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JEAN COCTEAU

LES PARENTS TERRIBLES (INDISCRETIONS)

Translated by Jeremy Sams

Introduced by Simon Callow

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Introduction

by Simon Callow

Cocteau's life was the longest photocall of all time. Prancing, strutting, preening, posing as the shutters clicked and the bulbs popped, for over fifty years Jean Cocteau was never far from the centre of the public scene, yet somehow always at an angle to it, in it, but not of it. Sometimes a gate-crasher, at other times the stage-manager, now critic and now reporter, he is present but elsewhere, his eyes glaze vatically (or is it just the opium?) as he turns his face to the camera to participate in the sacred rite of photography. What was merely a paparazzo's snap becomes a mythic image.

These images are oddly penetrating while being hauntingly contradictory; and the same is true of his work in general, that catalogue exhausting merely to list: aphorisms, ballet, comedy, design, erotica, film, glass work – one can go twice round the alphabet and still not run out. Staggering and staggeringly diverse, his unceasing productivity suggests another paradox: that of the driven dilettante, the industrious butterfly. Every casual effect was the result of extraordinarily hard work, every pose calculated and perfected. And yet the overall impression is of spontaneity, of – in the highest sense – amateurism. His work is suffused with love: of language, of form, of love itself. 'Instead of adopting Rimbaud's gospel, The time of the assassins has come,' he wrote in his erotic novel *Le Livre Blanc*, 'young people would do better to remember the phrase Love must be reinvented. The world accepts dangerous experiments in the realm of art because it does not take art seriously; but it condemns them in life.'

Cocteau's life is everywhere in his work, which is essentially a form of extended autobiography, and yet the man, omnipresent though he made himself, is strangely elusive. The Emperor Hadrian's self-observation – that all his public life contained something private, and all his private life something public – is equally true of Cocteau. Where the one begins and the other ends is almost impossible to say. His childhood, to which he constantly referred in his work and in his utterances, provided him with the themes that he continued to work out till the day he died: his awed love of the theatre ('the red-and-gold sickness' as he described it), its womb-like mysteries inevitably caught up with memories of his mother as she set off to see a play ('her red velvet dress, her necklace like the chandeliers in the boxes, her plume like a spotlight'); his complex relationship to the cruel beauty of his schoolfriend Dargelos whose savage treatment of him, both

desired and feared, haunted his work to the end; and his poignant sense of innocence lost. Of all of these he made powerful myths.

His actual childhood, however, is something of a mystery, poorly documented and available to us only filtered through Cocteau's own mythomanic imagination. He was born in 1889 in a prosperous suburb of Paris (its Ascot: site of the fashionable racing track) to a family somewhat less prosperous than most of the neighbours. When he was nine, Cocteau's father shot himself for reasons which Cocteau never cared to explain beyond commenting that 'he would not have had to shoot himself for the same thing nowadays.' Was there a scandal, and if so was it sexual or financial? Was Cocteau himself involved? Nobody knows.

After the catastrophe, Cocteau and his sensible, elegant mother, already close, naturally grew closer and closer, until, at the age of fifteen, seeking to escape the emotional claustrophobia, he ran away from home, to Marseilles. There he lived, he claimed, for an entire year in the red-light district, gaining his sexual initiation with both sexes. This rite of passage completed, he returned home, an adult, continuing to live with his mother for many years. The great Oedipal themes – the absent father, perhaps destroyed by the son – and the overwhelming relationship with the mother infiltrate his work at every level, in innumerable variations, as they did his life. The most obvious pattern is the search for a son – a biological son, in two interesting cases in which Cocteau had proposed marriage; both women, no doubt wisely, rejected his proposal, the first having, to his bitter chagrin, aborted their child. For the rest, until the end of his life, he was rarely without a younger male companion: sons and lovers. All strikingly handsome, all were to a greater or lesser degree artistically gifted. Often Cocteau was the first person to recognise these gifts: he made it his business to identify, develop and promote their talents. Nurturing, facilitating, idealising them, he displayed almost maternal tenderness towards his son/lovers, helping them both psychologically and practically. Raymond Radiguet, Jean Desbordes, Marcel Khill, Jean Marais, and the last of them, Edouard Dermit; all owe their fulfilment to him. He saw in them what no one else had seen; he allowed them to become themselves. Interestingly, most of them were bisexual and some subsequently had children: the grand-children of Cocteau.

Les Parents Terribles was Cocteau's highly practical present to Jean Marais, the breathtaking beauty for whom the only possible phrase at that time of his life is god-like; certainly the only phrase that Cocteau could find. 'An Antinous sprung from the people,' he wrote of him, 'possessing all the characteristics of those hyperboreans mentioned in Greek mythology.' Cocteau met him, an untrained working-class lad with a troubled and unproductive childhood only just behind him, at auditions for a student

production of his unperformed play *Oedipe-Roi.* Immediately Cocteau wanted to cast him in the title role, but was reluctantly persuaded that this would upset the older and more experienced members of the company; instead he cast him as Chorus, dressing him in nothing but bandages. The sensation that this caused taught the shrewd Marais that his uncommonly fine, and quite unworked-on, physique was something that he had to strive against, which meant resisting to some extent his new admirer's touching pride in displaying it. Cocteau quickly grasped the point, too; he was always willing to learn from his protégés, each of whom had in different ways changed his life.

Cocteau's next play was the Arthurian romance *The Knights of the Round Table.* Unsurprisingly, he cast Marais as Galahad, and although Cocteau was unable to resist having him tear off his tunic at a crucial point to reveal his bare torso, the role was a serious acting challenge, one which Marais felt he had not brought off. The next year, Cocteau wrote a role specifically for him, based squarely on Marais' own personality. This is a young actor's dream: the role he could play better than anyone else alive – himself. It was not simply the role, however, that belonged to Marais: to some extent the play itself was drawn from his life.

Les Parents Terribles chronicles the attempts of a young man to escape the dominance of his mother, away from the magnetic pull of her womb-like world, half-lit, alluring, disordered, into the cool clean air of his girl-friend's sensible, organised life. Marais' relationship with his mother (whom he called Rosalie after a character in a play, just as Mik in *Les Parents Terribles* calls his mother Sophie after the Princesse of Cleves) was not dissimilar; nor, of course, was Cocteau's relationship with his. To that extent, the role is a double portrait; a charming romantic gesture from Cocteau to Marais.

The layers of allusion in the play hardly stop there, however: the central device of the plot hinges on a father/son rivalry which is drawn from Raymond Radiguet's life; the opening of Cocteau's play alludes frankly, almost as an *hommage*, to a play of Jean Desbordes, yet another lover. The names of the characters are knowingly chosen: Yvonne is the name of the mother in the play, but also that of the actress for whom the part was written, Yvonne de Bray; Madeleine, the girl-friend's name, was the name of Cocteau's first girl-friend, with whom he used to consort in his little bachelor pad, just like the one in which Mik consorts with his Madeleine in *Les Parents Terribles.* Finally, Georges, the oddly absent and then all-too present father, was the name of Cocteau's own father. In the words of Milorad in his perceptive essay on the play, we have here 'a Pirandellian game between the theatre and life.'

All this suggests the highly personal nature of the play, more personal even than Cocteau's many other *oeuvres à clef*. It amounts to a highly complex projection of many strands of his inner and outer lives; it is also a departure in his work which is at the same time a return. His theatre work had experimented and improvised endlessly with form: the surreal, dream-like *Orphée*, the speeded-up horror of his version of Sophocles' *Oedipus Rex*, the four radically different acts of his own version of the Oedipus story, *La Machine Infernale*, in which Jocasta passes from the boulevard of act one, to the dream play of act two, to the emotional intensities of act three, culminating with the stark, stripped-down force of the last. His *Knight of the Round Table* contained another daring innovation: a character who doesn't appear, but possesses other characters in turn.

His startling innovation in *Les Parents Terribles* was to play it absolutely straight. 'This time,' he wrote in the programme of the original production, 'I'm transporting you neither by Greek chariot, nor by aeroplane on the shoulders of Merlin nor in a little racing car, as in *Orphée*. Here instead is the Rolls-Royce of families, uncomfortable and ruinous . . . with this play, I'm resuming the tradition of boulevard theatre.' His aim, he claimed, was to rediscover the 'purple thread' of the theatre 'lost among the excesses of *staging*.' He added: 'I'm not blaming anyone: no one is more responsible for the excess than me.' His request on the title page of the play was a simple one: 'the set must be so solidly constructed that the doors can be constantly slammed.' He wanted to reach 'the large public . . . that mysterious mass;' he wanted to unite Marais and that public, but also he had a personal passion to evoke again the theatre of his youth. After all, the all-powerful plot of boulevard plays is not so very different from the gods' game when they trap Oedipus in the infernal machine of his destiny. 'This is where fate's just having fun with us,' says Leo in *Les Parents Terribles*. She means the plot, of course. Michael and Leo and Georges and Yvonne in *Les Parents Terribles* are trapped inexorably in the workings of the play's action, and the outcome is equally absurd and tragic.

Cocteau succeeded in all his ambitions: the play is a brilliant exercise in the manner of the *fin-de-siècle* boulevard; the commentary on human affairs that it offers is acute and terrible; and Marais had an enormous personal triumph, the audience recalling him to receive his standing ovation, Cocteau delightedly recorded, though he had returned to his dressing room and started to remove his costume. There was a lucrative run, terminated by the Conseil de Paris, which owned the theatre, denouncing the play for what it claimed to be its depiction of incestuous relationships; this of course only increased the play's appeal, and it ran on to capacity houses for another six months at another theatre.

Marais remained a central figure in Cocteau's life and work, though they both drifted off to other relationships. Cocteau continued to write boulevard theatre (including a one-act play for Edith Piaf) as well as more ambitious pieces on loftier themes (*Bacchus*, then *Renaud and Armide*, in rhyming couplets). His creative future lay more significantly in film, where, most often in collaboration with Marais, he created two or three of the most fascinating works of the French cinema. Although the period of his greatest artistic intensity had passed, he continued ceaselessly productive to the end. Among his last works were two he worked on simultaneously: the designs for an altarpiece emblazoned with symbols of the esoteric Rosicrucian order of which he was rumoured to be Grand Master, and an adaptation of the sleazy late fifties musical *The World of Suzy Wong*. The paradoxes and the contradictions never ceased till the day of his death, 11 October 1963, the same day as his great friend Piaf. He couldn't have planned it better.

Jean Cocteau, 1889-1963: a Chronology

1889 July 5: Clément Eugène-Jean-Maurice Cocteau born at Maisons-Laffitte.

1899 Cocteau's father commits suicide. The family goes to live with Mme Cocteau's father.

1900-07 Begins to frequent circus, theatres and concerts. Fails *baccalaureat* examination three times and gives up studies.

1908 Actor Edouard de Max organises a reading at the Théâtre Femina of poetry by the 18-year-old Jean Cocteau. His first published work appears in the magazine *Je sais tout.*

1909 Cocteau publishes his first collection of poems, *La Lampe d'Aladin*, at his own expense and founds the magazine *Schéhérazade* with Maurice Rostand and François Bernard. Meets impresario Serge Diaghilev.

1910 Cocteau's poems *Le Prince frivole* published. Meets Igor Stravinsky.

1911 Executes posters and drawings for Diaghilev's *Le Spectre de la Rose.*

1912 Nijinsky creates *Le Dieu bleu*, a ballet Cocteau had written in collaboration with Reynaldo Hahn.

1913 Works with Stravinsky on his ballet *David.*

1914-16 Excused from military service, serves as a volunteer ambulance corps-man at Reims, then in the trenches on the Belgian front. Meets the aviator Roland Garros with whom he makes several flights and in whose memory he later publishes *Le Cap de Bonne-Espérance.* Frequents Montmartre and Montparnasse where he meets Picasso, Braque, Derain, Juan Gris, Modigliani, Apollinaire, Max Jacob, Blaise Cendrars, Erik Satie, Kisling, and later Morand and Breton.

1917 Premiere of the ballet *Parade* (which Cocteau has conceived, with Picasso as designer, Satie as composer, Diaghilev as producer, and Massine as choreographer) provokes noisy demonstrations by factions in the audience. The first 'metaphor of the everyday' in ballet.

1918 Publication of Cocteau's *Le Coq et l'Arlequin*, a celebration of modern music including American jazz, leads to a quarrel with Stravinsky.

1919 Publishes *Ode à Picasso* and *Le Potomak*. Meets and falls in love with the 16-year-old Raymond Radiguet and encourages him to write.

1920 Premiere of Cocteau's 'spectacle concert' *Le Boeuf sur le toit*, music hy Darius Milhaud and decor by Raoul Dufy. With Radiguet, founds the review *Le Coq*.

1921 Premieres of *Le Gendarme incompris*, a musical farce by Cocteau and Radiguet, and the mime drama *Les Mariés de la Tour Eiffel*.

1922 The premiere of Cocteau's adaptation of Sophocles' *Antigone*, with Antonin Artaud as Tiresias, scenery by Picasso and music by Honegger, is disrupted by a group of Surrealists.

1923 Gives a lecture at the College de France, entitled 'Order Considered as Anarchy'. Publishes *Le Grand Ecart, Plain-chant,* and *Thomas l'Imposteur*. Raymond Radiguet dies of typhoid, aged 20.

1924 Cocteau becomes addicted to opium. His adaptation of *Romeo and Juliet* is staged, with Cocteau as Mercutio. Writes the scenario for the Ballets Russes' *Le Train bleu*. Publishes a volume of his drawings.

1925 An exhibition of his drawings and manuscripts opens in Brussels. Undergoes treatment for his addiction. Publishes *Cri écrit, L'Ange Heurtebise, Le Mystère de Jean l'Oiseleur, Prière mutilée.*

1926 Premiere of his play *Orphée*. Publishes *Maison de Sante* and *Le Rappel à l'Ordre*. An exhibition is held of his *Poésie plastique.*

1927 Premiere of the oratorio *Oedipus Rex*, on which he has collaborated with Stravinsky. Publishes *Opéra*. His *Le Pauvre Matelot*, with music by Milhaud, is performed.

1928 Publishes *Oedipe-Roi* and *Roméo et Juliette*. Undergoes further treatment for his addiction.

1929 *Les Enfants terribles, Une Entrevue sur la critique* are published and *La Voix humaine*, his one-act play for a single character, first performed.

1930 First performance of *Cantate*. Shoots his first film, *Le Sang d'un poète. Opium* is published.

1934 Premiere of *La Machine infernale*.

1937 A production of the play *Oedipe-Roi* with Jean Marais (whom Cocteau has discovered at an audition) as Oedipus. Cocteau arranges the come-back of American bantam-weight champion of the world, Al Brown. Premiere of *Les Chevaliers de la table ronde.*

1938 14 November: premiere of *Les Parents terribles* at the Théâtre des Ambassadeurs. The play is accused of immorality and is closed on 23 December by the Municipal Council of Paris which owns the theatre. It re-opens the following year at the Théâtres des Bouffes-Parisiens.

1940 Premiere of *Les Monstres sacrés.* Edith Piaf performs the monologue Cocteau has written for her, *Le Bel Indifférent.* He undergoes his last treatment for opium addiction. *La Fin du Potomak* published.

1941 Premiere of *La Machine à écrire*, which is violently attacked by critics. Writes *Renaud et Armide* for Jean Marais. A revival of *Les Parents terribles* opens in October, is closed by the Prefect of Police, and re-opens at the end of December. Designs sets and costumes for Feydeau's *La Main Passe.* Writes dialogue for the film *Le Baron fantôme*, directed by Serge de Poligny, and appears himself as the baron.

1945 Begins filming *La Belle et la bête*, with Jean Marais as the Beast.

1946 The ballet of *Le Jeune Homme et la mort.* Premiere of *L'Aigle à deux tetes.*

1947 Meets Edouard Dermit, whom he will 'adopt' as his son. *La Difficulté d'être* published.

1948 Films *Les Parents terribles.*

1949 Cocteau is decorated as a Chevalier of the Legion d'Honneur. His adaptation of Tennessee Williams' *Streetcar Named Desire* opens. *Lettre aux Americains* published.

1950 His film *Orphée* wins the International Critics Prize at the Venice Film Festival.

1951 Begins to edit a personal diary, *Le Passé Defini.* The first volume is published in 1983. Contributes commentaries for several films.

1952 Publishes *Le Chiffre sept, Gide vivant, Le Journal d'un inconnu.*

1953 Ballet *La Dame à la licorne* opens at Munich.

1956-59 Receives an honorary doctorate at Oxford University. Works on decorations for the chapel of Saint-Pierre at Villefranche-sur-mer, for the marriage hall at the Hôtel de Ville in Menton, and for the Chapel of Saint-Blaise-des-Simples at Milly-la-Forêt; makes lithographs and starts working in pottery; paints frescoes for the exhibition *Earth and the Cosmos*. Cocteau, visiting London in 1959 as a member of the chorus when Stravinsky conducts *Oedipus Rex*, decorates the London church Notre-Dame-de-France, Leicester Place, WC2.

1960 His film *Le Testament d'Orphée* shown in Paris. (Director François Truffaut had contributed the prize money he won for his film *The Four Hundred Blows* towards the making of it.)

1961 Promoted to Commander of the Legion d'Honneur.

1962 An exhibition of Cocteau's work opens in Tokyo. Begins work on the 'bastion' of Menton and the chapel of Notre-Dame-de-Jerusalem at Fréjus. Records a 'Message for the Year 2000'. Publishes *Cordon ombilical, Picasso 1919-61,* and *Requiem.*

1963 Writes an adaptation of *The World of Suzy Wong* with Raymond Gérôme. Suffers a heart attack in Paris and returns home to Milly-la-Forêt, where he is cared for by Jean Marais and Edouard Dermit. On October 11, a few hours after the death of Edith Piaf, Cocteau dies.

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LES PARENTS TERRIBLES

Characters

YVONNE

LEO

MADELEINE

GEORGE

MICHAEL

Les Parents Terribles was first performed in this translation in Britain on the Lyttelton stage of the Royal National Theatre on 21 April 1994. Press night was 5 May. The cast was as follows:

GEORGE	Alan Howard
LEONIE (LEO)	Frances de la Tour
YVONNE	Sheila Gish
MICHAEL	Jude Law
MADELEINE	Lynsey Baxter

Musicians David Berry, Steven Buckley and Michael Haslam
Directed by Sean Mathias
Designed by Stephen Brimson Lewis
Lighting by Mark Henderson
Music by Jason Carr
Front cloth designed by Ricardo Cinalli Company
Voice Work Jeannette Nelson

ACT ONE

Scene One

YVONNE*'s room. Considerable disorder. A bed, some chairs. Three doors off: to the bathroom, to the hall, and to* LEO*'s room. As the curtain rises* GEORGE *runs from the bathroom to* LEO*'s door, shouting, slamming doors . . .*

GEORGE. Leo! Leo! Quick, quick, come quickly . . . Where are you?

LEO (*off*). Has Michael turned up yet?

GEORGE. I think it's something to do with Michael . . . hurry up.

LEO (*opening her door, slipping on an elegant house coat*). What is? What's happened?

GEORGE. Yvonne's taken an overdose.

LEO (*incredulous*). What?

GEORGE. Her insulin . . . she must have overfilled the syringe.

YVONNE *is revealed in the doorway of the bathroom. She is wearing a towelling dressing-gown, scarcely able to stand, as pale as death.*

LEO. Yvonne . . . My God what have you done? (YVONNE *is unwilling to be helped.*) Speak to me. Say something.

YVONNE (*barely intelligible*). Sugar . . .

GEORGE. I'll phone the clinic . . .

LEO. Stay where you are, keep calm. Thank God I'm here.

GEORGE. Oh damn and blast, it's Sunday, there won't be a soul there . . .

LEO. You should know by now that you've got to eat something after your insulin, and if you don't eat you need sugar.

GEORGE. Oh God, yes, the sugar.

He goes into the bathroom and returns with a glass of water. LEO *takes it and tries to get* YVONNE *to drink.*

LEO. Come on make an effort. Don't go all floppy on me. You don't want to die do you; not without seeing Michael again?

YVONNE *sits up a bit and drinks.*

GEORGE. God, Leo, I'm such an ass. If it hadn't been for you she'd have died. I'd've just let her die . . . out of sheer stupidity.

LEO (*to* YVONNE). How are you feeling?

YVONNE. Better. It works straight away. Look, I'm terribly sorry, that was grotesque . . .

GEORGE. And the doctor told me so many times, 'Never use household sugar, there's all sorts of muck in it. Use cane sugar, then you know it's pure'. And we always keep the glass ready, with the sugar, with the pure sugar dissolved in it. Just in case. And I completely . . .

YVONNE. Don't be silly, it's my fault.

LEO. It absolutely is your fault. You've been behaving like a complete madwoman.

YVONNE (*smiling*). Well, perhaps I have been a tiny bit madder than usual.

GEORGE. You have, that's why I couldn't think straight.

YVONNE. Well, thank God Leo's still sane.That's something anyway, you know I wouldn't have let Michael find me like . . . that. I wouldn't have upset him for the world.

GEORGE. If only he were as considerate as you.

YVONNE (*sitting up a bit*). So thank you, Leo. I should tell you what happened. It was five o'clock, time for my jab, and I was thinking, good, that'll be something to do. And then I heard the lift so I rushed out to see if it was . . . To see who it was. Only it wasn't for us it was downstairs or somewhere. So I went back, into the bathroom and I suddenly felt awful . . . Because I'd forgotten my sugar, you see, and then by some miracle George came and found me.

GEORGE. It was a miracle. I just came to see if you were having a nap.

LEO. What's all this nonsense about miracles? You were just miles away as usual, beavering away, the man in the moon. Then you heard a clock strike five – so the moonman came down to earth and met his own wife in her own room. Which is hardly a miracle.

GEORGE. Well, alright then it was a happy coincidence.

YVONNE. No, it was a miracle, Georgy. If it weren't for you . . .

GEORGE. . . . If it weren't for your sister . . .

YVONNE. If it weren't for *both* of you I would have turned a silly fuss about nothing into a complete nightmare.

GEORGE. I'm sorry Yvonne, but it's a bit more than a fuss about nothing. Michael didn't come home last night, he slept somewhere else. We haven't heard a peep out of him, he could be anywhere. He knows you, he knows full well what a state you get into . . .

YVONNE. I don't care as long as I know he's all right. But no-one's in on a Sunday so how can we know? D'you think something awful's happened, and his friends haven't dared phone us up and tell us?

GEORGE. If something awful'd happened we'd've found out straight away. One always does. No really I think this is outrageous behaviour. *Un*believable!

YVONNE. But where d'you think he's got to?

LEO. Look Yvonne, you've had a shock, don't get worked up. George, don't get her worked up. Go back to your study – we'll call you if we need you.

YVONNE. Yes darling, go back to work . . .

GEORGE (*exiting*). I'm just doing some sums. But I keep on losing my place and having to start again.

Scene Two

YVONNE. Leo, where's the boy been sleeping. Doesn't he know he's driving me mad..? Why hasn't he called me..? It's not hard just to make a phone call.

LEO. Well, sometimes it is – if you have to lie and you're not a very good liar and if you're as clumsy and as transparent as Michael is . . .

YVONNE. But why would Mickey lie to me?

LEO. Well, two possibilities. Either he's too embarrassed to call or to come back. *Or* he's having such a peachy time wherever he is that he wouldn't dream of doing either. So . . . he has to be hiding something.

YVONNE. There's not much you can teach me about my own son. There's no question of him forgetting to ring. If he hasn't rung, it's because he must somehow be in mortal danger.

LEO. Don't be melodramatic. You can always telephone someone. He just doesn't want to, that's all.

YVONNE. You've been behaving oddly ever since this morning. As if you *knew* something.

LEO. I don't know anything. But I'm sure of something – which is a different matter.

YVONNE. Sure of what?

LEO. It's not worth telling you – you wouldn't believe me. You'd just say, but that's *un*believable. The only *un*believable thing being that the whole family's been using that ridiculous turn of phrase lately.

YVONNE. But it's one of Mickey's phrases.

LEO. I wonder where it comes from. It's peculiar . . .

YVONNE (*laughing*). What's so peculiar? You know us. We probably stole it . . . which wouldn't be strange behaviour for a bunch of rogues, thieves, vagabonds and madmen, would it? Living in a gypsy camp as you're constantly reminding us . . .

LEO. Now don't be silly, just because I once called you the raggle-taggle gypsies, and said you lived in a gypsy encampment. Which you do. And that you're all as mad as a bag of snakes. Which you are. Madder.

YVONNE. All right, we live in a gypsy camp, and all right we're mad. But whose fault's that?

LEO. Oh God, you're not going to wheel out Grandpa again, are you?

YVONNE. Yes. Why not Grandpa? Grandpa who used to collect semicolons. Who counted all the semicolons in Balzac. You remember, 'You may be surprised to hear there are 37,000 semicolons in *La Cousine Bette*'. Except he was always worrying that he had lost count and he'd start all over again. But in those days you didn't say mad, you said eccentric. Nowadays, with a head start and a following wind, pretty much everybody's mad.

LEO. Let's call you lot eccentrics, then. Obsessives at least, you'll admit to that.

YVONNE. You're a bit of an obsessive yourself . . .

LEO. Well, possibly . . . I'm certainly obsessive about order, like you are about disorder. Which is why uncle left his tiny fortune to me. To keep you all on the straight and narrow.

YVONNE. Leonie!

LEO. Now don't be angry. I don't mind supporting you all. On the contrary. I admire George more than anybody. It's a privilege to help him continue with his research.

YVONNE. I'm sorry, but I've never understood you of all people taking George's researches remotely seriously. I mean talk about eccentric – he defines the term. The underwater sub-machine gun, indeed. I'mean, frankly, at his age, it's ludicrous . . .

LEO. All right, maybe George is just an overgrown schoolboy. All he's ever read is comic books and a surfeit of Jules Verne. And maybe he is a bit of a dilettante – but at heart he's a proper serious inventor. And you should at least give him credit for that.

YVONNE. That business with the war office. It's only because the minister was at school with Georgy. And it's not as if they've actually placed an order yet . . . and as for the gun, you know what I think, that's just what the raggle taggle gypsies need. Their latest sideshow, 'George and his Amazing Gun. Shoots real bullets underwater, roll up, roll up'. And since I do nothing all day but play patience in my dressing gown, I could be Gypsy Esmerelda, fortune teller. And you could be . . . of course, the strong lady. And Mickey.. Mickey would be . . .

LEO. The Eighth Wonder of the World.

YVONNE. Now that's not fair.

LEO. There are two distinct tribes in this world, children, and grown-ups. I, alas, fall into the latter category . . . you . . . George . . . and Michael . . . you belong to the former. Children who will always be children, and as children do, commit the most appalling crimes, apparently thoughtlessly..

YVONNE. Shut up. Listen. (*Silence.*) No . . . I thought I heard a car. Mickey will have drunk some champagne – that's it, and he's not used to it. So he'll have stayed with a friend. Perhaps he's still got a hangover, he'll be crippled with embarrassment, poor lamb.

LEO. You're completely blind.

YVONNE. What?

LEO (*slowly*). Yvonne, Michael has been spending the night with a woman.

YVONNE. Michael?

LEO. Yes Michael.

YVONNE. You're out of your mind. Mickey's just a child, you said so yourself a minute ago . . .

LEO. You don't listen. I said that you and George and Michael were children, and therefore dangerous – as opposed to other people who are grown-ups, and therefore less dangerous, that's

all. But Michael isn't a child, not in the sense you mean. Not any more. He's a man. He's twenty-two.

YVONNE. Ah well!

LEO. You're fantastic! You sow the seeds, and you can't see what you're reaping.

YVONNE. What am I sowing? What am I reaping? What are you talking about?

LEO. You've sowed dust and dirty washing and old cigarette ends. And reaped . . . well, put it this way, Michael has been choking on the woodsmoke of your old gypsy camp and has had to get out to get some fresh air.

YVONNE. And you say he's gone to get some fresh air, what, with women? That he's seeing whores, is that it?

LEO. Now, there's a typical mother's reaction. You know why he hasn't called. So's not to hear 'Mickey darling, *do* come home, Papa wants a word' or some such nonsense. I'm the only one here, and – this is ridiculous – me, the tidy one, the obsessive one, I'm the only one who's not behaving like a dyed-in-the-wool bourgeois.

YVONNE. Pah!

LEO. All right, what's a bourgeois family . . . ?

YVONNE. Puh!

LEO. No I'm asking you. They're rich, orderly, with servants . . . and we're penniless, disorderly, and without servants. Or rather with no servants who've ever lasted more than four days. So I do all that (with the help of a daily, who won't do Sundays). But, even so, bourgeois to our grubby finger tips. The middle class gypsies. 'Cos, let's face it, we're not artists, we're not bohemians, not remotely. So there you have it.

YVONNE. I don't see what you're getting so steamed up about.

LEO. I'm not – I am very calm and very composed. It's just there are times when your gypsy camp gets too much to bear. Have you any idea why whole mountains of dirty washing pile up in Michael's room? Or why George might just as well do his sums in the dust on his desk-top? Or why the bath tub's been blocked for weeks now? Well, I'll tell you. It's because, just now and then, I get a kind of perverse delight in watching you getting stuck knee-deep in the quagmire of your own mess – but then my obsessive nature gets the better of me and I save you all from . . . I don't know what . . . collapse, chaos, cholera . . .

YVONNE. So you're saying our gypsy life has pushed Michael out. Forced him to find – something else . . . with a woman . . .

LEO. I am. And he's not the first.

YVONNE. You don't mean George?

LEO. On the contrary, I do mean George.

YVONNE. Are you saying George has been deceiving me?

LEO. Well, why not . . . you've been deceiving him!

YVONNE. Me . . . With whom? Since when?

LEO. With Michael, since the day he was born. On that day you ceased to have eyes for George and only had eyes for Michael. You were in love . . . and your love grew and grew and grew, just as he did. And George was left out. So it shouldn't surprise you that he sought affection elsewhere. That he occasionally decamped.

YVONNE. All right, suppose that any of this nonsense is true . . . and suppose George – who's never shown the remotest interest in anything other than his so-called inventions – has a mistress. And suppose Michael – who, excuse me, tells me *everything*, I'm his best friend, we're more like chums, – *did* spend the night with a woman, why haven't you told me 'til now?

LEO. Because I didn't think you were totally blind. I thought, no, Yvonne's putting a brave face on it, but she knows . . .

YVONNE (*she should find this difficult*). Well, as far as George is concerned . . . I can see why he might . . . well, you know. After twenty years a marriage changes shape. And after a while there's a sort of implicit understanding between husband and wife which makes certain things . . . certain overtures . . . very embarrassing . . . almost indecent . . . sometimes impossible.

LEO. You are a very strange woman, Yvonne.

YVONNE. Actually, I'm not . . . but I'm sure I seem strange to you, there's such a gulf between us. You've always been so beautiful, so *soignée*, elegant, brilliant – and I was born an utter mess, with snuffles and hay fever, my hair all over the place – faffing around like a wet hen in a high wind. And if I try and tart myself up I always look like . . . well, a tart.

LEO. You're forty-five for God's sake, and I'm forty-seven.

YVONNE. You've always looked younger than me.

LEO. Didn't stop George choosing you. He was engaged to me, and he chose you. Just like that . . .

YVONNE. You didn't seem to mind at the time. You practically pushed us together.

LEO. Well, that's my business. I respect George. I was afraid that

with me it was all here. (*Taps her head.*) With you it was all there and there. (*She indicates her heart and between her legs.*) Also I had no idea that you were so desperate to have a son – and children like you invariably get what they want – *nor* that you would be so besotted with your son that you'd ignore George completely.

YVONNE. He could have found consolation with you.

LEO. You wanted me to sleep with George to take him off your hands . . . Why would he want me? It's young flesh he's after.

YVONNE. Don't be absurd . . .

LEO. You don't believe me but I know I'm right. And there's a ghost in this house. The ghost of a very young girl – and she's everywhere . . .

YVONNE. No, come on, that's *un*believable.

LEO. Oh there's our new catch phrase again. It came in with George. He had it before Michael. Michael caught it off him, and you caught if off Michael. It's like the clap.

YVONNE. So you think Michael's deceiving me too . . . I mean, lying to me?

LEO. No, you were right first time. He's been deceiving you. Is deceiving you.

YVONNE. That's completely unthinkable. Completely impossible. I'm sorry but I can't conceive of it. It can't be possible.

LEO. You see you don't mind George deceiving you. That's fine. But with Michael, it's quite a different affair.

YVONNE. You're lying to me. Michael's always seen me as his best friend. He tells me everything . . .

LEO. No mother is a friend to her son. He soon spots the spy hiding behind the friend. And the jealous woman behind the spy.

YVONNE. Mickey doesn't think of me as a woman.

LEO. No, that's where you're wrong. You don't think of him as a man. He may still be a little boy to you but in Michael's eyes you've become a woman. And your mistake is not being a slightly more seductive one. He's looked at you, thought about it, and made up his mind. He's flown the coop. He's decamped too.

YVONNE. And where would Michael find enough time to pay suitable homage to this mysterious temptress?

LEO. Time's elastic. With a bit of skill one can always give the

impression of being somewhere, while in fact being somewhere else altogether.

YVONNE. Michael's working very hard.

LEO. Michael is not working very hard. Nor do you wish him to. In fact you wish him not to.

YVONNE. That's outrageous.

LEO. You've always prevented him from taking a job.

YVONNE. They were stupid jobs and would've meant him rubbing shoulders with, I don't know, movie people, the motor trade, awful people.

LEO. Did you encourage him to meet boys or girls of his own age? Did you ever talk about marriage?

YVONNE. What, his marriage?

LEO. Why not? Many young people get married at twenty-three, twenty-four . . .

YVONNE. Mickey's a baby.

LEO. What if he isn't anymore?

YVONNE. I'd be the first to find him a woman . . .

LEO. Yes, hand-picked. Some plain, gormless bit of fluff, who'd be no challenge to your supremacy.

YVONNE. That's not true. Michael's free. In as much as I can let him be free. He's a very special trusting boy. I wouldn't want to see him hurt.

LEO. I warn you, don't keep him under lock and key. He'll spot what you're up to – and hate you for it.

YVONNE. Oh, aren't we the psychologist all of a sudden. My God, there's someone at the door. (*We hear the bell.*) Go, Leo, go and see, quickly. I don't think I've got the strength.

LEO *exits.* YVONNE, *left alone, grabs the bag left by* LEO *on the bed, opens it, looks at the pocket mirror, powders her nose, pats her hair. She only just has time to throw the bag back on the bed before* GEORGE *and* LEO *enter.* GEORGE *turns on the light.*

Scene Three

YVONNE. Who turned the lights on?

GEORGE. I did. Sorry I'll turn them off . . . I just thought . . . It was so dark in here . . .

YVONNE. I like the darkness. Who was it?

LEO. Someone for the doctor upstairs, got the wrong floor. The Doctor's always out hunting on a Sunday.

Silence.

GEORGE. Any news?

YVONNE. No . . . the bell rang.

GEORGE. The specialist's off hunting too. You could bleed to death on a Sunday, no-one'd be any the wiser.

YVONNE. Anyway. I'm being stupid – he's got the spare keys.

GEORGE. I think it's disgraceful that the keys to this flat are knocking around any old where.

YVONNE. Who knows, he could have dropped them in the gutter somewhere.

GEORGE. And one day we'll wake up to find we've all been murdered in our beds. Then he'd be sorry. He'd better give them to me.

LEO. It's a pity I can't record your dialogue and play it back to you.

MICHAEL *enters while they're talking. He looks rather larky – like a boy who's just played a practical joke.*

YVONNE. What time is it?

MICHAEL. Six o'clock.

They all get up suddenly.

MICHAEL. It's not a ghost – it's only me.

GEORGE. Michael – you frightened your mother out of her wits. Look at her. How did you get home?

MICHAEL. By the front door. I took the stairs four at a time. Let me . . . get my breath back. Now Sophie bear, what's the matter?

GEORGE. You mother isn't at all well.

MICHAEL. Sophie – is it all my fault you're poorly?

Tries to kiss her. She rejects him.

YVONNE. Don't touch me.

MICHAEL. Well, all these long faces. You look as if I've committed some terrible crime.

GEORGE. You're not that far off, my boy. Your mother literally nearly died of worry.

MICHAEL. I'm sorry. I come back, *dying* to see you all, to see the gypsies again. To give Mama a kiss. And now I feel really awful . . .

GEORGE. And so you should. Where d'you think you've been?

MICHAEL. Let me get my breath back. I've so much to tell you all.

GEORGE. You didn't come back last night – you slept out – you didn't tell us when you'd be coming back.

MICHAEL. Look, Papa, I'm twenty-two . . . and it's the first time I've done it. Isn't it . . . ?

YVONNE. Where have you been? Your father asked you where you've been.

MICHAEL. Now, calm down children – Oh sorry, I mean, listen Papa, listen Aunt Leo – only don't spoil everything. What I wanted to say . . .

YVONNE. You wanted! *You* wanted! Really! Your *father* runs the household here. Anyway, he wants to speak to you. Go with him to his study.

LEO. Astonishing.

MICHAEL. No, Sophie, no. Firstly because Papa doesn't have a study, he has a dusty old box-room. And secondly, I want to talk to you, on your own, before I talk to anyone else.

GEORGE. My dear boy . . .

YVONNE. Perhaps if Michael finds it easier to talk to me you ought to leave us alone together.

LEO. Of course.

YVONNE. If Mickey's got something on his mind it's quite natural that he should want to tell his mother. George, you go back to work. Leo, you keep him company.

MICHAEL. Papa, Auntie, please don't be angry with me. I'll tell you everything, but all in good time. I'm bursting to tell you.

YVONNE. It's not serious, is it, Mickey?

MICHAEL. No. I mean yes.

YVONNE. George, you're unnerving the boy.

MICHAEL. Yes, you are, a bit.

LEO. Well good luck to you both.

GEORGE (*leaving*). I still want to talk to you, my boy. I'm not going to let you off that easily.

MICHAEL. Of course not.

GEORGE *closes the door.*

Scene Four

MICHAEL. Now Sophie. Gorgeous little Sophie. You're not angry with me are you? (*He gives her a puppyish hug.*)

YVONNE. Can't you kiss me without knocking me over..? Or messing up my hair..? Don't kiss me in my ear. I hate that Michael, *really.*

MICHAEL. Sorry. I didn't do it on purpose.

YVONNE. You are the giddy limit, really you are.

MICHAEL. But, Sophie – hello, what's this? You've got lipstick on.

YVONNE. I haven't.

MICHAEL. You jolly have. And powder. Excuse me, let's get to the bottom of this. Who's all this for, eh? Unbelievable. That's real ruby red deep gloss, kiss-me, kiss-me lipstick.

YVONNE. I was as pale as a corpse. I didn't want to frighten your father.

MICHAEL. No, don't wipe it off – it suits you.

YVONNE. Not that you ever look at me!

MICHAEL. Sophie – I do believe you're making a scene. And I don't need to be looking at you all the time, I know you by heart.

YVONNE. Exactly, you never look at me. You never even notice me.

MICHAEL. No, that's where you're wrong. I do notice you – out of the corner of my eye. And I notice that you're rather letting yourself go. Now, if you'd only allow me to do your hair and make you up . . .