

## CHARACTERS

MRS. HARDWICKE-MOORE.

MRS. WIRE.

THE WRITER.

## The Lady of Larkspur Lotion

SCENE: *A wretchedly furnished room in the French Quarter of New Orleans. There are no windows, the room being a cubicle partitioned off from several others by imitation walls. A small slanting skylight admits the late and unencouraging day. There is a tall, black armoire, whose doors contain cracked mirrors, a swinging electric bulb, a black and graceless dresser, an awful picture of a Roman Saint and over the bed a coat-of-arms in a frame.*

*Mrs. Hardwicke-Moore, a dyed-blonde woman of forty, is seated passively on the edge of the bed as though she could think of nothing better to do.*

*There is a rap at the door.*

MRS. HARDWICKE-MOORE: *(in a sharp, affected tone)* Who is at the door, please?

MRS. WIRE: *(from outside, bluntly)* Me! *(Her face expressing a momentary panic, Mrs. Hardwicke-Moore rises stiffly.)*

MRS. HARDWICKE-MOORE: Oh. . . Mrs. Wire. Come in. *(The landlady enters, a heavy, slovenly woman of fifty.)* I was just going to drop in your room to speak to you about something.

MRS. WIRE: Yeah? What about?

MRS. HARDWICKE-MOORE: *(humorously, but rather painfully smiling)* Mrs. Wire, I'm sorry to say that I just don't consider these cockroaches to be the most desirable kind of room-mates—do you?

MRS. WIRE: Cockroaches, huh?

MRS. HARDWICKE-MOORE: Yes. Precisely. Now I have had

very little experience with cockroaches in my life but the few that I've seen before have been the pedestrian kind, the kind that *walk*. These, Mrs. Wire, appear to be *flying* cockroaches! I was shocked, in fact I was literally stunned, when one of them took off the floor and started to whiz through the air, around and around in a circle, just missing my face by barely a couple of inches. Mrs. Wire, I sat down on the edge of this bed and *wept*, I was just so shocked and disgusted! Imagine! Flying cockroaches, something I never dreamed to be in existence, whizzing around and around and around in front of my face! Why, Mrs. Wire, I want you to know—

MRS. WIRE: (*interrupting*) Flying cockroaches are nothing to be surprised at. They have them all over, even uptown they have them. But that ain't what I wanted to—

MRS. HARDWICKE-MOORE: (*interrupting*) That may be true, Mrs. Wire, but I may as well tell you that I have a horror of roaches, even the plain old-fashioned, pedestrian kind, and as for this type that flies—! If I'm going to stay on here these flying cockroaches have got to be gotten rid of and gotten rid of at *once!*

MRS. WIRE: Now how'm I going to stop them flying cockroaches from coming in through the windows? But that, however, is not what I—

MRS. HARDWICKE-MOORE: (*interrupting*) I don't know *how*, Mrs. Wire, but there certainly must be a method. All I know is they must be gotten rid of before I will sleep here one more night, Mrs. Wire. Why, if I woke up in the night and found one on my bed, I'd have a convulsion, I swear to goodness I'd simply *dis* of convulsions!

MRS. WIRE: If you'll excuse me for sayin' so, Mrs. Hardshell-Moore, you're much more likely to die from over-drinkin' than cockroach convulsions! (*She seizes a bottle from the dresser.*) What's this here? Larkspur Lotion! *Well!*

MRS. HARDWICKE-MOORE: (*flushing*) I use it to take the old polish off my nails.

MRS. WIRE: Very fastidious, yes!

MRS. HARDWICKE-MOORE: What do you mean?

MRS. WIRE: There ain't an old house in the Quarter that don't have roaches.

MRS. HARDWICKE-MOORE: But not in such enormous quantities, do they? I tell you this place is actually crawling with them!

MRS. WIRE: It ain't as bad as all that. And by the way, you ain't yet paid me the rest of this week's rent. I don't want to get you off the subject of roaches, but, nevertheless, I want to colleck that money.

MRS. HARDWICKE-MOORE: I'll pay you the rest of the rent as soon as you've exterminated these roaches!

MRS. WIRE: You'll have to pay me the rent right away or get out.

MRS. HARDWICKE-MOORE: I intend to get out unless these *roaches* get out!

MRS. WIRE: Then get out then and quit just talking about it!

MRS. HARDWICKE-MOORE: You must be out of your mind, I can't get out right now!

MRS. WIRE: Then what did you mean about roaches?

MRS. HARDWICKE-MOORE: I meant what I said about roaches, they are not, in my opinion, the most desirable room-mates!

MRS. WIRE: Okay! Don't room with them! Pack your stuff and move where they don't have roaches!

MRS. HARDWICKE-MOORE: You mean that you *insist* upon having the roaches?

MRS. WIRE: No, I mean I insist upon having the rent you owe me.

MRS. HARDWICKE-MOORE: Right at the moment that is out of the question.

MRS. WIRE: Out of the question, is it?

MRS. HARDWICKE-MOORE: Yes, and I'll tell you why! The

quarterly payments I receive from the man who is taking care of the rubber plantation have not been forwarded yet. I've been expecting them to come in for several weeks now but in the letter that I received this morning it seems there has been some little misunderstanding about the last year's taxes and—

MRS. WIRE: Oh, now stop it, I've heard enough of that goddam rubber plantation! The Brazilian rubber plantation! You think I've been in this business seventeen years without learning nothing about your kind of women?

MRS. HARDWICKE-MOORE: (*stiffly*) What is the implication in that remark?

MRS. WIRE: I suppose the men that you have in here nights come in to discuss the Brazilian rubber plantation?

MRS. HARDWICKE-MOORE: You must be crazy to say such a thing as that!

MRS. WIRE: I hear what I hear an' I know what's going on!

MRS. HARDWICKE-MOORE: I know you spy, I know you listen at doors!

MRS. WIRE: I never spy and I never listen at doors! The first thing a landlady in the French Quarter learns is not to *see* and not to *hear* but only collect your *money*! As long as that comes in—okay, I'm blind, I'm deaf, I'm dumb! But soon as it stops, I recover my hearing and also my sight and also the use of my voice. If necessary I go to the phone and call up the chief of police who happens to be an in-law of my sister's! I heard last night that argument over money.

MRS. HARDWICKE-MOORE: What argument? What money?

MRS. WIRE: He shouted so loud I had to shut the front window to keep the noise from carrying out on the streets! I heard no mention of any Brazilian plantation! But plenty of other things were plainly referred to in that little midnight conversation you had! Larkspur Lotion—to take the polish off nails! Am I in my infancy, am I? That's on a par with the

wonderful rubber plantation! (*The door is thrown open. The Writer, wearing an ancient purple bathrobe, enters.*)

WRITER: Stop!

MRS. WIRE: Oh! It's you!

WRITER: Stop persecuting this woman!

MRS. WIRE: The second Mr. Shakespeare enters the scene!

WRITER: I heard your demon howling in my sleep!

MRS. WIRE: *Sleep?* Ho-ho! I think that what you *mean* is your *drunken stupor*!

WRITER: I rest because of my illness! Have I no right—

MRS. WIRE: (*interrupting*) Illness—*alcoholic*! Don't try to pull that beautiful wool over my eyes. I'm glad you come in now. Now I repeat for your benefit what I just said to this woman. I'm *done* with *dead beats*! Now is that plain to yuh? Completely fed-up with all you Quarter rats, half-breeds, drunkards, degenerates, who try to get by on promises, lies, delusions!

MRS. HARDWICKE-MOORE: (*covering her ears*) Oh, please, please, please stop shrieking! It's not necessary!

MRS. WIRE: (*turning on Mrs. Hardwicke-Moore*) You with your Brazilian rubber plantation. That coat-of-arms on the wall that you got from the junk-shop—the woman who sold it *told* me! One of the Hapsburgs! Yes! A titled lady! *The Lady of Larkspur Lotion!* There's your title! (*Mrs. Hardwicke-Moore cries out wildly and flings herself face down on the sagging bed.*)

WRITER: (*with a pitying gesture*) Stop badgering this unfortunate little woman! Is there no mercy left in the world anymore? What has become of compassion and understanding? Where have they all gone to? Where's God? Where's Christ? (*He leans trembling against the armoire.*) What if there is no Brazilian rubber plantation?

MRS. HARDWICKE-MOORE: (*sitting passionately erect*) I tell

you there is, there is! (*Her throat is taut with conviction, her head thrown back.*)

WRITER: What if there is no rubber king in her life! There ought to be rubber kings in her life! Is she to be blamed because it is necessary for her to compensate for the cruel deficiencies of reality by the exercise of a little—what shall I say?—God-given—imagination?

MRS. HARDWICKE-MOORE: (*throwing herself face down on the bed once more*) No, no, no, no, it isn't—imagination!

MRS. WIRE: I'll ask you to please stop spitting me in the face those high-flown speeches! You with your 780-page masterpiece—right on a par with the Lady of Larkspur Lotion as far as the use of imagination's concerned!

WRITER: (*in a tired voice*) Ah, well, now, what if I am? Suppose there is no 780-page masterpiece in existence. (*He closes his eyes and touches his forehead.*) Supposing there is in existence no masterpiece whatsoever! What of that, Mrs. Wire? But only a few, a very few—vain scribblings—in my old trunk-bottom. . . . Suppose I wanted to be a great artist but lacked the force and the power! Suppose my books fell short of the final chapter, even my verses languished uncompleted! Suppose the curtains of my exalted fancy rose on magnificent dramas—but the house-lights darkened before the curtain fell! Suppose all of these unfortunate things are true! And suppose that I—stumbling from bar to bar, from drink to drink, till I sprawl at last on the lice-infested mattress of this brothel—suppose that I, to make this nightmare bearable for as long as I must continue to be the helpless protagonist of it—suppose that I ornament, illuminate—glorify it! With dreams and fictions and fancies! Such as the existence of a 780-page masterpiece—impending Broadway productions—marvelous volumes of verse in the hands of publishers only waiting for signatures to release them! Suppose that I live in this world of pitiful fiction! What satisfaction can it give you,

good woman, to tear it to pieces, to crush it—call it a lie? I tell you this—now listen! There are no lies but the lies that are stuffed in the mouth by the hard-knuckled hand of need, the cold iron fist of necessity, Mrs. Wire! So I am a liar, yes! But your world is built on a lie, your world is a hideous fabrication of lies! Lies! Lies! . . . Now I'm tired and I've said my say and I have no money to give you so get away and leave this woman in peace! Leave her alone. Go on, get out, get away! (*He shoves her firmly out the door.*)

MRS. WIRE: (*shouting from the other side*) Tomorrow morning! Money or out you go! Both of you. Both together! 780-page masterpiece and Brazilian rubber plantation! BALONEY! (*Slowly the derelict Writer and the derelict woman turn to face each other. The daylight is waning grayly through the skylight. The Writer slowly and stiffly extends his arms in a gesture of helplessness.*)

MRS. HARDWICKE-MOORE: (*turning to avoid his look*) Roaches! Everywhere! Walls, ceiling, floor! The place is infested with them.

WRITER: (*gently*) I know. I suppose there weren't any roaches on the Brazilian rubber plantation.

MRS. HARDWICKE-MOORE: (*warming*) No, of course there weren't. Everything was immaculate always—always. *Immaculate!* The floors were so bright and clean they used to shine like—mirrors!

WRITER: I know. And the windows—I suppose they commanded a very lovely view!

MRS. HARDWICKE-MOORE: Indescribably lovely!

WRITER: How far was it from the Mediterranean?

MRS. HARDWICKE-MOORE: (*dimly*) The Mediterranean? Only a mile or two!

WRITER: On a very clear morning I daresay it was possible to distinguish the white chalk cliffs of Dover? . . . Across the channel?

MRS. HARDWICKE-MOORE: Yes—in very clear weather it was.

*(The Writer silently passes her a pint bottle of whisky.)*

Thank you, Mr.—?

WRITER: Chekhov! Anton Pavlovitch Chekhov!

MRS. HARDWICKE-MOORE: *(smiling with the remnants of co-  
quetry)* Thank you, Mr.—Chekhov.

CURTAIN