

'Little Gentleman'

Play by Yale Udoff

THE LITTLE GENTLEMAN

MOTHER, a woman in her thirties, sponges down the sink counter as she hums, “The Anniversary Song.” Suddenly the ROAR of a jet airliner obliterates her voice. She stops working, angrily following the noise of the plane with her eyes until she is facing the audience. The sound of the plane fades. She moves to the crib, checks, smiles in relief.

MOTHER

Good baby, smart baby, strong baby. You sleep. Life is long and hard enough. Rest while you can. (She moves to the refrigerator, pulls out some vegetables and begins slicing and dicing. The oven clock RINGS. She rushes to it, pulls out a pie, smiles contentedly) A nice apple pie from a pretty oven. (She places it dead center on the breakfast table, then tiptoes back to the crib, takes a peek. The red phone RINGS. She hurries to it) Hello, Hello! (Listens) Harold? Oh, *that* Harold. Don't be silly dear. Of course I know who you are. You're the man who went to work this morning, the man who supports me, works for me...(checks her kitchen appliances)...buys me beautiful things. (Listens) Oh no, poopie. I'm sorry, I really am. But you just can't come home for lunch. (Listens) What time is it? (Looks to her Lalique clock) You mean according to the individually crafted Lalique clock encrusted with sand from the stars, which you bought me last week. Or according to the thirty-four karat, sixteen jewelled watch you bought me on our wedding and promised to match with a companion Swiss made pin-watch which you have, as yet, failed to do. It's close to noon. (Listens) Now, there's no need to get testy, dear. Just because I haven't permitted you home for lunch once in the past six months, doesn't mean it will always be this way. Things change. (Listens) Don't I cook you nice dinners? (Slight pause) Well, don't I? (From the crib, SOUNDS of a child starting to wake) Oh my, you've woken little Ronnie. Hold on. (Puts phone down, rushes to the crib) Is my little gentleman up? Has he has a good nap? Is he refreshed?

The baby remains unseen under his blanket, making baby gurgling noises. Mother looks to the glassed terraced door through which the sun's rays shoot at the carriage.

Is the light bothering you? It's pure fresh sunlight. (Waits) It is? Well, we can change that, can't we. (Pulls the drapes closed. The baby is still not to be seen) Now that's nice, isn't it darling?

RONALD'S VOICE

Umhmhmmmm.

MOTHER

Good. (She returns to the phone. Coquettishly) Are you still there, my husband? You will stay away, won't you? You won't regret it, believe me. I promise. Have no fear about that. (Listens) You *really* don't know what today is? It's your son's birthday. It's little Ronnie's day. (Listens) *How old is he?* Today, Ronnie is a year and a half old. How could you forget? How could you. (Listens) That is out of the question. Grandmother and Aunt Sylvia are coming over. And you know Sylvia has yet to see our beautiful new apartment. (Ronald clears his throat; we have as yet to see him) Wait a minute, Harold. (Rushes to the crib) Is my baby up? Is he ready for his wonderful day?

RONALD, a child somewhere between the ages of one and three, sits up He speak with a distinctly **Oxbridge English accent**. The fact that he is portrayed by an adult actor is not to be used to burlesque the dramatic situation.

RONALD

Be kind enough to clarify what you meant by that, if you will?

MOTHER

Now let's not be difficult, my little one.

RONALD

Mother, why can't you ever define anything? All I ask for is some clarity, a little lucidity of thought. Is that really too much?

Slight pause.

MOTHER

Would you like to talk to Daddy? (He doesn't answer, plays with his toys) You will talk to me though, won't you. I am your mother.

RONALD

Do I have a choice? (She returns to the phone)

MOTHER

He's up. Your son is up. (Aghast) What a terrible thing to say. Do you want to be responsible for what he thinks? Well, do you! (Listens) Fine then. I'll expect you for dinner. In the meantime, work, make plenty of money, and please Harold - make sure you have enough life insurance. And don't forget to bring me some presents. Any kind. (Hangs up. Moves to the refrigerator, pulls out a bowl of fruit) Your daddy's not well, poor man.

MOTHER (continues)

A weak heart, bad feet, a touch of lumbago, failing sight, a shrivelled stomach - not to mention a tendency to stoop and cough when in fresh air... It's all such a burden to bear. But Harold, my husband, your father takes it all with a smile. When I think of him, I sometimes think of crying. It's truly a pity, but what can man expect at thirty-seven. I mean, he's well past his prime. Isn't it a nice pie?

RONALD

I'd appreciate a portion. I'm famished.

MOTHER (correcting)

Hungry. You don't want people to think you're lording it over them. Not my little gentleman.

RONALD

I'm hungry mother. Quite.

MOTHER

Not now darling. Later, when Grandma Dora and Auntie Sylvia come. By then the pie will have a chance to cool to room temperature. And pies at room temperature are best.

RONALD

Correct me if I'm wrong, mother - but isn't today my birthday?

MOTHER

That it is.

RONALD

Then don't you think I should be able to have a slice of my own birthday pie when I want it?

MOTHER

Isn't that being a little selfish, dear?

RONALD

In what way?

MOTHER

It just is!

RONALD

Why is it selfish to ask for something you've prepared expressly for me?

MOTHER

Mother is always right. Don't argue with her. Mother is never wrong. Be a good baby and always obey her. You will never regret it. Mother promises that.

Slight pause.

RONALD

Mother, what's your real name? I mean your Christina name. You never have told me.

MOTHER (astonished)

But I'm mommy, mom - your mother!

RONALD

That I fully understand. All I want to know is what my mother's name is. Is that asking too much? Daddy always calls you things like "crazy" and "don't bother me." Grandmother Dora always calls you "my little girl," that is when she's speaking to you. Most of the time when people visit, you keep me in the TV room, so it's impossible for me to hear any names. And when I'm not in front of the TV you make me sleep. Really mother, I don't need as much sleep as you think. Please mommy, what's your name?

MOTHER

My! You certainly are a nervy little fellow. (Proudly) But then again you are mommy's child. That's for sure. One day she - mommy, I mean - will tell you everything you want to know -- (Doorbell CHIMES) Oh, that must be Auntie Sylvia, or maybe even Grandma - or maybe both. (Starts for hallway)

RONALD

But your name!

MOTHER

There will be plenty of time for that.

She exits. Ad-libs from the hallway. DORA, a woman in her sixties, enters.

DORA

Where is he! Where? (Spots the crib) There he is! What a boy! (She jets to Ronald, who pulls back for protection.

Mother remains a few yards away, smiling happily) How is my darling grandson? (No answer) Say *gevalt*. Go, say it darling. (No answer) Say *gott-in-himmel*. Come, say it. (No answer) Please, talk to me, say things. Tell me, speak my darling grandson. Talk to the one who loves you... (at Mother)...most.

MOTHER

Dora! (She moves to her mother)

DORA

He doesn't talk no more?

MOTHER

You scared him.

DORA

Me? I scared the most wonderful, beautiful, brilliant baby in the world! I would do such a thing? He should strike me dead if it's so. All I want is to teach him a few words from the old country, so he should know his background, his heritage, where he comes from. (With contempt) From you he'll never learn that. (Ronald sits up) There, look! He knows I love him. What a boy! What a beautiful child. Come darling - say, speak, talk to Dora. (Ronald looks to his Mother, then Dora) Say *gevalt*.

RONALD (mispronounces)

Ge walt.

DORA (elated)

Almost, almost. *Valt. Gevalt*. Say again.

RONALD

Ge...valt.

DORA

Beautiful. Absolutely marvelous. So now say *gott-in-himmel*.

RONALD

Gott...in...himmel. (She gives him a big wet kiss)

DORA

A genius, that's him. For sure.

MOTHER

That's enough for now, Dora. In fact, it's already too much!

DORA

Insulting! You're insulting me! I didn't come to be insulted. I'm leaving.

MOTHER

Goodbye.

Dora heads for the entrance hall and the door. Mother doesn't move. Dora breaks, turns.

DORA

All right, I won't leave. I'm here to celebrate my grandson's birthday and that's what I am going to do. I should die on this spot if I don't. (Returns to crib) Who would have thought at two-and-a-half a child would be so big, so smart.

MOTHER

Ronald's a year-and-a-half old.

DORA

Two-and-a-half.

MOTHER

One-and-a-half and not a day more!

DORA

Two-and-a-half and not a day less!

MOTHER

Sit down and behave yourself!

DORA (considers)

I'll do what my little girl says because I love her, but not as much as I love my grandson.

She sits at the table. Mother moves to the stove and the Krups coffee machine.

MOTHER

I'll make us some coffee. (Ronald signals to Dora as Mother deals with the coffee)

RONALD

Grandmother, would you be so kind as to tell me my mother's real name?