. What's an edge-trimmer?

MARI *produces a little appliance like a bread-cutter*. This is it . . . That's just what we call it.

*Everything is now played at high speed.*

ÁGI Daddy made it.

MAJOR Very interesting, very.

MARI He's ever so good with his hands. It can be clamped onto the table here . . .

MAJOR Clamped on! Quickly!

MARI Does this interest you, Major? This flap we turn down so . . .

ÁGI Here's a sample box. Now I score the cardboard.

MAJOR Why didn't you say? This is marvellous!

MARI And now I fold the box.

MAJOR Yes indeed! This is quite something! Which side do you fold first? *He sits down, takes a sheet of cardboard, folds all four sides. Everybody looks at him. He holds up the box in satisfaction*. Look, look . . . What d'you say to that?

MARI *claps her hands in admiration*.

ÁGI *looking at the Major like a demigod*. There now! I've never seen anything like it!

MAJOR *eagerly*. Ági, my dear! More cardboard, if you please!

MARI No, no . . . There can't be any question of our most valued guest debasing himself to such lowly work!

MAJOR Don't worry about me, Mari, my dear, when at last and for once I'm enjoying myself . . . Whatever next! You mean I'm not allowed to make boxes? In that case I'll rather pack my things and be off . . . *Gets up, hurries towards his room*.

MARI *dismayed, blocks his way*. Oh no! Please don't say that! Sit down, Major!

MAJOR *sits down, folding busily*. Come on, then, let's get some boxes made . . . Box making! *Doesn't care for the expression*. No! boxetry!

MARI What clever hands you've got.

ÁGI You do it better than Mummy and me.



MAJOR *looks up, catches sight of Tót.* And dear Mr Tót? Why isn't he joining us?

TÓT *startled.* Me?

ÁGI What, Daddy? *The Tóts laugh. The Major looks at them sternly. They stop laughing.*

TÓT Whatever next!

MAJOR *stops folding. Looks at Tót.* Why?

TÓT Ah. Me come and join you? *Alarmed at the Major's look.* I'm not that good with my hands.

MAJOR Do I detect, my dear Tót, that boxetry is beneath you?

TÓT Something beneath me that the deeply respected Major is prepared to do? No, no . . . But please appreciate my position. We are modest, anonymous little people of no rank, and we live our lives among little people. Little people are small-minded. They poke their noses into things, snoop around, watch each other out of the corners of their eyes . . . Just consider, if news were to get out of what I did here at home, and if a big fire were to break out, if I had the alarm bells rung, if I alerted the village . . . No, no! Nobody would move a muscle. They'd rather burn in their houses than accept orders from a fire-chief on whose escutcheon there was such a blot.

MAJOR So boxetry is beneath you, after all. Perhaps you're even secretly laughing at me . . . A fine thing.

TÓT Quite the opposite. I mean to say, that the Major's situation is different. A Major can do as he pleases. If the Major's game . . . *Sees the Major's face, the words stick in his throat.*

MAJOR *standing up, in a menacing tone.* What? I demand that you repeat that remark!

TÓT *taken aback.* I only meant that you, if you feel like it . . .

MAJOR *to the women.* Did you hear that? And are you going to put up with it and not say a word? *To Tót.* What d'you think I am? Is that the way you speak to me?

TÓT Me? Me? So what did I say?

MAJOR I won't sully myself by repeating the word with which you slandered me. But I'll have you know that at the front an insult like that would get you shot!

*Hurries into his room, slamming the door. The Tots look at one another in horror.*

MARI Oh, what did you say to him, Lajos my love?

TÓT You were here, weren't you? You heard every word.

MARI Perhaps I didn't hear properly. Go and ask him, Lajos dear.

TÓT *with dignity.* Me? You go and ask him.

MARI I daren't. Oh, no . . .

ÁGI I think it would be better if Mummy went to see the Major . . .

*Tót and his daughter bundle Mari towards the door. She knocks timidly and goes in. They remain standing outside the door in tense excitement. They dare not move.*

MARI *emerges quite broken. Her voice shakes. She stops, her hands fall.* He thought you'd said 'gay'.

TÓT What? Gay?

MARI Yes! *Covers her eyes.*

TÓT It just had to be a misunderstanding. What I said was 'If the Major's game . . .' Didn't I?

MARI Of course. You always know the right way to speak, Lajos my love.

TÓT *to Ági.* And what about you? Why are you looking at me like that?

ÁGI May I say something? I don't know whether Daddy said one thing or another just now . . . but I have noticed that when he's nervous or tired, or perhaps thirsty, very occasionally he has said things like that.

TÓT *furious*. Like what?

ÁGI Gor blimey. I know for a fact you've said that, for example.

MARI *immediately changing sides*. Now I hear that I think I remember.

TÓT Impossible! Perhaps ages ago, when I was on the railway . . . But since I've been a fire-fighter I've always been very careful to speak properly, because I know that people try to do you down.

MARI *now fully convinced*. Ági's quite right. And you once called me 'Zedvig'!

TÓT Zedvig? Hedvig, maybe. But never that!

MARI You said Zedvig, only of course you've forgotten . . . *Imploring*. Go on it. Follow him. Apologise.

TÓT *draws himself up. Straightens his helmet*. No.

MARI We've only got one son, Lajos my love. Just think of the struggle poor people have to go through for their son, when they're bringing up a child to be a teacher . . . All those years I went as a cleaner in the cinema when the Berger family had it! And you were on the arrival platform in your smart railway uniform, helping passengers with their luggage!

TÓT *gives a sigh*.

ÁGI *movingly*. And the cold weather's coming, the great Russian cold, the blizzards and the killer frost . . . *Puts her arms round her father and propels him toward the door*. And the partisans come creeping through the snow. They've got knives in their belts. Knives in their teeth . . . *Tót gradually yields to the pressure. Mari too urges him towards the door*. And Daddy doesn't have to apologise. Only to explain what he said.

*The two women force Tót through the door. They remain there, trembling.*

ÁGI Please, Mummy, may I say something.

MARI What's that, my girl?

ÁGI I simply daredn't say anything. But I did hear what Daddy said.

MARI What did he say?

ÁGI He didn't say 'gay'. Nothing of the sort. He said 'You carbuncular quiddle.

MARI *horrified*. What on earth? Quiddle?

ÁGI 'Carbuncular' I understand, but what's a quiddle? Is there such a word? I've heard fiddle . . . it sounds like a swear word.

MARI What are you saying? What are you hearing? You'll be the ruin of us all, my girl.

ÁGI Is it something bad?

MARI *covers her eyes*. Forget it, forget it, forget it . . . *Looks up as the door opens*. Here they come . . . *Out comes the Major triumphantly, pleasantly, all smiles. He pats Tót amicably on the shoulder. Tót steps forward timidly, with an unhappy smile*.

MAJOR What's the matter, Mari my dear? What are you standing here for? Why are you looking so miserable? Because of a little misunderstanding like that? Or has something happened?

MARI Oh, nothing at all, deeply respected Major, sir.

MAJOR Then let's get to work. Every minute counts . . . *Glances at Tót*. Now I'm really not sure. Is dear Mr Tót with us, or isn't he?

TÓT Well, I'd be grateful if you'd squeeze me in.

MAJOR *briskly arranging things*. Of course we will . . . Now if you'll permit, I'll take over the edge-trimmer. You sit there, Ági, and Mr Tót could take my place . . .

*They quickly set to work. The Major operates the edge-trimmer rapidly. The rest do the folding, but watch Tót out of the corners of their eyes.*

TÓT *folding clumsily, though with great effort. A rather potato-shaped box is the result. He looks at it solemnly.* Well, that's not very beautiful!

MAJOR Never mind! Beauty's not what matters, though that will come in time. The important thing is that we're here, here together, our hands and arms are moving, and time is going by. *They work in silence.* Everybody enjoying themselves?

MARI and ÁGI Very much!

Major What about dear Mr. Tót?

*Change of light*

POSTMAN *appears at the side, looks at his watch.* Gone eleven . . . And Mr Tót usually goes to bed at nine. *Shakes his head solemnly. Takes out a field letter.* 'When it gets dark, when the partisan danger is at its height, he yearns for entertainment and company. He doesn't like it if anybody goes to bed, indeed, the slightest sign of sleepiness, especially yawning, irritates him tremendously . . .' *Stares thoughtfully into space.* It was a mistake to interfere with the letters . . . Now I feel as if I'm responsible if Mr. Tót, God forbid, has a yawning fit . . . *Thinks.* But one mustn't always think the worst. He likes to have a stretch. And a groan. But to yawn, right in front of a Major? . . . No, no, no. *Tears up the letter, vanishes.*

*Meanwhile a little time has gone by. Tót is by now wilting badly.*

MAJORr Look here, I don't even know what time it is, but I hope that if you want to go to bed you'll speak up.

TÓT *stands up happily, Mari and Ági pull him gently back.*

MARI Go to bed? What an idea!

ÁGI I really don't know, but I don't think I've ever felt so lively.

MAJOR *looks at Tót*

TÓT *feels the look. Tries to brush it away like a fly.*

MAJOR What about dear Mr. Tót?

TÓT What was that? *Shoos away another fly.* Thank you kindly, I'm absolutely fine . . .

MARI We're just a bit anxious about the deeply respected Major.

MAJOR I'm afraid I'm a poor sleeper.

TÓT It's this crisp hill air . . . *Forgets what he meant to say.* At once. *Stares vacantly.* Ah yes . . . this crisp hill air. Even our visitors that have had bad insomnia have slept well.

MAJOR It's not helping me. I'd be happiest folding boxes until morning.

*The Tóts stare at him in horror.*

MARI All night long?

TÓT *laughs idiotically.* Hahaha . . .

*Change of light. An hour has passed.*

MAJOR Not too late for you? Please say.

ÁGI Not at all, not at all, not at all.

MARI *sleepily.* The resin-gatherers' fires are slowly beginning to go out, though.

MAJOR What does Mr. Tót think?

*He and the two women look at Tót, who does not react. Mari shakes him.*

TÓT *swaying semiconsciously.* Up and down . . . Up and down . . . *Clasps his head, shudders.* Didn't say a thing, Major.

*Change of light. Another hour has passed. The Tóts are folding boxes, completely exhausted.*

MAJOR I wouldn't believe it when your son assured me that here not only would my health be restored, but that I'd also be happy . . . and what's happened?

MARI *by now folding boxes mechanically, starts up in alarm.* What? What?

MAJOR That I seem already to have become a new man in your house . . . It's not the silence, not the scent of pines, but this magnificent hobby! *Festively.* My dear Mr. Tót!

TÓT *wakes, falls back.*

MAJOR I know what it means to be grateful . . . When I've returned to the front, my first task will be . . . Can you hear me, Mr. Tót? You're not sleepy?

TÓT Oh, yes. *His eyes close. Reopen.* Oh, no.

MAJOR My first task will be to take your Gyula to assist me in the well-heated battalion office.

ÁGI Mummy, did you hear that?

MARI *no longer able to feel pleasure. Forces a smile.*

ÁGI And Daddy! *Shouts.* The Major's going to take Gyula into the battalion office!

MAJOR What do you say to that, my dear Tót?

TÓT *staring the Major in the face, gives a loud yawn.*

MAJOR *looks at him, lets go the handle of the edge-trimmer. Gives a threatening look. Ági too looks at her father. Mari too comes to in the silence, and she too looks at her husband.*

MARI What's happened? *No reply.* What have you done this time, Lajos my love?

TÓT Me? Yawned.

MARI *to the Major.* He yawned.

*The Major says nothing. His face is gloomy. From that Mari, then Ági, finally Tót, begin to suspect that something is wrong. Painful silence.*

MAJOR *disappointedly.* I don't understand how this happened. I've asked several times whether you were sleepy.

MARI But he's not sleepy, deeply respected Major, sir.

MAJOR Then why did he yawn?

ÁGI Daddy! Why did you yawn?

TÓT *can scarcely speak.* With me, that is to say, yawning isn't a sign of sleepiness.

MAJOR Of what, then? Perhaps you yawned simply because you were enjoying yourself?

MARI That's right, that's right!

ÁGI Daddy's like that! He often gives great big sneezes, but he hasn't got a cold! It's a hobby of his!

MAJOR *reluctantly.* I accept what you say, but I wouldn't like it to happen again.

MARI How can you think such a thing, deeply respected Major, sir?

MAJOR So shall we carry on with the boxetry?

TÓT *about to fall on his face, but catches himself.* Are you asking me?

MAJOR Yes.

TÓT Shall I tell you the truth?

MAJOR Of course.

TÓT I . . . – *after a nudge in the ribs from Mari* – there’s nothing I’d like better than a little more boxetry.

MAJOR *pleased*. Then let’s get on . . . *They make boxes. Meanwhile it becomes completely daylight. A cockerel crows. He looks round.* I’m afraid it’s morning. Must get to bed.

TÓT *collapses onto the table*.

MARI *in a strange tone*. What a shame.

MAJOR *taking his leave*. That was a really pleasant way to spend the time.

MARI *pushing herself up with both hands, unsteady on her feet*. We’ve had a very good time as well.

MAJOR I hope we shall continue tomorrow.

MARI Yes indeed!

ÁGI Sweet dreams, dear Major! *Eagerly accompanies him to the door*.

MAJOR Good night to you all, dear people! *Takes the edge-trimmer clattering with him, goes into the room. Silence, then Tót, face down on the table, begins to snore. Mari too collapses onto the chair but pulls herself together, struggles to her feet and begins to shake Tót, who, however, gives no sign of life other than snores. Mari reaches under his arm, tries to lift him, but can’t manage it.*

MARI Give me a hand, girl.

*With a tremendous effort the two of them somehow lift Tót and drag him from the table, but can do no more.*

ÁGI Oh dear!

MARI He’s twice as heavy as usual . . . Fetch the duvet . . .

*Ági hurries off. Mari is now supporting her husband by herself. He falls onto her like a dead weight. Ági spreads a pillow and duvet on the floor and they try to get him to lie down. Tót, however, suddenly wakes up, pushes away the helping hands and, with an idiotic expression, begins to sing.*

TÓT How long will you coo, you ring-doves . . . *Gives up, lies down, goes to sleep.*

*Lighting change.*

POSTMAN *crosses the stage*. A telegram . . . “Hungarian Red Cross. Regretfully inform you that Second Lieutenant Tót, Gyula, field post-office 707/7, has been killed in action in the continuing hostilities....” *Looks up, groans*. Good Lord . . . What am I to do? I’m tearing this telegram up! *Tears it up, throws it in the bin, exit.*

*The background becomes light.*

MARI *half asleep*. Had a beer, had a bath, even set off back in daylight . . . My God, I hope the visitor enjoys himself! *Falls back.*

ÁGI *with a start*. An army officer!

*Curtain  
End of part 1.*

## ACT 2

### Scene 1

*A week later, on the glazed veranda. The Postman is looking in at the open window. Mari is dictating a letter to Ági.*

MARI Read out what we've put.

ÁGI Praise be, we've nothing but good to write. The deeply respected Major has put on five pounds in a week, he's stopped having bad dreams, and he's going to put you in the battalion office.

MARI *to the Postman.* Hear that?

POSTMAN Very nice.

ÁGI I'm afraid he's got rather hooked on boxetry, so that he can't bring himself to stop until morning. The two of us are standing the strain pretty well, but being kept awake is hard on poor Daddy . . .

TÓT *half asleep, crosses the stage unsteadily.*

MARI *goes to her, joins in the reading.* We two have worked out that it's possible to sleep in odd moments, for example, at lunch while the soup cools down . . . *Puts away the ironing.*

ÁGI *going on.* Daddy's sometimes so sleepy, poor thing, that he doesn't know where he is.

TÓT *enters, makes straight for the orchestra. Mari hurries to him, takes him off stage.*

ÁGI . . . and yesterday, when a box fell on the floor, poor Daddy crawled under the table after it. When that happens, as you know, he always tickles Ági's ankle. Unfortunately, he didn't really know where he was, and by mistake tickled the Major's ankle, and he took it so badly that he stopped boxetry although it wasn't even dawn yet. But don't worry, we're well, and send love and kisses. Your loving mother . . . *Mari takes the pen and signs. And Ági.*

MARI *takes the letter, hands it to the Postman.* There you are, send it off . . . *Seeing that he doesn't move.* Didn't you hear me?

POSTMAN *in confusion.* Yes, certainly.

MARI Well, give the postman a drink.

ÁGI *offers him wine.*

POSTMAN God preserve your dear son!

MARI Right then, off you go! . . . *To Ági.* Come on, let's get things ready! *Quickly and ceremoniously they get ready for boxetry. Ági piles up the sheets of cardboard. Mari hurries off for her husband.*

MARI Open your eyes, Lajos my love. *Tót blinks.* Can't you do a bit better than that? *Seats him at the table. To Ági.* Call him, my dear.

ÁGI *steals to the door.* Major, sir! We're ready!

*An expectant silence. The door opens and the Major hands out the edge-trimmer and a number of boxes.*

MAJOR *off stage, coldly.* Carry on without me.

MARI *surprised.* Doesn't the Major mean to do any boxetry?

MAJOR No.

MARI So what would you like to do?

MAJOR Take a walk.

ÁGI *timidly, after a startled silence.* At this time of day? May I say something? There isn't any street lighting here yet.

MAJOR Actually, I'm only going to take a walk in my room. *Horried silence.*

MARI *clasping her hands together.* My son, my son, my dear son . . . What will become of you? What have we done?

ÁGI I suppose he's still cross about the ankle-tickling.

MARI *to Ági, excitedly.* My girl! He's certainly not cross with you! Go in and have a word with him. Say that it's an old custom of your father's and that he meant no harm . . . Be quick!

ÁGI *hurries into the Major's room.*

MARI He's been sleeping so well. He's put on a nice bit of weight . . .

TÓT Presumably he's annoyed with me again.

MARI You've done no harm, Lajos my love.

ÁGI *comes back. She says nothing, merely gives her father a long look.*

MARI What's the matter, my dear? Don't say he's been offended?

ÁGI *a nervous sidelong glance at the door.* Very much so.

MARI Who's he angry with?

ÁGI I daren't say . . . Or may I? *She sighs, gives Tót a shocked look.* What's happened is that when Daddy crawled under the table he bit the deeply respected Major on the ankle.

TÓT I did what?

MARI *sternly.* The very idea! Your father doesn't bite people.

ÁGI *quite unconvinced.* No.

TÓT Now this is getting beyond a joke!

*Silence. The two women look at Tót. He frowns. The women turn away in confusion. Silence. Ági sighs. Tót looks in her direction. Ági clears her throat nervously. Mari sighs and begins to shake her head.*

TÓT *crossly.* What's the matter? Why are you shaking your head?

MARI *bursts into tears.*

TÓT Why are you crying? Can't you speak?

MARI *drying her eyes.* All we ask, Lajos my love, is that you should be a bit more careful.

ÁGI And another time, if anything falls down, Daddy isn't to do anything. I'll go down for it.

MARI That'll be very good.

TÓT Have you gone mad? Don't tell me you believe this rubbish?

MARI Of course not.

ÁGI The important thing is for Daddy not to go crawling under the table.

TÓT What are you getting at? I knocked a box down with my elbow. I went on hands and knees, picked it up and that's all.

ÁGI That's true. But all the same, if you don't mind my saying so, you were under the table rather a long time.

MARI That's right. I noticed that as well.

TÓT Perhaps I had a little nap. But as for biting, I didn't bite anybody.

MARI That's for sure. Tickling and biting are two different things.

ÁGI Nobody's going to doubt that. But all the same, if I may say something, people don't usually take offence for no reason. It could be that the way Daddy tickled the Major's ankle he could have taken it for a bite.

TÓT No way. A normal person can't confuse the two.

MARI I don't think so either.

ÁGI Well then, if I may ask, what was that crunch?

TÓT What kind of crunch? Did something crunch?

MARI It seemed to me too that something crunched.

TÓT *disconcerted*. What could it have been? *He considers*. Of course! Perhaps the box crunched as it was dropped.

MARI Of course. That's possible.

ÁGI I don't want to argue with Daddy, but the sound wasn't the sort crunch that a box makes.

TÓT What sort was it, then?

ÁGI I could be mistaken, but to my ears it was like somebody crunching a bone in their teeth.

MARI That was what I felt as well.

TÓT I give up! You believe, or rather, you want to make me believe . . . *Is silent, looks at them anxiously*. Now look here. Never in all my life have I bitten anybody!

MARI That is so!

ÁGI Well, Daddy's not that kind of person! But all the same, if you don't mind my saying so, the reason I bring such things up is that at times it's certainly happened that Daddy has done strange things for no reason.

TÓT *with growing uncertainty*. Have I? What, for example?

ÁGI Last year, for example, in spring, and on a Sunday walk into the bargain, you deeply offended Father Tomaji.

TÓT That can only be some sort of gossip.

ÁGI But I was there, walking with Daddy, and the ground nearly swallowed me up, because really and truly Daddy said 'and with your spirit' to the Father politely, but at the same time flicked his nose so that his hat nearly fell off.

TÓT What did I do? Flicked his nose? Ridiculous. I grant you, I might have wanted to brush a fly off his nose . . . But to flick the Father's nose? Tell me, now, Mari my dear . . . Is that the sort of man you know me for?

MARI I really don't believe such stupid gossip about you, but I do know that for a few days afterwards the Father was very cool when I spoke to him.

TÓT You're imagining things! It must have been quite accidental!

MARI *becoming agitated*. Accidental? Is everything with you accidental? Was it accidental that you were sacked on the spot from the railway?

TÓT *annoyed*. You're going to bring that up? As if you didn't know that the stationmaster at Piskolt treated me so badly because he wanted to bring in his dim-witted nephew as head shunter!

MARI *bursting out*. And he needed your job, eh? I know that tale. Only that's not what happened! What did happen was that the emperor of Italy, that lovely little Victor Emanuel, was here on a visit to Hungary. And what happened was that His Excellency the Governor invited the emperor to hunt bison. And what happened was that the station staff spent all night whitewashing the walls, polishing the seats, planting geraniums . . .

TÓT That's got nothing to do with . . .

MARI And when it had all been smartened up and the girls in white dresses had trooped out, and the Scouts, and the Youth Club, and the railway band, and the arrival of the special train had been signalled . . .

TÓT Don't go on . . .

MARI And the entire railway staff, from the stationmaster down to the two shunters, were lined up along the platform . . .

TÓT I don't want to know . . .

MARI *with unexpected bile*. Shut up! And the moment the special train was running through the station the one shunter – *she gives Tót an acid glance* – whom the poor, unhappy little emperor had done nothing to upset, suddenly turned round, dropped his trousers and showed his backside to the special train as rudely as possible . . .



TÓT Madness! Either you or I or both of us have dreamed up the whole thing!

MARI *explodes and points to the door.* Dreaming or not dreaming, I don't give a damn! You'd better think of our son, our only son, who's going to freeze to death if you don't get in there and apologise to the deeply respected Major!

TÓT *reeling.* But what am I to apologise for?

MARI For losing your senses, crawling under the table and biting the ankle of your son's benefactor!

TÓT *looks round, distraught, then gives up and goes into the Major's room.*

MARI and ÁGI *look at the door in tense expectation.*

MAJOR *hurries on, urging Tót along with him in amicable fashion. He goes to the table.*

Right, here we are. Nothing's happened. But before we begin boxetry let me say that I only want to start work if all of us derive the same pleasure. And now that we've managed to clear up that little misunderstanding I expect dear Mr Tót to continue to be so frank. The minute he's tired he'll say so, but on the other hand while we're engaged in boxetry he'll do it with heart and soul . . . *Puts down the edge-trimmer irritatedly.* Ah, just a moment. I haven't finished what I was saying.

TÓT *shivers.* Now what's wrong?

MAJOR I'm rather going to ask . . . Has something happened?

TÓT Nothing at all.

MAJOR Because you were looking over here, behind my back.

TÓT Ah well . . . a butterfly had come in.

MAJOR What kind of butterfly?

TÓT One with two yellow spots and a red one.

MAJOR And you pay attention to butterflies while we're engaged in boxetry!

TÓT I just happened to look that way.

MAJOR Just happened to look! But meanwhile you were thinking that it would be nice to go after it, catch it and kill it . . . Is that so or isn't it?

TÓT *shaking his head.* Why ever do you think that?

MAJOR *paces about, thinks, comes back.* Look here, Tóts. I live and die for boxetry. But the way we've been doing it up till now can't go on. If you've all got your minds on other things half the time, it's a complete waste of effort. Let's give it up, if you don't mind.

TÓT *submissively.* I don't wish to argue with the Major, but if you'll all forgive me it's difficult to prevent anyone thinking of something.

MAJOR That belief is very persuasive, but it is unfounded! I'll give you an example. Let's take eating. So, what does it consist of? In order: biting, chewing, salivating, swallowing . . .

*Picks up a cake.* Eat that, now. The operation forms a sequence, like a chain, which nothing can hinder . . . or did you think of something in the meantime?

TÓT *dreamily.* Once, when I was still working on the railway, I managed to catch a squirrel. The children were quite taken with it, and it was interesting, but it escaped . . .

MAJOR *impatiently.* You're a strange man. Let's take another example. Do you know the National Anthem, my dear Tót?

TÓT Of course . . . God bless the Magyar . . .

MAJOR Quite. And did you think of anything in the meantime?

TÓT No.

MAJOR Well, at last! Look, everyone. Out at the front I've seen in the case of my own men the dangers that accompany idleness. If a man's mind is left to itself he becomes the plaything of his thoughts, and he behaves as Mr Tót did just now over the red-spotted butterfly . . . But it's only been here, in your hospitable establishment, that I've hit upon the one and only cure for this, that is, boxetry! . . . Now do you follow my train of thought?

ÁGI It's as clear as the day.

MARI There are points here and there that I don't understand.

TÓT Same here.

MAJOR Never mind. It's not important for us to burden you just now with such theoretical reasoning when your brain's not actually working too well . . . Let's stick to boxetry! How did you do it before I arrived?

ÁGI I used to cut the sheets of cardboard and Mummy folded them.

MAJOR And what did dear Mr Tót do?

TÓT I just used to get a breath of fresh air.

MAJOR There, you see. Now, however, I myself cut the cardboard while the three of you do the folding, or rather you would, because there isn't enough cardboard, the reason for which is that formerly you were one to one, whereas now there's just me against the three of you. . . Therefore you become bored, doze off and allow your thoughts to wander!

ÁGI *delighted*. Well I never!

MAJOR Just look at me! When I arrived my nerves were in shreds, I was tormented by nightmares and didn't feel safe anywhere . . . But now I can say that not only have I recovered, but also that I've been rejuvenated in this pleasant place . . . I've almost forgotten what war is!

MARI *moved*. You hear that, Lajos my love?

TÓT *nods slowly*.

MAJOR And for this I am largely indebted to boxetry. Believe me, from the minute I wake up I can hardly wait for evening so that at last we can get down to it!

ÁGI Same here!

MARI Same here! *She gestures at Tót. Same goes for him! He nods at her slowly. They lean on one another and go to sleep.*

MAJOR *dreamily, poetically*. There is in this occupation a kind of elevating, pure beauty, of eternal peace . . . boxetry is the best thing in the world!

ÁGI *passionately*. Oh, how true that is!

MAJOR There are times when I dream of how fine it would be if even more, many more people could indulge in boxetry. Perhaps the time will one day come when the whole of humanity may be brought to it.

ÁGI *stands up*. If only! My God!

MAJOR Of course, the way I see it, one would have to maintain some differences. Every nation could make boxes in different shapes and colours. The Dutch, round ones, like their cheeses. The French, ones that could play tunes. Even the Russians, once we've defeated them, would be allowed to make boxes. Only little ones, of course, like matchboxes.

ÁGI Oh, if I could live to see that!

MAJOR It won't come quickly. But if it can be done, if this idea succeeds, the whole of mankind will bless our names.

ÁGI Major! Dear Major! Permit me to kiss the dear major's hand.

MAJOR That I cannot permit! Only this! *Kisses Ági on the forehead, then releases her and looks into the distance*. Dreams, dreams, splendid, beautiful dreams . . . *He looks at Tót, says in a sober tone*. Tót! *Mr and Mrs Tót give a start*. I hope, my dear Mr and Mrs Tót, that you now understand what my problem is with this edge-trimmer?!

ÁGI *happily*. Well, it's really not hard to see . . . The problem is that our edge-trimmer's too small, so that the Major can't keep up with us!

MAJOR Marvellous. Your little girl has a brilliant mind . . . Now, dear Mr Tót? The rest is child's play, isn't it?

TÓT *with no idea of what is wanted from him*. Well, of course.

MAJOR Congratulations. And what's to be done?

TÓT To be done? I don't know.

*Mari and Ági look round anxiously.*

MARI Oh, stop pretending, Lajos my love.

ÁGI Daddy, really! Look at me. What did I say just now?

TÓT That this edge-trimmer's too small.

MAJOR Marvellous . . . And what follows from that?

TÓT Nothing.

ÁGI Oh, oh, that's just like Daddy! . .

MAJOR You mustn't talk like that. He'll work it out for himself.

MARI Let's give him a hint . . .

MAJOR That way we'll only do him harm, Mari my dear, because we'll injure his self-esteem. Look here, Tót! If your shoes are tight what do you do?

TÓT Right away . . . I limp.

ÁGI Daddy, Daddy, Daddy! . .

MAJOR Don't force him, don't make him hurry . . . I'll turn my back, because my presence may perhaps be disturbing him. And you, my dear Mari and Ági, don't disturb him in his thoughts . . . *He turns away, walks round the Tóts, a short silence, then Tót stands up and makes for his mattress.*

MARI What are you doing, Lajos my love? Sit down again. You've got to do some thinking. *They fuss around him feverishly.* Wait a minute. I'll massage your temples . . . is that nice?

TÓT Very nice.

MARI Can you think?

TÓT No.

MARI Perhaps if we give him a quince to smell . . . *Ági hurries off.* Lean your head forward so that the blood runs into it . . . is that nice?

TÓT *towards the mattress.* You know how it would be nice? Lying down!

MARI No, no . . . *Takes the quince from Ági.* Take a few deep breaths, Lajos my love.

*Tót inhales. The two women watch him anxiously.*

TÓT *pushing them away.* Trouble is, when I begin to think I immediately have the feeling that something's trying to get at me.

MARI Shall we move the furniture back?

TÓT It's not the furniture that's trying to get at me.

MARI What, then?

TÓT The wall.

MARI The wall? Shall we go out into the garden?

TÓT Not that wall. The one that tries to get at me is here in my head, inside . . .

MAJOR *coming pleasantly over.* Well, my dear Mr. Tót? What's the verdict?

TÓT All sorts of things have come into my mind, deeply respected Major, sir, but I'm afraid none was the right one.

MAJOR Never mind. I've often had that trouble myself.

TÓT Really?

MAJOR May I give you a piece of advice? Just relax, make yourself comfortable. Unbutton your tunic, my dear Tót.

*Tót unbuttons his tunic. The rest surround him and watch expectantly. Tót tries tremendously hard to think.*

TÓT *after a short silence, with suppressed excitement.* Aha . . . *The others slowly stand up in their excitement.* I say, Major, I think something's becoming clear to me.

MAJOR Is it? Marvellous! And what would this something be?

TÓT *sighs, waves a hand.* Sorry, what I've thought wasn't what I was expecting, it was something completely different.

*The others sit back down disappointed.*

ÁGI Come on, Daddy.

MAJOR Perhaps we shouldn't pester him . . . Perhaps he'd care for a coffee?

TÓT *suddenly gestures that they should not pester him.* If the edge-trimmer's small . . . Now then, now then . . . It's as if the outline of something is coming clear . . . *The other three stand up.* Lost it.

*The others sit back down, silence.*

TÓT What's the time?

MAJOR *softly.* We're getting there.

TÓT *jumps up in excitement.* Right! . . . *Waves a hand, sits down.* No good. *Begins to pant.* Mind if I loosen my belt?

MAJOR Why not? Take your trousers off if it helps . . .

TÓT *suddenly stands. Overcome by great pains. Breaks out in perspiration, breathes noisily, gestures that he has thought of something. His whole body quivers.* It's coming . . . it's coming . . . it's coming . . . *Stretches.* Major! Mari my dear. I've got it! If this edge-trimmer is small, we've got to make a bigger one . . . Hahaha! *Laughs happily.*

MAJOR I knew it! Congratulations, my dear Tót.

*All make a fuss of Tót.*

TÓT *clutches his stomach, goes into sudden paroxysms of laughter, reels to the window and leans out.*

MARI *to Ági, very happily.* Take him into the garden and hold his forehead . . . and then get on with it! *Ági takes Tót into the garden, the Major goes into his room, clatters about and brings out the edge-trimmer.*

MARI *dreamily.* He never used to come empty-handed. He'd bring a little cigar or some chocolate, or some embrocation for the Father . . . But now he needn't bring anything! Come home empty handed, Gyula!

MRS GIZI *timidly, entering dressed to kill.* Good evening, my dear Mrs. Tót.

MARI What can I do for you, madam?

MRS GIZI I've brought a little baked apple, and . . . if you won't take it as an intrusion . . . I'd like a word with the Major.

MARI *gives her a long look. In this there is no scorn, rather a little anxiety. Mrs Tót does not want to share her credits with anyone. Her jealousy will be perceptible later.* Of course. *Knocks at the door.* Major, could you spare a moment . . .

MAJOR *coming out.* Certainly.

MRS GIZI *dare not look at him, rather addresses Mari, pleadingly.* Please tell him who I am.

MARI *to the Major.* This is Mrs Géza Gizi.

MAJOR I know. What can I do for her?

MARI *to Mrs Gizi.* What can he do for you?

MRS GIZI *still cannot bring herself to address the Major.* Oh, dear Mrs. Tót, ask him . . . Would he not care to drop in and see me some time?

MARI Please drop in and see her some time.

MAJOR Out of the question.

MARI *satisfiedly.* Out of the question.

MRS GIZI Just for a quarter of an hour.

MARI *interpreting.* Just for a quarter of an hour.

MAJOR Quarter of an hour, quarter of an hour . . . If I had that many quarters of an hour!

MARI You heard.

MRS GIZI Tell him, if you please, that it isn't only resin-gatherers that come to see me. Because what I do isn't knitting string bags!

MAJOR So I can well believe.

MRS GIZI *to Mari.* Well really, a major's been here and cast aspersions on my line of business. There is still professional integrity in the world, you know.

MARI *to the Major.* She says, there's still such a thing as professional integrity.

MAJOR I understand you, my good woman! It would be correct for me to pay calls here, and not only on you . . . But when? When? And what would the dear Tóts have to say if I were to desert them for so much as a quarter of an hour?

MARI *just looks at him with a happy smile.* Quite so.

MAJOR That is to say, presence is the most important thing in the world. To be present, at all times, everywhere. At the front my men can scarcely wait for my return. Sometimes I try to look towards where my battalion is positioned . . . *Looks in a certain direction, the others follow his gaze.* Ah, it's just wishful thinking. I'm sincerely sorry, my good woman, but one can't be in two places at once.

MARI *with satisfaction.* He's sincerely sorry.

MAJOR *takes out a photograph.* But accept this as a modest compensation. *Hands it to Mari.*

MARI *hands it on to Mrs Gizi.* As a modest compensation.

MRS GIZI *with delight.* May I hang it up?

MARI May she hang it up?

MAJOR Of course.

MRS GIZI Even above my bed?

MARI *to the Major.* Even above her bed?

MAJOR Anywhere. It will always be looking at you.

MRS GIZI Thank you very much.

MARI She thanks you very much. *To Mrs Gizi.* Good-bye.

MRS GIZI Good-bye. *Exit.*

ÁGI *runs in happily from the garden.* It's ready! All done! Mummy, please come and help!

MAJOR Let me see!

*They all run out into the garden and come back at once. Tót and Mrs Tót are carrying the new edge-trimmer, a mighty contraption on four legs with a blade as big as a guillotine. The Major accompanies them, delighted.*

MAJOR *pulls down the handle, which makes a great clank.* Crash! The sound is marvellous as well! I congratulate you, Mr. Tót. Just what I had in mind.

ÁGI Thank you very much, Major . . .

MAJOR Let's try it out. Come along. Let's not waste time!

*The Tót family stand up and prepare in a chain for boxetry. Tót passes out the sheets of cardboard and the Major, with great clanks of the machine, scores them.*

MAJOR Splendid! How well it works!

ÁGI My Daddy's ever so good with his hands!

MAJOR Perhaps this machine would take four at a time!

ÁGI Then put four in!

MAJOR Won't that be rather a lot?

ÁGI I don't think so. *To Tót as he dozily passes the sheets. Daddy! Give him four!*

TÓT *without a word slides from the chair, falls under the table and goes to sleep.*

MAJOR *coldly leaving him there.* What's the matter with him?

MARI Poor dear thought there was a mouse.

MAJOR What sort of mouse?

MARI Field mice sometimes run in from the garden . . . *She and Ági hunt the imaginary mouse with great shouts until Tót wakes up.* Please go on, it's run off.

MAJOR *enthusiastically.* Right, wait a moment. I'm going to put four sheets in . . . *Makes the machine clank.* Through like butter! Tell me, Tóts, do you feel like singing?

ÁGI I do.

MAJOR What about dear Mr, Tót? What does he say?

*He looks at Tót, who does not answer but only looks at the Major and slowly begins to chew, swallow, chew, swallow, as if there were a lump in his throat. The Major stops clanking. All look at Tót, who goes on chewing.*

MARI He doesn't want to say anything.

MAJOR Is he chewing something?

MARI He's recently developed the habit of keeping a piece of meat in his mouth and not swallowing it for days.

MAJOR Why doesn't he spit it out?

ÁGI Daddy, please, everybody's asking, please spit that bit of meat out.

TÓT *his eyes bulge. He looks at Ági, then back to the Major, and with a great effort goes on chewing.*

MARI Lajos!

TÓT *makes a final effort but cannot suppress a yawn. He yawns loudly straight into the major's face. The Major recoils.*

MARI *in despair.* Lajos, Lajos, now look what you've done, Lajos my love. *Tót looks round in alarm.* What kind of a father are you? Have you no decency?

MAJOR *slowly recovering his composure.* Why bother him, my dear Mari? He's done no harm!

MARI Only yawned. *Bursts into tears.*

MAJOR That's not certain. If someone opens their mouth it doesn't inevitably mean that they've yawned.

MARI If only!

ÁGI Perhaps that's right. What reason could he have had? He isn't bored or sleepy or sick or anything . . .

MAJOR Let him speak for himself . . . What did you do just now, my dear Tót?

TÓT Me? Nothing. . . *Looking round in alarm.* I could have opened my mouth a bit . . . Is that such a great problem?

MAJOR Not at all! Just as long as you weren't yawning . . .

TÓT Me yawn? God forbid! Never crossed my mind.

MAJOR I'm really glad about that. Yawning, or rather, the spiritual condition that yawning reveals, has almost as damaging an influence as thinking . . . So now you don't feel disposed to yawn?

TÓT Not in the least.

MAJOR And later?

TÓT Nor later either.

MAJOR You see, my dear Mari? *To Tót*. And you're prepared to take certain precautionary measures, only, of course, if you feel so disposed, by which you could forestall future yawns?

TÓT That's only natural.

MAJOR That's what I expected of you . . . Well, let's get on. It's not such a great incident, but all the same . . . Do you know the saying: It's easier to yawn than not to? You haven't heard it? It's one of mine.

ÁGI And how true!

MAJOR I know what I'm talking about . . . At the front, soldiers detailed for sentry duty at night are inclined to yawn, which is not good because anyone that yawns can easily go to sleep, and anyone that goes to sleep is shot . . . *He laughs*. hahaha! This, of course is different, there's less at stake, but all the same . . . *Becomes serious, looks at Tót*. What I do there is to make soldiers on guard take a plum-stone in their mouths, and when the relief comes pass it on . . . *He stares at Tót's mouth*. I don't suppose you've any fruit stones in the house, my dear Mari?

MARI Sorry, Major, the plum season's over and there aren't any peaches yet . . .

MAJOR Too bad! I've thought of something else . . . *He begins frenzied activity. He looks at Tót's mouth. He brings a pot of geraniums from the windowsill, but with a gesture puts it back. Just a moment! He hurries into his room. He comes out with a little lacquered box, and from this, still looking at Tót's mouth, he takes a Kodak. He turns Tót's face towards himself so as better to see his mouth. May I?*

MARI Give a smile, Lajos my love.

ÁGI Daddy's always so solemn.

MAJOR Just now that doesn't matter. Right! *He quickly puts the camera away and takes out his service revolver. He eyes it thoroughly. Either will do, but neither is ideal . . . I've got it! I've got it! Why didn't I think of it before! He runs off and comes back with a little pocket torch. He presses the switch, the light buzzes and comes on. This is what we call out there a bleeper . . . Can you hear it? If you press the switch it bleeps . . . With a grand gesture he places it in front of Tót. There you are, my dear Mr. Tót.*

*They all look at the bleeper.*

MARI What ever next! I'd never have thought of it . . .

ÁGI And ever so simple!

TÓT *looking at the torch. He picks it up, makes it buzz, the light comes on.* Really. Clever gadget.

MAJOR *with satisfaction.* Help yourself, my dear Tót!

TÓT *looking round.* What for? What am I supposed to do with it?

ÁGI *laughs.* Well, what do you think? Put it in your mouth, Daddy, that's all.

MARI Just be careful not to swallow it, Lajos my love.

MAJOR You mustn't chew it or swallow it. Only suck it quietly like a hard sweet.

TÓT *becoming indignant.* You mean I'm supposed to put this thing in my mouth?

ÁGI Well, where else? *Laughs loudly.*

TÓT *bangs on the table.* Be quiet! *Ági is silent, startled. Tót picks up the torch, looks at it, puts it down. Uncomprehendingly.* But it's a pocket torch!

MARI Well, of course it is, Lajos my love.

TÓT And I'm supposed to put it in my mouth?

MARI *cannot understand the reason for objection.* So what have you got against it? Oh, I see . . . *To the Major.* Poor thing, he's afraid he'll swallow it.

MAJOR You mustn't be afraid of that, my dear Tót. It may be a little strange at first, but one can just as well become accustomed to a pocket torch as to false teeth.

TÓT *looking only at Mari.* And is that what you say as well, Mari my love?

MARI Well, of course! Have I ever meant you any harm?

TÓT I'm supposed to . . . *He suddenly busts out, explodes, taking the bleeper in both hands as if to crush it.* This . . . this . . .

MARI *screams.* What are you doing there?

TÓT *is shaken, clutches his head. Looks in horror at the torch, then at the others, who all encourage him by smiling. He gives a great groan and puts the torch down in front of him.*

MARI *goes gently to him, feels that her husband has finally broken, takes hold of the torch. Now, open wide . . . Tót obediently opens his mouth. Mari carefully puts the torch inside, shuts her husband's mouth, strokes it and kisses his cheek.*

MAJOR Well, that's taken care of that . . . Doesn't taste too unpleasant, I hope?

TÓT *shakes his head stiffly.*

ÁGI May I say something? Now that his face is fatter I think Daddy's even more handsome!

MARI I think he looks better as well.

MAJOR You see what a success you are? *Tót nods rigidly.* Then let's get on with some boxetry. *Steps to the edge-trimmer.* Now let's try five sheets at once . . . Or rather, before we get to work, I'd also like to say that until now Lieutenant Mikulitz has bunked with me, but as soon as I'm back at the front your dear son is going in his place. This is to his advantage, because the school building where I live is surrounded by a double guard . . . *Mari and Ági jump up, rush to the Major, and heap upon him signs of gratitude.*

ÁGI Thank you so much, dear Major.

MARI We're never, never going to be able to thank you enough . . .

TÓT *ignored during this tumult of voices, stands up and moves off, torch in mouth, at first in the wrong direction. He bumps into the wall. Turns back and finally finds the door, through which he walks unobserved.*

MAJOR Please, don't thank me . . . I'm such an impatient man! Come on, come on, come on! . . . Where's dear Mr. Tót?

*All look round. Tót is nowhere.*

ÁGI I expect he'll be back in a moment.

MARI *wringing her hands in anxiety.* I don't know . . . I don't know . . . *From the door she calls into the garden. Lajos! No reply. Mari runs out, and her calls are heard, farther and farther away.*

*Blackout.*

POSTMAN *enters thoughtfully while the stage revolves.* I'll have you know I've been entirely unselfish in tampering with the letters. Just think, if I didn't keep an eye out everything would go completely to pot round here. I couldn't have delivered that telegram, though . . . I don't mean to say that if Professor Cipriani had a son, and his son was at the front, and he'd got that telegram . . . That's another matter. Round the back in the garden they've got a tennis court. They knock the ball all over the place. Now it's over there, then it's here again, then back there, then here again – your eyes can't keep still . . . How different it is



when Mr. Tót puts his helmet on! Nothing unsettles that man, everything about him is in balance. If, for example, I were to cut him in two with a big garden saw he'd fall into two identical pieces. It'd be a joy to behold! But that telegram did come. And letters keep coming as well, as if he were still alive, but letters take longer to get here, and he isn't alive. . . . But if I'd just handed it straight over! No, no. Two opposites don't fit together. For example, I tried sitting and standing at the same time, but it didn't work. That's when they took me into the clinic. Since then I've been keeping an eye on people, so their lives shan't get tangled up . . .  
*Exit.*

*The stage brightens.*

*Scene 2.*

*A room in the priest's house. A big crucifix on the wall and an iron bed, on which the priest lies snoring.*

MARI *enters after a timid knock.* His name be praised . . .  
TOMAJI *sits up, rubbing his eyes.* What is it? Have you brought the ironing, my dear Mari?  
MARI My husband's disappeared, Father!  
TOMAJI Where's he gone, then?  
MARI That's what I'd like to know . . . If I take my eyes off him for a moment, he's nowhere. I've got a visitor, I can't be watching him all day.  
TOMAJI *sighs.* Has everyone gone out of their minds in this peaceful parish? Yesterday morning Leonard, duke of Luxembourg, sent for me because he didn't know what to do, he felt that he was a convinced communist.  
MARI Poor thing. Since when?  
TOMAJI First thing in the morning there was nothing wrong with him. The change occurred while he was out riding.  
MARI Perhaps it was because of the jolting . . . And what advice did you give?  
TOMAJI Advice to a communist? A nice lukewarm bath! It won't be easy to advise you either, because we must bear in mind not only your visitor but also your husband's sensitivity.

*A snore is heard.*

MARI Well, that's the point! He wouldn't even hold a pocket torch in his mouth!  
TOMAJI He's a vain man, very vain . . . Would it not be possible simply to tie him to a chair? Then he certainly wouldn't run away.

*Snoring is heard again, and they look at one another in surprise.*

MARI That's no good, because if my beloved sits in one place for a long time he goes off to sleep.  
TOMAJI Well, then, tie a bell round his neck! I dare say I've got a spare sanctuary bell.

*A loud snore. Mari looks round nervously.*

MARI A bell? *Smiles.* He'd be like a little lamb . . . Only I'm afraid the sound of the bell would irritate the Major.

TOMAJI Then what can I say? Can you hear that? *Very loud snore.* Is that you snoring, Mari?

MARI Me? Not at all.

TOMAJI Then who is it?

*The snoring grows louder. They look for the source, and discover Tót, sleeping the sleep of the just under the bed. With great trouble they pull him out and with the utmost difficulty wake him.*

TÓT *supported by both of them.* Jesus Christ be praised.

TOMAJI For ever . . . How did you get in here, my son?

TÓT *naturally.* Through the window.

TOMAJI But why?

TÓT Because the door was shut.

TOMAJI That is, on sober reflection and by common sense, within the realm of the five senses . . . *Looks Tót over in astonishment, then to Mari.* Leave us to ourselves, my dear.

*Exit Mari.*

TOMAJI *to Tót.* Speak.

TÓT What am I to do? Please believe me, I've struggled against it. It's no good. For days I've been overwhelmed by a desire, a desire stronger than anything, to creep underneath something.

TOMAJI Under what?

TÓT That hardly matters. Wherever I am, I'm constantly on the lookout for a suitable hiding place nearby. I know it's not nice of me, but even now, while I'm talking to you, Father, I can scarcely resist the temptation not to crawl under your cassock.

TOMAJI My son, my son . . . *Sighs.* Such a fine, healthy figure of a man! This is terrible! *Raises his cassock.* Well, if it brings you relief, my son, I have no objection, creep under my cassock for a little while.

TÓT *looking longingly at the priest's shins.* I'm not saying, it would be nice, oh, really it would . . . But I'd better not. I'm afraid that temptation will completely overpower me.

TOMAJI You see, this conversation's good for you . . . And now, what are we to do?

There's a war on, day after day the papers report the victories of our forces, but still we're afraid, terrified of something . . . What am I saying! Pull yourself together, my son! Just think! Try to tell me what's troubling you, perhaps that will bring you a little relief.

TÓT *Thinking.* Father, there are three things that worry me.

TOMAJI Tell me.

TÓT Firstly, the dear visitor wishes me to pull my helmet down over my eyes, which is ridiculous and contrary to regulations.

TOMAJI And? Go on.

TÓT Then, I like to have a stretch now and then. And while I do it I like to say 'Oh, mother, mother . . .'

TOMAJI *crossly.* And?

TÓT That's forbidden as well. My third complaint is that I've got to carry the Major's pocket torch in my mouth so that I don't yawn.

TOMAJI So . . . *Begins to be angry.* And is this torch so big?

TÓT Not all that big. At the most, as big as a hen's egg.

TOMAJI So . . . And you've got to swallow it?

TÓT That I must not! Only hold it in my mouth, like a sweet.

TOMAJI *in a rage*. Is that all that's wrong with you? Does it hurt? *Calls through the door*. Come here, my dear Mari! *Enter Mari*. It's a pity you couldn't hear that! Here we are, right in the middle of a war, with people fearing for their lives or actually mourning their dead, and he comes along with piffling complaints. He might be grateful to God for bringing his son's commanding officer to your house. Get him out of here. I don't even want to set eyes on him. TÓT *seeing that no one is watching him, goes out through the window*.  
 MARI What am I to do with him, then?  
 TOMAJI He doesn't need a priest, he doesn't need God . . . What he does need is a psychiatrist!  
 MARI Oh, definitely . . . I'll take him to Professor Cipriani. Perhaps he'll help us.  
 TOMAJI Yes, he's a marvellous man, a world-famous doctor.  
 MARI *who has not noticed her husband's disappearance, makes for the door*. Say thank you very much, Lajos my love.  
 TOMAJI *who has not noticed Tót's absence either*. Go in peace, my son. Drive from your heart the demon of vanity.  
 MARI Yes, yes! And that confounded stubbornness of yours.  
 TOMAJI Abstain from meat and examine yourself. There's a war on, we're all suffering because of it. Off you go!  
 MARI *from the door*. Come on then, Lajos my love. *Exit*.  
 TOMAJI *left alone*. My God and Father, unto whom all hearts are open, thou alone knowest that I too would most heartily desire to hide under something.

*Blackout.*

### *Scene 3*

*Prof. Cipriani's consulting-room. The Professor is sitting at the desk. Tót is facing him. While the examination takes place Mari stands to the side.*

CIPRIANI *holding up a burning cigarette*. What is this?  
 TÓT *sighs, shakes his head*.  
 CIPRIANI *indicates the candelabrum*. And this?  
 TÓT *looks at it, shakes his head, sighs*.  
 CIPRIANI *takes off a shoe and holds it up*. And what is this?  
 TÓT I don't know.  
 MARI *on the verge of tears*. Your Honour, Professor, please, his brain isn't working very well at present.  
 CIPRIANI *gestures for her to be quiet. Holds the shoe up high*. Take a better look.  
 TÓT Not a flute, is it?  
 MARI *wringing her hands*. Oh, Lajos my love.  
 CIPRIANI My dear lady, don't interrupt . . . *To Tót*. A flute, then. Now! Can you show me where up is?  
 TÓT *looks up, looks down, looks everywhere, then*: Nowhere.  
 CIPRIANI An excellent statement . . . And yourself, my dear Tót . . . Are you a boy or a girl?  
 TÓT *gazes into space*.  
 CIPRIANI Or something else?  
 TÓT *nods at that in delight*. Something else.  
 MARI *in despair*. Lajos, for God's sake . . .

CIPRIANI Why are you distressed, my dear lady? There's nothing the matter . . . *To Tót.* And if you're something else, can this something else be plunged into cold water . . . or not?

TÓT No.

CIPRIANI Quite correct. *Stands.* My dear lady, accept my best wishes. Your husband is enjoying excellent health.

MARI He is? How ever can you say such a thing? Even now he's been talking rubbish. What's more, he crawls under the table and bites people . . . Is that being healthy? And there's a wall or something in his head.

CIPRIANI *taking an interest.* A wall? What kind of wall? Is it rendered?

TÓT *considers.* Yes. Though here and there it's cracked.

CIPRIANI *indicating his head.* Interesting. I've got one too. Is it going to collapse?

TÓT It tries to attack me.

CIPRIANI *laughs.* It must be quite a wall! Know what you've got to do? Prop it up with five-inch poles of top-quality pine, and you'll have no trouble. *Stands.* But you, dear lady, need have no anxiety, and you may be proud of your husband. As far as his nervous system is concerned he's as sound as a bell. And now, off you go home.

MARI *pleading.* Deeply respected Professor, how can I go home? You know who our visitor is at home. This man, instead of trying to keep in his good books, yawns all the time, gawks over other people's heads and keeps on hiding like a child . . . Now he looks at a shoe and thinks it's a flute . . . Really, is this normal?

CIPRIANI In my practice at the clinic such phenomena are routine. In this day and age, madam, if anyone ventures to call a shoe a shoe I'll venture to say that he's sick. You're surprised? But every age has its characteristic feature, and ours is conceptual confusion. There was a time when men worshipped dog-headed gods, or foretold the future from entrails, but that didn't make them mentally ill . . . Of course, if he can't get along with that Major, that's all so much cold comfort for you.

MARI Please help us with this, Professor, Your Honour.

CIPRIANI You won't take any notice of me at all, dear lady.

MARI I won't?

CIPRIANI No one does . . . What do the village people call me, eh?

MARI The honourable doctor Tihamér Cipriani, the well known university professor.

CIPRIANI Not Doctor Ga-ga? Tell the truth.

MARI *shifting from foot to foot.* I've never ever heard that said, Professor.

CIPRIANI Nowadays even that's no disgrace, dear lady . . . Well, my dear Tót. Stand up for a moment, if you wouldn't mind. *Tót stands. The Professor looks him up and down.* In your opinion, my dear Tót, how tall are you?

TÓT I'm above average height.

CIPRIANI Quite so. And the Major is shorter than you?

TÓT The deeply respected Major scarcely comes up to my shoulder.

CIPRIANI I thought as much . . . This is the nub of the problem, my dear chap. Both of you are suffering the consequences of this disparity, even though the fault lies with the Major . . . The fact is, dear lady, that in this day and age every pip-squeak of a major thinks that he's a person of importance, and it offends him bitterly if, all day long, he has to look up to his landlord.

MARI Do you hear that, Lajos my love?

TÓT Yes. But what am I supposed to do about it?

MARI All you think of is yourself . . . Our Gyula's life's at stake. Couldn't you stoop a bit, at least for these couple of days?

TÓT *tries.* It's no good. I'm afraid I can't alter my height.

MARI Did you hear? That's what he's doing to us! And you still say that a father that sends his son to certain death isn't sick?

CIPRIANI I foresaw that you wouldn't believe me . . . But that he can see his height with such clarity is the surest sign of spiritual well-being. Nowadays, dear lady, almost no one acknowledges their physical proportions. It's just as much a sign of the times as conceptual confusion. Those of small stature think that they are giants, while those that are a head taller than the rest would like at any cost to seem tiny . . . You don't believe that, do you? I'll give you an example straight away . . . *Goes to the door and calls out.* Frédike . . . The person in question is staying with me in complete secrecy, but I know that I can rely on your discretion . . . Frédi!

*Enter DR. EGGENBERGER a seven-year-old boy, on roller-skates, in tears.*

CIPRIANI What's the matter, Frédi?

EGGENBERGER That nasty Hektor's knocked me over . . .

CIPRIANI A big boy like you shouldn't cry . . . Come and say hello to this lady.

EGGENBERGER *snivelling.* Then I'll get ticked off.

CIPRIANI No you won't, because this gentleman's the village fire-fighter. Do a nice bow.

EGGENBERGER *bowing nicely.* Dr. Alfred Eggenberger, private university lecturer.

*Snivels, looks round to see if the dog is coming.* My books have appeared in five languages.

CIPRIANI Don't be frightened of the dog, my boy. And what are your books about?

EGGENBERGER The effect of compounds containing cholesterin on the propagation of tumorous cells . . . May I go now?

CIPRIANI Yes, my boy, only tell the lady how big you are.

EGGENBERGER *skating, sings.* 'I am little, I shall grow, I shall rise up just like dough . . .'

CIPRIANI You see, dear lady? He was researching a cure for cancer, but was expelled from the university. The times in which we live! An article has appeared in the Nervous Medicine Journal about a Jewish doctor who, despite a hundred and ten centimetre waist measurement, regularly leaves and enters his flat through the keyhole . . . Try to understand your husband. In this day and age there's nothing more natural than crawling under things.

*TÓT has for sometime been looking longingly under the table. Now he stands up.*

MARI What's the matter?

*TÓT bending down, peering.* Nothing.

MARI Where are you off to?

*TÓT* I think something's rolled underneath . . .

MARI *pulls him back.* Nothing's rolled underneath, Lajos my love . . . *To Cipriani.* Do you see? And the Professor still reassures him when we're in such a difficult situation!

CIPRIANI Don't worry, dear lady, there's a cure for everything. From now on your husband won't crawl under anywhere . . . *He rings. To Tót.* Don't you worry. Stand up straight. Keep your head up!

*enter MANSERVANT.*

CIPRIANI The fire-chief's horse, please . . . *Exit servant. To Tót.* I'll hide you, my dear Tót. Where a cancer researcher can find refuge, there's a place for a fire-fighter.

SERVANT *enters bringing a rocking-horse and a toy whip. Exit.*

CIPRIANI I've got no more roller-skates, I'm afraid, but a little rocking passes the time very well . . . *Gently to Tót.* On you get!

*TÓT eyes gleaming, immediately jumps onto the horse.* Gee up, there!

MARI Aren't you going to come off there, Lajos my love?

TÓT Not likely. *Rocks.* Giddy up! Hoho! *Laughs.*

CIPRIANI Rejoice that your husband has recovered, dear lady, and off you go for a nice walk home.

MARI Without him? The Major's there, and he'll want to do some boxetry! *To Tót.* Do you hear what I say? Our Gyula's life's what matters, Lajos my love!

TÓT *from the horse.* What more do you want from me? *To Cipriani.* I know very well what the duty of a father is, but I've done everything I can. I've pulled my helmet over my forehead, like a drunken waggoner. I've given up yawning and stretching, which was hard enough, indeed, I don't even spit out the Major's torch when it's put in my mouth. But I've only got one life, Professor. I'm stopping here and I'm going to rock!

MARI Let's be going, come on.

TÓT Not likely!

MARI You're coming with me, Lajos, and you're going to do some boxetry so that our son can take the place of Lieutenant Mikulitz . . .

TÓT More boxetry? I'd sooner die!

MARI *to Cipriani.* Please speak to him! I didn't bring him to see the Professor for his mind to be even more mixed up . . .

CIPRIANI Dear lady, I told you before that you wouldn't be satisfied with me. Why did you come to me? You know yourself, as does everyone else, that for sixteen years I've been running the clinic for nervous and mental disorders, and that as a result I too . . . *He stands up, in growing agitation.* I am, if you please. That's why I give such pieces of advice.

Nevertheless it is my conviction that what is now is not for ever. *Enter servant. Helps Cipriani into a straitjacket. Mari listens with ever greater horror to the Professor's prognostications. Her horror gradually spreads to Tót also.* That which is now . . . will one day have an end. This accursed war and this whole accursed world too will have an end!

MARI *moves to the rocking-horse, becoming indignant.* Do you hear that, Lajos my love?

CIPRIANI *goes after her.* And then your Major will be hanged. Your Major's commander too will be hanged . . .

TÓT *alarmed, looks at the Professor, gets off the rocking-horse.*

CIPRIANI The Major's commander's commander too will be hanged . . .

MARI Come along, Lajos! . . . Help! *Takes her husband by the hand, they hurry off.*

CIPRIANI *slowly becoming calm, sits on the rocking-horse.* And then everyone will be as tall as they like, people will be able to sleep, yawn, even to have a stretch . . .

*He slowly rotates with the set. The stage becomes dark. For a short time it is lit again. We are on the glazed veranda, where the Tóts are standing again to the rhythm of an old popular song, arms linked. Now they pass and cut cardboard and fold boxes to choreographed movements. Tót, who passes out the cardboard with scything movements, slowly steps out of the line and comes forward, while still scything in time to the music. Meanwhile the Tóts disappear, as does the glazed veranda. Tót looks at the stage, notices a door upstage, his face brightens and he hurries to it and shuts it behind him.*

*The stage brightens.*

#### Scene 4.

*The Tót privy, surrounded by blossoming hollyhocks, in the afternoon sunshine.*

MAJOR *comes from the direction of the house, tries to open the door. It remains shut. He knocks. A discreet cough. The Major withdraws.*

MARI *comes in agitation.* You've been in there since yesterday, Lajos my love, what are you doing? *Knocks firmly. A discreet cough. Impatiently.* Would you mind opening the door! How long do you mean to be there?

TÓT *from inside.* Why? Is the Major leaving?

MARI He's not going until tomorrow.

TÓT Then I'm staying put a bit longer.

MARI *Is enjoying yourself all you ever think of? Angry gesture. Towards the house.* Come here, Ági. *Enter Ági.* I'm going over to the shop . . . Your father's in here, the Major's having a walk in his room . . . Keep an eye on them, love. *Exit.*

ÁGI *sits down, stands up, doesn't know what to do. Then she suddenly lets down her lovely long hair. She waits.*

MAJOR *comes solemnly, knocks. A cough. He turns away.*

ÁGI *in a tremulous voice.* What lovely weather we're having! *The Major goes on, does not look back.* The sun's shining, but it's not too hot. *The Major goes on.* May I ask the Major something?

MAJOR *obliged to stop, but does not even look at Ági.*

ÁGI I'd like to know whether the Major also has times when he's depressed for no reason, and others when he suddenly feels like laughing and enjoying himself?

MAJOR *looks back. Mutters in an unfriendly tone.* Don't I just know it! *Exit.*

ÁGI *knocks, now very ill at ease.* Oh, Daddy, Daddy . . .

*No answer. Suddenly she folds back the neckline of her dress, strikes a provocative pose and waits.*

MAJOR *comes with heavy tread.*

ÁGI *summons up courage, blocks his way.* I'd like to ask the Major for something. *Speaks rapidly.* I haven't dared to speak before, but now that chance has brought us together like this I'll dare to say what I want.

MAJOR *crossly.* What's that?

ÁGI *straightens her neckline, feverishly.* I'd like to ask the deeply respected Major please to look at me and please to say the very first thing that comes into his mind. *Waits, breathing heavily.*

MAJOR *hoarsely.* Is your father still in the privy?

ÁGI *disappointed, runs away.*

MAJOR *towards the door, with suppressed rage.* You in there!

TÓT *coughs discreetly.*

MAJOR *more furiously.* What's going on in there, eh?

TÓT *coughs.*

MAJOR *pounds on the privy with his fists.* What's the matter? Gone dumb? Or are you having a sulk? Because then I'll pack my things and go . . .

MARI *runs on in horror.* Oh, Lord! . . . Deeply respected Major, sir, I pray and beseech you, please show a little patience. *Towards the privy.* Lajos! What are you up to? Have you no heart? *To the Major.* He won't be a moment. Right away. One moment.

MAJOR One moment, one moment! I've been hearing that since yesterday morning. For a while I consoled myself with the thought that he might have diarrhoea . . .

MARI No, no. I can't tell the Major a lie. I'm afraid he hasn't got diarrhoea.

MAJOR So! I thought as much! He's sitting there, thinking, brewing something up, racking his brains . . .

MARI *screams*. Oh! Do you hear that, Lajos my love? And haven't you got anything to say? You're sending your son to his death, you know.

TÓT *slowly opens the door, Stands up from the seat, steps out*. Deeply respected Major, sir, I simply can't imagine why you should suppose such a thing of me . . .

MAJOR Well, what are you doing in there?

TÓT Nothing.

MAJOR Poppycock! . . . Then what were you locked in for?

TÓT Deeply respected Major, sir, I swear that nothing has come into my mind for days.

MAJOR You haven't been thinking?

TÓT No question of it! I've just been sitting here because nobody troubles me, the flies buzz around, and if I bolt the door it's as if my poor dear mother was holding me in her arms.

MAJOR *suddenly milder*. Well, why don't you say something? And why do you stand on ceremony? If you please, be so good as to take a seat . . . Never mind, I'll tell you what. Let's just ask your dear daughter to run over to the old Klein beer-garden for a couple of bottles of ice-cold beer.

MARI *happily*. I'll get the bottle-opener.

*Mari and Ági hurry off.*

MAJOR Don't think I'm taking a liberty, my dear Tót, but might there be a little space?

TÓT *happy at being honoured moves over*. There might, only too pleased . . .

MAJOR *sits down beside Tót on the seat. They fidget somewhat*.

TÓT I'm afraid we're a bit cramped.

MAJOR So what? It doesn't matter.

*Ági brings beer, pours out and gives it to them. Tót and the Major each take a glass. Ági leaves.*

MAJOR *clinks glasses*. God bless, my dear Tót.

TÓT Your health, Major.

*They put the glasses on a shelf by their feet. A short silence.*

MAJOR Nice place.

TÓT Just a bit primitive . . . But there you are, the country's the country.

MAJOR This place, just as it is, is the perfect answer to my requirements . . . Your good health!

TÓT The same to you.

*They drink. A short silence.*

MAJOR It's really nice here. In your position I'd never move from here.

TÓT I'm not very anxious to leave.

MAJOR I can quite understand . . . What's that whispering sound?

TÓT The wind in the branches.

MAJOR And what's that buzzing?

TÓT An insect.

MAJOR What's it called?

TÓT A greenbottle.

MAJOR What a lovely name!



*A short silence. They clink glasses, drink.*

MAJOR I don't feel like getting up.

TÓT Neither do I.

MAJOR All the same, I hope we shall have the pleasure of your company this evening at the boxetry? . . . Or perhaps it's a burden to you?

TÓT Please don't say such a thing.

MAJOR I know, I know . . . *Puts an arm round Tót's shoulders.* It's interesting. At first we had divergent points of view, but now everything's been beautifully smoothed out. Thank God.

TÓT Thank God.

MAJOR *drinks, slightly tipsy.* Mr. Tót . . . *In fun.* Tiny Tót.

TÓT Hahaha.

MAJOR Tell you something. Listen, Tóty.

TÓT Tóty? Hahaha . . .

MAJOR I say . . . What about a song?

TÓT What do you suggest?

*The Major begins, Tót joins in. Arms around one another, swaying left and right, they sing.*

Gaudeamus igitur  
Juvenes dum sumus.  
Post jucundam juventutem,  
post molestam senectutem . . .

MARI *steals over on hearing the singing and wipes away tears of happiness.* Gyula, Gyula, if only you could see this! Our dear, good Gyula . . .

*Blackout*

*Scene 5*

*The bus stop. Enter the Tóts, in the final stages of exhaustion. Also the Major, fresh, bursting with health. Perhaps the band will take part also.*

MARI Here we are, then.

ÁGI So we must say good-bye.

MAJOR Believe me, my dear Tóts, I don't feel at all disposed to leave.

MARI This fortnight has simply flown! Isn't that right, Lajos my love?

TÓT *his eyes are shut. From time to time he starts to topple over and either his wife or his daughter hold him up, depending on which way he topples.* Yes, yes.

MAJOR I've been very pleased with you, my dear Tót. Do take care not to lapse into your old bad ways.

TÓT *slowly begins to fall onto the Major. The two women with great difficulty hold him upright.* No, no.

MARI Please give our love to our son, and give him this pie.

MAJOR That I will, my dear Mari . . . And, as I'm not a man of words, and prefer to show my gratitude by actions . . .

*The engine of the bus is heard.*

ÁGI *dejectedly*. Here comes the bus . . .

MARI *trying to hold back tears*. We're glad you've been comfortable in our humble home.

MAJOR If I were disposed to joke at so difficult a moment I'd say 'It was lovely, it was lovely, perhaps it wasn't real . . .' *Laughs forcedly*. Ági too begins to laugh, then Mari, last of all Tót. There is, however, no good humour in this, rather they are seeking escape in laughter. When the Major leaves them, the Tóts become serious at once.

MAJOR *the sound of the bus stops*. I must be off . . . *Shakes hands with Mari*. Once more, thank you very much for everything.

MARI All the best, Major.

MAJOR *Stroking Ági's face*. God bless, Ági, my dear!

ÁGI Good-bye, Major.

TÓT *feels that he is next, but by mistake seizes Mari's hand*. Have a good journey, deeply respected Major.

MARI *turning Tót towards the major*. This is the Major!

TÓT *shaking hands with the Major*. Thank you, Mari my love!

MAJOR All the best!

MARI and ÁGI together All the best!

MAJOR God bless! *Sets off, calls back*. Was I really no trouble to you?

THE TÓTS *all three waving*. No! Not a bit! Have a good journey!

MAJOR *leaves, waving*.

*The engine of the bus starts up. The Tóts smile and wave. The bus moves off, its sound dies away. The smile on the Tót's faces disappear as it does so. Tót is first to stop waving, then Mari, last Ági. Three solemn faces.*

ÁGI *whose heart is breaking*. He's gone.

TÓT Yes. *Slowly begins to topple*.

MARI Let's take your father's arms, girl.

TÓT No need . . . *Pushes them away, straightens up, puts his helmet straight on his head*. At last! *Calmly, confidently*. Let's go, Mari my love. *Sets off in manly fashion*.

*The background becomes dark. While the set rotates enter the Postman, a field letter in his hand.*

POSTMAN *reads*. I remember when our little squirrel Micu escaped . . . We children began to wail, but Daddy said 'Even that stupid squirrel wants to be free. It didn't even want our affection.' What a marvellous thing to say! Since then I too have realised how hard it is to be good, and that you have to expect bad as well as good, because everybody's got good and bad in them, and whether they're being the one or the other depends on the circumstances. Only I don't know how these circumstances are going to turn out. I can't make head or tail of it all, perhaps just because I'm too young and don't know life well enough . . . *Looks at the letter and sighs*. There were four of them, now there are three. But I still like even numbers: two, four, six, eight . . . *Tears up the letter. Exit*.

Scene 6

*The Tóts come one after the other onto the glazed veranda. They look round and sigh.*

MARI We're home . . . Let's leave everything as it is and get to bed.

TÓT Certainly not! First we'll tidy up. You clear up, Mari! Ági, get rid of these boxes . . . I'll be with you in a minute. *He picks up the edge-trimmer and takes it into the garden. When he comes back the veranda is tidy. He looks round in satisfaction. He starts the cuckoo clock which immediately begins to cuckoo.* From now on we're having breakfast in the morning and dinner in the evening, at night we're going to sleep, and we'll do everything the way we did before . . .

MARI *softly.* It'll be as you want, Lajos my love . . . Can I get you a cigar?

TÓT You certainly can. *Sits down in his usual place. Mari brings the cigar. Ági lights it. They both cluster around Tót. Dusk is falling.*

MARI What a lovely evening.

ÁGI The resin-gatherers' fires are being lit.

MARI It's getting late . . . Aren't you sleepy?

TÓT It's odd. I'm not now. Rather, I feel content . . . *Gives a sigh of pleasure.* Stand back a little, my dear.

ÁGI Going to do a stretch, Daddy?

*They make room.*

TÓT *enjoys making his joints crack, then.* Oh, mother, mother, my poor old mother . . . *The words stick in his throat, his hands fall.*

MAJOR *suitcase in hand, face beaming, appears in the doorway. Smiles broadly.* I see you can't believe your eyes! But it's me!

*General consternation. Tót tries to struggle to his feet, but only a cracking sound comes from him and he sits back down.*

MARI *cannot even move.*

MAJOR I went to have my leave pass stamped in Eger, but HQ at the station gave me the delightful news that the partisans have blown up a bridge, and for that reason there'll be no trains for three days . . . What do you say to that?

*The Tóts still cannot speak, merely stare at the Major, eyes wide*

MAJOR *puts down his case.* It was so hard for us to part, so I thought I'd spend those three days with you . . . I hope I won't be putting you out?

MARI *sighs.* Oh . . .

MAJOR *looks round, ready for action.* Well then, if we're all here together . . . Tell you what. How about a spot of boxetry? *He stops speaking, looks around.* Wait a minute! What's happened to the new edge-trimmer? Where is it, my dear Tót?

TÓT *with great difficulty struggles to his feet. In a natural voice.* The edge-trimmer? Mari my love, I don't suppose you know? Oh, that's right . . . I've taken it out into the garden, deeply respected Major.

MAJOR Into the garden? The machine? What for? Where?

TÓT *helpfully*. Just here, by the hollyhocks. Come along, I'll show you right away. *He has awoken. Refusing to take 'no' for an answer he shows the Major the way, and they step out into the garden. Tót does not look back, but as soon as he has gone out Ági and Mari stand rigid with terror. A short silence. Then the dull clank of the edge-trimmer is heard. The two women shake bodily. Twice more the edge-trimmer clanks. They likewise are shaken by it. They look fixedly at one another and wait.*

TÓT *walks in, dusting his hands. He is calm.* Why are you standing here?

MARI *her mouth quivering.* We were waiting for you.

TÓT It's late. Let's get to bed.

ÁGI *looks at her father with frightened eyes. Mari moves towards the bedroom but stops.*

MARI *timidly.* You've cut him in three, Lajos my love?

TÓT *reckoning up.* Three? No. I cut him into four equal pieces. Perhaps I've done wrong?

MARI You've done right, Lajos my love! You always know the right thing to do . . .

*A short silence.*

*In horror.* My son! My son! My only tiny little son!

*Curtain*