

THE CHAIRS

A Tragic Farce

The Characters

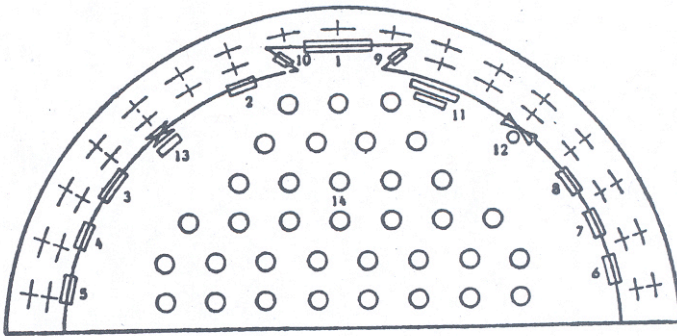
OLD MAN, aged 95

OLD WOMAN, aged 94

THE ORATOR, aged 45 to 50

And many other characters

SCENE: *Circular walls with a recess upstage center. A large, very sparsely furnished room. To the right, going upstage from the proscenium, three doors. Then a window with a stool in front of it; then another door. In the center of the back wall of the recess, a large double door, and two other doors facing each other and bracketing the main door: these last two doors, or at least one of them, are almost hidden from the audience. To the left, going upstage from the proscenium, there are three doors, a window with a stool in front of it, opposite the window on the right, then a blackboard and a dais. See the plan below. Downstage are two chairs, side by side. A gas lamp hangs from the ceiling.*



1: Main double door.

2, 3, 4, 5: Side doors on the right.

6, 7, 8: Side doors on the left.

9, 10: Two doors hidden in the recess.

11: Dais and blackboard.

12, 13: Windows, with stools, left and right.

14: Empty chairs.

XXX Corridor, in wings.

SCENE 1

[The curtain rises. Half-light. The Old man is up on the stool, leaning out the window on the left. The Old Woman lights the gas lamp. Green light. She goes over to the Old Man and takes him by the sleeve.]

OLD WOMAN: Come my darling, close the window. There's a bad smell from that stagnant water, and besides the mosquitoes are coming in.

OLD MAN: Leave me alone!

OLD WOMAN: Come, come, my darling, come sit down. You shouldn't lean out, you might fall into the water. You know what happened to Francois I. You must be careful.

OLD MAN: Still more examples from history! Sweetheart, I'm tired of French history. I want to see—the boats on the water making blots in the sunlight.

OLD WOMAN: You can't see them, there's no sunlight, it's nighttime, my darling.

OLD MAN: There are still shadows. *[He leans out very far.]*

OLD WOMAN *[pulling him in with all her strength]*: Oh! ... you're frightening me, my darling....come sit down, you won't be able to see them come, anyway. There's no use trying. It's dark...

[The Old Man reluctantly lets himself be pulled in.]

OLD MAN: *I wanted to see—you know how much I love to see the water.*

OLD WOMAN: How can you, my darling? ...It makes me dizzy. Ah! this house, this island, I can't get used to it. Water all around us ...water under the windows, stretching as far as the horizon.

SCENE 2

[The Old Woman drags the Old Man down and they move towards the two chairs downstage; the Old Man seats himself quite naturally on the lap of the Old Woman.]

OLD MAN: It's six o'clock in the evening...it is dark already. It wasn't like this before. Surely you remember, there was still daylight at nine o'clock in the evening, at ten o'clock, at midnight.

OLD WOMAN: Come to think of it, that's very true. What a remarkable memory you have!

OLD MAN: Things have certainly changed.

OLD WOMAN: Why is that, do you think?

OLD MAN: I don't know, Semiramis, sweetheart...Perhaps it's because the further one goes, the deeper one sinks. It's because the earth keeps turning around, around, around, around...

OLD WOMAN: Around, around, my little pet. *[Silence.]* Ah! yes, you've certainly a fine intellect. You are very gifted, my darling. You could have been head president, head king, or even head doctor, or head general, if you had wanted to, if only you'd had a little ambition in life...

OLD MAN: What good would that have done us? We'd not have lived any better. ...and besides, we have a position here. I am a general, in any case, of the house, since I am the general factotum.

OLD WOMAN *[caressing the Old Man as one caresses a child]*: My darling, my pet.

OLD MAN: I'm very bored.

OLD WOMAN: You were more cheerful when you were looking at the water...Let's amuse ourselves by making believe, the way you did the other evening.

OLD MAN: Make believe yourself, it's your turn.

OLD WOMAN: It's your turn.

OLD MAN: Your turn.

OLD WOMAN: Your turn

OLD MAN: Your turn.

OLD WOMAN: Your turn.

OLD MAN: Drink your tea, Semiramis.

[Of course there is no tea.] .

OLD WOMAN: Come on now, imitate the month of February.

OLD MAN: I don't like the months of the year.

OLD WOMAN: Those are the only ones we have, up till now. Come on, just to please me ...

OLD MAN: All right, here's the month of February. *[He scratches his head like Stan Laurel.]*

OLD WOMAN *[laughing, applauding]*: That's just right. Thank you, thank you, you're as cute as can be, my darling. *[She hugs him.]* Oh, you are so gifted, you could have been at least a head general, if you had wanted to ...

OLD MAN: I am a general, general factotum. *[Silence.]*

SCENE 3

OLD WOMAN: Tell me the story, you know *the* story: "Then at last we arrived..."

OLD MAN: Again? ...I'm sick of it ... "Then at last we arrived"? That again...you always ask for the same thing!" ...

Then at last we arrived..." But it's monotonous. .. For all of the seventy-five years that we've been married, every single evening, absolutely every blessed evening, you've made me tell the same story, you've made me imitate the same people, the same months. ..always the same ...let's talk about something else. ..

OLD WOMAN: My darling, I'm not tired of it ...it's your life, it fascinates me.

OLD MAN: You know it by heart.

OLD WOMAN: It's as if suddenly I'd forgotten everything. .. it's as though my mind were a clean slate every evening ... Yes, my darling, I do it on purpose, I take a dose, of salts ...I become new again, for you, my darling, every evening ...Come on, begin again, please.

OLD MAN: Well, if you want me to.

OLD WOMAN: Come on then, tell your story. ..It's also mine; what is yours is mine! Then at last we arrived. ..

OLD MAN: Then at last we arrived. ..my sweetheart. ..

OLD WOMAN: Then at last we arrived. ..my darling. ..

OLD MAN: Then at last we arrived at a big fence. We were soaked through, frozen to the bone, for hours, for days, for nights, for weeks. ..

OLD WOMAN: For months...

OLD MAN: ...In the rain. ..Our ears, our feet, our knees, our noses, our teeth were chattering. ..that was eighty

years ago. ..They wouldn't let us in ...they might at least have opened the gate of the garden. ..[*Silence.*]

OLD WOMAN: In the garden the grass was wet.

OLD MAN: There was a path which led to a little square and in the center, a village church. ..Where was this village? Do you recall?

OLD WOMAN: No, my darling, I've forgotten.

OLD MAN: How did we reach it? Where is the road? This place was called Paris, I think...

OLD WOMAN: Paris never existed, my little one.

OLD MAN: That city must have existed because it collapsed ...It was the city of light, but it has been extinguished, extinguished, for four hundred thousand years. ..Nothing remains of it today, except a song.

OLD WOMAN: A real song? That's odd. What song?

OLD MAN: A lullaby, an allegory: "Paris will always be Paris."

OLD WOMAN: And the way to it was through the garden? Was it far?

OLD MAN [*dreaming, lost*]: The song? ...the rain? ...

OLD WOMAN: You are very gifted. If you had had a little ambition in life you could have been head king, head journalist, head comedian, head general. ..All that's gone' down the drain, alas. ..down the old black drain. ..down the old drain, I tell you. [*Silence.*]

OLD MAN: Then at last we arrived. ..

OLD WOMAN: Ah! yes, go on ...tell me ...]

OLD MAN [*while the Old Woman begins to laugh softly, I senilely, then progressively in great bursts, the Old Man laughs, too, as he continues*]: Then at last we arrived, we laughed till we cried, the story was so idiotic. ..the idiot arrived full speed, bare-bellied, the idiot was pot-bellied.... he arrived with a trunk chock full of rice; the rice spilled out on the ground. ..the idiot on the ground too, belly to ground...then at last we laughed, we laughed, we laughed, the idiotic belly, bare with rice on the ground, the trunk, the story of sick from rice belly to ground, bare-bellied, all with rice, at last we laughed, the idiot at last arrived all bare, we laughed...

OLD WOMAN [*laughing*]: At last we laughed like idiots, at last arrived all bare, we laughed, the *trunk*, the trunk full of rice, the rice on the belly, on the ground...

OLD MAN AND OLD WOMAN *[laughing together]*: At last we laughed. Ah! ...laughed. ...arrived. ...arrived. ...Ah! ...Ah! ...rived. ...arrived. ...arrived. ...the idiotic bare belly. ...arrived with the rice. ...arrived with the rice. ...*[This is all we hear.]* At last we ...bare-bellied ...arrived. ...the trunk. ...*[Then the Old Man and Old Woman calm down little by little.]* We lau ...Ah! ... aughed ...Ah! ...arrived. ...Ah! ...arrived. ...aughed ...aughed.

OLD WOMAN: So that's the way it was, your wonderful Paris.

OLD MAN: Who could put it better?

OLD WOMAN: Oh! my darling, you are so really fine. Oh! so really, you know, so really, so really, you could have been

anything in life, a lot more than general factotum.

OLDMAN: Let's be modest. ...we should be content with the little. ...

SCENE 4

OLD WOMAN: Perhaps you've spoiled your career?

OLD MAN *[weeping suddenly]*: I've spoiled it? I've spilled it? Ah! where are you, Mamma, Mamma, where are you, Mamma? ...hi, hi, hi, I'm an orphan. *[He moans.]* ...an orphan, dworfan.

OLD WOMAN: Here I am, what are you afraid of?

OLD MAN: No, Semiramis, my sweetheart, you're not my mamma...orphan, dworfan, who will protect me?

OLD WOMAN: But I'm here, my darling!

OLD MAN: It's not the same thing. ...I want my mamma, na, you, you're not my mamma, you...

OLD WOMAN *[caressing him]*: You're breaking my heart, don't cry, my little one.

OLD MAN: Hi, hi, let me go, hi, hi, I'm all spoiled, I'm wet all over, my career is spilled, it's spoiled.

OLD WOMAN: Calm down.

OLD MAN *[sobbing his mouth wide open like a baby]*: I'm an orphan. ...dworfan.

OLD WOMAN *[trying to console him by cajoling him]*: My orphan, my darling, you're breaking my heart, my orphan.

[She rocks the Old Man who is sitting on her knees again.] .

OLD MAN *[sobbing]*: Hi, hi, hi! My mamma! Where is my mamma? I don't have a mamma anymore.

OLD WOMAN: I am your wife, I'm the one who is your mamma now.

OLD MAN *[giving in a little]*: That's not true, I'm an orphan, hi, hi.

OLD WOMAN *[still rocking him]*: My pet, my orphan, dworfan, worfan, morphan, orphan.

OLD MAN *[still sulky, but giving in more and more]*: No ... I don't wan't; I don't wa-a-a-ant.

OLD WOMAN *[crooning]*: Orphan-ly, orphan-ly, orphan-lo, orphan-loo.

OLD MAN: No-o-o ...No-o-o. .

OLD WOMAN *[same business]*: Li Ion lala, li lon la lay, orphanly," orphan-lay, relee-relay, orphan-li-relee-rela ...

OLD MAN: Hi, hi, hi, hi. *[He sniffles, calming down little by little.]* Where is she? My mamma.

OLD WOMAN: In heavenly paradise. ...she hears you, she sees you, among the flowers; don't cry anymore, you will only make me weep!

OLD MAN: That's not even true-ue ...she can't see me ... she can't hear me. I'm an orphan, on earth, you're not my

mamma...

OLD WOMAN *[he is almost calm]*: Now, come on, calm down, don't get so upset. ...you have great qualities, my little general. ...dry your tears; the guests are sure to come this evening and they mustn't see you this way. ...all is not lost, all is not spoiled, you'll tell them everything, you will explain, you have a message. ...you always say you are going to deliver it ...you must live, you have to struggle for your message...

SCENE 5

OLD MAN: I have a message, that's God's truth, I struggle, a mission, I have something to say, a message to communicate to humanity, to mankind...

OLD WOMAN: To mankind, my darling, your message! ...

OLD MAN: That's true, yes, it's true. ...

OLD WOMAN [*she wipes the Old Man's nose, dries his tears*]: That's it ...you're a man, a soldier, a general factotum. ...

OLD MAN [*he gets off the Old Woman's lap and walks with short, agitated steps*]: I'm not like other people, I have an ideal in life. I am perhaps gifted, as you say, I have some talent, but things aren't easy for me. I've served well in my capacity as general factotum, I've always been in command of the situation, honorably, that should be enough...

SCENE 6

OLD WOMAN: Not for you, you're not like other people, you are much greater, and moreover you'd have done much, better if you had got along with other people, like other people do. You've quarreled with all your friends, with all the directors, with all the generals, with your own brother.

OLD MAN: It's not my fault, Semiramis, you know very well what he said.

OLD WOMAN: What did he say?

OLD MAN: He said: "My friends, I've got a flea. I'm going to pay you a visit in the hope of leaving my flea with you."

OLD WOMAN: People say things like that, my dear. You shouldn't have paid any attention to it. But with Carel, why

were you so angry with him. Was it his fault too?

OLD MAN: You're going to make me angry, you're going to make me angry. Na. Of course it was his fault. He came one evening, he said: "I know just the word that fits you. I'm not going to say it, I'll just think it." And he laughed like a fool.

OLD WOMAN: But he had a warm heart, my darling. In this life, you've got to be less sensitive.

OLD MAN: I don't care for jokes like that.

OLD WOMAN: You could have been head admiral, head cabinet-maker, head orchestra conductor.

[*Long silence. They remain immobile for a time, completely rigid on their chairs.*]

SCENE 7

OLD MAN [*as in a dream*]: At the end of the garden there was. ..there was ...there was. ..there was. ..was

what, my dear?

OLD WOMAN: The city of Paris!

OLD MAN: At the end, at the end of the end of the city of Paris, there was, there was, was what?

OLD WOMAN: My darling, was what, my darling, was who?

OLD MAN: The place and the weather were beautiful. ...

OLD WOMAN: The weather was so beautiful, are you sure?

OLD MAN: I don't recall the place. ...

OLD WOMAN: Don't tax your mind then. ...

OLD MAN: It's too far away, I can no longer. ...recall it ... where was this?

OLD WOMAN: But what?

OLD MAN: What I ...what I ...where was this? And who?

OLD WOMAN: No matter where it is-I will follow you anywhere, I'll follow you, my darling.

OLD MAN: Ah! I have so much difficulty expressing myself. .. but I must tell it all.

OLD WOMAN: It's a sacred duty. You've no right to keep your message from the world. You must reveal it to mankind, they're waiting for it ...the universe waits only for you.

OLD MAN: Yes, yes, I will speak.

OLD WOMAN: Have you really decided? You must.

OLD MAN: Drink your tea.

OLD WOMAN: You could have been head orator, if you'd had more will power in life. ...I'm proud, I'm happy that you have at last decided to speak to every country, to Europe, to every continent!

OLD MAN: Unfortunately, I have so much difficulty expressing myself, it isn't easy for me.

OLD WOMAN: It's easy once you begin, like life and death. ...it's enough to have your mind made up. It's in speaking that ideas come to us, words, and then we, in our own words, we find perhaps everything, the city too, the garden, and then we are orphans no longer.

OLD MAN: It's not I who's going to speak, I've hired a professional orator, he'll speak in my name, you'll see.

SCENE 8

OLD WOMAN: Then, it really is for this evening? And have you invited everyone, all the characters, all the property owners, and all the intellectuals?

OLD MAN: Yes, all the owners and all the intellectuals. *[Silence.]*

OLD WOMAN: The janitors? the bishops? the chemists? the tinsmiths? the violinists? the delegates? the presidents? the police? the merchants? the buildings? the pen holders? the chromosomes?

OLD MAN: Yes, yes, and the post-office employees, the innkeepers, and the artists, everybody who is a little intellectual, a little proprietary!

OLD WOMAN: And the bankers?

OLD MAN: Yes, invited.

OLD WOMAN: The proletarians? the functionaries? the militaries? the revolutionaries? the reactionaries? the alienists and their alienated?

OLD MAN: Of course, all of them, all of them, all of them, since actually everyone is either intellectual or proprietary.

OLD WOMAN: Don't get upset, my darling, I don't mean to annoy you, you are so very absent-minded, like all great geniuses. This meeting is important, they must all be here this evening. Can you count on them? Have they promised?

OLDMAN: Drink your tea, Semiramis. *[Silence.]*

OLD WOMAN: The papacy, the papayas, and the papers?

OLD MAN: I've invited them. *[Silence.]* I'm going to communicate the message to them. ...All my life, I've felt that I was suffocating; and now, they will know all, thanks to you and to the Orator, you are the only ones who have understood me.

OLD WOMAN: I'm so proud of you. ...

OLD MAN: The meeting will take place in a few minutes.

OLD WOMAN: It's true then, they're going to come, this evening? You won't feel like crying any more, the intellectuals and the proprietors will take the place of papas and mammas? *[Silence.]* Couldn't you put off this meeting? It won't be too tiring for us?

[More violent agitation. For several moments the Old Man has been turning around the Old Woman with the short, hesitant steps of an old man or of a child. He takes a step or two towards one of the doors, then returns and walks around her again.]

OLD MAN: You really think this might tire us?

OLD WOMAN: You have a slight cold.

OLD MAN: How can I call it off?

OLD WOMAN: Invite them for another evening. You could telephone.

OLD MAN: No, my God, I can't do that, it's too late. They've probably already embarked!

OLD WOMAN: You should have been more careful.

SCENE 9

[We hear the sound of a boat gliding through the water.]

OLD MAN: I think someone is coming already. ...*[The gliding sound of a boat is heard more clearly.]*

...Yes, they're coming!...

[The Old Woman gets up also and walks with a hobble.]

OLD WOMAN: Perhaps it's the Orator.

OLD MAN: He won't come so soon. This must be somebody else. *[We hear the doorbell ring.]* Ah!

OLD WOMAN: Ah!

[Nervously, the Old Man and the Old Woman move towards the concealed door in the recess to the right. As they move upstage, they say:]

OLD MAN: Come on ...

OLD WOMAN: My hair must look a sight. ..wait a moment.. .

[She arranges her hair and her dress as she hobbles along, pulling up her thick red stockings.]

OLD MAN: You should have gotten ready before. ..you had plenty of time.

OLD WOMAN: I'm so badly dressed. ..I'm wearing an old gown and it's all rumped. ..

OLD MAN: All you had to do was to press it ...hurry up! you're making our guests wait.

[The Old Man, followed by the Old woman still grumbling, reaches the door in the recess, 'we don't see them for a moment; we hear them open the door, then close it again after having shown someone in.]

VOICE OF OLD MAN: Good evening, madam, won't you please come in. We're delighted to see you. This is my wife.

VOICE OF OLD WOMAN: Good evening, madam, I am very happy to make your acquaintance. Take care, don't ruin your hat. You might take out the hatpin, that will be more comfortable. Oh! no, no one will sit on it.

VOICE OF OLD MAN: Put your fur down there. Let me help you. No, nothing will happen to it.

VOICE OF OLD WOMAN: Oh! what a pretty suit. ..and such darling colors in your blouse. ..Won't you have some cookies. ..Oh, you're not fat at all ...no ...plump. .. Just leave your umbrella there.

VOICE OF OLD MAN: Follow me, please.

OLD MAN *[back view]*: I have only a modest position. ..

[The Old Man and Old Woman re-enter together, leaving space between them for their guest. She is invisible. The Old Man and Old Woman advance, downstage, facing the audience and speaking to the invisible Lady, who walks between them.]

OLD MAN *[to the invisible Lady]*: You've had good weather?

OLD WOMAN *[to the Lady]*: You're not too tired? ...Yes, a little.

OLDMAN *[to the Lady]*: At the edge of the water. ..

OLD WOMAN *[to the Lady]*: It's kind of you to say so.

OLD MAN *[to the Lady]*: Let me get you a chair.

[Old Man goes to the left, he exits by door No.6.]

OLD WOMAN *[to the Lady]*: Take this one, for the moment, please. *[She indicates one of the two chairs and seats herself on the other, to the right of the invisible Lady.]* It seems rather warm in here, doesn't it? *[She smiles at the Lady.]* What a charming fan you have! My husband. ..*[The Old Man re-enters through door No.7, carrying a chair.]* ... gave me one very like it, that must have been seventy-three years ago. ..and I still have it ...*[The Old Man places the chair to the left of the invisible Lady.]* ...it was for my birthday! ...

[The Old Man sits on the chair that he has just brought onstage, so that the invisible Lady is between the old couple. The Old Man turns his face towards the Lady, smiles at her, nods his head, softly rubs his hands together, with the air of following what she says. The Old Woman does the same business.]

OLD MAN: No, madam, life is never cheap.

OLD WOMAN *[to the Lady]*: You are so right. ...*[The Lady speaks.]* As you say, it is about time all that changed. ... *[Changing her tone:]* Perhaps my husband can do some- thing about it ...he's going to tell you about it.

OLD MAN *[to the Old Woman]*: Hush, hush, Semiramis, the time hasn't come to talk about that yet. *[To the Lady:]* Excuse me, madam, for having aroused your curiosity. *[The Lady reacts.]* Dear madam, don't insist. ...

[The Old Man and Old Woman smile. They even laugh. They appear to be very amused by the story the invisible Lady tells them. A pause, a moment of silence in the conversation. Their faces lose all expression.]

OLD MAN *[to the invisible Lady]*: Yes, you're quite right. ...

OLD WOMAN: Yes, yes, yes. ...Oh! surely not.

OLD MAN: Yes, yes, yes. Not at all.

OLD WOMAN: Yes?

OLD MAN: No!?

OLD WOMAN: It's certainly true.

OLD MAN *[laughing]*: It isn't possible.

OLD WOMAN *[laughing]*: Oh! well. *[To the Old Man:]* she's charming.

OLD MAN *[to the Old Woman]*: Madam has made a conquest. *[To the invisible Lady:]* my congratulations! ...

OLD WOMAN *[to the invisible Lady]*: You're not like the young people today. ...

OLD MAN *[bending over painfully in order to recover an invisible object that the invisible Lady has dropped]*: Let me ...don't disturb yourself. ...I'll get it ...Oh! you're quicker than I ...*[He straightens up again.]*

OLD WOMAN *[to the Old Man]*: She's younger than you!

OLD MAN *[to the invisible Lady]*: Old age is a heavy burden. I can only wish you an eternal youth.

OLD WOMAN *[to the invisible Lady]*: He's sincere, he speaks from the heart. *[To the Old Man:]* My darling!

[Several moments of silence. The Old Man and Old Woman, heads turned in profile, look at the invisible Lady, smiling politely; they then turn their heads towards the audience, then look again at the invisible Lady, answering her smile with their smiles, and her questions with their replies;]

OLD WOMAN: It's very kind of you to take such an interest in us.

OLD MAN: We live a retired life.

OLD WOMAN: My husband's not really misanthropic, he just loves solitude.

OLD MAN: We have the radio, I get in some fishing, and then there's fairly regular boat service.

OLD WOMAN: On Sundays there are two boats in the morning, one in the evening, not to mention privately chartered trips.

OLD MAN *[to the invisible Lady]*: When the weather's clear, there is a moon.

OLD WOMAN *[to the invisible Lady]*: He's always concerned with his duties as general factotum.

...they keep him busy ...On the other hand, at his age, he might very well take it easy.

OLD MAN *[to the invisible Lady]*: I'll have plenty of time to take it easy in my grave.

OLD WOMAN *[to the Old Man]*: Don't say that, my little darling. ...*[To the invisible Lady:]* Our family, what's left of it, my husband's friends, still came to see us, from time to time, ten years ago. ...

OLD MAN *[to the invisible Lady]*: In the winter, a good book, beside the radiator, and the memories of a lifetime.

OLD WOMAN *[to the invisible Lady]*: A modest life but a full one...he devotes two hours every day to work on his message.

SCENE 10

[The doorbell rings. After a short pause, we hear the noise of a boat leaving.]

OLD WOMAN *[to the Old Man.:* Someone has come. Go quickly.

OLD MAN *[to the invisible Lady]*: Please excuse me, madam. Just a moment! *[To the Old Woman:]* Hurry and bring some chairs!

[Loud ringing of the doorbell.]

OLD MAN *[hastening, all bent over, towards door No.2 to the right, while the Old Woman goes towards the concealed door on the left, hurrying with difficulty, hobbling along]*: It must be someone important. *[He hurries, opens door No. 2, and the invisible Colonel enters. Perhaps it would be useful for us to hear discreetly several trumpet notes, several phrases, like "Hail the Chief." When he opens the door and sees the invisible Colonel, the Old Man stiffens into a respectful position of attention.]* Ah! ...Colonel! *[He lifts his hand vaguely towards his forehead, so as to roughly sketch a salute.]* Good evening, my dear Colonel. ..This is a very great honor for me ...I ...I ...I was not expecting it ...although. ..indeed. ..in short, I am most proud to welcome you, a hero of your eminence, into my humble dwelling. *[He presses the invisible hand that the invisible Colonel gives him, bending forward ceremoniously, then straightening up again.]* Without false modesty, nevertheless, I permit myself to confess to you that I do not feel unworthy of the honor of your visit! Proud, yes ...unworthy, no!..

[The Old Woman appears with a chair, entering from the right.]

OLD WOMAN: Oh! What a handsome uniform! What beautiful medals! Who is it, my darling?

OLD MAN *[to the Old Woman]*: Can't you see that it's the Colonel?

OLD WOMAN *[to the Old Man]*: Ah!

OLD MAN *[to the Old Woman]*: Count his stripes! *[To the Colonel:]* This is my wife, Semiramis. *[To the Old Woman:]* Come here so that I can introduce you to the Colonel. *[The Old Woman approaches, dragging the chair by one hand, and makes a curtsy, without letting go of the chair. To the Colonel:]* My wife. *[To the Old Woman:]* The Colonel.

OLD WOMAN: How do you do, Colonel. Welcome. You're an old comrade of my husband's, he's a general...

OLD MAN *[annoyed]*: factotum, factotum. .. *[The invisible Colonel kisses the hand of the Old Woman. This is apparent from the gesture she makes as she raises her hand toward his lips. Overcome with emotion, the Old Woman lets go of the chair.]*

OLD WOMAN: Oh! He's most polite. ..you can see that he's really superior, a superior being! ...*[She takes hold of the chair again. To the Colonel:]* This chair is for you...

OLD MAN *[to the invisible Colonel]*: This way, if you please ...*[They move downstage, the Old Woman dragging the chair. To the Colonel:]* Yes, one guest has come already. We're expecting a great many more people! ...

[The Old Woman places the chair to the right.]

SCENE 11

OLD WOMAN *[to the Colonel]*: Sit here, please. *[The, Old Man introduces the two invisible guests to each other.]*

OLD MAN: A young lady we know...

OLD WOMAN: A very dear friend...

OLD MAN *[same business]*: The Colonel. ...a famous soldier.

OLD WOMAN *[indicating the chair she has just brought in to the Colonel]*: Do take this chair. ..

OLD MAN *[to the Old Woman]*: No, no, can't you see that the Colonel wishes to sit beside the Lady! ...

[The Colonel seats himself invisibly on the third chair from the left, the invisible Lady is supposedly sitting on the second chair; seated next to each other they engage in an inaudible conversation; the Old Woman and Old Man continue to stand behind their chairs, on both sides of their invisible guests; the Old Man to the left of the Lady, the Old Woman to the right of the Colonel.]

OLD WOMAN *[listening to the conversation of the two guests]*: Oh! Oh! That's going too far.

OLD MAN *[same business]*: Perhaps. *[The Old Man and the Old Woman make signs to each other over the heads of their guests, while they follow the inaudible conversation which takes a turn that seems to displease them. Abruptly:]* Yes, Colonel, they are not here yet, but they'll be here. And the Orator will speak in my behalf, he will explain the meaning of my message. ..Take care, Colonel, this Lady's husband may arrive at any moment.

OLD WOMAN *[to the Old Man]*: Who is this gentleman?

OLD MAN *[to the Old Woman]*: I've told you, it's the Colonel. *[Some embarrassing things take place, invisibly.]*

OLD WOMAN *[to the Old Man]*: I knew it. I knew it.

OLD MAN: Then why are you asking?

OLD WOMAN: For my information. Colonel, no cigarette butts on the floor!

OLD MAN *[to Colonel]*: Colonel, Colonel, it's slipped my mind—in the last war did you win or lose?

OLD WOMAN *[to the invisible Lady]*: But my dear, don't let it happen!

OLD MAN: Look at me, look at me, do I look like a bad soldier? One time, Colonel, under fire...

OLD WOMAN: He's going too far! It's embarrassing! *[She seizes the invisible sleeve of the Colonel.]* Listen to him! My darling, why don't you stop him!

OLD MAN *[continuing quickly]*: And all on my own, I killed 209 of them; we called them that because they jumped so high to escape, however there weren't so many of them as there were flies; of course it is less amusing, Colonel, but thanks to my strength of character, I have. ..Oh! no, I must, please.

OLD WOMAN *[to Colonel]*: My husband never lies; it may be true that we are old, nevertheless we're respectable.

OLD MAN *[violently, to the Colonel]*: A hero must be a gentleman too, if he hopes to be a complete hero!

OLD WOMAN *[to the Colonel]*: I've known you for many years, but I'd never have believed you were capable of this. *[To the Lady, while we hear the sound of boats:]* I'd never have believed him capable of this. We have our dignity, our self-respect.

OLD, MAN *[in a quavering voice]*: I'm still capable of bearing arms. *[Doorbell rings.]* Excuse me, I must go to the door. *[He stumbles and knocks over the chair of the invisible Lady.]* Oh! pardon.

OLD WOMAN *[rushing forward]*: You didn't hurt yourself?

[The Old Man and Old Woman help the invisible Lady onto her feet.] You've got all dirty, there's some dust. *[She helps brush the Lady. The doorbell rings again.]*

SCENE 12

OLD MAN: Forgive me, forgive me. *[To the Old Woman:]* Go bring a chair.

OLD WOMAN *[to the two invisible guests]*: Excuse me for a moment.

[While the Old Man goes to open door No.3, the Old Woman exits through door No.5 to look for a chair, and she re- enters by door No.8.]

OLD MAN *[moving towards the door]*: He was trying to get my goat. I'm almost angry. *[He opens the door.]* Oh! madam, you're here! I can scarcely believe my eyes, and yet, nevertheless. ..I didn't really dare to hope. ..really it's. ..Oh! madam, madam. ..I have thought about you, all my life, all my life, madam, they always called you La Belle. ..it's your husband. ..someone told me, certainly. ..you haven't changed a bit. ..Oh! yes, yes, your nose *has* grown longer, maybe it's a little swollen

I didn't notice it when I first saw you, but I see it now. ..a lot longer. ..ah! how unfortunate! You certainly didn't do it on purpose. ..how did it happen? ...little by little. ..excuse me, sir and dear friend,

you'll permit me to call you "dear friend," I knew your wife long before you...she was the same, but with a completely different nose. ..I congratulate you, sir, you seem to love each other very much. [*The Old Woman re-enters through door No. 8 with a chair.*] Semiramis, two guests have arrived, we need one more chair. ..[*The Old Woman puts the chair behind the four others, then exits by door No.8 and re-enters by door No.5, after a few moments, with another chair that she places beside the one she has just brought in. By this time, the Old Man and the two guests have moved near the Old Woman.*] Come this way, please, more guests have arrived. I'm going to introduce you...now then, madam. ..Oh! Belle, Belle, Miss Belle, that's what they used to call you. ..now you're all bent over. .. Oh! sir, she is still Belle to me, even so; under her glasses, she still has pretty eyes; her hair is white, but under the white: one can see brown, and blue, I'm sure of that. .. come nearer, nearer. ..what is this, sir, a gift, for my wife? [*To the Old Woman, who has just come on with the chair:*] Semiramis, this is Belle, you know, Belle. ..[*To the Colonel and the invisible Lady:*] This is Miss, pardon, Mrs. Belle, don't smile. ..and her husband. ..[*To the Old Woman:*] A childhood friend, I've often spoken of her to you. ..and her husband. [*Again to the Colonel and to the invisible Lady:*] And her husband...

OLD WOMAN [*making a little curtsey*]: He certainly makes good introductions. He has fine manners. Good evening, madam, good evening, sir. [*She indicates the two first guests to the newly arrived couple:*] Our friends, yes. ..

OLD MAN [*to the Old Woman*]: He's brought you a present.

[*The Old Woman takes the present.*]

OLD WOMAN: Is it a flower, sir? or a cradle? a pear tree? or a crow?

OLD MAN [*to the Old Woman*]: No, no, can't you see that it's a painting?

OLD WOMAN: Oh! how pretty! Thank you, sir ...[*To the invisible Lady:*] Would you like to see it, dear friend?

OLD MAN [*to the invisible Colonel*]: Would you like to see it? OLD WOMAN [*to Belle's husband*]: Doctor, Doctor, I feel

squeamish, I have hot flashes, I feel sick, I've aches and pains, I haven't any feeling in my feet, I've caught cold in my eyes, I've a cold in my fingers, I'm suffering from liver trouble, Doctor, Doctor! ...

OLD MAN [*to the Old Woman*]: This gentleman is not a doctor, he's a photo-engraver.

OLD WOMAN [*to the first invisible Lady*]: If you've finished looking at it, you might hang it up. [*To the Old Man:*] That doesn't matter, he's charming even so, he's dazzling. [*To the Photo-engraver:*]

Without meaning to flatter you. ..

[*The Old Man and the Old Woman now move behind the chairs, close to each other, almost touching, but back to back; they talk: the Old Man to Belle, the Old Woman to the Photo-engraver; from time to time their replies, as shown by the way they turn their heads, are addressed to one or the other of the two first guests.*]

SCENE 13

OLD MAN [*to Belle*]: I am very touched. ..You're still the same, in spite of everything. ..I've loved you, a hundred years ago. ..But there's been such a change. ..No, you haven't changed a bit. ..I loved you, I love you. ..

OLD WOMAN [*to the Photo-engraver*]: Oh! Sir, sir, sir ...

OLD MAN [*to the Colonel*]: I'm in complete agreement with you on that point.

OLD WOMAN [*to the Photo-engraver*]: Oh! certainly, sir, certainly, sir, certainly. ..[*To the first Lady:*] Thanks for hanging it up ...Forgive me if I've inconvenienced you.

[*The light grows stronger. It should grow stronger and stronger as the invisible guests continue to arrive.*]

OLD MAN [*almost whimpering to Belle*]: Where are the snows of yester year?

OLD WOMAN [*to the Photo-engraver*]: Oh! Sir, sir, sir. .. Oh! sir. ..

OLD MAN [*pointing out the first lady to Belle*]: She's a young friend. ..she's very sweet. ..

OLD WOMAN [*pointing the Colonel out to the Photo-engraver*]: Yes, he's a mounted staff colonel. ...a comrade of my husband. ...a subaltern, my husband's a general. ...

OLD MAN [*to Belle*]: Your ears were not always so pointed! ...My Belle, do you remember?

OLD WOMAN [*to the Photo-engraver, simpering grotesquely; she develops this manner more and more in this scene; she shows her thick red stockings, raises her many petticoats, shows an underskirt full of holes, exposes her old breast; then, her hands on her hips, throws her head back, makes little erotic cries, projects her pelvis, her legs spread apart; she laughs like an old prostitute; this business, entirely different from her manner heretofore as well as from that she will have subsequently, and which must reveal the hidden personality of the Old Woman, ceases abruptly*]: So you think I'm too old for that, do you?

OLD MAN [*to Belle, very romantically*]: When we were young, the moon was a living star, Ah! yes, yes, if only we had dared, but we were only children. Wouldn't you like to recapture those bygone days. ...is it still possible? Is it still possible? Ah! no, no, it is no longer possible. Those days have flown away as fast as a train. Time has left the marks of his wheels on our skin. Do 'you believe surgeons can perform miracles? [*To the Colonel:*] I am a soldier, and you too, we soldiers are always young, the generals are like gods. ...*[To Belle:]* It ought to be that way. ... Alas! Alas! We have lost everything. We could have been so happy, I'm sure of it, we could have been, we could have been; perhaps the flowers are budding again beneath the snow! ...

OLD WOMAN [*to Photo-engraver*]: Flatterer! Rascal! Ah! Ah! I look younger than my years? You're a little savage! You're exciting.

OLD MAN [*to Belle*]: Will you be my Isolde and let me be your Tristan? Beauty is more than skin deep, it's in the heart. ...Do you understand? We could have had the pleasure of sharing, joy, beauty, eternity. ...an eternity ...Why didn't we dare? We weren't brave enough. ... Everything is lost, lost, lost.

OLD WOMAN [*to Photo-engraver*]: Oh no, Oh! no, Oh! la la, you give me the shivers. You too, are you ticklish? To tickle or be tickled? I'm a little embarrassed. ...*[She laughs.]* Do you like my petticoat? Or do you like this skirt better?

OLD MAN [*to Belle*]: A general factotum has a poor life!

OLD WOMAN [*turning her head towards the first invisible Lady*]: In order to make crepes de Chine? A leaf of beef, an hour of flour, a little gastric sugar. [*To the Photo-engraver:*] You've got clever fingers, ah ...all the sa-a-a-me! ...Oh-oh-oh-oh.

OLD MAN [*to Belle*]: My worthy helpmeet, Semiramis, has taken the place of my mother. [*He turns towards the Colonel:*] Colonel, as I've often observed to you, one must take the truth as one finds it. [*He turns back towards Belle.*]

OLD WOMAN [*to Photo-engraver*]: Do you really really believe that one could have children at any age? Any age children?

OLD MAN [*to Belle*]: It's this alone that has saved me: the inner life, peace of mind, austerity, my scientific investigations, philosophy, my message. ...

OLD WOMAN [*to Photo-engraver*]: I've never yet betrayed my husband, the general. ...not so hard, you're going to make me fall. ...I'm only his poor mamma! [*She sobs.*] A great, great [*She pushes him back.*], great.. ...mamma. My conscience causes these tears to flow. For me the branch of the apple tree is broken. Try to find somebody else..I no longer want to gather rosebuds. ...

OLD MAN [*to Belle*]: ...All the preoccupations of a superior order...

[The Old Man and Old Woman lead Belle and the Photo-engraver up alongside the two other invisible guests, and seat them.]

SCENE 14

OLD MAN AND OLD WOMAN *[to the Photo-engraver and Belle]*: Sit down, please sit down.
[The Old Man and Old Woman sit down too, he to the left, she to the right, with the four empty chairs between them. A long mute scene, punctuated at intervals with "no," "yes," "yes." The Old Man and Old Woman listen to the conversation of the invisible guests.]

OLD WOMAN *[to the Photo-engraver]*: We had one son. .. of course, he's still alive. ..he's gone away. ..it's a common

Story...or, rather, unusual...he abandoned his parents...he had a heart of gold...that was a long time ago. ..We loved him so much...he slammed the door...My husband and I tried to hold him back with all our might...he was seven years old, the age of reason, I called after him: "My son, my child, my son, my child." ...He didn't even look back. ..

OLD MAN: Alas, no ...no, we've never had a child. ..I'd hoped for a son. ..Semiramis, too. ..we did everything ...and my poor Semiramis is so maternal, too. Perhaps it was better that way. ..As for me I was an ungrateful son myself. ..Ah! ...grief, regret, remorse, that's all we have. ..that's all we have left. ..

OLD WOMAN: He said to me: "You kill birds! Why do you kill birds?" ...But we don't kill birds...we've never harmed so much as a fly ...His eyes were full of big tears. He wouldn't let us dry them. He wouldn't let me come near him. He said: "Yes, you kill all the birds, all the birds."...He showed us his little fists ..."You're lying, you've betrayed me! The streets are full of dead birds, of dying baby birds." It's the song of the birds! ..."No, it's their death rattle. The sky is red with blood." ...No, my child, it's blue. He cried again: "You've betrayed me, I adored you, I believed you to be good. ..the streets are full of dead birds, you've torn out their eyes. ..Papa, mamma, you're wicked! ...I refuse to stay with you." ...I threw myself at his feet. ..His father was weeping. We couldn't hold him back. As he went we could still hear him calling: "It's you who are responsible" ...What does that mean, "responsible"?

OLD MAN: I let my mother die all alone in a ditch. She called after me, moaning feebly: "My little child, my beloved son, don't leave me to die all alone...Stay with me. I don't have much time left." Don't worry, Mamma, I told her, I'll be back in a moment. ..I was in a hurry. ..I was going to the ball, to dance. I will be back in a minute. But when I returned, she was already dead, and they had buried her deep. ..I broke open the grave, I searched for her...I couldn't find her. ..I know, I know, sons, always, abandon their mothers, and they more or less kill their fathers. ..Life is like that. ..but I, I suffer from it ...and the others, they don't. ..

OLD WOMAN: He cried: "Papa, Mamma, I'll never set eyes on you again."

OLD MAN: I suffer from it, yes, the others don't. ..

OLD WOMAN: Don't speak of him to my husband. He loved his parents so much. He never left them for a single moment.

He cared for them, cuddled them. ..And they died in his arms, saying to him: "You have been a perfect son. God will be good to you."

OLD MAN: I can still see her stretched out in the ditch, she was holding lily of the valley in her hand, she cried: "Don't

forget me, "don't forget me" ...her eyes were full of big tears, and she called me by my baby name: "Little Chick," she said, "Little Chick, don't leave me here all alone."

OLD WOMAN *[to the Photo-engraver]*: He has never written to us. From time to time, a friend tells us that he's been seen here or there, that he is well, that he is a good husband...

OLD MAN *[to Belle]*: When I got back, she had been buried a long time. *[To the first invisible Lady:]* Oh, yes. Oh! yes, madam, we have a movie theatre in the house, a restaurant, bathrooms...

OLD WOMAN *[to the Colonel]*: Yes, Colonel, it is because he...

OLD MAN: Basically that's it.

[Desultory conversation, getting bogged down.]

OLD WOMAN: *If only!*

OLD MAN: Thus, I've not. ..I, it ...certainly...

OLD WOMAN [*dislocated dialogue, exhaustion*]: All in all.

OLD MAN: To ours and to theirs.

OLD WOMAN: So that.

OLD MAN: From me to him.

OLD WOMAN: Him, or her?

OLD MAN: Them.

OLD WOMAN: Curl-papers... After all.

OLD MAN: It's not that.

OLD WOMAN: Why?

OLD MAN: Yes.

OLD WOMAN: I.

OLD MAN: All in all.

OLD WOMAN: All in all.

OLD MAN [*to the first invisible Lady*]: What was that, madam? [*A long silence, the Old Man and Old Woman remain rigid on their chairs. Then the doorbell rings.*]

SCENE 15

OLD MAN [*with increasing nervousness*]: Someone has come. People. Still more people.

OLD WOMAN: I thought I heard some boats.

OLD MAN: I'll go to the door. Go bring some chairs. Excuse me, gentlemen, ladies. [*He goes towards door No.7.*]

OLD WOMAN [*to the invisible guests who have already arrived*]: Get up for a moment, please. The Orator will be here soon. We must ready the room for the meeting. [*The Old Woman arranges the chairs, turning their backs towards the audience.*] Lend me a hand, please. Thanks.

OLD MAN [*opening door No.7*]: Good evening, ladies, good evening, gentlemen. Please come in. [*The three or four invisible persons who have arrived are very tall, and the Old Man has to stand on his toes in order to shake hands with them. The Old Woman, after placing the chairs as indicated above, goes over to the Old Man.*]

OLD MAN [*making introductions*]: My wife. ..Mr. ... Mrs... my wife...Mr... Mrs... my wife...

OLD WOMAN: Who are all these people, my darling?

OLD MAN [*to Old Woman*]: Go find some chairs, dear. OLD WOMAN: I can't do everything! ... [*She exits, grumbling, by door No.6 and re-enters by door No.7, while the Old Man, with the newly arrived guests, moves downstage.*]

OLD MAN: Don't drop your movie camera. [*More introductions.*] The Colonel. ..the Lady. ..Mrs. Belle. ..the Photo-engraver. ..These are the newspaper men, they have come to hear the Orator too, who should be here any minute now. ..Don't be impatient. ..You'll not be bored. ..all together now. ..[*The Old Woman re-enters through door No.7 with two chairs.*] Come along, bring the chairs more quickly. ..we're still short one.

[*The Old Woman goes to find another chair, still grumbling, , exiting by door No.3, and re-entering by door No.8.*]

OLD WOMAN: All right, and so ...I'm doing as well as I can....I'm not a machine, you know. ..Who are all these people? [*She exits.*]

OLD MAN: Sit down, sit down, the ladies with the ladies, and the gentlemen with the gentlemen, or vice versa, if

you prefer. ..We don't have any more nice chairs. .. we have to make do with what we have. ..I'm sorry. .. take the one in the middle.. ..does anyone need a fountain pen? Telephone Maillot, you'll get Monique

...Claude is an angel. I don't have a radio. ..I take all the newspapers ... that depends on a number of things; I manage these buildings, but I have no help. ..we have to economize ...no interviews, please, for the moment. ..later, we'll see. ..you'll soon have a place to sit. ..what can she be doing? [*The Old Woman enters by door No.8 with a chair.*] Faster, Semiramis. . .

OLD WOMAN: I'm doing my best. ..Who are all these people?

OLD MAN: I'll explain it all to you later.

OLD WOMAN: And that woman? That woman, my darling?

OLD MAN: Don't get upset. ..[*To the Colonel:*] Colonel,

journalism is a profession too, like a fighting man's. .. [*To the Old Woman:*] Take care of the ladies, my dear ...

[*The doorbell rings. The Old Man hurries towards door No.8.*] Wait a moment. ..[*To the Old Woman:*] Bring chairs!

OLD WOMAN: Gentlemen, ladies, excuse me ... [*She exits by door No.3, re-entering by door No.2, the Old Man goes to open concealed door No.9, and disappears at the moment the Old Woman re-enters by door No.2.*]

SCENE 16

OLD MAN [*out of sight*]: Come in ...come in ...come in ...come in ...[*He reappears, leading in a number of invisible people, including one very small child he holds by the hand.*] One doesn't bring little children to a scientific lecture. ..the poor little thing is going to be bored. .. if he begins to cry or to peepee on the ladies' dresses, that'll be a fine state of affairs! [*He conducts them to stage center; the Old Woman comes on with two chairs.*] I wish to introduce you to my wife, Semiramis; and these are their children.

OLD WOMAN: Ladies, gentlemen. ..Oh! aren't they sweet!

OLD MAN: That one is the smallest.

OLD WOMAN: Oh, he's so cute. ..so cute. ..so cute!

OLD MAN: Not enough chairs.

OLD WOMAN: Oh! dear, oh dear, oh dear...

[*She exits, looking for another chair, using now door No.2 as exit and door No.' 3 on the right to re-enter.*]

OLD MAN: Hold the little boy on your lap. ..The twins can sit together in the same chair. Be careful, they're not very Strong ...they go with the house, they belong to the landlord. Yes, my children, he'd make trouble for us, he's a bad man...he wants us to buy them from him, these worthless chairs. [*The Old Woman returns as quickly as she can with a chair.*] You don't all know each other. . . you're seeing each other for the first time. . .you knew each other by name. ..[*To the Old Woman:*] Semiramis, help me make the introductions. . .

OLD WOMAN: Who are all these people? ...May I introduce you, excuse me ...May I introduce you. ..but who are they?

OLD MAN: May I introduce you. ..Allow me to introduce you. ..permit me to introduce you. ..Mr., Mrs., Miss. . .Mr. . . . Mrs. . . Mrs. . . Mr.

OLD WOMAN [*to Old Man*]: Did you put on your sweater? [*To the invisible guests:*] Mr., Mrs., Mr. . . [*Doorbell rings again.*]

OLD MAN: More people!

[*Another ring of doorbell.*]

OLD WOMAN: More people!

SCENE 17

[The doorbell rings again, then several more times, and more times again,. the Old Man is beside himself; the chairs, turned towards the dais, with their backs to the audience; form regular rows, each one longer as in a theatre; the Old Man is winded, he mops his brow, goes from one door to another, seats invisible people, while the Old Woman, hobbling along, unable to move any faster, goes as rapidly as she can, from one door to another, hunting for chairs and carrying them in. There are now many invisible people on stage; both the Old Man and Old Woman take care not to bump into people and to thread their way between the rows of chairs. The movement could go like this: the Old Man goes to door No.4, the Old Woman exits by door No.3, returns by door No.2; the Old Man goes to open door No. 7, the Old Woman exits by door No.8, re-enters by door No.6 with chairs, etc., in this manner making their way around the stage, using all the doors.]

OLD WOMAN: Beg pardon. . .excuse me . . .what. . .oh, yes. . .beg pardon. . .excuse me . . .

OLD MAN: Gentlemen. . .come in . . .ladies. . .enter . . .it is Mrs. . . .let me . . .yes. . .

OLD WOMAN *[with more chairs]*: Oh dear. . .Oh dear. . . there are too many. . .There really are too, too. . .too many, oh dear, oh dear, oh dear. . .

[We hear from outside, louder and louder and approaching nearer and nearer, the sounds of boats moving through the water; all the noises come directly from the wings. The Old Woman and the Old Man continue the business outlined above; they open the doors, they carry in chairs. The doorbell continues to ring.]

OLD MAN: This table is in our way. *[He moves a table, or he sketches the business of moving it, without slowing down his rhythm, aided by the Old Woman.]* There's scarcely a place left here, excuse us . . .

OLD WOMAN *[making a gesture of clearing the table, to the Old Man]*: Are you wearing your sweater?

[Doorbell rings.]

OLD MAN: More people! More chairs! More people! More chairs! Come in, come in, ladies and gentlemen. . .Semiramis, faster. . .We'll give you a hand soon. . .

OLD WOMAN: Beg pardon. . .beg pardon. . .good evening, Mrs. . . .Mrs. . . .Mr. . . .Mr. . . .yes, yes, the chairs. . .

[The doorbell rings louder and louder and we hear the noises of boats striking the quay very close by, and more and more frequently. The Old Man flounders among the chairs; he has scarcely enough time to go from one door to another, so rapidly do the ringings of the doorbell succeed each other.]

OLD MAN: Yes, right away. . .are you wearing your sweater? Yes, yes. . .immediately, patience, yes, yes. . .patience. . .

OLD WOMAN: Your sweater? My sweater? . . .Beg pardon, beg pardon.

OLD MAN: This way, ladies and gentlemen, I request you . . .I re you. . .pardon. . .quest. . .enter, enter . . .going to

show. . .there, the seats. . . .dear friend. . .not there. . .take care. . .you, my friend?

[Then a long moment without words. We hear waves, boats, the continuous ringing of the doorbell. The movement culminates in intensity at this point. The doors are now opening and shutting all together ceaselessly. Only the main door in the center of the recess remains closed. The Old Man and Old Woman come and go, without saying a word, from one door to another; they appear to be gliding on roller skates. The Old Man receives the people, accompanies them, but doesn't take them very far, he only indicates seats to them after having taken one or two steps with them; he hasn't enough time. The Old Woman carries in chairs. The Old Man and the Old Woman meet each other and bump into each other, once or twice, without interrupting their rhythm. Then, the Old Man takes a position upstage center, and turns from left to right, from right to left, etc., towards all the doors and indicates the seats with his arms. His arms move very rapidly. Then, finally the Old Woman, stops, with a chair in one hand, which she places, takes up again, replaces, looks as though she, too, wants to go from one door

to another, from right to left, from left to right, moving her head and neck very rapidly. This must not interrupt the rhythm; the Old Man and, Old Woman must still give the impression of not stopping, even while remaining almost in one place; their hands, their chests, their heads, their eyes are agitated, perhaps moving in little circles. Finally, there is a progressive slowing down of movement, at first slight: the ringings of the doorbell are less loud, less frequent; the doors open less and less rapidly; the gestures of the Old Man and Old Woman slacken continuously- At the moment when the doors stop opening and closing altogether; and the ringings cease to be heard, we have the impression that the stage is packed with people.]

SCENE 18

OLD MAN: I'm going to find a place for you. . .patience. . . Semiramis, for the love of . . .

OLD WOMAN [*with a large gesture, her hands empty*]: There are no more chairs, my darling. [*Then, abruptly, she begins to sell invisible programs in a full hall, with the doors closed.*] Programs, get your programs here, the program of the evening, buy your program!

OLD MAN: Relax, ladies and gentlemen, we'll take care of you. . .Each in his turn, in the order of your arrival. . . You'll have a seat. I'll take care of you.

OLD WOMAN: Buy your programs! Wait a moment, madam, I cannot take care of everyone at the same time, I haven't got thirty-three hands, you know, I'm not a cow. . .Mister, please be kind enough to pass the program to the lady next to you, thank you. . .my change, my change. . .

OLD MAN: I've told you that I'd find a place for you! Don't get excited! Over here, it's over here, there, take care. . .

oh, dear friend. . .dear friends. . .

OLD WOMAN: . . .Programs. . .get your grams. . .grams. . .

OLD MAN: Yes, my dear, she's over there, further down, she's selling programs. . .no trade is unworthy. . .that's her. . . do you see her? . . .you have a seat in the second row. . . to the right, . . .no, to the left. . .that's it! . . .

OLD WOMAN: gram. . .gram. . . program. . .get your program. . .

OLD MAN: What do you expect me to do? I'm doing my best! [*To invisible seated people:*] Push over a little, if you will

please. . .there's still a little room, that will do for you, won't it, Mrs. . . .come here. [*He mounts the dais, forced by the pushing of the crowd.*] Ladies, gentlemen, please excuse us, there are no more seats available. . .

OLD WOMAN [*who is now on the opposite side of the stage, across from the Old Man, between door No.3 and the window*]: Get your programs. . .who wants a program? Eskimo pies, caramels. . .fruit drops. . .[*Unable to move, the Old Woman, hemmed in by the crowd, scatters her programs and candies anywhere, above the invisible heads.*] Here are some! There they are!

OLD MAN [*standing on the dais, very animated; he is jostled as he descends from the dais, remounts it, steps down again, hits someone in the face, is struck by an elbow, says*]: Pardon. . .please excuse us. . .take care. . .[*Pushed, he staggers, has trouble regaining his equilibrium, clutches at shoulders.*]

OLD WOMAN: Why are there so many people? Programs, get your program here, Eskimo pies.

OLD MAN: Ladies, young ladies, gentlemen, a moment of silence, I beg you. . .silence. . .it's very important. . . those people who've no seats are asked to clear the aisles . . .that's it . . .don't stand between the chairs.

OLD WOMAN [*to the Old Man, almost screaming*]: Who are all these people, my darling? What are they doing here?

OLD MAN: Clear the aisles, ladies and gentlemen. Those who do not have seats must, for the convenience of all, stand against the wall, there, along the right or the left. . .you'll be able to hear everything, you'll see every thing, don't worry, you won't miss a thing, all seats are equally good! [*There is a great hullabaloo. Pushed by the crowd, the Old Man makes almost a complete turn around*

the stage and ends up at the window on the right, near to the stool. The Old Woman makes the same movement in reverse, and ends up at the window on the left, near the stool there.]

OLD MAN [*making this movement*]: Don't push, don't push.

OLD WOMAN [*same business*]: Don't push, don't push.

OLD MAN [*same business*]: Don't push, don't push.

OLD WOMAN [*same business*]: Don't push, ladies, and gentlemen, don't push.

OLD MAN [*same business*]: Relax. . .take it easy. . .be quiet. . .what's going on here?

OLD WOMAN [*same business*]: There's no need to act like savages, in any case.

[At last they reach their final positions. Each is near a window. The Old Man to the left, by the window which is beside the dais. The Old Woman on the right. They don't move from these positions until the end.]

SCENE 19

OLD WOMAN [*calling to the Old Man*]: My darling. . .I can't see you, anymore. . .where are you? Who are they? What do all these people want? Who is that man over there?

OLD MAN: Where are you? Where are you, Semiramis?

OLD WOMAN: My darling, where are you?

OLD MAN: Here, beside the window. . .Can you hear me?

OLD WOMAN: Yes, I hear your voice! . . .there are so many
...but I can make out yours. . .

OLD MAN: And you, where are you?

OLD WOMAN: I'm beside the window too! . . .My dear, I'm frightened, there are too many people. . .we are very far from each other. . .at our age we have to be careful. . . we might get lost. . .We must stay close together, one never knows, my darling, my darling. . .

OLD MAN: Ah! . . .I just caught sight of you. . .Oh! . . . We'll find each other, never fear. . .I'm with friends. [*To the friends:*] I'm happy to shake your hands. . .But of course, I believe in progress, uninterrupted progress, with some jolts, nevertheless. . .

OLD WOMAN: That's fine, thanks. . .What foul weather Yes, it's been nice! [*Aside:*] I'm afraid, even so ...What am I doing here? . . . [*She screams:*] My darling, My darling
[The Old Man and Old Woman individually speak to guests near them.]

OLD MAN: In order to prevent the exploitation of man by man, we need money, money, and still more money!

OLD WOMAN: My darling! [*Then, hemmed in by friends:*] Yes, my husband is here, he's organizing everything. . . over

there. . .Oh! you'll never get there. . .you'd have to go across, he's with friends. . .

OLD MAN: Certainly not. . .as I've always said. . .pure logic does not exist. . .all we've got is an imitation.

OLD WOMAN: But you know, there are people who are happy. In the morning they eat breakfast on the plane, at noon they lunch in the pullman, and in the evening they dine aboard the liner. At night they sleep in the trucks that roll, roll, roll...

OLD MAN: Talk about the dignity of man! At least let's try to save face. Dignity is only skin deep.

OLD WOMAN: Don't slink away into the shadows. . . [*She bursts out laughing in conversation.*]

OLD MAN: Your compatriots ask of me.

OLD WOMAN: Certainly. . .tell me everything.

OLD MAN: I've invited you. . .in order to explain to you. . . that the individual and the person are one and the same.

OLD WOMAN: He has a borrowed look about him. He owes us a lot of money.

OLD MAN: I am not myself. I am another. I am the one in the other.

OLD WOMAN: My children, take care not to trust one another.

OLD MAN: Sometimes I awaken in the midst of absolute silence. It's a perfect circle. There's nothing lacking. But one must be careful, all the same. Its shape might disappear. There are holes through which it can escape.

OLD WOMAN: Ghosts, you know, phantoms, mere nothings ...The duties my husband fulfills are very important, sublime.

OLD MAN: Excuse me. . .that's not at all my opinion! At the proper time, I'll communicate my views on this subject to

you. . .I have nothing to say for the present! ...We're waiting for the Orator, he'll tell you, he'll speak in my behalf, and explain everything that we hold most dear. . . he'll explain everything to you. . .when? . .when the moment has come. . .the moment will come soon. . .

OLD WOMAN [*on her side to her friends*]: The sooner, the better. ..That's understood. ..[*Aside:*] They're never going to leave us alone. Let them go, why don't they go? . . .My poor darling, where is he? I can't see him any more. . .

OLD MAN [*same business*]: Don't be so impatient. You'll hear my message. In just a moment.

OLD WOMAN [*aside*]: Ah! ...I hear his voice! ...[*To her friends:*] Do you know, my husband has never been understood. But at last his hour has come.

OLD MAN: Listen to me, I've had a rich experience of life. In all walks of life, at every level of thought. . .I'm not an egotist: humanity must profit by what I've learned.

OLD WOMAN: Ow! You stepped on my foot. . .I've got chilblains!

OLD MAN: I've perfected a real system. [*Aside:*] The Orator ought to be here. [*Aloud:*] I've suffered enormously.

OLD WOMAN: We have suffered so much. [*Aside:*] The Orator ought to be here. It's certainly time.

OLD MAN: Suffered much, learned much.

OLD WOMAN [*like an echo*]: Suffered much, learned much.

OLD MAN: You'll see for yourselves, my system is perfect.

OLD WOMAN [*like an echo*]: You'll see for yourselves, his system is perfect.

OLD MAN: If only my instructions are carried out.

OLD WOMAN [*echo*]: If only his instructions are carried out.

OLD MAN: We'll save the world! ...

OLD WOMAN [*echo*]: Saving his own soul by saving the world! ...

OLD MAN: One truth for all!

OLD WOMAN [*echo*]: One truth for all! OLDMAN: Follow me!...

OLD WOMAN [*echo*]: Follow him! ...

OLD MAN: For I have absolute certainty! ...

OLD WOMAN [*echo*]: He has absolute certainty!

OLD MAN: Never...

OLD WOMAN [*echo*]: Ever and ever. ..

[*Suddenly we hear noises in the wings, fanfares.*]

OLD WOMAN: What's going on?

SCENE 20

[*The noises increase, then the main door opens wide, with a great crash; through the open door we see nothing but a very powerful light which floods onto the stage through the main door and the windows, which at the entrance of the emperor are brightly lighted.*]

OLD MAN: I don't know. . .I can scarcely believe. . .is it possible. . .but yes. . .but yes. . .incredible. . .and' still it's true. . .

yes. . .if . . .yes. . .it is the Emperor! His Majesty the Emperor!
[The light reaches its maximum intensity, through the open door and through the windows; but the light is cold, empty; more noises which cease abruptly.]

OLD MAN: Stand up!...It's His Majesty the Emperor! The Emperor in my house, in our house. . .Semiramis. . .do you realize what this means?

OLD WOMAN *[not understanding]*: The Emperor. . .the Emperor? My darling! *[Then suddenly she understands.]* Ah, yes, the Emperor! Your Majesty! Your Majesty! *[She wildly makes countless grotesque curtsies.]* In our house! In our house!

OLD MAN *[weeping with emotion]*: Your Majesty! ...Oh! Your Majesty! ...Your little, Your great Majesty! ...Oh! what a sublime honor. . .it's all a marvelous dream.

OLD WOMAN *[like an echo]*: A marvelous dream. . .arvelous...

OLD MAN *[to the invisible crowd]*: Ladies, gentlemen, stand up, our beloved sovereign, the Emperor, is among us! Hurrah! Hurrah!
[He stands up on the stool; he stands on his toes in order to see the Emperor; the Old Woman does the same on her side.]

OLD WOMAN: Hurrah! Hurrah!
[Stamping of feet.]

OLD MAN: Your Majesty! ...I'm over here! ...Your Majesty! Can you hear me? Can you see me? Please tell his Majesty that I'm here! Your Majesty! Your Majesty!!! I'm here, your most faithful servant! . . .

OLD WOMAN *[still echoing]*: Your most faithful servant, Your Majesty!

OLD MAN: Your servant, your slave, your dog, arf, arf, your dog, Your Majesty! . . .

OLD WOMAN *[barking loudly like a dog]*: Arf . . .arf. . .arf. . .

OLD MAN *[wringing his hands]*: Can you see me? ...Answer, Sire! ...Ah, I can see you, I've just caught sight of Your Majesty's august face.. .your divine forehead. . .I've seen you, yes, in spite of the screen of courtiers. . .

OLD WOMAN: In spite of the courtiers. . .we're here, Your Majesty!

OLD MAN: Your Majesty! Your Majesty! Ladies, gentlemen, don't keep him—His Majesty standing. . . you see, Your Majesty, I'm truly the only one who cares for you, for your health, I'm the most faithful of all your subjects. . .

OLD WOMAN *[echoing]*: Your Majesty's most faithful subjects!

OLD MAN: Let me through, now, ladies and gentlemen. . . how can I make my way through such a crowd? . . .I must go to present my most humble respects to His Majesty, the Emperor . . . let me pass. . .

OLD WOMAN *[echo]*: Let him pass. . .let him pass. . .pass . . .ass. . .

OLD MAN: Let me pass, please, let me pass. *[Desperate:]* Ah! Will I ever be able to reach him?

OLD WOMAN *[echo]*: Reach him. . .reach him . . .

OLD MAN: Nevertheless, my heart and my whole being are at his feet, the crowd of courtiers surrounds him, ah! ah! they want to prevent me from approaching him . . .They know very well that. . . oh! I understand, I understand. . . Court intrigues, I know all about it . . .They hope to separate me from Your Majesty!

OLD WOMAN: Calm yourself, my darling. . .His Majesty sees you, he's looking at you. . His Majesty has given me a
wink. . .His Majesty is on our side! . . .

OLD MAN: They must give the Emperor the best seat. . .near the dais. . .so that he can hear everything the Orator is going to say.

OLD WOMAN *[hoisting herself up on the stool, on her toes, lifting her chin as high as she can, in order to see better]*: At last they're taking care of the Emperor.

OLD MAN: Thank heaven for that! *[To the Emperor:]* Sire ...Your Majesty may rely on him. It's my friend, it's my representative who is at Your Majesty's side. *[On his toes, standing on the stool:]* Gentlemen, ladies, young ladies, little children, I implore you.

OLD WOMAN *[echoing]*: Plore ...plore ...

OLD MAN: . . .I want to see. . .move aside. . .I want. . .the celestial gaze, the noble face, the crown, the radiance of His Majesty. . .Sire, deign to turn your illustrious face !n my direction, toward your humble servant. . .so humble . . .Oh! I caught sight of him clearly that time. . .I caught sight. . .

OLD WOMAN *[echo]*: He caught sight that time. . .he caught sight. . .caught. . .sight. . .

SCENE 21

OLD MAN: I'm at the height of joy. . .I've no more words to express my boundless gratitude. . .in my humble dwelling, Oh! Majesty! Oh! radiance! . . .here. . .here. . .in the dwelling where I am, true enough, a general. . .but within the hierarchy of your army, I'm only a simple general factotum. . .

OLD WOMAN *[echo]*: General factotum . . .

OLD MAN: I'm proud of it . . .proud and humble, at the same time. . .as I should be . . .alas! certainly, I am a general, I might have been at the imperial court, I have only a little court here to take care of. . .Your Majesty. . .I . . .Your Majesty, I have difficulty expressing myself. . .I might have had. . .many things, not a few possessions if I'd known, if I'd wanted, if I . . .if we . . .Your Majesty, forgive my emotion. . .

OLD WOMAN: Speak in the third person!

OLD MAN *[sniveling]*: May Your Majesty deign to forgive me! You are here at last. . .We had given up hope . . .you might not even have come. . .Oh! Savior, in my life, I have been humiliated. . .

OLD WOMAN *[echo, sobbing]*: . . .miliated . . .miliated . . .

OLD MAN: I've suffered much in my life. . .I might have been something, if I could have been sure of the support of Your Majesty. . .I have no other support. . .if you hadn't come, everything would have been too late. . .you are, Sire, my last recourse. . .

OLD WOMAN *[echo]*: Last recourse. . .Sire. . .ast recourse . . .ire . . .recourse. . .

OLD MAN: I've brought bad luck to my friends, to all those who have helped me ...Lightning struck the hand which was held out toward me . . .

OLD WOMAN *[echo]*: ...hand that was held out. . .held out ...out. . .

OLD MAN: They've always had good reasons for hating me, bad reasons for loving me . . .

OLD WOMAN: That's not true, my darling, not true. *I* love you, I'm your little mother. . .

OLD MAN: All my enemies have been rewarded and my friends have betrayed me . . .

OLD WOMAN *[echo]*: Friends. . .betrayed. . .betrayed. . . OLD MAN: They've treated me badly. They've persecuted me.

If I complained, it was always they who were in the right ...Sometimes I've tried to revenge myself. . .I was never able to, never able to revenge myself. . .I have too much pity. . .I refused to strike the enemy to the ground, I have always been too good.

OLD WOMAN *[echo]*: He was too good, good, good, good, good...

OLD MAN: It is my pity that has defeated me.

OLD WOMAN *[echo]*: My pity. . .pity. . .pity. . .

OLD MAN: But they never pitied me. I gave them a pin prick, and they repaid me with club blows, with knife blows, with cannon blows, they've crushed my bones. . .

OLD WOMAN *[echo]*: ...My bones. . .my bones. . .my bones. . .

OLD MAN: They've supplanted me, they've robbed me, they've assassinated me ...I've been the collector of injustices, the lightning rod of catastrophes. . .

OLD WOMAN *[echo]*: Lightning rod. . .catastrophe. . .lightning rod. . .

OLD MAN: In order to forget, Your Majesty, I wanted to go in for sports. . .for mountain climbing. . .they pulled my feet and made me slip. . .I wanted to climb stairways, they rotted the steps. . .I fell down. . .I wanted to travel, they refused me a passport. . .I wanted to cross the river, they burnt my bridges. . .

OLD WOMAN [*echo*]: Burnt my bridges.

OLD MAN: I wanted to cross the Pyrenees, and there were no more Pyrenees.

OLD WOMAN [*echo*]: No more Pyrenees. . .He could have been, he too, Your Majesty, like so many others, a head editor, a head actor, a head doctor, Your Majesty, a head king...

OLD MAN: Furthermore, no one has ever shown me due consideration ...no one has ever sent me invitations. . . However, I, hear me, I say this to you, I alone could have I saved humanity, who is so sick. Your Majesty realizes this I as do I ...or, at the least, I could have spared it the evils from which it has suffered so much this last quarter of a century, had I had the opportunity to communicate my message; I do not despair of saving it, there is still time, I have a plan...alas, I express myself with difficulty. . .

OLD WOMAN [*above the invisible heads*]: The Orator will be here, he'll speak for you. His Majesty is here, thus you'll be heard, you've no reason to despair, you hold all the trumps, everything has changed, everything has changed. . .

OLD MAN: I hope Your Majesty will excuse me ...I know you have many other worries. . .I've been humiliated. . . Ladies and gentlemen, move aside just a little bit, don't hide His Majesty's nose from me altogether, I want to see the diamonds of the imperial crown glittering. . .But if Your Majesty has deigned to come to our miserable home, it is because you have condescended to take into consideration my wretched self. What an extraordinary reward. Your Majesty, if corporeally I raise myself on my toes, this is not through pride, this is only in order to gaze upon you! ...morally, I throw myself at your knees.

OLD WOMAN [*sobbing*]: At your knees, Sire, we throw ourselves at your knees, at your feet, at your toes. . .

OLD MAN: I've had scabies. My employer fired me because I did not bow to his baby, to his horse. I've been kicked in the ass, but all this, Sire, no longer has any importance. . . since. . .since. . .Sir ...Your Majesty. . .look. . . I am here. . . here. . .

OLD WOMAN [*echo*]: Here. . .here. . .here. . .here. . . here. . .here. . .

OLD MAN: Since Your Majesty is here. . .since Your Majesty will take my message into consideration. . . But the Orator should be here. . .he's making His Majesty wait. . .

OLD WOMAN: If Your Majesty will forgive him. He's surely coming. He will be here in a moment. They've telephoned

us.

OLD MAN: His Majesty is so kind. His Majesty wouldn't depart just like that, without having listened to everything, heard everything.

OLD WOMAN [*echo*]: Heard everything. . .heard. . .listened to everything. . .

OLDMAN: It is he who will speak in my name. . .I, I cannot ...I lack the talent. . .he has all the papers, all the documents. . .

OLD WOMAN [*echo*]: He has all the documents. . .

OLD MAN: A little patience, Sire, I beg of you. . .he should be coming.

OLD WOMAN: He should be coming in a moment.

OLD MAN [*so that the Emperor will not grow impatient*]: Your Majesty, hear me, a long time ago I had the revelation ...I was forty years old. . .I say this also to you, ladies and gentlemen. . .one evening, after supper, as was our custom, before going to bed, I seated myself on my father's knees. . .my mustaches were longer than his and more pointed. . .I had more hair on my chest. . .my hair was graying already, but his was still brown. . .There were some guests, grownups, sitting at table, who began to laugh, laugh.

OLD WOMAN [*echo*]: Laugh. . .laugh ...

OLD MAN: I'm not joking, I told them, I love my papa very much. -Someone replied: It is midnight, a child shouldn't stay up so late. If you don't go beddy-bye, then you're no longer a kid. But I'd still not have believed them if they hadn't addressed me as an adult.

OLD WOMAN *[echo]*: An adult.

OLD MAN: Instead of as a child. . .

OLD WOMAN *[echo]*: A child.

OLD MAN: Nevertheless, I thought to myself, I'm not married. Hence, I'm still a child. They married me off right then, expressly to prove the contrary to me ...Fortunately, my wife has been both father and mother to me ...

OLD WOMAN: The Orator should be here, Your Majesty. . .

OLD MAN: The Orator will come.

OLD WOMAN: He will come.

OLD MAN: He will come.

OLD WOMAN: He will come.

OLD MAN: He will come.

OLD WOMAN: He will come.

OLD MAN: He will come, he will come.

OLD WOMAN: He will come, he will come.

OLDMAN: He will come.

OLD WOMAN: He is coming.

OLD MAN: He is coming.

OLD WOMAN: He is coming, he is here.

OLD MAN: He is coming, he is here.

OLD WOMAN: He is coming, he is here.

OLD MAN AND OLD WOMAN: He is here. . .

OLD WOMAN: Here he is!

SCENE 22

[Silence; all movement stops. Petrified, the two old people stare at door No.5; this immobility lasts rather long- about thirty seconds; very slowly, very slowly the door opens wide, silently; then the Orator appears. He is a real person. He's a typical painter or poet of the nineteenth century; he wears a large black felt hat with a wide brim, loosely tied bow tie, artist's blouse, mustache and goatee, very histrionic in manner, conceited; just as the invisible people must be as real as possible, the Orator must appear unreal. He goes along the wall to the right, gliding, softly, to upstage center, in front of the main door, without turning his head to right or left; he passes close by the Old Woman without appearing to notice her, not even when the Old Woman touches his arm in order to assure herself that he exists. It is at this moment that the Old Woman says: "Here he is!"]

OLD MAN: Here he is!

OLD WOMAN *[following the Orator with her eyes and continuing to stare at him]*: It's really he, he exists. In flesh and blood.

OLD MAN *[following him with his eyes]*: He exists. It's really he. This is not a dream!

OLD WOMAN: This is not a dream, I told you so.

[The Old Man clasps his hands, lifts his eyes to heaven;. he exults silently. The Orator, having reached upstage center, lifts his hat, bends forward in silence, saluting the invisible Emperor with his hat with a Musketeer's flourish and some- what like an automaton. At this moment:]

OLD MAN: Your Majesty. ...May I present to you, the Orator. . .

OLD WOMAN: It is he!

[Then the Orator puts his hat back on his head and mounts the dais from which he looks down on the invisible crowd on the stage and at the chairs,. he freezes in a solemn pose.]

OLD MAN *[to the invisible crowd]*: You may ask him for autographs. *[Automatically, silently, the Orator signs and distributes numberless autographs. The Old Man during this time lifts his eyes again to heaven, clasping his hands, and exultantly says:]* No man, in his lifetime, could hope for more. . .

OLD WOMAN *[echo]*: No man could hope for more.

SCENE 23

OLD MAN *[to the invisible crowd]*: And now, with the permission of Your Majesty, I will address myself to all of you, ladies, young ladies, gentlemen, little children, dear colleagues, dear compatriots, Your Honor the President, dear comrades in arms. . .

OLD WOMAN *[echo]*: And little children. ..dren ...dren ...

OLD MAN: I address myself to all of you, without distinction of age, sex, civil status, social rank, or business, to thank you, with all my heart.

OLD WOMAN *[echo]*: To thank you...

OLD MAN: As well as the Orator. ..cordially, for having come in such large numbers. ..silence, gentlemen! ...

OLD WOMAN *[echo]*: ...Silence, gentlemen. ..

OLD MAN: I address my thanks also to those who have made possible the meeting this evening, to the organizers. . .

OLD WOMAN: Bravo!

[Meanwhile, the Orator on the dais remains solemn, immobile, except for his hand, which signs autographs.]

OLD MAN: To the owners of this building, to the architect, to the masons who were kind enough to erect these walls! ...

OLD WOMAN *[echo]*: ...walls. ..

OLD MAN: To all those who've dug the foundations. .. Silence, ladies and gentlemen. ..

OLD WOMAN: ...adies and gentlemen. ..

OLD MAN: Last but not least I address my warmest thanks to the cabinet-makers who have made these chairs on which you have been able to sit, to the master carpenter. . .

OLD WOMAN *[echo]*: ...penter ...

OLD MAN: ...Who made the armchair in which Your Majesty is sinking so softly, which does not prevent you, nevertheless, from maintaining a firm and manly attitude ...Thanks again to all the technicians, machinists, electrocutoners ...

OLD WOMAN *[echoing:]* ...cutioners ...cutioners ...

OLD MAN: ...To the paper manufacturers and the printers, proofreaders, editors to whom we owe the programs, so charmingly decorated, to the universal solidarity of all men, thanks, thanks, to our country, to the State *[He turns toward where the Emperor is sitting:]* whose helm Your Majesty directs with the skill of a true pilot. ..thanks to the usher. . .

OLD WOMAN *[echo:]* ...usher. ..rusher. ..

OLD MAN *[pointing to the Old Woman]*: Hawker of Eskimo pies and programs. . .

OLD WOMAN *[echo]*: ...grams...

OLD MAN: ...My wife, my helpmeet ...Semiramis! ...

OLD WOMAN *[echo]*: ...ife ...meet. ..mis ...*[Aside:]* The darling, he never forgets to give me credit.

OLD MAN: Thanks to all those who have given me their precious and expert, financial or moral support, thereby contributing to the overwhelming success of this evening's gathering. ..thanks again, thanks above all to our beloved sovereign, His Majesty the Emperor. ..

OLD WOMAN [*echo*]: ...jesty the Emperor. . .

OLD MAN [*in a total silence*]: ...A little silence. ..Your Majesty. ..

OLD WOMAN [*echo*]: ...jesty ...jesty ...

SCENE 24

OLD MAN: Your Majesty, my wife and myself have nothing more to ask of life. Our existence can come to an end in this apotheosis. ..thanks be to heaven who has granted us such long and peaceful years. ..My life has been filled to overflowing. My mission is accomplished. I will not have lived in vain, since my message will be revealed to the world. ..[*Gesture towards the Orator, who does not perceive it; the Orator waves off*] requests for autographs, very dignified and firm.] To the world, or rather to what is left of it! [*Wide gesture toward the invisible crowd.*] To you, ladies and gentlemen, and dear comrades, who are all that is left from humanity, but with such leftovers one can still make a very good soup. ; .Orator, friend. ..[*The Orator' looks in another direction.*] If I have been long unrecognized, underestimated by my contemporaries, it is because it had to be ...[*The Old Woman sobs.*] What matters all that now when I am leaving to you, to you, my dear Orator and friend [*The Orator rejects a new request for an autograph, then takes an indifferent pose, looking in all directions.*] ...the responsibility of radiating upon posterity the light of my mind. ..thus making known to the universe my philosophy. Neglect none of the details of my private life, some laughable, some painful or heartwarming, of my tastes, my amusing gluttony. ..tell everything. .. speak of my helpmeet. ..[*The Old Woman redoubles her s(jbs).*] ...of the way she prepared those marvelous little Turkish pies, of her potted rabbit a la Normandabbit ... speak of Berry, my native province. ..I count on you, great master and Orator. ..as for me and my faithful helpmeet, after our long years of labor in behalf of the progress of humanity during which we fought the good fight, nothing remains for us but to withdraw. ..immediately, in order to make the supreme sacrifice which no one demands of us but which we will carry out even so ...

OLD WOMAN [*sobbing*]: Yes, yes, let's die in full glory. .. let's die in order to become a legend. ..At least, they'll name a street after us ...

OLD MAN [*to Old Woman*]: O my faithful helpmeet! ... you who have believed in me, unfailingly, during a whole century, who have never left me, never. ..alas, today, at this supreme moment, the crowd pitilessly separates us ...

Above all I had hoped
that together we might lie
with all our bones together
within the selfsame skin
within the same sepulchre
and that the same worms
might share our old flesh
that we might rot together. . .

OLD WOMAN: ...Rot together. ..

OLD MAN: Alas! ...alas! ...

OLD WOMAN: Alas! ...alas! ...

OLD MAN: ...Our corpses will fall far from each other, and we will rot in an aquatic solitude. ..Don't pity us over much.

OLD WOMAN: What will be, will be!

OLD MAN: We shall not be forgotten. The eternal Emperor will remember us, always.

OLD WOMAN *[echo]*: Always.

OLD MAN: We will leave some traces, for we are people and not cities.

OLD MAN AND OLD WOMAN *[together]*: We will have a street named after us.

OLD MAN: Let us be united in time and in eternity, even if we are not together in space, as we were in adversity: let us die at the same moment. *..[To the Orator, who is impassive, immobile:]* One last time.

..I place my trust in you. ..I count on you. You will tell all ...bequeath my message. ..[To the Emperor:] If Your Majesty will excuse me ...Farewell to all. Farewell, Semiramis.

OLD WOMAN: Farewell to all! ...Farewell, my darling!

OLD MAN: Long live the Emperor!

[He throws confetti and paper streamers on the invisible Emperor; we hear fanfares; bright lights like fireworks.]

OLD WOMAN: Long live the Emperor!

[Confetti and streamers thrown in the direction of the Emperor, then on the immobile and impassive Orator, and on the empty chairs.]

OLD MAN *[same business]*: Long live the Emperor!

OLD WOMAN *[same business]*: Long live the Emperor!

[The Old Woman and Old Man at the same moment throw themselves out the windows, shouting "Long Live the Emperor." Sudden silence; no more fireworks; we hear an "Ah" from both sides of the stage, the sea-green noises of bodies falling into the water. The light coming through the main door and the windows has disappeared; there remains only a weak light as at the beginning of the play; the darkened windows remain wide open, their curtains floating on the wind.]

SCENE 25

ORATOR *[he has remained immobile and impassive during the scene of the double suicide, and now, after several moments, he decides to speak. He faces the rows of empty chairs, he makes the invisible crowd understand that he is deaf and dumb; he makes the signs of a deafmute; desperate efforts to make himself understood; then he coughs, groans, utters the guttural sounds of a mute]*: He, mme, mm, mm. Ju, gou, hou, hou. Heu, heu, gu gou, gueue.

[Helpless, he lets his arms fall down alongside his body; suddenly, his face lights up, he has an idea, he turns toward the blackboard, he takes a piece of chalk out of his pocket, and writes, in large capitals:

ANGELFOOD

then:

NNAA NNM NWNWNW V

ORATOR Mmm, Mmm, Gueue, Gu, Gu. Mmm, Mmm, Mmm, Mmm.

Adieu Adieu APA