

CHARACTERS

MME. DUVENET

ELOI,* her son.

* Pronounced Ell-wah. The part is created for Mr. John Abbott.

Auto-Da-Fé

SCENE: *The front porch of an old frame cottage in the Vieux Carré of New Orleans. There are palm or banana trees, one on either side of the porch steps: pots of geraniums and other vivid flowers along the low balustrade. There is an effect of sinister antiquity in the setting, even the flowers suggesting the richness of decay. Not far off on Bourbon Street the lurid procession of bars and hot-spots throws out distance-muted strains of the juke-organs and occasional shouts of laughter. Mme. Duvenet, a frail woman of sixty-seven, is rocking on the porch in the faint, sad glow of an August sunset. Eloi, her son, comes out the screen-door. He is a frail man in his late thirties, a gaunt, ascetic type with feverish dark eyes.*

Mother and son are both fanatics and their speech has something of the quality of poetic or religious incantation.

MME. DUVENET: Why did you speak so crossly to Miss Bordelon?

ELOI: *(standing against the column)* She gets on my nerves.

MME. DUVENET: You take a dislike to every boarder we get.

ELOI: She's not to be trusted. I think she goes in my room.

MME. DUVENET: What makes you think that?

ELOI: I've found some evidence of it.

MME. DUVENET: Well, I can assure you she doesn't go in your room.

ELOI: Somebody goes in my room and roots through my things.

MME. DUVENET: Nobody ever touches a thing in your room.

ELOI: My room is my own. I don't want anyone in it.

MME. DUVENET: You know very well that I have to go in to clean it.

ELOI: I don't want it cleaned.

MME. DUVENET: You want the room to be filthy?

ELOI: Just don't go in it to clean it or anything else.

MME. DUVENET: How could you live in a room that was never cleaned?

ELOI: I'll clean it myself when cleaning is necessary.

MME. DUVENET: A person would think that you were concealing something.

ELOI: What would I have to conceal?

MME. DUVENET: Nothing that I can imagine. That's why it's so strange that you have such a strong objection to even your mother going into your room.

ELOI: Everyone wants a little privacy, Mother.

MME. DUVENET: (*stiffly*) Your privacy, Eloi, shall be regarded as sacred,

ELOI: Huh.

MME. DUVENET: I'll just allow the filth to accumulate there.

ELOI: (*sharply*) What do you mean by "the filth"?

MME. DUVENET: (*sadly*) The dust and disorder that you would rather live in than have your mother come in to clean it up.

ELOI: Your broom and your dust-pan wouldn't accomplish much. Even the air in this neighborhood is unclean.

MME. DUVENET: It is not as clean as it might be. I love clean window-curtains, I love white linen, I want immaculate, spotless things in a house.

ELOI: Then why don't we move to the new part of town where it's cleaner?

MME. DUVENET: The property in this block has lost all value. We couldn't sell our place for what it would cost us to put new paint on the walls.

ELOI: I don't understand you, Mother. You harp on purity,

purity all the time, and yet you're willing to stay in the midst of corruption.

MME. DUVENET: I harp on nothing. I stay here because I have to. And as for corruption, I've never allowed it to touch me.

ELOI: It does, it does. We can't help breathing it here. It gets in our nostrils and even goes in our blood.

MME. DUVENET: I think you're the one that harps on things around here. You won't talk quietly. You always fly off on some tangent and raise your voice and get us all stirred up for no good reason.

ELOI: I've had about all that I can put up with, Mother.

MME. DUVENET: Then what do you want to do?

ELOI: Move, move. This asthma of mine, in a pure atmosphere uptown where the air is fresher, I know that I wouldn't have it nearly so often.

MME. DUVENET: I leave it entirely to you. If you can find someone to make an acceptable offer, I'm willing to move.

ELOI: You don't have the power to move or the will to break from anything that you're used to. You don't know how much we've been affected already!

MME. DUVENET: By what, Eloi?

ELOI: This fetid old swamp we live in, the Vieux Carré! Every imaginable kind of degeneracy springs up here, not at arm's length, even, but right in our presence!

MME. DUVENET: Now I think you're exaggerating a little.

ELOI: You read the papers, you hear people talk, you walk past open windows. You can't be entirely unconscious of what goes on! A woman was horribly mutilated last night. A man smashed a bottle and twisted the jagged end of it in her face.

MME. DUVENET: They bring such things on themselves by their loose behavior.

ELOI: Night after night there are crimes taking place in the parks.

MME. DUVENET: The parks aren't all in the Quarter.

ELOI: The parks aren't all in the Quarter but decadence is. This is the primary lesion, the—focal infection, the—chancre! In medical language, it spreads by—metastasis! It creeps through the capillaries and into the main blood vessels. From there it is spread all through the surrounding tissue! Finally nothing is left outside the decay!

MME. DUVENET: Eloi, you are being unnecessarily violent in your speech.

ELOI: I feel that strongly about it.

MME. DUVENET: You mustn't allow yourself to sound like a fanatic.

ELOI: You take no stand against it?

MME. DUVENET: You know the stand that I take.

ELOI: I know what ought to be done.

MME. DUVENET: There ought to be legislation to make for reforms.

ELOI: Not only reforms but action really drastic!

MME. DUVENET: I favor that, too, within all practical bounds.

ELOI: Practical, practical. You can't be practical, Mother, and wipe out evil! The town should be razed.

MME. DUVENET: You mean this old section torn down?

ELOI: Condemned and demolished!

MME. DUVENET: That's not a reasonable stand.

ELOI: It's the stand I take.

MME. DUVENET: Then I'm afraid you're not a reasonable person.

ELOI: I have good precedence for it.

MME. DUVENET: What do you mean?

ELOI: All through the Scriptures are cases of cities destroyed by the justice of fire when they got to be nests of foulness!

MME. DUVENET: Eloi, Eloi.

ELOI: Condemn it, I say, and purify it with fire!

MME. DUVENET: You're breathing hoarsely. That's what brings on asthma, over-excitement, not just breathing bad air!

ELOI: (*after a thoughtful pause*) I am breathing hoarsely.

MME. DUVENET: Sit down and try to relax.

ELOI: I can't any more.

MME. DUVENET: You'd better go in and take an amytal tablet.

ELOI: I don't want to get to depending too much on drugs. I'm not very well, I'm never well any more.

MME. DUVENET: You never will take the proper care of yourself.

ELOI: I can hardly remember the time when I really felt good.

MME. DUVENET: You've never been quite as strong as I'd like you to be.

ELOI: I seem to have chronic fatigue.

MME. DUVENET: The Duvenet trouble has always been mostly with nerves.

ELOI: Look! I had a sinus infection! You call that nerves?

MME. DUVENET: No, but—

ELOI: Look! This asthma, this choking, this suffocation I have, do you call that nerves?

MME. DUVENET: I never agreed with the doctor about that condition.

ELOI: You hate all doctors, you're rabid on the subject!

MME. DUVENET: I think all healing begins with faith in the spirit.

ELOI: How can I keep on going when I don't sleep?

MME. DUVENET: I think your insomnia's caused by eating at night.

ELOI: It soothes my stomach.

MME. DUVENET: Liquids would serve that purpose!

ELOI: Liquids don't satisfy me.

MME. DUVENET: Well, something digestible, then. A little hot cereal maybe with cocoa or Postum.

ELOI: All that kind of slop is nauseating to look at!

MME. DUVENET: I notice at night you won't keep the covers on you.

ELOI: I can't stand covers in summer.
MME. DUVENET: You've got to have something over your body at night.
ELOI: Oh, Lord, oh, Lord.
MME. DUVENET: Your body perspires and when it's exposed, you catch cold!
ELOI: You're rabid upon the subject of catching cold.
MME. DUVENET: Only because you're unusually prone to colds.
ELOI: (*with curious intensity*) It isn't a cold! It is a sinus infection!
MME. DUVENET: Sinus infection and all catarrhal conditions are caused by the same things as colds!
ELOI: At ten every morning, as regular as clock-work, a headache commences and doesn't let up till late in the afternoon.
MME. DUVENET: Nasal congestion is often the cause of headache.
ELOI: Nasal congestion has nothing to do with this one!
MME. DUVENET: How do you know?
ELOI: It isn't in that location!
MME. DUVENET: Where is it, then?
ELOI: It's here at the base of the skull. And it runs around here.
MME. DUVENET: Around where?
ELOI: Around here!
MME. DUVENET: (*touching his forehead*) Oh! There!
ELOI: No, no, are you blind? I said *here!*
MME. DUVENET: Oh, here!
ELOI: *Yes! Here!*
MME. DUVENET: Well, that could be eye-strain.
ELOI: When I've just changed my glasses?
MME. DUVENET: You read consistently in the wrong kind of light.
ELOI: You seem to think I'm a saboteur of myself.
MME. DUVENET: You actually are.

ELOI: You just don't know. (*darkly*) There's lots of things that you don't know about, Mother.
MME. DUVENET: I've never pretended nor wished to know a great deal. (*They fall into a silence, and Mme. Duvenet rocks slowly back and forth. The light is nearly gone. A distant juke-box can be heard playing "The New San Antonio Rose." She speaks, finally, in a gentle, liturgical tone.*) There are three simple rules I wish that you would observe. One: you should wear under-shirts whenever there's changeable weather! Two: don't sleep without covers, don't kick them off in the night! Three: chew your food, don't gulp it. Eat like a human being and not like a dog! In addition to those three very simple rules of common hygiene, all that you need is faith in spiritual healing! (*Eloi looks at her for a moment in weary desperation. Then he groans aloud and rises from the steps.*) Why that look, and the groan?
ELOI: (*intensely*) You—just—don't—know!
MME. DUVENET: Know what?
ELOI: Your world is so simple, you live in a fool's paradise!
MME. DUVENET: Do I indeed!
ELOI: Yes, Mother, you do indeed! I stand in your presence a stranger, a person unknown! I live in a house where nobody knows my name!
MME. DUVENET: You tire me, Eloi, when you become so excited!
ELOI: You just don't know. You rock on the porch and talk about clean white curtains! While I'm all flame, all burning, and no bell rings, nobody gives an alarm!
MME. DUVENET: What are you talking about?
ELOI: Intolerable burden! The conscience of all dirty men!
MME. DUVENET: I don't understand you.
ELOI: How can I speak any plainer?
MME. DUVENET: You go to confession!

ELOI: The priest is a cripple in skirts!
MME. DUVENET: How can you say that!
ELOI: Because I have seen his skirts and his crutches and heard his meaningless mumble through the wall!
MME. DUVENET: Don't speak like that in my presence!
ELOI: It's worn-out magic, it doesn't burn any more!
MME. DUVENET: Burn any more? Why should it!
ELOI: Because there needs to be burning!
MME. DUVENET: For what?
ELOI: (*leaning against the column*) For the sake of burning, for God, for the purification! Oh, God, oh, God. I can't go back in the house, and I can't stay out on the porch! I can't even breathe very freely, I don't know what is about to happen to me!
MME. DUVENET: You're going to bring on an attack. Sit down! Now tell me quietly and calmly what is the matter? What have you had on your mind for the last ten days?
ELOI: How do you know that I've had something on my mind?
MME. DUVENET: You've had something on your mind since a week ago Tuesday.
ELOI: Yes, that's true. I have. I didn't suppose you'd noticed . . .
MME. DUVENET: What happened at the post-office?
ELOI: How did you guess it was there?
MME. DUVENET: Because there is nothing at home to explain your condition.
ELOI: (*leaning back exhaustedly*) No.
MME. DUVENET: Then obviously it was something where you work.
ELOI: Yes . . .
MME. DUVENET: What was it, Eloi? (*Far down the street a tamale vendor cries out in his curiously rich haunting voice: "Re-ed ho-ot, re-ed ho-ot, re-e-ed!" He moves in the other direction and fades from hearing.*) What was it, Eloi?
ELOI: A letter.

MME. DUVENET: You got a letter from someone? And that upset you?
ELOI: I didn't get any letter.
MME. DUVENET: Then what did you mean by "a letter"?
ELOI: A letter came into my hands by accident, Mother.
MME. DUVENET: While you were sorting the mail?
ELOI: Yes.
MME. DUVENET: What was there about it to prey on your mind so much?
ELOI: The letter was mailed unsealed, and something fell out.
MME. DUVENET: Something fell out of the unsealed envelope?
ELOI: Yes!
MME. DUVENET: What was it fell out?
ELOI: A picture.
MME. DUVENET: A what?
ELOI: A picture!
MME. DUVENET: What kind of a picture? (*He does not answer. The juke-box starts playing again the same tune with its idiotic gaiety in the distance.*) Eloi, what kind of a picture fell out of the envelope?
ELOI: (*gently and sadly*) Miss Bordelon is standing in the hall and overhearing every word I say.
MME. DUVENET: (*turning sharply*) She's not in the hall.
ELOI: Her ear is clapped to the door!
MME. DUVENET: She's in her bedroom reading.
ELOI: Reading what?
MME. DUVENET: How do I know what she's reading? What difference does it make what she is reading!
ELOI: She keeps a journal of everything said in the house. I feel her taking short-hand notes at the table!
MME. DUVENET: Why, for what purpose, would she take short-hand notes on our conversation?
ELOI: Haven't you heard of hired investigators?

MME. DUVENET: Eloi, you're talking and saying such horrible things!

ELOI: (*gently*) I may be wrong. I may be wrong.

MME. DUVENET: Eloi, of course you're mistaken! Now go on and tell me what you started to say about the picture.

ELOI: A lewd photograph fell out of the envelope.

MME. DUVENET: A what?

ELOI: An indecent picture.

MME. DUVENET: Of whom?

ELOI: Of two naked figures.

MME. DUVENET: Oh! . . . That's all it was?

ELOI: You haven't looked at the picture.

MME. DUVENET: Was it so bad?

ELOI: It passes beyond all description!

MME. DUVENET: As bad as all that?

ELOI: No. Worse. I felt as though something exploded, blew up in my hands, and scalded my face with acid!

MME. DUVENET: Who sent this horrible photograph to you, Eloi?

ELOI: It wasn't to me.

MME. DUVENET: Who was it addressed to?

ELOI: One of those—opulent—antique dealers on—Royal . . .

MME. DUVENET: And who was the sender?

ELOI: A university student.

MME. DUVENET: Isn't the sender liable to prosecution?

ELOI: Of course. And to years in prison.

MME. DUVENET: I see no reason for clemency in such a case.

ELOI: Neither did I.

MME. DUVENET: Then what did you do about it?

ELOI: I haven't done anything yet.

MME. DUVENET: Eloi! You haven't reported it to the authorities yet?

ELOI: I haven't reported it to the authorities yet.

MME. DUVENET: I can't imagine one reason to hesitate!

ELOI: I couldn't proceed without some investigation.

MME. DUVENET: Investigation? Of what?

ELOI: Of all the circumstances around the case.

MME. DUVENET: What circumstances are there to think of but the fact that somebody used the mails for that purpose!

ELOI: The youth of the sender has something to do with the case.

MME. DUVENET: The sender was young?

ELOI: The sender was only nineteen.

MME. DUVENET: And are the sender's parents still alive?

ELOI: Both of them still living and in the city. The sender happens to be an only child.

MME. DUVENET: How do you know these facts about the sender?

ELOI: Because I've conducted a private investigation.

MME. DUVENET: How did you go about that?

ELOI: I called on the sender, I went to the dormitory. We talked in private and everything was discussed. The attitude taken was that I had come for money. That I was intending to hold the letter for blackmail.

MME. DUVENET: How perfectly awful.

ELOI: Of course I had to explain that I was a federal employee who had some obligation to his employers, and that it was really excessively fair on my part to even delay the action that ought to be taken.

MME. DUVENET: The action that has to be taken!

ELOI: And then the sender began to be ugly. Abusive. I can't repeat the charges, the evil suggestions! I ran from the room. I left my hat in the room. I couldn't even go back to pick it up!

MME. DUVENET: Eloi, Eloi. Oh, my dear Eloi. When did this happen, the interview with the sender?

ELOI: The interview was on Friday.

MME. DUVENET: Three days ago. And you haven't done anything yet?

ELOI: I thought and I thought and I couldn't take any action!

MME. DUVENET: Now it's too late.
ELOI: Why do you say it's too late?
MME. DUVENET: You've held the letter too long to take any action.
ELOI: Oh, no, I haven't. I'm not paralyzed any longer.
MME. DUVENET: But if you report on the letter now they will ask why you haven't reported on it sooner!
ELOI: I can explain the responsibility of it!
MME. DUVENET: No, no, it's much better not to do anything now!
ELOI: I've got to do something.
MME. DUVENET: You'd better destroy the letter.
ELOI: And let the offenders go scot free?
MME. DUVENET: What else can you do since you've hesitated so long!
ELOI: There's got to be punishment for it!
MME. DUVENET: Where is the letter?
ELOI: I have it here in my pocket.
MME. DUVENET: You have that thing on your person?
ELOI: My inside pocket.
MME. DUVENET: Oh, Eloi, how stupid, how foolish! Suppose something happened and something like that was found on you while you were unconscious and couldn't explain how you got it.
ELOI: Lower your voice! That woman is listening to us!
MME. DUVENET: Miss Bordelon? No!
ELOI: She is, she is. She's hired as investigator. She claps her ear to the wall when I talk in my sleep!
MME. DUVENET: Eloi, Eloi.
ELOI: They've hired her to spy, to poke and pry in the house!
MME. DUVENET: Who do you mean?
ELOI: The sender, the antique-dealer!
MME. DUVENET: You're talking so wildly you scare me. Eloi, you've got to destroy that letter at once!

ELOI: Destroy it?
MME. DUVENET: Yes!
ELOI: How?
MME. DUVENET: Burn it! (*Eloi rises unsteadily. For a third time the distant juke-organ begins to grind out "The New San Antonio Rose," with its polka rhythm and cries of insane exultation.*)
ELOI: (*faintly*) Yes, yes—burn it!
MME. DUVENET: Burn it this very instant!
ELOI: I'll take it inside to burn it.
MME. DUVENET: No, burn it right here in my presence.
ELOI: You can't look at it.
MME. DUVENET: My God, my God, I would pluck out my eyes before they would look at that picture!
ELOI: (*hoarsely*) I think it is better to go in the kitchen or basement.
MME. DUVENET: No, no, Eloi, burn it here! On the porch!
ELOI: Somebody might see.
MME. DUVENET: What of it?
ELOI: It might be thought that it was something of mine.
MME. DUVENET: Eloi, Eloi, take it out and burn it! Do you hear me? Burn it now! This instant!
ELOI: Turn your back. I'll take it out of my pocket.
MME. DUVENET: (*turning*) Have you matches, Eloi?
ELOI: (*sadly*) Yes, I have them, Mother.
MME. DUVENET: Very well, then. Burn the letter and burn the terrible picture. (*Eloi fumblingly removes some papers from his inside pocket. His hand is shaking so that the picture falls from his grasp to the porch-steps. Eloi groans as he stoops slowly to pick it up.*) Eloi! What is the matter?
ELOI: I—dropped the picture.
MME. DUVENET: Pick it up and set fire to it quickly!
ELOI: Yes . . . (*He strikes a match. His face is livid in the glow of the flame and as he stares at the slip of paper, his eyes*

seem to start from his head. He is breathing hoarsely. He draws the flame and the paper within one inch of each other but seems unable to move them any closer. All at once he utters a strangled cry and lets the match fall.)

MME. DUVENET: (turning) Eloi, you've burned your fingers!

ELOI: Yes!

MME. DUVENET: Oh, come in the kitchen and let me put soda on it! (Eloi turns and goes quickly into the house. She starts to follow.) Go right in the kitchen! We'll put on baking soda! (She reaches for the handle of the screen door. Eloi slips the latch into place. Madame Duvenet pulls the door and finds it locked.) Eloi! (He stares at her through the screen. A note of terror comes into her voice.) Eloi! You've latched the door! What are you thinking of, Eloi? (Eloi backs slowly away and out of sight.) Eloi, Eloi! Come back here and open this door! (A door slams inside the house, and the boarder's voice is raised in surprise and anger. Mme. Duvenet is now calling frantically.) Eloi, Eloi! Why have you locked me out? What are you doing in there? Open the screen-door, please! (Eloi's voice is raised violently. The woman inside cries out with fear. There is a metallic clatter as though a tin object were hurled against a wall. The woman screams; then there is a muffled explosion. Mme. Duvenet claws and beats at the screen door.) Eloi! Eloi! Oh, answer me, Eloi! (There is a sudden burst of fiery light from the interior of the cottage. It spills through the screen door and out upon the clawing, witch-like figure of the old woman. She screams in panic and turns dizzily about. With stiff, grotesque movements and gestures, she staggers down the porch-steps, and begins to shout hoarsely and despairingly.) Fire! Fire! The house is on fire, on fire, the house is on fire!

CURTAIN