

ACT TWO, SCENE TWO

*(The morning of the following day. BASIL enters with a tray of coffee and rolls. He goes through the usual routine of neatening the desk, setting and pouring the coffee, etc. After this, he looks out toward the beach. He is clearly searching for signs of Clay. He seems not to spot him.)*

*(SIMS enters. He is lost in thought. BASIL allows him a moment, another longstanding routine, before he judges it is appropriate to speak).*

BASIL

Sleep well?

SIMS

Yes and no.

BASIL

Why and why not?

SIMS

Well, when I sleep, I feel that deep sense of peace I've been talking about. For the first time since I was a child, I can shut my eyes and not be afraid. Truly. I hadn't realized that, between the wars and other things, I don't think I've ever really lost consciousness when I sleep.

BASIL

You do when you drink.

SIMS

*(Takes a moment, then reconsiders his intended riposte.)* Actually, not even then. There always seems to be the vague awareness of the force of evil. The air raid siren. The German guard.

BASIL

The bad notice from the London Times.

SIMS

Basil, I truly wish for you the kind of peace I have achieved through Our Lord.

BASIL

*(After a pause).* And what about the "no."

SIMS

The what?

BASIL

When I asked you if you slept well, you said, “Yes and no.” What about the no?

SIMS

Ah. Well, I did wake up at intervals in the night. Not with a panic. More with a sense of anticipation. I get kind of keyed up about what’s to come.

BASIL

That is really good news.

SIMS

Thank you, Basil.

BASIL

It means a new book or script is about to burst forth.

SIMS

Oh. No, I don’t think so.

BASIL

You used the phrase “keyed up.” That is your code for getting back to the typewriter. Rather a bad pun, but I’ll forgive it if you produce greatness.

SIMS

Well – perhaps you’re right. I don’t know. (Pause.) I have written a new poem.

BASIL

Not really your line these days, is it?

SIMS

I have recently been reminded that I once had a talent for it.

BASIL

By whom, I wonder?

SIMS

(Ignores him. Begins reciting:)

The brook shimmers

Droplets rise, pursuing the upward path of a solitary trout.

Mouth agape, he almost begs for the hook

Then torques his way back to the water.

The droplets rejoin their community.

*(Silence)*

BASIL

Yes, well, that's over.

SIMS

I think it's good.

BASIL

To borrow from both this poem and vaudeville parlance, I think it "begs for the hook."

SIMS *(Again, stifling the urge to fight back:)*

I'll work on it.

BASIL

Drink your coffee.

*(SIMS does.)*

BASIL

Sims, what are you doing about Claire?

SIMS

What do you mean?

BASIL

I mean that yesterday you implied that you were willing to begin being a so-called "true husband" to her.

SIMS

Yes.

BASIL

Sims.

SIMS

What?

BASIL

She's in love with Mr. Grant. And apparently on the receiving end of more than love letters from him. Personally, the mental picture revolts me. What is more difficult for me to believe is that *you* are not revolted by the prospect of taking Mr. Grant's place atop her.

SIMS

Basil, if you are trying to get a rise out of me, I have to remind you that I have found a more profound peace than your vulgarities can provoke.

BASIL

I'm serious. Don't search for a piercing reply. Just answer the question.

SIMS

This is a process, Basil! The process of conversion has many obstacles.

BASIL

If you say "Rome wasn't built in a day," I promise I'll slap you.

SIMS

If I did, you'd have my permission.

*(A moment of mutual pleasure.)*

SIMS

Patience is all I require.

BASIL

I doubt patience will do the trick.

SIMS

I will remind you that I have indeed been a husband to Claire, in many ways of which God approves, beyond the merely carnal. I took care of her, I put up with her, I listened to her endless

self-adulation. I provided her with comfort, luxury, and by the way, a few damned good roles that could have gone to Gladys Cooper or any number of better actresses.

*(Pause)*

I shouldn't have said "damned." I'm working on that as well.

*(Pause)*

I would have loved to have had children.

BASIL

Even if you begin the carnal chapter of this marriage, my vague knowledge of gynecology tells me that that is unlikely.

SIMS

I was genuinely hurt by Claire's dismissal of our early attempts at ...genital contact.

*(BASIL is genuinely surprised.)*

I felt it my duty to try and afford her some of the physical pleasure I found in others' arms. I know that, compared to what I've felt with men, however wrong it is, that our mingling was unsatisfactory.

BASIL

She was referring to *her* disappointment, not yours.

SIMS

Be that as it may, I reject her indictments.

About that, as well as about my having somehow forced her out of her ingénue phase.

For instance, it was I who begged her to consider having a child. Just because one can't assume the normal husbandly duties with vigor doesn't mean one doesn't wish to see one's life prolonged by the arrival of a child.

Claire is an actress. She was never very pretty, but she was always vain. In her first stage roles, she was always praised for her willowy figure – hah! That went by the wayside long before I supposedly insisted she gain weight. But in the early days, that was enough for her to believe that pregnancy would rob her of the thing that helped her beat out the other young hags then appearing in the West End.

*(SIMS is now lost in his own thoughts as he continues.)*

Love. She thinks she's in love because a man finds her fascinating and knows how to make her feel that she's the lady of the camellias at fifty.

Love, if I have known it at all, has been diluted by...life. Life makes us strange. Life makes us ugly. Life makes us keenly aware of the world and its madness.

And love! Love requires the biggest lies.

Love. Do you think those poor bastards starving in dozens of Godforsaken corners of the globe have time for love? Do you think that mother love exists when you drop a kid in the field and then run for your life because someone has a sharp blade or a gun muzzle aimed at you? Do you think that boys and girls get to sip strawberry sodas and give each other friendship rings when they're forced to sell themselves to lascivious tourists who barely acknowledge that they're human?

And here, in the land of milk and honey. Here we can love, right? I suppose all these shining starlets may be in love with their pot-bellied producers, but I doubt it.

Love! This life of mine--of ours—that Clay wants to expose-- doesn't allow for love! It allows for youthful infatuation. It, God help me, allows for releases of lustful urges. It even allows for deep friendships. Like ours, Basil.

*(BASIL's reaction is one, at long last, of honest pain.)*

BASIL

I'm not sure you've ever said anything more hurtful in all these years.

SIMS *(Ignoring him, still in his own world)*

She's in love. Well, she's welcome to it.

BASIL

Given all you've just said, can you really go through with this Catholic thing?

SIMS

It's my only hope.

BASIL

*(Pause)*

Well, then, it's goodbye.

SIMS

*(Slowly)*. Yes. I think it is.

BASIL *(Raises his glass)*

Cheers and amen.

*(FATHER THEODOR suddenly appears. He looks unsettlingly like SIMS did after his beating. His eyes are wild with a mixture of excitement and fear. During their exchange, FATHER THEODOR gradually loses his manic energy.)*

SIMS

Good heavens, Father! What's happened?

FATHER THEODOR

You inspired me!

SIMS

I what?

FATHER THEODOR

Your poems. Your war stories.

SIMS

What about them?

FATHER THEODOR

You were brave.

SIMS

That was fiction.

FATHER THEODOR

No. I knew it was you.

SIMS

Father, what have you done?

FATHER THEODOR

That—Clay. I--- had a talk with him.

SIMS

What—exactly did you talk with him about?

FATHER THEODOR

I told him I knew all about him.

SIMS

Oh, God...

FATHER THEODOR

I told him that he knew he was doing wrong.

SIMS

You could have been killed.

FATHER THEODOR

He didn't kill *you*.

SIMS

I have something he wants. He just...needed to frighten me.

FATHER THEODOR

I'm not frightened. I'm fine. I'm...happy!

SIMS

Why?

FATHER THEODOR

I-- (*A pause.*)

SIMS

Good God. Don't say, "I'm not afraid to die." That's the stupidest thing ever said.

FATHER THEODOR

I don't think----

SIMS (*Suddenly afire*)

You think you're a coward because you stayed in hospitals instead of facing a bomb or a pistol.

FATHER THEODOR

Yes.

SIMS

You think you're not a proper Christian shepherd because you minister to film stars and decrepit old has-beens like me.

FATHER THEODOR

Yes—No--



SIMS

And the solution is to throw yourself in front of a rabid dog?

FATHER THEODOR (*Holds SIMS by the shoulder*)

I--I want him to stop.

SIMS

So do I, but you're about as likely to stop him as...as...I am.

FATHER THEODOR

You...in the prison camp...

SIMS

What about it?

FATHER THEODOR

You risked everything.

SIMS

I didn't!

FATHER THEODOR

I haven't served my Lord.

SIMS (*suddenly aware that FATHER THEODOR is losing consciousness*)

Oh, God.

FATHER THEODOR

I've been a coward.

(*FATHER THEODOR falls to his knees. His jacket opens. There is blood on his chest.*)

SIMS

Oh, Jesus! Basil, please, get help!

(*BASIL exits. SIMS suddenly snaps into action. It is clear from the way he now cradles FATHER THEODOR and expertly applies pressure to his chest that SIMS has seen these kinds of injuries before during his war years.*)

SIMS

Lie down. Here.

FATHER THEODOR

I told him! I told him that he couldn't do this to you! I---

SIMS

Yes, yes. Don't talk.

FATHER THEODOR

I warned him.

SIMS

Yes—

SIMS

Stay quiet, now.

FATHER THEODOR

I tried to be—brave.

*(FATHER THEODOR loses consciousness).*

SIMS

Stay with me, Father. Young man, please... Please. Stay with me.

BLACKOUT