

THE FEAST

by Bryan Colley

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THE SETTING

The main feasting hall of Axton Keep. It is a large, spacious chamber with many exits. In this chamber are three tables. Two are very large and seat five. The other is small and seats two. Doors lead away from the feasting hall into two ante-chambers, with a table and bench in each.

THE CHARACTERS

FROM ENDFIELD:

Prince Leonard Brennan
Prince Geoffrey Brennan
Sir Cedric Gibbons
Mildred Gibbons

FROM HUMBERG:

Prince Nigel Scourby
Princess Natalia Scourby
Sir Torold Lubin
Gavin Ince
Bernhard Harrington

OTHER ROLES:

Nicolas Poltron, of Axton Keep
Bebo, a peddler
A speaking guard
A speaking servant
Other guards
Other servants

"When thou sittest to eat with a ruler, consider diligently what is before thee: And put a knife to thy throat, if thou be a man given to appetite. Be not desirous of his dainties: for they are deceitful meat." - *PROVERBS*

The Feast is a winner of the Gorilla Theater's 1998 Inaugural Dramatists Festival. *The Feast* was produced for the first time by Gorilla Theater Productions at the Alanz Theater, Kansas City, MO, in tandem with *The Southern Man* by Martin English, on August 11, 1999 with the following personnel:

Jerry Stark.....	LEONARD
Kevin Eib.....	GEOFFREY
Jonathan McClure.....	CEDRIC
Carrie Rosetti.....	MILDRED
Tom Moriarty.....	NIGEL
Michelle Cotton.....	NATALIA
Daniel Carmichael.....	TOROLD
Aaron Couser.....	GAVIN
Bryan Colley.....	BERNHARD
Stuart Kahn.....	NICOLAS
Bill "Jazzbo" Hargrave.....	BEBO
David Brisco Luby, Tyler Miller, George Forbes, and Bryan Colley.....	GUARDS
Roberta Von Fange.....	SERVANT/ASSASSIN
Paul Burns.....	DIRECTOR
Jenifer Tracy.....	ASSISANT DIRECTOR/SOUND BOARD
Richard Buswell.....	FIGHT CHOREOGRAPHER
Tyler Miller.....	TECHNICAL DIRECTOR
David Brisco Luby.....	SCENE DESIGN/PROPERTIES
Georgianna Londré.....	COSTUME DESIGN
Mark Green.....	LIGHTING DESIGN
Bryan Colley.....	SOUND DESIGN
Brad McKibben.....	SOUND ENGINEER
Dean Kinsey.....	HISTORIAN
David Molton.....	PHOTOGRAPHY
Bill "Jazzbo" Hargrave.....	TRUMPET
Stuart Kahn.....	SCENE PAINTER
Bryan Colley.....	PUBLICITY/PROGRAMS

ABOUT THE PLAYWRIGHT

Bryan Colley received a B. A . in theater and a minor in art from the University of Missouri, Kansas City, in 1996 and was trained in playwriting by Dr. Felicia Londré. With Gorilla Theatre he directed Eugene O'Neill's *The Hairy Ape* in 1998 at the Alanz Theater. He was a drama critic for the *Pitch Weekly* and he's currently a graphic designer and writer for *KC Stage Magazine*. He was president of the Just Off Broadway Theatre Association from 2000 -2003. *The Feast* was his first stageplay, adapted from his one -act play *Roses for Rosita*. His other plays include *Cascades*, *An American Institution*, *Twilight*, and *Lingerie Shop*. He has also written several screenplays, including *Aeroplane*, *NY Cowboy*, *Dark Matter*, *Fanged*, and *Mysterium*. He resides in Kansas City.

ACT I

SCENE 1

At rise. The guests of the feast are spread throughout the main feasting hall, immersed in various conversations. Pitchers and goblets are on the three tables. LEONARD, CEDRIC, and GAVIN are standing downstage, speaking between themselves.

LEONARD

...ha, ha! So true! So true.

GAVIN

But that did not stop Cedric! Throughout the war's progress, on a field so bloody the rivers ran red from its drainage, with corpses so thick as to form a rampart upon which we fought, Cedric would not yield. As our evasion was prepared, Cedric leapt upon a mound of flesh, and against a sky of showering arrows cried, "Onto the field, brothers, and set upon our foes! Run steel through their bones and terror through their veins! I want such ferocity that their cowardice is displayed in screaming yelps of fear!" It stirred the hearts of all to see him there, blood streaming from his wounds, eyes tired from restless days of battle but still showing that lusty vigor to kill. Truly, the men were moved, Sire, and charged upon our host with confidence of victory. Our stay depended upon Cedric's commands.

CEDRIC

You overestimate my abilities, Gavin.

GAVIN

I speak only what I know, Uncle. I cannot see how the war was lost with commanders such as Cedric.

CEDRIC

Please, Gavin, 'tis futile flattery. You are the hero of that day. Had Gavin not brought us the news that Nigel was moving his forces through the Shallow Crag, to fall upon us in surprise, all would have been lost. We owe Gavin our survival.

GAVIN

Let another man praise thee, not thy own mouth.

CEDRIC

A stranger, and not thine own lips.

LEONARD

Cedric is commendable, indeed, but the war was all in vain, for nothing has been gained.

CEDRIC

Except a few more scars.

LEONARD

So true, so true.

CEDRIC

I cannot take credit for the morale of the soldiers when it was their strong loyalty to you, Leonard, that led them into battle. No fool's words could have improved their desire to fight. I should think I failed to organize the rabble, else victory would have befallen us. In truth, I am to blame for this affair, so do not praise my abilities as a commander.

LEONARD

You've nothing to do with our losses in this war, Cedric, so I'll hear no more of your self-inflicted blame. Do you understand me?

CEDRIC

Sire.

GAVIN

I meant only the best of compliments with my rambles, Cedric.

LEONARD

Oh, he has complained of his inadequacies ever since the war's end. Knowing full well the truth of the matter, he still remains incredulous despite the facts. Have no regrets for past deeds, Cedric. They cannot be undone.

GAVIN

You are still the greatest warrior to have fought for Endfield since Valamir was expatriated.

LEONARD

Your best recourse is to plan your future. We did battle with Humberg and we have lost. We are no better than before the assault, save the lives of our brave warriors. Before the war we were eager to dip our hands in enemy blood, and now we are drenched in sorrow. Shake off your melancholy, restore your vigor, and swallow the past. As long as Endfield stands, you will always have a hopeful future.

CEDRIC

My liege, I feel that I have erred.

GAVIN

And as they say, 'tis human.

TRUMPETS sound in the background and everyone takes a seat.

The people of Endfield sit at a table opposite those from Humberg. NICOLAS, at the smaller table between the two, lifts his goblet and stands to address the chamber.

NICOLAS

Greetings, my guests! I welcome you to Axton Keep. It is not often that this castle and valley have visitors of such esteem. I have gone through great effort to grant you every possible comfort during your stay. I hope your accommodations these past few days have been acceptable. I know to what great lengths and through what formidable hazards you have journeyed. I extend my hand to you both; first to you, Prince Leonard of Endfield. I am most humbled by this visit from you and your entourage, which has sailed across the dangerous seas into foreign lands to meet in this castle.

Nicolas motions toward the Endfield table with his goblet. Leonard and his company are pleased with his reference.

NICOLAS

(cont)

I am equally grateful for this visit from Prince Nigel Scourby, who has set out from Humberg with his company and has himself also navigated the stormy surf to be here on this historic day.

Nicolas now directs his glass toward the other table, and Nigel acknowledges his address.

NICOLAS

(cont)

It is here in these alien and neutral walls that you will commit to peace between your two lands, to end a long, hard war that has cost dearly both your armies in sweat and tears. From this day on, peace shall govern your interactions, and ne'er more will spill a drop of blood. I offer a toast...

Everyone in the room rises with goblets in hand.

NICOLAS

(cont)

...to an everlasting bond that weds two kingdoms as husband and wife, and joins two lands into a thriving one, I offer this toast to peace!

EVERYONE

TO PEACE! TO PEACE!

NIGEL

I would like to extend this toast, in honor of my respect for the citizens of Endfield, and grant condolences to the Prince. May he live long, and may our swords remain sheathed until all time has passed. I offer my toast unto you. Long live Prince Leonard!

EVERYONE

LONG LIVE PRINCE LEONARD!

LEONARD

I return your gratitude, my noble Prince Nigel. It is not Endfield's humility to have lost a war to so great a foe, but to have set upon such a foe to start. May this convocation end all strife that our lands have dealt unto each other, and may our homes be once again secure from hostile attacks. To this end I say, praise Prince Nigel.

EVERYONE

PRAISE PRINCE NIGEL!

NICOLAS

As a final word of note, may I give honor to Prince Geoffrey Brennan of Endfield, and Princess Natalia Scourby of Humberg, who shall this evening be wed for the love and peace between your two nations. May your marriage forge the unity between your two lands. It so cheers me to see youth in love. I wish good fortune for this young couple, and I bid a hearty congratulations.

EVERYONE

CONGRATULATIONS!

NICOLAS

This formal congress is met to invest your peace, and sign a treaty of terms to which you have already agreed. The charter is at this moment being drawn up, to be signed at the end of our festive gathering. It is said that a cheerful heart has a continual feast, so until that time arrives, I have prepared for you, my esteemed visitors, food and entertainments that I hope delight your senses. With contentment in the hearts of men, upon my word, let the feast begin!

MUSIC begins. Servants enter and set food down on the tables. Some people get up and move about. Others remain and eat their meals. The chamber returns to its previous state of confusion. MILDRED meets BERNHARD and they eventually depart. NIGEL, NATALIA and GAVIN make their way downstage through the crowd.

GAVIN

...sad but true, so true.

NATALIA

How nice to end this horrid war, Father.

NIGEL

With our best generals dead, Natalia, peace is the only option.

GAVIN

With Endfield's army destroyed, peace is their only option.

NIGEL

I am weary of the dead.

NATALIA

I fear to smile at this feast be a sin, considering my reproach for the bloodshed that begot this supper.

NIGEL

Happiness is not easily gained.

GAVIN

But this jolly feast celebrates what is to be, not what has progressed. Have no sorrow for those departed, but delight for those that will not die from war.

NATALIA

Those that did not die from war would not have died in peace, Gavin, so it is foolish to praise the living to no purpose.

GAVIN

Perhaps, but who needs call to celebrate? We have journeyed down the road to war and arrived at our destination.

NIGEL

Which destination?

GAVIN

Victory!

NIGEL

The victory is yours, Gavin. Without your knowledge of Endfield, there would be no feast this day.

GAVIN

I mean only to serve.

NIGEL

Had I more enemies for you to befriend, I would to war with them as well. However, I do believe there is one unsettled matter between us.

GAVIN

I thought you had forgotten.

NIGEL

One does not forget what one owes. He merely hopes he is not called upon to pay. Come, to our table.

THEY RETURN TO THE HUMBERG
TABLE.

SCENE 2

MILDRED and BERNHARD enter the Endfield
ante-chamber.

BERNHARD

O Mildred, I love thee.

MILDRED

Come, Bernhard. Let us sit.

BERNHARD

Since you have been away in Endfield, I have longed for your return. I cannot begin to describe the suffering and torture I have endured without you. Now we can once again be together, so long have we been apart.

MILDRED

Yes. Kiss me, Bernhard.

BERNHARD

My lips have waited for your return, to taste your delicate skin. I have prayed for this reunion, for I know God to be giving, that He should send you to my arms. O Mildred, please tell me that you love me.

MILDRED

I love thee, Bernhard. Now kiss me.

BERNHARD

Yet, tell me of your forbearance, of your hidden desires, how you struggled to hold back your true feelings for me. Let me know how this broken romance has tortured you.

MILDRED

It has been horrible.

BERNHARD

Yes, horrible.

MILDRED

And painful.

CEDRIC

Why, I've a mind to remove thy head, dog.

MILDRED

Stop it, Cedric!

CEDRIC

Curb thy tongue, Millie, you're next.

BERNHARD

Please, Cedric, we can settle this quietly.

CEDRIC

'Tis my wife, scowl. I'll kill thee.

BERNHARD

Please, I have wealth and gold. Is that compensation?

CEDRIC

It is best for a man to die wealthy. It makes his relatives very happy after the funeral.

BERNHARD

My services then, all that Humberg can offer.

CEDRIC

I have servants of my own who do not bed my wife.

BERNHARD

No, I know secrets I could lend thee of Humberg's political affairs.

CEDRIC

Secrets are for war, not peace, fool.

BERNHARD

I pray, spare me, Cedric!

CEDRIC

If you take my wife, then I your life.

Cedric grabs Bernhard and starts to strangle him.

BERNHARD

Perhaps you know of Prince Leonard's death?

CEDRIC

What do you mean? Leonard lives.

BERNHARD

But not when this feast is over.

Explain yourself. CEDRIC

If my life is spared. BERNHARD

Very well. CEDRIC

Cedric releases his hold. BERNHARD

Thank you. BERNHARD

Now tell me of Leonard's death. CEDRIC

Simply a rumor I heard spoken. Prince Leonard is to be assassinated. BERNHARD

Rubbish! CEDRIC

At the end of the feast, he will be killed. BERNHARD

Where did you hear this? CEDRIC

Princess Natalia told me. BERNHARD

Lies! False words! CEDRIC

Then they are lies from her lips. BERNHARD

She told you this? CEDRIC

No. She spoke to another man. I listened out of sight. BERNHARD

And who was that man? CEDRIC

I know not. His voice was unfamiliar. BERNHARD

Who is the assassin? CEDRIC

BERNHARD

I know not.

CEDRIC

And when was this?

BERNHARD

This morning, after breakfast.

CEDRIC

You are certain it will be after the treaty is signed?

BERNHARD

Of that I am certain, they did so stress the matter.

CEDRIC

Tell me what else! What else?

BERNHARD

That is my full knowledge. I've told all I know.

CEDRIC

We of Endfield hang traitors, Bernhard.

With one strong punch, Cedric knocks Bernhard to the floor. He then opens the door and calls out into the hall.

CEDRIC

Guards!

There is no response. Cedric exits to get some guards.

MILDRED

Oh, Bernhard, I am sorry. Are you hurt?

BERNHARD

A bruise or two is pain endured, yet Cedric's strong arm speaks well of him.

MILDRED

Betimes Cedric is irrational.

BERNHARD

That is a jealous brute you married, love.

MILDRED

I know not why.

BERNHARD

Why you married?

MILDRED
Why he is jealous.

Cedric enters with two guards.

CEDRIC
Strip his arms and take him where he can cause no harm.

GUARD
Yes, Sire!

The guards remove Bernhard's weapons.

CEDRIC
Come, Trouble.

MILDRED
Trouble?

CEDRIC
Yes, that is thy new name. I am returning you to the feasting hall. Keep quiet! Speak not a word of what you have heard, especially to Leonard. The less he knows, the less he worries, and that is for the better. Come now. Feign ignorance to this plot and resume feasting.

The guards drag Bernhard out.

CEDRIC
Wait! I told you to remove his weapons.

GUARD
I did, sire.

Cedric removes the pin holding Bernhard's cape. The cape falls to the floor. Cedric turns the pin over and shows the guard a four-inch needle.

CEDRIC
This pin could make quite a prick. Take him away!

The guards exit with Bernhard.

CEDRIC
(cont)
Let us return to the hall.

Cedric and Mildred exit.

SCENE 3

Cedric and Mildred return to the main feasting hall. Nicolas sits with Geoffrey and Natalia. Nigel and Torold are not present.

CEDRIC

How now, Gavin?

GAVIN

Uncle!

CEDRIC

May I speak with you privately?

Mildred flirts with Gavin as he converses.

GAVIN

Speak what you will.

CEDRIC

I am grateful for your aid during the war, Gavin.

GAVIN

Unfortunately, this feast is the end of my duties unto you.

CEDRIC

Perhaps not.

GAVIN

Oh! What will you hear from me of Humberg?

CEDRIC

Know you of an assassination?

GAVIN

I have no such knowledge.

CEDRIC

I fear there is a plot to kill Prince Leonard.

GAVIN

Here at the feast?

CEDRIC

Yes, afterwards.

GAVIN

I've heard nothing of it.

CEDRIC

If you explore the matter, and locate something --

GAVIN

I will come first to you. Consider my employment valid.

CEDRIC

Thank you, Gavin. Now, I must away to important matters.

GAVIN

What matters are those?

CEDRIC

I must find some faithful guards to protect Leonard. We must have some escape if all goes wrong. Go, but make your inquiries discreet.

GAVIN

Take care, Cedric.

Cedric exits.

GAVIN

This is a royal feast, is it not, my lady?

Gavin takes Mildred's hand and they exit. BEBO enters, carrying a basket of roses.

NICOLAS

Friends! Friends! Quiet. Let me tell you how happy I am with your wonderful visit. Just this morning I met the loveliest lady that ever tread the soil of Axton. Such a beauty she was that once my eyes met hers, my heart was scorched with the burning flame of love. It was not an ordinary desire or lust. It was an uncontrolled passion! Then this low flower peddler passed by, and I did purchase from him one perfect red rose.

He takes a rose from Bebo and gives it to Natalia.

NICOLAS

(cont)

Upon seeing her, I approached most humbly, and passed it to her hand, with a kiss upon the wrist. Such an action caused her to swoon, but I caught her.

NATALIA

(Swooning)

I know what you mean, Nicolas.

NICOLAS

And she was enchanted. So much that we spent the morning together. I cannot provide the exact exotic details here, but I was a happier man by lunch.

NATALIA

Such a lucky girl. What was her name?

NICOLAS

Well now, the beauty of that name draws such fervor that the lips quiver when it is spoken. It so smoothly pours from the larynx it is like sipping the finest of wines. A sound that, when spoken so, quakes one's knees. It creates a timbre that chokes the untrained throat. Such a name I will try to pronounce with all the grace and beauty that hath its possessor. Such a wonderful name is Mildred.

GEOFFREY

Mildred!

NICOLAS

Oh! I shiver at that sound.

GEOFFREY

Not Mildred Gibbons?

NICOLAS

Such is the lovely cadence of perfection. Why, what is wrong with such a name?

GEOFFREY

It's just that...

NICOLAS

Do not those words cause your heart to burn with fire? Does not the mere mention of Mildred inspire desire?

NATALIA

The problem is Cedric Gibbons.

NICOLAS

Cedric Gibbons? Cedric Gibbons. It would seem to me that throughout the long experience of illustrious life that name resides within my memory. Cedric. Cedric. Why, Cedric Gibbons!

NATALIA

The one and same.

NICOLAS

The great Endfield hero who returned with all glory for combat in the war.

GEOFFREY

The one and same.

NATALIA

The same Cedric Gibbons whose lovely wife is Mildred Gibbons.

NICOLAS

Ek! That name hath lost its charm.

GEOFFREY

Cedric is exceedingly jealous. To hear such things of his wife, he would seldom hesitate to sever the tongue that spoke it.

NATALIA

Pray thee never to speak of her again in public.

NICOLAS

It would seem, then, in respect for the valiant hero, that from my lips never the utterance of Mil-, er, the wife of noble Cedric.

Cedric enters.

NICOLAS

(cont)

I am sorry to have spoiled our jolly jubilation, but I must be gone.

GEOFFREY

Why hurry away so, Nicolas?

NICOLAS

My lord, when one performs such acts of gluttony as this day has seen, Nature tends to take revenge.

Nicolas exits.

BEBO

You must pay for the rose, my lord.

Bebo exits after Nicolas. As he leaves, a guard steals a rose from his basket and exits after Mildred.

CEDRIC

Geoffrey, if I may, a word with you?

GEOFFREY

Yes, Cedric. Is your artful wit fit for chess?

CEDRIC

Not at this moment. May we be alone?

GEOFFREY

I shall meet thee in thy chambers, love.

NATALIA

Very well, Geoffrey.

Natalia exits.

CEDRIC

I have uncovered a dire situation.

GEOFFREY

What is it?

CEDRIC

I spoke with Bernhard in the other room. He told me that someone plans to assassinate your father.

GEOFFREY

Who would do that?

CEDRIC

At the moment, I have no suspicions.

GEOFFREY

How did Bernhard strike this mine of knowledge?

CEDRIC

That is why I came to you. He learned of it from Natalia.

GEOFFREY

Natalia? When such mendacity spouts from a man of such turbid mettle as Bernhard, he belittles his own name. Who could envision Natalia's participation in murder?

CEDRIC

I propose that you set your mind to that purpose, and ascertain what her involvement is in this rumor.

GEOFFREY

Me?

CEDRIC

She exchanged words with a stranger this morning. He may be the assassin.

GEOFFREY

I could raise the subject in conversation?

CEDRIC

Yes, but do not betray our knowledge of their plan. If they have a plot, let's not let them alter it.

They will not act until after the treaty is signed, so we have until that time to find out who it is.

GEOFFREY

My own careful deliberation fails to conceive her in partnership with such a devious deed.

CEDRIC

I hope that she is not involved, and Bernhard is a rotten liar, but I must be certain. If truth implicates Natalia, you can trace her participation to her father Nigel. Only he would attempt a murder at a festival of peace.

GEOFFREY

Then let us reason Nigel's predicament. Certainly, he could not act the assassin. The player in this scheme must be a man of brawn and vigor, youth and vassalage.

CEDRIC

He has soothed someone's fear of Endfield to tender a slaying.

GEOFFREY

Someone able to make a pointed contact with my father.

CEDRIC

Someone here at the feast.

GEOFFREY

A guard, perchance?

CEDRIC

A guard could not be trusted to succeed.

GEOFFREY

True! This task requires the insurance of an adept virtuoso, a master assassin. Reason implicates our guests. Yet, who in Nigel's entourage has such capable hands? Nigel keeps many nefarious friends. Bernhard is not a suspect, nor Natalia. Only your nephew Gavin stands able to hold Nigel's trust.

CEDRIC

He is able-bodied, but not able-minded. Being a relative of blood and friendship, his heart belongs to Endfield, not Humberg. He was our confidant during the war, bringing invaluable knowledge of Humberg's covert plans to our camps in the field.

GEOFFREY

Then what of the lord of Axton Keep?

CEDRIC

Nicolas. I do not know him well.

GEOFFREY

As a neutral liaison, he holds a seat of confidence with Nigel. Men do not appear with such prominence in strange lands unless welcomed for some extraordinary purpose. I fear a partnered plot against Endfield.

CEDRIC

We should not distrust him.

GEOFFREY

And in all the land, from sea to barbaric, barren borders, none lives that is as cruel and caballing as Torold Lubin.

CEDRIC

Yes, Torold. A most likely candidate.

GEOFFREY

Torold's foul character is widely known. He is a highly-regarded brute and cut-throat, famed in his deceptiveness, and eminent in murder. Ne'er lived a man more notorious, and ne'er died a man without his hand being part of it, for Torold is the embodiment of death. Yet, I extol his capacities beyond reason, so before I make a god of this villain, take heed that Torold has the might and mind to murder my father.

CEDRIC

Torold's prowess in battle is unquestionable. If Nigel puts his trust in such a facile butcher, then I should fear for Leonard's life. I will do what I can to remove him from the feast. Until then, speak with Natalia.

GEOFFREY

I shall.

CEDRIC

Mark you, your father knows nothing of this. Keep it so.

Geoffrey exits.

CEDRIC

O, how false this feast.

Nigel and Torold enter.

NIGEL

...ha, ha! So true! So true.

TOROLD

Look, there is Cedric, the warrior.

NIGEL

Caution, Torold.

TOROLD

How goes my brave combatant? Is that dreadful wound healed, good Cedric?

CEDRIC

One should not take such pride in deceitful attacks, good Torold. Had you faced me like a true gentleman in a brave and just manner, perchance I should be shamed for the scar I bear. Yet, as your hand passed the wound unto me by an accident of fate, and I live to this day despite your sorrowful attempts to backstab me in such a dark and underhanded manner, you should lower thy head when you pass, so as not to arouse my wrath.

TOROLD

I know as much of honor as any man. But tell me, Cedric, how one faces a retreating army? As you provided only your back as a target, I had little choice in my attacks.

CEDRIC

You needed only speak my name and I would have turned to face thee in glee, my good Torold. How I wish this were Shallow Crag, that I might draw my sword upon you now.

NIGEL

Cedric! Do not draw thy blade. Remember the feast, and our agreed peace. The war is over!

CEDRIC

I remember the feast. I remember when it was in this very room, but it is no more. A feast is a place of cheer and happiness, and there is no smile upon my face. If the company were better, I ask your leave, for I wish to be with friends.

Cedric starts off.

TOROLD

Cedric! I call thy name to your backside. What say you?

CEDRIC

If I thought you were a man of honor, I would accept your challenge.

TOROLD

Is my blood not red enough for your taste?

CEDRIC

I would like nothing better than to taste your blood. Fill a goblet with your juice, and I will drink of it. Feed me your flesh, for 'tis a filling meal. Then give me your head, to keep as a trophy.

Leonard enters.

TOROLD

This head, though mine to give, is not yours to take. If your blade can reach my gullet, these eyes, this nose and mouth, my brains are yours, and I should not care what becomes of them.

CEDRIC

Then feel my iron tooth, Torold.

They draw swords.

LEONARD

Cedric! Stop this madness!

CEDRIC

He wishes to fight, my lord.

LEONARD

I command you, Cedric! Replace thy blade!

Cedric sheaths his sword.

LEONARD

(cont)

How could you allow this disgraceful display, Prince Nigel?

NIGEL

Good Prince, it was in their hearts that they should fight. I cannot command men's desires.

LEONARD

We did not come this far from Endfield, from our homes, to spill our blood on foreign soil. The war ended on the battlefield, and it is finished. Our swords shall never touch again. You may have no quarrels over this horrid war any more, Cedric. And I expect your vassals to act the same, Nigel. I did not agree to peace with half a heart, and though the treaty is not signed, we are bound to its terms from this moment on. Do you uphold this, Nigel?

NIGEL

I feel as you, Leonard. No more blood.

LEONARD

Then it would be best to avoid confrontation. It will only stoke our rancor. Come away with me, Cedric.

CEDRIC

I am sorry, Leonard.

LEONARD

Think of brighter things. Look to the future, not the past. This is, after all, a feast. Think of returning home, of meeting old friends, of your wife.

CEDRIC

Have you seen her?

LEONARD

Who?

CEDRIC

My wife!

LEONARD

No.

CEDRIC

She is off again, the harlot. I must find her.

Cedric and Leonard exit.

TOROLD

Ha! Ha! Ha!

NIGEL

You shall ruin everything, Torold.

TOROLD

I was only playing with the fool, Nigel. His face turns red, and he near explodes, and that tickles me.

NIGEL

Your entertainments will be my downfall.

TOROLD

Entertainments! I have yet to finish my story, thanks to Cedric's interruption. Do you remember where I ended?

NIGEL

You invited her to lunch.

TOROLD

Indeed, I asked her, 'Would you care to dine with me?'

NIGEL

And she agreed?

TOROLD

No. She did not think it polite to dine in public, being a wedded woman, so I invited her unto my haunt.

NIGEL

Yes, and then?

TOROLD

Along the way, I passed a peddler, and in a ridiculous ploy, bought her a red rose.

NIGEL

You jest?

TOROLD

For once I speak truth.

NIGEL

Continue.

TOROLD

Unto my meek hovel we did present ourselves, and she turned to face me.

NIGEL

Go on, Torold.

TOROLD

I need only say my lunch was most satisfying.

NIGEL

Do not spare the details.

TOROLD

Very well.

They lean together and speak in private. Gavin and Bebo enter.

GAVIN

How are you this evening?

BEBO

Very well, thank you.

GAVIN

Those roses are lovely.

BEBO

They're good business today.

GAVIN

The fragrance has the sweetest flavor. I think I shall have one for a gift.

BEBO

Here, lad.

GAVIN

Thank you. 'Tis sweet as the spring air, as sweet as dear Mildred.

CEDRIC

(Off-stage)

Wrath and rage, I trust her not, Leonard.

Gavin hides when he hears Cedric approaching.

LEONARD

(Off-Stage)

You must stay calm, Cedric.

Cedric and Leonard enter.

CEDRIC

I'll not have it. I'll not!

Gavin exits without Cedric's knowledge.

LEONARD

Compose yourself, Cedric, before your hot head does turn to fever. Sit and have a drink. You must not see betrayal in all of your wife's affairs. Exercise faith.

CEDRIC

You preach faith!

LEONARD

Loyalty, as to a friend, like unto me.

CEDRIC

She may claim to have bought those flowers, Leonard, but I know the truth. Somewhere she keeps a man, and has the nerve to bear his gifts about in a public declaration. I will find out who her carnal confidant is, and discover who imparts roses to a married woman. (Bebo starts to exit.) Peddler! Stop!

BEBO

Yes, Cedric?

CEDRIC

Do you know my wife, Mildred Gibbons?

BEBO

Yes, sire.

CEDRIC

Have you seen her today?

Yes, sire. BEBO

Whom was she with? CEDRIC

Uh. No, sire. BEBO

What do you mean, no? CEDRIC

I dinnuh see her. BEBO

But you just said you did? CEDRIC

My mind has changed. BEBO

Did you or didn't you see my wife? CEDRIC

I did not. BEBO

Then where did she get those two roses? CEDRIC

From my basket. BEBO

And whom did purchase the roses from you? CEDRIC

I cannot say. BEBO

Tell me, instantly! CEDRIC

I cannot. BEBO

Oh, you'll tell, huckster, or I shall slice that unspeaking tongue from thy muzzle, and pluck those unsightly eyes from thy ignorant skull. Speak! CEDRIC

'Twas Torold. BEBO

CEDRIC
Torold, the scoundrel! Await me.

LEONARD
Cedric, do converse with caution.

CEDRIC
What speak you so secretly?

TOROLD
Tales of a filling lunch.

CEDRIC
Was the cuisine so delightful as to retell in vivid detail?

TOROLD
It was.

CEDRIC
Didst thou invest in a rose this afternoon?

TOROLD
I did not.

CEDRIC
This peddler claims you have.

TOROLD
He lies.

LEONARD
He has no call to.

TOROLD
Perchance I did.

CEDRIC
Whereto went the rose?

TOROLD
I know not.

CEDRIC
You lie!

TOROLD
You speak outright against me.

CEDRIC
This audience knows of your character. You are a liar and a cheat.

TOROLD

Seek you a short life? Your words have found the switchback to death.

LEONARD

He means it not, good gentleman.

CEDRIC

I'm sorry, Torold, but to defend against you would reduce my moral standards to a lowly position. You suit me not.

TOROLD

You'll not deliver insults and walk away.

CEDRIC

Only creditable gentlemen bear arms against me.

NIGEL

To contradict your judgment, I will stand in honor of Torold's good nature.

CEDRIC

Why, Prince Nigel. Are you certain you wish to risk your untarnished reputation for such refuse?

NIGEL

Torold has proven a trustworthy friend.

CEDRIC

My apologies, then, dear Torold. However, my accusation still stands. Dare you deny the rose came from your hand?

TOROLD

I do, sire.

CEDRIC

Very well, I will allow God to pass judgment, that whosoever vanquish the other be the honest man. I shall duel with this man before the feast's end. The contest shall be entered into this day's tired schedule.

LEONARD

I cannot allow this, Cedric.

CEDRIC

This is not the result of war, Prince Leonard. This man has enjoyed my dear wife. Such circumstances I must defend at swordpoint, or lose my honor. Our duel is on; not for war, but for love.

TOROLD

One moment, Cedric. You are right. I am a liar.

CEDRIC

Gave you, then, the rose to Mildred?

TOROLD

I did so, this very afternoon.

CEDRIC

This assembly is witness to your disclosure. However, this evidence is a mark to my good name. To recredit my repute, Torold, I have no other choice. We shall duel tonight.

NIGEL

You'd best not toy with him, Torold. He hath wrath and rage.

TOROLD

Cedric, you cannot allow this. 'Twas but a rose, no more.

Nicolas enters.

CEDRIC

A rose! A rose bears in its petals an undeniable love. The hand that passes the rose gives more than any other gift can yield. What is the rose but a fragile bud, a dainty scent, and velvet corolla that soon wilts and dies? It is not the flower that makes the present precious, but the intentions in the gift. Such intentions toward Mildred I cannot tolerate.

NICOLAS

Forgive me, Cedric!

CEDRIC

What?

NICOLAS

I knew not to whom I bestowed the rose. Had I known Mildred was the wife of the great Cedric Gibbons, my desire would have never taken form.

CEDRIC

You gave the roses to Mildred?

NICOLAS

Yes, this morning. Yet, I am grieved to know what wrong I have done. Please forgive me.

CEDRIC

Is this a joke? Don't ridicule me, stranger. What do you have to do with this affair?

NICOLAS

I most humbly plead for forgiveness.

CEDRIC

What causes you to tell me this story? Is it Torold's doing?

NICOLAS

No, sire. I am suppliant. I have gravely erred. You have discovered the rose I made a present to your wife, and I say that I am sorry.

TOROLD

Here is your culprit, Cedric.

LEONARD

Hold a moment, Torold! You are not innocent. Tell me, minor merchant, did this groveling Nicolas purchase a red rose this morning?

BEBO

Such a long time ago...

CEDRIC

Mark his features. Can you recall them?

BEBO

...Yes! A rose he did buy.

LEONARD

A rose, only one, and not many.

BEBO

Verily, one.

LEONARD

You gave Mildred a single rose?

NICOLAS

A single rose for the simplicity of love. I bought one bud.

CEDRIC

When I spoke with Mildred, not a singular rose did she have in her hair, but twins. If Nicolas gave only one, the other did come from Torold's hand.

TOROLD

And all in one day.

CEDRIC

Quiet, knave! Display the guilt you should feel for blackening my family's name. Two roses in a day! What ill luck I have acquired? Torold, you curly rascal! Stray not far, for our duel doth stand.

TOROLD

Then the sword shall make amends. I can tolerate him no more.

NIGEL

Let us go, Torold. Now!

Torold and Nigel exit.

CEDRIC

As for you, cowering infidel--

NICOLAS

Take pity, sire!

CEDRIC

My course is set. Stand, Nicolas. One rose was far too many. To learn suddenly of another does twist my heart. Rise, you begging dog! Thou hast proclaimed thy guilt, therefore accept your sentence. Under the eyes of God we shall combat to the death, and may the righteous man find victory.

NICOLAS

No, Cedric!

CEDRIC

Weep no more, jackal, and sharpen thy blade. We shall duel, Nicolas.

NICOLAS

No! No! By God's grace, no!

LEONARD

But, Cedric...

CEDRIC

One moment! Axton's reputation will suffer from your absence, Nicolas. See to it your carcass is present.

NICOLAS

My appeals to your compassion, Cedric!

Gavin bursts in with his sword drawn.

GAVIN

Stand, Uncle, and face thine enemy!

CEDRIC

Young Gavin, why speaketh so?

GAVIN

I henceforth proclaim my love of the lady Mildred Gibbons, to whom thou art wed.

CEDRIC

Here, what say you?

GAVIN

I did win her admirations this very evening, and did make a proposal with a rose.

CEDRIC

A rose! You didn't give my lady a rose, did you?

GAVIN

Back, Cedric, or my sword will cut you. I do request a mortal trial for her fair hand. What say you?

CEDRIC

You wish to fight me?

GAVIN

I have no fear, despite your history. I believe true love can conquer.

CEDRIC

What is this? Who plays these pranks upon me? A third rose bearer on the same day. Absurdity!

GAVIN

Laugh not at my blade, for it is deadly.

CEDRIC

I have trouble swallowing your threat with sobriety, young fool, considering the circumstances.

LEONARD

Say, silly peddler, if you have seen that face today.

BEBO

Yes, not a few moments past.

CEDRIC

Even as we speak of flowers, this young lad doth enamor my Mildred with another red rose. It was red, was it not?

GAVIN

As your blood is red, so the rose.

CEDRIC

O stupid child. Where Nicolas begs forgiveness, you pray for death. Death! Several deaths will end this accursed nightmare. Do not think you can press me. I can still gather my wits and right this ridicule. I will not be made the fool. I am Cedric Gibbons! I have fought in the war! I am a great master of the sword, and I am a respectable man. How dare the people in this castle turn against me in force. Your prayers are answered, dunderhead. If I must slay every man I shall do so, and this infant shall be the first.

Young Gavin, sheath thy sword for now, for I have already arranged a time for combat.

GAVIN

I pray for that hour, then.

Gavin exits.

LEONARD

O unfortunate souls.

CEDRIC

Leonard. Leonard. What insanity has formed in this chamber? What is the cause of this misfortune?

LEONARD

This incident merely foreshadows what is to come. You have pledged to three duels, and each at once.

CEDRIC

So I have. 'Tis incorrigible. First the rogue, and then the stranger, and then the child. I cannot believe the performance that has just preceded me.

LEONARD

What will become of them?

CEDRIC

I know not, but let us leave, Leonard. No sooner did I enter this keep than learn of four affairs with lovely Mildred. I fear to stay longer would introduce a fifth suitor. I must regain my breath. Come to the night air, where we can drink from the well.

Leonard and Cedric exit.

BEBO

Sadly Cedric is confused,
His honor being thus abused.
Yet still he laughs, he is amused
By how three villains roses used.

(Bebo exits. Curtain.)

ACT II

SCENE 1

NATALIA opens the door to the Humberg ante-chamber.

NATALIA

In here, Geoffrey. Come along.

Natalia and Geoffrey enter.

GEOFFREY

Where is this?

NATALIA

Our dressing chamber.

GEOFFREY

It is far more comforting than our own.

NATALIA

Come and sit.

GEOFFREY

Your father has ne'er been as jovial as this night.

NATALIA

He loves to feast.

GEOFFREY

He has many things to show his cheer for.

NATALIA

Yes, tomorrow, he shall have a son.

GEOFFREY

And I a father.

NATALIA

And I a husband.

GEOFFREY

I love you, Natalia.

(They kiss.)

Impatience prods me. Must we wait 'til the treaty is signed?

NATALIA

Yes, we must.

GEOFFREY

This day has few waking hours remaining. We might wait 'til nigh the sun, on chariots drawn, proclaims a new day before peace and our wedding is made.

NATALIA

You have waited for the war to end. How are a few more hours going to harm you?

GEOFFREY

Hours? Why, I mark every minute. Every second I suffer.

NATALIA

Yet you'll have me the rest of your life. Cheer yourself. This feast is your reception. By tomorrow, you will be wed, and by tomorrow you will have nothing to frown upon.

GEOFFREY

Tomorrow.

NATALIA

Yes, tomorrow.

GEOFFREY

I pray for the sun, then.

They kiss again. There is a knock on the door.

GEOFFREY

(cont)

I hear the thunder of my heart!

NATALIA

That is the door.

GEOFFREY

Who dares disturb us?

NATALIA

It must be my father.

GEOFFREY

Very good, then. I shall not forbid his entry.

Geoffrey opens the door. Nigel enters.

GEOFFREY

(cont)

Do come in, Lord Scourby.

NIGEL

Geoffrey, Geoffrey. I will be your new father tomorrow. Please, call me by that given title, or if you prefer else, then 'Nigel' is an acceptable assignation.

GEOFFREY

Quite true. Know that I shall not regard you as father-in-law, but as father-in-heart.

NATALIA

All is well, but do not regard me as sister.

GEOFFREY

Never, love.

NIGEL

This is truly the easiest way to gain a son.

GEOFFREY

Dear father, I know that in the merry spirit of this feast, you have little appetite for ill tidings, but I must feed you some sour tidbits. In all honor of the celebration, I loathe to dampen your cheerful mood and alter thy visage into doleful contortion, so forgive my sad sobering when I tell you that Cedric knows of the assassination.

NATALIA

Geoffrey, no!

GEOFFREY

Yes! However, one elusive yet substantial enterprise pervades Cedric's vigilant purpose. He supposes to discover this nameless identity and frustrate his disingenuous design. I bade him fortunate hunting, though I believe his wits will ne'er flush out the villain. His initial error was approaching me to incite my assistance, to which I implicitly pledged yet have neglected to effectuate.

NIGEL

He does not suspect you?

GEOFFREY

His education of our intrigue was so ruefully taught by Bernhard Harrington that I fear his prospects of defeating us are unreasonable. That poor, paltry Bernhard eavesdropped as Natalia implored my forbearance this morning, but fortunately he could not identify my voice, nor find opportunity to look upon my face, for my discovery should have ruined us.

NATALIA

But if Cedric finds out, what will he do?

GEOFFREY

Do not worry. I have made allowance for this alteration and kept the advantage. Already Cedric is led astray. I avoid all mistrust, as he accepts what I say as accurate truths.

NATALIA

But that is dangerous.

GEOFFREY

The peril is inconsequential as I pilot their hunt. I can forward them on paths of sad fruition 'til our treaty has been signed. Already I have implicated Torold, proposing him as your mercenary.

NATALIA

You must be cautious, Geoffrey.

GEOFFREY

You need not worry.

NIGEL

Torold! Yes! He is more the killer than you.

GEOFFREY

Cedric will attempt to dispose of him.

NIGEL

Torold is not an easy man to kill. He may be vulgar, but he has cunning, too, and a sword to match.

GEOFFREY

Cedric is a worthy opponent for him. He shall scour the castle until my father is saved. Meanwhile, the true assassin laughs beneath his nose.

NIGEL

Be thankful that lies and deceit have no odor.

GEOFFREY

True, for Cedric is not unlike a hound sniffing out a fox.

NATALIA

Yet note how the hound can always find even the most cunning of foxes. If Cedric is following our trail, be it so misguided, he may at some time find proper direction. We must prepare for Cedric's vengeance.

GEOFFREY

What shall we do?

NIGEL

My militia must protect us from Cedric.

GEOFFREY

I should not want Cedric harmed. He is no more an enemy of mine than a brother would be.

NIGEL

You need not worry. He is safe if he causes no disturbance.

GEOFFREY

Yet I expect him to react.

NIGEL

What of Leonard's other guards?

GEOFFREY

They are loyal whilst Leonard lives. They only serve in fear of dire punishment.

NIGEL

Then we need only concern ourselves with Cedric.

GEOFFREY

And we can continue as planned.

NIGEL

Have you no fears, Geoffrey?

GEOFFREY

True, given his eminent brutality, I have reason to fear, but my friendship has furnished courage. My only sentiments toward Cedric are pity and compassion, for he is deprived much by my hand.

NATALIA

Then you're prepared to kill your father?

GEOFFREY

Prepared? I was prepared many years ago, but ne'er was given a proper moment. Once I was envious of Cedric. Long ago he set forth to fight the wars that won our family the many lands 'tween Endfield and your fair harbor. His deeds, recounted by my father, were most remarkable. Upon his return he received all the glory my father could bestow upon him, as well as a resplendent sword. In my immaturity, I was much impressed by the grandeur of this weapon, so I asked Father for one of my own. He said I was too small for such a heavy blade, and gave me his dagger instead. Well-contented for the time, I kept the dagger.

(He removes a jeweled anlace
from under his cloak.)

It is this same dagger that will find lodging in his spine. My hesitation is only on your insistence. I understand the importance of this treaty, so have deferred myself 'til it is signed. Yet once his ring lifts from the parchment, his soul shall lift from his carcass and leave such a hollow man he should split like an eggshell. Yes, I am prepared for this moment. For many years I have prepared.

NATALIA

I am sorry for you, Geoffrey. I pray that God forgives your actions.

GEOFFREY

You are responsible for my actions, Natalia. Pray that he forgives you.

NATALIA

Where am I cause for guilt?

GEOFFREY

Had I not loved you, I would not long to kill my father. My purpose was clear, once you and I were divided by his witless war.

NATALIA

Then your father is to blame for his own death. If he had not started the war between our nations, you would never have come to Humberg as an ambassador for peace, and we shall never have met.

GEOFFREY

Then Father commits, indirectly, a suicide.

NATALIA

It would seem.

GEOFFREY

I must return to the feast.

NATALIA

So quickly?

GEOFFREY

I will be missed by my father.

NATALIA

Return to your father, then, and you'll be missed by me.

GEOFFREY

Yes, but for you to mark my absence strengthens your longing. For my father, it only angers him.

NATALIA

Geoffrey, I love you.

GEOFFREY

Tell me again, when the sun is nigh.

Geoffrey kisses her and exits.

NATALIA

That foolish prince. He should surrender his plan before it is too late.

NIGEL

No. I'll let Geoffrey proceed. His own neck is in danger, not mine.

NATALIA

This is too hazardous a risk to take.

NIGEL

My trust in the boy has waned. He seemed an intelligent child.

NATALIA

Yet his knowledge is by no means practical. Betimes actuality escapes him. His anxiousness and desire to perform our needed sacrifice unsettles me. Perhaps you should cancel the assassination.

NIGEL

We will let Geoffrey proceed with his scheme, but I shall prepare to save him if his puerile games do not defeat Cedric's wits.

NATALIA

Why must we risk that chance? No harm can come from killing Cedric.

NIGEL

If we disrupt the feast, Prince Leonard may not sign the treaty.

NATALIA

He cannot afford to allow the war to continue any more than you.

NIGEL

That is true.

NATALIA

He has no choice but to sign, or lose his principality.

NIGEL

This is too much trouble for one nation.

NATALIA

This is easier than continuing the war. Many lives would be lost if you try to take Endfield by force. In this way, few men die.

NIGEL

Leave Cedric to me, then.

NATALIA

Be careful, for Cedric's defenses are keen.

NIGEL

Cedric is already pledged to a duel with Torold. I will force this duel, in hopes that Torold can kill Cedric. If he does not, I can make other arrangements.

NATALIA

The country is small, but its lands are fertile. The plans are laid, and Endfield shall be ours by daybreak.

Nigel and Natalia exit.

SCENE 2

Cedric, Mildred and Geoffrey enter the Endfield ante-chamber. Cedric clasps a shackle to Mildred's arm, and puts the other end around his wrist.

CEDRIC

This should keep you near me.

MILDRED

Cedric! You have my promise to stay close. Take this off.

CEDRIC

Promises! You would be off again seeking your prostrate pleasures. Promise me nothing.

GEOFFREY

Your prisoner makes quite a fuss, Cedric.

MILDRED

I'm no prisoner!

CEDRIC

Indeed, could I put my eyes in her pocket to know where she goes, I could trust her.

GEOFFREY

That would be best, for the eyes taint the imagination.

CEDRIC

Did you speak with Natalia?

GEOFFREY

I did, Cedric, and through my subtle baiting, fished for this rogue's name. So cleverly did I angle that she did not taste the hook in her mouth, and I pulled from this sea of anonymity a sizable catch. Every intimation suggested that Torold is our fish and fiend.

CEDRIC

Then your deductions proved true. How should we proceed?

GEOFFREY

Let Torold's own folly be his death. If I may urge you, Cedric, to press upon your duel with him. Indeed, you have the opportunity before you to prevent the assassination.

CEDRIC

Very well. I will force him to my blade, and force my blade into him.

GEOFFREY

Then there is nothing to trouble our minds.

CEDRIC

When this day is over, I will no longer worry.

GEOFFREY

It is pother.

CEDRIC

It keeps me thinking. I have appointed guards of loyalty to lead us out of the castle if the need arrives.

GEOFFREY

Are they trustworthy?

CEDRIC

They are intimate friends with whom I trained and fought with. There are fewer men I would put my faith in, after Leonard and yourself, than these few soldiers.

GEOFFREY

And their abilities?

CEDRIC

They are the best of fighters.

GEOFFREY

Then why should you worry?

CEDRIC

I am thinking we should depart now, before the treaty is prepared.

GEOFFREY

No, the covenant must be made. We cannot go on with this accursed war.

CEDRIC

But if the treaty is signed, and the Prince killed, it is invalidated.

GEOFFREY

No. Once the seal upon his ring is set into the treaty, it is legally the mark of Endfield, and his own consequences make little difference. Do not worry. You have ensured our escape. This game of rats and cats cannot --

Leonard enters.

LEONARD

Has the feast found a new home?

CEDRIC

Come in, Leonard. We were just, um...

GEOFFREY

With all respect for Nicolas, he is an excellent host, but the tumult and turmoil in the feasting hall disheartened us, so we sought the shelter of solitude.

CEDRIC

Betimes the restive moments make the festive moments more appreciated.

GEOFFREY

We were discussing the merits of peace, and Cedric's future now that the war is over.

LEONARD

Cedric has never needed anything aside from a nation to fight for, and a sword to fight with. He is without passion without war.

CEDRIC

I rest not for wanting more.

LEONARD

And though some find it a blessed pleasure, idleness he does not treasure, so when there's no calling for the sword, he comes to Mildred when he is bored.

MILDRED

So I've learned, and will try to live with.

LEONARD

And no doubt alter if you can.

CEDRIC

I am known to be a stubborn man.

GEOFFREY

Stubborn, true, for this war wracks his brain and he will not let it end.

LEONARD

What will you do without a war?

CEDRIC

I know not.

LEONARD

For once, Cedric is without a solution.

CEDRIC

As I am forever faithful, my loyalties are unto Prince Leonard, and they shall be passed on, with the crown, unto Geoffrey. I am merely a servant to a royal bloodline.

GEOFFREY

The family needs a bleeding.

CEDRIC

How do you mean, Geoffrey?

GEOFFREY

The Endfield line reeks with bitter blood, and should be drained of an heir such as me. I sometimes wish Cedric were the prince, for he would make a better ruler.

CEDRIC

Such ideas are unimaginable, for you are the heir of Endfield, and you cannot escape that noble calling.

GEOFFREY

But don't you agree?

CEDRIC

We are not so different, Geoffrey. You could perform as well as I in your father's position.

GEOFFREY

Though our lives were spent together, you have the wisdom a mother provides, where I do not. That is your advantage.

LEONARD

Enough of this! From your demeanor, you should think this a funeral, not a feast. Now, Cedric, temper thy mettle with pride. Claim what victories you have made and rejoice in them. This private gathering should sadden my spirit with such sour faces surrounding me. Sorrow does not benefit a feast. Now return to the hall, all, and lift thy hearts to a merrier mood.

CEDRIC

Some cheer would be gratifying.

MILDRED

My lord, Prince Leonard, sire?

LEONARD

Yes, Mildred?

MILDRED

Can you do something, please? Cedric has me bound in shackles.

LEONARD

Ha. Ha. 'Tis best for wives.

CEDRIC

Come along.

Leonard opens the door for Cedric and Mildred.

CEDRIC

(cont)

Are you coming, Geoffrey?

GEOFFREY

I've no interest in the feast. I shall stay in the quiet and read.

CEDRIC

Very well.

Cedric and Mildred exit. Leonard remains.

LEONARD

Geoffrey, what did you mean by insulting me that way?

GEOFFREY

Insulting you?

LEONARD

You may blacken the Endfield name in front of me, but not when other guests are present. They don't need to hear your opinions of my principality.

GEOFFREY

I spoke what I believe. Will thou chastise me for that?

LEONARD

Had I been ill-tempered, I should have struck thee then. Be thankful that Cedric covered your blunder.

GEOFFREY

He cannot cover my inadequacies when I take the throne.

LEONARD

That is precisely why you must improve yourself. You spend your days learning, but have yet to know what it means to rule a nation. You must prepare for your obligations.

GEOFFREY

Though you find me a poor candidate, I believe I am sufficiently primed to become the prince.

LEONARD

How can reading these books all day prepare you for what you must face?

GEOFFREY

Only books provide knowledge worth knowing.

LEONARD

What about protecting your home and castle?

GEOFFREY

Weapons only kill and slay. I require no knowledge of them. The sword is merely a barbarian's law.

LEONARD

You will not be just a lawmaker, but a potentate. The people must respect you and follow you. Loyalty is your strongest ally.

GEOFFREY

Popularity merely benefits conceit. Unlike you, I need not experience the vile delectations of conquest and dominion.

LEONARD

You overestimate your mind, son. This harsh world needs more than words to succeed. You have no understanding of its realities.

GEOFFREY

Understanding? You are the one with the feeble mind. I am surprised your loins could have produced such genius.

LEONARD

Don't insult me, boy!

GEOFFREY

You are a fool. You crave supremacy and notoriety. You slaughter hundreds of men in fruitless wars, and you want me to tread your bloody path.

Leonard raises his hand to strike Geoffrey.

GEOFFREY

(cont)

What will you do? Beat me again! Strike me down! Inflict pain on your own son as you have countless others. You've killed other men for affronting you, why not me?

Leonard grabs Geoffrey and holds him in a tight headlock.

LEONARD

Try to escape! Try!

Geoffrey tries to escape as Leonard strangles him, but cannot. Leonard lets him go.

LEONARD

You see, words do not always win. Until you learn that, you'll never be the duke.

GEOFFREY

I have no desire to be!

LEONARD

Return to the feast, and act as if you were my son.

Leonard pushes Geoffrey to the door.
They exit.

SCENE 3

Everyone is in the main feasting hall except Geoffrey, Cedric and Mildred. Torold is stretching his muscles for the duel.

NICOLAS

I cannot stay for death!

TOROLD

You will remain, Nicolas, as you have promised.

NICOLAS

I cannot stay!

TOROLD

Cease sobbing and limber thy bones, suckling.

GAVIN

Prepare to see Cedric's end. 'Tis an historical event that I instigate today.

TOROLD

If you believe you've the might to best Cedric, I should worship thy blade. But my conviction does not come easy.

GAVIN

Perhaps I should administer a sharp sermon to you so your conversion is without question.

TOROLD

I must draw the line at slaying babes.

NICOLAS

The hour is 'nigh. Cedric may not arrive.

GAVIN

He will show, else suffer a defeat of dishonor much worse than my sword could cause.

NIGEL

Lo, Cedric approaches.

NICOLAS

He comes! He comes. My butcher is here.

GAVIN

Show your bravado, Nicolas. Let him not think you're a weasel.

Leonard and Geoffrey enter with Cedric,
who is chained to Mildred.

CEDRIC

Welcome, hounds, to your bereavement. Let it be known that this day I will take the lives of three men for the honor of Mildred Gibbons. You are free for the time, Millie.

Cedric opens the shackles.

NATALIA

He keeps her in chains?

GEOFFREY

For wives it is best.

NATALIA

Then you would tie a leash to me?

GEOFFREY

You, dear, are not Mildred.

NATALIA

Merrily, I'm not.

GEOFFREY

Our bond is a slender thread.

NATALIA

But threads are easily broken.

GEOFFREY

Naturally. Where the chain cannot be torn apart, the thread divides at will, so the uncut thread between two loves is proof of love fulfilled.

GAVIN

We are ready to face you, Cedric.

CEDRIC

Approach then, rose bearers, and face the grave. Meet me bravely or cowardly, but step forth and settle this matter. Who shall face me first?

NICOLAS

Not I!

GAVIN

Step aside, dear Mildred, and allow me to evince the vigor of ardent affection.

CEDRIC

Torold, thief and cutthroat, step forward into my sword.

GAVIN

'Tis not Torold's right to take your life. Fight me, Cedric.

CEDRIC

Aside, boy. I have called upon Torold.

LEONARD

But Cedric, who will test the honor of Axton against Nicolas if you are slain by Torold?

NICOLAS

That is of no consequence.

CEDRIC

True. Come forward, Nicolas.

NICOLAS

No, my lord, fight Torold.

CEDRIC

Come.

NIGEL

I must protest, Cedric. My honor, too, lies in your match with Torold. I will not have the duel canceled by your death.

GAVIN

'Tis unfair. I did challenge Cedric fairly. I should get a sword in edgewise.

CEDRIC

Decide then who will firstly fight. I will wait.

LEONARD

It seems, Cedric, that a logical order should be established.

CEDRIC

True. How then do you find the logic?

LEONARD

Well, Torold was the first man you challenged.

NICOLAS

Then Torold goes first.

TOROLD

Yet Nicolas was the first to offer Mildred the rose.

CEDRIC

So true. Nicolas it is.

NICOLAS

No, not I!

GAVIN

My tardiness in my affections should be no reason to delay my duel. I challenged you, Cedric. Exact that commitment first.

LEONARD

Who, then, will fight Cedric?

GAVIN

I will fight Cedric, and I will kill him.

NIGEL

Wrong! Torold will kill Cedric.

LEONARD

Nicolas should kill him.

NICOLAS

No, fight the lad.

LEONARD

Choose, Cedric.

GAVIN

What say you, Torold? Combat me, and the victor can have his luck with Cedric.

TOROLD

As you wish, son. Your vigor outdoes your age.

Gavin and Torold raise swords. Cedric stops them.

CEDRIC

Hold one moment. Cease! As I would like my competition to destroy themselves, let's not forget who is thrice dishonored here. I'll not have my own enemies kill each other for the privilege to best me. I must kill all three.

NIGEL

True, my ends will not be met by Torold's death at the hands of a child.

LEONARD

How then do we solve this puzzle?

CEDRIC

I will fight all three at once!

GAVIN, NICOLAS, TOROLD

Very Well.

(They step forward, swords raised.)

NIGEL

But Cedric, though you combat all three, only one submits a death blow unto you. What then, of the other two whose duel is cut short?

CEDRIC

Again we are without solution.

MILDRED

Decide then. I'm bored.

NICOLAS

Fight Torold!

Everyone breaks into arguments and discussions, naming who should fight whom. They all gather around Cedric, urging him to decide.

CEDRIC

SILENCE! SILENCE! Peace!

LEONARD

It would seem, Cedric, that there is only one solution to this poser.

CEDRIC

What is that, Leonard?

LEONARD

Nicolas is here, for giving thy lady Mildred a rose this morning.

NICOLAS

My apologies, Cedric.

LEONARD

Torold is present for the same deed, having done so at today's lunch.

CEDRIC

Quite so.

LEONARD

Gavin is before us as a result of his floral donations this night, is he not?

MILDRED

Sweet Gavin.

LEONARD

And you are here, Cedric, for discovering the roses in Mildred's hair.

CEDRIC

I did!

LEONARD

Mildred Gibbons accepted as a gift these roses from her three lovers; the milksop, sharper and swain, and did so under the vows of marriage. She then, with all pretension, paraded about with the blossoms as ornaments, without regard for her sacred union, husband or distinction. Any estimable lady of the gentry would privy her affairs, yet Mildred makes them widely known. She is the one who is dishonorable, and you truly have no quarrel with these good fellows. Each of these men were driven by impulses and temptations they could not govern. I dare say I should not resist if so baited, so you can hardly blame these gentlemen for Mildred appearing as a jade. They were merely refreshment for her thirst.

GEOFFREY

There's truth in his words.

CEDRIC

Has my demeanor been so blind?

LEONARD

It has, Cedric. Indeed, pulchritude should not have such potency.

CEDRIC

What can you say for yourself, Mildred?

MILDRED

My lord, I am sorry.

CEDRIC

You are right, Leonard. Nicolas, Axton is your home, and you are far from any knowledge of Endfield. Had you known Mildred was married, perchance you would have acted differently.

NICOLAS

Verily, I would have shunned the coquette.

CEDRIC

Lord Nigel, my apologies for questioning your honor, and I dismiss your impudence, too, Torold.

TOROLD

Thank you, Cedric.

CEDRIC

As for you, young Gavin...

GAVIN

This effigy mars my conception of Mildred. I ask you, in all honor Cedric, to rebuff my dare.

CEDRIC

Done, Gavin! I no longer have discord with any of you good people. The duel is called. My only quarrel is with poor Mildred.

MILDRED

Quarrel with me?

CEDRIC

Only one thing will keep the people of this castle from having dear Mildred.

LEONARD

No, Cedric!

CEDRIC

Yes!

He gives Bebo a bag of coins, and takes the basket of roses.

CEDRIC

There must be no more roses!

He gives the basket to Mildred.

MILDRED

I love you, Cedric.

They kiss and the crowd breaks up. A guard throws his rose down in disgust.

A servant runs into Cedric, spilling red wine on his clothes.

CEDRIC

You fool!

SERVANT

I am sorry, sire. Please, let me clean you off.

The servant takes a rag and wipes the stain.

CEDRIC

Leave it alone.

SERVANT

My rag is dry, sire. Come with me, and I shall take care of you.

SCENE 4

Cedric enters the Endfield ante-chamber. The servant does not follow.

CEDRIC

You have destroyed this garment, you graceless cretin. Hand me your towel.

Cedric reaches for the rag but receives nothing. Two assassins attack him. He kills both, but is severely wounded. He collapses as Gavin, Mildred and Leonard enter.

LEONARD

Cedric!

GAVIN

He is wounded.

MILDRED

Cedric, my love!

GAVIN

Who did this?

CEDRIC

Nigel's assassins.

LEONARD

But why?

GAVIN

Soldiers hold many grudges after a war, and seek revenge.

CEDRIC
No, Gavin. Leonard must be told.

LEONARD
Told what?

CEDRIC
I will get Geoffrey.

GAVIN
No, stay. I will get him.

Gavin exits.

LEONARD
What must be told, Cedric?

CEDRIC
Nigel is planning to assassinate you.

LEONARD
They thought you were I?

CEDRIC
No! I was ambushed because I know. They are waiting for you to sign the treaty.

LEONARD
But that cannot be true.

Geoffrey and Gavin enter.

MILDRED
Cedric! Poor Cedric!

CEDRIC
I am accustomed to such wounds. Help me with my shirt.

Mildred helps him remove his shirt.

CEDRIC
Take these bodies out of here. Hide them!

GAVIN
Hide them?

CEDRIC
A nose will find them in a few days, but conceal them from the wandering eye.

Geoffrey and Gavin each grab an assassin and drag him out.

LEONARD

Cedric, why didn't you tell me earlier?

CEDRIC

Torold is our assassin, most assuredly. I was waiting to kill him in that fruitless duel, but now we must alter our plan.

LEONARD

Your ambush proves that they know everything.

CEDRIC

So it does. I have girded ourselves to fend off Nigel's guard.

Gavin and Geoffrey re-enter.

LEONARD

Nigel protected Torold strongly.

CEDRIC

Yet, he also urged Torold to set upon me.

GEOFFREY

It would seem that Nigel favors eliminating the entire Endfield government, and has assurance of Torold's proficiency in accomplishing the task.

CEDRIC

My suspicions are satisfied. We will sign the treaty and brace ourselves for what may come.

There is a distant TRUMPET CALL.

CEDRIC

(cont)

The feast has ended. The treaty is prepared.

GAVIN

Then I must return to Nigel. I will keep my guard, Cedric.

Gavin exits.

GEOFFREY

Can you walk?

CEDRIC

Perhaps. The pain has ended.

Cedric stands.

LEONARD

If Torold awaits us, what will we do?

CEDRIC

What choice do we have?

GEOFFREY

If you safeguard yourself from Torold, he will not be a detriment.

CEDRIC

Geoffrey and I will stay near you, Leonard, and guard our proximity. The moment you've penned the treaty, we'll quit this castle. Now prepare yourselves for the procession.

They put on their ceremonial robes.

LEONARD

I must end this dreadful war.

CEDRIC

I would suspect that if there is an assassin in the audience, and Princess Natalia knows who it is, then she could not help looking in his direction to note his progress. I will steel my eyes on hers, and note where her attention lies. If she looks to Torold, I shall ready for his attack.

GEOFFREY

Very good, Cedric.

CEDRIC

And you must guard your father's back, Geoffrey. I understand you're not an able fighter, but you need only protect. We have a close escape, so we shall make our peace and depart.

GEOFFREY

Could you help me with my cape, Cedric?

Cedric places Geoffrey's cape on his shoulders and clasps it with a large pin.

GEOFFREY

Thank you.

The TRUMPETS CALL again.

CEDRIC

They call everyone to the feasting hall. It is time!

LEONARD

Are you certain about this, Cedric?

CEDRIC

Trust me.

LEONARD

I do, and fear the sanity of it.

CEDRIC

If we are ready, let us proceed.

Leonard, Geoffrey, Mildred and Cedric exit.

SCENE 5

The TRUMPETS CALL everyone to the main feasting hall. A table has the treaty on it. Nicolas stands near the table. Nigel, Natalia, Torold and Gavin are on one side of the room. Cedric, Leonard, Mildred and Geoffrey are on the other side. Some guards are positioned about the chamber from all three nations.

There is a different TRUMPET CALL, and the procession begins. The Humberg party moves to the table. Nigel lifts the quill pen and signs his name. He then tips a burning candle over the parchment, and depresses his signet ring into the soft, red wax. Nicolas bows in gratitude and motions for them to step aside.

The TRUMPET CALLS once more, and the Endfield party starts across the hall. They arrive at the table. Cedric watches Natalia and Nigel. A small detail on their garments catches his attention. Leonard lifts the quill and pens his name. Geoffrey grasps the dagger's handle. Leonard tips the candle over the treaty. He presses his ring into wax. He lifts his hand from the paper. Geoffrey raises the dagger into the air. Cedric suddenly turns and grabs Geoffrey, pulling him over his shoulder and throwing him on the floor. He grabs the pin on Geoffrey's cape and rips it off. Cedric raises the pin into the air.

CEDRIC

He wears the Emblem of Humberg!

Nigel makes a hand signal. Nigel's guards enter. Cedric draws his sword.

Leonard's guards enter. A battle commences in the feasting hall. Gavin pushes Leonard out.

GAVIN

This way, Prince Leonard. You must escape.

Gavin and Leonard exit. Torold cuts through the battle. He and Cedric fight. Cedric strikes Torold down. The enemy closes in around him. The guards lunge at Cedric, piercing him from several directions. Cedric falls dead to the floor.

GUARD

Follow me! The Prince is trying to escape.

Nigel's soldiers rush out of the room after Leonard. Few people are left standing, none of them soldiers. Mildred finds Cedric's body and holds him in tears. Nigel and Natalia re-enter with Nicolas. There are many corpses on the floor. Natalia searches through the bodies, looking for Geoffrey. Nigel finds what remains of the treaty.

NIGEL

The treaty is destroyed.

NICOLAS

What have you done, Nigel?

NIGEL

I, uh...

NICOLAS

What have you done!

NATALIA

Geoffrey! Geoffrey!

Natalia pulls Geoffrey out from under a dead guard.

GEOFFREY

Natalia?

NATALIA

Geoffrey!

Nigel's guards re-enter. They hold
Gavin prisoner.

GUARD

Prince Leonard has escaped, sire. This man was caught aiding
him.

NIGEL

Take him away. He will be dealt with in time. Have some men
clean out this room.

GUARD

Yes, sire.

Two guards exit with Gavin. The rest
lift the bodies from the floor. Nigel
and Natalia help Geoffrey to his feet
and they exit.

MILDRED

No, no, no, no!

She falls in sobs over his body.

After a moment, Bebo enters with a mop
and bucket. He begins to clean the
floor, then turns to the audience.

BEBO

It seems the feast has reached an end
With bloodshed, death, and foul mayhem.
And peace may ne'er be known again
Till these tragic wounds do mend.

Final Curtain.

This play is best done without a
curtain call.