

## **Autumn Fires**

BY GUSTAV WIED

TRANSLATED BY BENJAMIN F. GLAZER.

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### PERSONS

HELMS, } KRAKAU, } HANSEN, } JOHNSTON, } [*Old Men,*  
*inmates of an old men's home*]. HAMMER, } BUFBE, } BOLLING, }  
KNUT [*An eighteen-year-old boy*].

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### AUTUMN FIRES

#### A COMEDY IN ONE ACT BY GUSTAV WIED

*[The room of Helms and Krakau in the Old Men's Home. The time is afternoon of a late September day. There is a window at right looking out on the street and another at left overlooking a courtyard. There is a single door back center which opens into a corridor on both sides of which are similar doors in long regular rows and at the end of which is a stairway from the lower floors.*

*An imaginary line divides the room into two equal parts. Helms lives on the street side and Krakau on the side nearest the courtyard. In each division there is a bed, chiffonier, a cupboard, a table, a sofa and several chairs. The stove is on Krakau's side, but by way of compensation Helms has an upholstered arm chair with a tall back. A lamp hangs in the exact center of the ceiling.*

*Though there is a low screen which can be used as partial partition between the two divisions it is now folded and standing against the*

*back wall, and the two tables are placed down center, end to end, so that the place is for all present purposes a single room.*

*Helms' side is conspicuously ill kept and in disorder; Krakau's side is spick and span. On Helms' table there is a vase filled with flowers and near it a pair of gray woolen socks and a pair of heavy mittens. There is also a photograph of a boy in a polished nickel standing-frame.*

*Helms, his spectacles on his nose, sits in his great arm chair at the table and reads a newspaper.*

*Krakau sits next to him working out a problem on a chess board.*

*There is a short pause after the curtain rises.]*

KRAKAU. There, I've done it again.

HELMS [*without looking up from his paper*]. It's easy enough if one cheats.

KRAKAU. Who cheats?

HELMS. Well, year after year you work out the same problem. Anybody can do that.

KRAKAU [*rearranging the chessmen*]. You can't.

HELMS. Just try another problem once, then see how smart you are.

KRAKAU. I'm quite satisfied with this one. [*Moves a piece.*] Going to have chocolate to-day?

HELMS [*contemptuously*]. Chocolate! What for?

KRAKAU. I thought on account of it being your birthday--

HELMS. Chocolate! That's a drink for women. On my birthday I serve wine.

KRAKAU. Hmmm! Wine, eh? Who's coming?

HELMS. Just one floor.

KRAKAU. Bolling too?

HELMS. I suppose Buffe will bring him along.

KRAKAU. And he won't have a word to say.

HELMS. He never has a word to say.

KRAKAU. No, never.

HELMS. Must you rattle those pieces like that?

KRAKAU. Can I help it if they are heavy? [*Moves them more carefully.*] You are always complaining about noise. You only do it to remind me how well you can hear.

HELMS. Your hearing has gotten a good deal worse this year, hasn't it? Hansen says so, too.

KRAKAU. Hansen! A lot he knows! [*Moves a piece.*] Is there anything about you in the paper?

HELMS. Nonsense! What should there be?

KRAKAU. Your eightieth birthday. They put all kinds of foolishness in the papers these days.

HELMS. Didn't you hear what I said? There is nothing.

KRAKAU. I heard you.

HELMS [*regards him distrustfully over his spectacles*]. Have you been reading this paper while I was out?

KRAKAU [*loftily*]. I always read the paper at night, you know. Newspaper ought to be read by lamplight.

HELMS. Boasting about your eyesight again.

KRAKAU. Yes, I have excellent eyes. [*Knocks solemnly on wood.*]

HELMS. Did you read the "personal notes"?

KRAKAU [*indignantly*]. I told you I haven't touched your old paper.

HELMS. My son-in-law has been appointed postal inspector.

KRAKAU. Postal Inspector! That's not a very high office. I suppose that is why Knut hasn't turned up to-day.

HELMS [*resentfully*]. You haven't congratulated me.

KRAKAU. Because he's a postal inspector? Hump! Congratulations. [*Pushes aside the chessboard and rises.*]

HELMS [*ironically*]. Thanks. Ah, if my daughter had lived, she would be proud.

KRAKAU [*over his shoulder*]. If Mary's gray cat had been a horse she could have gone riding in the park.

HELMS [*regarding him sharply over his glasses*]. Do you know what I have noticed, Krakau? [*Krakau does not answer.*] I have noticed that whenever I mention my son-in-law you get mad.

KRAKAU. So?

HELMS [*querulously*]. Yes you do. I noticed it long ago. I don't see what you've got against him. His son Knut is your godson, too.

KRAKAU. We'll not talk about that, Helms.

HELMS. But I want to talk about it. We have been friends for sixty years, you and me, and--

KRAKAU [*suddenly*]. Why didn't Knut send regards to me in his birthday letter?

HELMS. Ha, you're jealous, that's what you are. After all, it's my birthday, not yours.

KRAKAU. He never forgot to send regards to *you* on *my* birthday.

HELMS [*beating his breast*]. Well, he's my grandson and he's only your godson.

KRAKAU [*incredulously*]. So--e?

HELMS. Well, isn't he your godson?

KRAKAU. Yes.

HELMS. Then why do you say so--e like that?

KRAKAU [*restraining himself*]. We'd better not talk about that. I told you so before.

HELMS. But, damn it, I insist upon talking about it. I want to know what you mean.

KRAKAU. That's all right.

HELMS. It isn't the first time you've made the same stupid remark.... Do you mean to insinuate that he isn't my grandson? Is that what you're driving at?

KRAKAU. For the third time, let's drop the subject. [*Down in the courtyard a hand organ begins to play.*] There's the old organ grinder.... This is Thursday.

HELMS. You needn't tell me. I can hear for myself.

KRAKAU. It's your turn to give him something.

HELMS. I have no small change. Lay it out for me.

KRAKAU. Remember you owe me for the pack of matches.

HELMS. This will make seventeen.

KRAKAU. [*Wraps a coin in a bit of paper.*] I just want to make sure you've got it right. You always argue about it afterwards.

HELMS. Hmm!

KRAKAU. [*Opens the window, throws out the coin. The music plays more vigorously, then suddenly stops.*] The porter is chasing him away.... I suppose it's because Larsen is sick downstairs.

HELMS [*laughs angrily*]. Huh! You were in an awful hurry about throwing that money down, weren't you? Well, I won't pay you for that.

KRAKAU [*hastily closing the window*]. What kind of a way is that?

HELMS. You should have waited until he'd played a few tunes.

KRAKAU. How was I going to know the porter would chase him away?

HELMS. That's your lookout. You should have waited, then you would have seen, I won't pay you back.

KRAKAU. You're a damned old swindler, Helms, and you always were. [*Turns away and pulls out his pipe.*]

HELMS [*sees the pipe*]. I can't bear tobacco smoke to-day; my throat's too bad.

KRAKAU. Let me tell you something; I take no orders from you.

HELMS. I'll complain to the superintendent. Smoke hurts my throat, and you know it.

KRAKAU. Huh! Won't you complain to your postal clerk son-in-law, too?

HELMS. No, but I'll tell Knut when he comes. I don't see why I let you be his godfather anyway. They wanted some one else, but I said: "No, let's ask Krakau; it will please him." I was a fool.

KRAKAU. You asked me because you knew I'd give him a handsome present. Old miser that you are!

HELMS. But you've always been jealous because I am his grandfather while you are only his godfather.

KRAKAU. So--!

HELMS [*furious*]. Don't you dare to smoke, do you hear!

KRAKAU. Who's smoking? [*Puts the pipe back in his pocket.*]

HELMS. You needn't pretend you are not jealous. Why, when my daughter was alive and came to visit me here you used to crawl over to your own side and hide your envious face.

KRAKAU. She didn't come to see me.

HELMS. Well, you might at least have been polite.... But you were always a false friend. You never forgave me for having a wife and family while you were a lonely old bachelor.

KRAKAU. So--e!

HELMS. Don't make that nasty noise! It's true; you know it's true. To this day I remember how angry you were when Andrea was born. For two years you didn't set foot in my house. You said you couldn't bear children about.... But if she had been your own child--

KRAKAU. Can't you talk about anything else?

HELMS. And you wouldn't come to my wife's funeral either. I shall never forgive you that, Krakau,--the wife of your best friend--and now you want to smoke though you know I have a weak throat.

KRAKAU. Why will you talk like an idiot? Don't you see the pipe is in my pocket.

HELMS. Well, you were going to smoke, weren't you? And there's another thing: It never occurred to you to congratulate me when I told you my son-in-law had been made a postal clerk.

KRAKAU [*ironically*]. I do congratulate you. But you needn't be so stuck up about it. He's not the only postal inspector in the world.

HELMS. Who's stuck up? Not a bit of it! I was thinking of Knut. He'll be better provided for now his father has a good position. Isn't it natural for me to think of Knut's welfare? I am his grandfather.

KRAKAU. So--o?

HELMS. There you go again with your So--o! My daughter's son is my grandson. Any fool knows that.

KRAKAU. Many a fool has believed he was a daughter's father--and wasn't.

HELMS. What's that? My daughter...? You are an idiot.

KRAKAU. Do you remember what happened to Adam Harbee?

HELMS. That has nothing to do with the case. My wife was not that sort of a woman. You'll concede that.

KRAKAU. Ye-es.

HELMS. Well, then--but what can an innocent old bachelor like you know of such things.

KRAKAU. Are you going to talk stuck up again, Helms?

HELMS. Sure I will: I am too stuck up to let an ignorant bachelor like you teach me what's what about married life. What do you know about it? Virgin!



KRAKAU [*infuriated*]. I'll tell you what I know about it. You are not Andrea's father at all.

HELMS [*laughs incredulously*]. Ain't I? Well, if I may take the liberty to ask, who is her father?

KRAKAU. That's all right. We'll not talk about it any more.

HELMS. Oh yes, we will! Who is her father, if I am not?

KRAKAU. That's all right.

HELMS. Just empty talk, eh? I might have known it. You just say such things because I owe you seventeen pfennig.

KRAKAU. Twenty-seven! I laid out ten for cake last Friday.

HELMS. Twenty-seven, then. And that's why you make up these stories to annoy me.

KRAKAU.. Have it your way.

HELMS [*whimpering*]. Why don't you speak out, then? If I am not Andrea's father, who is? You can't leave it like this. Who is the man you accuse, eh? Was it Axel?

KRAKAU [*scornfully*]. No.

HELMS. Or Summensen?

KRAKAU. Do you suppose Caroline would mix up with a couple of swine like that?

HELMS. Of course I don't. It's you that's been putting such things in my head. You don't know what you are talking about.

KRAKAU. I know what I know.

HELMS [*pounds on the table*]. Who was he then? Speak up or admit that you are a filthy liar.

KRAKAU [*with sudden determination*]. I was her father. Now you know it.

HELMS [*derisively*]. You!... Ha, ha, ha!... You! God knows how you hit on that idea. Do tell us about it.

KRAKAU [*savagely; he is on his own side of the room now*]. Yes, I'll tell you about it.... With pleasure, my dear Helms!... I had made up my mind to carry the secret with me to the grave ... but I can't stand your overbearing ways any more.... Now it comes out.... And thank God for it.... You were a devil to your wife and you have been a devil to me, Helms, all the fifteen years we have lived in this room.

HELMS. Ha, ha! So I've been a devil, eh? The things one lives and learns!

KRAKAU. Yes, a devil--a devil on wheels. You whine and crow and fuss and scold ... nothing suits you ... no matter how hard I try ... and you are mean and niggardly.... Every pfennig must be pulled out of you like a tooth.

HELMS. I don't throw my money in the street.

KRAKAU. Nobody throws his money in the street, but you can't get along without spending money, can you?

HELMS. No.

KRAKAU. No, but you expected Caroline to. Instead of money you gave her compliments. Naturally she came to me for help. She had to have pin money and clothes.

HELMS. And you gave her money.

KRAKAU. Of course I did.

HELMS. Yes, what then?

KRAKAU. Of course it was humiliating to her. She was very unhappy. I did my best to console her.

HELMS. And then Andrea was born.

KRAKAU. Yes.

HELMS [*bitterly*]. That was ... that was powerful consolation, Krakau, I must say.... But tell me how you are so sure that Andrea was your daughter.

KRAKAU. Caroline told me herself. Besides, didn't I know that she had lived with you ten years before and never had a child.

HELMS [*pathetically*]. No. [*With a flash of anger.*] Why didn't you tell me this before?

KRAKAU [*who is half sorry now*]. Why should I have told you?

HELMS [*without heeding him; mumbles half to himself, shaking his head*]. And if she was your daughter, then Knut is your grandson and you are also his godfather ... and to me he is nothing [*bows his head*]. I am eighty years old to-day, Krakau.... It is hard to be told such a thing when you are eighty....

KRAKAU [*has gone over to him, sympathetically touching his shoulder*]. I'm sorry, Helms. I wish I hadn't told you. But you made me so angry it just popped out.... But don't worry ... everything will be just the same as before--

HELMS [*shakes his head mournfully*]. No.

KRAKAU. But yes! I don't want him all for myself. We can share him, can't we?

HELMS. Share him?

KRAKAU. Of course. Instead of being your grandson Knut will be *our* grandson, that's all.

HELMS [*sits up proudly*]. Knut is nothing to me.

KRAKAU. But nobody knows that.

HELMS. He is a perfect stranger.

KRAKAU. But nobody knows it except you and me--don't you see?

HELMS. You would throw it up to me every day.

KRAKAU. Never! We should be equal partners. And oh, the long talks we could have about him!... Before it was different ... you were so stuck up about your grandson, I couldn't bear it any longer.... But now we can both be stuck up.

HELMS [*hotly*]. No.... Go over on your own side. I don't want you here.... I want to be alone.

KRAKAU. Helms....

HELMS. Get out of here, I say.... And take your flowers with you. I accept no presents from the like of you.

KRAKAU. The flowers--?

HELMS. Yes, take them away. And take [*chokes over the word*] take Knut's picture, too, and the stockings his father sent.... I guess they're yours by right.

KRAKAU [*indignantly*]. I'll do nothing of the kind. My name's not Carl Helms.

HELMS. Well, take the flowers then.

KRAKAU [*takes the flowers*]. I can do that, all right.

HELMS. And see that you don't come on my side again without asking permission.

KRAKAU [*walks a few paces; turns around*]. Hadn't I better straighten up a bit before your guests come?

HELMS. You leave my things alone ... and mind your business.

[*Krakau goes with the flowers to his own side.*]

HELMS. You've got the best of everything anyhow. The stove is on your side and the morning sun. Wouldn't you like to take my arm chair too, and my pictures? Don't mind me, you know.

[*Krakau does not answer. There is a pause. A clock outside strikes five.*]

KRAKAU. The clock's striking five.

HELMS. Let it strike.

[*There is another pause. A knock on the door is heard. Neither answers it. There is a louder knock.*]

KRAKAU. [*Impatiently.*] Why don't you answer the door?

HELMS. I'm not in the humor for company.

KRAKAU. But some one is knocking.

HELMS. What's that to me? [*There is a third knock.*]

KRAKAU. Obstinate old fool. [*Loudly.*] Come in.

[*Hansen and Johnston enter. Behind them in the hallway Buffe can be seen with Bolling on his arm. Farther back Hammer is seen.*]

[*Krakau rises, goes to the window and stands there, looking gloomily out into the courtyard.*]

HANSEN [*leaving the door open*]. The others are coming. Well, congratulations, Helms.

HELMS. Thank you.

JOHNSTON. Many happy returns. [*They shake hands.*]

BUFFE [*entering with Bolling*]. I'll have to put him in your arm chair.

HELMS. Right over there.

BUFFE. [*Helping Bolling to the chair.*] Our heartiest congratulations, eh, Bolling?

BOLLING. Hey?

BUFFE [*speaking close to his ear*]. I say we congratulate Helms on his birthday.

BOLLING. No. It's nothing to boast about.

HAMMER [*entering*]. Congratulations!

HANSEN. Now we're all here.

HELMS. Make yourselves comfortable. [*They all take seats.*]

[*Bolling sits rigid in the arm chair absently twirling his fingers.*

*Krakau, who has once or twice shown the impulse to go over to Helms, stirs uneasily but turns his back to his window.*

*A silence falls.*

*Suddenly Hansen begins to whistle, a tuneless mournful strain.*]

JOHNSTON [*whispering confidentially*]. My dear Peter, one doesn't whistle at a birthday party.

HANSEN [*mocking him*]. My dear Henry, mind your own affairs.

JOHNSTON. You have the soul of a greengrocer.

HANSEN. You have the manners of a barber.

BUFFE [*laughing*]. Those boys are always fighting.

HAMMER. But they can't live without each other.

BUFFE [*to Hammer*]. Aren't you lonely since Kruger died?

HAMMER. It is lonesome sometimes, but I have more room now.

BUFFE. My wrists are so full of rheumatism I can hardly bend them any more.

HAMMER. There's something the matter with all of us. How is your throat, Helms?

HELMS. Pretty good. [*There is silence again.*]

HANSEN. Fine weather to-day.

JOHNSTON. Regular birthday weather.

HAMMER. On my birthday it always rains.

HANSEN [*points to the window*]. You can see the sun from here.

BUFFE. I read in the papers about your son-in-law's appointment.

HELMS [*shortly*]. Yes?

JOHNSTON. Yes, we must congratulate you over again.

HANSEN. Helms is the luckiest man in the place.

HAMMER. Has your grandson been here yet?

HELMS. No.

BUFFE. Of course he's coming.

HELMS. I don't know.

JOHNSTON. Of course he'll come on your birthday. He's a fine young fellow.

HANSEN. Yes, indeed, Helms, you should be proud of him.

HAMMER [*sees Knut's portrait*]. There he is. [*All except Helms and Bolling look at the picture.*]

HANSEN. Looks something like his grandfather.

JOHNSTON. Yes, it's a striking resemblance.

HAMMER. The nose.

JOHNSTON. And the eyes--look at the eyes.

HANSEN. Yes.

BUFFE. We are looking at his grandson's picture, Bolling.

[*Bolling stares indifferently. Helms casts apprehensive glances at Krakau.*]

HAMMER. Look at the gifts.

HANSEN. He's a lucky man.

JOHNSTON [*with a sigh*]. Ah yes, when you have your family--

BUFFE [*showing the stockings*]. Helms got some wonderful birthday presents, Bolling.

BOLLING [*feeling them*]. Good wool.

HANSEN [*suddenly*]. What is Krakau doing over there?

HELMS [*angrily*]. Yes, why don't you stop skulking over there like a homeless dog.



BUFFE [*to Hammer*]. They have quarreled.

HAMMER. I guess so. [*To Hansen.*] Have they had a fight?

HANSEN. I don't know.

JOHNSTON. That's right, be sociable, Krakau.

HELMS [*irritably*]. Why don't you get the wine, Krakau?

KRAKAU. How should I know--

HELMS [*interrupts*]. You know it is in the closet. [*Krakau takes bottle and glasses from the cupboard.*]

HAMMER [*delighted*]. Did you say wine?

BUFFE. Wine! Did you hear?

HANSEN. You might think Helms was a postal inspector himself.

JOHNSTON. More than that! He's a millionaire in disguise. Krakau can tell you--he has stockings full of good red gold.

[*Krakau pours the wine. All watch with eager eyes. The sun now shines full in the room.*]

KRAKAU. Hadn't we better push the tables together.

HELMS [*petulantly*]. No. It's my birthday. And we can do very well without your table.

HAMMER. There'd be more room with both tables.

BUFFE. We can't all sit around one table.

HELMS. All right--push them together. [*They do so.*]

JOHNSTON. We must fix our tables this way, too, Peter.

HANSEN. All right.

BUFFE [*to Bolling*]. Come over to the table; we are going to have wine.

[*Bolling stands up. They move his chair to the table. He sits again.*]

HANSEN. Why are you so quiet, Bolling?

BOLLING. Everything there is to say has been said.

JOHNSTON. He's a smart man. [*Nods admiringly.*]

HANSEN. Ha, ha, ha!

BOLLING [*suddenly to Krakau*]. What's that you are pouring?

KRAKAU. Sherry.

BOLLING [*angrily*]. I can't stand port wine.

KRAKAU. Yes, but this is sherry.

BOLLING. Port wine is poison.

HAMMER. But this is sherry.

BOLLING. Port wine is poison.

BUFFE. Yes, Bolling; but this is sherry; it won't hurt you.

BOLLING. Poison--port wine is.

JOHNSTON [*raising his glass.*] Many happy returns!

HAMMER. Many future birthdays!

HANSEN. Happy ones!

BUFFE. Bolling, we are drinking to Helms.

BOLLING. It isn't port wine, is it?

BUFFE. No, indeed,--sherry.

BOLLING. I da'sn't drink port.

BUFFE. It's a toast to Helms.

BOLLING. Why?

BUFFE. He's eighty years old to-day.

BOLLING. I am ninety-two. That's nothing to be glad about.

*[All except Bolling raise their glasses. They utter cheery exclamations and drink.]*

HELMS. Thanks; thank you!

BOLLING *[raising his glass]*. Congratulations, Helms. I hope you never get as old as me.

HAMMER *[angrily]*. That's no way to talk, Bolling.

HANSEN. He's spoiling the whole party.

BUFFE *[apologetically]*. Bolling's tired of living.

JOHNSTON. You're joking.

BUFFE. No; really he is. He wants to die.

JOHNSTON. Nonsense! How can any one *want* to die? It's against human nature.

KRAKAU *[who has taken cigars from the cupboard]*. Who wants to smoke?

HANSEN [*with delight.*] Cigars too!

[*Krakau passes the cigars. Hansen, Hammer and Johnston each take one. The sun now shines on the table and men.*]

BUFFE. The sun is as red as wine.

HANSEN [*with a sigh*]. Autumn is coming.

HANSEN. We've had Autumn weather for two weeks past.

HELMS. Unseasonable weather! I hate it. [*During the entire scene he has been ill at ease, casting frequent apprehensive glances at Krakau, who avoids his gaze.*]

BUFFE. It isn't like it used to be.

HAMMER. No. When the calendar said *Summer* we *had* Summer.

BOLLING [*apropos of nothing*]. I am ninety-two.

BUFFE [*explaining apologetically*]. He always says that. It's on his mind.

KRAKAU. I hear that the nurse downstairs is engaged to be married.

HANSEN. Yes, with the doctor.

JOHNSTON. The hospital doctor?

KRAKAU. Yes; he's a sick man himself.

HAMMER. Then it's a good thing she's a nurse.

HELMS. Every young woman ought to be trained as a nurse.

BUFFE [*to Bolling*]. The nurse in the hospital is going to marry the doctor.

BOLLING. I was married, too.

HELMS. Fill the glasses, Krakau. [*Krakau does.*]

BUFFE. How is Larsen's brain fever getting along?

HANSEN. He must be worse. The porter chased the organ grinder away.

HAMMER. I thought I heard the organ. Is this Thursday?

KRAKAU. Thursday, September twentieth.

HELMS [*testily*]. Don't show off, Krakau.

JOHNSTON [*raises his glass*]. Here's health. Splendid sherry.

KRAKAU [*to Buffe*]. Why aren't you drinking?

BUFFE. Thanks. I never take more than one glass. This sunshine warms you as much as wine.

HAMMER. I have the morning sun in my window.

HANSEN. So have I. It wakes me up every morning. It's supposed to be healthy.

HELMS. Krakau stole it from me.

KRAKAU. You know very well that--

HELMS. Yes you did. And the stove, too.

KRAKAU. The stove--

HELMS. Isn't the morning sun on your side?

KRAKAU. Yes, but--

HELMS. And the stove, too?

KRAKAU. Didn't you--

HELMS. Nothing of the kind. You live on the east side, and the morning sun is healthiest.

KRAKAU. We can change, for my part.

HELMS. Do you hear that? Now he wants to steal my view of the street, too?

HAMMER. What do you old friends want to quarrel for?

JOHNSTON. And on your birthday.

HELMS. Who is quarreling?

BUFFE. You may be well satisfied with the afternoon sun, Helms. See how beautifully it shines in the window. Look at the sun, Bolling.

BOLLING. I've seen it before.

BUFFE [*explaining with pride*]. Bolling used to be a carpenter, you know. He traveled all over the world.

BOLLING. I have seen everything.

[*There is a rap at the door. Silence. Krakau opens it, Knut enters.*]

KNUT [*to Krakau*]. Hello, Grandpop! [*To Helms, shaking his hand.*] Congratulations, grandfather. [*To the others.*] Hello, everybody.

[*The old men nod their heads, delighted. Buffe whispers to Bolling.*]

BUFFE. It's Knut. The son of Helms' daughter.

BOLLING. I had a son.

HELMS. I'm glad you came my--my son [*glares at Krakau defiantly.*]

KNUT. I can only stay a minute. Have you heard about father's appointment?

JOHNSTON. He's been bragging to us about it, sonny.

HAMMER. And treated us to sherry.

BOLLING. Port wine is poison.

HANSEN. And cigars.

KNUT. Not really!

HELMS. Why don't you hang up your cap?

KNUT. I must be off in a minute. Back to school. I had only an hour's leave, and it takes half an hour to ride each way.

BUFFE. How old are you, my boy?

KNUT. Seventeen.

BUFFE. It's sixty-one years since I was that young. He's only seventeen, Bolling.

BOLLING. I was seventeen--once. Now I'm ninety-two.

HAMMER. I am seventy-three.

KNUT. Let's add up the number of years in this room.

HELMS. There's too many. It can't be done.

KNUT [*with a laugh*]. Let's try. [*Rapidly.*] Mr. Bolling is 92 and grandfather is 80; that's 172.

HELMS. There's quick counting for you!

KNUT. How old are you, Mr. Buffe?

BUFFE. Seventy-eight.

KNUT. That's 250.

HAMMER [*in wonderment*]. Two hundred and fifty!

KNUT. And you, grandpop?

KRAKAU. Seventy.

KNUT. 320. And you, Mr. Hammer?

HAMMER. Seventy-three.

KNUT. 393.

JOHNSTON. Think of that!

KNUT. And Mr. Hansen?

[*All the old people except Bolling and Hansen, snigger. Hansen turns away, offended.*]

KNUT. Don't you know how old you are, sir?

HANSEN. Of course, I know.

HELMS. He's ashamed to tell you. Ha, ha!

BUFFE. He's afraid. Ha, ha!

HANSEN. Who's afraid? [*Reluctantly.*] I'm only sixty.

THE OLD PEOPLE. "Only a boy." "Not dry behind the ears." "He'll grow." "Poor child."

KNUT. That makes 453.

JOHNSTON [*beats his chest*]. I am seventy-five.



KNUT. That gives us 528 altogether.

HAMMER. Five hundred and twenty-eight! What a head the boy has on him.

BUFFE [*to Bolling*]. All together we are 528 years old.

BOLLING. What does it matter?

HELMS. We'd be older still if there weren't a boy among us.

JOHNSTON. Yes, Hansen spoils it by being so young.

KRAKAU. You'll have to hurry, Hansen.

HAMMER. Yes, so you will.

BUFFE. Why don't you take something to make you grow?

HANSEN. Oh, let me alone!

KNUT. Well, I must be going.

THE OLD PEOPLE. "What a pity." "Can't you be late for once?"  
"The teacher won't mind."

KNUT. I really must. Good-by, grandfather.... Hope you live eighty years more.... Good-by, grandpop.... Good-by, everybody. Good luck!  
[*He exits.*]

HAMMER. You can see him go from here. [*Goes to the window.*]

HANSEN. Can you? [*Joins him.*]

[*All go to the window except Bolling, who sits stiff and abstracted in his chair.*]

HELMS. Open it. [*He helps Johnston do so.*]

JOHNSTON. There he goes.

KRAKAU. He is waving to us. [*All wave back.*]

BUFFE. What a fine lad!

KRAKAU. Good-by. [*All shout good-by. Bolling does not stir.*]

BUFFE [*turning away from the window, with a sigh*]. He's gone.

HANSEN [*low*]. Yes, he's gone.

JOHNSTON. It's nice to have young people around once in a while.

BUFFE [*nods sadly*]. Yes.

JOHNSTON. You have a fine young grandson, Helms.

HELMS [*with an uneasy glance at Krakau*]. Yes, I can't complain of him.

BUFFE. It's good to have a family that look after you.

HANSEN. It's good to have a family at all. Many people haven't.

HAMMER. No.

BOLLING. No. They die.

HELMS [*sharply*]. Close the window, Krakau. There's a draught.  
[*Krakau closes the window.*]

HAMMER. Yes, the sun is down.

BUFFE. Yes.

HANSEN. Isn't it time we were going?

JOHNSTON. These *young* people should be early to bed. [*Laughter.*]

BUFFE. It really is time to go. Thank you, Helms. It was a nice party.

HELMS. Going already? [*Glances uneasily at Krakau.*]

BUFFE. It's near supper time, you know. We are going, Bolling.

HAMMER. Then we'll go too.... We enjoyed your party, Helms.

HELMS. The pleasure was mine.

JOHNSTON. Good night, Helms. Next time it's my party.

HELMS. When?

JOHNSTON. October 23rd.

HANSEN. Good-by--and many thanks.

HELMS. Not at all, not at all.

BUFFE. Are you ready, Bolling?

BOLLING. Hum! [*He rises.*]

BUFFE. Good-by, everybody. [*To Bolling.*] Say good-by.

BOLLING. Good-by.

[*Krakau holds open the door. The guests file out talking gayly. He closes the door and their voices are faintly heard outside.*]

[*Helms bustles about uneasily.*]

KRAKAU [*on his own side*]. Well, it went off very nicely.

HELMS. Yes, very well--very well.

KRAKAU. Want me to help you straighten up?

HELMS. No--I can do it myself.

*[There is a pause. Krakau takes back his chairs.]*

KRAKAU. We'll want to move my table back.

HELMS *[seizing one end of it]*. Well, come on! Where are you?

KRAKAU *[taking the other end hastily]*. Coming, coming!

*[The table moved, there is another pause. Each is on his own side. Helms potters helplessly with the bottles and glasses.]*

KRAKAU. Need any help?

HELMS. You stand there doing nothing and you ask me-- *[The rest is a sullen growl.]*

*[Krakau takes the glasses, puts them on a tray and carries them across to left.]*

HELMS. Where are you going with my glasses?

KRAKAU *[stops]*. I was going to wash them.

HELMS. Well, don't forget whom they belong to.

KRAKAU. Don't worry. *[Puts the glasses on the wash stand.]* Shall I light the lamp?

HELMS. You can't see in the dark, can you?

KRAKAU *[lighting the hanging lamp]*. Knut behaved very nicely, didn't he?

HELMS *[moodily]*. Yes.

KRAKAU. He made everybody happy with his high spirits.

HELMS. Not me.

KRAKAU [*hastily changing the subject*]. It's funny about old Bolling. How he's changed in the last year! He never talks any more.

HELMS. When you get to be ninety-two and not a relation in the world--[*His voice breaks in self-pity.*]

KRAKAU [*finished with the lamp, makes a little solicitous gesture behind his friend's back, but immediately busies himself with putting things to right*]. Where do you want these things to go?

HELMS. On the chiffonier ... next to the other.... Bolling is so old he feels superfluous.... I am getting like that--

KRAKAU [*hastily*]. Where do these stockings and things go?

HELMS. Next to the last drawer.

KRAKAU. I guess you are all fixed now.... There's nothing else? [*Turns from the chiffonier, having closed the drawer, and starts for his own side of the room.*]

HELMS [*suddenly*]. It's a terrible thing you've done to me, Krakau!

KRAKAU [*in surprise*]. What now?

HELMS [*his voice trembling*]. You have made my dead wife a strumpet and my dead daughter a bastard. [*Krakau bridles and turns to him with clenched fists. Helms continues pitifully.*] And you have robbed me in my old age of a grandson ... all I have in the world. [*Querulously musing.*] When men are young they see red and kill for that sort of thing ... yes ... they kill.... But when you are old it's different.... I can't even be very angry with you, Krakau.... Isn't it queer?... It's all so far back ... in the past ... impersonal ... and blurred like a half-remembered dream.

KRAKAU [*with contrition*]. I shouldn't have told you.

HELMS. You shouldn't have told me.... No ... but you did ... and I can't be angry with you.... I am an old fool.... After all ... honor ...

fidelity ... marriage vows ... what do they matter when there is nothing to do but to sit and count the days until you die?

KRAKAU [*chokingly*]. Helms!

HELMS [*with a flash of anger*]. But Knut matters. He *is* my grandson ... in spite of you.... You shan't take him away from me.

KRAKAU. I don't want to take him away from you.

HELMS. Your blood ... perhaps ... but *my grandson--*

KRAKAU [*eagerly*]. Of course, he is, Helms. We can share him between us. Don't you see? He need never know. No one need know ... just you and I.... We can have him together ... our own little secret.

HELMS [*looks at him*]. Nobody else will know?

KRAKAU [*solemnly*]. Not a soul. I swear it.

HELMS. Nobody?

KRAKAU. Nobody.

HELMS [*a faint smile dispels his frown*]. And when we talk about Knut you won't say "So-o" any more?

KRAKAU. Never ... for hereafter he'll be *our* Knut ... just as if you were his father and I his mother.

HELMS [*the idea pleases him, considers it, then gives his assent like a child playing a game*]. No, I'll be the mother. And we can quarrel about him ... of course, in a friendly way.

KRAKAU. Always friendly.

HELMS. And just think--we shall have something to talk about all the time.

KRAKAU. Especially at night ... after supper ... under the lamp.

HELMS. And when we are in bed in the dark and cannot sleep.

KRAKAU. Always about our Knut.

HELMS. Ha, ha.... Do you know, Krakau, I think you should have told me long ago.

KRAKAU. I was afraid.

HELMS. Afraid! Absurd. What was there to be afraid about? You can see for yourself that we are better friends since you told me. [*Goes to the chiffonier and gets the photograph.*] He does look something like you.

KRAKAU [*magnanimously*]. Oh, no! He's your wife's son all over.

HELMS [*with equal magnanimity*]. He looks a good deal like you just the same.... Don't you want to borrow this for a few days?

KRAKAU. Why, you only got it this morning.

HELMS. Never mind. Take it.... Saturday I'll get it back from you. Then in a few days I'll lend it to you again.

KRAKAU. Thanks. [*Takes the photograph*]. Can I borrow the paper, too?

HELMS. Sure, take it with you.... And lend me your chess men, will you?

KRAKAU [*with animation*]. I'll get it for you. [*Goes to his own chiffonier for it.*]

HELMS. We might as well move the tables together. It's more comfortable that way.

KRAKAU. Certainly. [*Comes down with the chessboard and helps move the tables.*]

HELMS. Now you take my arm chair and read your paper. I'll play over here.

KRAKAU. I wouldn't think of taking your chair.

HELMS. You do as you are told. [*Sits on an ordinary chair.*] I can reach better from one of these anyway.

KRAKAU. Oh, well. [*Sits in the arm chair and unfolds the newspaper. There is a pause.*]

HELMS. Why don't you light your pipe?

KRAKAU. Your throat--

HELMS. My throat is all right. Go on and smoke.

KRAKAU [*comfortably lights his pipe, relaxes*]. Well, now we'll see how good you are at working out problems.

HELMS. I don't think I can do it.

KRAKAU [*reading*]. Sure you can.

HELMS. Look here. Would you check with the bishop?

KRAKAU [*studies the board*]. No ... that loses you the queen.... Hum ... you've sort of mixed it up.... Back with that rook.

HELMS. How's that?

KRAKAU. Brilliant!

HELMS. Knut is back at school by this time.

KRAKAU. Yes, probably studying his lessons.

HELMS. He's a boy.

KRAKAU. None better.



HELMS. Isn't it nice to talk about him like this ... calm and friendly?... You have no cause to be jealous any more, ha, ha!

KRAKAU. And you needn't be stuck up any more, ha, ha!

HELMS. No, ha, ha! There, I've muddled it again.

KRAKAU. No, you haven't.... Just move here ... and here.

HELMS [*suddenly takes out his purse*]. By the way, I owe you twenty-seven pfennig.

KRAKAU. There's no hurry.

HELMS. Take it!

KRAKAU. All right. [*He rises.*]

HELMS. Where are you going?

KRAKAU [*at the chiffonier*]. We forgot the flowers.

HELMS. Oh, yes!

KRAKAU. They smell so fragrant. [*Puts them on the table.*]

HELMS [*takes a flower and puts it in Krakau's buttonhole*]. You must wear one.

KRAKAU [*overcome*]. Thank you, Helms, thank you. [*They bend over the chessboard again.*]

HELMS [ *rubs his hands with delight*]. Now white moves.

KRAKAU [*considering*]. White moves.... I should say ... there ... that pawn ... I'd sacrifice it.

HELMS [*picks it up with playful tenderness*]. Poor little white pawn! [*Places it on the board.*]

*[They study the next move absorbedly as the curtain falls.]*

*[Curtain.]*