THE TREAT

a play by Pam Gems

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THE TREAT

A BROTHEL IN FRANCE IN THE EARLY TWENTIES. A CHAISE LONGUE, DRESSING TABLE, JAPANESE SCREEN WITH SILK SHAWL DRAPED OVER IT, DRINKS.. BRANDY, WINE, AND CHAMPAGNE ON ICE, AND ARTIFICIAL FLOWERS AND PAMPAS GRASS IN VASES. THE SPACE IS LOW LIT.

THREE WOMEN ARE PRESENT. THEY WEAR THE LOUIS HEELED PUMPS OF THE PERIOD, LACY CHEMISES IN PALE COLOURS AND KIMONOS. FRANCINE IS BUOXOM, MARIE-HELENE IS PALE, THIN AND FAIR, BERTHE IS SMALL.

BERTHE I don't. TO FRANCINE Do you?

FRAN Sure.

BERTHE Do you? SURPRISED.

FRAN We-ell... WITH A TEMPORISING GLANCE TO MARIE.

BERTHE You don't. I don't.

MARIE LOW Please..

BERTHE Well I don't, I don't!

MARIE You shouldn't.. SHE CLAPS HER HANDS OVER HER EARS.

FRAN She's frightened he'll hear you.

BERTHE Never.

MARIE PLEADING How can you be sure?

BERTHE He won't because he can't. And he can't because he's not there. SLIGHT PAUSE. FRANCINE TAKES THE HARD SKIN OFF HER HEELS WITH A FILE. BERTHE CALLS Are you there?
BERTHE: ACCOSTS MARIE WITH SWEET REASON. There's nobody there.

MARIE: There is.

BERTHE: There isn't.

MARIE: Don't.

BERTHE: Prove it!

FRAN: Oh shut up, the pair of you.

BERTHE: You see, she can't. MARIE MOVES APART.

FRAN: Leave her alone.

BERTHE: I didn't start it.

FRAN: You did.

BERTHE: I never, she did! She asked me if I believed in him.

FRAN: She asked me.

BERTHE: Well anyway, I don't. PAUSE. Waste of time. PAUSE.

A PAUSE.

FRAN: TO MARIE Fancy a toffee?

MARIE: No thanks.

MARIE GASPS, BENDS OVER, CLUTCHING HER ABDOMEN.
FRAN    What is it?

MARIE   DOUBLED UP   Cramps.

BERTHE  Again?

MARIE   DOUBLED UP   All day.

FRAN    Tell him!

BERTHE  No don't, you'll upset him. Take an aspirin.

MARIE   MOVES TO SOFA.  HUMBLY  I've had eight.

    PAUSE.  FRANCINE MOVES APART, GAZES OUT, BEMUSED.

BERTHE  CALLS, TO FRANCINE  What you doing?

FRAN    Watching this fly clean its legs. It's got lovely little legs. Ah.. there it goes!

MARIE, ON THE SOFA, HAS A SPASM, RECOVERS. SHE PRAYS.

MARIE   Oh God. Thou doest love us. Thou lovest and seest us in this our earthly torment...

MONSIEUR RAYMOND, THE BOSS, ENTERS WITH A MAN.

RAYMOND La Choix, Monsieur. Mes enfants - Monsieur ... 'Max'. MAX, WHO LOOKS LIKE A BOXER ON HIS NIGHT OFF, SMIRKS.
AT THE ENTRANCE OF THE MEN THE GIRLS ARE IMMEDIATELY 'ON'.

'MAX'

Yers, well.

THE GIRLS LIFT THEIR SKIRTS TO EXPOSE THEIR BODIES... FRONT FIRST, THEN THEY TURN, TOGETHER, TO EXPOSE THE REAR. MONSIEUR 'MAX' WALKS ALONG THE LINE, TAKING HIS TIME, INSPECTING WITH SHREWD ATTENTION. HE GESTURES.

RAY

Tournez, mes enfants.

THEY TURN TO THE FRONT AGAIN.

RAY

May I introduce, Monsieur Max, for your pleasure.. Mademoiselle Francine, fresh from the buttercup meadows of.. ah.. Normandy... Mademoiselle Marie-Helene..(SOTTO VOCE).. from a good family, Monsieur, tragic story....... et la petite Berthe!

MAX

Yors. Pas de fausse mineur?

RAY

La petite Berthe will oblige, Monsieur!

MAX

Nah, she's too old.

RAY

Monsieur will be amazed, I assure you. Allons, la petite!

BERTHE GOES. THE BOSS GESTURES MONSIEUR MAX TO SIT. FRANCINE OFFERS HIM A BOX OF CIGARS AND A BOX OF CIGARETTES. HE Chooses A CIGAR. SHE OFFERS HER THIGH, HE ROLLS THE CIGAR AGAINST IT. FRANCINE CUTS IT FOR HIM, MARIE LIGHTS IT.

RAY

Un petit peu, Monsieur? INDICATING THE DRINKS.
MAX
What you got there?

RAY
POURING Un vrai petit vin du pays.. you won't be disappointed.

MAX
Oh, where's it from?

RAY
CAUGHT OUT Oh.. from the.. ah... Auvergne. WARMING TO THE FICTION My home. MAX TASTES. We have others in the cellar if Monsieur -

MAX
No, this'll do.

RAY
I know the vineyard personally. My brother -

MAX
It'll do, it'll do.

FRANCINE SITS ON HIS LAP. HE ASSESSES HER THROUGH HIS CIGAR SMOKE, THEN TAKES A GOOD LOOK AT MARIE.

MAX
Yers.. yers.

RAY
Good to relax, Monsieur, after a hard day at .. er... affairs and all that,

MAX
Yers.

RAY
Good for the constitution. And the bowels.

MAX BLOWS OUT SMOKE.. TAKES ANOTHER LOOK AT MARIE.

RAY
GESTURES EXPANSIVELY, REFILLING HIS OWN GLASS
A small establishment, as you see. But of superior
RAY

quality. We cater to the man of taste — the man of sophistication.

MAX

So I've been told. Where's your negress, I don't see your negress, is she — ? WAVES A HANDBOE.

RAY

Alas, not at the moment, sir. We like to keep up with the fashion but I have my clients' pockets to consider - we don't go in for stupidity here. Next month, perhaps.

MAX

WHO HAS BEEN EYING MARIE HEAVILY You, Come here. SHE APPROACHES AND, AT A GLARE FROM RAYMOND, INTENSIFIES HER HAUGHTY LANGUOR.

MAX

Come on, girl, let's see what you've got.

MARIE

COLD Monsieur desires?

MAX

SLAPS HER Don't give me your airs and graces, you're nothing but a common whore. SLAPS HER. What are you? SLAPS HER AGAIN.

MARIE

LOW A common whore.

MAX

What?

MARIE

A common whore.

MAX

Right, and don't you forget it.

RAY

Good for you, Monsieur. She's a haughty bitch, needs keeping in her place.

MAX APPRAISES MARIE THROUGH HIS CIGAR SMOKE.

MAX

No. Too scraggy.

HE TURNS HIS ATTENTION TO FRANCINE, PUSHING HER ROUND ROUGHLY, ASSESSING HER. HE MURMURS THOUGHTFULLY, NODS TO RAYMOND.
MAX

Good haunches, I'll give you that. I like plenty of weight on the haunch, you can keep the featherweights. Bar the fausse mineurs, of course.

RAY

Oh, absolutely. A childlike scantiness .. for the man of taste .. in a certain mood. HICCUPS SLIGHTLY INTO HIS GLASS. Makes a change.

MAX

ASSESSING FRANCINE, WHO TURNS INDOLENTLY IN HIS HANDS Yers. A bit thick in the waist - but good quality.

RAY

Monsieur can be confident of that, we offer only the best, hand-selected..... aha, voici.....voila! La Petite!

BERTHE ENTERS AS THE FAUSSE MINEUR. SHE IS DRESSED AS A CHILE, IN WHITE MUSLIN, WITH A WIDE SASH OF BLUE RIBBON ROUND HER WAIST. HER HAIR HANGS TO HER WAIST, AND SHE WEARS A LARGE BLUE BOW OF SATIN RIBBON ON TOP OF HER HEAD. SHE WEARS BALLET PUMPS AND WHITE STOCKINGS AND CARRIES A WIDE-BRIMMED STRAW HAT DECORATED WITH FLOWERS AND MORE RIBBONS.

SHE CURTSIES SHYLY TO MONSIEUR MAX.

FRAN

Ah!! Isn't she sweet!

MARIE

SHE IS NOT SUCH A GOOD ACTRESS    Lovely.

RAY

Monsieur?

MAX

Very good.. very good... excellent!

HE BENDS OVER BERTHE.

And what's your name, little girl?

BERTHE

HALF-WHISPERS, IN A LISP    Lisette, Monsieur.
HE PATS HER CHEEK. BERTHE DROOPS, RUBBING A KNUCKLED FINGER INTO HER EYE.

FRAN
Ah, she's shy!

MARIE
Ah..

MAX
You're not frightened of me, are you, little girl?

FRAN
Don't be silly, Lisette, the big man's not going to hurt you.

SHE HOLDS OUT A DISH OF BONBONS. MAX TAKES ONE, EATS. FRANCINE INDICATES, HE PROFFERS ONE TO BERTHE, TANTALISES HER, THEN POPS THE SWEET INTO HER MOUTH. SHE JUMPS UP AND DOWN WITH GLEE.

BERTHE
Thank you, Thir.

MAX
Such a tiny little mouth! My poor little girl, never mind, Daddy will be very, very gentle. Now come along, I've got a great big surprise for you!

BERTHE
Ooh!

MAX
But you must promise me not to scream. You won't scream, will you?

BERTHE HANGS BACK.

BERTHE
Don't want to.

MAX
Come on.

BERTHE
No..

FRAN Now she's being naughty.

MARIE Yes.

FRAN She needs her bottom smacked.

MARIE AFTER A NUDGE FROM RAYMOND A good spanking.

FRANCINE, A BIT TOO QUICK, HANDS HIM A LARGE WOODEN HAIRBRUSH... HE FROWNS AT HER OVER-PROMPTNESS.

BERTHE 'weeping' Please Daddy, don't hurt me... say you won't hurt me.....

SHE DRAGS HER FEET AND HE HAULS HER OFF.

Please, Daddy ... please ..... THEY GO.

THE OTHERS SWITCH OFF LIKE A LIGHT. RAYMOND EXITS SEPARATELY, RETURNS WITH A LARGE CAN BASKET FULL OF UNDERWEAR.

RAY Here you are. Francine, you mend the stockings, you've got a finer stitch.

FRAN Oh, come on, guvnor! I'm getting prick marks all over my hands!

RAY Shut your mouth, I'm not having you girls sitting about doing nothing, make yourselves useful.

HE GOES. FRANCINE PULLS A HORRIBLE FACE AT HIS BACK... MARIE GIGGLES.

FRAN Oh why don't you buzz off!

MARIE He never stops.

BUT THEY PICK OVER THE MENDING, SELECT PIECES AND AND BEGIN TO SEW.
MARIE

How's your tooth?

FRAN

Fell out, yesterday. (SHE SHOWS MARIE, LIFTING THE SIDE OF HER MOUTH WITH HER FINGER)

MARIE

Oh good.

FRAN

I'm saving up. I'm gonna have them all out, get a proper set.

MARIE

I'd like that.

FRAN

Yes, really white. (THEY SIGH WITH PLEASURE AT THE THOUGHT, AND SEW)

MARIE

The trouble is, she'll go to hell!

FRAN

No she won't. She won't do that. Never.

MARIE

But it's a terrible sin - look at St. Peter!

FRAN

(BAFFLED) Eh? Oh .. yeah.

MARIE

She's so careless.

FRAN

I know what you mean. (BITES OFF A THREAD) Still, if you look at it her way - I mean, she's got a point. Well you can't prove it!

MARIE

But .... God IS. He's there!

FRAN

Yes but you can't prove it.

MARIE

You can.

FRAN

How?

MARIE

It's in the Bible!

A PAUSE. THEY SEW.
FRAN  Look at this, all ripped — can't be worth mending.

MARIE  That was last night, Monsieur Emil. TAKES THE SEWING.

FRAN  Sew a bit of lace over it, he can pull that off for a thrill. LEANS IN. Just catch it together, then he won't rip the cambric and get us told off.

THEY SEW.

MARIE  If I could just put it across to her.

FRAN  Oh no! (MUTTERED) ALOUD  Don't take any notice. Ignore her.

MARIE  I worry.

FRAN  Worry about yourself.

MARIE  QUICK  Why, has he said anything?

FRAN  Course not. Marie, he's not going to turn you away, you're his favourite.

MARIE  That wouldn't stop him.

LOUD, AWFUL SCREAMING FROM WITHIN. MARIE MERELY RAISES HER VOICE TO BE HEARD OVER IT, MODULATES BACK WHEN THE SCREAMING CEASES.

He's always going for me... making threats. When he's not messing me about he's trying to frighten the life out of me - Monsieur Henri, what a charming surprise..... how sweet of you to call.

HER VOICE CHANGES MID-SENTENCE INTO AN UPPER-CLASS PURR AS SHE RISES. EXTENDING A HAND TO GREET AN ELDERLY MAN USHERED IN BY THE BOSS. HE WEARS DATED EVENING CLOTHES, AND A CLOAK-COAT, AND CARRIES A VICTORIAN POSY OF FLOWERS. HE KISSES MARIE'S HAND REVERENTLY.

HENRI  Cherie .... ma cherie.....
MARIE: TAKING THE FLOWERS, For me? How delightful ..white roses... so kind..

HENRI: La Divine..divine... embrasse moi... embrasse moi...

HE DIVES FOR HER.

Ooh, your lovely tits! .. your beautiful squasy tits .... squeeze, squeeze ...

MARIE: Monsieur Henri... SLAPS HIM LIGHTLY WITH ONE OF HIS GLOVES... naughty boy, naughty boy... ow!

FRAN: TO DRAW HIM OFF Wine, cher Monsieur Henri?

HENRI: Ah, La Francine! Now, now.. no need to feel neglected, you shall have a cuddle later on at the Mayor's party - now you must all be on top form - no slacking!

FRAN: Depend on us, cher Monsieur.

HENRI: We'll have some real fun eh?.. but first I must have a little nibble at my lovely girl here.. before the others, heh, heh..oh.. HIS EYES SHINE... by the way, Francine - guess who's coming tonight?

FRAN: Ooh.. who?

HENRI: Go on, guess!

FRANCINE, WITH A GRIMACE ASIDE, MIMEs GUESSING.

FRAN: I give up!.. Monsieur Henri, you're a terrible tease! ABOVE HIS HEAD, SHE AND MARIE EXCHANGE A DERISORY GLANCE.
HENRI: I am, I am, I know! You'll never guess... not in a million years! Have a go!

FRAN: Rudolph Valentino?

HENRI: No-o...

FRAN: Ah.... the Kaiser?

HENRI: TANTALISING No-o.....

FRANCINE SLIPS FOR A MOMENT, LOSING PATIENCE.

FRAN: IRRITABLY Who then?

HENRI: Your favourite...... your favourite - you know!

FRAN: What?

MARIE: Who?

HENRI: Monsieur Guillaume! The bald one! With the ...
HE GESTURES AN ENORMOUS STOMACH. THE GIRLS BLENCHE.

FRAN: MUTTERS Oh, Fatty Arbuckle.

MARIE GIGGLES BEHIND HENRI'S BACK.

FRAN: MUTTERS Eight months if he's a day.

HENRI CHUCKLES. AND CHASES AFTER FRANCINE, WHO OBEDIENTLY RUNS AWAY FROM HIM.

HENRI: CHUCKLING The one who likes to be - HE MIME WHIPPING, POINTING HIS FINGER AT FRANCINE IN DELIGHT.

FRAN: Ooh, yes. Bravo.
HENRI
You'll give him a good stroke tonight, eh? ... and me .. and me!

FRAN
I shall be very firm with you both. Very firm.

HENRI
Ooh!

SHE TURNS HIM TOWARDS MARIE, KISSING HIM LIGHTLY ON TOP OF THE HEAD AS HE GOES, HANGING ON TO MARIE.

HE HAS LEFT HIS CLOAK. FRANCINE GOES THROUGH THE POCKETS ABSENTLY, A ROUTINE TASK .. BUT FINDS NOTHING OF INTEREST. SHE FINDS A LETTER, READS IT, SHAKES HER HEAD DISMISSIVELY AS THE BOSS ENTERS.

RAY
Anything?

FRAN
Nothing. WAVES THE LETTER. It's only from his sister. SHE INSPECTS THE CLOAK. Coat's worth a bob or two.

RAY
Mean old sod. I wouldn't mind putting a touch in.

FRAN
Yeah - local man. Be worth his while to cough up.

RAY
Not him. Too mean by half.

FRAN
Threaten to split, tell his family. Go on.

RAY
Nah. there's only the wife and the old girls. What do they matter?

FRAN
Send Big Louis round, give him a punch in the head.

RAY
No-o. Wouldn't work. He's too well in.

FRAN
I still think he won't want his wife to know what he gets up to.

RAY
Don't be a bigger twot than you are. You want to sit
RAY in church of a Sunday, watch him put a fortune on the plate and her sitting beside him in a coat so old it's green on the shoulders, bloody disgrace.

FRAN DRY I shouldn't worry. What she don't get, you do, eh? HE TURNS ON HER, GLOWERING AND SHE BACKS AWAY PRUDENTLY. I still think he'd like it kept quiet, guvnor.

RAY No, not that old sod. People knew, he'd strut round like a bloody rooster.

FRAN Pity though.

RAY Yeah.

FRAN He must be well off.

RAY DISGRUNTLED Yeah.

FRAN There must be something he'd mind.

RAY Keep thinking.

HE GESTURES HER TO GET ON WITH THE SEWING AND GOES. SHE PICKS UP THE SEWING OBEDIENTLY BUT DROPS IT AS SOON AS HE DISAPPEARS, MUTINOUS.

BERTHE PASSES THROUGH.

FRANCINE LOOKS ABOUT, SIGHS, BUT CAN THINK OF NOTHING TO DO WITH HERSELF SO PICKS UP A PIECE OF THE MENDING. SHE SETTLES ON THE SOFA, AND BEGINS TO SING
TUNefully TO HERSELF, A COUNTRY SONG, low AND sweet.

BERTHE returns in her chemise AND wrap. SHE picks up a piece of mending.

BERTHE Thank God for small mercies. We're on our own for a bit.

FRAN She's all right.

BERTHE She's potty. Barmy.

FRAN Look, if it makes her feel better –

BERTHE Why should I believe a lot of rubbish, just to please her?

FRAN Talk about something else!

BERTHE You can't! You start talking about dancing, or having your shoe mended, all of a sudden she's back to God again. It's getting worse ... she's been like it for days this time.

FRAN All I'm saying is, just nod your head and agree with her.

BERTHE What for?

FRAN Because I say so.

BERTHE You're not the boss! Anyway, why should I be the one to shut up, why don't you tell her to shut up?

FRAN She's an orphan!

BERTHE MOCK SYmpATHY Ahh! So what.

FRAN You know she's ill.

BERTHE So she says. MUTTERS TO HERSELF. Believe what she wants, I'm not stopping her .. why blame it all on me?
MARIE ENTERS, TYING HER KIMONO. SHE TIDIES HER HAIR AT THE DRESSING TABLE.

FRAN You were quick.

MARIE Yes, he felt queer.

FRAN Oh good - that's good.

BERTHE You look better, you got a bit more colour.

MARIE Yes. I don't feel so faint. (SHE SMILES GRATEFULLY, PICKS UP SEWING)

FRAN (SEWING SWIFTLY AND DEFTLY) Roll on the party, eh?

MARIE (DISMAYED) Oh! I'd forgotten!

BERTHE Think of the food! (TO FRANCINE) What are we having?

FRAN I asked the old girl, It's quenelles, game pie, duckling and fresh pineapple.

BERTHE Oooh!!

FRAN Remember the strawberries, at the Baron's farewell?

BERTHE Not half! You made a pig of yourself.

FRAN (FONDLY) I know! A marble bath of wild strawberries -

BERTHE Silver buckets of cream -

FRAN Gold casters full of sugar -

BERTHE You could buy a house with the cost -

FRAN God, they know how to live!
BERTHE  Remember the quail inside the capon inside the turkey inside the swan?

FRAN  (TOGETHER) Inside the swan! And log fires as big as a forest!

BERTHE  And that Italian woman singing opera - (TO MARIE) - you burst out crying!

MARIE  I didn't mean to.

FRAN  You looked lovely that night, Marie, just like the Virgin.

BERTHE  She was supposed to! And you fainted.

MARIE  It was the flowers ..

FRAN  All those lilies. But what about the sheets, eh? Real silk!

BERTHE  Yeah, imagine being able to sleep in them -

FRAN  You'd never want to get up.

BERTHE  And presents ..

FRAN  Lipsticks, and fans ... and little evening purses, with tassels -

BERTHE  And Suzanne found hereiif a patron -

FRAN  No. That's off.

BERTHE  Why?

MARIE  (TOGETHER) Oh! What happened?
FRAN Fell for a baby, the old biddy who saw to her made a mess of it, she ended up in hospital.

BERTHE No!

FRAN And they did their usual. Left an arm inside her, she had it two weeks later. She's been ever so ill... septic. Lucien says she looks like a bladder of lard... lost all her looks.

MARIE Oh God, please God...

BERTHE Poor kid. Still, she'll be all right. Legs like that, she'll never want for work.

MARIE FEARFUL Not if she's lost her looks.

FRAN I'll put in a word for her with the boss.

BERTHE QUICK No you won't.

FRAN Why not?

MARIE LOOKS FROM ONE TO THE OTHER.

MARIE Has he said anything, he's said something, hasn't he?

FRAN No, I was just trying to do her a good turn!

MARIE He was looking at the girl in the bakery.
BERTHE  Rubbish. Anyway, I never liked Suzanne, too argumentative, what's more if we did ask that mean sod for anything - A MAN BURSTS IN, FOLLOWED BY THE BOSS... WINNINGLY Bonsoir, Monsieur!

MAN     I said, how much?

BOSS    Monsieur.. Monsieur, if you please.

MAN     How much?

BOSS    If Monsieur would care for a glass of wine -

THE MAN GRABS HIM BY THE LAPELS, SWINGS HIM ROUND.

MAN     How much?! 

BOSS    GETTING UP OFF THE FLOOR Whatever Monsieur desires, I assure you, it's what we're here for.

MAN     BERTHE APPROACHES, PLACATING What's this supposed to be?

BOSS    Perhaps Monsieur could advise me as to his tastes - PUSHING BERTHE OUT OF THE WAY.
Tastes? THE MAN GLARES FRIGHTENINGLY. I want a fuck, I need a fucking fuck, that's what I'm here for!

HE GOES FOR THE BOSS AGAIN, KNOCKING MARIE TO THE FLOOR AS SHE BRAVELY TRIES TO INTERVENE TO PROTECT RAYMOND. RAYMOND STUMBLES. THE MAN HAULS HIM TO HIS FEET BY HIS LAFELS.

INTO RAYMOND'S FACE How much?!

RAYMOND WAVES HIS ARMS, PLACATING. HE SIGNALS TO THE GIRLS BEHIND THE MAN'S BACK BUT THEY GESTURE, HELPLESS TO ASSIST HIM.

Very well, Monsieur, very well. Our special rates. With my compliments.

HE DUSTS HIMSELF, STRAIGHTENS HIS TIE.

And less of the fucking fuss.

HE TURNS, GLOWERS AT THE GIRLS, JABS A FINGER AT FRANCINE. You.

Ah, Monsieur favours Mam'selle -

Shut up. I don't want to know her name.

QUIETLY, This way, Monsieur.

THE MAN FOLLOWS HER OFF. THE BOSS COLLAPSES. MARIE GETS HIM A DRINK.

You did the right thing, Georges.

Leave it.

On the cheap, eh? HE GLARES AT HER.

What was the matter with him!
BERTHE   He's had a row with his wife. You can see it in his eyes.

RAY      Shut your mouth.

BERTHE   He'll take it out of Francine now.

RAY      CUFFS HER ACROSS THE HEAD And where were you when you were needed?

BERTHE   What was I supposed to do!

RAY      Hit him with a bloody bottle!

BERTHE   Oh yeah? And get a knife in my guts?

RAY      TWISTING HER ARM Next time be quicker about it.

BERTHE   Ow!

RAY      Get on with your work.

HE GOES, TAKING A BOTTLE WITH HIM. THE SOUNDS OF A BEATING NEXT DOOR.

FRAN     OFFSTAGE Stop it! Ow .. ah! No don't .... ah!

MARIE TRIES TO SSW BUT HER HANDS SHAKE. SHE PUTS DOWN HER WORK.

BERTHE   Feeling bad again? MARIE NODS.

MARIE NODS, AND BENDS, CRAMPED,OVER THE SEWING.

Could be something you ate.

MARIE    APOLOGETICALLY It's all the time now. It never stops.

BERTHE   You're going to have to pull yourself together.

MARIE    LOW I know. BERTHE SITS AT THE DRESSING TABLE, GIVES
HERSELF A HEAVY MAKEUP, REDOING HER HAIR. MARIE TRIES TO CONTROL HER SHAKING. PAUSE.

BERTHE

AT THE MIRROR Look ahead, make plans for yourself, I do. REDOES HER MOUTH. I don't intend to be doing this for the rest of me life. You gotta plot, learn to get your own way.

MARIE

SAD How?

BERTHE

Start on little things, work your way up. TRIES A SPANISH COMB IN HER HAIR. One time I wouldn't say boo to a goose. My first guvnor knocked me about something horrible if I didn't get through thirty a night minimum. I was working in Marseille. I hate Marseille. Horrible place. FINISHES HER TOILETTE. But I knew something would turn up. I said to myself, keep your eyes open, Berthe.. and it did. I met this Spanish bloke.

MARIE

What happened?

BERTHE

We went to the races, and he had a good day, we were drunk as newts after, him worse than me. I was through his wallet and on that train to Paris the same night. Bought meself a whole new wardrobe, silk undies, the lot. All I need now is some old gink to set me up. With a bit of luck he'll peg out from it and I'm laughing. Know what I'm going to do?

MARIE

No what?

BERTHE

Run me own sweet shop. I'm having gold boxes, mauve ribbons and special silk roses for weddings and christenings.

MARIE

It sounds lovely!
BERTHE  I'll have a little orchard out the back, somewhere
to sit for morning coffee. Pomeranian dog.. A couple of cats, Persian. I've even thought of
keeping chickens.

MARIE  Oh Berthe! HER EYES GLOW AT THE THOUGHT.

BERTHE  You wanna stand up for yourself. Enter into it
a bit more. Worth while, you know, we get a good
class clientele.

MARIE  APOLOGETIC  I bleed all the time.

BERTHE  What did the doctor say?

MARIE  That I was fit to work. No infection.

BERTHE  Perhaps you got a fibroid.

MARIE  What's that?

BERTHE  On your womb! They grow as big as a grapefruit!
Then just when you think you're having twins the
bloody thing explodes. Either that or it strangles
your tripes. You constipated?

MARIE  No, I get diarrhoea all the time.

BERTHE  Oh, good.

MARIE  It gives me such terrible cramps.

BERTHE  Tell him!

MARIE  He says I'm complaining.

BERTHE  But you've gone all thin.

MARIE  He likes me like that.
BERTHE

Come on, he'll be back in a minute. JOINS MARIE who is trying to sew. Look. can't you stop your hands shaking, it gets on my nerves!

MARIE

Sorry.

BERTHE

Here... SHE BITES OFF HER COTTON, THROWS HER SEWING TO MARIE... if he wants to know you've done that bit.

FRANCINE EMERGES, HOLDING HER FACE. STUMBLING THROUGH, RETURNS, SITS HEAVILY, THE BOSS ENTERS AT ONCE WITH TWO MEN,

RAY

La Choix, Messieurs... La Choix! Who is it to be this week, Monsieur Paul.... la belle Marie-Helene... our little Berthe of the dazzling derriere... BOTH LAUGH, AND INDICATE FRANCINE... ONE MURMURING IN THE BOSS'S EAR - aha, the triple crown! An excellent choice! Our beautiful Francine will accommodate you... strong thighs, messieurs, perfect for your purpose, to work, Francine!

FIRST MAN

Yes, come on, Francine! What about last week, eh? I brought you off, didn't I?

FRAN

You did, you did - you're a real sportsman!

FIRST

TO RAYMOND There's not many do THAT with a whore.

RAY

No indeed, sir!

SECOND

GOSSIPING HER Come on, Francine... Francine!

FIRST

Francine... Francine! FONDLING HER TOGETHER... THEY ARE DRUNK.

FRANCINE TAKES THE ARM OF THE FIRST MAN. THE THREE MAKE FOR THE EXIT.
RAY  You'll get your money's worth with Francine, sirs ..... worth every penny.

SECOND  GAILY  We'll see to that all right, don't you worry, Monsieur Pimpo. Francine!

FRANCINE TAKES THEM OFF. RAYMOND, FURIOUS, TRIPS OVER THE SEWING BASKET. BERTHE MAKES THE MISTAKE OFF GIGGLING. HE TURNS, PICKING UP A GARMENT.

RAY  UGLY  What's this?

MARIE  We put a piece of lace on. To cover the tear.

RAY  Who said you could do that? Who said you could do that?

MARIE  SMALL  Nobody.

RAY  What do you think I am? Wasting good lace. Do you think I'm made of money?

HE THROWS THE SEWING AT HER FEET. SHE PICKS IT UP, TRIES TO SHOW HIM.

MARIE  It's all torn ..

RAY  Then cobble it together, you stupid tart!

BERTHE SHAKES HER HEAD AT MARIE WARNingly.

MARIE  I'll unpick it carefully, and use the same bit of cotton to darn it.

RAY  That's all very well - do the job twice that's still my time you've wasted. Stupid bitch.

HE GOES, MutterING TO HIMSELF.

BERTHE  Bloody mending.
MARIE I should have thought.

BERTHE BITING COTTON We shouldn't be doing it, the old girl ought to do it. Ruins your hands.

MARIE That's what Francine said.

BERTHE She's right! I was in trouble the other day with Monsieur Bertrand, he commented that my finger was real rough. Mind you, piles the size he's got, he's going to find anything painful.

MARIE I know. As soon as you push them in they pop out again.

BERTHE Silly old fart. And him. JERKING HER HEAD AT THE DOOR.

MARIE SMILES. SHE WATCHES BERTHE SEW. A THOUGHT OCCURS.

MARIE Berthe. BERTHE LOOKS UP. You must have believed when you were little.

BERTHE GRIMACES FEARSOMELY Look, please.

PAUSE.

MARIE LOW, APOLOGETIC It's just that it's such a terrible sin.

BERTHE Well that's my worry, innit?

MARIE Don't you care?

BERTHE I care that what goes on in here SHE TAPS HER HEAD is mine. One thing they can't take away from you.

MARIE But it's all in the Bible!
BERTHE
That's no proof! If you tells me milk comes out of a cow's tit and I say it comes from a factory in a bottle you can take me in a field, show me a bloody cow and squirt it in my face. That's proof. Anyway, God didn't write the Bible.

MARIE
He did. Well he got his prophets to.

BERTHE
That's what I'm saying. It was a lot of old ginks - Isaiah .. Elijah ... Numbers.

MARIE
Yes, but where did They get it from?

BERTHE
God knows.

MARIE
(GIGGLES) That's just what I'm saying.

BERTHE LAUGHS. THUMPING AND SQUAWKS FROM NEXT DOOR.

It had to come from God in the first place .. where else? God's everywhere ..... everything in the world comes from God.

BERTHE
Even misery?

MARIE
It's sent to try us. We should feel blessed to suffer, we're carrying the sins of the world. He loves us, Berthe ... he loves us!

BERTHE
Look, I don't want to argue, believe what you want. But after losing my brother, sicking his lungs up all over the bed, and my bloody stepmother worried about the sheets getting dirty -

MARIE
I know..

BERTHE
And losing my little girl ... what was all that for?
I know ...

Sick every sodding day for nine months, then three
days in labour, and then born perfect, not a mark
on her, like a little doll ... then all of a sudden
out like a light, for no reason ....... you tell me,
who dreamed that up? What did I do to deserve that, who
thought that one up for me. If somebody's there, he's
got a few things to answer for. I may not be perfect,
all right, suppose I'm due for punishment ........
but why take it out on the kid?

Perhaps God needed her, on His right hand.

Why bother sending her in the first place, then?
Putting me through it. Bloody spiteful if you ask
me.

Berthe, don't. Perhaps God chose her to suffer for
your sins.

What? Oh, that's nice. Anyway, why me? I'm not
wicked. I don't see why I should be picked out for
punishment.

Yes but —

There's a lot worse than us.

D'you think so?

Yeah!

We're harlots.
BERTHE  I don't think that's bad.

MARIE  Most people do. The Church does.

BERTHE  What about Mary Magdalene?

MARIE  I know.

BERTHE  Ah, bollocks to the Church.

MARIE  Berthe!

BERTHE  Shit on it and set fire to the tower - and Him! -

MARIE  COVERS HER EARS  No, don't! Stop it! I won't listen!

BERTHE  Go on, it's only swearing.

MARIE  You're taking the Lord's Name in vain. It's wicked!

BERTHE  Oh all right. Look, I'll wash me mouth out with cold cream. SHE PICKS UP A POT OF CREAM, PUTS SOME INTO HER MOUTH. Ugh! MARIE GIGGLES. BERTHE SPITS OUT THE CREAM, GAGGING, WIPING HER MOUTH. Anyway, I don't know what you want to listen to priests for .. that's just a lot of old men! Half the world's women! SHE SCRAPES HER CHAIR CLOSE TO MARIE. Listen, they only thought all this up .. the Church and that .. to keep us down 'cos we're quicker than they are. Bloody have to be and all.

MARIE  Oh Berthe, don't say such things. The Church is our only refuge -

BERTHE  Bugger the Church. Here, who's the most regular client we got - Father Antoine! Don't go telling me there's a God. Devil maybe.

RAYMOND ENTERS, MURMURING OBSEQUIOUSLY TO A CLIENT, HIS MANNER NERVOUS AND CAREFUL.

RAY  La Choix!
THE MAN AT ONCE POINTS TO MARIE, WHO RISES. HE WHISPERS TO RAYMOND, WHO GESTURES TO MARIE. MARIE EXITS. THE MAN SITS, TALL AND BONY, LOOKING STRAIGHT AHEAD. BERTHE PICKS UP THE CIGARS TO OFFER HIM BUT RAYMOND SHAKES HIS HEAD.

RAY

CLEARLY TREAT A.. a glass of wine, Monsieur le Comte? Brandy perhaps?

THE MAN SHAKES HIS HEAD, QUELLING THEM BOTH WITH A GLANCE.

MARIE RETURNS. SHE IS DRESSED AS A NUN, AND CARRIES CHAINS AND WHIPS.

BERTHE

Thought things were a bit quiet. To MARIE, WHO LOOKS DISTRACTED.

MARIE EXITS WITH THE MAN. RAYMOND EXITS SEPARATELY, RETURNS AT ONCE WITH ANOTHER CUSTOMER.

RAY

If you prefer to wait, Monsieur, or I can offer you la petite Berthe.

MAN

Too small. Nothing else?

RAY

A few moments, Monsieur.

MAN

I haven't got time. How much if I don't mount her, I don't find her attractive. THEY MOVE APART, STRIKING A BARGAIN. Right.. all right. HE NODS. TO BERTHE Come on. Be quick about it, I haven't got all night. HE AND BERTHE EXIT,

PAUSE. FRANCINE PASSES THROUGH, THE WORSE FOR WEAR. THE BOSS BIDS FAREWELL TO THE SPORTSMEN, OFF.

BOSS

OFF Au 'voir, mesieurs, au 'voir ... come and see us soon. . always glad to welcome real sportsmen ..aha.. ha..ha..ha...
FRANCINE ENTERS, CROSSES TO DRESSING TABLE, TO REPAIR HER FACE. THE BOSS ENTERS WITH A SENILE OLD MAN.

RAY

Et voici, la belle Francine, waiting to enjoy your company. Monsieur Vincent!

VINCENT

Francine! EMBRACES HER How are you, my dear.. plump as ever?

FRANCINE

Monsieur Vincent.. SHE SUPPORTS HIM AS HE WAVERS.

VINCENT

AS THEY EXIT TOGETHER I thought we might try a new variation this week ... have you got the little book?

FRAN

Of course. SHE ASSISTS HIM OFF.

BERTHE ENTERS, CROSSES, EXITS. SHORT PAUSE. BERTHE RETURNS, SITS, GRABS AN APPLE, HAS NO TIME TO TAKE A BITE.

BERTHE

MUTTERS God Almighty AS RAYMOND USHERS IN A YOUNG MAN. SHE RISES, SMILING.

RAY

INDICATING BERTHE Voila, Monsieur .. la petite soeur de Monsieur.

BERTHE CURTSEYS.

YOUNG MAN She don't look much like our Paulette.

RAY

She will, my dear young man .. she will. Describe your sister, Monsieur.

YOUNG MAN SULKY She's got long hair. And she's very shy.

BERTHE LETS DOWN HER HAIR, AND TURNS AWAY SHYLY.

YOUNG MAN And she's got a smile like St. Bernadette.
BERTHE SMILES AT HIM.

RAY

REVERENTLY  Kneel, cher Monsieur... kneel.

THE YOUNG MAN, MESMERISED, DOES SO. BERTHE APPROACHES, Puts a hand on his head. He groans and begins to pant. RAYMOND GIVES BERTHE A QUICK LOOK, SHE TAKES THE YOUNG MAN'S HAND AND LEADS HIM OFF QUICKLY. MARIE ENTERS, WEEPING QUIETLY.

RAY

What's the matter with you?

SHE DISPLAYS HER BACK, THEN HER CHEST. SHE IS COVERED IN WEALS, AND THERE ARE MARKS ON HER THROAT.

MARIE

He's getting worse. He'll kill me next time, Georges - you'll have to stop him.

RAY

How can I? IRRITABLE.

MARIE

Don't let him in.

RAY

You know who he is, I can't do that!

MARIE

But I swear he'll -

RAY

I can't afford to upset the gentry. You'll have to take your chance.

MARIE

Georges, please...! FOR A MOMENT HE WAVERS.

RAY

IN A TEMPER  Now don't start!  HE GOES.

FRANCINE ENTERS, CROSSES, EXITS.. RE-ENTER AND SITS.

FRAN

TIRED  Just old Vincent.. all talk. Hello, what's up?

MARIE SHOWS FRANCINE HER BACK.
FRAN Oh my God. No, that's too much.

MARIE He'll kill me, Francine, next time, or the time after. I can see it in his eyes.

FRAN What did the guvnor say?

MARIE He said there's nothing he can do.

FRAN Frightened to upset him. Wouldn't be the first time either. Turn round.

MARIE What d'you mean?

FRAN Remember Esmeralda?

MARIE The one who went to Italy with a lion-tamer?

FRAN That's his idea of a joke. She puts her hands round her neck, makes a choking sound. And one of the maids on the estate. They hushed it up... said she'd fallen down a well. Likely.

RAYMOND ENTERS WITH A BUSINESSMAN.

RAY La Choix. Monsieur......... La Choix!

BUSINESSMAN Good God this one's badly marked. You need some new flesh, Monsieur Raymond. Well, it'll have to be Francine again.

RAY As you say, Monsieur.

BUSINESSMAN At least she's got a good ass on her.
Indeed, Monsieur. FRANCINE AND THE MAN GO.

Vulgar bugger. I hate that sort of talk. Ah! AS A MAN IN A MORNING COAT ENTERS. Entrez, my dear Monsieur Richaud... a grand occasion I see!

WITH A SMALL CURTSEY Bonsoir, Monsieur Richaud.

Hullo Marie.. TO RAYMOND can't stop, old thing, reception's in full swing up there.

Of course, your daughter's wedding!

Just popped in with a bit of cake for the girls.

Oh I say! There, Marie! Think of that! Cher Monsieur - oh they will be pleased - well, you know women!

I should think I do - five daughters.

You've time for a glass, no, I insist.. POURS A BRANDY, RICHAUD KNOCKS IT BACK. Mention the word wedding to my girls, oh, they all pipe their eye! To the young couple.. to their good health .. hang on, this calls for something special! OPENS CHAMPAGNE.

Haha! Bravo!

THEY DRINK.

Bless you!

Reception's going well eh?
Ray: Aha, girls! Nothing like it.

Richaud: I will say my little Anne's the prettiest of the lot, in her white dress. Fit to eat. He sighs heavily.

Ray: Softly We're always here, old friend.

Richaud: Yes, yes.

Ray: I tell you what! We'll dress Marie-Hélène here as the bride! To celebrate the occasion!

Richaud: Oh I wouldn't put you to the trouble.

Ray: Not a bit of it! It's the least we can do for a man who's losing his prettiest daughter — not that they aren't all good-looking.. lovely girls. Off you go, Marie-Hélène .. the best dress, the one the Countess gave us .. you know the one, my dear, with the Brussels lace. She goes. Marvellous girl. Good family, you know. All these lovely girls.

Richaud: Yes. It's a strange feeling, Georges. One minute they're sitting on your lap gazing up into your eyes and asking for bonbons... all of a sudden some young whippersnapper comes along, wants to get up to I don't know what with them. Makes you think, Georges.. makes you think.

Short pause. They drink reflectively.

Ray: Discreetly Good arrangements?

Richaud: Can't complain.
RAY
I hear she's marrying into a fine family. Building supplies, was it?

RICHAUD
And sanitary fittings.

RAY
She won't go wrong there.

RICHAUD
The wife saw to it all... she doesn't stand for any nonsense.

RAY
A good match, eh?

RICHAUD
Oh yes. They NEED an older man. Anyway, once she's had a couple of children - by the time she's twenty she'll have too much to think about......aha! Oh my dear girl! Oh, what a picture!

MARIE APPEARS DRESSED AS A BRIDE.

RICHAUD
You've done me proud, old friend. BLOWS HIS NOSE INTO A LARGE SILK HANKIE... BREAKS DOWN AND CRIES. ....not every day a man loses his daughter ...

RAY
And there's nothing wrong with a manly tear about it! You're a man of sentiment, sir... a man of sentiment! Come, kiss the bride. RICHAUD AND MARIE APPROACH EACH OTHER. I now pronounce you man and wife... back with the veil, my dear, you're a married woman now - she's all yours, my friend, to have and to hold, eh? Look at her lovely lips... they're all trembling for it... she can't wait for your hand on her... it's what they're made for, friend..... it's what they're made for ......

RICHAUD GROANS, GRASPS MARIE GREEDILY AND EMBRACES HER, SMOTHERS HER FACE WITH KISSES.

RICHAUD
I shan't forget this, Georges. A day to remember! LIFTS MARIE, AND STAGGERS OFF WITH HER.
BERTHE ENTERS.

BERTHE I'm having trouble with the kid.

RAY What sort of trouble?

BERTHE He's crouched down in the corner crying. I can't get him to move.

RAY Didn't he get off into you?

BERTHE You kidding, I can't hardly stand up, I think he's done me an injury, I can't feel this arm.

RAY Let's have a look. SHE SHOWS HIM HER BLACKENED UPPER ARM. It's not too bad, put some violet on.

BERTHE Can I stop work?

RAY You'll pack up when I tell you to and not before.

BERTHE Oh, have a heart, boss, he nearly whacked me through the floor, I'm not kidding.

RAY TAKES A SMALL BOTTLE FROM HIS POCKET GIVES HER TWO TABLETS You can have two of these.

BERTHE Thanks, boss, you're a treat!

RAY Don't tell the others. And don't say I don't look after you!

THEY EXIT SEPARATELY.

FRANCINE APPEARS, CROSSES, EXITS, RE-ENTERS. PAUSE. SHE BEGINS TO DOZE.

BERTHE APPEARS, WALKING AWKWARDLY.
FRAN  SLEEPY  What's up?

BERTHE  INFORMATION  Lunatic. Pain's just coming through.

FRAN  Guvnor give you anything?

BERTHE  Yeah.

FRANCINE GIVES HER A SHARP LOOK, UNSEEN. IF TABLETS HAVE BEEN DISPENSED THE INJURY IS REAL.

FRAN  Put your legs above your head.

RAYMOND ENTERS.

RAY  Messieurs..... La Choix!

TWO MEN FOLLOW HIM ON.

1ST. MAN  TO THE SECOND  Turn and turn about?

SECOND  I'll take the littlun first. Want a good poke, littlun?

BERTHE SMILES CHEEKILY.

BERTHE  You and who else... whoops! AS HE GOSES HER.

1ST. MAN  TO FRANCINE  Right, it's you and me, lovely. Look lively, we ain't got all night. HE WHACKS HER BEHIND, SEE JERKS FORWARD. That's better.. AS SHE MANAGES A GRIN.. we're here for a bit of fun, not for the knitting. TO THE BOSS  How much for buggery?

RAY  Twenty, Monsieur.

1ST. MAN  Mmm, a bit steep - thirty for the two?

RAY  Thirty-five.
1ST. MAN  Done. TO BERTHE  That'll take the smile off your face, Tich.

SECOND MAN  Yeah!

RAY  My girls will accommodate you sir, never fear.

SECOND  Been there, have you?

RAY  Monsieur?

1ST. MAN  Right... no cocking about... here we go. Lead the way ... fuck, fuck ... fuck, fuck, fuck... HE MARCHES.

SECOND  Girls were made to poke and suck.... THE MEN LAUGH LOUDLY AS THEY GO.

THE BOSS SITS, HELPS HIMSELF TO CHAMPAGNE.

MARIE ENTERS, THE WEDDING DRESS OVER HER ARM. HER WHITE SATIN PETTICOAT IS RIPPED.

RAY  All right?

MARIE  He gave me ten francs.

HE PUTS OUT HIS HAND, POCKETS THE MONEY. MARIE EXITS, RETURNS IN HER KIMONO, CARRYING THE WEDDING DRESS.

MARIE  The train needs mending, and the underskirt.

HE LOOKS AT THE DAMAGE.

RAY  Dirty bastard.

MARIE  TURNING THE DRESS OVER  I'd better see to it.
RAY

No, come here.

MAIRE

Oh Georges, not now.

RAY

Just a quick one. Come on. There, that's better, isn't it? Best bit of prick you've had all night.

MAIRE

Georges .. please .. I don't want to go with Monsieur Guy any more.

RAY

Let me finish, for God's sake. Ah. Ah. HE DOES SO. SITS, CUDDLES HER. There. That was all right, wasn't it?

MAIRE

Oh yes.

RAY

What's the matter now? I look after you, don't I?

MAIRE

Yes, Georges.

RAY

Well then.

MAIRE

He'll kill me!

RAY

Rubbish. Keep away from him.. arms length.

MAIRE

How can I? Please, don't make me.

RAY

LOOKS DOWN AT HER, SOFTENS Look, there's nothing to worry about.. he's a gent... aristocrat... he knows what he 's doing.

MAIRE

He's going to kill me.

RAY

You'll have to take your chance.

MAIRE

But you know he's dangerous, you know!

RAY

Shut up!
He'll murder me, like he did Esmeralda!

CLOSE AND DANGEROUS. You shut your face this instant. I don't want to hear that again.

He'll do it. I know. NO RESPONSE. You'll be a girl short!

Plenty more where you came from. Look, it's what you're paid for. Try and keep his hands off your neck. Do what he wants, get him through it, that's your job.

A maid on their estate was found strangled.

TWISTS HER ARM Another word and you'll be living at a new address—down the docks.

BERTHE APPEARS.

What are you doing, get back!

They both want Francine.

SHE GOES OFF TO WASH. MARIE WEEPS.

And you can stop that. Stop it. SHE SNIFFS, TRYING TO STOP.

You got a good meal coming up.

I'm not hungry — I'm ill, Georges.

Bollocks, pull yourself together. I want you looking fresh tonight — you're the surprise.

Oh no, please! HE FINISHES HIS DRINK AND GOES. BERTHE ENTERS, SITS.
BERTHE: Ooh you do look queer.

MARIE: I think I've come on again.

SHE GOES BEHIND SCREEN.

BERTHE: CALLS All right?

MARIE: FROM BEHIND SCREEN I don't know what to do, it won't stop.

BERTHE: Shove some cotton wool up. I hear the madman was in.

MARIE: OFF Yes.

BERTHE: No wonder you've got the flow again.

MARIE COMES OUT, SITS GINGERLY. SHE IS DEATHLY WHITE.

BERTHE: Did he hurt you?

MARIE LOOKS AT HER.

BERTHE: Tell you what.. next time he comes - yell! Me and Francine'll be in there, scratch his eyes out... we don't care.

MARIE: Will you?

BERTHE: Yeah! Course! Here... SHE POUPS MARIE A GLASS OF CHAMPAGNE, WITH A QUICK GLANCE, OFF... have some of this.

MARIE SIPS WITH DIFFICULTY.

BERTHE: Go on, knock it back! SHE IS WORRIED THAT THEY WILL BE CAUGHT. Listen, if you go sick, me and her will have to see to the lot of them between us.

MARIE: I am trying. SHE DRINKS. IT SEEMS AS IF SHE WILL
FAINT .. HER EYES ROLL UP..

BERTHE  Oh Christ..

.. BUT SHE OPENS HER EYES AGAIN AND CLUTCHES BERTHE
IN ECSTASY.

MARIE  Berthe ... Berthe! Believe! Please ... please believe!

BERTHE  Oh, that's better. More like your old self. SHE GIVES MARIE
MORE CHAMPAGNE. Put your feet up a minute, get your
strength back. SHE LIFTS MARIE'S FEET ONTO THE
OTTOMAN, EVEN STROKES THE HAIR BACK FROM MARIE'S FACE.

MARIE  CATCHES BERTHE'S HAND, CLASPS IT TO HER  I must try to
save you!

BERTHE  Yes, OK. DISENGAGES HERSELF.

FRANCINE CROSSES, EXITS. MARIE MUTTERS FEVERISH
PRAYERS.

MARIE  Please, Berthe.. please..... Help me. Help me,
sweet Jesus.. MUTTERS PRAYERS... give me light....
MUTTERS..... Mary, Mother of God ....MUTTERS TO HERSELF.

FRANCINE ENTERS.

MARIE, STILL MUTTERING, SWINGS, ALMOST FALLS OFF THE
OTTOMAN ONTO HER KNEES, STILL PRAYING. SHE CLASPS
HER HANDS TOGETHER AND BEGINS TO MOVE ACROSS THE FLOOR
ON HER KNEES, WITH AN INCANDESCENT LOOK ON HER FACE.

FRAN  Christ, what's up with her?

BERTHE  Tunno.

FRAN  Here.. Marie.....
BUT MARIE RISES, IN ECSTASY. SHE LIFTS HER ARMS IN INTENSE, JOYFUL PRAYER.

MARIE

Oh Lord ... Thou who givest us light, and air, and all the beasts of the field, and of the forest ... all the birds, and those that swim in the deep and are unknown .... dearly beloved Lord, see this thy sister.. blessed be the Lord who giveth me light .....oh! Oh! Lord, Thou blesseth me beyond my desert or knowing.. Blessed be the name of the Lord!

SHE CRIES OUT IN TRIUMPH, TURNS TO THE OTHERS, EYES STARING.

Blessed be the Lord who hath given light where there was Darkness! Blessed be His Name!

SHE APPROACHES, ATTEMPTS TO CLASP THEM.

Now I can make you understand! Berthe...... Love!

BERTHE Eh?

MARIE You understand Love ... surely?

BERTHE Not really.

FRAN Yes you do, she does.

MARIE God Is Love!

FRAN Sure.
MARIE  Sister Therese was Right! Why didn't I listen? Sense! MAKING THEM JUMP AGAIN.

FRAN  Shut up, he'll hear you!

MARIE  Berthe, Berthe... you like cooking, don't you?

BERTHE  She's gone mad.

MARIE  Cakes! If there's a cake..... there has to be a cook. Am I right?

BERTHE  NODS.

This chair - who made it?

BERTHE  Little Louie. BUT MARIE SHAKES HER HEAD. No? I thought he did.

BUT MARIE SHAKES HER HEAD, SMILING WARMLY.

FRAN  I know. God,

MARIE  Blessed be the name of the Lord. TO BERTHE. Berthe.. you must see... BERTHE GROANS.

If there's no God.. who made us? Where are we from? Why the world.... the stars..... the firmament?

BERTHE  Search me.


FRAN  God knows.

MARIE  Someone must have created it! They must have - otherwise we wouldn't be here, it wouldn't make sense. Things have to make sense.

FRAN  Who says so?
BERTHE  Most of us get a right drubbing.

MARIE  You believe in evil?

BERTHE  Oh yeah.

MARIE  Then you must believe in Good!

BERTHE  Eh?

MARIE  It's all around us...

BERTHE  LOOKING ROUND  What?

MARIE  ... we see ... we hear ... we feel! How can you not believe?

BERTHE  IRRITATED  Believe in what ... what?

MARIE  In God ... in Love! Love! Love supports us ... love creates us ... nourishes our spirit ... keeps us alive. Oh Berthe, dear Berthe ... use your sweet sound sense and Believe - can you not See? We are the children of Love!

SHE FLOODS.

Ohh!

SHE COLLAPSES ON THE SOFA. FRANCINE GRABS TOWELS FROM THE DRESSING TABLE.

FRAN  Quick!

BERTHE  Christ!

FRAN  Here... SHE HANDS BERTHE A PIECE OF CLOTH FROM THE MENDING BASKET... GIVES ANOTHER PIECE TO MARIE. TO MARIE  Quick, shove this up before he comes - if you stain this ottoman he'll kill us.

RAYMOND ENTERS. THEY MOVE SWIFTLY, IN ORDER TO HALF HIDE MARIE FROM HIS VIEW.
RAY

That's it for tonight, girls. No more casuals, you can get yourselves dolled up for the party. Marie's the surprise. Come on, make yourselves useful.

FRANCINE QUICKLY THROWS A COLOURED SHawl OVER MARIE, FOLLOWS THE OTHERS OFF. THEY RETURN WITH A LONG TABLE, RAYMOND AT ONE END, THE GIRLS THE OTHER. IT IS COVERED WITH A DAMASK CLOTH, AND DECORATED WITH SMILAX... HAS SOME FOOD, DISHES UPON IT.

RAY

TO MARIE Come on, you... on your feet.

FRAN

She's feeling a bit faint... WHISPERS... you know, that Monsieur Guy. SHE HAULS HIM AWAY. She'll be OK for later. SHE SMILES. HE GRUNTS, BUT NODS AND GOES. THEY FOLLOW, AND RETURN WITH ORNATE SILVER DISHES, AND DECORATED FOOD.

BERTHE

Ooh, lovely!

RAY

Keep your thieving fingers off. LOOKS AT HIS WATCH. Now make sharp and get dressed all of you, we're late. HE GOES. THEY CROSS TO MARIE.

BERTHE

Marie?

FRAN

Marie? TO BERTHE I don't like the look of her. Marie? BERTHE SHOVES FRANCINE ASIDE, LIFTS MARIE, SEAKING HER.. THEN DROPS HER AND JUMPS BACK.

BERTHE

Ugh, it's blood!

FRAN

Where?

BERTHE

Coming out her mouth.

FRAN

Quick - mop it up! Oh Christ. Marie.. Marie.. come on, love... come on - wake up!
BERTHE  Marie, don't mess about - come on!

FRAN  Shut up he'll hear you! Marie .... Marie....? SHE LEANS OVER MARIE, THEN STRAIGHTENS UP. No good, she's flat out.

BERTHE  What are we going to do? SHE PANICS, GRABS THE CHAMPAGNE BOTTLE AND SLOSHES IT OVER MARIE'S HEAD.

FRAN  Steady on, mind out, you'll Stain everything! Give it here, for Christ's sakes. SHE TAKES THE BOTTLE, DABS CHAMPAGNE ON MARIE'S FOREHEAD. BERTHE GIVES HER THE GLASS AND THEY TRY TO MAKE MARIE DRINK, WITHOUT SUCCESS.

BERTHE  Shall I get the old girl?

FRAN  No she'll tell him. THEY LOOK DOWN AT MARIE.

BERTHE  Here.. she's not dead is she?

FRAN  Don't be so daft. BUT BERTHE LAYS HER HEAD ON MARIE'S CHEST.

BERTHE  I can't hear nothing.

FRAN  Let me have a go. SHE LISTENS. Neither can I.

BERTHE  Look at her face it's gone blue.

FRANCINE LOOKS AT MARIE'S FACE, LIFTS HER HAND, FEELS FOR A PULSE.

BERTHE  What you doing?

FRAN  Feeling her pulse.

FRANCINE IS STILL FOR A LONG MOMENT. THEN SHE PUTS MARIE'S HAND DOWN GENTLY. Give us that glass. BERTHE HANDS HER THE CHAMPAGNE GLASS, SHE GESTURES IRRITABLY. BERTHE HANDS HER A GLASS. SHE PUTS IT TO MARIE'S LIPS THEN LOOKS AT THE GLASS, BERTHE CRANING OVER HER SHOULDER.

BERTHE  She is dead, you know.
BERTHE GIVES A MOANING SCRERCH.

FRAN   HISSES FRANTICALLY  Shut up!

BERTHE What are we going to do?

FRAN   It's not our fault!

BERTHE She said she felt ill.. the sheets in her room are black with blood, it smells horrible in there, ooh, I feel funny.

FRAN   Sit down. Not there, you fool! AS BERTHE GOES TO SIT ON THE OTTOMAN. BERTHE FLOUNDS, RECOVERS, STANDS.

BERTHE Who's going to tell him?

FRAN   I'm not telling him.

BERTHE Nothing to do with me!

FRAN   Let's go and get changed.

BERTHE Yeah. Then he can come in and find her..

FRAN   .. and it's nothing to do with us.

BERTHE We weren't here at the time.

FRAN   Right. She was fine when we left.

BERTHE Drinking his champagne!

FRAN   Leave off. THEY GO. PAUSE. RAYMOND LOOKS IN, SEES MARIE.

RAY   DOUBLETAKES  Look sharp, Marie, we haven't got all night. LOOKS ROUND SHARPLY  .. GOES. A PAUSE. FRANCINE ENTERS, DRESSED AS A SORT OF DEMETEP, GODDESS OF PLENTY, IN PINK AND CREAM AND YELLOW, WITH HIGH GOLD BOOTS. SHE TOTTERS ACROSS, LOOKS AT MARIE AFTER REPLACING CHAMPAGNE BOTTLE AND TOPPING IT UP.
LOOKING DOWN AT MARIE SADLY  Ah, what a shame. What a shame.

BERTHE ENTERS. SHE IS WEARING VERY LITTLE AND LOOKS LIKE A FAIRY FROM THE TOP OF A CHRISTMAS TREE, IN SPANGLES.

BERTHE  He's bringing the wine in and they're coming. He says for Marie to get in the whatsit. THEY LOOK DOWN AT MARIE.

FRAN  Where's her dress?

BERTHE  In the whatsit. Oh, I couldn't, I couldn't touch her!

FRAN  I can't do it on me own! Here, catch hold of her. We can't leave her in here, he'll know we've seen her! Come on!

BERTHE  All right! Ooh, God, she's heavy! You wouldn't think it!

FRAN  You've only got the feet end. What's the matter now?

BERTHE  Lost me wand.

FRAN  Never mind that that, he'll be in here!

BERTHE  I can't do it.. I can't!

FRAN  What's the matter with you!

BERTHE  I've never seen anybody dead before. I don't like dead people.. I hate death!

FRAN  THROUGH HER TEETH  WILL you come on!

THEY MANHANDLE THE BODY OFF.  PAUSE.

RAYMOND ENTERS, GIVES THE TABLE A QUICK INSPECTION. VOICES OFF, AS THE PARTY ENTER.

A PARTY OF MEN ENTERS, INCLUDING MONSIEUR HENRI.
FIRST     I put it to him, straight.
SECOND    Did you, by God?
FIRST     I said to him .. when did you last pay a dividend, I said.
SECOND    By God, you didn't mince your words!
FIRST     I didn't!
HENRI     Wait till you see, gentlemen, wait till you see ..
THIRD     Wife well?
FOURTH    Oh yes.
THIRD     Still cooking?
FOURTH    (GLOOMY) Yes.
THIRD     At least you get a return on your outlay, mine's spend, spend, spend ... now it's paintings, she's buying daubs by a chap called Pickasso .. it's money thrown in the Seine... evening, Sardine ... 
HENRI     Wait till you see! All beautiful girls .... beautiful ...... and so strict!
THIRD     Hardly Paris, old nan.
HENRI     Ah, Paris!
THIRD     My brother-in-law, from Bruges. In buttered almonds.
FIRST     Come for a spanking time, eh?
SECOND    Where are the ladies? Ahh!
THE MEN CHEER AS BERTHE ERUPTS RATHER WILDLY ONTO THE SCENE. THE FIRST MAN GRABS HER .. SHE SHRIEKS.

BERTHE

AS HE TICKLES HER  Ooh, stop it!

THIRD

This one's a bit small ..

SECOND

A bit of a tiddler!

FOURTH

We'd better throw her back! HE LIFTS BERTHE AND THROWS HER TO THE SECOND MAN. BERTHE SQUEALS AS THEY MANHANDLE HER.

FIRST

Go all the way down do you my dear?

BERTHE

You'll have to find out, won't you?

HENRY

Oh, la petite Berthe! .. she's a strong little madam in the saddle .. trot, canter, gallop .. we'll put her to the fences .. aha, little Berthe, giddy up, little Berthe! ..

THE MEN WHOOP. FRANCINE APPEARS, COOL, SMOKING A CHEROOT.

Ah .. here she is - La Francine! La Francine .. La Superba!

FOURTH

Bravo!

THREE

More like it!

SECOND

Goe are you, eh .. eh?

FRAN

If Monsieur has the petrol in his tank .. CHEERS. RAY PUSHES THROUGH.

RAY

Make way .. make way for the quest of honour ... ladies and gentlemen, mesdames et messieurs .. je vous presente ... His Worship the Mayor!

FIRST

AS THE MAYOR APPEARS  Bravo! bravo, the Mayor I say!
ANOTHER CHORUS OF BRAVOS.

MAYOR
Thank you, thank you friends...

SECOND
Silence for the Mayor, friends..

MAYOR
Thank you, thank you. Now I'm not going to make a speech... you all get plenty of that..

CHORUS OF 'NO'S.

MAYOR
I'd just like to offer a little vote of thanks to our friend Gaston, here, for the wonderful banquet we've just enjoyed at his restaurant... TO RAYMOND... seven courses, without the pudding... we'll have a job to do justice to your little spread, but we'll try... VOCIFEROUS AGREEMENT... we'll do our best... I see you've got trifle... never trifle with trifle, eh? ha ha ha! THEY ALL LAUGH.

RAY
One moment..... one moment, 'Monsieur, if I may be so bold.

MAYOR
Eh, what? What's he up to?

RAY
A little surprise, Monsieur le Mayor.

BERTHE
A surprise!

MAYOR
Not another dozen magnums of champagne - we've brought them with us, by the way, you can put your badger's piss away ha ha ha.....

RAY
Gentlemen, if we may have your attention...... Francine.. the lights my dear, if you will! Berthe..... la musique!

BERTHE PUTS ON A GRAMOPHONE RECORD. RAYMOND SWOOPS
OFF. THEY LAUGH, WAITING... HE RETURNS ALMOST AT ONCE WHEELING ON A HUGE 'CAKE' WITH CANDLES ON THE TOP. LAUGHTER AND APPLAUSE.

MAYOR

ASIDE Oh, not again.. the second one tonight..... and there'll be another before the night's out..... you think they'd dream up something a bit different.. no imagination, no imagination..... bravo, wonderful surprise..... oh, and candles too!

CHORUS

Blow them out.... blow out the candles! Come on, Monsieur the Mayor, lots of breath please! A good blow now!

HE BLOWS OUT THE CANDLES, TO APPLAUSE.

RAY

Et voila!!

NOTHING HAPPENS.

RAY

Voila!

NOTHING HAPPENS.

RAY

Voila... voila!

LAUGHTER.

MAYOR

Hurray! What's the matter, is she stuck? LOUD LAUGHTER.

RAYMOND, FURIOUS, GIVES THE CAKE A KICK.

RAY

My apologies, Monsieur! Un moment, s'il vous plait. Monsieur Raymond will take a look! HE WAGS HIS ASS SAUCILY, LIFTS THE LID OF THE CAKE, LOOKS INSIDE. AND BANGS THE LID DOWN QUICK.

SECOND

Come on, come on....

FOURTH

Yes, what have you got in there?
MAYOR Pig, is it? Gaggle of geese? Couple of ducks?

THIRD CUDDLING FRANCINE We've got those already!

HENRI Come on, come on, come on.... I know who it is, I know who it is! Surprise, surprise!

FIFTH Let's have a look!

RAY No.. no, there's been a mistake.... a little mistake......

FRANCINE COMES FORWARD. Gentlemen....... gentlemen.........
It's special! A surprise. For the Mayor's eyes only.!

RAY Yes... yes......

FRANCINE What's all this about Champagne, Monsieur le Mayor?

RAY I'll open it at once.

MAYOR No. You stay, Monsieur Raymond. I want to see my gift. Tout le monde.... into the salon..... La Veuve awaits you. Off you go.. bugger off.

BERTHE AND FRANCINE HERD THE OTHERS OUT.

SECOND Surprise eh?

FOURTH If it's cake, we all want a slice!

THEY GO, LAUGHING.

MAYOR And now, my friend..... let's see what we have here. Something gone wrong?

RAY No, no... no, I assure you.
MAYOR We'll see. HE APPROACHES THE CAKE. I think I know how these things work, eh? We've seen enough of them... remember the little girl last year... ten years old, now that WAS a surprise - you'll have a lot to do to better that, my friend. Well, let's see.

HE OPENS THE CAKE, LETTING DOWN A SIDEFLAP.

INSIDE IS MARIE, FACE DEATHLY WHITE. SHE IS DRESSED AS THE VIRGIN MARY AND THERE ARE LILIES IN HER HANDS.

RAY WHISPERS Oh my God.
HE CROSSES HIMSELF, TERRIFIED.

MAYOR Well, well, well.... what have we here?
HE PUFFS AT HIS CIGAR, APPRAISING THE SCENE.

Well, well.

RAYmond TREMBLES.

You're a clever man Monsieur Raymond. You're better than I gave you credit for. Bold too. I like that... I can use that in a man.

SHARP Who told you? How did you know?

RAY Told me? No-one.... no-one, Monsieur le Mayor.

MAYOR Hmm. We'll talk about it later. No.. you're a wag - you're a wag, sir. Last year, and now this - no, I like a man who takes the trouble to study me - clear the stuff off that table.... just push it to one end..

RAY Sir?

MAYOR Here, I'll give you a hand ... there , that's enough I think.... leave that. AS RAYMOND MAKES TO CLEAR SOME OF THE PUDDINGS.
RAYMOND, PETRIFIED, HELPS HIM TO PUT MARIE ONTO THE TABLE. THE MAYOR REMOVES DISHES, PUTS HER HEAD ON A LARGE SALAMI.

MAYOR AS THEY MOVE HER  No, quite imaginative. I like imagination. Knew you had a certain sort of little business here but .. no, we must have a chat sometime. There. Splendid. I congratulate you. Where did you get her, the morgue?

RAY  What?

MAYOR Never mind. Discretion. No, I'm in your debt. Not easy to procure. KISSES RAYMOND IN SALUTATION. Now, if I may be allowed to enjoy my birthday treat before the others.. HE TAKES SOME PUDDING FROM A BOWL, STROKES IT INTO MARIE'S HAIR... you don't object?

RAY BACKS AWAY  Not at all Monsieur. Whatever.. whatever your Honour desires.

MAYOR How peaceful she looks. Placid ... calm ... willing .... and silent. If only they were all like that, ooh what a world we'd have. SCOOPS UP SOME BLANCMANGE, RUBS IT IN HER FACE. There, my dear, you don't mind that, do you? See, not a murmur.

THIS IS TOO MUCH FOR RAYMOND. HE LURCHES, TURNS AND STAGGERS AWAY.

THE MAYOR TAKES OFF HIS JACKET, FOLDS IT CAREFULLY, PUTS ASIDE HIS CIGAR WITH EQUAL PRECISION. APPROACHES MARIE. LOOKS DOWN AT HER.

MAYOR Divine, silent marble! Ah! SHAKES HIS HEAD IN APPRECIATION.

HE RUBS FOOD INTO HER BARE ARM APPRECIATIVELY. MOVES TO GET ON THE TABLE.

MAYOR What a treat. What a treat.

LIGHTS DOWN TO BLACK.
ALTERNATIVE ENDING . . . THE TREAT

MAYOR

What a treat. What a treat.

HE CLIMBS ON TOP OF MARIE. AS HE TURNS, TO
PUT DOWN HIS CIGAR, MARIE BECOMES CONSCIOUS.
SHE SITS UP SLOWLY.

MARIE

Who are you? Are you God?

THE MAYOR FREAKS. HE UTTERS A STRANGLED ROAR
IN TERROR, FALLS OFF THE TABLE, GRABS THE TABLECLOTH,
TRYING TO HAUL HIMSELF UP, STAGGERS WILDLY, HAS A STROKE,
AND EXPIRES OPERATICALLY. MARIE, SITTING UP ON THE
TABLE, FESTOONED WITH TRIFLE, WATCHES IN OBEIDENT
AWE.

MARIE

(TIMID) Monsieur?

SHE CLIMBS DOWN, WOBBLY AT THE KNEES.

Monsieur?

SHE BENDS OVER HIM.

What would you like me to do? We're here to oblige,
Monsieur. We're yours to command.

THE LIGHTS BEGIN TO DARKEN.

You don't look comfortable.

Can I assist? SHE TRIES TO HELP HIM TO RISE BUT HE
IS SO HEAVY THAT HER EFFORTS CAUSE HIS BODY TO SLIDE
FROM A SEMI-SITTING POSITION AGAINST THE TABLE TO
FLAT ON HIS BACK.

Oh, you poor thing . . . you poor thing . . . . . . ahh!

SHE SITS ON THE FLOOR, CRADLING AND STROKING HIS HEAD.