

Facing Death

BY AUGUST STRINDBERG

CHARACTERS

MONSIEUR DURAND, a pension proprietor, formerly connected with the state railroad
ADÈLE, his daughter, twenty-seven
ANNETTE, his daughter, twenty-four
THÉRÈSE, his daughter, twenty-four
ANTONIO, a lieutenant in an Italian cavalry regiment in French Switzerland in the eighties
PIERRE, an errand boy

[SCENE--A dining-room with a long table. Through the open door is seen, over the tops of churchyard cypress trees, Lake Lemman, with the Savoy Alps and the French bathing-resort Evian. To left is a door to the kitchen. To right a door to inner rooms. Monsieur Durand stands in doorway looking over the lake with a pair of field glasses.]

ADÈLE [Comes in from kitchen wearing apron and turned-up sleeves. She carries a tray with coffee things]. Haven't you been for the coffee-bread, father?

DURAND. No, I sent Pierre. My chest has been bad for the last few drays, and it affects me to walk the steep hill.

ADÈLE. Pierre again, eh? That costs three sous. Where are they to come from, with only one tourist in the house for over two months?

DURAND. That's true enough, but it seems to me Annette might get the bread.

ADÈLE. That would ruin the credit of the house entirely, but you have never done anything else.

DURAND. Even you, Adèle?

ADÈLE. Even I am tired, though I have held out longest!

DURAND. Yes, you have, and you were still human when Thérèse and Annette cautioned me. You and I have pulled this house through

since mother died. You have had to sit in the kitchen like Cinderella; I have had to take care of the service, the fires, sweep and clean, and do the errands. You are tired; how should it be with me, then?

ADÈLE. But you mustn't be tired. You have three daughters who are unprovided for and whose dowry you have wasted.

DURAND [Listening without]. Doesn't it seem as if you heard the sound of clanging and rumbling down toward Cully? If fire has broken out they are lost, because the wind is going to blow soon, the lake tells me that.

ADÈLE. Have you paid the fire insurance on our house?

DURAND. Yes, I have. Otherwise I would never have got that last mortgage.

ADÈLE. How much is there left unmortgaged?

DURAND. A fifth of the fire insurance policy. But you know how property dropped in value when the railroad passed our gates and went to the east instead.

ADÈLE. So much the better.

DURAND [Sternly]. Adèle! [Pause.] Will you put out the fire in the stove?

ADÈLE. Impossible. I can't till the coffee-bread comes.

DURAND. Well, here it is.

[Pierre comes in with basket. Adèle looks in the basket.]

ADÈLE. No bread! But a bill--two, three--

PIERRE.--Well, the baker said he wouldn't send any more bread until he was paid. And then, when I was going by the butcher's and the grocer's, they shoved these bills at me. [Goes out.]

ADÈLE. Oh, God in heaven, this is the end for us! But what's this?
[Opens a package.]

DURAND. Some candles that I bought for the mass for my dear little Réné. Today is the anniversary of his death.

ADÈLE. You can afford to buy such things!

DURAND. With my tips, yes. Don't you think it is humiliating to stretch out my hand whenever a traveller leaves us? Can't you grant me the only contentment I possess--let me enjoy my sorrow one time each year? To be able to live in memory of the most beautiful thing life ever gave me?

ADÈLE. If he had only lived until now, you'd see how beautiful he'd be!

DURAND. It's very possible that there's truth in your irony--as I remember him, however, he was not as you all are now.

ADÈLE. Will you be good enough to receive Monsieur Antonio yourself? He is coming now to have his coffee *without* bread! Oh, if mother were only living! She always found a way when you stood helpless.

DURAND. Your mother had her good qualities.

ADÈLE. Although you saw only her faults.

DURAND. Monsieur Antonio is coming. If you leave me now, I'll have a talk with him.

ADÈLE. You would do better to go out and borrow some money, so that the scandal would be averted.

DURAND. I can't borrow a sou. After borrowing for ten years! Let everything crash at once, everything, everything, if it would only be the end!

ADÈLE. The end for you, yes. But you never think of us!

DURAND. No, I have never thought of you, never!

ADÈLE. Do you begrudge us our bringing-up?

DURAND. I am only answering an unjust reproach. Go now, and I'll meet the storm--as usual.

ADÈLE. As usual--h'm!

[Goes. Antonio comes in from back.]

ANTONIO. Good morning, Monsieur Durand.

DURAND. Monsieur Lieutenant has already been out for a walk?

ANTONIO. Yes, I've been down toward Cully and saw them put out a chimney fire. Now, some coffee will taste particularly good.

DURAND. It's needless to say how it pains me to have to tell you that on account of insufficient supplies our house can no longer continue to do business.

ANTONIO. How is that?

DURAND. To speak plainly, we are bankrupt.

ANTONIO. But, my good Monsieur Durand, is there no way of helping you out of what I hope is just a temporary embarrassment?

DURAND. No, there is no possible way out. The condition of the house has been so completely undermined for many years that I had rather the crash would come than live in a state of anxiety day and night, expecting what must come.

ANTONIO. Nevertheless I believe you are looking at the dark side of things.

DURAND. I can't see what makes you doubt my statement.

ANTONIO. Because I want to help you.

DURAND. I don't wish any help. Privation must come and teach my children to lead a different life from this which is all play. With the exception of Adèle, who really does take care of the kitchen, what do the others do? Play, and sing, and promenade, and flirt; and as long as there is a crust of bread in the house, they'll never do anything useful.

ANTONIO. Granting that, but until the finances are straightened out we must have bread in the house. Allow me to stay a month longer and I will pay my bill in advance.

DURAND. No, thank you, we must stick to this course even if it leads us into the lake! And I don't want to continue in this business, which doesn't bring bread--nothing but humiliations. Just think how it was last spring, when the house had been empty for three months. Then at last an American family came and saved us. The morning after their arrival I ran across the son catching hold of my daughter on the stairs. It was Thérèse,--he was trying to kiss her. What would you have done in my case?

ANTONIO [Confused]. I don't know--

DURAND. I know what I, as a father, should have done, but--father-like--I didn't do it. But I know what to do the next time.

ANTONIO. On account of that very thing it seems to me that you should think very carefully about what you do, and not leave your daughters to chance.

DURAND. Monsieur Antonio, you are a young man who, for some inexplicable reason, has won my regard. Whether you grant it, or not, I am going to ask one thing of you. Don't form any opinions about me as an individual, or about my conduct.

ANTONIO. Monsieur Durand, I promise it if you will answer me one question; are you Swiss born, or not?

DURAND. I am a Swiss citizen.

ANTONIO. Yes, I know that, but I ask if you were born in Switzerland.

DURAND [Uncertainly]. Yes.

ANTONIO. I asked only--because it interested me. Nevertheless--as I must believe you that your pension must be closed, I want to pay what I owe. To be sure it's only ten francs, but I can't go away and leave an unpaid bill.

DURAND. I can't be sure that this is really a debt, as I don't keep the accounts, but if you have deceived me you shall hear from me. Now I'll go and get the bread. Afterward we'll find out.

[Goes out. Antonio alone. Afterward Thérèse comes in, carrying a rat-trap. She wears a morning negligée and her hair is down.]

THÉRÈSE. Oh, there you are, Antonio! I thought I heard the old man.

ANTONIO. Yes, he went to get the coffee-bread, he said.

THÉRÈSE. Hadn't he done that already? No, do you know, we can't stand him any longer.

ANTONIO. How beautiful you are today, Thérèse! But that rat-trap isn't becoming.

THÉRÈSE. And such a trap into the bargain! I have set it for a whole month, but never, never get a live one, although the bait is eaten every morning. Have you seen Mimi around?

ANTONIO. That damned cat? It's usually around early and late, but today I've been spared it.

THÉRÈSE. You must speak beautifully about the absent, and remember, he who loves me, loves my cat. [She puts rat-trap on table and picks up an empty saucer from under table.] Adèle, Adèle!

ADÈLE [In the kitchen door]. What does Her Highness demand so loudly?

THÉRÈSE. Her Highness demands milk for her cat and a piece of cheese for your rats.

ADÈLE. Go get them yourself.

THÉRÈSE. Is that the way to answer Her Highness?

ADÈLE. The answer fits such talk. And besides, you deserve it for showing yourself before a stranger with your hair not combed.

THÉRÈSE. Aren't we all old friends here, and--Antonio, go and speak nicely to Aunt Adele, and then you'll get some milk for Mimi. [Antonio hesitates.] Well, aren't you going to mind?

ANTONIO [Sharply]. No.

THÉRÈSE. What kind of a way to speak is that? Do you want a taste of my riding whip?

ANTONIO. Impudence!

THÉRÈSE. [Amazed]. What's that? What's that? Are you trying to remind me of my position, my debt, my weakness?

ANTONIO. No, I only want to remind you of my position, my debt, my weakness.

ADÈLE [Getting the saucer]. Now listen, good friends. What's all this foolishness for? Be friends--and then I'll give you some very nice coffee. [Goes into the kitchen.]

THÉRÈSE [Crying]. You are tired of me, Antonio, and you are thinking of giving me up.

ANTONIO. You mustn't cry, it will make your eyes so ugly.

THÉRÈSE. Oh, if they are not as beautiful as Annette's--

ANTONIO.--So, it's Annette now? But now look here; all fooling aside, isn't it about time we had our coffee?

THÉRÈSE. You'd make a charming married man--not able to wait a moment for your coffee.

ANTONIO. And what a lovable married lady you would be, who growls at her husband because she has made a blunder.

[Annette comes in fully dressed and hair done up.]

ANNETTE. You seem to be quarreling this morning.

ANTONIO. See, there's Annette, and dressed already.

THÉRÈSE. Yes, Annette is so extraordinary in every respect, and she also has the prerogative of being older than I am.

ANNETTE. If you don't hold your tongue--

ANTONIO.--Oh, now, now, be good, now, Thérèse!

[He puts his arm around her and kisses her. Monsieur Durand appears in the doorway as he does so.]

DURAND [Astonished]. What's this?

THÉRÈSE [Freeing herself]. What?

DURAND. Did my eyes see right?

THÉRÈSE. What did you see?

DURAND. I saw that you allowed a strange gentleman to kiss you.

THÉRÈSE. That's a lie!

DURAND. Have I lost my sight, or do you dare lie to my face?

THÉRÈSE. Is it for you to talk about lying, you who lie to us and the whole world by saying that you were born a Swiss although you are a Frenchman?

DURAND. Who said that?

THÉRÈSE. Mother said so.

DURAND [To Antonio]. Monsieur Lieutenant, as our account is settled, I'll ask you to leave this house immediately, or else--

ANTONIO. Or else?

DURAND. Choose your weapon.

ANTONIO. I wonder what sort of defense you would put up other than the hare's!

DURAND. If I didn't prefer my stick, I should take the gun that I used in the last war.

THÉRÈSE. You have surely been at war--you who deserted!

DURAND. Mother said that, too. I can't fight the dead, but I can fight the living.

[Lifts his walking-stick and goes toward Antonio. Thérèse and Annette throw themselves between the men.]

ANNETTE. Think what you are doing!

THÉRÈSE. This will end on the scaffold!

ANTONIO [Backing away]. Good-bye, Monsieur Durand. Keep my contempt--and my ten francs.

DURAND [Takes a gold piece from his vest pocket and throws it toward Antonio]. My curses follow your gold, scamp!

[Thérèse and Annette following Antonio.]

THÉRÈSE and ANNETTE. Don't go, don't leave us! Father will kill us!

DURAND [Breaks his stick in two]. He who cannot kill must die.

ANTONIO. Good-bye, and I hope you'll miss the last rat from your sinking ship. [He goes.]

THÉRÈSE [To Durand]. That's the way you treat your guests! Is it any wonder the house has gone to pieces!

DURAND. Yes--that's the way--such guests! But tell me, Thérèse, my child--[Takes her head between his hands] tell me, my beloved child, tell me if I saw wrong just now, or if you told a falsehood.

THÉRÈSE [Peevishly]. What?

DURAND. You know what I mean. It isn't the thing itself, which can be quite innocent--but it is a matter of whether I can trust my senses that interests me.

THÉRÈSE. Oh, talk about something else.--Tell us rather what we are going to eat and drink today. For that matter, it's a lie; he didn't kiss me.

DURAND. It isn't a lie. In Heaven's name, didn't I see it happen?

THÉRÈSE. Prove it.

DURAND. Prove it? With two witnesses or--a policeman! [To Annette.] Annette, my child, will you tell me the truth?

ANNETTE. I didn't see anything.

DURAND. That's a proper answer. For one should never accuse one's sister. How like your mother you are today, Annette!

ANNETTE. Don't you say anything about mother! She should be living such a day as this!

[Adèle comes in with a glass of milk, which she puts on table.]

ADÈLE [To Durand]. There's your milk. What happened to the bread?

DURAND. Nothing, my children. It will continue to come as it always has up to the present.

THÉRÈSE [Grabs the glass of milk from her father]. You shall not have anything, you who throw away money, so that your children are compelled to starve.

ADÈLE. Did he throw away money, the wretch? He should have been put in the lunatic asylum the time mother said he was ripe for it. See, here's another bill that came by way of the kitchen.

[Durand takes the bill and starts as he looks at it. Pours a glass of water and drinks. Sits down and lights his briar pipe.]

ANNETTE. But he can afford to smoke tobacco.

DURAND [Tired and submissively]. Dear children, this tobacco didn't cost me any more than that water, for it was given to me six months ago. Don't vex yourselves needlessly.

THÉRÈSE [Takes matches away]. Well, at least you sha'n't waste the matches.

DURAND. If you knew, Thérèse, how many matches I have wasted on you when I used to get up nights to see if you had thrown off the bedclothes! If you knew, Annette, how many times I have secretly given you water when you cried from thirst, because your mother believed that it was harmful for children to drink!

THÉRÈSE. Well, all that was so long ago that I can't bother about it. For that matter, it was only your duty, as you have said yourself.

DURAND. It was, and I fulfilled my duty and a little more too.

ADÈLE. Well, continue to do so, or no one knows what will become of us. Three young girls left homeless and friendless, without anything to live on! Do you know what want can drive one to?

DURAND. That's what I said ten years ago, but no one would heed me; and twenty years ago I predicted that this moment would come, and I haven't been able to prevent its coming. I have been sitting like a lone brakeman on an express train, seeing it go toward an abyss, but I haven't, been able to get to the engine valves to stop it.

THÉRÈSE. And now you want thanks for landing in the abyss with us.

DURAND. No, my child, I only ask that you be a little less unkind to me. You have cream fur the cat, but you begrudge milk to your father, who has not eaten for--so long.

THÉRÈSE. Oh, it's you, then, who has begrudged milk for my cat!

DURAND. Yes, it's I.

ANNETTE. And perhaps it is he who has eaten the rats' bait, too.

DURAND. It is he.

ADÈLE. Such a pig!

THÉRÈSE [Laughing]. Think if it had been poisoned!

DURAND. Alas, if only it had been, you mean!

THÉRÈSE. Yes, you surely wouldn't have minded that, you who have so often talked about shooting yourself--but have never done it!

DURAND. Why didn't you shoot me? That's a direct reproach. Do you know why I haven't done it? To keep you from going into the lake, my dear children.--Say something else unkind now. It's like hearing music--tunes that I recognize--from the good old times--

ADÈLE. Stop such useless talk now and do something. Do something.

THÉRÈSE. Do you know what the consequences may be if you leave us in this shape?

DURAND. You will go and prostitute yourselves. That's what your mother always said she'd do when she had spent the housekeeping money on lottery tickets.

ADÈLE. Silence! Not a word about our dear, beloved mother!

DURAND [Half humming to himself].

In this house a candle burns, When it burns out the goal he earns, The goal once won, the storm will come With a great crash. Yes! No!

[It has begun to blow outside and grown cloudy. Durand rises quickly and says to Adèle] Put out the fire in the stove. The wind storm is coming.

ADÈLE [Looking Durand in the eyes]. No, the wind is not coming.

DURAND. Put out the fire. If it catches fire here, we'll get nothing from the insurance. Put out the fire, I say, put it out.

ADÈLE. I don't understand you.

DURAND [Looks in her eyes, taking her hand]. Just obey me, do as I say. [Adèle goes into kitchen, leaving the door open. To Thérèse and Annette.] Go up and shut the windows, children, and look after the draughts. But come and give me a kiss first, for I am going away to get money for you.

THÉRÈSE. Can you get money?

DURAND. I have a life insurance that I think I am going to realize on.

THÉRÈSE. How much can you get for it?

DURAND. Six hundred francs if I sell it, and five thousand if I die. [Thérèse concerned.] Now, tell me, my child,--we mustn't be

needlessly cruel,--tell me, Thérèse, are you so attached to Antonio that you would be quite unhappy if you didn't get him?

THÉRÈSE. Oh, yes!

DURAND. Then you must marry him if he really loves you. But you mustn't be unkind to him, for then you'll be unhappy. Good-bye, my dear beloved child. [Takes her in his arms and kisses her cheeks.]

THÉRÈSE. But you mustn't die, father, you mustn't.

DURAND. Would you grudge me going to my peace?

THÉRÈSE. No, not if you wish it yourself. Forgive me, father, the many, many times I've been unkind to you.

DURAND. Nonsense, my child.

THÉRÈSE. But no one was so unkind to you as I.

DURAND. I felt it less because I loved you most. Why, I don't know. But run and shut the windows.

THÉRÈSE. Here are your matches, papa--and there's your milk.

DURAND [Smiling]. Ah, you child!

THÉRÈSE. Well, what can I do? I haven't anything else to give you.

DURAND. You gave me so much joy as a child that you owe me nothing. Go now, and just give me a loving look as you used to do. [Thérèse turns and throws herself into his arms.] So, so, my child, now all is well. [Thérèse runs out.] Farewell, Annette.

ANNETTE. Are you going away? I don't understand all this.

DURAND. Yes, I'm going.

ANNETTE. But of course you're coming back, papa.

DURAND. Who knows whether he will live through the morrow?
Anyway, we'll say farewell.

ANNETTE. Adieu, then, father--and a good journey to you. And you won't forget to bring something home to us just as you used to do, will you?

DURAND. And you remember that, though it's so long since I've bought anything for you children? Adieu, Annette. [Annette goes. Durand hums to himself.]

Through good and evil, great and small, Where you have sown, others gather all.

[Adèle comes in.] Adèle, come, now you shall hear and understand. If I speak in veiled terms, it is only to spare your conscience in having you know too much. Be quiet. I've got the children up in their rooms. First you are to ask me this question, "Have you a life insurance policy?" Well?

ADÈLE [Questioningly and uncertain]. "Have you a life insurance policy?"

DURAND. No, I had one, but I sold it long ago, because I thought I noticed that some one became irritable when it was due. But I have a fire insurance. Here are the papers. Hide them well. Now, I'm going to ask you something; do you know how many candles there are in a pound, mass candles at seventy-five centimes?

ADÈLE. There are six.

DURAND [Indicating the package of candles]. How many candles are there there?

ADÈLE. Only five.

DURAND. Because the sixth is placed very high up and very near--

ADÈLE.--Good Lord!

DURAND [Looking at his watch]. In five minutes or so, it will be burned out.

ADÈLE. No!

DURAND. Yes! Can you see dawn any other way in this darkness?

ADÈLE. No.

DURAND. Well, then. That takes care of the business. Now about another matter. If Monsieur Durand passes out of the world as an [Whispers] incendiary, it doesn't matter much, but his children shall know that he lived as a man of honor up to that time. Well, then, I was born in France, but I didn't have to admit that to the first scamp that came along. Just before I reached the age of conscription I fell in love with the one who later became my wife. To be able to marry, we came here and were naturalized. When the last war broke out, and it looked as if I was going to carry a weapon against my own country, I went out as a sharpshooter against the Germans. I never deserted, as you have heard that I did--your mother invented that story.

ADÈLE. Mother never lied--

DURAND.--So, so. Now the ghost has risen and stands between us again. I cannot enter an action against the dead, but I swear I am speaking the truth. Do you hear? And as far as your dowry is concerned, that is to say your maternal inheritance, these are the facts: first, your mother through carelessness and foolish speculations ruined your paternal inheritance so completely that I had to give up my business and start this pension. After that, part of her inheritance had to be used in the bringing-up of you children, which of course cannot be looked upon as thrown away. So it was also untrue that--

ADÈLE. No, that's not what mother said on her death-bed--

DURAND.--Then your mother lied on her death-bed, just as she had done all through her life. And that's the curse that has been following me like a spook. Think how you have innocently tortured me with these two lies for so many years! I didn't want to put disquiet into your young lives which would result in your doubting your mother's

goodness. That's why I kept silent. I was the bearer of her cross throughout our married life; carried all her faults on my back, took all the consequences of her mistakes on myself until at last I believed that I was the guilty one. And she was not slow, first to believe herself to be blameless, and then later the victim. "Blame it on me," I used to say, when she had become terribly involved in some tangle. And she blamed and I bore! But the more she became indebted to me, the more she hated me, with the limitless hatred of her indebtedness. And in the end she despised me, trying to strengthen herself by imagining she had deceived me. And last of all she taught you children to despise me, because she wanted support in her weakness. I hoped and believed that this evil but weak spirit would die when she died; but evil lives and grows like disease, while soundness stops at a certain point and then retrogrades. And when I wanted to change what was wrong in the habits of this household, I was always met with "But mother said," and therefore it was true; "Mother used to do this way," and therefore it was right. And to you I became a good-for-nothing when I was kind, a miserable creature when I was sensitive, and a scamp when I let you all have your way and ruin the house.

ADÈLE. It's honorable to accuse the dead who can't defend themselves!

DURAND [Fast and exalted]. I am not dead yet, but I will be soon. Will you defend me then? No, you need not. But defend your sisters. Think only of my children, Adèle. Take a motherly care of Thérèse; she is the youngest and liveliest, quick for good and bad, thoughtless but weak. See to it that she marries soon, if it can be arranged. Now, I can smell burning straw.

ADELE. Lord protect us!

DURAND [Drinks from glass]. He will. And for Annette you must try to find a place as teacher, so that she can get up in the world and into good company. You must manage the money when it falls due. Don't be close, but fix up your sisters so that they will be presentable to the right kind of people. Don't save anything but the family papers, which are in the top drawer of my chiffonier in the middle room. Here is the key. The fire insurance papers you have. [Smoke is seen forcing its way through the ceiling.] It will soon be accomplished now. In a

moment you will hear the clanging from St. François. Promise me one thing. Never divulge this to your sisters. It would only disturb their peace for the rest of their lives. [He sits by table.] And one thing more, never a hard word against their mother. Her portrait is also in the chiffonier; none of you knew that, because I found it was enough that her spirit walked unseen in the home. Greet Thérèse, and ask her to forgive me. Don't forget that she must have the best when you buy her clothes; you know her weakness for such things and to what her weakness can bring her. Tell Annette--

[A distant clanging of bells is heard; the smoke increases. Monsieur Durand drops his head in his hands on the table.]

ADÈLE. It's burning, it's burning! Father, what's the matter with you? You'll be burned up! [Durand lifts his head, takes the water glass up and puts it down with a meaningful gesture.] You have--taken--poison!

DURAND [Nods affirmatively]. Have you the insurance papers? Tell Thérèse--and Annette--

[His head falls. The bell in distance strikes again. Rumbling and murmur of voices outside.]

CURTAIN.
