



Manitoba Theatre for Young People

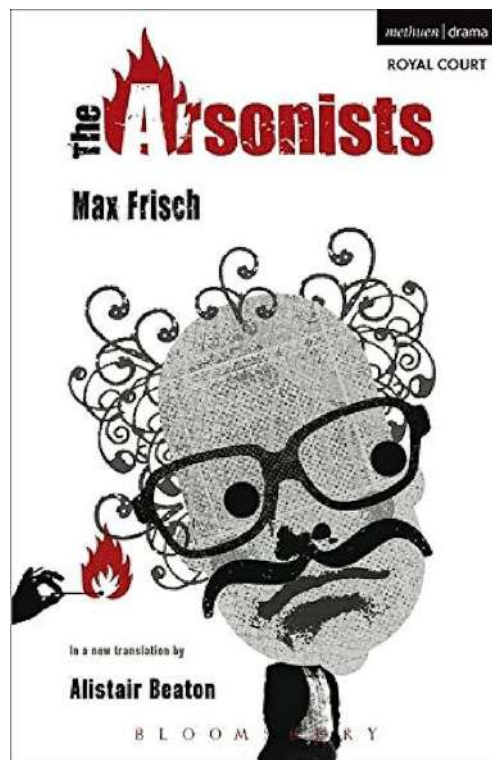
YOUNG COMPANY 2023-2024

AUDITION GUIDE

The Arsonists: A Moral Play Without a Moral

Written by Max Frisch, Translation by Alistair Beaton

Directed by Anika Dowsett



ABOUT THE PLAY

THE ARSONISTS is a dark comedy set in a town that is regularly attacked by arsonists.

The central character, a businessman called Biedermann, is seen at the outset reading newspaper reports of arson, convinced that he could never be taken in. Within minutes, the first "hawker" has appeared (Schmitz), and through a combination of intimidation and persuasion, he talks his way into spending the night in the attic. As the play unfolds, a second arsonist appears (Eisenring), and before Biedermann can do anything to stop it, his attic is piled high with oil drums full of petrol. He even helps them to measure the detonating fuse and gives them matches, refusing to believe the full horror of what is happening. He soon becomes an accomplice in his own downfall.

The action is observed by a Greek-style chorus of "firemen" who comment on Beidermann's actions.

THE ARSONISTS will be directed by long-time MTYP Instructor Anika Dowsett.

AUDITION REQUIREMENTS

- 1) Students must be between the ages of 13 to 18 as of December 1, 2023
- 2) Students must submit a resume and headshot to theatreschool@mtyp no later than 24 hours before their audition time.
- 3) Students must be familiar with the play and the "sides" (i.e. excerpts from the play) attached to this Audition Guide. **No memorization of this material is necessary.**
- 4) Students should wear comfortable clothes to move in
- 5) Students should be prepared to answer the following questions: "What is something that makes you laugh?" "What is something that makes you angry?" "What does it mean to you to be respectable?"
- 6) **Students AND Parents/Caregivers must fill out the "Letter of Commitment" BEFORE they audition located here:**

<https://forms.gle/an1nuXzgoRuAiPPc6>

- 7) **Students must register for an audition time here:**

<https://forms.gle/P1D2wdUEQ7hM6ADW6>

AUDITION TIMES AND FORMAT

This is an ensemble play with a heavy focus on choral work and physical comedy. Casting will be 'gender blind'. We are auditioning students in groups of five.

DATES/TIMES

Auditions will be held on:

Tuesday, September 5, 2023 and
Wed September 6, 2023

Auditions will be 45 min to 1 hour in length

To sign up for audition go click here:

<https://forms.gle/P1D2wdUEQ7hM6ADW6>

Sign up times are FINAL. You cannot change a sign up time, so please ensure you can make it!

TERMS:

Résumé: a one-page summary of your experience in theatre and/or film. Include your name, phone number and/or email, acting experience (indicate the name of production or film, your role, the name of the director, and the school, theatre or production company), relevant training (classes, lessons and workshops) and special skills.

Head Shot: a *recent* photo from the shoulders to the top of the head, to help identify the student. Normally printed on 8x10 paper, a high res image should be sent along with the resume.

IMPORTANT INFO BEFORE YOU BOOK AN AUDITION

The commitment level for these courses is high – students are expected to miss no more than **two prearranged rehearsals or classes** for the entirety of the process

WHAT HAPPENS IF I GET INTO THE COMPANY?

We will let you know shortly after your audition whether you have a spot in the company. If you do, we will ask you to register for the course at that time.

WHAT HAPPENS IF I DON'T?

If you don't get into one of the companies, we will offer you a 20% discount on one course at MTYP!

CAN I AUDITION FOR BOTH YOUNG COMPANY AND MUSICAL THEATRE COMPANY?

Yes.

Any other questions? Please contact theatreschool@mtyp.ca

FOR THE ROYAL COURT

Royal Court Theatre, Sloane Square, London SW1W 8AS
Tel: 020 7565 5050 Fax: 020 7565 5001
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www.royalcourttheatre.com

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Associate Directors **Ramin Gray, Sacha Wares***
Artistic Associate **Emily McLaughlin**
Trainee Associate Director **Lyndsey Turner†**
Artistic Assistant **Rebecca Hanna-Grindall**

Literary Manager **Ruth Little**
Literary Associate **Terry Johnson***
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International Administrator **Chris James**
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YWP Administrator **Nina Lyndon**
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Writers' Tutor **Leo Butler***

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Head of Lighting **Johanna Town**
Lighting Deputy **Nield Brown**
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Lighting Board Operator **Joe Hicks**
Head of Stage **Steven Scudder**
Stage Deputy **Duncan Russell**
Stage Chargehand **Lee Crimmen**
Chargehand Carpenter **Richard Martin**
Head of Sound **Ian Dickinson**
Sound Deputy **David McSeveney**
Sound Operator **Alex Caplan**
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Thanks to all of our box office assistants, ushers and bar staff.

* Sacha Wares' post is supported by the BBC through the Gerald Chapman Fund.

‡ The Trainee Associate Director Bursary is supported by the Quercus Trust.

† This theatre has the support of the Pearson Playwrights' scheme, sponsored by the Peggy Ramsey Foundation.

* Part-time.

Council
Chairman **Anthony Burton**
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James Midgley
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Alan Rickman
Anita Scott
Katharine Viner
Stewart Wood

The Arsonists

A moral play without a moral

Characters

Gottlieb Biedermann

Babette, his wife

Anna, a maidservant

Schmitz, a wrestler

Eisenring, a waiter

Policeman

Mrs Knechtling

Doctor of Philosophy

Firemen's Leader

Chorus of Firemen

Settings

A living room

An attic

Prologue

*The stage is dark, then we see **Biedermann's** face as he lights a cigarette. Immediately he has lit it, **Firemen** in helmets appear threateningly all around him.*

Biedermann It's not easy these days, lighting a cigarette.

Pause.

Everyone thinks the whole world's about to go up in flames.

Pause.

Don't you just hate it?

Biedermann *hides the lit cigarette and slips away, whereupon the **Firemen** step forward in the manner of a Greek chorus.*

A church clock strikes a quarter past the hour.

Chorus

Citizens of this town

Observe us, the guardians of this town,

Watching

Listening

Always well disposed

Towards the well-disposed citizen.

Leader

Who in the end pays our wages.

Chorus

Our equipment all gleaming,

We circle your home

Watchful

Yet never thinking the worst.

Leader

Sometimes we stop,

Take the weight off our feet,

But never in order to sleep.

We are untiring.

Chorus

Watching
Listening
So the combustible threat
Hidden from sight
Is revealed
Before it's too late
To put out the flames.

The church clock strikes the half-hour.

Leader

Many things burn
But not every fire
Is determined by fate.
Sometimes the fire
Can be prevented.

Chorus

It's only human
To talk about fate.
Fate means we don't need to ask
Why the city is burning
No need to ask how the terror began.

Leader

It's only human,

Chorus

It's all too human,

Leader

To wipe out a few human beings.

The church clock strikes three-quarters.

Chorus

Reason can save us from evil.

Leader

That's right.

Chorus

It's unworthy of God

And unworthy of man
If the nonsense that happens
Is put down to fate
Just because it has happened.

If humans start thinking like that
Then they will not deserve
Their place on this earth
This generous earth
That is fruitful and gracious to man.
They will not deserve
Their place in the sun
They will not deserve
The air that they breathe.

If the nonsense that happens
Is put down to fate
Just because it has happened
Then the flames may rise
To the point where nobody knows
How to put out the fire.

Leader

Our watch has begun.

The Chorus sits down, while the clock strikes nine.

Scene One

Living room.

Gottlieb Biedermann is sitting in his living room, reading the newspaper and smoking a cigarette. **Anna**, the maidservant, wearing a little white apron, brings a bottle of wine.

Anna Mr Biedermann?

No reply.

Mr Biedermann –

He folds the newspaper up.

Biedermann Firebombers again. They should hang the lot of them. I've said it before and I'll say it again. Hang the lot of them. It's the same story every time: someone at the door trying to sell you something, ends up being invited in. Wangles his way into staying overnight. Gets offered a corner of the attic to sleep in. Incredible . . .

He takes the bottle.

They should hang the lot of them!

He takes the corkscrew.

Anna Mr Biedermann —

Biedermann What is it?

Anna He's still there.

Biedermann Who's still there?

Anna The man waiting in the hall. He wants to speak to you.

Biedermann Say I'm not at home.

Anna I told him that, Mr Biedermann, I told him that about an hour ago. He says he knows you. I can't throw him out on the street, sir, I just can't.

Biedermann Why not?

Anna He's too big.

Biedermann *uncorks the bottle.*

Biedermann Tell him to come to my office tomorrow.

Anna I've told him that at least three times, Mr Biedermann, but he's not interested in coming to your office.

Biedermann Why not?

Anna He says he doesn't want any of your hair rejuvenator.

Biedermann What does he want then?

Anna A little humanity.

Biedermann *sniffs at the cork.*

Biedermann Tell him to clear off right now, or I'll throw him out myself.

He carefully pours wine into his burgundy glass.

A little humanity . . .

He tastes the wine.

He can wait in the hall. I'll be there in a minute. I'm not insensitive, but . . . I'm not insensitive, Anna, you know that, but I won't let strangers into the house. If I've told you once, I've told you a hundred times. Even if we had *three* spare beds, it still wouldn't be on. I'm sorry, it's just not on. You know what that leads to — these days . . .

Anna makes to leave, but sees that Schmitz has just entered. He is athletic, his clothing half reminiscent of prison and half reminiscent of the circus. He has a tattoo on one arm, leather cuffs round his wrists. Anna slips out. Schmitz waits till Biedermann has tasted his wine and turned round.

Schmitz Good evening.

An astonished Biedermann drops his cigar.

Schmitz Your cigar, Mr Biedermann.

He picks up the cigar and gives it to Biedermann

Biedermann Now wait a minute —

Schmitz Good evening!

Biedermann What's going on? I told my maid very clearly that you were to wait in the hall. How — well, I mean . . . you didn't even knock . . .

Schmitz My name is Schmitz.

Biedermann You didn't even knock.

Schmitz Josef Schmitz.

Silence.

Good evening!

Biedermann What is it you want?

Schmitz No cause for alarm, Mr Biedermann. I'm not trying to sell you anything.

Biedermann Who are you then?

Schmitz Wrestler by profession,

Biedermann Wrestler?

Schmitz Heavyweight.

Biedermann I see.

Schmitz Well, used to be a wrestler.

Biedermann And now?

Schmitz Unemployed.

Pause.

No cause for alarm, Mr Biedermann. I'm not looking for work. Not wrestling work, anyway. I've gone off wrestling . . . Only came here to get out of the rain.

Pause.

It's warmer in here.

Pause.

I hope I'm not disturbing you?

Pause.

Biedermann Do you smoke?

He offers cigars.

Schmitz You don't know what it's like for me, Mr Biedermann, being this big. Everybody's afraid of me . . . Thanks.

Biedermann *gives him a light.*

Schmitz Thanks.

They stand and smoke.

Biedermann I'll come straight to the point. What do you want?

Schmitz My name is Schmitz.

Biedermann So you said. Lovely to meet you, but –

Schmitz I'm homeless.

He savours the cigar.

I'm homeless.

Biedermann Would you like – some bread?

Schmitz If that's all you have . . .

Biedermann Or a glass of wine?

Schmitz Ah, the bread and the wine . . . But not if I'm disturbing you, Mr Biedermann, not if I'm disturbing you.

Biedermann *goes to the door.*

Biedermann Anna!

He comes back.

Schmitz That girl said you were going to throw me out. But I thought, no, I thought, Mr Biedermann wouldn't do a thing like that.

Anna *has entered.*

Biedermann Anna, bring another glass.

Anna Yes, Mr Biedermann.

Biedermann Oh, yes, and some bread –

Schmitz And if it's no trouble to the young lady, some butter. And some cheese, and perhaps a little cold meat. Something along those lines. But don't put yourself out. Oh, and a few gherkins, and maybe a tomato. And a little mustard. Just whatever you happen to have.

Anna I'll see what I can do.

Schmitz But don't put yourself out.

Anna leaves.

Biedermann You told her you knew me.

Schmitz Indeed I do, Mr Biedermann, indeed I do.

Biedermann Where from?

Schmitz Only from your good side, Mr Biedermann. Yes, I have seen your good side.

Biedermann Oh?

Schmitz Last night in the café, at your usual table. You wouldn't have seen me, I was in the corner. I must say, we all loved it every time you banged your fist.

Biedermann What was I saying?

Schmitz The right thing.

He smokes his cigarette, then:

They should hang the lot of them. Every last one. The sooner the better. String them up. The arsonists, I mean.

Biedermann *offers him a seat.*

Biedermann Please –

Schmitz *sits down.*

Schmitz Men like you, Mr Biedermann, that's exactly what we need.

Biedermann Yes, that's true of course, but –

Schmitz No buts, Mr Biedermann. No buts. They don't make them like you any more. You still have a positive attitude. It follows.

Biedermann True –

Schmitz You still have civic courage.

Biedermann Yes –

Schmitz You see? It follows.

Biedermann Yes. What follows?

Schmitz Well, you still have a conscience. As everyone in that café could tell. A genuine conscience.

Biedermann Well, yes, naturally, I –

Schmitz But it's not natural, Mr Biedermann. Not these days. Take the circus where I used to work as a wrestler – the one that got burnt down – my boss there, if I ever mentioned conscience, he used to say, you must be joking. You must be joking, he used to say. Joe, he would say – that's short for Josef – Joe, he would say, what do I need a conscience for? That's what he would say, straight out. For circus animals I need a whip, not a conscience, he'd say. That's the sort of man he was. A conscience, he'd always say, don't make me laugh. If anyone has a conscience, it's normally a bad conscience. That's what he'd say.

He relishes the cigar.

May he rest in peace.

Biedermann He's dead?

Schmitz Burnt to death. Along with everything he owned.

A grandfather clock strikes nine.

Biedermann I don't know why that girl's taking so long.

Schmitz I'm not in a hurry –

They suddenly happen to look one another in the eye.

And you don't have a spare bed. As the maid explained.

Biedermann Why are you laughing?

Schmitz 'No spare bed, unfortunately.' You see, that's what they all say. The minute a homeless man comes to the door and – not that I'm asking for a bed.

Biedermann No?

Schmitz I'm used to sleeping on the floor, Mr Biedermann. My father was a miner, you see. I'm used to it . . .

He blows the smoke out.

No buts, Mr Biedermann, no buts. You're not one of those men who talk big to hide how scared they are. Not you, Mr Biedermann. 'No spare bed, unfortunately.' As they all say. But you, Mr Biedermann, I take your word for it. I believe you. Where will it all end if we stop believing one another? That's what I say, where will it all end, eh? Everybody thinking the other bloke is an arsonist. Nothing but mutual suspicion in the world. Am I right? Yesterday the whole café could tell that you still believe in the goodness of people, not to mention the goodness within yourself. Am I right? You're the first person in this town who doesn't treat me as if I'm no better than an arsonist.

Biedermann Have an ashtray.

Schmitz Am I right?

He carefully flicks ash into the ashtray.

These days most people don't believe in God. They believe in the fire brigade.

Biedermann What do you mean by that?

Schmitz The truth.

Anna enters with a tray.

Anna There's no cold meat.

Schmitz That's all right, darling, there's enough there. *(Beat.)* You forgot the mustard.

Anna I'm sorry.

She leaves.

Biedermann Eat up!

He fills their glasses.

Schmitz You don't get this kind of welcome just anywhere these days, you know. The things I've seen . . . People like me, no suit to wear, no place to live, nothing to eat, we're hardly

through the door and it's 'Do take a seat' while behind your back they're calling the police. What do you think of that, eh? I ask for a place to stay, nothing more, me a decent, well-behaved wrestler, who's wrestled for years, then some well-dressed bloke who's never wrestled in his life grabs me by the scruff of the neck . . . What's that for? I ask, and all I do is turn round so I can look him in the face and - and, oh dear, look, he's acquired a dislocated shoulder.

He takes the glass.

Cheers!

They drink, and Schmitz begins to eat.

Biedermann I'll tell you what it's like these days. You open a newspaper and there you are, another house burnt down. And it's always the same old story, it's incredible. A complete stranger comes to the door, asks for a bed for the night, and the next day the house is in flames. What I mean is, well, to be perfectly frank, a certain degree of mistrust is understandable.

He reaches for his newspaper.

Take a look for yourself.

He lays the open newspaper beside Schmitz's plate.

Schmitz I've seen it.

Biedermann An entire district.

He gets up from his chair to show it to Schmitz.

Biedermann Go on. Read it.

Schmitz *eats and drinks and reads.*

Schmitz Is this a Beaujolais?

Biedermann Yes.

Schmitz Could be a little warmer . . .

Across his plate, he reads the paper.

'The fire appears to have been planned in exactly the same way as last time.'

They look at one another.

Biedermann It's incredible, isn't it?

Schmitz (*putting newspaper aside*) That's why I don't read newspapers.

Biedermann How do you mean?

Schmitz It's always the same old stuff.

Biedermann Yes, yes, I can see that, of course, but it's no solution, is it, just not reading the papers? At the end of the day, you have to know what you're up against.

Schmitz Why?

Biedermann You just have to.

Schmitz Won't stop it happening.

He sniffs at the sausage.

It's God's judgement.

He cuts himself some sausage.

Biedermann Do you think so?

Anna *brings the mustard.*

Schmitz Thank you, darling, thank you.

Anna Anything else?

Schmitz Not today.

Anna *stops by the door.*

Schmitz I love mustard. It's my favourite.

He squeezes mustard from the tube.

Biedermann Why's it God's judgement?

Schmitz How should I know?

He eats, and looks at the newspaper again.

'According to experts, the fire appears to have been planned in exactly the same way as last time.'

He laughs briefly, then fills his glass with wine.

Anna Mr Biedermann?

Biedermann What is it?

Anna Mr Knechtling would like to speak to you.

Biedermann Knechtling? Now? Knechtling?

Anna He says –

Biedermann It's not possible now.

Anna He says he can't understand why you –

Biedermann What does he need to understand?

Anna Apparently he has a sick wife and three children.

Biedermann No, it's completely out of the question.

He stands up impatiently.

Mr Knechtling! Mr Knechtling! Bloody hell. Either Mr Knechtling can leave me alone, or he can go and find himself a lawyer. Anyway, it's outside office hours. Mr Knechtling! I'm not putting up with this behaviour just because a man's lost his job. It's ridiculous. And there is social security, in case he hasn't noticed. Better benefits than ever before . . . Yes, he can go and talk to a lawyer, and I'll do the same. A share of the profits from his invention! What a load of rubbish. He can go and stick his head in an oven or find himself a lawyer, whichever he prefers. If he can afford a lawyer. But if that's what he wants, fine, he can go right ahead.

He looks at Schmitz and regains control.

Biedermann Tell him I have a visitor.

Anna *leaves.*

Biedermann I'm so sorry.

Schmitz You're in your own home, Mr Biedermann.

Biedermann How's the food?

He sits down and watches his guest enjoy the food.

Schmitz Who would have thought it, eh? Who'd have thought you'd still find something like this?

Biedermann Mustard?

Schmitz Humanity.

He puts the cap back on the tube of mustard.

All I mean is, you're not grabbing me by the scruff of the neck and throwing me out on the street, out in the rain, now are you? You see, that's what we need, Mr Biedermann, a little humanity.

He takes the bottle and pours himself some wine.

God bless.

He drinks, obviously enjoying it.

Biedermann I don't want you to think I'm insensitive . . .

Schmitz Mr Biedermann!

Biedermann That's what Mrs Knechtling is saying, you see.

Schmitz If you were insensitive, you wouldn't be offering me a bed for the night, now would you?

Biedermann That's true.

Schmitz Even if it's only a corner of the attic.

He puts down his glass.

The wine's about right now.

The doorbell rings.

Schmitz Police?

Biedermann My wife.

Schmitz Oh.

The bell rings again.

Biedermann Come on. But on one condition. Not a sound out of you. My wife has a heart complaint.

We hear women's voices outside. Biedermann gestures to Schmitz to hurry up, and helps clear away the tray, glass and bottle, which they take with them as they tiptoe off left, where the Chorus is sitting

Biedermann Excuse me.

He climbs over the bench on which the Chorus is sitting

Biedermann Excuse me.

They leave, while Babette enters from the right, accompanied by Anna, who takes her things from her.

Babette Where's my husband? You know, Anna, we're not narrow-minded. You can have a boyfriend, but I don't want you sneaking him into the house.

Anna Mrs Biedermann, I don't have a boyfriend.

Babette Then whose is that bike outside the front door? It scared me to death -

Attic.

Biedermann *snaps the light on. We see the loft space. He waves to Schmitz to come in. They talk in a whisper.*

Biedermann The switch is here . . . If you're cold, there's an old sheepskin jacket somewhere, I think . . . Keep it quiet, for God's sake! . . . Take your shoes off!

Schmitz *puts the tray down and takes one shoe off*

Biedermann Mr Schmitz -

Schmitz Mr Biedermann?

Biedermann You promise me, you're really not an arsonist?

Schmitz *laughs.*

Biedermann Shhh!

He nods goodnight, goes out and closes the door. Schmitz takes his other shoe off.

Living room.

Babette, *crossing the stage, has heard something. She looks up, horrified. Then, suddenly relieved, she turns to the audience.*

Babette Gottlieb – that's my husband – Gottlieb has promised me he'll personally check the attic on a nightly basis, to make sure there are no arsonists up there. I can't tell you how grateful I am. I mean, otherwise I wouldn't sleep a wink.

Attic.

Schmitz, *now in socks, goes to the light switch and puts the light out.*

Chorus

Citizens of this town,
See how we watch over you,
Guarding your innocence.
Still watchful
Yet still not thinking the worst,
Well disposed towards the slumbering town,
Sitting,
Standing –

Leader

Sometimes lighting a roll-up to help pass the time.

Chorus

Watching
Listening
To make sure no flames
Burst out through the roofs
And lay waste to our town.

A clock tower strikes three.

Leader

Everyone knows we're here,
Just give us a shout.

He rolls his cigarette.

Chorus

Who's switching on lights

In the downstairs rooms
At this time of night?
It's Biedermann's wife,
A bundle of nerves,
Sleepless and wretched.

Babette *appears in a dressing gown.*

Babette Somebody's coughing!

We hear snoring

Gottlieb! Don't you hear it?

We hear coughing

There's somebody there!

We hear snoring

Men! First sign of trouble, what do they do? They take a sleeping pill.

The clock tower strikes four.

Leader

It's four o'clock.

Babette *puts the light out.*

Leader

And nobody's called us.

He puts his roll-up away. In the background it grows light.

Chorus

First rays of the sun,
One blink of God's eye,
The roofs appear,
And it's daylight again.
All hail the firefighters!
The town has survived
One more night.
All hail the firefighters!

The Chorus sits down.

Scene Two

Living room.

Biedermann *is standing with coat and hat on, leather briefcase under his arm. He is drinking his morning coffee and talking to somebody offstage.*

Biedermann For the last time. He is not an arsonist!

Babette *(off)* How do you know?

Biedermann I asked him. And anyway, can we please talk about something else for a change? It's driving me mad, you and your arsonists, on and on and on.

Babette *enters with a milk jug.*

Biedermann It's driving me mad!

Babette Don't shout at me.

Biedermann I'm not shouting at you, I'm just shouting in general.

She pours milk into his coffee.

I have to leave the house.

He drinks his coffee, which is too hot.

Where's it going to get us if we start thinking everyone's an arsonist? You need to have a bit of faith in people, Babette, a bit of trust -

He looks at his watch.

Babette I'm not having it, Gottlieb, I'm just not having it. You're too good-natured. You do what your heart tells you, while I have to lie awake worrying all night. I'll give him breakfast, but then I'm telling him to go.

Biedermann Do that.

Babette In a friendly sort of way. I don't want to hurt his feelings.

Biedermann Fine.

He puts down his cup.

I have to see my lawyer.

He gives Babette a routine kiss just as Schmitz appears, wearing a sheepskin jacket. They don't see him at first.

Babette Why did you fire Knechtling?

Biedermann Because I didn't need him any more.

Babette You were always so pleased with him.

Biedermann That's exactly what he's trying to exploit. A share of the profits from his invention! He knows very well what our hair rejuvenator is. Follica Plus is not an invention, it's a marketing opportunity. Follica Plus! The men who use it might as well be rubbing piss into their scalps.

Babette Gottlieb!

Biedermann Well, it's the truth.

He makes sure he has everything he needs in his briefcase.

You're right, I'm too good-natured. Knechtling. I'll wring his bloody neck.

About to leave, he sees Schmitz.

Schmitz Good morning, friends!

Biedermann Mr Schmitz -

Schmitz *extends his hand.*

Schmitz Please. Call me Joe.

Biedermann *does not offer his hand.*

Biedermann My wife will speak to you, Mr Schmitz. I have to go, I'm afraid. But I wish you all the best.

He shakes Schmitz's hand.

Biedermann All the best, Mr Schmitz, all the best!

He sets off.

Schmitz All the best, Gottlieb, all the best.

Babette *stares at him.*

Schmitz Your husband is called Gottlieb, isn't he?

Babette How did you sleep?

Schmitz Thank you, I was cold. But I took the liberty of borrowing a sheepskin jacket. Took me back to my youth. Oh yes, I'm used to the cold.

Babette Your breakfast's ready.

Schmitz Mrs Biedermann!

She indicates his chair.

I can't accept this!

She fills his cup.

Babette You eat up now, Joe. You probably have a long journey in front of you.

Schmitz Do I?

She indicates his chair again.

Babette Would you like a soft-boiled egg?

Schmitz Two, please.

Babette Anna!

Schmitz Ah, Mrs Biedermann, I really feel at home here. May I?

He sits down.

Anna *enters.*

Babette Two soft-boiled eggs.

Anna Very good.

Schmitz Three and a half minutes.

Anna Very good.

She makes to leave.

Schmitz Anna!

Anna *stops at the door.*

Schmitz Good morning!

Anna Morning (*Leaves.*)

Schmitz The way that girl looks at me. My God. If it were up to her, I'd be out in the pouring rain.

Babette *pours coffee for him.*

Babette Mr Schmitz —

Schmitz Yes?

Babette If I may be perfectly frank —

Schmitz Mrs Biedermann. You're trembling.

Babette Mr Schmitz —

Schmitz Is there a problem?

Babette Have some cheese.

Schmitz Thank you.

Babette Or some jam?

Schmitz Thank you.

Babette Or some honey?

Schmitz Oh, it's one thing after another, with you, Mrs Biedermann, one thing after another!

He leans back in his chair, eats his bread and butter, ready to listen.

What is it?

Babette To be perfectly frank, Mr Schmitz —

Schmitz Please. Call me Joe.

Babette To be perfectly frank —

Schmitz You want to get rid of me?

Babette No, Mr Schmitz, no! I wouldn't put it like that at all -

Schmitz How would you put it?

He takes some cheese.

I love Emmental. It's my favourite.

He leans back, eats, ready to listen.

So you think I'm an arsonist?

Babette No, don't get me wrong. What was it I said? The last thing I want to do is hurt your feelings, I assure you. You've got me all confused now. Nobody's saying anything about arsonists. I have no complaints about your behaviour, Mr Schmitz -

He puts down his cutlery.

Schmitz I know: I have no table manners.

Babette No, no, that's not what I'm saying.

Schmitz A man who eats like a pig.

Babette Nonsense.

Schmitz That's what they always told me in the orphanage. Schmitz, they used to say, stop eating like a pig.

Babette *takes the pot, to pour more coffee.*

Babette No, no, for heaven's sake, that's not what I meant at all.

Schmitz *(holding his hand over the cup)* I'm leaving.

Babette Mr Schmitz -

Schmitz I'm leaving.

Babette One more cup?

He shakes his head.

Half a cup?

He shakes his head.

You can't just leave like this, Mr Schmitz. I didn't mean to upset you. I never said you eat like a pig.

He gets up.

Have I upset you?

He folds up the napkin.

Schmitz It's not your fault I have no table manners. My father was a miner. Why should someone like me have table manners? Hunger and cold, I know how to handle hunger and cold, but - with no education, Mrs Biedermann, no manners, no culture . . .

Babette I understand.

Schmitz I'm off.

Babette Where will you go?

Schmitz Out into the rain . . .

Babette Oh, God.

Schmitz I'm used to it.

Babette Mr Schmitz . . . Please don't look at me like that . . . Your father was a miner, I quite understand. You probably had a terribly hard childhood.

Schmitz No, not really.

He drops his gaze and counts on his fingers.

My mother didn't die until I was . . . seven.

He turns round and wipes his eyes.

Babette Joe! - But, Joe . . .

Anna *comes with the boiled eggs.*

Anna Anything else?

She gets no answer, and leaves.

Babette I'm not sending you away, I never said I was sending you away. What did I say? Really, you've completely misunderstood. Oh, this is so terrible. What can I do to make you believe me?

After some hesitation, she takes him by the sleeve.

Come on, Joe, sit down and eat!

Schmitz *sits down at the table again.*

Babette What kind of people do you think we are? I never noticed that you eat like a pig, honestly. And even if you do, Gottlieb and I don't care about appearances, we're just not like that.

He slices the top off the egg

Schmitz God bless.

Babette Salt?

He eats the egg

Schmitz It's true. You haven't sent me away, absolutely not. I'm very sorry about the misunderstanding. Please forgive me . . .

Babette Is the egg right for you?

Schmitz A little too runny . . . Please forgive me.

He has finished the egg

So what were you about to say, earlier? Something about being perfectly frank . . .

Babette Yes, what was I about to say?

Schmitz *(slicing the top off the second egg)* God bless. Now, Billy, he always says that individual acts of kindness don't happen any more. There are no decent people any more, no human beings left. Kindness has become a function of the state. According to Billy. That's why the world's going down the pan.

He puts salt on his egg

I can't wait to see his face, when he gets given a breakfast like this. Yes, Billy's going to be over the moon.

The doorbell rings.

Maybe that's him now.

The doorbell rings.

Babette Billy? Who's Billy?

Schmitz He's a man of culture, you wait and see. He used to be a waiter at the Metropole. Before it was burnt down, of course.

Babette Burnt down?

Schmitz Head waiter.

Anna enters.

Babette Who is it?

Anna A gentleman.

Babette What does he want?

Anna He says he's from the insurance. Says he needs to do a safety check.

Babette *gets up.*

Anna Though he's dressed like a waiter.

Babette and Anna *go out. Schmitz pours himself some coffee.*

Schmitz Good old Billy.

Chorus

Now there are two
To arouse
Our suspicion.
Bicycles,
We wonder who they belong to . . .

Leader

One bike from yesterday
One from today.

Chorus

Woe unto us!

Leader

Again it is night
Again we keep watch.

A clock tower strikes.

Chorus

The timid see dangers
With no danger there.
They fear their own shadows.
Brave when it's only a rumour,
They stumble through life
Filled with fear,
Till one day the rumour
Walks in through the door.

The clock tower strikes.

Leader

How should I read it —
Those two not leaving the house?

The clock tower strikes.

Chorus

The timid are blind,
More blind than the blind.
Hoping the evil
Is not really evil,
They welcome the evil.
Defenceless, exhausted by fear,
They hope for the best . . .
Until it's too late.

The clock tower strikes.

Chorus

Woe unto us!

The Chorus sits down.

Scene Three

Attic.

Schmitz is still in his wrestler's costume, and **Eisenring** has taken off his waiter's jacket and is only wearing trousers and a waistcoat. Together they are rolling oil drums into the loft. These are metal drums, the kind used to transport fuel. Both men have taken off their shoes and are rolling the drums as quietly as possible.

Eisenring Shhh!

Schmitz What happens if he decides to call the police?

Eisenring A bit further.

Schmitz What will we do?

Eisenring Slowly, slowly . . . Stop.

They have now rolled the final drum up against the drums already there in the shadows. Eisenring wipes his hands on a rag.

Eisenring Why would he call the police?

Schmitz Why wouldn't he?

Eisenring Because he's guilty too.

We hear pigeons cooing.

Damn. It's getting light. Let's get some sleep.

He throws the rag away.

Every citizen is guilty, actually. Above a certain income. There's nothing to worry about.

There is a knocking at the bolted door.

Biedermann Open the door! Open the door!

He bangs and shakes the door.

Eisenring Doesn't quite sound like an invitation to breakfast, does it?

Biedermann Open the door! Immediately!

Schmitz He's never been like this before.

The banging and thumping gets louder. Eisenring puts his waiter's jacket back on, unhurried but nimble. He adjusts his tie, dusts himself down, then opens the door. In comes Biedermann in his dressing gown, not noticing the newcomer standing behind the door.

Biedermann Mr Schmitz!

Schmitz Good morning, Mr Biedermann, good morning. I hope that stupid rumbling noise didn't wake you.

Biedermann Mr Schmitz!

Schmitz I promise it won't happen again.

Biedermann Get out of my house.

Pause.

I said: get out of my house.

Schmitz When?

Biedermann This instant.

Schmitz Why?

Biedermann Otherwise my wife will call the police. I can't stop her and I won't stop her.

Schmitz Hmmm.

Biedermann You heard. This instant.

Pause.

What are you waiting for?

Schmitz, *silent, takes his shoes.*

Biedermann I don't want any discussion.

Schmitz I'm not saying a word.

Biedermann If you think there's no limit to what I'll put up with, just because you're a wrestler – well, my God, what a dreadful noise. All night long.

He points with outstretched arm to the door.

Get out! I'm telling you, get out!

Schmitz *calls across to Eisenring.*

Schmitz He's never been like this before.

Biedermann *turns and is speechless.*

Eisenring My name's Eisenring.

Biedermann Why are you – ?

Eisenring William Eisenring. Call me Billy.

Biedermann Why . . . why are there suddenly two of you?

Schmitz and Eisenring *look at one another.*

Biedermann Without even asking!

Eisenring You see?

Biedermann What's going on?

Eisenring I told you, didn't I? You just don't do that sort of thing, Joe. You have no manners. Without even asking! What sort of way is that to behave – suddenly two of us, without even asking?

Biedermann I'm really, really angry about this.

Eisenring You see? He's really, really angry about this.

He turns to Biedermann.

Eisenring I told him.

He turns to Schmitz.

Eisenring I told you, didn't I?

Schmitz *is ashamed.*

Biedermann What on earth do you think you're doing? At the end of the day, I'm the homeowner. I'm asking you: what do you think you're doing?

Pause.

Eisenring Answer when the gentleman speaks to you!
Pause.

Schmitz Well, you see, Billy is my friend.

Biedermann Go on.

Schmitz We went to school together. As children.

Biedermann And?

Schmitz So I thought . . .

Biedermann You thought what?

Pause.

Eisenring You didn't think at all!

He turns to Biedermann.

Eisenring I understand completely. There's a time and a place for everything, but in the end -

He shouts at Schmitz.

Eisenring Do you think a man who owns his own house should put up with this kind of behaviour?

He turns to Biedermann.

Eisenring He didn't even ask you, is that right?

Biedermann Never mentioned it.

Eisenring Joe -

Biedermann Never mentioned it.

Eisenring And you're surprised when people throw you out on the street?

He shakes his head and laughs as if Schmitz is an idiot.

Biedermann It's no laughing matter! I'm very serious about this. My wife has a heart condition -

Eisenring You see?

Biedermann She was awake half the night, with that awful noise. What on earth are you doing?

He looks around him.

What in God's name are those oil drums for?

Schmitz and Eisenring stare into a corner without drums.

Biedermann No, here. Over here! What's this?

Knocks on one of the drums.

What is it?

Schmitz It's an oil drum.

Biedermann And where have the oil drums come from?

Schmitz Do you know where they've come from, Billy?

Eisenring They're imported. Says on them.

Biedermann Now listen -

Eisenring Somewhere.

Eisenring and Schmitz look for the label.

Biedermann I don't believe this. What do you think you're doing? The attic filled with oil drums. Piled high. Look. They're piled high.

Eisenring Yes. They are.

Biedermann Well . . . why?

Eisenring Joe got his figures wrong. Twelve metres by fifteen, you said, and in fact the whole attic can't be more than a hundred square metres. I think you'll understand I can't just leave my oil drums out on the street.

Biedermann I don't understand a thing.

Schmitz shows him a label.

Schmitz Here it is, Mr Biedermann, look, here's the label!

Biedermann I don't believe this.

Schmitz Here it is. Where they come from. Here.

Biedermann I just don't believe it. (*Looks at the label.*)

Living room.

Anna leads a **Policeman** into the living room.

Anna I'll call him.

She goes and the Policeman waits.

Attic.

Biedermann *Petrol?*

Living room.

Anna comes back.

Anna What was it about, officer?

Policeman It's an official matter.

Anna goes and the **Policeman** waits.

Attic.

Biedermann Is this true? Is it?

Eisenring Is what true?

Biedermann What it says on the label!

He shows them the label.

How stupid do you think I am? Honestly. Do you think I can't read?

They look at the label.

Well?

He laughs at the outrageousness of it all.

Petrol! All right, all right.

In the sombre tones of an investigating judge:

What is in these metal drums?

Eisenring Petrol.

Biedermann I'm not in the mood for jokes. I'm asking you for the last time: what is in these drums? You know as well as I do that an attic isn't the place to store petrol.

He runs a finger over a drum.

Here. Smell it.

He holds his finger under their noses.

Is that petrol or is it not petrol?

They sniff, then look at one another.

Answer me!

Eisenring It's petrol.

Schmitz It's petrol.

Eisenring and Schmitz It's definitely petrol.

Biedermann Are you mad? The whole attic full of petrol?

Schmitz That's why we're not smoking.

Biedermann Don't you know the papers are full of warnings about this sort of thing? What do you think you're doing? My wife will have a fit.

Eisenring You see?

Biedermann Will you stop saying that?!

Eisenring You can't do that to a housewife, Joe. I know a thing or two about housewives -

Anna (*calling from the stairwell*) Mr Biedermann! Mr Biedermann!

Biedermann shuts the door.

Biedermann Mr Schmitz! Mr . . .

Eisenring Eisenring.

Biedermann If you don't get these drums out of the house right now - and I mean right now - then -

Eisenring Then you'll call the police.

Biedermann Yes.

Schmitz You see?

Anna (*calls*) Mr Biedermann!

Biedermann (*whispers*) That's my last word on the matter!

Eisenring Which word was that?

Biedermann I am not having petrol in my attic! Do you understand?! I'm not having it!

Somebody knocks at the door.

Coming.

He opens the door to leave and the Policeman enters.

Policeman Ah, here you are, Mr Biedermann, found you at last, sir. No need to come downstairs, I shan't take up much of your time.

Biedermann Good morning!

Policeman Good morning!

Eisenring Morning . . .

Schmitz Morning . . .

Schmitz and Eisenring *bow.*

Policeman It's concerning an accident -

Biedermann Oh my God.

Policeman Occurring to an elderly gentleman. His wife claims he used to work for you. As an inventor. Last night the said gentleman put his head in a gas oven.

He checks his notepad.

Name of Knechtling, Johan . . . residing at Number Eleven, Steed Street.

He puts his notepad away.

Were you acquainted with the deceased?

Biedermann I . . .

Policeman Perhaps you would prefer to have this conversation in private, sir?

Biedermann Yes.

Policeman After all, it's nothing to do with your employees.

Biedermann Quite.

He remains standing in the doorway.

If anyone's looking for me, I'm with the police. Understood? I'll be right back.

Schmitz and Eisenring *nod.*

Policeman Mr Biedermann -

Biedermann Let's go.

Policeman What have you got in those drums?

Biedermann Me?

Policeman If I might ask.

Biedermann Hair rejuvenator.

He looks at Schmitz and Eisenring.

Eisenring Follica Plus.

Schmitz Good news for men.

Eisenring Follica Plus.

Schmitz At last, the answer to baldness.

Eisenring Follica Plus.

Schmitz Hair today, hair tomorrow.

Eisenring and Schmitz Follica Plus! Follica Plus! Follica Plus!

The Policeman laughs.

Biedermann Is he dead?

Biedermann and the Policeman leave.

Eisenring What a nice man.

Schmitz Didn't I tell you?

Eisenring Nothing about breakfast, though.

Schmitz He's never been like this before . . .

Eisenring reaches into his trouser pocket.

Eisenring Have you got the detonator?

Schmitz reaches into his trouser pocket.

Schmitz Never been like this before . . .

Chorus

First rays of the sun,
One blink of God's eye,
Rooftops appear,
And it's daylight again.

Leader

Today as it was yesterday.

Chorus

All hail the firefighters!

Leader

The town has survived.

Chorus

All hail the firefighters!

Leader

The town has survived
One more night.

Chorus

All hail the firefighters!

Noise of traffic, hooting of horns, a tram.

Leader

To overcome danger
We need to be smart

And think about what we observe.
By staying alert
We'll see signs of disaster
And act in good time –
If we want to.

Chorus

And what if we don't?

Leader

In order to know
What dangers we face
We open our newspapers daily.
Each morning at breakfast
Appalled by distant events
We let others explain what is happening,
So we're never required
To think for ourselves.
Daily discovering
What happened yesterday
Far, far away,
We fail to see clearly
What's happening right now
Under our noses
Under our roofs.

Chorus

Unpublished.

Leader

Obvious.

Chorus

Outrageous.

Leader

Real.

Chorus

Not keen to look at it
Otherwise –

The Leader interrupts with a gesture.

Leader

He's coming.

The Chorus swings round.

Chorus

The town has survived one more night,
 Today as it was yesterday.
 Watch as the citizen
 Shining and shaved
 Dashes to work
 Forgetting the imminent danger.

Biedermann enters in coat and hat, briefcase under his arm.

Biedermann Taxi! . . . Taxi? . . . Taxi!

The Chorus stands in his way.

Biedermann What's going on?

Chorus

Woe unto us.

Biedermann What can I do for you?

Chorus

Woe unto us.

Biedermann So you said.

Chorus

Woe unto us.

Biedermann Why?

Leader

We've seen something highly suspicious
 Something inflammable
 You've seen it too.
 What do we make of it?

Something inflammable
 Up in the attic.
 Drums of petrol
 Up in the attic.

Biedermann (*shouting*) What's it got to do with you?!

Silence.

Let me through. — I need to see my lawyer. What do you want?
 I'm innocent . . .

He is scared.

What is this? An interrogation?

He shows masterful certainty.

Just let me through, all right?

The Chorus stands motionless.

Chorus

The Chorus should not sit in judgement
 On citizens ready to act.
 It wouldn't be right.

Leader

Eyeing events from the sidelines,
 The Chorus is quicker to grasp
 The imminent danger.

Chorus

As choruses do, we draw near,
 Politely posing our questions,
 Powerless, watchful,
 Showing concern,
 Issuing warnings,
 Bathed in cold sweat,
 Till it's too late to put out the flames,
 Till even the firefighters
 Cannot put out the flames.

Biedermann looks at his watch.

Biedermann I'm in a hurry.

Chorus

Woe unto us.

Biedermann I really don't know what you want.

Leader

Allowing those drums full of petrol,
Biedermann, Biedermann,
What did you think they were for?

Biedermann What were they for?

Leader

Knowing how easy it is
To send the whole world up in flames,
Biedermann, Biedermann,
What were you thinking?

Biedermann Thinking? (*He scrutinises the Chorus.*) Now listen, I'm a free citizen. I can think what I want. Why all these questions? I have the right not to think anything at all. Quite apart from which, what goes on under my own roof . . . Well, let's face it, I own this house.

Chorus

Let the holy of holies be holy:
Property.
Who cares where that takes us?
Who cares if it leads
To flames that can't be extinguished,
Flames that will scar us and scorch us?
Let the holy of holies be holy.

Biedermann Well -

Silence.

Why won't you let me through?

Silence.

You shouldn't always think the worst, you know. Where does that get you? I just want a quiet life, that's all, and as far as those two upstairs are concerned, quite apart from the fact that I have other things on my mind at the moment -

Babette *enters in coat and hat.*

Biedermann What are you doing here?

Babette Am I interrupting?

Biedermann Yes. I'm having a meeting with the Chorus.

Babette *nods to the Chorus, then whispers in Biedermann's ear.*

Biedermann With a ribbon, yes. A wreath with a ribbon. It doesn't matter what it costs.

Babette (*nodding to the Chorus*) Sorry to interrupt.

She goes away.

Biedermann All right. I'll come straight to the point. I've had enough. You and your arsonists. I don't even want to meet my friends any more; it's all they ever talk about. In the end, I only have one life to live. If we assume that everyone is an arsonist, how are things ever going to get better? We need to have a little bit of trust, a little bit of goodwill. That's what I think. Not always seeing evil round the corner. Not everyone's an arsonist, for God's sake! That's what I think. A little bit of trust. A little -

Pause.

I can't live in fear all the time.

Pause.

Do you think I slept last night? I'm not stupid, you know. Petrol is petrol! I grappled with some very difficult thoughts. I climbed on to the table, so as to hear better. I even got up on top of the wardrobe and put my ear against the ceiling. I did! They were snoring! Snoring! I climbed on top of that wardrobe at least four times. Snoring away, they were, dead to the world. At one point I got so angry I went out on to the stairs in my pyjamas - believe it or not. I was just about to wake those two and throw them out on the street, with my own two hands, just like that. Along with their drums of petrol. Even if it was the middle of the night.

Chorus

With your own two hands?

Biedermann Yes.

Chorus

Just like that?

Biedermann Yes.

Chorus

In the middle of the night?

Biedermann I was just about to do it. I would have done it if my wife hadn't appeared. She was worried I'd catch a cold. But I was just about to do it, oh yes.

Out of embarrassment, he takes a cigar.

Leader

What should I make of it this time?

Biedermann just couldn't sleep.

Did he never once think

That a citizen's goodness might be abused?

Doubt overcame him.

Why should that be?

Biedermann *lights his cigar.*

Chorus

It's hard for a citizen

Brutal in business

Who's otherwise kind and considerate,

Always prepared to do good.

Leader

When it suits him.

Chorus

Hoping that good

Will come from being good-natured.

He makes a deadly mistake.

Biedermann What do you mean by that?

Chorus

The curious odour of petrol.

Biedermann *(sniffing)* I don't smell it.

Chorus

Woe unto us.

Biedermann I can't smell a thing.

Leader

He's already so used to the odour of evil.

Chorus

Woe unto us.

Biedermann Can you please stop all this woe-unto-us stuff? It's pure defeatism.

A car beeps its horn.

Taxi! Taxi!

A car stops.

Excuse me.

He hurries off.

Chorus

Where to, citizen?

A car drives off.

Leader

Poor unfortunate Biedermann,

What's he got planned?

Fearful-audacious, he struck me, and pale.

Then ran off fearful-decisive -

What for?

A car beeps.

Chorus

So used to the odour of evil.

A car beeps in the distance.

Woe unto us.

Leader

Woe unto you.

The Chorus steps back, apart from the Leader, who takes out his roll-up.

Leader

If the thought of radical change
Scares you more than the thought of disaster,
What can you do
To stop the disaster?

He follows the Chorus.

Scene Four

Attic.

Eisenring *is alone, unwinding cord from a reel. As he does so, he whistles 'Lili Marlene'. He interrupts his whistling to lick his finger and stick it out through the skylight to check the wind.*

Living room.

Biedermann *enters, followed by Babette. Cigar in mouth, he takes his coat off and throws his briefcase down.*

Biedermann Just do what I ask.

Babette A goose?

Biedermann A goose.

Cigar still in mouth, he takes his jacket off.

Babette Why are you taking your jacket off?

Biedermann *(handing her the jacket)* If I report them to the police, I know I'll be making enemies of them. What good's that going to do us? One spark could set the whole house ablaze. What good's that going to do us? Whereas, if I go up and invite them to supper — assuming they accept my invitation . . .

Babette Then?

Biedermann Then they'll be our friends.

He leaves.

Babette Just so you know, Anna, you can't have the night off. We're having guests. Set the table for four.

Attic.

Eisenring *is singing 'Lili Marlene' when Biedermann knocks at the door.*

Eisenring Come in!

He continues to sing but nobody enters.

Come in!

Biedermann *enters, in shirtsleeves.*

Eisenring Morning, Mr Biedermann.

Biedermann May I?

Eisenring How did you sleep?

Biedermann Badly, thank you.

Eisenring Me too. It's the weather. Wind's from the south.

He continues his work with the cord and the reel.

Biedermann I don't mean to disturb you.

Eisenring But please, Mr Biedermann, you're in your own home.

Biedermann I don't want to impose.

We hear the cooing of pigeons.

Where's our friend?

Eisenring Who, Joe? Off working. The lazy sod didn't want to go without breakfast. I sent him to get firelighters.

Biedermann Firelighters?!

Eisenring Firelighters. Just to be on the safe side.

Biedermann *laughs politely, as if at a rather feeble joke.*

Biedermann Safe . . . ha, ha, ha, very good, yes . . . No, what I meant to say was, what I meant to say –

Eisenring You want to throw us out again?

Biedermann No, what happened was, in the middle of the night – I'd run out of sleeping pills, you see – I realised in the middle of the night that you've got no toilet up here.

Eisenring That's all right. We do it through the skylight.

Biedermann Whatever suits you. Yes, fine by me. I just couldn't stop worrying about it, all night long. Maybe you'd like to wash, or take a shower? Please feel free to use my bathroom. I've told Anna to put towels in there for you.

He looks at Eisenring.

Biedermann Why are you shaking your head?

Eisenring Where did he put it?

Biedermann What?

Eisenring Have you seen a detonator anywhere?

He looks here and there.

Biedermann A detonator?!

Eisenring Don't you worry about the bathroom, Mr Biedermann, really don't worry. There wasn't a bathroom in prison either.

Biedermann Prison?

Eisenring I just got out. Didn't Joe tell you?

Biedermann No.

Eisenring Didn't even mention it?

Biedermann No.

Eisenring Terrible. All that man ever talks about is himself. There are people like that, you know. But in the end, what can you do with someone who's had such a tragic youth? Did you have a tragic youth, Mr Biedermann? Not that I did! I could

have studied, you know. My father wanted me to go into the law.

He stands at the skylight and talks to the pigeons.

Prrrr! Prrrr! Prrrr!

Biedermann *lights another cigar.*

Biedermann Mr Eisenring, I didn't sleep all night, to be absolutely honest. Is it really petrol in those drums?

Eisenring Don't you trust us?

Biedermann I'm only asking.

Eisenring What kind of people do you think we are? To be absolutely honest.

Biedermann I don't want you to feel I've got no sense of humour, but I must say, your jokes can be, well, a little bit . . . unusual.

Eisenring It's something we're working on.

Biedermann What is?

Eisenring Our jokes. You see, comedy is the third-best tactic. The second-best tactic is sentimentality. You know, the stuff that Joe comes out with: miner's family, childhood poverty, orphanage, all that bollocks. But in my experience, the best, the most reliable tactic is still the naked truth. Because, funnily enough, nobody believes it.

Living room.

Anna ushers in Mrs Knechtling, dressed in black.

Anna Take a seat.

Mrs Knechtling *sits down.*

Anna But if you're Mrs Knechtling, you're wasting your time. Mr Biedermann's made it clear that he wants nothing to do with you.

Mrs Knechtling *gets up.*

Anna Take a seat!

Mrs Knechtling *sits down.*

Anna But don't get your hopes up.

Anna *leaves.*

Attic.

Eisenring *is making himself busy.* **Biedermann** *stands and smokes.*

Eisenring Why's Joe taking so long? Firefighters aren't that hard to find. Let's hope he hasn't had his collar felt.

Biedermann Had his collar felt?

Eisenring What's so funny about that?

Biedermann Expressions like that, you know, well, it's as if you're from another planet. Having your collar felt! I find that fascinating. You see, in my world, people don't often 'get their collars felt'.

Eisenring Because, in your world, people don't steal firefighters. Obviously. It's a class thing.

Biedermann Rubbish.

Eisenring You're not trying to tell me that -

Biedermann I don't believe in class. I'm a man of my time, you see, in case you hadn't noticed. In fact, what I really can't stand is the attitude of the socially disadvantaged themselves, because they go on about class more than anyone else does! These days we're all human beings, aren't we? Rich or poor, we're all human beings. Even the middle classes. You and I, we're both made of flesh and blood, aren't we? . . . I don't know whether you smoke . . .

He offers a cigar, but Eisenring shakes his head.

Biedermann I'm not saying everybody should be the same. There will always be stupid people and clever people, thank heavens, but why can't we be friends? A little bit of goodwill,

for God's sake, a little idealism, a little - then we'd all have a quiet life, rich and poor together, don't you think?

Eisenring If I may be frank -

Biedermann I'm all for that.

Eisenring You won't take offence?

Biedermann The franker the better.

Eisenring You're quite sure?

Biedermann Absolutely certain.

Eisenring You really shouldn't smoke in here.

Biedermann, *shocked, puts out his cigarette.*

Eisenring It's not for me to lay down the rules, I know. At the end of the day, this is your home, but you understand -

Biedermann Of course I do!

Eisenring There it is!

He picks up something off the floor, and blows on it to clean it, before attaching it to the cord, once again whistling 'Lili Marlene'.

Biedermann I'm sorry, what is it you're doing all the time? If you don't mind my asking. And what's that?

Eisenring That's the detonator.

Biedermann -?

Eisenring And that's the fuse wire.

Biedermann -?

Eisenring Joe says the latest detonators are even better. But they've not been issued to the army yet, so we can't steal them, and buying them's out of the question. Military hardware's terribly expensive. Everything has to be top quality, you see.

Biedermann Fuse wire? You did say 'fuse wire'?

Eisenring Detonating fuse wire.

He gives Biedermann the end of the fuse wire.

Eisenring Would you be kind enough to hold the end? . . . So I can measure it.

Biedermann *holds the fuse wire.*

Biedermann Joking apart -

Eisenring It won't take a minute.

He whistles 'Lili Marlene' while measuring out the fuse wire.

Thank you, Mr Biedermann. Thank you so much.

Biedermann *suddenly has to laugh.*

Biedermann I'm not someone you can make a fool of, you know. Definitely not. I must say, you rather take it for granted that people will see the funny side. I'm not surprised you get arrested from time to time. Not everybody's sense of humour is as highly developed as mine, you know.

Eisenring You have to find the right sort of people.

Biedermann If I said people were fundamentally decent, everyone I know would laugh in my face.

Eisenring Ha.

Biedermann Mind you, I donated a fair old whack to the local fire brigade. I'm not saying how much.

Eisenring Ha.

He lays out the fuse wire.

Don't worry. Come the big day, everybody's going to cop it. Sense of humour or no sense of humour.

Biedermann, *sweating, sits down on an oil drum.*

Eisenring What's the matter, Mr Biedermann? You've gone all pale!

He claps him on the shoulder.

It's this smell, isn't it? Petrol. If you're not used to it . . . I'll open the skylight.

He opens the door.

Biedermann Thank you.

Anna *(calling up the stairs)* Mr Biedermann! Mr Biedermann!

Eisenring Not the police again?

Anna Mr Biedermann!

Eisenring It's a police state, that's what it is.

Anna Mr Biedermann!

Biedermann I'm coming! *(Whispers.)* Do you like goose?

Eisenring Goose?

Biedermann Goose. Yes, goose.

Eisenring Me? Like goose? Why?

Biedermann With chestnut stuffing.

Eisenring And red cabbage?

Biedermann Yes. What I'm trying to say is, me and my wife, well, mainly me - we thought, I just thought, if it would appeal to you . . . I don't want to force you . . . But if you would like to join us for a bite to eat, you and Mr Schmitz -

Eisenring This evening?

Biedermann Is tomorrow better?

Eisenring Oh, I think we'll be gone by tomorrow. No, this evening. This evening would be perfect. Thank you very much.

Biedermann Shall we say, seven o'clock?

Anna *(calling up the stairs)* Mr Biedermann!

Biedermann *(shaking hands)* It's a deal!

Eisenring It's a deal.

Biedermann *makes to leave, but stops in the doorway, nodding agreeably while staring blankly at the drums and fuse wire.*

Eisenring It's a deal.

Biedermann leaves. **Eisenring** works on, whistling. Enter the **Chorus**, as if the scene were ended. But as the **Chorus** assembles downstage, there is a noise from above. Something has fallen over.

Eisenring You can come out now.

The **Doctor of Philosophy**, wearing glasses, crawls out from between the oil drums.

Eisenring You heard: Joe and I have been invited downstairs for supper. You keep watch here. Make sure nobody comes in here and starts smoking. At least not yet. Got that?

The **Doctor** polishes his spectacles.

Eisenring You know, sometimes I wonder why you're with us. You don't really enjoy it, do you, setting places on fire? You don't get off on it. The sparks, the flames, the smoke, the noise. Dogs barking, people screaming, fire engines arriving too late. Ashes. None of that does a thing for you, does it?

The **Doctor** puts his spectacles on, silent and earnest. **Eisenring** laughs.

Eisenring Do-gooder!

He whistles a little without looking at the **Doctor**.

Eisenring I don't much like academics. But you know that, **Doctor**, don't you? I told you that from the start. Academics like you don't get any kind of buzz from it. You lot are all so theoretical. Always very ideological. Always very serious. I don't trust people like you. A **Doctor of Philosophy**! Your heart's not in it.

He busies himself and whistles.

Chorus

We are prepared
The hoses carefully rolled
According to colour,
According to rule.
Every hose reel
Shining and carefully oiled.
Everyone knows what has to be done.

Leader

It's only a pity the wind's coming up,
The wind from the south.

Chorus

Everyone knows what has to be done
The brass pumps, gleaming,
Have all been carefully checked
To make sure the pressure is high.

Leader

And remember to check on the hydrants.

Chorus

Everyone knows what has to be done.

Leader

We are prepared.

Enter the **Doctor** and **Babette**, carrying a goose.

Babette Yes, **Doctor**, yes, I know it's urgent, I'll tell my husband it's urgent.

She leaves the **Doctor** and comes downstage, holding up the goose.

Babette One goose. As ordered by husband. Apparently I'm meant to cook it so we can be friends with those two up there.

We hear church bells.

I can't get rid of this stupid feeling that it could be the last time the bells of this town will ring out like that . . .

Biedermann (off) **Babette**!

Babette I'm not sure my husband's always right. Honestly, I'm not. I mean, his line is, they may be thugs, but if he makes enemies of them, that's the end of his hair rejuvenator.

Biedermann (off) **Babette**!

Babette It's always the same. I know my **Gottlieb**. He's always too kind. Too kind for his own good.

She leaves, still carrying the goose.

Chorus

Look at the one with the glasses,
Probably son of a well-to-do family,
Never known envy
Probably very well read
And horribly pale.
Not one to hope that good might come
From being good-natured,
No, this one's ready
To do just about anything,
The end justifying the means
(So he hopes).
Respectable sometimes,
Cleaning his glasses
He's very far-sighted.
In drums full of petrol
He does not see petrol
Instead he sees an idea.
Till the idea's on fire.

Doctor Good evening . . .

Leader

Stand by the hoses!
Stand by the pumps!
Stand by the ladders!

The Firemen run to their positions.

Leader

Good evening.

Fireman One

Ready!

Fireman Two

Ready!

Fireman Three

Ready!

Leader

We are prepared.

Scene Five

Living room.

Mrs Knechtling is still there. She is standing. We hear church bells, very loud.

Anna is setting the table. **Biedermann** brings two chairs.

Biedermann — because, as you see, I don't have time to deal with the dead, I don't have the time. You heard what I said: talk to my lawyer.

Mrs Knechtling leaves.

Biedermann Anna, I can't hear myself think. Shut that window!

Anna shuts the window and the bells are quieter.

Biedermann I said a cosy little meal. Why those ridiculous candlesticks?

Anna We always have them, Mr Biedermann.

Biedermann A cosy little meal, I said. None of this pretension. Oh my God, finger bowls! And porcelain plates! And a salt grinder, for God's sake! Everything's all white and elegant! What kind of impression does that make?

He picks up the salt grinder and puts it in his trouser pocket.

Oh, and Anna, I'm wearing my oldest jacket. But just look at you . . . You can keep the big carving knife, we'll need that. But apart from that, get rid of the smart stuff. Our two guests need to feel comfortable. Where's the corkscrew?

Anna Here.

Biedermann Don't we have anything simpler?

Anna In the kitchen. But it's rusty.

Biedermann Get it.

He takes a silver ice bucket off the table.

What's this doing here?

Anna For the wine.

Biedermann It's silver!

He stares at the ice bucket, then at Anna.

Do we always have this?

Anna Yes. We need it, Mr Biedermann.

Biedermann Need it? In what sense, need? What we need is a little human kindness, a sense of community. Get rid of it. And - what the hell are those?

Anna Napkins.

Biedermann Linen napkins!

Anna They're the only ones we have.

He collects up the napkins and puts them in the ice bucket.

Biedermann There are entire tribes who live without napkins, you know. People like us are -

Babette enters with a large wreath. **Biedermann** fails to see her at first, stands in front of the table.

Biedermann I'm just wondering if we really need a tablecloth.

Babette Gottlieb?

Biedermann Let's make it classless.

He sees Babette.

Biedermann What's the wreath for?

Babette It's the one we ordered, Gottlieb. And what do you think? They've sent it here by mistake. I wrote out the address of the Knechtlings for them myself, clear as day. And the ribbon's all wrong.

Biedermann The ribbon? Why?

Babette And apparently they've sent the bill to Mrs Knechtling.

She shows him the ribbon.

Biedermann (*reading*) 'Gottlieb Biedermann. RIP?! I'm sorry, this is unacceptable. It's bloody outrageous. They'll just have to change it.

He goes back to the table.

Don't get me all upset, now, Babette, I have other things to do, for God's sake. I can't be everywhere.

Babette leaves with the wreath.

Biedermann Right, get rid of the tablecloth. Come on, Anna, give me a hand! And like I said, you don't dish out the food. Is that clear? You just come in without knocking, you just come in and you simply put the pan down on the table.

Anna The pan? On the table?

Biedermann (*taking the tablecloth away*) A completely different atmosphere, see? A wooden table, nothing more. Like at the last supper.

He gives her the tablecloth.

Anna You mean you want me to bring the goose to the table in the roasting pan?

She folds up the tablecloth.

What wine do you want?

Biedermann I'll get it myself.

Anna Mr Biedermann!

Biedermann What is it now?

Anna I don't have a jumper. At least not the kind you want me to wear so that I look like one of the family.

Biedermann Borrow one from my wife.

Anna The yellow or the red?

Biedermann Just keep it informal! I don't want to see any caps or aprons, is that understood? And like I said, get rid of

the candlesticks. And generally, just make sure the place doesn't look so perfect. I'll be down in the cellar.

He leaves.

Anna 'Just make sure the place doesn't look so perfect.' All right then.

Anna flings the tablecloth into a corner, goes over and tramples it as Schmitz and Eisenring enter, each carrying a rose.

Schmitz and Eisenring Good evening.

Anna leaves without looking at them.

Eisenring And why are there no firefighters?

Schmitz They've all been seized by the police. A pre-emptive measure. Anyone selling or possessing firefighters without a licence will be arrested. A pre-emptive national security measure.

He combs his hair.

Eisenring Have you got a light?

Schmitz No.

Eisenring Me neither.

Schmitz (*blowing his comb clean*) We'll have to ask him.

Eisenring What, Biedermann?

Schmitz Yes. Don't forget.

He puts his comb away. He sniffs.

Mmm, smells good.

Biedermann *enters downstage, bottles in his arms.*

Biedermann (*to audience*) You can think what you like about me, all right? But tell me this—

Schmitz and Eisenring *shout and laugh.*

Biedermann Sorry about those two. But if that's all they get up to, I'll be happy. If someone had told me a week ago that I'd be getting the best bottles out of my cellar . . . for

them! . . . Now, come on, tell me the truth: exactly how long have you known that those two are arsonists? It's not like you think. It doesn't dawn on you just like that. It starts slowly, and then suddenly: suspicion. Well, I had my suspicions right from the start, you always have your suspicions, don't you? But be honest, in my place, what would you have done? Come on, for God's sake, what would you have done?! And when?

He listens.

Silence.

I've got to go.

He hurries off.

Scene Six

Living room.

The goose supper is in full swing Biedermann, holding a bottle, is doubled up with laughter at the joke that has just been told. Schmitz and Eisenring join in the laughter, but Babette does not.

Biedermann Kindling? Did you hear that one? Kindling. With kindling you don't really need firefighters!

Babette Why's that funny?

Biedermann Do you know what kindling is?

Babette Yes. You light fires with it.

Biedermann You have no sense of humour, Babette.

He puts the bottle on the table.

What can you do with someone who simply has no sense of humour?

Babette Then explain the joke.

Biedermann All right. So, this morning, Billy says he's sent Joe to steal some firefighters. Firefighters, right? And so I ask Joe, what's this with firefighters? And he says, he couldn't find

any firefighters, only bags of kindling. You understand? And Billy says, with kindling, you don't really need firefighters!

Babette I understood that.

Biedermann Did you?

Babette Yes. Only it isn't funny.

Biedermann (*giving up on her*) Come on, let's have a drink!

He opens the bottle.

Babette (*to Schmitz*) Is it true then? Have you got bags of kindling up in our attic?

Biedermann You'll laugh, Babette. This morning we even measured out the fuse wire together, me and Billy.

Babette The fuse wire?

Biedermann Detonating fuse wire.

He fills the glasses.

Babette Seriously though, please, everyone. What's going on?

Biedermann (*laughs*) 'Seriously though,' she says! 'Seriously though.' Did you hear that, 'seriously though'? They're winding you up, Babette. They have a slightly offbeat sense of humour. Some jokes travel, some don't, that's what I always say. I expect you'll be asking me for a light next!

Schmitz and Eisenring *exchange glances.*

Biedermann You see, our two guests still think I'm an uptight little coward. With no sense of humour. The sort of person who'll believe anything.

He raises his glass.

Cheers!

Eisenring Cheers!

Schmitz Cheers!

They clink glasses.

Biedermann To our friendship.

They stand to drink and sit down again.

Please. Help yourself. Don't wait to be served. It's not that kind of house.

Schmitz I can't eat any more.

Eisenring Don't hold back. You're not in the orphanage now, Joe. Don't hold back.

He helps himself to goose.

Your goose is terrific, Babette,

Babette I'm delighted.

Eisenring (*relishing the red wine*) Goose with a decent burgundy . . . mmm. All we really need now is a tablecloth.

Babette Gottlieb, did you hear that?

Eisenring It's not essential. You know, a nice white linen tablecloth, with candlesticks.

Biedermann Anna!

Eisenring Perhaps damask linen? With a floral pattern? White flowers, of course. Something delicate, like those frost patterns you see on windowpanes. But it's not essential, Gottlieb, it's not essential. In prison we didn't have tablecloths either.

Biedermann Anna!

Babette In prison?!

Biedermann Where on earth is she?

Babette Have you been in prison?

Anna enters, in a bright red jumper.

Biedermann Anna, bring a tablecloth. Right away.

Anna Very good.

Eisenring You don't happen to have finger bowls, do you?

Anna Of course.

Eisenring And perhaps a few serviettes? Or does one say napkins?

Anna Of course.

Eisenring You may find it childish, Babette, but ordinary people are like that, I'm afraid. Take Joe, father a miner, never seen a salt grinder in his life – well, of course it's the dream of his poor, wasted life to sit at a table with nice cutlery and crystal glasses.

Babette Oh, we can provide that.

Eisenring But it's not essential.

Anna Fine.

Anna brings everything to the table.

Eisenring I hope you're not taking this the wrong way, Babette. You know, when you're fresh out of prison, deprived of cultivated society for months on end –

He takes the tablecloth and shows it to Schmitz.

Eisenring Do you know what this is? (*To Babette.*) Never seen one in his life. (*Back to Schmitz.*) This is linen. Damask linen.

Schmitz So? What am I meant to do with it?

Eisenring *ties the tablecloth around Schmitz's neck.*

Eisenring Like this.

Biedermann *tries to find it funny, laughs.*

Babette And where's our nice salt grinder, Anna?

Anna Mr Biedermann said –

Biedermann Get it!

Anna You said, get rid of it.

Biedermann No, get it! That's what I'm saying! Where in God's name is it?!

Anna In your left-hand trouser pocket.

Biedermann *puts his hand into his pocket and finds it.*

Eisenring Calm down, now.

Anna Well, it's not my fault!

Eisenring Calm down.

Anna *bursts into tears, turns and leaves.*

Eisenring It's the weather. You know, wind from the south.

Pause.

Biedermann Come on, friends, drink up!

They drink in silence.

Eisenring I used to have goose every day, of course. When I was a waiter. You know, dashing down those long corridors, plateful of goose right there in the palm of my hand . . . well . . . you know. But then, of course, afterwards, where do you wipe your fingers? That's the question. Answer: in your hair. And to think other people have crystal finger bowls for that! That's what I can't get out of my mind. The crystal finger bowls.

He dips his fingers into the finger bowl.

Do you know what it is to be traumatised?

Biedermann No.

Eisenring They explained it all to me in prison.

He dries his fingers.

Babette How did you end up in prison?

Biedermann Babette!

Eisenring How did I end up in prison?

Biedermann You don't ask people things like that.

Eisenring I often ask myself the same question. Like I said, I was a waiter. A little head waiter. And then, out of the blue, they mistook this little head waiter for a big-time arsonist.

Biedermann Hmm.

Eisenring Arrested me in my own home.

Biedermann Hmm.

Eisenring I was so taken aback, I went along with it.

Biedermann Hmm.

Eisenring I was lucky, Babette. They sent seven extremely charming policemen. When I explained that I had to get to the restaurant and had no time to talk to them, they said the restaurant had been burnt down.

Biedermann Burnt down?

Eisenring Yes. During the night, apparently.

Babette Burnt down?

Eisenring Fine, I said. In that case I have got time. The restaurant was just a pile of smouldering timbers. I saw it as we drove past, you know, from the little barred window in the police van.

He drinks his wine like a connoisseur.

Biedermann And then?

Eisenring (*examining the wine label*) Cave de l'Echanson. We used to have this in the restaurant, you know. Good year, too. And anyway, there I am sitting in the police station, fiddling with my handcuffs, and who do they bring in but him!

Schmitz beams.

Eisenring Cheers, Joe!

Schmitz Cheers, Billy!

They drink.

Biedermann And then?

Schmitz 'Are you the arsonist?' they ask him, and offer him a cigarette. And he says, 'Excuse me, officer, even though you think I'm an arsonist I'm afraid I don't have a light.'

They laugh uproariously and slap their thighs.

Biedermann Hmm.

Anna enters. *She is once again wearing a maid's outfit. She hands Biedermann a business card, which he examines.*

Anna He says it's urgent.

Biedermann But I've got guests -

Schmitz and **Eisenring** *clink glasses again.*

Schmitz Cheers, Billy!

Eisenring Cheers, Joe!

They drink. Biedermann examines the business card again.

Babette Who is it, then, Gottlieb?

Biedermann It's that Doctor of Philosophy.

Anna busies herself at the sideboard.

Eisenring And what about those other things over there?

Anna The candlesticks?

Eisenring Why are you hiding them away?

Biedermann Bring them over!

Anna But, Mr Biedermann, you told me to -

Biedermann I said, bring them over!

Anna puts the candlesticks on the table.

Eisenring Joe, can you imagine? They have these beautiful candlesticks and they hide them away! Got any matches?

He digs in his trouser pocket.

Schmitz Me? No.

He also digs in his trouser pocket.

Eisenring Sad to say, we don't have any matches.

Biedermann Ah, but I do.

Eisenring Let's have them, then!

Biedermann No, no, no, allow me. Allow me.

He lights the candles.

Babette What's he want, this doctor of philosophy?

Anna I don't know what he's on about, madam. He's waiting on the stairs. Says he can no longer be silent.

Babette He wants to speak to my husband in private?

Anna Yes. He says he wishes to expose a scandal.

Babette What kind of scandal?

Anna I don't understand a word he says, Mrs Biedermann. He could say it a hundred times and I still wouldn't understand it. Something about wanting to disassociate himself from . . .

Lots of candles have been lit.

Eisenring You can't beat candlelight for atmosphere, can you? Don't you agree, Babette?

Babette Yes. Yes, it's true.

Eisenring I'm all for atmosphere.

Biedermann Absolutely.

Now all the candles have been lit.

Eisenring Schmitz! Table manners!

Babette takes **Eisenring** aside.

Babette Leave him alone.

Eisenring He has absolutely no manners, Babette. Eats like a pig. I am so sorry. I'm simply appalled. But then, how could he have table manners? From coalminer's cottage to children's home to . . . well . . .

Babette I know, I know.

Eisenring From children's home to the circus.

Babette I know.

Eisenring From the circus to the theatre.

Babette I know. *(Beat)* The theatre?!

Eisenring Fate, Babette, fate.

Babette turns to **Schmitz**.

Babette Were you in the theatre?

Schmitz gnaws at a goose bone and nods.

Babette Where?

Schmitz Backstage.

Eisenring But very talented. Have you seen him do his ghost?

Schmitz No, no, not now.

Eisenring Why not?

Schmitz I was only in the theatre for a week when it burnt down.

Babette Burnt down?!

Eisenring Come on, don't be shy.

Biedermann Burnt down?

Eisenring Don't be shy.

He takes off the cloth that has been worn by Schmitz as a napkin, and throws it over Schmitz's head.

Eisenring Come on!

Schmitz, with white cloth over his head, stands up.

Eisenring See what I mean? Terrific ghost.

Anna It's a bit scary.

Eisenring Aw, poor baby!

Eisenring *tries to put his arm round Anna, who covers her face with her hands.*

Schmitz Settle down, everybody!

Eisenring Theatre language, Babette. He learned that after only a week of rehearsals. Amazing, eh? Of course, that was before the fire.

Babette Will you stop talking about fires!

Schmitz Settle down, everybody!

Eisenring Ready?

The others remain seated as Eisenring pulls Anna towards him.

Schmitz Everyman! Everyman!

Babette Gottlieb?

Biedermann Shush.

Babette Didn't we see this at Stratford?

Biedermann *(snaps)* Salzburg!

Babette Salzburg.

Schmitz Biedermann! Biedermann!

Eisenring Terrific performance, eh?

Schmitz Biedermann! Biedermann!

Eisenring You have to ask, 'Who are you?'

Biedermann Me?

Eisenring Otherwise he can't do his big speech.

Biedermann Oh, all right. Who am I?

Babette No, you've got to ask who *he* is!

Biedermann Oh, I see.

Schmitz Dost thou not hear me?

Eisenring No, Joe, stop. Take it from the top. That's another theatrical expression.

They take up different positions.

Schmitz Everyman! Biedermann!

Babette Let me guess. Are you meant to be Death?

Biedermann Don't be stupid.

Babette Well, what else can he be?

Biedermann You're meant to ask, who are you? He could be Hamlet's father. Or Banquo. Or that stone statue, you know, what's-his-name, in *Don Giovanni*?

Schmitz Who calls me?

Eisenring Keep going.

Schmitz Biedermann! Biedermann!

Babette Go on, ask him, he's talking to you.

Schmitz Dost thou not hear me?

Biedermann All right, then, who are you?

Schmitz I am the ghost of . . . Knechtling!

Babette *jumps up. She screams.*

Eisenring Stop!

He tears the cloth off Schmitz's head.

Eisenring You moron! Knechtling! You can't play the ghost of Knechtling! It's not on! Knechtling was buried today.

Schmitz Exactly.

Babette *covers her face with her hands.*

Eisenring Mrs Biedermann, don't worry, it's not him.

He shakes his head at Schmitz.

Eisenring How could you be so tasteless?

Schmitz I couldn't think of who else to be.

Eisenring Knechtling! What a choice. An old colleague of Mr Biedermann's, a faithful employee, just think about it, laid to rest this very day. Corpse still in perfect condition. White as a tablecloth. Pale and gleaming like damask, cold, and stiff. And you decide to put him on the stage!

He takes Babette by the shoulders.

Eisenring Word of honour, Mrs Biedermann, that was not Knechtling.

Schmitz (*wiping sweat from his face*) I'm sorry.

Biedermann Let's all sit down.

Anna Is that it?

They sit down. An awkward pause.

Biedermann How about a little cigar?

He offers a box of cigars.

Eisenring How stupid can you be? Look, go on, look at poor Mr Biedermann. He's trembling all over. (*Taking cigar*) Thank you, Mr Biedermann, most kind. I suppose you think it's funny? When you know very well that Knechtling put his head in an oven, forgetting everything that Gottlieb had done for him? Fourteen years Mr Biedermann gave that man work, fourteen years, and what thanks does he get for it?

Biedermann Let's not talk about it any more.

Eisenring That's your thank you.

They prepare their cigars.

Schmitz Shall I sing us a song?

Eisenring What song?

Schmitz Um, let me see . . .

He sings.

London's burning, London's burning.

Eisenring That's enough.

Schmitz

Fetch the engines, fetch the engines.
Fire, fire! Fire, fire!

Eisenring He's drunk.

Schmitz (*fumbling with his flies*)

Pour on wee-wee, pour on wee-wee.

Eisenring Don't listen, Mrs Biedermann.

Schmitz

Pour on wee-wee, pour on wee-wee.

He starts again.

London's burning, London's burning . . .

Biedermann 'Pour on wee-wee . . . ' That's good.

The round continues, with Biedermann and Schmitz joining in.

The Men

London's burning, London's burning,
Fetch the engines, fetch the engines,
Fire, fire! Fire, fire!
Pour on water, pour on water.

Amid lots of noise and laughter, they continue with the round. Every now and then they pause, but it is always Biedermann who sets it off again, leading the fun, until everyone is exhausted.

Biedermann Well then . . . cheers!

They raise their glasses. Off: distant sirens.

Biedermann What was that?

Eisenring Sirens.

Biedermann No, joking apart.

Babette It's the arsonists, that's what it is, the arsonists!

Biedermann Don't shout.

Babette *tears the window open. We hear sirens get nearer. The shrieking noise pierces to the quick as they go howling past.*

Biedermann At least they're not for us.

Babette Where are they heading?

Eisenring Where the south wind comes from.

Biedermann At least they're not for us.

Eisenring It's our normal procedure. We set off a false alarm in some poor district on the outskirts of town, and later, when everything's really hotting up, they find their way back has been blocked.

Biedermann But joking apart . . .

Schmitz But that's how we do it. Joking apart.

Biedermann Let's just stop the nonsense. Please! There's a limit. Look at my wife. She's as white as a sheet.

Schmitz As a tablecloth.

Babette *(to Biedermann)* You don't look so good yourself.

Biedermann After all, a siren is a siren, it's not something I find funny. There are limits. And there's a fire out there somewhere. There's a fire. Otherwise the fire brigade wouldn't be out.

Eisenring *looks at his watch.*

Eisenring We have to go.

Biedermann What, already?

Eisenring I'm afraid so.

Schmitz

Fetch the engine, fetch the engine,
Fire, fire! Fire, fire!

We can hear the sirens again.

Biedermann Let's have coffee, Babette.

Babette *leaves.*

Biedermann And you, Anna? Don't just stand there with your mouth open!

Anna *leaves.*

Biedermann Just between us, enough is enough. My wife has a heart condition. I'd like you to stop joking about people setting fire to things.

Schmitz Oh, but we're not joking.

Eisenring We're arsonists.

Biedermann Now listen – and I'm very serious about this –

Schmitz We're very serious.

Eisenring Very serious.

Schmitz Why don't you believe us?

Eisenring Your house is in a perfect position, Mr Biedermann. Don't you realise that? You'll be one of five fires. All in a circle round the petrol station. You see, we can't attack the petrol stations directly, because they're guarded now. But with fires all around, and the south wind blowing, well . . .

Biedermann I don't believe it.

Schmitz Gottlieb. If you really think we're arsonists, why not say so?

Biedermann *nods like a whipped dog*

Biedermann It's not that I think you're arsonists, that's not true. You do me an injustice. I don't think you're . . . arsonists.

Eisenring You swear?

Biedermann I swear, I swear you're not arsonists!

Schmitz Who do you think we are, then?

Biedermann You're . . . you're my friends.

They clap him on the shoulder and leave him standing there.

Where are you going now?

Eisenring It's time.

Biedermann I swear. As God is my witness.

Eisenring God?

Biedermann Yes!

He slowly raises his hand as if taking an oath.

Schmitz Billy doesn't believe in God. And neither do you. So you can swear as long as you like.

They continue to the door.

Biedermann What can I do to make you believe me?

He blocks their exit.

Eisenring Give us your matches.

Biedermann What? I'm meant to — ?

Eisenring We're right out of matches.

Biedermann I'm meant to — ?

Eisenring If you don't think we're arsonists . . .

Biedermann Matches?

Schmitz As a sign of trust.

Eisenring A lighter will do.

Biedermann *puts his hand into his trouser pocket.*

Eisenring He's not sure. Can you see? He's not sure.

Biedermann Quiet. Not in front of my wife . . .

Babette *(entering)* Coffee will be ready in a moment.

Pause.

You're leaving?

Biedermann Well, my friends, it's a great pity, but . . . well, the main thing is, you have realised that we — I don't want to make any big speeches, but, well, why don't we use first names?

Babette Hmm.

Biedermann And drink a toast to friendship.

He picks up a bottle and the corkscrew.

Eisenring Tell your husband he shouldn't open another bottle on our account. It's really not worth it now.

Biedermann *(uncorking the bottle)* Nothing's too much trouble for you, my friends, nothing's too much trouble. Anything you'd like, anything at all . . . just say.

He hastily fills the glasses and hands them round.

A toast.

They clink glasses.

To friendship.

He kisses Schmitz on the cheek.

Biedermann Joe.

Schmitz Gottlieb.

Biedermann *kisses Eisenring on the cheek.*

Biedermann Billy.

Eisenring Gottlieb.

They stand and drink.

Eisenring Time to go, I'm afraid.

Schmitz Must be off.

Eisenring Babette . . .

We hear sirens.

Babette It was a delightful evening.

We hear church bells ringing in alarm.

Eisenring Oh, one more thing, Gottlieb.

Biedermann What?

Eisenring I think you know.

Biedermann If there's anything you'd like me to do . . .

Eisenring The matches.

Anna has come in with the coffee.

Babette Anna, what's wrong?

Anna Coffee.

Babette You're all upset.

Anna If you look out the back . . . The sky . . . from the kitchen window, you can see it . . . the whole sky is lit up.

The sky is already red as Schmitz and Eisenring bow and leave.

Biedermann *stands pale and stiff.*

Biedermann Well, it's not our house, at least it's not our house.

The Doctor of Philosophy enters.

Biedermann What do you want?

Doctor I can no longer be silent.

Takes document from his jacket pocket and reads:

'I the undersigned, being deeply distressed by recent events, events which in my view can only be regarded as criminal, wish to make the following statement . . .'

We hear howling of many sirens, as the Doctor reads out a detailed text, of which not a single word can be heard. It is drowned out by the barking of dogs, alarm bells, shouts and screams, far-off sirens and, closer, the crackling of flames. Then the Doctor crosses to

Biedermann *and gives him the document.*

Doctor I completely disassociate myself from it all.

Biedermann And?

Doctor I have said what I have to say.

He takes his glasses off and folds them away.

You see, Mr Biedermann, I was a do-gooder. Earnest and honest. I knew exactly what they were doing up in your attic, every detail of it. But there was one thing I didn't know — they do it because they like doing it.

Biedermann Doctor —

The Doctor withdraws.

Biedermann Listen, you — Doctor — What am I meant to do with this?

The Doctor goes downstage and into the auditorium, where he takes a seat in the stalls.

Babette Gottlieb . . .

Biedermann He's gone.

Babette What did you give them? I saw you. Was it matches? Was it?

Biedermann Well . . . why not?

Babette You gave them matches?

Biedermann Yes. If they have no matches of their own, they can't possibly be arsonists, can they? Babette . . . My darling Babette . . .

The grandfather clock strikes. Silence. The light gets redder. As it gets dark onstage we hear alarm bells, dogs barking, sirens, the noise of collapsing buildings, car horns, crackling of flames, shouts, until the Chorus enters.

Chorus

There is much that is senseless
And nothing more senseless
Than the story just told.
A story once started
That killed many people,
But didn't kill everyone
And failed to change anything.

First explosion.

Leader

First storage tank.

Second explosion.

Leader

Second storage tank.

Chorus

If you spend long enough
Looking into the future
What you foresee
Will finally happen:
Stupidity dressed up as fate,
Always stupidity
Blazing and burning
Until it can not be put out.

Third explosion.

Leader

Another storage tank.

There follows a series of horrific explosions.

Chorus

Woe unto us.

House lights up. Curtain.

Prologue

The stage is dark, then we see Biedermann's face as he lights a cigarette. Immediately he has lit it, Firemen's helmets appear threateningly all around him.

Biedermann It's not easy these days, lighting a cigarette.

Pause.

Everyone thinks the whole world's about to go up in flames.

Pause.

Don't you just hate it?

Biedermann *Hides the lit cigarette and slips away, whereupon the Firemen step forward in the manner of a Greek chorus.*

A church clock strikes a quarter past the hour.

Chorus

Citizens of this town
Observe us, the guardians of this town,
Watching
Listening
Always well disposed
Towards the well-disposed citizen.

Leader

Who in the end pays our wages.

Chorus

Our equipment all gleaming,
We circle your home
Watchful
Yet never thinking the worst.

Leader

Sometimes we stop,
Take the weight off our feet,
But never in order to sleep.
We are untiring.

4 The Arsonists

Chorus

Watching
Listening
So the combustible threat
Hidden from sight
Is revealed
Before it's too late
To put out the flames.

The church clock strikes the half-hour.

Leader

Many things burn
But not every fire
Is determined by fate.
Sometimes the fire
Can be prevented.

Chorus

It's only human
To talk about fate.
Fate means we don't need to ask
Why the city is burning
No need to ask how the terror began.

Leader

It's only human,

Chorus

It's all too human,

Leader

To wipe out a few human beings.

The church clock strikes three-quarters.

Chorus

Reason can save us from evil.

Leader

That's right.

Chorus

It's unworthy of God

And unworthy of man
If the nonsense that happens
Is put down to fate
Just because it has happened.

If humans start thinking like that
Then they will not deserve
Their place on this earth
This generous earth
That is fruitful and gracious to man.
They will not deserve
Their place in the sun
They will not deserve
The air that they breathe.

If the nonsense that happens
Is put down to fate
Just because it has happened
Then the flames may rise
To the point where nobody knows
How to put out the fire.

Leader

Our watch has begun.

The Chorus sits down, while the clock strikes nine.

Scene One

Living room.

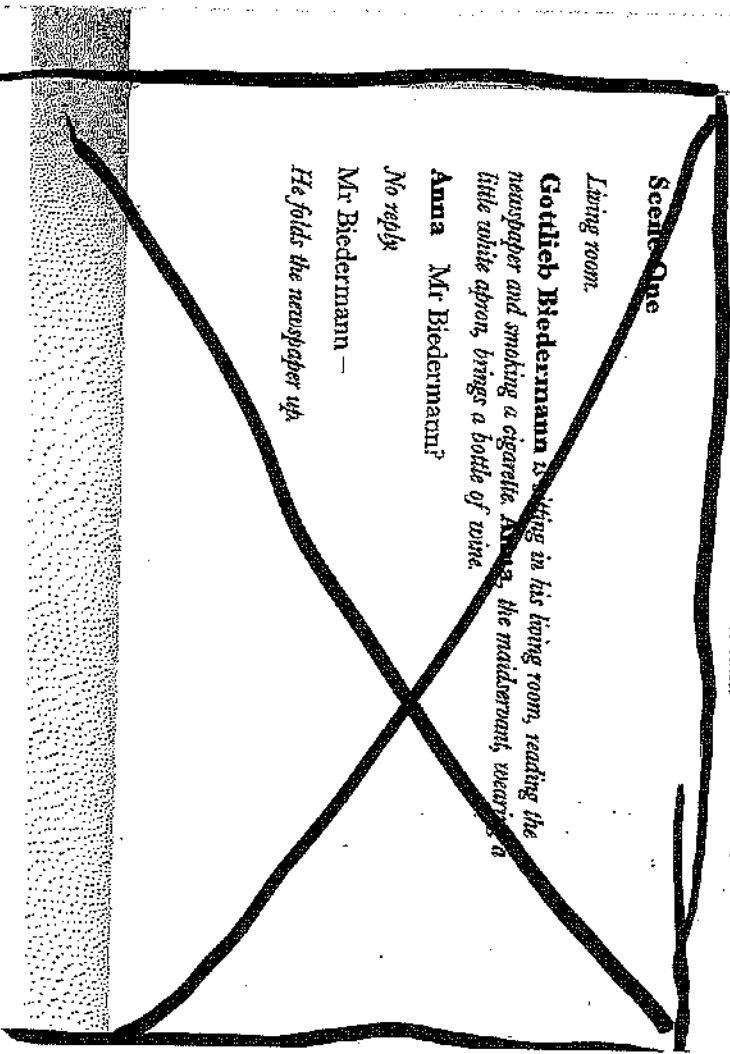
Gottlieb Biedermann is sitting in his living room, reading the newspaper and smoking a cigarette. **Anna**, the maid-servant, wears a little white apron, brings a bottle of wine.

Anna Mr Biedermann?

No reply

Mr Biedermann —

He folds the newspaper up.



Scene Three

Babette Am I interrupting?

Biedermaun Yes, I'm having a meeting with the Chorus.

Babette nods to the Chorus, then whispers in Biedermaun's ear:

Biedermaun With a ribbon, yes. A wreath with a ribbon. It doesn't matter what it costs.

Babette (nodding to the Chorus) Sorry to interrupt.

She goes again.

Biedermaun All right. I'll come straight to the point. I've had enough. You and your arsonists. I don't even want to meet my friends any more; it's all they ever talk about. In the end, I only have one life to live. If we assume that everyone is an arsonist, how are things ever going to get better? We need to have a little bit of trust, a little bit of goodwill. That's what I think. Not always seeing evil round the corner. Not everyone's an arsonist, for God's sake! That's what I think. A little bit of trust. A little --

Pause.

I can't live in fear all the time.

Pause.

Do you think I slept last night? I'm not stupid, you know. Petrol is petrol! I grappled with some very difficult thoughts. I climbed on to the table, so as to hear better. I even got up on top of the wardrobe and put my ear against the ceiling. I did! They were snoring! Snoring! I climbed on top of that wardrobe at least four times. Snoring away, they were, dead to the world. At one point I got so angry I went out on to the stairs in my pyjamas -- believe it or not. I was just about to wake those two and throw them out on the street, with my own two hands, just like that. Along with their drums of petrol. Even if it was the middle of the night.

Chorus

With your own two hands?

Biedermaun Yes.

For God's sake, a little idealism, a little — then we'd all have a quiet life, rich and poor together, don't you think?

Eisenring If I may be frank —

Biedermann I'm all for that.

Eisenring You won't take offence?

Biedermann The franker the better.

Eisenring You're quite sure?

Biedermann Absolutely certain.

Eisenring You really shouldn't smoke in here.

Biedermann, *shocked, puts out his cigarette.*

Eisenring It's not for me to lay down the rules, I know. At the end of the day, this is your home, but you understand —

Biedermann Of course I do!

Eisenring There it is!

He picks up something off the floor, and blows on it to clean it, before attaching it to the cord, once again whistling 'Lili Marlene'.

Biedermann I'm sorry, what is it you're doing all the time? If you don't mind my asking. And what's that?

Eisenring That's the detonator.

Biedermann —?

Eisenring And that's the fuse wire.

Biedermann —?

Eisenring Joe says the latest detonators are even better. But they've not been issued to the army yet, so we can't steal them, and buying them's out of the question. Military hardware's terribly expensive. Everything has to be top quality, you see.

Biedermann Fuse wire? You did say 'fuse wire'?

Eisenring Detonating fuse wire.

He gives Biedermann the end of the fuse wire.

Eisenring Would you be kind enough to hold the end? . . . So I can measure it.

Biedermann *holds the fuse wire.*

Biedermann Joking apart —

Eisenring It won't take a minute.

He whistles 'Lili Marlene' while measuring out the fuse wire.

Thank you, Mr Biedermann. Thank you so much.

Biedermann *suddenly has to laugh.*

Biedermann I'm not someone you can make a fool of, you know. Definitely not. I must say, you rather take it for granted that people will see the funny side. I'm not surprised you get arrested from time to time. Not everybody's sense of humour is as highly developed as mine, you know.

Eisenring You have to find the right sort of people.

Biedermann If I said people were fundamentally decent, everyone I know would laugh in my face.

Eisenring Ha.

Biedermann Mind you, I donated a fair old whack to the local fire brigade. I'm not saying how much.

Eisenring Ha.

He lays out the fuse wire.

Don't worry. Come the big day, everybody's going to cop it. Sense of humour or no sense of humour.

Biedermann, *sweating, sits down on an oil drum.*

Eisenring What's the matter, Mr Biedermann? You've gone all pale!

He claps him on the shoulder.

It's this smell, isn't it? Petrol. If you're not used to it . . . I'll open the skylight.

Scene Four 53

He opens the door.

Biedermann Thank you.

Anna *(calling up the stairs)* Mr Biedermann! Mr Biedermann!

Eisenring Not the police again?

Anna Mr Biedermann!

Eisenring It's a police state, that's what it is.

Anna Mr Biedermann!

Biedermann I'm coming! *(Whispers.)* Do you like goose?

Eisenring Goose?

Biedermann Goose. Yes, goose.

Eisenring Me? Like goose? Why?

Biedermann With chestnut stuffing.

Eisenring And red cabbage?

Biedermann Yes. What I'm trying to say is, me and my wife, well, mainly me - we thought, I just thought, if it would appeal to you . . . I don't want to force you . . . But if you would like to join us for a bite to eat, you and Mr Schmitz -

Eisenring This evening?

Biedermann Is tomorrow better?

Eisenring Oh, I think we'll be gone by tomorrow. No, this evening. This evening would be perfect. Thank you very much.

Biedermann Shall we say, seven o'clock?

Anna *(calling up the stairs)* Mr Biedermann!

Biedermann *(shaking hands)* It's a deal?

Eisenring It's a deal.

Biedermann *makes to leave, but stops in the doorway, nodding agreeably while staring blankly at the drums and fuse wire.*

Eisenring It's a deal.