

The Lady's Not For Burning

A comedy

By Christopher Fry -- 1949

Frontispiece: " In the past I wanted to be hung. It was worth while being hung to be a hero, seeing that life was not really worth living."

A convict who confessed falsely to a murder -

February 1947

SCENE

A Room in the house of Hebble Tyson, Mayor of the small market town of Cool Clary

TIME

1400, either more or less exactly

ACT I

THOMAS: (*Off*)
Soul!

RICHARD:
... and the plasterer, that's fifteen pence ...

THOMAS:
Hey, soul!

RICHARD:
... for stopping the draught in the privy ...

THOMAS: (*Appearing*)
Body!
You calculating piece of clay.

RICHARD:

Damnation!

THOMAS:

Don't mention it. I've never seen a world
So festering with damnation. I have left
Rings of beer on every alehouse table
From the salt sea coast across half a dozen counties,
But each time I thought I was on the way
To a faintly festive hiccup
The sight of the damn world sobered me up again.
Where is the Mayor? I've business with His Worship.

RICHARD:

Where have you come from?

THOMAS:

Straight from your alehouse.
Damnation's pretty active there this afternoon,
Licking her lips over gossip of murder and witchcraft.
There's mischief brewing for someone. Where's the Mayor?

RICHARD:

I'm the Mayor's clerk.

THOMAS:

How are you?

RICHARD:

Can I have your name?

THOMAS:

It's yours.

RICHARD:

Now, look...

THOMAS:

It's no earthly
Use to me. I travel light; as light,
That is, as a man can travel who will
Still carry his body around because
Of its sentimental value. Flesh
Weighs like a thousand years, and every morning
Wakes heavier for an intake of uproariously
Comical dreams which smell of henbane,
Guts, humors, ventricles, nerves, fibres,
And fat ... the arterial labyrinth, body's hell.
Still it was the first thing my mother gave me,
God rest her soul. What were you saying?

RICHARD:

Name
And business.

THOMAS:

Thomas Mendip. My well-born father,
If birth can ever be said to be well, maintains
A castle as draughty as a tree. At every sunset
It falls, reflecting down into the river, and fish swim
Through its walls. They swim into the bosom of my grandmother,
Who sits late, watching for the constellation of Orion
Because my dead grandfather, she believes,
Is situated somewhere in the Belt.
That is part of the glory of my childhood.

RICHARD:

I like you as much as I've liked anybody.
Perhaps you're a little drunk. But here, I'm afraid,
They may not take to you.

THOMAS:

That's what I hope.

RICHARD:

Who told you to come here?
You couldn't have chosen a less fortunate afternoon.
They're expecting company ... well, a girl. Excuse me,
I must get back to the books.

THOMAS:

I'll wait.

RICHARD:

He'll not
See anybody; I'm sure of it.

THOMAS:

Dear boy,
I only want to be hanged. What possible
Objection can he have to that?

RICHARD:

Why no, I ...
To be ... want to be hanged? How very drunk you are,
After all. Who ever would want to be hanged?

THOMAS:

You don't
Make any allowance for individuality.
How do you know that out there, in the day or night,

According to latitude, the entire world
Isn't wanting to be hanged? Now you, for instance,
Still damp from your cocoon, you're desperate
To fly into any noose of the sun that should dangle
Down from the sky. Life, forbye, is the way
We fatten for the Michaelmas of our own particular
Gallows.—
What a wonderful thing is a metaphor!

RICHARD:

Was that a knock?

THOMAS:

The girl. She knocks. I saw her
Walking in the garden beside a substantial nun.
Whsst! Revelation!

ALIZON:

Two steps down, she said. One, two,
The floor. Now I begin to be altogether
Different I suppose.

RICHARD:

Oh, God, God,
God, God, God! I can see such trouble!
Is life sending a flame to nest in my flax?
For pity's sake!

THOMAS:

Sweet pretty noose, nice noose.

RICHARD:

Will you step in?

ALIZON:

They told me no one was here.

RICHARD:

It would be me they meant.

ALIZON:

Oh, would it be?
Coming in from the light, I am all out at the eyes.
Such white doves were paddling in the sunshine
And the trees were as bright as a shower of broken glass.
Out there, in the sparkling air, the sun and the rain
Clash together like cymbals clashing
When David did his dance. I've an April blindness.
You're hidden in a cloud of crimson catherine-wheels.

RICHARD:

It doesn't really matter. Sit in the shadow.

THOMAS:

There are plenty to choose from.

ALIZON:

Oh, there are three of us.

Forgive me.

RICHARD:

He's waiting ... he wants ... he says ...

THOMAS:

I breath,

I spit, I am. But take no further notice.

I'll just nod in at the window like a rose;

I'm a black and frosted rosebud whom the good God

Has preserved since last October. Take no notice.

ALIZON:

Men, to me, are a world to themselves.

RICHARD:

Do you think so?

ALIZON:

I am going to be married to one of them, almost at once.

I have met him already.

RICHARD:

Humphrey, the Town Councillor.

ALIZON:

Are you his brother?

RICHARD:

No. All I can claim as my flesh and blood

Is what I stand up in. I wasn't born,

I was come-across. In the dusk of one Septuagesima,

A priest found an infant, about ten inches long,

Crammed into the poor-box. The money had all

Been taken. Nothing was there except myself,

I was the baby as it turned out. The priest,

Thinking I might have eaten the money, held me

Upside down and shook me, which encouraged me

To live, I suppose, and I lived.

ALIZON:

No father or mother?

RICHARD:

Not noticeably.

ALIZON:

You mustn't let it make you conceited.
Pride is one of the deadly sins.

THOMAS:

And it's better to go for the lively ones.

ALIZON:

Which ones
Do you mean?

THOMAS:

Pay no heed. I was nodding in.

ALIZON:

I am quite usual, with five elder sisters. My birth
Was a great surprise to my parents, I think. There had been
A misunderstanding and I appeared overnight
As mushrooms do. It gave my father thrombosis.
He thought he would never be able to find enough husbands
For six of us, and so he made up his mind
To simplify matters, and let me marry God.
He gave me to a convent.

RICHARD:

What showing did he think he would make as God's
Father-in-law?

ALIZON:

He let his beard grow longer.
But he found that husbands fell into my sister's laps.
So then he stopped thinking of God as eligible...
No prospects, he thought. And he looked around and found me
Humphrey Devize. Do you think he will do?

RICHARD:

Maybe.
He isn't God, of course.

ALIZON:

No, he isn't.
He's very nearly black.

RICHARD:

Swart.

ALIZON:

Is that it?
When he dies it may be hard to picture him
Agreeable to the utter white of heaven.
Now you, you are ...

RICHARD:
Purgatory-color.

ALIZON:
It's on its way to grace. Who are you?

RICHARD:
Richard,
The Mayor's copying clerk.

ALIZON:
The Mayor is Humphrey's
Uncle. Humphrey's mother is the Mayor's sister.
And then, again, there's Nicholas, Humphrey's bother.
Is he sensible?

RICHARD:
He knows his way about.

THOMAS:
Oh enviable Nick.

RICHARD:
He's nodding in.

ALIZON:
I'll tell you a strange thing. Humphrey Devize
Came to the convent to see me, bringing a present
For his almost immediate wife, he said, which is me,
Of barley sugar and a cross of seed pearls. Next day
Nicholas came, with a little cold pie, to say
He had a message from Humphrey. And then he sat
And stared and said nothing until he got up to go.
I asked him for the message, but by then
It had quite gone out of his head. Quite gone, you see.
It was curious. ... Now you're not speaking either.

RICHARD:
Yes, of course; it was curious.

ALIZON:
Men are strange. It's almost unexpected
To find they speak English. Do you think so?

RICHARD:

Things happen to them.

ALIZON:
What things?

RICHARD:
Machinations of nature;
As April does to the earth.

ALIZON:
I wish it were true!
Show me daffodils happening to a man!

RICHARD:
Very easily.

THOMAS:
And thistles as well, and ladies
Bedstraw and deadly nightshade, and the need
For rhubarb.

ALIZON:
Is it a riddle?

RICHARD:
Very likely.
Certainly a considerable complication.

NICHOLAS:
Where are you Alizon? Alizon, what do you think?
The stars have blown all my way, by Providence!
It's me you're going to marry. What do you think
Of that?

RICHARD:
You have mud in your mouth.

NICHOLAS:
You canter off.

ALIZON:
No Nicholas. That's untrue. I have to be
The wife of Humphrey.

NICHOLAS:
Heaven says no. Heaven
And all the acquiescent nodding of angels
Say Alizon for Nicholas, Nicholas for Alizon.
You must come to know me; not
So much now, because now

I'm excited, but I have got at least three virtues.
How many have you got?

RICHARD:

Are you mad? Why don't you
Go clean yourself up?

NICHOLAS:

What shall I do
With this nattering wheygoose, Alizon?
Shall I knock him down?

ALIZON:

His name is Richard, he says,
And I think he might knock you down.

THOMAS:

Nicholas,
He might. There you have a might for once
That's right. Forgive me, an unwarranted interruption.

NICHOLAS:

Come in, come in. Alizon dear, this Richard
Is all very well. But I was conceived as a hammer
And born in a rising wind. I apologize
For boasting, but once you know my qualities
I can drop back into a quite brilliant
Humility. God have mercy on me,
You have such little hands. I knew I should love you.
How long will it be before you love me, Alizon?
Let's go.

RICHARD:

Just tell me: am I to knock him down? You have only
To say so.

ALIZON:

No, oh, no. We only have
To be patient and unweave him. He is mixed,
Aren't you Nicholas?

NICHOLAS:

Compounded of all combustibles,
The world's inside. I'm the receipt God followed
In the creation. It took the roof off his oven.
How long will it be before you love me, Alizon?
Let's go.

MARGARET:

Where are you taking Alizon, Nicholas?

NICHOLAS:

Out in the air, Mother.

MARGARET:

Unnecessary.

She's in the air already. The room is full of it.

Put her down Nicholas. You look

As though you had come straight out of a wheelbarrow;

And not even straight out. And the air so trim

And fresh. It's such a pity.

NICHOLAS:

I must tell you,

I've just been reborn.

MARGARET:

Nicholas, you always think

You can do things better than your mother. You can be sure

You were born quite adequately on the first occasion.

There is someone here I don't know. Who is it, Alizon?

Did he come with you?

ALIZON:

Oh, no. A rosebud, he says.

MARGARET:

A rosebud Alizon?

ALIZON:

He budded in October.

MARGARET:

He's not telling the truth. ... You're a pretty child,

And mercifully without spots, unlike

The cowslip. Oh, heavens, we've all been young,

Young all day long, young in and out of season,

In the dream, in the glass, in the firelight-

Perfectly young, obstreperously golden.

What a martyrdom it was. ... Tch! More rain!

This is properly April. And you're eager to see

Your handsome Humphrey. Nicholas will fetch him.

They're inseparable, really twin natures, utterly

Brothers, like the two ends of the same thought-

Nicholas dear, call Humphrey.

NICHOLAS:

I can't. I've killed him.

MARGARET:

Fetch Humphrey, Nicholas dear.

NICHOLAS:

I've killed him, dearest
Mother.

MARGARET:

Well never mind. Call Humphrey, dear.

THOMAS:

Is that the other end of this happy thought,
There, prone in the flower bed?

RICHARD:

Yes, it's Humphrey
Lying in the rain.

MARGARET:

One day I shall burst my bud
Of calm, and blossom into hysteria.
Tell him to get up. Why on this patient earth
Is he lying in the rain?

THOMAS:

All flesh is grass.

ALIZON:

Have you really killed Humphrey?

MARGARET:

Nicholas,
Your smile is no pleasure to me.

NICHOLAS:

We fought for possession
Of Alizon Eliot. What could be more natural?
What he loves, I love. And if existence will
Molest a man with beauty, how can he help
Trying to impose on her the boundary
Of his two bare arms? ... O pandemonium
What a fight, what a fight! It couldn't be more strenuous
Getting into heaven, or out again. And Humphrey
Went twinkling like Lucifer into the daffodils.
When Babylon fell there wasn't a better thump.

MARGARET:

Are you standing there letting your brother be rained on?
Haven't you any love for him?

NICHOLAS:

Yes, Mother,
But wet as well as dry.

MARGARET:

Can Richard carry him
Single-handed?

NICHOLAS:

Why can't he use both hands?
And how did I know it was going to rain?

MARGARET:

I would rather have to plait the tails of unbroken
Ponies than try to understand Nicholas.

(Bells off)

Oh! It's bell-ringing practice. Their ding-dong rocks me,
Until I become the belfry, and makes bright blisters
All along my nerves.

(Cuckoo off)

Dear God, a cuckoo
As well!

THOMAS:

By God, a cuckoo. Grief and God.
A canting cuckoo, that laugh with no smile!
A world unable to die sits on and on
In spring sunshine, hatching egg after egg,
Hoping against hope that one of them
Will come the reason for it all; and always
Out pops the arid chuckle and centuries
Of cuckoo spit.

MARGARET:

I don't really think we need
To let that worry us now. I don't know why you're waiting,
Or who brought you, or whether I could even
Begin to like you, but I know it would be agreeable
If you left us.
There's enough going on already.
There is certainly.

THOMAS:

Enough going on. Madam, watch Hell come
As a gleam into the eye of the wholesome cat
When philip-sparrow flips his wing.
I see a gleam of hell in you, madam.
You understand those bells perfectly.
I understand them too.
What is it, that out there in the mellow street,
The soft rain is raining on?
It is only the little sour grass, madam?

MARGARET:

Out in the street? What could it be?

THOMAS:

It could be

And it is, a witch hunt.

MARGARET:

Oh! ... dear; another?

THOMAS:

Your innocence is on at such a rakish angle

It gives you quite an air of iniquity.

By the most naked of compassionate angels,

Hadn't you better answer that bell? With a mere

Clouding of your unoccupied eyes, madam.

Or a twitch of the neck; what better use can we put

Our faces to than to have them express kindness

While we're thinking of something else? Oh, be disturbed,

Be disturbed, madam, to the extent of a tut

And I will thank God for civilization.

This is my last throw, my last poor gamble

On the human heart.

MARGARET:

If I knew who you were

I would ask you to sit down. But while you're on

Your feet, would you be kind enough to see

How Humphrey's doing?

THOMAS:

If we listened, we could hear

How the hunters, having washed the dinner things

Are now toiling up and down the blind alleys

Which they think are their immortal souls,

To scour themselves in the blood of a grandmother.

They, of course, will feel all the better for it.

But she? Grandma? Is it possible

She may be wishing she had died yesterday,

That wicked sobbing old body of a woman?

MARGARET:

At the moment, as you know,

I'm trying hard to be patient with my sons.

You really mustn't expect me to be Christian

In two directions at once.

THOMAS:

What, after all,

Is a halo? It's one more thing to keep clean.
Richard and Nicholas
Have been trying to persuade the body to stand up.

ALIZON:

Why, yes, he isn't dead. He's lying on his back
Picking the daffodils. And now they are trying
To lift him. I am sure that yellow and wet
Whistling is a blackbird. The hot sun
Is out again.

MARGARET:

Let me look over your shoulder.
They mustn't see me taking an interest.
Oh, the poor boy looks like a shock
Of bedraggled oats ... But you will see, Alizon,
What a nice boy he can be when he wears a clean shirt.
I more than once lost my heart to clean linen
When I was a young creature, even to linen
That hung on hedges without a man inside it.
Do I seem composed, sufficiently placid and unmotherly?

ALIZON:

Altogether, except that your ear-ring
Trembles a little.

MARGARET:

It's always our touches of vanity
That manage to betray us.

THOMAS:

When shall I see the Mayor?
I've had enough of this horror beating in the belfry.
Where is the Mayor?

NICHOLAS:

Here's Humphrey. Where would you like him?

MARGARET:

Humphrey, why do you have to be carried?

HUMPHREY:

Mother, I didn't knock myself down. Why
Should I pick myself up? ... Daffodils
For my future wife.

NICHOLAS:

You slawsy poodle, you tike.
You crapulous puddering pipsqueak! Do I have to kill you
A second time? What about the stars?

HUMPHREY:

All right;
What about the stars? They flicker and flicker,
Like Hell's light they flicker.

NICHOLAS:

You dismal copralite!
Haven't they said that I shall have Alizon Eliot?

HUMPHREY:

Astral delirium, dear Nick. Officially
Alizon is mine. What is official
Is incontestable. It undercuts
The problematic world and sells us life
At a discount.-Without disrespect either
To you, Mother, or to my officially
Dear one, I shall lie down.
... Who is playing the viol?

MARGARET:

The Chaplain is tuning his fiddle to the bells.
It must be time for prayers. It must be time
For something. You're both transfigured with dirt!

THOMAS:

Where in thunder is the Mayor? Are you deaf to the baying
Of those bib-and-tuckered bloodhounds out in the street?
I want to be hanged.

NICHOLAS:

O blastodom of injustice.
You multiplication of double crossing!
Alizon, who's going to marry you?

MARGARET:

He deserves no answer.

RICHARD:

Can you tell us, Alizon?

ALIZON:

I'm not very used to things happening rapidly.
The nuns, you see, were very quiet, especially
in the afternoon. They say I shall marry Humphrey.

MARGARET:

Certainly so. Now, Nicholas, go and get clean.

NICHOLAS:

She never shall.

THOMAS:

Will someone fetch the Mayor?
Will no one make the least effort to let me
Out of this world?

NICHOLAS:

Let Humphrey go and officially
Bury Himself. She's not for him.
What does love understand about hereinafter-
Called-the-bride-to-be-contracted?
An April anarchy, she is, with a dragon's breath,
An Angel on a tiger,
The jaws and maw of a kind of heaven, though hell
Sleeps there with one open eye; an onslaught
Unpredictable made by a benefactor
Armed to the teeth-

THOMAS:

Who benefits, before God,
By this concatenation of existences,
This paroxysm of the flesh? Let me get out!
I'll find the mayor myself wherever he may be having
His pomposity of snobjoy snores,
And you can go on with you psalm of love.

HUMPHREY:

Who the hell's that?

RICHARD:

The man about the gallows.

MARGARET:

Now, here's your uncle. Do for the sake of calm,
Go and sweeten yourselves.

THOMAS:

Is this the man
I long for?
(*Richard Nods*)

TYSON:

Pest, who has stolen my handkerchief?

MARGARET:

Use this one Hebble. Go and get
Under the pump.

TYSON:

Noses, noses.

THOMAS:

Mr. Mayor, it's a joy to see you.
You are about to become my gateway to eternal
Rest.

TYSON:

Dear sir, I haven't yet been notified
Of your existence. As far as I'm concerned
You don't exist. Therefore you are not entitled
To any rest at all, eternal or temporary,
And I would be obliged if you'd sit down.

MARGARET:

Here is Alizon Eliot, Humphrey's bride
To be.

THOMAS:

I have come to be hanged, do you hear?

TYSON:

Have you filled in the necessary forms?
So this is the young lady? Very nice, very charming ... In triplicate
... And a very pretty dress.
Splendid material. A florin a yard
If a groat. I'm only sorry you had to come
On a troubled evening such as this promises
To be. The bells you know. Richard, my boy,
What is it this importunate fellow wants?

RICHARD:

He says he wants to be hanged sir.

TYSON:

Out of the question.
It's the most immodest suggestion, which I know
Of no precedent for. Cannot be entertained.
I suspect an element of mockery
Directed at the ordinary decencies
Of life Tiresome catarrh ... A sense of humor
Incompatible with good citizenship-
And I wish you a good evening. Are we all
Assembled together for evening prayers?

THOMAS:

Oh no!
You can't postpone me. Since opening time I've been
Propped up at the bar of heaven and earth, between
The wall-eye of the moon and the brandy-cask of the sun,
Growling thick songs about jolly good fellows

In a mumping pub where the ceiling drips humanity,
Until I've drunk myself sick, and now, by Christ,
I mean to sleep it off in a stupor of dust
Till the morning after the day of judgment.
So put me on the waiting list for your gallows
With a note recommending preferential treatment.

TYSON:

Go away; you're an unappetising young man
With a tongue too big for your brains. I'm not at all sure
It would be amiss to suppose you to be a vagrant,
In which case an unfortunate experience
At the cart's tail. ...

THOMAS:

Unacceptable.
Hanging or nothing.

TYSON:

Get this man away from here.
Good gracious, do you imagine the gallows to be
A charitable institution? Very mad,
Wishes to draw attention to himself;
The brain a delicate mechanism; Almighty
God more precise than a clockmaker;
Grant us all a steady pendulum.
All say Amen.

ALL:

Amen.

THOMAS:

Listen! The wild music of the spheres;
Tick-tock.

RICHARD:

Come on; you've got to go.

THOMAS:

Does justice with her sweet, impartial,
Devastating and deliberate sword
Never come to this place? Do you mean
There's no recognition given to murder here?

MARGARET:

Murder?

TYSON:

Now what is it?

THOMAS:

I'm not a fool.

I didn't suppose you would do me a favor for nothing.

No crime, no hanging; I quite understand the rules.

But I've made that all right. I managed to do-in

A rag-and-bone merchant at the bottom of Leapfrog Lane.

(Alizon gives a little cry)

THOMAS:

Utterly unhinged.

MARGARET:

Hebble, they're all

In the same April fit of exasperating nonsense.

Nicholas, too. He said he'd killed Humphrey,

But of course he hadn't. If he had I should have told you.

THOMAS:

It was such a monotonous cry, that "Raga-boa!"

(Cuckoo is heard)

Like that damned cuckoo. It was more than time

He should see something of another world.

But poor man, he wasn't willing to go.

He picked on his rags and bones as love

Picks upon hearts, he with an eye to profit

And love with an eye to pain.

RICHARD:

Sanctus fumus!

TYSON:

Get a complete denial of everything

He has said. I don't want to be bothered with you.

You don't belong to this village. I'm perfectly satisfied

He hasn't killed a man.

THOMAS:

I've killed two men,

If you want to be exact.

The other I thought scarcely worth mentioning;

A poor unprepossessing pimp with a birthmark.

He couldn't have had any affection for himself,

So I pulped him first and knocked him into the river

Where the water gives those girlish giggles, around

The ford, and held him under with my foot

Until he was safely in Abraham's bosom, birthmark

And all. You see, it still isn't properly dry.

TYSON:

What a confounded thing! Who do people
Think they are, coming here without
Identity, and putting us to considerable
Trouble and expense to have them punished.
You don't deserve to be listened to.

THOMAS:

It's habit.

I've been unidentifiably
Floundering in Flanders for the past seven years.
Prising open men's ribs to let men go
On the indefinite leave that needs no pass.
And now all roads are uncommonly flat, and all hair
Stands on end.

NICHOLAS: (*Entering*)

I'm sorry to interrupt,
But there's a witch to see you, Uncle.

TYSON:

To see me?

A witch to see me? I will not be the toy
Of irresponsible events. Is that clear
To you all?

NICHOLAS:

Yes, but she's here.

TYSON:

A witch to see me!

Do I have to tell you what to do with her?

NICHOLAS:

Don't tell me. My eyes do that only too well.
She's the one, of witches she's the one
Who most disturbs Hell's heart. Jimminy!
How she must make Damnation sigh.
How she must make Torment be tormented
To have her to add to its torment! How the flames
Must burn to lay their tongues about her.
If evil has a soul it's here outside,
The dead-of-midnight flower, Satan's latest
Button-hole. Shall I ask her in?

THOMAS:

She's young,
Oh, God, she's young.

TYSON:

I stare at you, Nicholas,
With no word of condemnation. I stare
Astonished at your behavior.

MARGARET:

Ask her in?
In here? Nicholas ...

THOMAS:

Nicholas! Expose
The backside of immorality before ladies?
Your mother would never be able to get the smell
Of sulphur out of the curtains.

NICHOLAS:

She's the glorious
Undercoat of this painted world ...
(Enter Jennet)
... you see;
It comes through, however much of our whiteness
We paint over it.

TYSON:

What is the meaning of this?
(Picking up Bible)
What is the meaning of this?

THOMAS:

That's the most relevant
Question in the world.

JENNET:

Will someone say
Come in? And understand I don't every day
Break in on the quiet circle of a family
At prayers. Not quite so unceremoniously,
Or so shamefully near a flood of tears.
Or looking as unruly as I surely do. Will you
Forgive me?

TYSON:

You'll find I can't be disarmed
With pretty talk, young woman. You have no business
At all in this house.

JENNET:

Do you know how many walls
There are between the garden of the Magpie,
Past Lazer's field, Slink Alley and Poorsoul Pond

To the gate of your paddock?

TYSON:

I'm not to be seduced.

I'm not attending.

JENNET:

Eight. I've come over them all.

MARGARET:

How could she have done?

THOMAS:

Her broomstick's in the hall.

MARGARET:

Come over to this side of the room, Nicholas.

NICHOLAS:

Don't worry, Mother, I have my fingers crossed.

TYSON:

Never before in the whole term of my office

Have I met such an extraordinary ignorance

Of what is permitted ...

JENNET:

Indeed I was ignorant

They were hooting and howling for me, as though echoes

Could kill me. So I took to my toes. Thank God

I only passed one small girl in a shady

Ditch telling the beads of her daisy chain.

And a sad rumpled idiot-boy

Who smiled at me. They say I have turned a man

Into a dog.

TYSON:

This will all be gone into

At the proper time. ...

JENNET:

But it isn't a dog at all.

It's a bitch; an appealing, rueful, brindle bitch

With many fleas. Are you a gentleman

Full of ripe, friendly wisdom?

TYSON:

This

Will all be gone into at the proper ...

JENNET:

If so
I will sit at your feet. I will sit anyway;
I'm tired. Eight walls are enough.

MARGARET:

What are we to do?
I can almost feel the rustling in of some
Kind of enchantment already.

TYSON:

She will have
to be put in charge.

ALIZON:

Oh, must she, must she?

THOMAS:

He can see she's a girl of property,
And the property goes to the town if she's a witch;
She couldn't have been more timely.

NICHOLAS:

Curious, crooked
Beauty of the earth. Fascinating.

TYSON:

Get up at once, you undisciplined girl. Have you never
Heard of law and order?

NICHOLAS:

Won't you use
This chair?

JENNET:

Thank you. Oh, this is the reasonable
World again! I promise not to leave behind me
Little flymarks of black magic, or any familiars
Such as mice or beetles, which might preach
Demonology in your skirting board.
I have wiped my shoes so that I shouldn't bring in
The soft Egyptian sand which drifts at night,
They tell me, into the corners of my house
And then with the approach of naked morning
Flies into the fire like a shadow of goldfinches.
The tales unbelievable, the wild
Tales they tell!

TYSON:

This will be discussed

At the proper time ...

THOMAS:

When we have finished talking
About my murders.

MARGARET:

O peaceful and placid heaven,
Are they both asking to be punished? Has death
Become the fashionable way to live?
Nothing would surprise me in their generation.

JENNET:

Asking to be punished? why no, I have come
Here to have the protection of your laughter.
They accuse me of such a brainstorm of absurdities
That my fear dissolves in the humor of it.
If I could perform what they say I can perform
I could have got safely away from here
As fast as you bat an eyelid.

TYSON:

Oh indeed;
Could you indeed?

JENNET:

They say I have only
To crack a twig, and over the springtime weathercocks
Cloudburst, hail and gale, whatever you will
Come leaping fury-foremost.

TYSON:

The report
May be exaggerated, of course, but where there's smoke ...

JENNET:

They also say that I bring back the past;
For instance Helen comes
Brushing the maggots from her eyes,
And, clearing her throat of the dust of several thousand years
She says "I loved ..."; but cannot any longer
Remember names. Sad Helen. Or Alexander, wearing
His imperial cobwebs and breastplate of shining worms
Wakens and looks for his glasses, to find the empire
Which he knows he put beside his bed.

TYSON:

Whatever you say will be taken down in evidence
Against you; am I making myself clear?

JENNET:

They tell one tale that once, when the moon
Was gibbous and in a high dazed state
Of nimbus love, I shook a jonquil's dew
On to a pearl, and let a cricket chirp
Three times, thinking of pale Peter;
And there Titania was, vexed by a cloud
Of pollen, using the sting of a bee to clean
Her nails, and singing, as drearily as a gnat,
"Why try to keep clean?"

THOMAS:

"The earth is all of earth" ...
So sang the queen;
So the queen sung,
Crumbling her crownet into clods of dung.

JENNET:

You heard her too, Captain? Bravo! Is that
A world you've got there, hidden under your hat?

THOMAS:

Bedlam, ma'am, and the battlefield
Uncle Adam died on. He was shot
To bits with the core of an apple
Which some fool of a serpent in the artillery
Had shoved into God's cannon.

TYSON:

That's enough!
Terrible frivolity, terrible blasphemy,
Awful unorthodoxy. I can't understand
Anything that's being said. Fetch a constable.
The woman's tongue clearly knows the flavor
Of *spiritu maligno*. The man must be
Drummed out of town.

THOMAS:

Oh, must he be?

RICHARD:

Are you certain, sir? The constable? The lady
Was laughing. She laughed at the very idea
Of being a witch, sir.

TYSON:

Yes, just it, just it.
Giving us a rigmarole of her dreams;
Probably dreams; but intentionally

Recollected, intentionally consented to,
Intentionally delighted in. And so
As dangerous as the act. Fetch the constable.

NICHOLAS:

Sad how things always are. We get one gulp
Of dubious air from our hellmost origins
And we have to bung up the draught with a constable.
It's a terribly decontaminating life.

TYSON:

I'll not have any frivolity. The town
Goes in terror.

MARGARET:

Sin is so inconvenient.

ALIZON:

She is lovely. She is certain to be good.

TYSON:

I have told you twice, Richard, what to do.
Are you going about it?

RICHARD:

No, sir. Not yet.

TYSON:

Did you speak to me? Now be careful how you answer.

JENNET:

Can you be serious? I am Jennet Jourdemayne
And I believe in the human mind. Why play with me
And make me afraid of you, as you did for a moment,
I confess it.

(Crowd offstage)

You can't believe ... oh, surely not,
When the centuries of the world are piled so high ...
You'll not believe what in their innocence
Those old credulous children in the street
Imagine of me.

THOMAS:

Innocence! Dear girl!
Before the world was, innocence
Was beaten by a lion all round the town.
And liked it.

JENNET:

What, does everyone still knuckle

And suckle at the big breast of irrational fears?
 Do they really think I charm a sweat from Tagus,
 Or hire an Amazonian gnat to fasten
 On William Brown and shake him till he rattles?
 Can they think and then think like this?

TYSON:

Will be
 Gone into at the proper time. Disturbing
 The peace. In every way. Have to arrest you.

JENNET:

No!

THOMAS:

You bubble-mouthing, fog-blathering,
 Chin-chuntering, chap-flapping, liturgical,
 Turgidical, base old man! What about my murders?
 And what goes round in your head,
 What funny little murders and fornications
 Chatting up and down in three-four time
 Afraid to come out? What bliss to sin by proxy
 And do penance by way of someone else!
 But we'll not talk about you. It will make the outlook
 So dark. Neither about this exquisitely
 Mad young woman. Nor about this congenital
 Generator, your nephew there;
 Nor about anyone but me. I'm due
 To be hanged. Good Lord, aren't two murders enough
 To win half the medals of damnation? Must I put
 Half a dozen children on a spit
 And toast them at the flame that comes out of my mouth?
 You let the fairies fox you while the devil
 Does you. Concentrate on me.

TYSON:

I'll not
 have it ... I'll ... I'll ... I'll ...

THOMAS:

Power of Job!
 Must I wait for a stammer? Your life, sir, is propelled
 By a dream of the fear of having nightmares; your love
 By the fear of your single self; your world's history
 The fear of a possible leap by a possible antagonist
 Out of a possible shadow, or a not improbable
 Skeleton out of your dead-certain cupboard.
 But here am I, the true phenomenon
 Of acknowledged guilt, steaming with the blood

Of the pimp and the rag-and-bone man, Crime
Transparent. What the hell are we waiting for?

TYSON:

Will you attend to me? Will you be silent?

JENNET:

Are you doing this to save me?

THOMAS:

You flatter my powers,
My sweet, you're too much a woman. But if you wish
You can go down to the dinner of damnation
On my arm.

JENNET:

I dine elsewhere.

TYSON:

Am I invisible?
Am I inaudible? Do I merely festoon
The room with my presence? Richard, wretched boy,
If you don't wish to incur considerable punishment
Do yourself the kindness to fetch the constable.
I don't care for these unexpurgated persons.
I shall lose my patience.

MARGARET:

I shall lose my faith
In the good breeding of providence. Wouldn't this happen
Now: today; within an hour or two
Of everyone coming to congratulate
Humphrey and Alizon. Arrangements were made
A month ago, long before this gentleman's
Murders were even thought of.

TYSON:

They don't exist,
I say ...

HUMPHREY: (*Entering*)

Uncle, there's a sizable rumpus,
Without exaggeration a how-do-you-do
Taking place in the street. I thought you should know.

TYSON:

Rumpus?

HUMPHREY:

Perhaps rumpus isn't the word.

A minor kind of bloody revolution.
It's this damned rascal, this half-pay, half-wit.
I should say he's certifiable. It seems
He's been spreading all around the town some tale
About drowning a pimp and murdering Old Skipps,
The rag-and-bone man.

THOMAS:

Ah, Old Skipps, Old Skipps,
What a surplus of bones you'll have where you've gone to now!

JENNET:

Old Skipps? But he's the man ...

TYSON:

Will you both be silent?
I won't have every Tom, Dick and Harry
Laying evidence against himself before
He's got written authority from me.

HUMPHREY:

Quite right.
As it is the town is hell's delight. They've looked
For the drowned pimp and they've looked for Skipps,
And they've looked in the places where he says he left them,
And they can't find either.

NICHOLAS:

Can't find either?

HUMPHREY:

Can't find either.

MARGARET:

Of course they can't. When he first
Mentioned murders I knew he had got hold
Of a quite wrong end of the stick.

HUMPHREY:

They say he's the Devil.

MARGARET:

I can imagine who started that story.

HUMPHREY:

But are we so sure he isn't? Outside in the street
They're convinced he's the Devil. And none of us ever having
Seen the Devil, how can we know? They say
He killed the old me and spirited them into the Limbo.
We can't search there. I don't even know where it is.

THOMAS:

Sir, it's between me and the deep blue sea.
The wind of conscience blows straight from its plains.

HUMPHREY:

Shut up! If you're the Devil I beg your pardon. They also have the idea
He's got a girl in his toils, a witch called ...

(Nicholas points)

Jennet.

JENNET:

I am she.

HUMPHREY:

God.

TYSON:

Well, Humphrey, well?
Is that the end of your information?

NICHOLAS:

Humphrey,
Have you spoken to your little future wife
Lately?

THOMAS:

Tinder, easy tinder.

HUMPHREY:

In fact ...
In fact ...

NICHOLAS:

In fact it's all a bloody revolution.

TYSON:

I'm being played with, I'm sure of it. Something tells me
There's irresponsibility somewhere. Richard.
You'll not get out of this lightly. Where is the constable?
Why isn't he standing before me?

RICHARD:

I can see.
No need for a constable, sir.

TYSON:

No need? No need?

CHAPLAIN:

I am late for prayers, I know, I know you think me
A broken reed and my instrument, too, my better half.

You lacked it, I'm afraid. But life has such
Diversity, I sometimes remarkably lose
Eternity in the passing moment. Just now
In the street there's a certain boisterous interest
In a spiritual matter. They say ...

TYSON:

I know what they say.

CHAPLAIN:

Ah, yes, you know. Sin, as well as God,
Moves in a most mysterious way. It's hard to imagine
Why the poor girl should turn Skipps into a dog.

NICHOLAS:

Skipps? Skipps into a dog?

HUMPHREY:

But Skipps ...

THOMAS:

Skipps trundles in another place, calling
His raga-boa in gutters without end.
Transfigured by the spatial light
Of Garbage Indestructible. And I
Ought to know since I sent him there. A dog?
Come, come, don't let's be fanciful.

TYSON:

They say one thing, and another thing, and both at once.
I don't know. It will all have to be gone into
At the proper time ...

HUMPHREY:

But this is a contradiction ...

CHAPLAIN:

Ah, isn't that life all over! And is this
The young assassin? If he is the doer of the damage,
Can it be she also? My flock are employing
Fisticuffs over this very question.

HUMPHREY:

But if he could be the Devil ...

THOMAS:

Good boy. Shall I set
Your minds at rest and give you proof? Come here?

HUMPHREY:

That's not funny.

THOMAS:

Not funny for the goats.

HUMPHREY:

I've heard it before. He says the Day of Judgment
Is fixed for tonight.

MARGARET:

Oh, now. I have always been sure
That when it comes it will come in autumn.
Heaven, I am quite sure, wouldn't disappoint
The bulbs.

THOMAS:

Consider: vastness lusted, Mother;
A huge heaving desire, overwhelming solitude,
And the mountain belly of Time labored
And brought forth man, the mouse. The spheres churned on,
Hoping to charm our ears
With sufficient organ music, sadly sent out
On the wrong wave of sound; but still they roll
Fabulous and fine, a roundabout
Of doomed and golden notes. And on beyond,
Profound with thunder of oceanic power,
Lie the morose dynamics of our dumb friend
Jehovah.
Why should these omnipotent bombinations
Go on with the deadly human anecdote, which
From the first was never more than remotely funny?
No; the time has come for tombs to tip
Their refuse: for the involving ivy, the briar,
The convolutions of convolvulous,
To disentangle and make way
For the last great ascendancy of dust,
Sucked into judgment by a cosmic yawn
Of boredom. The Last Trump
Is timed for twenty-two forty hours precisely.

TYSON:

This will all be gone into at the proper ...

THOMAS:

Time
Will soon be most improper. Why not hang me
Before it's too late?

MARGARET:

I shall go and change my dress;
Then I shall both be ready for our guests
And whatever else may come upon the world.

HUMPHREY:

I'm sure he's mad.

CHAPLAIN:

And his information, of course,
Is in opposition to what is plainly told
In the Scriptures: that the hour will come ...

NICHOLAS:

Do you think
He means it? I've an idea he's up to something
None of us knows about, not one of us.

ALIZON:

Quiet Richard, son of nobody.

RICHARD:

It isn't always like this, I promise it isn't.

JENNET:

May I, Jennet Jourdemayne, the daughter
Of a man who believed the universe to be governed
By certain laws, be allowed to speak?
Here is such a storm of superstition
And humbug and curious passions, where will you start
To look for the truth? Am I in fact
An enchantress bemused into collaboration
With the enemy of man? Is this the enemy,
This eccentric young gentleman never seen by me
Before? I say I am not. He says perhaps
He is. You say I am. You say he is not.
And now the eccentric young gentleman threatens us all
With imminent cataclysm. If, as a living creature,
I wish in all good faith to continue living,
Where do you suggest I should lodge my application?

TYSON:

That is perfectly clear. You are both under arrest.

THOMAS:

Into Pandora's box with all the ills.
But not if that little Hell-cat Hope's
Already in possession. I've hoped enough.
I gave the best years of my life to that girl,
But I'm walking out with Damnation now, and she's

A flame that's got finality.

JENNET:

Do you want no hope for me either? No compassion
To lift suspicion off me?

THOMAS:

Lift? Compassion
Has a rupture, lady. To hell with lifting.

JENNET:

Listen, please listen to me.

THOMAS:

Let the world
Go, lady; it isn't worth the candle.

TYSON:

Take her, Richard; down to the cellars.

THOMAS:

You see?
He has the key to every complexity.
Kiss your illusions for me before they go.

JENNET:

But what will happen?

THOMAS:

That's something even old Nosedrip doesn't know!

TYSON:

Take him away.

THOMAS:

Mr. Mayor, hang me for pity's sake,
For God's sake hang me, before I love that woman!.

ACT II

TAPPERCOOM:

Well, it's poss-ss-ible, it's poss-ss-ible.
I may have been putting the Devil to the torture.
But can you smell scorching? ... not a singe
For my sins ... that's from yesterday: I leaned
Across a candle. For all practical purposes
I feel as unblasted as on the day I was born.
And God knows I'm a target. Cupid scarcely
Needs to aim, and no devil could miss me.

TYSON:

But his action may be delayed. We really must
Feel our way. We don't want to put ourselves wrong
With anything as positive as evil.

TAPPERCOOM:

We have put him to the merest thumb-screw, Tyson,
Courteously and impartially, the purest
Cajolery to coax him to deny
Those cock-and-bull murders for which there isn't a scrap
Of evidence.

TYSON:

Ah; ah. How does he take it?
He hasn't denied them?

TAPPERCOOM:

On the contrary.
He says he has also committed petty larceny,
Abaction, peculation and incendiarism.
As for the woman Jourdemayne ...

TYSON:

Ah, yes,
Jourdemayne. What are we to make of her?
Wealthy, they tell me. But on the other hand
Quite affectingly handsome. Sad, you know,
We see where the eye cannot come, eh Tappercoom?
And all's not glorious within; no use
Saying it is. ... I had a handkerchief.
Ah yes, buried amongst all this evidence.

TAPPERCOOM:

Now no poetics, Tyson. Blow your nose
And avoid lechery. Keep your eye on the evidence
Against her; there's plenty of it there. Religion
Has made an honest woman of the supernatural
And we won't have it kicking over the traces again.
Will we, Chaplain? ... In the land of Nod.
Admirable man.

TYSON:

Humanity,
That's all, Tappercoom; it's perfectly proper.
No one is going to let it interfere
With anything serious. I use it with great
Discretion, I assure you.-Has she confessed?

TAPPERCOOM:

Not at all. Though we administer persuasion
With the greatest patience, she admits nothing, and the man
Won't stop admitting. It really makes one lose
All faith in human nature.

MARGARET: *[Entering]*

Who has the tongs?

The tongs, Hebble, the tongs, dear! Sweet
Elijah, we shall go up in flames!

TYSON:

Flames! Did you hear that Tappercoom? Flames!
My sister said flames!

MARGARET:

A log the size of a cheese
Has fallen out of my fire! Well where are they?
What men of action!
Tongs, I said!- Chaplain.
They're under your feet. Very simple you'd look
As a pile of ashes. *[Exit]*

TYSON:

Oh, I beg your pardon
Tappercoom. A blazing log.

CHAPLAIN:

Would there be something
I could do? I was asleep you know.

TYSON:

All this evidence from the witchfinder ...

TAPPERCOOM:

The advent of a woman cannot be
Too gradual. I am not a nervous man,
But I like to be predisposed to an order of events.

CHAPLAIN:

It was very interesting; I was dreaming I stood
On Jacob's ladder, waiting for the gates to open.
And the ladder was made entirely of diminished sevenths.
I was surprised, but not put out. Nothing
Is altogether what we suppose it to be.

TAPPERCOOM:

As for the Day of Judgment, we can be sure
It's not due yet. What are we told the world
Will be like? "Boasters, blasphemers, without natural

Affection, traitors, trucebreakers," and the rest of it.
Come, we've still a lot of backsliding ahead of us.

TYSON:

Are you uneasy, Tappercoom?

TAPPERCOOM:

No, Tyson.

The whole thing's a lot of amphigourious
Stultiloquential fiddle-faddle!

MARGARET: *[Enters]*

Hebble!

TAPPERCOOM:

For God's sake!

TYSON:

What is it now? What is it?

MARGARET:

The street's gone mad. They've seen a shooting star!

TYSON:

They? Who? What of it?

MARGARET:

I'm sure I'm sorry,
But the number of people gone mad in the street
Is particularly excessive. They were shaking
Our gate, and knocking off each other's hats,
And six fights simultaneously, and some
Were singing psalm a hundred and forty ... I think
It's a hundred and forty ... and the rest of them shouting
"The Devil's in there?" *(pointing at this house.)*
"Safety from Satan!" and "Where's the woman? Where's
The witch? Send her out!" and using words
That are only fit for the Bible. And I'm sure
There was blood in the gutter from somebody's head
Or else it was the sunset in a puddle,
But Jobby Pinnock was prising up cobblestones,
Roaring like the north wind, and you know
What he is in church when he starts on the responses.
And that old Habakkuk Brown using our wall
As it was never meant to be used. And then
They saw a start fall over our roof somewhere
And followed its course with a downrush of whistling
And Ohs and Ahs and groans and screams; and Jobby
Pinnock dropped a stone on his own foot

And roared "Almighty God, it's a sign!" and some
Went down on their knees and others fell over them
And they've started to fight again, and the hundred and fortieth
Psalm has begun again louder and faster than ever.
Hebble dear, isn't it time they went home?

TYSON:

All right, all right. Now why
Can't people mind their own business! This shooting star
Has got nothing to do with us, I am quite happy
In my mind about that. It probably when past,
Perfectly preoccupied with some astral anxiety or other
Without giving us a second thought. Eh, Tappercoom?
One of those quaint astrological holus-boluses,
Quite all right.

TAPPERCOOM:

Quite. An excess of phlegm
In the solar system. It's on its way
To a heavenly spittoon. How is that,
How is that? On its way ...

TYSON:

I consider it unwise
To tempt providence with humor, Tappercoom.

MARGARET:

And on the one evening when we expect company!
What company is going to venture to get here
Through all that heathen hullabaloo in the road?
Except the glorious company of the Apostles,
And we haven't enough glasses for all that number.

TAPPERCOOM:

Doomsday or not, we must keep our integrity.
We cannot set up dangerous precedents
Of speed. We shall sincerely hope, of course,
That Doomsday will refrain from precipitous action,
But the way we have gone must be the way we arrive.

CHAPLAIN:

I wish I were a thinking man, very much.
Of course I feel a good deal, but that's no help to you.

TYSON:

I'm not bewildered, I assure you I'm not
Bewildered. As a matter of fact a plan
Is almost certainly forming itself in my head
At this very moment. It may even be adequate.

CHAPLAIN:

Where did I put my better half? I laid it
Aside. Angel! I could take it down to the gate and perhaps
Disperse them with a skirmish or two of the bow.
Orpheus, you know, was very successful in that way,
But of course I haven't his talent, not nearly his talent.

TYSON:

If you would allow me to follow my train of thought ...

TAPPERCOOM:

It's my believe that the woman Jourdemayne
Got hold of the male prisoner by unlawful
Supernatural soliciting.
And bewitched him into a confession of murder
To draw attention away from herself. But the more
We coax him to withdraw his confession, the more
Crimes he confesses to.

CHAPLAIN:

I know I am not
A practical person; legal matters and so forth
Are Greek to me; except of course
That I understand Greek. And what may seem nonsensical
To men of affairs like yourselves might not seem so
To me, since everything astonishes me,
Myself most of all. When I think of myself
I can scarcely believe my senses. But there it is,
All my friends tell me I actually exist
And by an act of faith I have come to believe them.
But this fellow who is being such a trouble to us
He, on the contrary, is so convinced
He is that he wishes he were not. Now why
Should that be?

THOMAS:

I believe you mean to tell us,
Chaplain.

MARGARET:

I might as well sit down, for all
The good that standing up does.

CHAPLAIN:

I imagine
He finds the world not entirely salubrious.
If he cannot be stayed with flagons, or comforted
With apples ... I quote of course ... or the light, the ocean,
The everchanging ... I mean and stars, extraordinary

How many, or some instrument or other ... I am afraid
I appear rhapsodical-but perhaps the addition
Of your thumbscrew will not succeed, either. The point
I am attempting to make is this one: he might be wooed
From his aptitude for death by being happier;
And what I was going to suggest, quite irresponsibly,
Is that he be invited to partake
Of our festivities this evening (*Pause*) No,
I see it astonishes you.

MARGARET:

Do you mean ask him ... ?

TYSON:

I have heard very little of what you have said, Chaplain,
Being concerned as I am with a certain Thought,
But am I to believe that you recommend our inviting
This undesirable character to rub shoulders
With my sister?

CHAPLAIN:

Ah; rubbing shoulders. I hadn't exactly
Anticipated that. It was really in relation to the soul
That the possibility crossed my mind.

TAPPERCOOM:

As a criminal the boy is a liability.
I doubt very much if he could supply a farthing
Towards the cost of his own execution. So
You suggest, Chaplain, we let him bibulate
From glass to glass this evening, help him to
A denial of his guilt and get him off our hands
Before the daybreak gets the town on its feet again?

MARGARET:

I wish I could like the look of the immediate future,
But I don't.

TYSON:

I'm glad to tell you
An idea has formed in my mind, a possible solution.

RICHARD: [*Enters*]

Sir, if you please ...

TYSON:

Well, Richard?

RICHARD:

I should like to admit
That I've drunk some of the wine put out for the guests.

TYSON:

Well, that's a pretty thing, I must say.

RICHARD:

I was feeling
Low; abominably; about the prisoners
And the row in the street that's getting out of hand.
And certain inner things. And I saw the wine
And I thought Well, here goes, and I drank
Three glassesful.

TYSON:

I trust you feel better for it.

RICHARD:

I feel much worse. Those two, sir, the prisoners,
What are you doing with them? I don't know why
I keep calling you Sir. I'm not feeling very respectful.
If only inflicted pain were as contagious
As a plague, you might use it more sparingly.

TAPPERCOOM:

Who's this cub of a boy?

MARGARET:

Richard, be sensible.
He's a dear boy but a green boy, and I'm sure
He'll apologize in a minute or two.

TYSON:

The boy
Is a silly boy, he's a silly boy; and I'm going
To punish him.

MARGARET:

Where are Humphrey and Nicholas?

TYSON:

Now Margaret ...

RICHARD:

They were where the prisoners are,
Down in the cellars.

MARGARET:

Not talking to that witch?

RICHARD:

There isn't a witch. They were sitting about on barrels.
It seemed that neither would speak while the other was there,
And neither would go away. Half an hour ago.
They may be there still.

TYSON:

I must remind you, Margaret,
I was speaking to this very stupid boy.
He is going to scrub the floor. Yes, scrub it.
Scrub this floor this evening before our guests
Put in an appearance. Mulish tasks for a mulish
Fellow. I haven't forgotten his refusal
To fetch the constable.

RICHARD:

Has Alizon Eliot
Been left sitting alone?

MARGARET:

Alizon Eliot
Is not for you to be concerned with, Richard.

TYSON:

Am I supposed to be merely exercising my tongue
Or am I being listened to? Do you hear me?

RICHARD:

Yes; scrub the floor. No she is not;
I know that.

TYSON:

Furthermore, you'll relegate
Yourself to the kitchen tonight, fetching and carrying.
If you wish to be a mule you shall be a mule.
And take this to whatever splendid fellow's
On duty. You will return with the prisoners
And tell them to remain in this room till I send for them.
— Tactics, Tappercoom; the idea that came to me.
You'll think it very good.— You may go, Richard.

TAPPERCOOM:

I am nothing but the Justice here, of course,
But perhaps, even allowing for that, you could tell me
What the devil you're up to.

NICHOLAS: *[Enters]*

Look, Chaplain, blood.
Fee fi, fo, fum. Can you smell it?

MARGARET:

Now what have you been doing?

NICHOLAS:

Isn't it beautiful?

A splash from the cherry red river that drives my mill!

CHAPLAIN:

Well, yes, it has a cheerful appearance,

But isn't it painful?

MARGARET:

I'm sure it's painful.

How did you ...

HUMPHREY:

Mother, I make it known publicly

I'm tired of my little brother. Will you please

Give him to some charity?

NICHOLAS:

Give me faith

And hope and the revolution of our native town.

I've been hit on the head by two thirds of a brick.

HUMPHREY:

The young fool climbed on the wall and addressed the crowd.

NICHOLAS:

They were getting discouraged. I told them how happy it made me

To see them interested in world affairs

And how the conquest of evil was being openly

Discussed in this house at the very moment,

And then unfortunately I was hit by a brick.

MARGARET:

What in the world have world affairs

To do with anything? But we won't argue.

TYSON:

I believe that brick to have been divinely delivered

And richly deserved. And am I to understand

You boys have also attempted conversation

With the prisoners?

HUMPHREY:

Now surely, Uncle,

As one of the Town Council I should be allowed

To get a grasp of whatever concerns the welfare

Of the population? Nicholas, I agree,

Had no business on earth to be down there.

NICHOLAS:

I was on
Business of the soul, my sweetheart, business
Of the soul.

MARGARET:

You may use that word once too often,
Nicholas. Heaven or someone will take you seriously
And then you would look foolish. Come with me
And have your forehead seen to.

NICHOLAS:

But my big brother
Was on business of the flesh, by all the fires
Of Venus, weren't you Humphrey?

HUMPHREY:

What the hell
Do you mean by that, you little death-watch beetle?

MARGARET:

Nicholas, will you come?

NICHOLAS:

Certainly, Mother. *[Exeunt with Margaret]*

TYSON:

How very remarkably insufferable
Young fellows can sometimes be. One would expect them
To care to model themselves on riper minds
Such as our own, Tappercoom. But really,
We might as well not have existed, you know.

TAPPERCOOM:

Am I to hear your plan, Tyson, or am I
Just to look quietly forward to old age?

TYSON:

My plan, ah, yes. Conclusive and humane.
The two are brought together into this room.
How does that strike you?

TAPPERCOOM:

It makes a complete sentence:
Subject: they. Predicate: are brought together.

TYSON:

Ah, you will say "with what object?" I'll tell you. We,

That is ourselves, the Chaplain, and my elder nephew
Will remain unobserved in the adjoining room
With the communicating door ajar.-And how
Does that strike you?

TAPPERCOOM:

With a dull thud, Tyson,
If I may say so.

TYSON:

I see the idea has eluded you.
A hypothetical Devil, Tappercoom,
Brought into conversation with a witch.
A dialogue of hell, perhaps, and conclusive.
Or one or other by their exchange of words
Will prove to be innocent, or we shall have proof
Positive of guilt. Does that seem good?

TAPPERCOOM:

Good is as good results.

HUMPHREY:

I should never have thought
You would have done anything so undignified
As to stoop to keyholes, uncle.

TYSON:

No, no, no,
The door will be ajar, my boy.

HUMPHREY:

Ah, yes,
That will make us upright. I can hear them coming.

TYSON:

Come along, come along.

CHAPLAIN:

"The ears of them that hear
Shall harken"-The prophet Isaiah.

TYSON:

Come along Chaplain.

TAPPERCOOM:

A drink, Tyson. I wish to slake the dryness
Of my disbelief. [*Tyson, Tappercoom, Humphrey Exeunt*]

CHAPLAIN:

I mustn't leave my mistress.

Where are you angel? Just where chuckle-head left you.

RICHARD: *[Enters with Thomas, Jennet]*

He wants you to wait here till he sends for you.

If in some way-I wish-! I must fetch the scrubbers. *[Exit]*

CHAPLAIN:

Ah ... ah ... I'm not really here. I came

For my angle, a foolish way to speak of it,

This instrument. May I say a happy issue

Out of all your afflictions? I hope so.-Well,

I'm away now.

THOMAS:

God bless you, in case you sneeze.

CHAPLAIN:

Yes, thank you. I may. And God bless you. *[Exit]*

THOMAS:

You would think by the holy scent of it our friend

Had been baptising the garden. But it's only

The heathen rainfall.

JENNET:

Do you think he knows

What has been happening to us?

THOMAS:

Old angel-scraper?

He knows all right. But he's subdued

To the cloth he works in.

JENNET:

How tired I am.

THOMAS:

And palingenesis has come again

With a hey and a ho. The indomitable

Perseverance of Persephone.

Became ludicrous long ago.

JENNET:

What can you see

Out there?

THOMAS:

Out here? Out here is a sky so gentle

Five stars are ventured on it. I can see

The sky's pale belly glowing and growing big,

Soon to deliver the moon. And I can see
A glittering smear, the snail-trail of the sun
Where it crawled with its golden shell into the hills.
A darkening land sunken into prayer,
Lucidly, in dewdrops of one syllable,
Nunc dimittis. I see twilight, madam.

JENNET:

But what can you hear?

THOMAS:

The howl of human jackals.

RICHARD: *[Enters]*

Do you mind? I have to scrub the floor.

THOMAS:

A good old custom. Always fornicate
Between clean sheets and spit on a well scrubbed floor.

JENNET:

Twilight, double, treble, in and out!
If I try to find my way I bark my brain
On shadows sharp as rocks where half a day
Ago was a wild soft world, a world of warm
Straw whispering every now and then
With rats, but possible, possible, not this,
This where I am lost. The morning came, and left
The sunlight on my step like any normal
Tradesman. But now every spark
Of likelihood has gone. The light draws off
As easily as though no one could die
Tomorrow.

THOMAS:

Are you going to be so serious
About such a mean allowance of breath as life is?
We'll suppose ourselves to be caddis-flies
Who live one day. Do we waste the evening
Commiserating with each other about
The unhygienic condition of our worm-cases?
For God's sake, shall we laugh?

JENNET:

For what reason?

THOMAS:

For the reason of laughter, since laughter is surely
The surest touch of genius in creation.

Would you have thought of it, I ask you,
If you had been making man, stuffing him full
Of such hopping greeds and passions that he has
To blow himself to pieces as often as he
Conveniently can manage it... would it also
Have occurred to you to make him burst himself
With such a phenomenon as cachinnation?
That same laughter, madam, is an irrelevancy
Which almost amounts to a revelation.

JENNET:

I laughed
Earlier this evening, and where am I now?

THOMAS:

Between
The past and the future which is where you were
Before.

JENNET:

Was it for laughter's sake you told them
You were the Devil? Or why did you?

THOMAS:

Honesty,
Madam, common honesty.

JENNET:

Honesty common
With the Devil?

THOMAS:

Gloriously common. It's Evil, for once
Not travelling incognito. It is what it is,
The Great Unspurious.

JENNET:

Thank you for that
You speak of the world I thought I was waking to
This morning. But horror is walking round me here
Because nothing is as it appears to be.
That's the deep water my childhood had to swim in.
My father was drowned in it.

THOMAS:

He was drowned in what?
In hypocrisy?

JENNET:

In the pursuit of alchemy.

In refusing to accept the dictum "It is
 What it is." Poor father. In the end he walked
 In Science like the densest night. And yet
 He was greatly gifted.
 When he was born he gave an algebraic
 Cry; at one glance measured the cubic content
 Of that ivory cone his mother's breast
 And multiplied his appetite by five.
 So he matured by a progression, gained
 Experience by correlation, expanded
 Into marriage by contraction, and by
 Certain physical dynamics
 Formulated me. And on he went
 Still deeper into the calculating twilight
 Under the twinkling of five-pointed figures
 Till Truth became the sum of sums
 And Death the long division. My poor father.
 What years and powers he wasted.
 He thought he could change the matter of the world
 From the poles to the simultaneous equator
 By strange experiment and by describing
 Numerical parabolas.

THOMAS:

To change
 The matter of the world! Magnificent
 Intention. And so he died deluded.

JENNET:

As a matter of fact, it wasn't a delusion.
 As a matter of fact, after his death
 When I was dusting his laboratory
 I knocked over a crucible which knocked
 Over another which rocked a third, and they poured
 And spattered over some copper coins, which two days later
 By impregnation, had turned into solid gold.

THOMAS:

Tell that to some sailor on a horse!
 If you had such a secret, I
 And all my fiendish flock, my incubi,
 Succubi, imps and cacodemons, would have leapt
 Out of our bath of brimming brimstone, crying
 Eureka, cherchez la femme!... Emperors
 Would be colonising you, their mistresses
 Patronizing you, ministers of state
 Governmentalising you. And you
 Would be eulogised, lionised, probably

Canonised for your divine mishap.

JENNET:

But I never had such a secret. It's a secret
Still. What it was I spilt, or to what extent,
Or in what proportion; whether the atmosphere
Was hot, cold, moist or dry, I've never known.
And someone else can discolor their fingers, tease
Their brains and spoil their eyesight to discover it.
My father broke to the wheel of a dream; he was lost
In a search. And so for me the actual!
What I touch, what I see, what I know; the essential fact.

THOMAS:

In other words, the bare untruth.

JENNET:

And, if I may say it
Without appearing rude, absolutely
No devils.

THOMAS:

How in the miserable world, in that case
Do you come to be here, pursued by the local consignment
Of fear and guilt? What possible cause...

JENNET:

Your thumbs,
I'm sure they're giving you pain.

THOMAS:

Listen! By both
My cloven hoofs! If you put us to the rack
Of an exchange of sympathy, I'll fell you to the ground.
Answer my question.

JENNET:

Why do they call me a witch?
Remember my father was an alchemist.
I live alone, preferring loneliness
To the companionable suffocation of an aunt.
I still amuse myself with simple experiments
In my father's laboratory. Also I speak
French to my poodle. Then you must know
I have peacock which on Sundays
Dines with me indoors. Not long ago
A new little serving-maid carrying the food
Heard its cry, dropped everything and ran,
Never to come back, and told all she met

That the Devil was dining with me.

THOMAS:

It really is

Beyond the limit of respectable superstition

To confuse my voice with a peacock's. Don't they know

I sing solo bass in Hell's Madrigal Club?

...And as for you, you with no eyes, no ears,

No senses, you are the most superstitious

Of all... (for what greater superstition

Is there than the mumbo-jumbo of believing

In reality?)... you should be swallowed whole by Time

In the way that you swallow appearances.

Horns, what a wast of effort it has all been

To give you Creation's vast and exquisite

Dilemma! where altercation thrums

In every granule of the Milky Way,

Persisting still in the dead-sleep of the moon,

And heckling itself hoarse in that hot-head

The sun. And as for here, each acorn drops

Arguing to earth, and pollen's all polemic...

We've given you a world as contradictory

As a female, as cabalistic as the male,

A conscienceless hermaphrodite who plays

Heaven off against hell, hell off against heaven,

Revolving in the ball-room of the skies,

Glittering with conflict as with diamonds:

We have wasted paradox and mystery on you

When all you're asking for is cause and effect!...

A copy of your birth-certificate was all you needed

To make you at peace with Creation. How uneconomical

The whole thing's been.

JENNET:

This is a fine time

To scold me for keeping myself to myself and out

Of the clutch of chaos. I was already

In a poor way of perplexity and now

You leave me no escape except

Out in a stream of tears.

THOMAS:

Now, none of that!...

[He trips over Richard, and falls]

Hell!

RICHARD:

I beg your pardon.

THOMAS:

Now that I'm down
On my knees I may as well stay here. In the name
Of all who ever were drowned at sea, don't weep!
I never learnt to swim. May God keep you
From being my Hellespont.

JENNET:

What I do
With my own tears is for me to decide.

THOMAS:

That's all very well. You get rid of them.
But on whose defenceless head are they going to fall?

JENNET:

I had no idea you were so afraid of water.
I'll put them away.

THOMAS:

O Pete, I don't know which
Is worse; to have you crying or to have you behaving
Like Catherine of Aix, who never wept
Until after she was beheaded, and then
The accumulated tears of a long lifetime
Burst from her eyes with such force, they practic'ly winded
Three onlookers and floated the parish priest
Two hundred yards into the entrance hall
Of a brothel.

JENNET: (*laughs*)

Poor Catherine.

THOMAS:

Not at all:
It made her life in retrospect infinitely
More tolerable, and when she got to Purgatory
She was laughing so much they had to give her a sedative.

JENNET:

Why should you want to be hanged?

THOMAS:

Madam,
I owe it to myself. But I can leave it
Until the last moment. It will keep
While the light still lasts.

JENNET:

What can we see in this light?

Nothing, I think, except flakes of drifting fear,
The promise of oblivion.

THOMAS:

Nothing can be seen
In the thistledown, but the rough-head thistle comes.
Rest in that riddle. I can pass to you
Generations of roses in this wrinkled berry.
There: now you hold in your hand a race
Of summer gardens, it lies under centuries
Of petals. What is not, you have in your palm.
Rest in the riddle, rest; why not? This evening
Is a ridiculous wisp of down
Blowing in the air as disconsolately as dust.
And you have your own damnable mystery too,
Which at this moment I could well do without.

JENNET:

I know of none. I'm an unhappy fact
Fearing death. This is a strange moment
To feel my life increasing, when this moment
And a little more may be for both of us
The end of time. You've cast your fishing-net
Of eccentricity, your seine of insanity
Caught me when I was already lost
And landed me with despairing gills on your own
Strange beach. That's too inhuman of you.

THOMAS:

Inhuman?
If I dared to know what you meant it would be disastrous!

JENNET:

It means I care whether you live or die.
You have cut yourself a shape on the air, which may be
My scar.

THOMAS:

Will you stop frightening me to death?
Do you want our spirits to hobble out of their graves
Enduring twinges of hopeless human affection
As long as death shall last? Still to suffer
Pain in the amputated limb! To feel
Passion in vacuo! That is the sort of thing
That causes sun-spots, and Lord knows what
Infirmities in the firmament. I tell you
The heart is worthless,
Nothing more than a pomander's perfume
In the sewerage. And a nosegay of private emotion

Won't distract me from the stench of the plague-pit,
You needn't think it will— Excuse me, Richard...
Don't entertain the mildest interest in me
Or you'll have me die screaming.

JENNET:

Why should that be?

If you're afraid of your shadow falling across
Another life, shine less brightly upon yourself,
Step back into the rank and file of men,
Instead of preserving the magnetism of mystery
And your curious passion for death. You are making yourself
A breeding ground for love and must take the consequences.
But what are you afraid of, since in a little
While neither of us may exist? Either or both
May be altogether transmuted into memory,
And then the heart's obscure indeed. Richard
There's a tear rolling out of your eye. What is it?

RICHARD:

Oh, that? I don't really know. I have things on my mind.

JENNET:

Not us?

RICHARD:

Not only.

THOMAS:

If it's a woman, Richard,
Apply yourself to the scrubbing-brush. It's all
A trick of the light.

JENNET:

The light of a fire.

THOMAS:

And, Richard,
Make this woman understand that I
Am a figure of vice and crime—

JENNET:

Guilty of—

THOMAS:

Guilty
Of mankind. I have perpetrated human nature.
My father and mother were accessories before the fact,
But there'll be no accessories after the fact,

By my virility there won't! Just see me
 As I am, me like a perambulating
 Vegetable, patched with inconsequential
 Hair, looking out of two small jellies for the means
 Of life, balanced on folding bones, my sex
 No beauty but a blemish to be hidden
 Behind judicious rags, driven and scorched
 By boomerang rages and lunacies which never
 Touch the accommodating artichoke
 Or the seraphic strawberry beaming in its bed:
 I defend myself against pain and death by pain
 And death, and make the world go round, they tell me,
 By one of my less lethal appetites:
 Half this grotesque live I spend in a state
 Of slow decomposition, using the name of
 Unconsidered God as a pedestal
 On which I stand and bray that I'm best
 Of beasts, until under some patient
 Moon or other I fall to pieces, like
 A cake of dung. Is there a slut would hold
 This in her arms and put her lips to it?

JENNET:

Sluts are only human. By a quirk
 Of unastonished nature, your obscene
 Decaying figure of vegetable fun
 Can drag a woman's heart, as though
 Heaven were dragging up the roots of hell.
 What is to be done? Something compels us into
 The terrible fallacy that man is desirable
 And there's no escaping into truth. The crimes
 And cruelties leave us longing, and campaigning
 Love still pitches his tent of light among
 The suns and moons. You may be decay and a platitude
 Of flesh, but I have no other such memory of life.
 You may be as corrupt as ancient apples, well then
 Corruption is what I most willingly harvest.
 You are Evil, Hell, the Father of Lies; if so
 Hell is my home, and my days of good were a holiday:
 Hell is my hill and the world slopes away from it
 Into insignificance. I have come suddenly
 Upon my heart and where it is I see no help for.

THOMAS:

We're lost, both irretrievably lost...

TAPPERCOOM: *[Enters with Tyson, Humphrey, Chaplain]*

Certainly the woman has confessed. *Spargere auras*

Per vulgam ambiguas. The town can go to bed.

TYSON:

It was a happy idea, eh, Tappercoom? This will be
A great relief to my sister, and everybody
Concerned. A very nice confession my dear.

THOMAS:

What is this popping-noise? Now what's the matter.

JENNET:

Do they think I've confessed to witchcraft?

HUMPHREY:

Admirably.

CHAPLAIN:

Bother such sadness. You understand, I'm sure:
Those in authority over us. I should like
To have been a musician but others decreed otherwise
And sin, whatever we might prefer, cannot
Go altogether unregarded.

TAPPERCOOM:

Now,
Now, Chaplain, don't get out of hand.
Pieties come later.— Young Devize
Had better go and calm the populace.
Tell them faggots will be lit to-morrow at noon.

HUMPHREY:

Have a heart, Mr. Tappercoom; they're hurling bricks.

JENNET:

What do they mean? Am I at noon to go
To the fire? Oh, for pity! Why must they brand
Themselves with me?

THOMAS:

She has bribed you to procure
Her death! Graft! Graft! Oh, the corruption
Of this town when only the rich can get to kingdom-
Come and a poor man is left to groan
In the full possession of his powers. And she's
Not even guilty! I demand fair play
For the criminal classes!

TYSON:

Terrible state of mind.
Humphrey, go at once to the gate—

HUMPHREY:

Ah, well, I can
But try to dodge.

THOMAS:

You didn't try soon enough.
Who else is going to cheat me out of my death?
Whee, ecclesiastic, let me brain you with your wife!

CHAPLAIN:

No, no! With something else oh, please
Hit me with something else.

THOMAS:

Exchange it
For a harp and hurry off to heaven.— Am I dangerous?
Will you give me the gallows?... Now, Now, Mr. Mayor!
Richard, I'll drown him in your bucket.

RICHARD:

Look, she has fallen!

CHAPLAIN:

Air! Air!

TYSON:

Water!

THOMAS:

But no fire, do you hear? No fire!... How is she, Richard?
Oh, the delicate mistiming of women! She has carefully
Snapped in half my jawbone of an ass.

RICHARD:

Life is coming back.

THOMAS:

Importunate life!
It should have something better to do
Than to hang about at a chronic street corner
In dirty weather and worse company.

TAPPERCOOM:

It is my duty as Justice to deliver
Sentence upon you as well.

THOMAS:

Ah!

TAPPERCOOM:

Found guilty

Of jaundice, misanthropy, suicidal tendencies
And spreading gloom and despondency. You will spend
The evening joyously, sociably, taking part
In the pleasures of your fellow men.

THOMAS:

Not
Until you've hanged me. I'll be amenable then.

JENNET:

Have I come back to consciousness to hear
That still?— Richard, help me to stand... You see,
Preacher to the caddis-fly, I return
To live my allotted span of insect hours.
But if you batter my wings with talk of death
I'll drop to the ground again.

THOMAS:

Ah! One
Concession to your courage and then no more.
Gentlemen, I'll accept your most inhuman
Sentence. I'll not disturb the indolence
Of your gallows yet. But on one condition:
That this lady shall take her share to-night
Of awful festivity. She shall suffer too.

TYSON:

Out of the question, quite out of the question.
Absolutely out of the question. What, what?

TAPPERCOOM:

What?

THOMAS:

That you shall spend the night in searching
For the bodies of my victims, or else the Lord
Chief Justice of England shall know you let a murderer
Go free. I'll raise the country.

JENNET:

Do you think
I can go in gaiety tonight
Under the threat of tomorrow? If I could sleep...

THOMAS:

That is the heaven to come.
We should be like stars now that it's dark:
Use ourselves up to the last bright dregs
And vanish in the morning. Shall we not

Suffer as wittily as we can? Now, come,
Don't purse your lips up like a little prude at the humour
Of annihilation. It is somewhat broad
I admit, but we're not children.

JENNET:

I am such

A girl of habit. I had got into the way
Of being alive. I will live as well as I can
This evening.

THOMAS:

And I'll live, too, if it kills me.

HUMPHREY:

Well, Uncle? If you're going to let this clumsy
Fisted cut-throat loose on the house to-night,
Why not the witch girl too?

CHAPLAIN:

Foolishly,

I can't help saying it, I should like
To see them dancing.

TYSON:

We have reached a decision.
The circumstances compel us to agree
To your most unorthodox request.

THOMAS:

Wisdom

At last. But listen, woman: after this evening
I have no further interest in the world.

JENNET:

My interest also will not be great, I imagine,
After this evening.

ACT III

THOMAS: *[Enters, Humphrey discovered on stage]*

Tedium, tedium, tedium. The frenzied
Ceremonial drumming of the humdrum!
Where in this small talking world can I find
A longitude with no platitude? I must
Apologize. That was no joke to be heard
Making to myself in the full face of the moon.
If only I had been born flame, a flame
Poised say, on the flighty head of a candle,

I could have stood in this draught and gone out,
Whip, through the door of my exasperation.
But I remain, like the possibility
Of water in a desert.

HUMPHREY:

I'm sure nobody
Keeps you here. There's a road outside if you want it.

THOMAS:

What on earth should I do with a road? That furrow
On the forehead of imbecility, a road?
I would as soon be up there, walking in the moon's
White unmolared gums. I'll sit on the world
And rotate with you till we roll into the morning.

HUMPHREY:

You're a pestering parasite. If I had my way
You'd be got rid of. You're mad and you're violent,
And I strongly resent finding you slightly pleasant.

THOMAS:

Oh, God, yes, so do I.

NICHOLAS: *[Enters]*

As things turn out
I want to commit an offense.

THOMAS:

Does something prevent you?

NICHOLAS:

I don't know what offense to commit.

THOMAS:

What abysmal
Poverty of mind!

NICHOLAS:

This is a night
Of the most asphyxiating enjoyment that ever
Sapped my youth.

HUMPHREY:

I think I remember
The stars gave you certain rights and interests
In a little blond religious. How is she, Nicholas?

NICHOLAS:

Your future wife, Humphrey, if that is who

You mean, is pale, tearful and nibbling a walnut.
I loved her once...Earlier today...
I thought you wanted her, and I'm always deeply
Devoted to your affairs. But now, I'm bored,
As bored as the face of a fish,
In spite of the sunlit barley of her hair.

HUMPHREY:

Aren't I ready to marry her? I thought that was why
We were mooning around celebrating. What more
Can I do to make you take her off my hands?
And I'm more than ready for the Last Trump as well.
It will stop old Mrs. Cartwright talking.

NICHOLAS:

Never.
She's doom itself. She could talk a tombstone off anybody.

MARGARET: *[Enters]*

Oh, there you are. Whatever's wrong? You both
Go wandering off, as though our guests could be gay
Of their own accord (the few who could bring themselves
To bring themselves, practically in the teeth
Of the recording angle). They're very nervous
And need considerable jolly. Goose liver,
Cold larks, cranberry tart and sucking pig,
And now everyone looks as though they only
Wanted to eat each other, which might in the circumstances
Be the best possible thing. Your uncle sent me
To find you. I can tell he's put out; he's as vexed
As a hen's hind feather's in a wind. And for that
Matter so am I. Go back inside
And be jolly like anyone else's children.

NICHOLAS:

Mother,
I'd as soon kiss the bottom of a Barbary ape.
The faces of our friends may be enchantment
To some, but they wrap my spirits in a shroud—
For the sake of my unborn children I have to avoid them.
Oh, now, be brave, Mother. They'll go in the course of nature.

MARGARET:

It's unfortunate, considering the wide
Choice of living matter on this globe
That I should have managed to be a mother. I can't
Imagine what I was thinking of. Your uncle
Has made me shake out the lavender

From one of my first gowns which has hung in the wardrobe
Four-and-twenty unencouraging years,
To lend to this Jennet girl, who in my opinion
Should not be here. And I said to her flatly
"The course of events is incredible. Make free
With my jewel box." Where is she now?

THOMAS:

No doubt

Still making free. Off she has gone
Away to the melting moody horizons of opal,
Moonstone, bloodstone, now moving in lazy
Amber, now sheltering in the shade
Of jade from a brief rainfall of diamonds.
Able to think to-morrow has an even
Brighter air, a glitter less moderate,
A quite unparalleled freedom in the fire:
A death, no bounds to it. Where is she now?
She is dressing, I imagine.

MARGARET:

Yes, I suppose so.

I don't like to think of her. And as for you
I should like to think of you as someone I knew
Many years ago, and, alas, wouldn't see again.
That would be quite charming. I beg you to come
Humphrey. Give your brother a good example.

HUMPHREY:

Mother, I'm unwell.

MARGARET:

Oh, Humphrey!

NICHOLAS:

Mother,

He is officially sick and actually bored.
The two together are as bad as a dropsy.

MARGARET:

I must keep my mind as concentrated as possible
On such pleasant things as the summer I spent at Stoke
D'Abernon. Your uncle must do what he will,
I've done what I can. *[Exit]*

NICHOLAS:

Our Mother isn't
Pleased.

HUMPHREY:

She has never learnt to yawn,
And so she hasn't the smallest comprehension
Of those who can.

THOMAS:

Benighted brothers in boredom
Let us unite ourselves in a toast of ennui,
I give you a yawn: to this evening, especially remembering
Mrs. Cartwright. *[Yawn]* To mortal life, women,
All government, wars, art, science, ambitions
And the entire fallacy of human emotions!

JENNET: *[Enters]*

And wake us in the morning with an ambrosial
Breakfast, amen, amen.

NICHOLAS:

Humphrey, poppin,
Draw back the curtains. I have a sense of daylight.

HUMPHREY:

It seems we're facing east.

THOMAS:

You've come too late.
Romulus, Remus and I have just buried the world
Under a heavy snowfall of disinterest.
There's nothing left of life by cranberry tarts,
Goose's liver, sucking pig, cold larks,
And Mrs. Cartwright.

JENNET:

That's riches running mad.
What about the have-not moon? Not a goose, not a pig,
And yet she manages to be the wit
Of heaven, and roused the envious Queen of Sheba
To wash in mercury so the Sheban fountains
Should splash deliriously in the light of her breast.
But she died, poor queen, shining less
Than the milk of her thousand shorthorn cows.

THOMAS:

What's this?
Where has the girl I spoke to this evening gone
With her Essential Fact? Surely she knows
If she is true to herself, the moon is nothing
But a circumambulating aphrodisiac
Divinely subsidised to provoke the world

Into a rising birth-rate... a veneer
Of sheerest Venus on the planks of Time
Which may fool the ocean but which fools not me.

JENNET:
So no moon.

THOMAS:
No moon.

NICHOLAS:
Let her have the last quarter.

JENNET:
No;
If he says no moon then of course there can be no moon.
Otherwise we destroy his system of thought
And confuse the quest for truth.

THOMAS:
You see, Nicholas?

JENNET:
I have only one small silver night to spend,
So show me no luxuries. It will be enough
If you spare me a spider, and when it spins I'll see
The six days of Creation in a web.
And a fly caught on the seventh. And if the dew
Should rise in the web, I may well die a Christian.

THOMAS:
I must shorten my sail. We're into a strange wind.
This evening you insisted on what you see,
What you touch, what you know. Where did this weather blow from?

JENNET:
Off the moors of mortality; that might
Be so. Or there's that inland sea, the heart
But you mustn't hinder me, not now. I come
Of a long-lived family, and I have
Some sixty years to use up almost immediately
I shall join the sucking pig.

NICHOLAS:
Please take my arm.
I'll guide you there.

HUMPHREY:
He shall do no such thing.
Who's the host here?

THOMAS:

They have impeccable manners
When they reach a certain temperature.

HUMPHREY:

A word
More from you, and you go out of this house.

THOMAS:

Like the heart going out of me, by which it avoids
Having to break.

JENNET:

Be quiet for a moment. I hear
A gay, modulating anguish, rather like music.

NICHOLAS:

It's the Chaplain, extorting lightness of heart
From the guts of his viol, to the greater glory of God.

TYSON: *[Enters, without seeing Jennet at first]*

What I hear from your mother isn't agreeable to me
In the smallest... a draught, quite noticeable.
I'm a victim to air.— I expect members of my family

THOMAS:

Is this courtesy, Mr Mayor, to turn your back
On a guest?

JENNET:

Why should I be welcome? I am wearing
His days gone by. I rustle with his memories!
I, the little heretic, as he thinks,
The all unhallows Eve to his poor Adam;
And nearly stubbing my toes against my grave
In his sister's shoes, the grave he has ordered for me.
Don't ask impossibilities of the gentleman.

TYSON:

Humphrey will you explain yourself?

HUMPHREY:

Uncle,
I came out to cool my brow. I was on my way back.

NICHOLAS:

Don't keep us talking. I need to plunge again
Into that ice-cap of pleasure in the next room.
I repeat, my arm.

HUMPHREY:

I repeat that I am the host.
I have the right...

JENNET:

He has the right, Nicholas.
Let me commit no solecism so near
To eternity. Please open the door for us.
We must go in smoothly as old friends. *[Exeunt with Humphrey, Nicholas]*

THOMAS:

Well, does your blood run deep enough to run
Cold, or have you none?

TYSON:

That's enough. Get away.

THOMAS:

Are you going to cry off the burning?

TYSON:

Worthless creatures,
Both; I call you clutter. The standard soul
Must mercilessly be maintained. No
Two ways of life. One God, one point of view,
A general acquiescence to the mean.

THOMAS:

And God knows when you say the mean, you mean
The mean. You'd be surprised to see the number
Of cloven hoofmarks in the yellow snow of your soul.
And so you'll kill her.
Time would have done it for her, too, of course,
But more cautiously and with a pretence of charm.
Am I allowed in bail into your garden?

TYSON:

Tiresome catarrh; I haven't any wish to see you,
Not in the slightest degree; go where you like.

THOMAS:

That's nowhere in this world. But still maybe
I can make myself useful and catch mice for an owl. *[Exit]*

TAPPERCOOM: *[Enters]*

The young lunatic slipping off, is he?
Cheered up and gone? So much the less trouble for us.
Very jolly evening, Tyson. Are you sober?

TYSON:

Yes, yes, yes.

TAPPERCOOM:

You shouldn't say that, you know.
You're in tears, Tyson. I know when I see them,
My wife has them. You've drunk too deep, my boy.
Now I'm as sober as a judge, perhaps a judge
A little on circuit, but still sober. Tyson,
You're in tears, old fellow, two little wandering
Jews of tears getting 'emselves embrangled
In your beard.

TYSON:

I won't stand it, Tappercoom:
I won't have it, I won't have evil things
Looking so distinguished. I'm no longer
Young, and I should be given protection.

TAPPERCOOM:

What
Do you want protecting from now?

TYSON:

We must burn her,
Before she destroys our reason. Damnable glitter.
Tappercoom, we mustn't become bewildered
At our time of life. Too unusual
Not to be corrupt. Must be burnt
Immediately burnt, burnt, Tappercoom,
Immediately.

TAPPERCOOM:

Are you trying to get rid of temptation,
Tyson? A belated visit of the wanton flesh
After all these years? You've got to be dispassionate.
Calm and civilized. I am civilized.
I know, frinstance, that Beauty is not an Absolute.
Beauty is a Condition. As you might say
Hey nonny yes or Hey nonny no.
But the Law's as absolute an Absolute...

[Chaplain Enters]

Hello, feeling dickey, Chaplain?

CHAPLAIN:

It would be
So kind if you didn't notice me. I have
Upset myself. I have no right to exist,
Not in any form, I think.

TAPPERCOOM:

I hope you won't
Think me unsociable if I don't cry myself.
What's the matter? Here's the pair of you
Dripping like newly weighed anchors.
Let the butterflies come to you, Chaplain.
Or you'll never be pollinated into a Bishop.

CHAPLAIN:

No, it's right and it's just that I should be cast down.
I've treated her with an abomination
That maketh desolate:... the words, the words
Are from Daniel...

TAPPERCOOM:

Hey, what's this? The young woman again?

CHAPLAIN:

My patient instrument. I made my viol
Commit such sins of sound... and I didn't mind:
No, I laughed. I was trying to play a dance.
I'm too unaccomplished to play with any jollity.
I shouldn't venture beyond religious pieces.

TYSON:

There's no question of jollity. We've got
To burn her, for our peace of mind.

TAPPERCOOM:

You must wait
Until tomorrow, like a reasonable chap.
And to-morrow, remember, you'll have her property
Instead of your present longing for impropriety.
And her house, now I come to think of it
Will suit me nicely.
A large mug of small beer for both of you.
Leave it to me.

CHAPLAIN:

No, no, no,
I should become delighted again. I wish
For repentance...

TAPPERCOOM:

You shall have it. I'll pour it out
Myself. You'll see; it shall bring you to your knees.

CHAPLAIN:

I'm too unaccomplished. I haven't the talent.
But I hoped I should see them dancing. And after all

They didn't dance...

TAPPERCOOM:

They shall, dear saint, they shall. *[Exeunt with Chaplain]*

RICHARD: *[Enters]*

I was sent to tell you, Mr. Tyson...

TYSON:

I'm not

To be found. I'm fully occupied elsewhere.

If you wish to find me I shall be in my study.

You can knock, but I shall give you no reply.

I wish to be alone with my convictions.

Good night. *[Exit]*

THOMAS: *[Enters]*

The Great Bear is looking so geometrical

One would think something or other could be proved.

Are you sad, Richard?

RICHARD:

Certainly.

THOMAS:

I also.

I've been cast adrift on a raft of melancholy.

The night wind passed me, like a sail across

A blind man's eye. There it is,

The interminable tumbling of the great grey

Main of moonlight, washing over

The little oyster-shell of this month of April:

Among the raven-quills of the shadows

And on the white pillows of men asleep:

The night's a pale pastureland of peace,

And something condones the world incorrigibly.

But what, in fact, is this vaporous charm?

We're softened by a nice conglomeration

Of the earth's uneven surface, refraction of light,

Obstruction of light, condensation, distance,

And that sappy upshot of self-centered vegetablism,

The trees in the garden. How is it we come

To see this as a heaven in the eye?

Why should we hawk and spit out ecstasy

As though we were nightingales, and call these quite

Casual degrees and differences

Beauty? What guile recommends the world

And gives our eyes a special sense to be

Deluded, above all animals?... Stone me, Richard!
I've begun to talk like that soulless girl, and she
May at this moment be talking like me! I shall go
Back into the garden, and choke myself with the seven
Sobs I managed to bring with me from the wreck.

RICHARD:

To hear her you would think her feet had almost
Left the ground. The evening which began
So blackly, now, as though it were a kettle
Set over her flame, has started to sing. And all
The time I find myself praying under my breath
That something will save her.

THOMAS:

You might do worse,
Tides turn with a similar sort of whisper.

ALIZON: *[Enters]*

Richard!

RICHARD:

Alizon!

ALIZON:

I've come to be with you.

RICHARD:

Not with me. I'm the to-and-fro-fellow
Tonight. You have to be with Humphrey.

ALIZON:

I think

I have never met Humphrey. I have met him less
And less the more I have seen him.

THOMAS:

You will forgive me.

I was mousing for a small Dutch Owl.
If it has said to-woo t-twice it has said it
A thousand times. *[Exit]*

RICHARD:

Hey! Thomas—!

...Ah, well.—

The crickets are singing well with their legs tonight.

ALIZON:

It sounds as though the night air were riding
On a creaking saddle.

RICHARD:

You must go back to the others.

ALIZON:

Let me stay. I'm not able to love them.

Have you forgotten what they mean to do tomorrow?

RICHARD:

How could I forget? But there are laws

And if someone fails them...

ALIZON:

I shall run

Away from laws if laws can't live in the heart.

I shall be gone tomorrow.

RICHARD:

You make the room

Suddenly cold. Where will you go?

ALIZON:

Where

Will you come to find me?

RICHARD:

Look, you've pulled the thread

In your sleeve. Is it honest for me to believe

You would be unhappy?

ALIZON:

When?

RICHARD:

If you marry Humphrey?

ALIZON:

Humphrey's a winter in my head.

But whenever my thoughts are cold and I lay them

Against Richard's name, they seem to rest

On the warm ground where summer sits

As golden as a humblebee.

So I did very little by think of you

Until I ran out of the room.

RICHARD:

Do you come to me

Because you can never love the others?

ALIZON:

Our father

God moved many lives to show you to me.
I think that is the way it must have happened.
It was complicated, but very kind.

RICHARD:

If I asked you
If you could ever love me, I should know
For certain that I was no longer rational.

ALIZON:

I love you quite as much as I love St. Anthony,
And rather more than I love St. John Chrysostom.

RICHARD:

But putting haloes on one side, as a man
Could you love me, Alizon?

ALIZON:

I have become
A woman, Richard, because I love you. I know
I was a child three hours ago. And yet
I love you as deeply as many years could make me,
But less deeply than many years will make me.

RICHARD: *[kisses her]*

I think I may never speak steadily again,
What have I done or said to make it possible
That you should love me?

ALIZON:

Everything I loved
Before has come to one meeting place in you,
And you have gone out into everything I love.

RICHARD:

Happiness seems to be weeping in me, as
I suppose it should, being newly born.

ALIZON:

We must never leave each other now, or else
We should perplex the kindness of God.

RICHARD:

The kindness
Of God itself is not a little perplexing.
What do we do?

ALIZON:

We cleave to each other, Richard.
That is what is proper for us to do.

RICHARD:

But you were promised to Humphrey, Alizon.
And I'm hardly more than a servant here,
Tied to my own apron-strings. They'll never
Let us love each other.

ALIZON:

Then they will have
To outwit all that ever went to create us.

RICHARD:

So they will. I believe it. Let them storm.
We're lovers in a deep and secret place
And never lonely any more...Alizon,
Shall we make the future, however much it roars,
Lie down with our happiness? Are you ready
To forego custom and escape with me?

ALIZON:

Shall we go now, before anyone prevents us?

RICHARD:

I'll take you to the old priest who first found me.
He is as near to being my father
As putting his hand into a poor-box could make him.
He'll help us. Oh, Alizon, I so
Love you *[kiss]* Let yourself quietly out and wait for me
Somewhere near the gate but in a shadow.
I must fetch my savings. Are you afraid?

ALIZON:

In some
Part of me, not all; and while I wait
I can have a word with the saints Theresa and Christopher:
They may have some suggestions.

RICHARD:

Yes, do that.
Now like a mouse *[kiss, she exits]* Only let me spell
No disillusion for her, safety, peace,
And a good world, as good as she has made it!

MARGRET: *[Enters]*

Now, Richard, have you found Mr. Tyson?

RICHARD:

Yes,
He's busy with his convictions.

MARGRET:

He has no business
To be busy now. How am I to prevent
This girl, condemned as a heretic, from charming us
With gentleness, consideration and gaiety?
It makes orthodoxy seem almost irrelevant.
But I expect they would tell us the soul can be as lost
For loving-kindness as in anything else.
Well, well; we must scramble for grace as best we can.
Where is Alizon?

RICHARD:

I must... I must...

MARGRET:

The poor child has gone away to cry
See if you can find her, will you Richard?

RICHARD:

I have to... have to... *[Exit]*

MARGRET:

Very well, I will go
In search of the sad little soul, myself.
Oh, dear, I could do with a splendid holiday
In a complete vacuum. *[Exit]*

NICHOLAS: *[Enters with Jennet & Humphrey]*

Are you tired of us?

HUMPHREY:

Why on earth
Can't you stop following her?

NICHOLAS:

Stop following me.

JENNET:

I am troubled to find Thomas Mendip.

NICHOLAS:

He's far gone...
As mad as the nature of man.

HUMPHREY:

As rude and crude
As an act of God. He'll burn your house.

JENNET:

So he has...
Are you kind to mention burning?

HUMPHREY:

I beg your pardon.

NICHOLAS:

Couldn't you tomorrow by some elementary spell
Reverse the direction of the flames and make them burn downwards?
It would save you unpleasantness and increase at the same
Time the heat below, which would please
Equally heaven and hell.
I feel such a tenderness for you, not only because
I think you've bewitched my brother, which would be
A most salutary thing, but because, even more
Than other women, you carry a sense of that cavernous
Night folded in night, where Creation sleeps
And dreams of men. If only we loved each other
Down the pitshaft of love I could go
To the motive mysteries under the soul's floor
Well drenched in damnation I should be as pure
As a limewashed wall.

HUMPHREY:

Get out!

JENNET:

He does no harm...
Is it possible he still might make for death
Even on this open-hearted night?

HUMPHREY:

Who might?

JENNET:

Thomas Mendip. He's sick of the world, but the world
Has a right to him.

HUMPHREY:

Damn Thomas Mendip.

NICHOLAS:

Nothing
Easier. *[Richard Enters]* You're just the fellow, Richard.
We need some more Canary, say five bottles
More. And before we go in, we'll drink here, privately,
To beauty and the sombre sultry waters
Where beauty haunts.

RICHARD:

I have to find... to find...

NICHOLAS:

Five bottles of Canary. I'll come to the cellars
And help you bring them. Quick before our Mother
Calls us back to evaporate into duty. *[Exeunt with Richard]*

HUMPHREY:

He's right. You have bewitched me. But not by scents
Of new-mown hell. For all I know you may
have had some by-play with the Devil, and your eyes
May well be violets in a stealthy wood
Where souls are lost. If so, you will agree
The fire is fair, as fair goes: you have
To burn.

JENNET:

It is hard to live last hours
As the earth deserves. Must you bring closer the time
When, as the night yawns under my feet,
I shall be cast away in the chasm of dawn?
I am tired with keeping my thoughts clear of that verge.

HUMPHREY:

But need you? These few hours of the night
Might be lived in a way which wouldn't end
In fire. It would be insufferable
If you were burned while you were strange to me.
I should never sit at ease in my body again.

JENNET:

Must we talk of this? All there is
To be said has been said, and all in a heavy sentence.
There's nothing to add except a grave silence.

HUMPHREY:

Listen, will you listen? There is more to say,
I'm able to save you, since all official action
Can be given official hesitation. I happen
To be on the Council, and a dozen reasons
Can be found to postpone the moment of execution:
Legal reasons, monetary reasons...
They've confiscated your property, and I can question
Whether your affairs may not be too disordered.
And once postponed, a great congestions of quibbles
Can be let loose over the Council table...

JENNET:

Hope can break the heart, Humphrey. Hope
Can be too strong.

HUMPHREY:

But this is true: actual
As my body is. And as for that ... now, impartially
Look what I risk. If in any way you've loosened
The straps which hold in place our fairly workable
Wings of righteousness, and they say you have,
Then my status in both this town and the after-life
Will be gone if either suspect me of having helped you
I have to be given a considerable reason
For risking that.

JENNET:
I fondly hope I'm beginning
To misconstrue you.

HUMPHREY:
Later on tonight
When they've all gone small into their beauty sleep
I'll procure the key and come to your cell. Is that
Agreeable?

JENNET:
Is it so to you?
Aren't you building your castles in foul air?

HUMPHREY:
Foul? No; it's give and take, the basis
Of all understanding.

JENNET:
You mean you give me a choice:
To sleep with you, or tomorrow to sleep with my fathers.
And if I value the gift of life,
Which, dear heaven, I do, I can scarcely refuse.

HUMPHREY:
Isn't that sense?

JENNET:
Admirable sense.
Oh, why , why am I not sensible?
Oddly enough, I hesitate. Can I
So dislike being cornered by a young lecher
That I would rather die? That would be
The maniac pitch of pride. Indeed it might
Even be sin. Can I believe my ears?
I seem to be considering heaven. And heaven,
From this angle, seems considerable.

HUMPHREY:

Now, please, we're bit going to confuse the soul and the body.
This, speaking bodily, is merely an exchange
Of compliments.

JENNET:

And surely throwing away
My life for the sake of pride would seem to heaven
A bodily blasphemy, a suicide?

HUMPHREY:

Even if heaven were interested. Or even
If you cared for heaven. *[attempts to kiss her]*
Am I unattractive to you?

JENNET:

Except that you have the manners of a sparrowhawk,
With less reason, no, you are not. But even so
I'd no more run to your arms than I wish to run
To death. I ask myself why. Surely I'm not
Mesmerised by some shake of chastity?

HUMPHREY:

This isn't the time...

JENNET:

Don't speak, contemptible boy,
I'll tell you: I am not. We have
To look elsewhere ... for instance, into my heart
Where recently I heard begin
A bell of longing which calls no one to church.
But need that, ringing away in vain,
Drown the milkmaid singing in my blood
And freeze into the tolling of my knell?
That would be pretty, indeed, but unproductive.
No, it's not that.

HUMPHREY:

Jennet, before they come
And interrupt us ...

JENNET:

I am interested
In my feelings, I seem to wish to have some importance
In the play of time. If not,
Then sad was my mother's pain, sad my breath,
Sad the articulation of my bones,
Sad, sad my alacritous web of nerves,
Woefully, woefully sad my wondering brain,
To be shaped and sharpened into such tendrils

Of anticipation, to feed the swamp of space.
What is deep as love is deep, I'll have
Deeply. What is good as love is good
I'll have well. Then if time and space
Have any purpose, I shall belong to it.
If not, if all is a pretty fiction
To distract the cherubim and seraphim
Who so continually do cry, the least
I can do is to fill the curled shell of the world
With human deep-sea sound, and hold it to
The ear of God, until he has appetite
To taste our salt sorrow on his lips.
And so you see it might be better to die.
Though on the other hand, I admit it might
Be immensely foolish. Listen! What
Can all the thundering from the cellars be?

HUMPHREY:

I don't know at all. You're simply playing for time.
Why can't you answer me, before I'm thrown
By the bucking of my pulse, before Nicholas
Interrupts us? Will it be all right?

JENNET:

Doesn't my plight seem pitiable to you?

HUMPHREY:

Pitiable, yes. It makes me long for you
Intolerably. Now be a saint, and tell me
I may come to your cell.

JENNET:

I wish I could believe
My freedom was not in the flames. Oh God, I wish
The ground would open.

THOMAS: *[Thomas enters; throws and stands on Humphrey]*

Allow me to open it for you.
Admit I was right. Man's a mistake.
Lug-worms the lot of us.

HUMPHREY:

Wipe your filthy boots
Before you start trespassing.

THOMAS:

And as for you,
I'll knock your apple-blossom back to the roots
Of the Tree of Knowledge where you got it from!

JENNET:

Oh dear,
Is it lug-worms at war? And by what right, will you tell me,
Do your long ears come moralizing in
Like Perseus to Andromeda? Pause a moment
And consider.

THOMAS:

Madam, if I were Herod in the middle
Of the massacre of the innocents, I'd pause
Just to consider the confusion of your imagery.

HUMPHREY:

If he wants to fight me, let him. Come out in the garden.
Whatever happens I shall have one bash at him
Which, next to this other thing, is the most desirable
Act in the world. If he kills me, you and I
The day after tomorrow, can improve
The deadly hours of the grave
By thrashing out the rights and wrongs of it
Only remember, I thought you unfairly beautiful
And to balance your sins, you should be encouraged
For heaven's sake to spend your beauty
In a proper way, on someone who knows its worth.

THOMAS:

Sound the trumpets!

JENNET:

Yes, why not! And a roll
Of drums. You, if you remember, failed
Even to give me a choice. You have only said
"Die, woman, and look as though you liked it."
So you'll agree this can hardly be said to concern you.

THOMAS:

All right! You've done your worst. You force me to tell you
The disastrous truth. I love you. A misadventure
So intolerable, hell could not do more.
Nothing in the world could touch me
And you have to come and be the damnable
Exception. I was nicely tucked up for the night
Of eternity, and like a restless dream
Of a fool's paradise, you, with a rainbow where
Your face is and an ignis fatuus
Worn like a rose in your girdle, come pursued
By fire, and presto! the bedclothes are on the floor
And I, the tomfool, love you. Don't say again
That this doesn't concern me, or I shall say

That you needn't concern yourself with tomorrow's burning.

NICHOLAS: *[Enters]*

Do you know what that little bastard Richard did?
He locked me in the cellars.

THOMAS:

Don't complicate
The situation ... I love you, perfectly knowing
You're nothing but a word out of the mouth
Of that same planet of almighty blemish
Which I long to leave. But the word is an arrow
Of larksong, shot from the earth's bow, and falling
In a stillborn sunrise ... I shall lie in my grave
With my hands clapped over my ears, to stop your music
From riddling me as much as the meddling worms.
Still, that's beside the point. We have to settle
This other matter.

NICHOLAS:

Yes, I was telling you.
I went into the cellars to get the wine,
And the door swung after me, and that little son
Of a crossbow turned the key ...

THOMAS:

Can we find somewhere
To talk where there isn't quite so much insect life?

NICHOLAS:

And there I was, in cobwebs up to my armpits,
Hammering the door and yelling like a slaughter-house
Until the cook came and let me out. Where is he?

JENNET:

What should we talk of? You mean to be hanged.
Am I to understand that your tongue-tied dust
Will slip a ring on the finger of my ashes
And we'll both die happily ever after? Surely
His suggestion, though more conventional,
Has fewer flaws.

THOMAS:

But you said, like a ray of truth
Itself, that you'd rather burn.

JENNET:

My heart, my mind
Would rather burn. But may not the casting vote

Be with my body? And is the body necessarily
Always ill-advised?

NICHOLAS:

Something has happened
Since I made the descent into those hellish cobwebs
I'm adrift. What is it?

THOMAS:

Let me speak to her.
You've destroyed my defences, the laborious contrivance
Of hours, the precious pair of you. Oh, Jennet,
Jennet, you should have let me go before
I confessed a word of this damned word love. I'll not
Reconcile myself to a dark world
For the sake of five-feet six of wavering light,
For the sake of a woman who goes no higher
Than my bottom lip.

NICHOLAS:

I'll strip and fly my shirt
At the masthead unless someone picks me up.
What has been going on?

THOMAS:

Ask that neighing
Horse-box-kicker there, your matchless brother.

NICHOLAS:

Ah, Humphrey, darling, have there been
Some official natural instincts?

HUMPHREY:

I've had enough.
The whole thing's become unrecognisable.

JENNET:

Have I a too uncertain virtue to keep you
On the earth?

THOMAS:

I ask nothing, nothing. Stop
Barracking my heart. Save yourself
His way if you must. There will always be
Your moment of hesitation, which I shall chalk
All over the walls of purgatory. Never mind
That, loving you, I've trodden the garden threadbare
Completing a way to save you.

JENNET:

If you saved me
Without troubling to save yourself, you might have saved
Your trouble.

NICHOLAS:

I imagine it's all over with us, Humphrey.
I shall go and lie with my own thoughts
And conceive reciprocity. Come on, you boy of gloom,
The high seas for us.

HUMPHREY:

Oh go drown yourself
And me with you.

NICHOLAS:

There's no need to drown,
We'll take the tails off mermaids.

MARGARET: *[Enters]*

Have any of you seen
That poor child Alizon? I think
She must be lost.

NICHOLAS:

Who isn't? The best
Thing we can do is to make wherever we're lost in
Look as much like home as we can. Now don't
Be worried. She can't be more lost than she was with us.

HUMPHREY:

I can't marry her, mother. Could you think
Of something else to do with her?
I'm going to bed.

NICHOLAS:

I think Humphrey has been
Improperly making a proper suggestion, mother.
He wishes to be drowned.

MARGARET: *[To Thomas]*

They find it impossible
To concentrate. Have you seen the little
Fairhaired girl?

NICHOLAS:

He wishes to be hanged.

MARGARET:

Have you hidden the child?

NICHOLAS:

She wishes to be burned
Rather than sleep with my brother.

MARGARET:

She should be thankful
She can sleep at all. For years I have woken up
Every quarter of an hour. I must sit down.
I'm too tired to know what anyone's saying.

JENNET:

I think none of us knows where to look for Alizon.
Or for anything else. But shall we, while we wait
For news of her, as two dispirited women
Ask this man to admit he did no murders?

THOMAS:

You think not?

JENNET:

I know. There was a soldier,
Discharged and centerless, with a towering pride
In his sensibility, and an endearing
Disposition to be a hero, who wanted
To make an example of himself to all
Erring mankind, and falling in with a witch-hunt
His good heart took the opportunity
Of providing a diversion. O Thomas,
It was very theatrical of you to choose the gallows.

THOMAS:

Mother, we won't listen to this girl.
She is jealous, because of my intimate relations
With damnation. But damnation knows
I love her.

RICHARD: *[Enters with Alizon]*

We have come back.

NICHOLAS:

I want to talk to you. Who locked me in the cellars?

MARGARET:

Alizon, where have you been?

ALIZON:

We had to come back.

MARGARET:

Back? From where?

RICHARD:

We came across Old Skipps.

ALIZON:

We were running away. We wanted to be happy.

NICHOLAS:

Skipps?

HUMPHREY:

The body of Old Skipps? We'd better
Find Tappercoom. *[Exit]*

MARGARET:

Alizon, what do you mean,
Running away?

RICHARD:

He is rather drunk. Shall I bring him
In? He had been to see his daughter.

JENNET:

Who
Will trouble to hang you now?

THOMAS:

He couldn't lie quiet
Among so many bones. He had to come back
To fetch his barrow.

TAPPERCOOM: *[Enters]*

What's all this I'm told?
I was hoping to hang on my bough for the rest of the evening
Ripe and undisturbed. What is it? Murder
Not such a fabrication after all?

ALIZON:

We had to come back, you see, because nobody now
Will be able to burn her.

RICHARD:

Nobody now will be able
To say she turned him into a dog. Come in,
Mr. Skipps.

TAPPERCOOM:

It looks uncommonly to me
As though someone has been tampering with the evidence.
Where's Tyson? I'm too amiable to-night
To controvert any course of events whatsoever.

SKIPPS: *[Enters]*

Your young gentleman says Come in, so I comes in. Youse only has to say muck off, and I goes wivout argument.

TAPPERCOOM:

Splendid, of course. Are you the rag-and-bone merchant of this town, name of Matthew Skipps?

SKIPPS:

Who give me that name? My grandfathers and grandmothers and all in authority undrim. Baptized I blaming was, and I says to youse, baptized I am, and I says to youse, baptized I will be, wiv holy weeping and washing of teeth. And immersion upon us miserable offenders. Miserable offenders all... no offence meant. And if any of youse is not a miserable offender, as he's told to be by almighty and mercerable God, then I says to him Hands off my daughter, you bloody-minded heathen.

TAPPERCOOM:

All right, all right...

SKIPPS:

And I'm not quarrelling, mind; I'm not quarrelling. Peace on earth and good tall women. And give us our trespassers as trespassers will be prosecuted for us. I'm not perfect, mind. But I'm as good a miserable offender as any man here present, ladies excepted.

THOMAS:

Here now, Matt, aren't you forgetting yourself? You're dead; you've been dead for hours.

SKIPPS:

Dead am I? I has the respect to ask you to give me coabberation of that. I says mucking liar to nobody. But I seen my daughter three hours back, and she'd have said fair and to my face Dad, you're dead. She don't stand for no nonsense.

NICHOLAS:

The whole town knows it, Skipps, old man. You've been dead since this morning.

SKIPPS:

Dead. Well, you take my breaf away. Do I begin to stink, then?

HUMPHREY:

You do.

SKIPPS:

Fair enough. That's coabberation. I'm among the blessed saints.

TAPPERCOOM:

He floats in the heaven of the grape. Someone take him home to his hovel.

SKIPPS:

Alleluia! Alleluia! Alleluia!

TAPPERCOOM:

Now, stop that, Skipps. Keep your hosannas for the cold light of morning or we shall lock you up.

SKIPPS:

Alleluia!

TAPPERCOOM:

He'll wake your guests and spoil their pleasure. They're all sitting half sunk in a reef of collars. Even the dear good Chaplain has taken so many glassesfull of repentance he's almost unconscious of the existence of sin.

SKIPPS:

Glory, amen! Glory, glory, amen, amen!

MARGARET:

Richard will take this old man home. Richard...

Where is Richard? Where is Alizon?

Have they gone again?

NICHOLAS:

Yes; Humphrey's future wife,

Blown clean away.

MARGARET:

Yes; that's all very well;

But she mustn't think she can let herself be blown

Away whenever she likes.

THOMAS:

What better time

Than when she likes.

SKIPPS:

As it was in the beginning,

Ever and ever, amen al-lelulia!

MARGARET:

Take the old man to his home. Now that you've made him

Think he's dead we shall never have any peace.

HUMPHREY:

Nor shall we when he's gone.

NICHOLAS:

Spread your wings, Matthew; we're going to teach you to fly.

SKIPPS:

I has the respect to ask to sit down. Youse blessed saints don't realize: it takes it out of you, this life everlasting. Alleluia!

NICHOLAS:

Come on

Your second wind can blow where no one listens. *[Exeunt with Skipps and Humphrey]*

TAPPERCOOM:

That's more pleasant.
What was the thread, now, which the rascal broke?
Do I have to collect my thoughts any further?

MARGARET:

Yes:
Or I must. That poor child Alizon
Is too young to go throwing herself under the wheels
Of happiness. She should have wrapped up warmly first.
Hebble must know, in any case. I must tell him,
Though he has locked himself in, and only blows his nose
When I knock.

TAPPERCOOM:

Yes, get him on to a horse;
It will do him good.

MARGARET:

Hebble on a horse is a man
Delivered neck and crop to the will of God.
But he'll have to do it. *[Exit]*

TAPPERCOOM:

Ah yes, he'll have to do it.
He's a dear little man... What's to be the end of you?
I take it the male prisoner is sufficiently
Deflated not to plague us with his person
Any longer?

THOMAS:

Deflated? I'm overblown
With the knowledge of my villainy.

TAPPERCOOM:

Your guilt, my boy,
Is a confounded bore.

THOMAS:

Then let it bore me to extinction.

TAPPERCOOM:

The female prisoner may notice, without
My mentioning it, that there's a certain mildness
In the night, a kind of somnolent inattention.
If she wishes to return to her cell, no one
Can object. On the other hand... How very empty
The streets must be just now. You will forgive
A yawn in an overworked and elderly man.—
The moon is full, of course. To leave town

Unobserved, one would have to use caution. As for me
I shall go and be a burden to my bed.
Good night. *[Exit]*

JENNET:
Good night.

THOMAS:
Good night.
So much for me.

JENNET:
Thomas, only another
Fifty years or so, and then I promise
To let you go.

THOMAS:
Do you see those roofs and spires?
There sleep hypocrisy, porcous pomposity, greed,
Lust, vulgarity, cruelty, trickery, sham,
And all possible nitwittery ... are you suggesting— fifty
Years of that?

JENNET:
I was only suggesting fifty
Years of me.

THOMAS:
Girl, you haven't changed the world
Glimmer as you will, the world's not changed.
I love you, but the world's not changed. Perhaps
I could draw you up over my eyes for a time
But the world sickens me still.

JENNET:
And do you think
Your gesture of death is going to change it? Except
For me?

THOMAS:
Oh, the unholy mantrap of love!

JENNET:
I have put on my own gown again.
But otherwise everything that is familiar,
My house, my poodle, peacock and possessions,
I have to leave. The world is looking frozen
And forbidding under the moon; but I must be
Out of this town before daylight comes, and somewhere,
Who knows where, begin again.

THOMAS:

Brilliant!

So you fall back on the darkness to defeat me.

You gamble on the possibility

That I was well brought up. And, of course, you're right.

I have to see you home, though neither of us

Knows where on earth it is.

[cock crows]

JENNET:

Thomas, can you mean to let

The world go on?

THOMAS:

I know my limitations,

When the landscape goes to seed, the wind is obsessed

By tomorrow.

JENNET:

I shall have to hurry.

That was the pickaxe voice of the cock, beginning

To break up the night. Am I an inconvenience

To you?

THOMAS:

As inevitably as original sin. *[kiss]*

And I shall be loath to forgo one day of you,

Even for the sake of my ultimate friendly death.

JENNET:

I am friendly too.

THOMAS:

Then let me wish us both

Good morning.— And God have mercy on our souls!