

NORMAN. That's true. Doctors. Just imagine trying to explain to a doctor what Sir's been through. "Well, you see, doctor, he's been trying to recruit actors for his Shakespearean company but all the able-bodied and best ones are in uniform, and the theatres are bombed to bits as soon as you book them, not to mention the trouble this week with Mr. Davenport-Scott." Doctors. He'd have had his hypodermic rampant before you could say 'As You Like It'. That's all they know. Hypodermics.

HER LADYSHIP. What's the latest on Mr. Davenport-Scott?

NORMAN. If you don't mind, I'd rather not discuss Mr. Davenport-Scott with a lady. I'll tell Madge all about it when she comes in. Suffice to say he will not be making an appearance this evening.

*(Pause)*

HER LADYSHIP. There's no alternative. We'll have to cancel.

NORMAN. Oh no, your ladyship, cancellation's ever so drastic.

HER LADYSHIP. He's ill. There's no crime in being ill, it's not high treason, not a capital offence, not desertion in the face of the enemy. He's not himself. He can't work. Will the world stop turning? Will the Nazis overrun England? One Lear more or less in the world won't make any difference.

NORMAN. Sir always believes it will.

HER LADYSHIP. Who really cares whether he acts or not?

NORMAN. There's bound to be someone.

*(Pause)*

HER LADYSHIP. I never imagined it would end like this. I've always thought he was indestructible.

NORMAN. This'll be the first time we've ever cancelled. I want to go to the hospital—

HER LADYSHIP. No, Norman—

NORMAN. I want to sit with him and be with him and try to give him comfort. I can usually make him smile. Perhaps when he sees me—

HER LADYSHIP. They wouldn't even let me stay.

*(NORMAN fights tears. Pause)*

NORMAN. Sixteen years. I wish I could remember the name of the girl who got me into all this. Motherly type she was, small parts, play as cast. I can see her face clearly. I can see her standing there, Platform 2 at Crewe. A Sunday. I was on Platform 4. "Norman," she called. We'd been together in *Outward Bound*, the Number Three tour, helped with wardrobe I did, understudied Scrubby, the steward. That's all aboard a ship, you know. Lovely first act. "We're all dead, aren't we?" And I say, "Yes, Sir, we're all dead. Quite dead." And he says, "How long have you been—you been—oh you know?" "Me, Sir? Oh, I was lost young." And he says, "Where—where are we sailing for?" And I say, "Heaven, Sir. And hell, too. It's the same place, you see." Lovely. Anyway. "Norman!" she called. What was her name? She'd joined Sir, oh, very hoity-toity, I thought, tiaras and blank verse while I was in panto understudying the Ugly Sisters. Both of them.

MADGE. (*To SIR*) You look exhausted.

NORMAN. That's what I call tact.

MADGE. Are you sure you're able to go on tonight?

NORMAN. He wouldn't be here if he wasn't, would you, Sir?

SIR. (*To MADGE*) How long have you been with me, Madge-dear?

MADGE. Longer than anyone else.

SIR. How long?

MADGE. Twenty years, nearly twenty years.

SIR. Have I ever missed a performance?

MADGE. No, but then you've never been ill.

(*SIR sits and stares*)

MADGE. (*Quietly*) I only want what's best for you.

NORMAN. What's best for Sir is that he's allowed to get ready.

SIR. Ready, yes, I must get ready. (*HE waves them away*)

MADGE. Ready for what? (*SHE goes. SIR sits and stares*)

NORMAN. Excuse me, your ladyship, shouldn't you be getting ready, too? (*HE puts a kettle on a small gas ring*)

HER LADYSHIP. I can't bear to see him like that.

NORMAN. Then best to leave us. I've had experience of these things. I know what has to be done.

(*SIR stifles a sob*)

HER LADYSHIP. Imagine waking to that night after night. (*SHE goes. NORMAN secretly takes a quarter*

*bottle of brandy from his pocket and has a swig. HE replaces the bottle and turns to SIR)*

NORMAN. Right! Shall we begin at the beginning? *(Pause)* Good evening, Sir. *(Pause)* Good evening, Norman. And how are you this evening, Sir? A little tearful, I'm afraid, and you, Norman? I'm very well, thank you, Sir, had ever such a quiet day, cleaning your wig and beard, ironing your costumes, washing your undies. And what have you been up to, Sir? I've been jumping on my hat, Norman. Have you? That's an odd thing to do. May one ask why? Why what, Norman? Why we've been jumping on our hat, Sir? Not much fun for me this conversation, not much fun for you either, I suspect. *(Pause)* Are we going to sulk all evening, or are we going to speak to our servants? *(Pause)* I do wish you'd stop crying, Sir. *(Pause)* Shall we play 'I Spy'? I spy with my little eye something beginning with A. I know you won't guess so I'll tell. A is for actor. And actors have to work, and actors have to put on their make-up and change their frocks and then, of course, actors have to act. Zounds, madam, where dost thou get this knowledge? From a baboon, Sir, that wandered wild in Eden. Or words to that effect. I've never known a kettle take so long to boil. Tell you what, have a little brandy. Break the rules, have a nip. A little brandy won't harm as the surgeon said to the undertaker's widow.

*(No response. NORMAN has a nip of brandy himself)*

NORMAN. There's less than an hour to go. You usually want longer. Shall we make a start?

*brandy*) I shall want a rest after the storm scene.

NORMAN. There's no need to tell me. I know.

SIR. Towel. (NORMAN *hands SIR a towel which SIR presses against the beard and moustache. SIR looks at himself in the looking-glass, and suddenly goes blank*) Something's missing. What's missing?

NORMAN. I don't want to get above myself, Sir, but how about the wig? (NORMAN *removes the wig from the block and hands it to SIR*) And shall we take extra care with the join tonight? On Tuesday Richard III looked as if he were wearing a peaked cap.

(SIR *puts on the wig and begins to colour the join. HE stops—*)

SIR. Hot, unbearably hot, going to faint—

(NORMAN *whips out the brandy bottle*)

NORMAN. Have a nip, it won't harm— (SIR *waves him away. NORMAN has a nip, puts the bottle away, and returns to SIR, who hasn't moved*) Oh, Sir, we mustn't give up, not now, not now. Let's highlight our lines.

(*Silence. SIR continues to add highlights*)

SIR. Imagine bombing the Grand Theatre, Plymouth. Barbarians. (*Pause*) I shall give them a good one tonight. (*Pause. SIR becomes alarmed*) Norman!

NORMAN. Sir?

SIR. What's the first line again? All this clitter-clatter-chitter-chatter—

NORMAN. 'Attend the Lords of France and Burgundy—'

SIR. You've put it from my head. You must keep silent when I'm dressing. I have to work to do, work, hard bloody labour, I have to carry the world tonight, the whole bloody universe—

NORMAN. Sir, Sir—

SIR. I can't remember the first line. A hundred thousand performances behind me and I have to ask you for the first line—

NORMAN. I'll take you through it—

SIR. Take me through it? Nobody takes you through it, you're *put* through it, night after night, and I haven't the strength.

NORMAN. Well, you're a fine one, I must say, you of all people, you disappoint me, if you don't mind my saying so. You, who always say self-pity is the most unattractive quality on stage or off. Who have you been working for all these years? The Ministry of Information? Struggle and survival, you say, that's all that matters, you say, struggle and survival. Well, we all bloody struggle, don't we? I struggle, I struggle, you think it's easy for me, well, I'll tell you something for nothing it isn't easy, not one little bit, neither the struggle nor the bloody survival. The whole world's struggling for bloody survival, so why can't you?

(*Silence*)

SIR. My dear Norman, I seem to have upset you.

be ninety-three. May still be alive for all I know. There! Albert Durer couldn't have done better. (HE rises. HE powders SIR's hands. HER LADYSHIP enters, wiggled and costumed as Cordelia but wearing a dressing-gown)

HER LADYSHIP. Bonzo, how do you feel?

SIR. A little more myself, Pussy.

NORMAN. You see? Once he's assumed the disguise, he's a different man. Egad, Madam, thou hast a porcupine wit.

HER LADYSHIP. And you're sure you're able to go on?

SIR. On and on and on.

NORMAN. Don't start that again, please.

SIR. Pussy, I thought it was the Black One tonight.

HER LADYSHIP. My dear. Shall I fetch the cloak and tie it on as usual?

SIR. Yes. As usual.

HER LADYSHIP. Mr Thornton and Mr Oxenby are waiting outside to see you. Shall I ask them to come in?

SIR. I don't want to see Oxenby. He frightens me. Mind you, he's the best Iago I've ever had or seen and I include that four-foot-six ponce Sir Arthur Palgrove.

NORMAN. (To HER LADYSHIP) That's more like the Sir we know and love.

SIR. *Sir* Arthur Palgrove. He went on playing Hamlet till he was sixty-eight. There were more lines on his face than steps to the balcony. I saw his Lear. I was pleasantly disappointed. *Sir* Arthur Palgrove. Who advises His Majesty, answer me that?

(HE continues to adjust his make-up putting the finishing touches. HER LADYSHIP draws NORMAN aside)

HER LADYSHIP. You're a miracle-worker, Norman.

NORMAN. Thank you, your ladyship.

HER LADYSHIP. Here's a piece of chocolate for you.

NORMAN. Thank you, your ladyship.

HER LADYSHIP. It'll be all hands to the pump tonight, Norman.

NORMAN. A small part of the service, your ladyship.

HER LADYSHIP. Thank you. (SHE goes)

SIR. Don't suppose I didn't see that because I did. There are thousands of children in this beloved land of ours scavenging the larders for something sweet, and if only they came to me I could tell them of the one person in England who has an inexhaustible supply of chocolate. It is *I* who have to carry her on dead as Cordelia. It is *I* who have to lift her up, carry her in my arms. Thank Christ, I thought, for rationing, but no, she'd find sugar in a sand-dune.

NORMAN. Shall I show the actors in?

SIR. I don't—I don't want—

NORMAN. Sir, you have to see the actors. (HE opens the door and calls) Mr Thornton!

(GEOFFREY THORNTON, an elderly actor, enters. HE wears a costume as Fool that is much too large for him)

NORMAN. Mr Thornton to see you, Sir.

SIR. Well, Geoffrey . . . does the costume fit?

GEOFFREY. Mr Davenport-Scott was such a tall man.

SIR. Mr Davenport-Scott was a worm. You look—  
(HE makes a vague gesture. NORMAN begins to help SIR into his Lear costume) Do you know the lines?

GEOFFREY. Yes.

SIR. Don't keep me waiting for them.

GEOFFREY. Oh no.

SIR. Pace, pace, pace, pace, pace, pace.

GEOFFREY. Yes.

SIR. And keep out of my focus.

GEOFFREY. Yes.

SIR. The boom lights placed in the downstage wings are for me and me alone.

GEOFFREY. Yes, old man, I know.

SIR. You must find what light you can.

GEOFFREY. Right.

SIR. Let me hear you sing.

GEOFFREY. What?

SIR. 'He that has and a little tiny wit.'

GEOFFREY. (*Faltering*) 'He that has and—he that has—'

NORMAN. (*Singing*) 'He that has and a little tiny wit—'

GEOFFREY.

'He that has and a little tiny wit,  
With hey, ho, the wind and the rain,  
Must make content with his fortunes fit,  
For the rain it raineth every day.'

SIR. All right, speak it, don't sing it. And in the storm scene, if you're going to put your arms round my legs as Davenport-Scott did, then round

my calves not my thighs. He nearly ruptured me twice.

GEOFFREY. If you rather I didn't, old man—

SIR. Feel it, my boy, feel it, that's the only way. Whatever takes you.

GEOFFREY. Right.

SIR. But do not let too much take you. Remain within the bounds. And at all costs remain still when I speak.

GEOFFREY. Of course.

SIR. And no crying in the part.

GEOFFREY. Oh no.

SIR. I have the tears in this play.

GEOFFREY. I know.

SIR. Serve the playwright.

GEOFFREY. Yes.

SIR. And keep your teeth in.

GEOFFREY. It's only when I'm nervous—

SIR. You will be nervous, I guarantee it. There will be no extra payment for this performance. I believe your contract is 'play as cast'.

GEOFFREY. Yes.

SIR. Good fortune attend your endeavours.

GEOFFREY. Thank you, Sir.

(SIR nods for him to leave. NORMAN sees him out)

NORMAN. God bless, Geoffrey.

GEOFFREY. I'd rather face the Nazi hordes any time. (HE goes)

SIR. I hope Mr Churchill has better men in the Cabinet.

That way, I'll this—he that first lights on him  
Holla the other.

MADGE. Go storm.

*(SHE switches a switch. The red cue light glows. Green warning light. The thunder begins, NORMAN and IRENE managing between them. SIR and GEOFFREY go on. HER LADYSHIP watches the stage. OXENBY stands apart, also watching. HER LADYSHIP runs to the thunder crew)*

SIR. Blow, winds, and crack your cheeks...! *(His voice is drowned by the noise of the storm)*

HER LADYSHIP. Louder! Louder! *(SHE returns to watch the stage as the thunder increases. HER LADYSHIP returns to the crew)* Louder, louder, he wants it louder!

*(The noise increases. NORMAN works frantically. HER LADYSHIP comes to them again)*

HER LADYSHIP. *(Contd)* Louder! Louder!

*(NORMAN and IRENE give all THEY have. OXENBY, who has been watching them, takes over the thunder sheet. HER LADYSHIP takes charge of the wind machine. The sound of a mighty tempest is reproduced. And when the sound is overpowering and at its loudest: blackout. SIR comes raging into the wings. Lights on SIR and NORMAN)*

seen you so full of the real thing, if you don't mind my saying so, Sir. And wasn't Geoffrey agile as Fool? For a man of his age. Kept well-down-stage, never once got in your light, much less obtrusive than Mr Davenport-Scott. In every way. And here's something funny. In the storm scene, when we were beating ourselves delirious, and I was having to jump between thunder-sheet and timpani like a juggler with rubber balls and Indian clubs, Mr Oxenby came to our aid uninvited. Cracked and clapped he did with abandon. Not a word said, just gave assistance when assistance was needed. Afterwards, just before the interval, I thanked him. "Get stuffed," he said which wasn't nice, and added scornfully, "I don't know why I helped." And I said, "Because we're a band of brothers, and you're one of us in spite of yourself." I did, that's what I said, quite unabashed. He hobbled away, head down, and if he was given to muttering, he'd have muttered. Darkly. *(Pause)* More tea? Are you asleep, Sir?

SIR. To be driven thus. I hate the swines.

NORMAN. Who? Who is it you hate? The critics?

SIR. The critics? Hate the critics? I have nothing but compassion for them. How can one hate the crippled, the mentally deficient and the dead? Bastards.

NORMAN. Who then?

SIR. Who then what?

NORMAN. Who then what is it you hate?

SIR. Let me rest, Norman, you must stop questioning me, let me rest. But don't leave me till I'm asleep. Don't leave me alone. *(Pause)* I am a spent force. *(Pause)* My days are numbered.

*(Silence. NORMAN watches him, then takes out his brandy bottle but finds it empty. HE tip-toes out of the room. In the corridor HE meets HER LADYSHIP, carrying a sewing-bag)*

HER LADYSHIP. Is he asleep?

NORMAN. I think so.

HER LADYSHIP. I'll sit with him.

NORMAN. Don't wake him, will you, your ladyship. He's ever so tired. *(HE goes. HER LADYSHIP enters SIR's dressing room and deliberately makes a noise. SIR starts)*

SIR. Is it my cue?

HER LADYSHIP. No. It's still the interval. *(SHE sits and begins to darn pairs of tights)* I have things to say.

SIR. Norman tells me you thought I was mighty tonight.

HER LADYSHIP. I never said anything of the kind. He makes these things up.

*(Pause)*

SIR. What have you to say?

HER LADYSHIP. What I always have to say.

SIR. You know my answer.

HER LADYSHIP. You've worked hard. You've saved. Enough's enough. Tonight, in your curtain speech, make the announcement.

SIR. I can't.

HER LADYSHIP. You won't.

SIR. I've no choice.

HER LADYSHIP. You'll die. Or end up a vegetable. Well, that's your affair. But you're not going to drag me with you.

SIR. I am helpless, Pussy. I do what I'm told. I cower, frightened of being whipped. I am driven.

HER LADYSHIP. Driven, no. Obstinate, yes, cruel, yes, ruthless, yes.

SIR. Don't.

HER LADYSHIP. You know where your priorities lie. Whatever you do is to your advantage and to no one else's. Talk about being driven. You make yourself sound like a disinterested stage-hand. You do nothing without self-interest. Self. You. Alone.

SIR. Pussy, please, I'm sinking, don't push me further into the mud—

HER LADYSHIP. Sir. Her Ladyship. Fantasies. For God's sake, you're a third-rate actor-manager on a tatty tour of the provinces, not some Colossus bestriding the narrow world. Sir. Her Ladyship. Look at me. Darning tights. Look at you. Lear's hovel is luxury compared to this.

SIR. I'm not well, I have half of Lear's lifetime yet to live, I have to lift you in my arms, I have howl, howl, howl yet to speak.

HER LADYSHIP. Sir. Her Ladyship. We're a laughing-stock. You'd never get a knighthood because the King doesn't possess a double-edged sword. The only honour you'll ever get is when you go on stage and we all bow.

*(Silence)*

SIR. I thought tonight I caught sight of him. Or saw myself as he sees me. Speaking 'Reason not the need,' I was suddenly detached from myself. My thoughts flew. And I was observing from a great height. Go on, you bastard, I seemed to be saying

the King, "But, Sir, I wasn't kneeling." Not once in his whole career did he put a toe outside London.

HER LADYSHIP. I liked America.

SIR. I shall never forgive them for what they wrote about me.

*(Knock on the door)*

IRENE. *(Off)* Act Two beginners, please, Sir.

SIR. I must rest now, Pussy. I want peace.

HER LADYSHIP. All you want is to have your cake and to eat it.

SIR. I've never seen any point in having cake unless one's going to eat it. *(HE laughs. NORMAN re-enters)*

NORMAN. Everything jolly?

SIR. Don't you know what knocking is?

NORMAN. Please, Sir, not in front of Her Ladyship. I've been mingling. You should hear what they think out there. I've never known an interval like it. Michelangelo, William Blake, God knows who else you reminded them of.

SIR. Michelangelo, did they?

NORMAN. And Blake.

HER LADYSHIP. I'm going to my room.

SIR. Please stay.

HER LADYSHIP. You must rest, Bonzo, mustn't he, Norman?

NORMAN. Yes, he must.

SIR. Pussy—

*(SHE goes)*

SIR. Be gentle with Her Ladyship.

NORMAN. I'm always gentle with Her Ladyship.

SIR. Especially gentle.

NORMAN. Why?

SIR. Time of life.

NORMAN. You mean hot flushes and dizzy spells.

SIR. She's become very preoccupied with herself.

NORMAN. Sounds like a bad attack of change.

SIR. Be gentle. I don't want her hurt.

NORMAN. Sleep now. Is there anything else you want?

SIR. Only oblivion.

NORMAN. That'll come sooner or later and I hope later. I'll wake you in plenty of time so you can enter fantastically dressed in wild flowers. Sleep tight, don't let the fleas bite. *(HE goes. SIR suddenly starts, rises, finds his exercise book and, straining to see, begins to write. IRENE knocks gently on the door)*

SIR. Who?

IRENE. Irene. I'm returning the triple crown, Sir.

SIR. Come.

*(SHE enters the room)*

SIR. Put it down.

*(SHE does so. HE continues to write. Pause)*

IRENE. Sir, will it disturb you if I say something?

SIR. It depends on what it is.

IRENE. I just wanted to thank you.

SIR. For what?

IRENE. The performance this evening.

IRENE. I'm not telling you—

*(HE grabs her closer and threatens to strike her)*

NORMAN. I'll mark you for life, ducky.

IRENE. You strike me and I'll tell him, I'll tell Sir, I'll tell Sir, I will, I'll tell Sir—

*(HE lets go of her)*

NORMAN. Tell Sir? On me? I quake in my boots. I shan't be able to eat my tea. Tell Sir? Gadzooks, madam, the thought of it, you telling Sir on me. Ducky, in his present state, which totters between confusion and chaos, to tell Sir anything at all would take a louder voice and clearer diction than that possessed by the most junior member of this Shakespearean troupe, the assistant stage-manager, dog's body, general understudy, map-carrier and company mattress, namely you. You won't be able to tell Sir you'd let him touch your tits on a Thursday matinee in Aberystwyth. Tell Sir. You think I don't know the game? You think I've dressed the rotten bugger for sixteen bloody years, nursed him, spoiled him, washed his sweat-sodden doublet and hose and his foul underpants night after night without knowing every twist and turn of what is laughingly known as his mind? Never mind tell Sir. I'll tell you. He did something, something unseen and furtive, something that gave him pleasure. "That's more like it!" More like what, Irene? I have to know all that occurs. I have to know all he does.

SIR. A good woman. (SIR applies cold cream slowly and wearily and when the mask is covered and the colours a blur, HE lets out a sudden moan and cannot apparently move)

NORMAN. Sir, what is it, Sir?

(SIR moans)

SIR. I'm—I'm tired. Terribly tired. The room is spinning. I—I must lie down

(NORMAN quickly helps him to the couch. SIR lies back)

SIR. See if you can get me a taxi in this Godforsaken place.

NORMAN. All in good time. (No response. NORMAN takes cotton wool and begins to clean SIR's face. SIR begins to cry) Don't cry. Don't cry.

SIR. There's nothing left.

NORMAN Stop that at once.

SIR. I've begun *My Life*.

NORMAN. What?

SIR. Fetch it. The book. I made a start—

(NORMAN brings it to him)

SIR. Find the place.

(NORMAN pages through the book)

NORMAN. You didn't get very far—

SIR. What did I write?

NORMAN. (HE *reads*) My Life. Dedication. This book is dedicated to My Beloved Pussy who has been my splended spur. To the spirit of all actors because of their faith and endurance which never fails them. To Those who do the work of the theatre yet have but small share in its glory: Carpenters, Electricians, Scene-shifters, Property men. To the Audiences who have laughed with us, have wept with us and whose hearts have united with ours in sympathy and understanding. And finally—ah Sir—to the memory of William Shakespeare in whose glorious service we all labour.

(*Silence*)

SIR. *My Life* will have to do.

(*Silence*)

NORMAN. Wait a moment, wait a moment—(HE *re-reads the passage*) "Carpenters, electricians, property-men..." But Sir, Sir—(NORMAN *looks at him*) Sir? Sir? (HE *shakes SIR gently. A long pause*) We're not dead are we? (*Silence. For the first time NORMAN's drunkenness shows physically. HE staggers, almost falls—*) You're right. The room is spinning. (HE *regains his balance, stands staring at SIR, then is seized by terror and panic. HE stumbles, to the door—*) Your ladyship! Madge! Anybody! (HE *stands in the doorway, whimpering. MADGE hurries into the corridor, then past him into the dressing room. NORMAN takes a step inside and watches her. MADGE looks down at SIR. SHE is perfectly*

*still. SHE lets out a soft short cry but then controls herself. Silence*) Wasn't much of a death scene. Unremarkable and ever so short. For him.

*(MADGE turns away from the BODY)*

MADGE. Where's Her Ladyship?

NORMAN. Left before he did. Couldn't wait.

MADGE. I'll get a doctor.

NORMAN. Too late for a doctor, ducky.

*(MADGE takes SIR's Lear cloak and covers the BODY with it)*

NORMAN. What's to happen to me?

MADGE. Close the door. Wait outside.

NORMAN. You're nothing now, ducky. He took away your stripes. And mine. How could he be so bloody careless?

MADGE. Come away.

NORMAN. And then where will I go? Where? I'm nowhere out of my element. I don't want to end up running a boarding house in Westcliff-on-Sea. Or Colwyn Bay. What am I going to do?

MADGE. You can speak well of him.

NORMAN. Speak well of that old sod? I wouldn't give him a good character, not in a court of law. Ungrateful bastard. Silence, ducky. My lips are sealed.

MADGE. Get out. I don't want you in here.

NORMAN. Holy, holy, holy, is it? Are we in a shrine? No pissing on the altar—

MADGE. Stop it.

NORMAN. He never once took me out for a meal.