

Brothers

BY LEWIS BEACH

A SARDONIC COMEDY

CHARACTERS

SETH.

LON.

PA.

BROTHERS was first presented by the Provincetown Players, New York.

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[SCENE: A very small room in a tar-papered shanty, reeking poverty. The entrance is center-back,--a few boards nailed together for a door. A similar door, opening into the bedroom of the shack, upstage right. Downstage left, a broken window. Left center, a rusty cooking stove. Above it, a series of shelves holding a few dishes and cooking utensils. Rough board table in the center of the room. A kitchen chair at the right of the table. A large wooden rocker near the stove; rope and wire hold it together. An arm-chair, below the bedroom door is full of newspapers. Several heterogeneous colored prints culled from out-of-date newspapers and calendars are tacked on the rain-stained walls. When the entrance door is open we see a cleared, sandy spot with a background of scrub oaks and jack pines.

The curtain rises on the late afternoon of a spring day.

A man of forty enters, leaving the bedroom door open behind him. His small head and childish face, on a tall, thin, and extremely erect body, resemble those of a species of putty-like rubber doll whose head may be reshaped by the hand. He wears a winter cap, blue flannel shirt,

well-worn trousers with suspenders, and sneakers that were once white. Outside shirt sleeves are rolled to the elbow; undershirt sleeves are not. His shoes make no noise; nevertheless, he comes on tiptoe, his eyes fixed on the shelves. For a moment he stops and glances into the room he has just quitted. Satisfied, he squats before the shelves. He hesitates, then quickly lifts from a lower shelf an inverted cooking vessel, and grasps a small tin box which was hidden under it. He inspects the box, trying to decide whether he can pry open its lock.]

[*The voice of an old, infirm man in the adjoining room*]: Seth?

SETH [*alarmed; starts to return the box to the shelf*]. Yes, Pa? [*His voice is pitched high.*]

PA [*querulously*]. What yuh doin'?

SETH. Jest settin'.

PA. Don't yuh go near my tin box 'til I'm dead.

[*Seth makes no answer.*]

PA. D'yuh hear?

SETH. I hear.

PA. I won't heve no one know nothin' 'bout my last will an' testament 'til I'm dead.

[*There is a pause. Seth is regarding the box intently.*]

PA. Seth?

SETH [*peevishly*]. What d'yuh want?

PA. Bring me a drink.

SETH. There ain't no more water in the pail.

PA. There's lots in the well this spring.

[*A pause. Seth continues his scrutiny of the lock.*]

PA. My throat's burnin' up.

SETH. Well, maybe I kin find a drop. [*Puts the box on the shelf and re-covers it; in doing so makes a slight noise.*]

PA. What's that noise?

SETH. I'm gettin' yuh a drink!

[*Seth strolls to the stove, lifts the top from the kettle, and looks inside. He finds a tin cup and fills it with water. Looking into the kettle again, he sees there is little water left. Why make a trip to the pump necessary? Back into the kettle goes some of the water. Cup in hand, he moves toward the bedroom. He reaches the door when a sagging bellied man enters from the yard. It is Lon, the elder, shorter brother. His face has become molded into an expressionless stare, and his every movement seems to be made with an effort. An abused man, Lon, the most ill-treated fellow in the world. At least, so he is ever at pains to have all understand. He wears an old felt hat, cotton shirt, badly patched trousers, suspenders attached to the buttons of his trousers with string, and shoes that are almost soleless. His shirt, stained with sweat, is opened at the throat, revealing red flannel underwear. When Seth sees Lon he immediately closes the bedroom door, silently turns the key in the lock, and puts the key in his pocket. For a moment the men stand looking at each other, reminding one of two roosters. Then Seth strolls to the stove, pours the water into the kettle, and plunks himself down in the rocker. Lon glances once or twice at the bedroom door, but moves not to it. He watches Seth suspiciously. Finally he speaks.*]

LON [*in an expressionless drawl*]. I hear Pa's dyin'.

SETH. Yuh hear right.

LON [*with a motion of his head toward the bedroom*]. Is he in there?

SETH. Yes.

[Lon hesitates, then moves slowly toward Pa's room. An idea strikes Seth suddenly and he interrupts Lon's progress.]

SETH. He's asleep.

[Lon stops. Seth fills his pipe and lights it. Lon takes his corncob from his pocket and coughs meaningly. Seth looks at Lon, sees what he wants, but does not offer him tobacco. Lon puts his pipe back in his pocket, moves to the table, sits, and sighs. He crosses his right foot so Seth sees what was once the sole of his shoe.]

SETH. What did yuh come here fur?

LON. 'Cause Pa's dyin'.

SETH. Yuh never come when he was about.

LON. Wall, no one ever seed yuh a settin' here much.

SETH [*fleeringly*]. Suppose yuh want t' know what he's left yuh.

LON. Wall, ... it warn't comfortable comin' three miles an' a quarter on a day like this un.

SETH [*cackles*]. Sand's hot on yer bare naked feet, ain't it?

LON [*moves his feet*]. Yuh kin talk about my holey boots. If I didn't heve no mouths but my own t' feed I guess I could buy new ones too. So there, Seth Polland!

SETH. Jacobs offered yuh a job at the fisheries same as me.

LON. It's too fur t' hoof it twict a day.

SETH. Yuh could sleep at the fisheries.

LON. I got t' look after my kids.

SETH [*grins*]. 'Tain't my fault yuh've kids.

LON [*threateningly*]. Don't yuh talk 'bout that! [*Pause.*] Yer woman had t' leave yuh. [*Laughs.*] Yuh didn't give her 'nough t' eat.

SETH [*indifferently*]. She warn't no good.

LON. She had t' leave yuh same as Ma left Pa twenty years ago. Pa's dyin' fur sure?

SETH. Who told yuh?

LON. Ma.

SETH [*greatly surprised*]. Ma? [*suspiciously.*] What you got t' do with her?

LON. I was passin' her place this mornin'. Furst time I spoke t' her in a year.

SETH. I ain't in two.

LON [*in despair*]. Seth, she's cut twenty cords o' wood t' sell.

SETH [*shaking his head*]. An' me without a roof o' my own.

LON. Me an' the kids wonder sometimes where our next meal's comin' from.

SETH [*as though there were something better in store for him*]. Oh, wall.

LON [*pricks up his ears; coughs*]. If I had this house I could work at the fisheries.

SETH. But yuh ain't a goin' t' git it.

LON [*alarmed*]. Pa ain't gone an' left it t' yuh?

SETH. Pa deeded this t' Doc last winter.

LON [*amazed and angered*]. He did?

SETH. Doc said he could live here 'till he died. But it's Doc's.

LON. It warn't right.

SETH. Wall, he had t' pay fur his physics some way. He told me yuh wouldn't help him out.

LON. And Pa told me yuh wouldn't. An' yuh ain't got two kids t' feed. [*Pause.*] There's Pa's old shanty down the road. If I had that I could work at the fisheries.

[*Seth's smile is his only response.*]

Pa still owns it, don't he?

SETH. There warn't no call fur him t' make his last will an' testament if he don't.

LON [*brightens*]. He's left his last will an' testament?

SETH. Yes. I'm figgerin' on sellin' the place t' Doc.

LON [*emphatically*]. Pa ain't a left it t' yuh!

SETH. Doc'll want it.

LON [*forcefully*]. Where's the will an' testament?

SETH [*with a gesture*]. In the tin box under that there kittle.

[*Lon hurries to the shelves, picks up the dish, and grasps the box.*]

LON [*disappointed*]. It's locked.

SETH. An' the key's round Pa's neck.

LON. Let's git it.

SETH. Pa won't give it t' us.

LON. Yuh said he was sleepin'.

SETH. I mean--he might wake up.

[*Lon inspects the box further.*]

LON. I think I could open it.

SETH. Pa might ask t' see it.

LON. Hell. [*Puts the box back on the shelf.*]

SETH. Doc'll want the place seein' as how it's right next t' this un.

[*Lon is very nervous.*]

Yuh might jest as wall go home.

LON. No, yuh don't! Yuh can't make me believe Pa's left it t' yuh.
[*Takes off his hat and mops his brow with his sleeve. The top of his head is very bald.*]

SETH. Then what yuh gettin' so excited 'bout?

LON. I ain't excited. [*Puts his hat on.*] It jest makes me mad 'cause yuh say Pa's left it t' yuh, an' I know he ain't. See? There warn't no call fur him t' heve willed an' testamented it t' yuh. Yuh've only yerself t' look after an' I've two motherless kids.

SETH. Every one knows how much Pa thought o' them.

LON. It warn't my fault if they thumbed their noses at him.

SETH. Yuh could o' basted 'em.

LON. They's like their Ma. Bastin' never done her no good, God rest her soul. All the same, Pa knowd how hard it is fur me t' keep their bellies full. Why, when we heve bread Alexander never wants less

than half the loaf! An' all the work I gits t' do is what the city folks who come t' the Beach in the summer gives me.

SETH. Huh! Jest as though I didn't know 'bout yuh. Mr. Breckenridge told me yuh wouldn't even contract t' chop his wood fur him. An' there yuh sits all winter long in that God-fursaken shanty o' yourn, with trees all round yuh, an' yuh won't put an ax t' one 'til yer own fires dies out.

LON. My back ain't never been strong. Choppin' puts the kinks in it. Yuh kin talk, yuh kin, Seth Polland, with a soft job at the fisheries an' three squares a day which yuh don't heve t' cook yourself. Nothin' t' do all winter but walk round them cottages an' see that no one broke in. An' I'm the one who knows how often yuh walk round them cottages. I wish I hed yer snap. [*Sits.*] But I ain't never had no luck.

SETH [*defending himself*]. I walk round them cottages jest as often as I need t' walk round them cottages.

LON. Huh! I could tell a tale. Who was it set with his feet in the oven last winter, an' let Jack Tompkins break into them cottages--*with keys*? [*Seth does not answer.*] I could tell, I could. But I ain't a goin' t' 'til they put me on the witness-stand. [*Pause.*] But the furst initials o' his name is Seth Polland.

SETH [*rising instantly*]. Lon Polland, yuh ever tell an' I'll skin yuh alive.

LON. Huh!

SETH. Skin yuh like a pole-cat.

LON. Huh!

[*Seth turns, knocks the ashes from his pipe into the stove. Lon rises; takes Seth's chair and rocks vigorously.*]

SETH. Yuh know what I got on yuh.

[*Lon's bravado is short-lived. He rocks less strenuously.*]

SETH. Yuh thought I didn't see yuh, but I was right on the spot when yuh set fire t' Mr. Rogers' bath-house.

[Lon stops rocking.]

SETH. Right behind a jack pine I was an' seed yuh do it. An' yuh done it 'cause Mr. Rogers leaved Jessup paint the house when yuh thought yuh ought t' had the job.

LON *[rises]*. I got t' be a gettin' home a fore dark an' tend t' my stock.

SETH. Stock? *[Cackles. Pulls out his tobacco-pouch and fills his pipe. Lon shows his pipe again.]* A blind mare an' a rooster. *[Drops pouch on the table as he lights his pipe.]*

LON. Rooster's dead. *[Moves stealthily toward the table.]*

SETH. What of?

LON. Pip.

SETH. Starvation.

LON. I would a killed him this long time, but Victoria howled so when I threatened. The fowl used t' wake me in winter same as summer with his crowin'.

[As Lon finishes his speech he reaches for the pouch. But Seth's hand is quicker. Seth moves to the rocker and sits, dangling the pouch temptingly by one finger. Lon puts his pipe in his pocket.]

SETH. Should think yuh'd want t' set round 'til Pa dies, bein' as yer so sure he's left yuh his property.

LON. He oughter a left it t' me.

SETH. Well, I'm a tellin' yuh it's mine.

LON. Yuh ain't got no right t' it. [*Mops his head again.*] Pa begged yuh t' come an' live with him, offered yuh this fine roof over yer head, an' yuh was too cussed even t' do that fur him. An' now yuh expect he's made yuh his heir.

SETH. I've treated him righter 'an yuh.

LON. Yuh ain't.

[*Suddenly something seems to snap in Seth's brain. He looks as though he were in intense pain.*]

SETH [*gasping*]. Maybe he's left it t' the two o' us!

LON. *What?*

SETH. Maybe he's divided the place a 'tween us.

LON [*shakes his head*]. Oh, he wouldn't be so unhuman as that.

SETH. He would. He was always settin' one agin' t' other.

LON. He used t' tell me I had t' figger how t' git the best o' yuh or he'd baste me.

SETH. He was all the time whettin' us on when we was kids.

LON. It was him showed me how t' shake my old clock so it'd run fur five minutes, an' then you'd swop that pail yuh found fur it.

SETH. Huh! He give me his gum t' stop up the hole in that pail. Yuh wouldn't know it leaked an' we could laugh at yuh when you had t' carry water in it.

LON [*pathetically*]. There warn't never more 'an a pint left when I got t' the house. An' Pa always hed such a thirst.

SETH. He'd like t' laugh at us in his grave.

LON. It jest tickled him t' raise hell a 'tween us.

SETH [*rises*]. I'll take my oath he's divided the old shanty an' the two acres a 'tween us. [*Drops into his chair like a condemned man.*] An' I figgered I'd be sellin' them t' Doc t'morrow.

LON. Me an' the kids was a goin' t' heve a garden on the cleared spot.

SETH. A garden in that sand?

LON. Radishes an' rutabagas.

SETH [*persuasively; his manner becomes kind*]. Lon, what yuh need is the shanty.

LON [*droning*]. The shanty ain't no good t' me without I hes the ground fur it t' set on.

SETH. Yuh can tear it down an' use the lumber t' mend yer old leaky one.

LON. I want the shanty t' live in so I kin git a soft job at the fisheries. [*Sympathetically.*] You ought t' have a shanty, Seth. Supposin' yuh was t' take sick. They wouldn't keep yuh at the fisheries then. Yuh take my place an' give me Pa's.

SETH [*flashing into anger*]. I want the two acres t' sell Doc. Yer old place leaks like a net! [*Then, fearing he has been too disparaging:*] But yuh could make it real comfortable with the lumber in--

LON [*cutting in*]. I'll make a bargain. I'll leave yuh a bed-stead an' a table if yuh'll take my place.

SETH. I don't want it! I want Pa's old place.

LON. An' I want it. I'm older 'an yuh.

SETH. I got the best claim t' it.

LON. Yuh ain't. We with three mouths t' feed. Yer a swindler, yuh are. Yuh always tried t' cheat me.

SETH. No one kin say that t' me. I'm an honest man. But I'm a goin' 't heve the two acres if I heve t' go t' law.

LON. Wall, yuh ain't a goin' t' wreck me.

SETH [*calmly; philosophically again*]. Maybe yer right, Lon, when yuh say I ought t' have a roof. I'll tell yuh what I'll do, seein' as how yer my brother. Yuh give me the ground an' the house on it, an' I'll make yuh a present o' twenty-five dollars.

LON. That's a lie! Yuh ain't got twenty-five dollars t' yer name.

SETH. Yuh think so.

LON. Every one in these parts knows yuh owes Hawkins forty-three dollars an twenty-nine cents he kin't collect. Give me the house an' ground, an' I'll give yuh my own house an' my note fur twenty-five dollars.

SETH. Yer note! I'm a goin' t' heve Pa's old place.

LON. An' I say that yuh or no swindler like yuh is a goin' t' cheat me out o' it.

SETH. I ain't a swindler, yuh wall-eyed son--

LON [*advancing*]. Take it back. Don't yuh call me dissipated names.

SETH. I'll never take it back!

[Lon doubles his fists and strikes; but the blow lands in the air as Seth grabs Lon. They fight furiously and in dead earnest, though there is no ethics to the struggle. The rickety furniture trembles as they advance and retreat. Seth is quicker and lighter and less easily winded; but Lon's bulk is not readily moved, and, despite his "weak back," he can still wield his arms. It looks like a fight to the finish. Isn't their future at stake? And they are giving vent to a hatred bred by their father. But suddenly Pa's voice is heard, calling wildy to Seth. The men do not move: the voice seems to have paralyzed their

muscles. For a moment they stand dazed. Then consciousness comes to them: they realize that the waiting is over. They tear to the bedroom. A silence follows. They must be fascinated by the ghost of the old man.]

SETH [*in the bedroom; quietly*]. He's gone, Lon.

LON [*in the bedroom*]. Yer right, Seth.

[*Then their voices rise in dispute.*]

Don't yuh take it!

SETH. I've got it!

LON. It's mine!

SETH. It ain't!

LON. Yuh kin't--

SETH. Shut up!

[*They rush into the kitchen, Seth in advance, Lon close on his heels. The younger throws the cooking-dish to the floor, grabs the box, and hurries to the table. As though they were about to discover a world's secret, they unlock the box, each as near to it as possible, his arms tense, fingers itching, ready to ward off a blow or seize the treasure. From the box, Seth takes an old tobacco-pouch, a jack-knife, a bit of heavy cord, a couple of letters. These are contemptuously thrown on the table. The will lies at the bottom of the box. Lon snatches it. Seth would take it from him.*]

LON. Hold off! I'm jest a goin' t' read it.

[*Seth curbs his impatience. Lon opens the document and reads, slowly and haltingly.*]

"I, Nathaniel Polland, o' Sandy Point in the County o' Rhodes an' State o' Michigan, bein' o' sound mind an' memory, do make, publish, an'

declare this t' be my last Will an' Testament in manner followin', viz--
." What does "viz" mean?

[Unable to bear the suspense longer, Seth seizes the paper. He scans it until his eyes catch the all-important paragraph.]

SETH. "--Bequeath all my earthly possessions to my wife, Jennie Polland."

[Their thunderbolt has descended. They stand like two men suddenly deprived of thought and motion. Medusa's victims could not have been more pitiable. They have been hurled from their El Dorado, which, at the worst, was to have been their common property.]

[Then Seth's voice comes to him, and sufficient strength to drop into a chair.]

SETH. The damned old critter.

LON. I'll be swaned.

SETH [*blazing out*]. That's gratitude.

LON. After all we done fur him.

SETH [*pathetically*]. An' me a plannin' these last five years on gettin' that house an' ground.

LON. My kids are packin' our furniture this afternoon, gettin' ready t' move in.

SETH [*with supreme disgust*]. Leavin' it t' Ma.

LON. Her who he ain't hardly spoke t' in twenty years.

SETH. Jest as though yuh an' me wasn't alive.

LON. We'd a given him our last pipeful.

SETH. His own flesh an' blood.

LON. Why, he told me more 'an a thousand times he hated Ma.

SETH. She don't need it.

LON. She's ready fur the grave-yard.

SETH. She's that stingy, cuttin' an' choppin' wood, sellin it t' the city folks. We might a knowd.

LON. An' me a comin' all the three miles an' a quarter t' see him a fore he died.

SETH. I been settin' here two days a waitin'.

LON. An' then t' treat us like that. [*Wipes his mouth.*] Why, the hull place ain't worth a damn!

SETH. A cavin'-in shanty an' two acres yuh couldn't grow weeds on.

LON. A pile o' sand.

SETH [*rising; bursting into fire like an apparently dead rocket*]. She ain't a goin' t' heve it!

LON. What?

SETH. I won't let Ma heve it!

LON. But how yuh goin' t' stop her? 'Twon't do no good t' tear up the will an' testament. It's rec-ord-ed.

SETH. Don't make no difference. She ain't a goin' t' heve that place.

LON [*eagerly*]. But how yuh goin'--?

SETH. I don't know. But I'm a goin' t'.

LON. It ain't hers by rights.

SETH. Didn't she leave him twenty years ago?

LON. Why, she ain't even expectin' it!

SETH. She'll never miss it if she don't git it.

LON [*shaking his head*]. Me an' the kids packed up, ready t' move in.

[*There is a silence. Lon deep in his disappointment, Seth making his brain work as it has never worked before. And he is rewarded for his diligence. A suggestion of his sneering smile comes to his face.*]

SETH. Lon?

LON. Yes?

SETH [*looks about, making sure that only his brother is listening*]. Yuh 'member what yuh done t' Rogers when he didn't leave yuh paint his bath-house?

LON [*his eyes open wide*]. Burn it?

SETH. Sh!

LON. Oh, no!

SETH. Yuh don't want Ma t' heve it, does yuh?

LON. When I burned that bath-house I didn't sleep good fur a couple o' nights. I dreamed o' the sheriff.

SETH. Nobody knows but me. An' nobody'll know yuh an' me set fire t' Pa's old place.

LON. Yuh swear yuh won't never tell?

SETH [*raising his right hand*]. I swear.

LON. Yuh won't never try an' make out I done it next time we run agin each other fur district school-inspector?

SETH [*raising his right hand*]. I swear. 'Cause if I kin't have Pa's old place, no one kin.

LON. Got matches?

SETH. Yes. An' Pa's kerosene-can's got 'bout a pint in it. [*Takes the can from the bottom shelf.*]

LON. I may as wall take these papers along with me. [*Picks up the newspapers.*]

[*Seth moves to the table. Begins to fill his pipe. Lon takes his corncob from his pocket and coughs. Seth looks at Lon, meditates, then speaks.*]

SETH. Heve a smoke, Lon?

LON. Maybe I will.

[*Lon fills his pipe.--Seth strikes a match, lights his own pipe first, then hands the match to Lon.*]

SETH. We're brothers.

LON. The same flesh an' blood has got t' treat each other right.

[*Lon starts to put Seth's tobacco-pouch in his pocket, but Seth stops him.*]

SETH. An' we wouldn't be treatin' each other right if we let Pa's property come into Ma's hands.

[*Seth carries the kerosene, Lon the papers. They go out the back door and disappear. Thus, in disgust and rage, the brothers are united. Then Seth's voice is heard.*]

SETH [*in the yard*]. Wait a minute, Lon.

[Seth returns. He picks up Pa's tobacco-pouch, knife and scissors, glances toward the door to see that Lon isn't watching, and sticks them into his pocket.]

LON *[in the yard]*. What yuh doin', Seth? *[Appears at the door.]*

SETH. I thought I left somethin' valuable. But I ain't. *[He leaves.]*

[Lon and Seth pass out of sight.]

[Curtain.]