

BARDS OF BROMLEY

A comedy

by

Perry Pontac

FIRST BROADCAST: 25th March 2004

FOR EDUCATIONAL USE ONLY

CHARACTERS

MRS SWERDLOW
WILLIAM WORDSWORTH
GEORGE ELIOT
AUGUST STRINDBERG
A A MILNE
JOHANN WOLFGANG VON GOETHE
DOCTOR

(CHAMBER MUSIC UNDER THE CREDITS. THE SOUND OF A SMALL GROUP OF INDETERMINATE SIZE AND INDISTINCT CONVERSATION, WITH A LITTLE COUGHING. IT QUICKLY FADES AS MRS SWERDLOW BEGINS TO SPEAK.)

MRS SWERDLOW: (ADDRESSING THE GROUP) Good afternoon, gentlemen, and welcome to the writers' workshop at West Bromley College. I am Jacqueline Swerdlow, and it has been my duty to select the five outstanding manuscripts that have been submitted, and my great pleasure to invite you, their authors, here today. Over the past few years, in similar workshops round the country, I have been privileged to discover and develop several promising new writers who have gone on to make their mark. Regina Bloxham whose book of poetry, 'Daisies on My Ceiling', has recently been published by the Regina Bloxham Press; Norris Grudgeon's play, *Dead for a Duck*, was performed last year at the Old Sulphur Pit, Dagenham; and Simon Jayston's romantic novel, *Five Lords-a-Loving*, comes out in the autumn, all being well. And who can say, gentlemen, if in time some of your names will rank with theirs? At any rate I hope everyone will have a creative and rewarding experience.

MILNE: Speaking for us all, if I may, Mrs Swerdlow, I'm quite certain we shall.

SWERDLOW: (GRATEFUL FOR THE RESPONSE) Thank you so much. Now, each of you has, I trust, received copies of everyone else's work so we may discuss them together - offering encouragement and support, sharing impressions and suggestions.

(A SLIGHT MURMUR OF UNEASE FROM THE OTHERS)

I think we're all here, so I shall call the roll.

(SHE FLIPS LOUDLY THROUGH HER PAPERS, CLEARS HER THROAT ELABORATELY AND READS RATHER SLOWLY.)

Mr. William. Wordsworth.

WORDSWORTH: (RUSTIC ACCENT) Ay, Mrs. Over here.

SWERDLOW: Good afternoon, Mr Wordsworth. (TO THE OTHERS) As you all know, Mr Wordsworth has tried his hand at writing a little poem about clouds and lambs and flowers and such – in his native Yorkshire I believe.

WORDSWORTH: Lake District, Mrs.

SWERDLOW: The Lake District of course. And we'll be dealing with his 'Daffodils' shortly – a poem which displays, if I may say so, a certain sentimental, even anthropomorphic view of nature perhaps.

WORDSWORTH: Ay?

SWERDLOW: (OVER-RIDING WORDSWORTH'S RESPONSE) But to continue.

(SHE RUSTLES THROUGH HER PAPERS)

Mr..George Eliot. (PAUSE) Mr Eliot? (SHE LOOKS ABOUT.) Are you here, Mr Eliot?

GEORGE ELIOT: (A WOMAN OF COURSE) Present.

SWERDLOW: (SURPRISED TO FIND GEORGE ELIOT SO LADY-LIKE) Oh. (RECOVERING) Welcome, Mr Eliot. And what an attractive organdie blouse and pleated skirt. (TO THE OTHERS) George is a budding writer of fiction, and he has written a novel, a rather lengthy one which I hope all of you had the fortitude to plough through, called *Middlemarch*. Though I'm bound to say that *Mid-March* would be rather more grammatically pleasing, don't you think? Or perhaps *The Ides of March* – that has a certain literary thrust behind it. Just a thought, Mr Eliot.

ELIOT: But...

SWERDLOW: We'll return to you later. (BACK TO THE ROLL) Mr August Strindberg.

STRINDBERG: (FIERCELY, AND WITH A SLIGHT SWEDISH ACCENT) Yes!

SWERDLOW: (STARTLED BY HIS FEROCITY) Hello. Mr Strindberg's play, *The Dance of Death*, is a rather quirky piece I think you'll agree...

STRINDBERG: (FIERCELY AGAIN) Quirky?

SWERDLOW: And such a morbid title, don't you think? – *The Dance of Death*. Not likely to attract the passing trade on Shaftsbury Avenue. But for the moment let us go on. (SHE CONSULTS HER PAPERS.) Mr..A A Milne.

MILNE: (MILDLY) Here I am. Good afternoon, Mrs Swerdlow.

SWERDLOW: Good afternoon, Mr Milne. As you'll recall, Mr Milne's little story of bears and pigs and kangaroos offers a rare glimpse into the natural world of our native woodlands – Sussex I believe.

MILNE: Quite so. (TO THE OTHERS) Delighted to be here, everyone.

SWERDLOW: There is also an intriguing view of an inter-species relationship – an erotic bond perhaps – between a bird and a bear.

MILNE: A bird, Mrs Swerdlow?

SWERDLOW: Yes. The robin, Christopher.

MILNE: Oh. A slight misunderstanding here I think. Christopher Robin is a boy.

SWERDLOW: A boy?

MILNE: My son, in fact. A lovely little chap.

SWERDLOW: (WITH GROWING INTEREST) Fascinating. More of this later. (BACK TO THE ROLL) And last, a man who has written novels, poetry, plays, philosophical treatises and scientific speculations – Jack of all trades and master of none – Johann Wolfgang von Goethe. Is that you, Mr Goethe? In the floppy velvet hat and black, swirling writer's cloak?

GOETHE: (LUGUBRIOUSLY) Ja.

SWERDLOW: Good. Mr Goethe, of course, has submitted a work called *Faust*, in two huge volumes, all written in his own tiny and distinctive hand, a real challenge I think.

GOETHE: (GRUNTS ENIGMATICALLY)

SWERDLOW: But let us now begin, let us open ourselves to the creative process. As Hamlet says somewhere, 'On your imaginary forces work.' (PAUSE) First, Mr Wordsworth and his little poem.

WORDSWORTH: Ay, very well.

(HE GOES AND STANDS BEFORE THE GROUP.
THEN, WITH HIS CUSTOMARY RELISH,
RECITES.)

WORDSWORTH: 'I wandered lonely as a cloud / That floats on high o'er vales and hills / When all at once'...

SWERDLOW: (INTERRUPTING) No need for that, Mr Wordsworth. We've all read your piece I think. Well, my first problem with it – before I open the discussion out to everyone else – is...the style.

WORDSWORTH: The style, Mrs?

SWERDLOW: It's very ... *jingly*, isn't it, Mr Wordsworth? – so sing-songy. (SING-SONGILY) 'I wandered lonely as a cloud' / Ti-tum, ti-tum, ti-tum, ti-tum / Ti-tum, ti-tum, ti-tum, ti-tum / Ti-tum, ti-tum... You must break up the rhythm, man: 'I wandered lonely like I was some sort of (PAUSE) Cloud, floating round and round here and there in the (PAUSE) Sky.' Stretch the line, *shatter* the line, fragment it, destroy it!

WORDSWORTH: But...

SWERDLOW: And all those rhymes... Really, the way you write, Mr Wordsworth, it's as though Modernism had never happened.

WORDSWORTH: (UNFAMILIAR WITH THE TERM) As though what?

SWERDLOW: (PAINED TO POINT IT OUT) And there's the archaic vocabulary. 'Oft when on my couch I lie.' – 'Oft'? My dear Mr Wordsworth, how frequently do you say, 'Oft'?

(PAUSE)

WORDSWORTH: Oft. Full oft. 'Tis the way one talks, the way everyone talks. 'Tis part of my method, you see. (LAPSING INTO BLANK VERSE) I speak but with the common tongue of men. / As when the zephyr in a field of corn – / Bright grain of Ceres – rustleth all the sheaves / Unnoticed, so will my plain utterance bring - / Passing with ease into the reader's mind - / The deep philosophy of daily things.

SWERDLOW: (NOT UNDERSTANDING AT ALL) Sorry?

MILNE: I think I understand. You're saying, if I'm not mistaken, Mr Wordsworth, that you wish to use the simple language of ordinary speech.

WORDSWORTH: Forsooth, it is my mission and my pride.

MILNE: An admirable object, sir. Well done, well done indeed.

SWERDLOW: And what is our view of Mr Wordsworth's poem? Mr Eliot?

ELIOT: A very pleasant little thing. But, if I may say so, I'm not certain that poetry is the proper medium for ideas. Perhaps instead a novel on the subject would be rather more satisfactory.

WORDSWORTH: A novel? About daffodils?

ELIOT: Not entirely, of course. As things develop, nasturtiums and begonias for example might be introduced into the plot. (ENVISAGING IT) Yes, a huge novel, charged with philosophy and social history, touching perhaps on the plight of the poor, the obligations of wealth, the nature of the affections, the ethics of Spinoza, and the reform of the divorce laws.

SWERDLOW: A challenging notion, Mr Eliot. And now, Mr Milne, tell us please: Do Mr Wordsworth's daffodils bloom for you?

MILNE: (ENTHUSIASTICALLY) I think his poem is absolutely topping. Loved the dancing flowers, loved the floating cloud. 'That inward eye / Which is the bliss of solitude' – a lovely phrase, and so true. It reminds me of a holiday I took a few years ago – a long weekend really – in Hazelbyrne, just outside Wrexham. (Do you know it?) Daffodils everywhere dancing about, giving their all, inexhaustible plucky little things. And the waves of the lake, bowing and curtsying in time to the gentle tide. Butterflies on every bloom, the dew still hanging on the rhubarb. The 'peep-peep-peep' of the linnet, the 'hummm' of the bluebottle, the swish of the trout frolicking happily in every stream, filling the heart with joy and the eyes (not infrequently) with grateful tears. It was all as Mr Wordsworth describes it and feels it; indeed his art is nature itself. Wonderful work, sir. My congratulations.

WORDSWORTH: (TAKING IT AS HIS DUE) Thank you, Milne.

SWERDLOW: And now, Mr Goethe, your views.

GOETHE: (FIRMLY) Nein!

SWERDLOW: (SURPRISED) Pardon, Mr Goethe?

GOETHE: Nein! (PAUSE) Nein!

SWERDLOW: I see. Very well. Then, Mr Strindberg, have you any reflections on the poem?

STRINDBERG: Indeed I have. My dear Wordsworth, please consider: Your beloved daffodils, far from being blameless ornaments of nature, are the tumours of the earth – vile excrescences rising unbidden, posturing like prostitutes, flaunting their bodies, sending their stink abroad, luring the callow bees into their rank entrails. All flowers – daffodils, the noxious buttercup, the sinister periwinkle – are nourished by rotting corpses and the worms that feed on them, blind and voracious gluttons, grubs and slugs and things of slime. *And* the working classes – they play their part in it somehow, I assure you.

MILNE: Steady on there, old fellow. Surely buttercups have much to recommend them. Why, one day Christopher Robin was...

STRINDBERG: Ignore it if you will, Wordsworth, but daffodils, like all plants, are a plague and a parasite on man, sprouting and festering in the cracks and corners of life. I would kill all flowers – raze them like invading troops. And trees as well. What are they but gigantic weeds, giving shelter and succour to birds with their idiotic cries and filthy personal habits? No, death to all vegetation, all verdure, all foliage, all growth. Give me honest sterility, the dead promise of a barren field.

- WORDSWORTH: A bleak and horrible doctrine, Strindberg.
- STRINDBERG: Embrace the bleakness in life, man. Court the horror. Only then will freedom come, the freedom of disgust!
- SWERDLOW: Mr Strindberg's point is perhaps too powerfully put. But has it never occurred to you, Mr Wordsworth, that Nature may simply not be your proper subject? There is so much more to write about in life – the world of sport, high fashion, the royal family. Mr Strindberg's views...
- WORDSWORTH: Strindberg's views are those of a deranged Swedish blackguard.
- STRINDBERG: (INTO HIS STRIDE) And as for wandering 'lonely as a cloud' – my play *The Dance of Death* is about true loneliness, the loneliness of a man surrounded by family and friends. Did you steal the theme of loneliness from me? It seems an extraordinary coincidence.
- WORDSWORTH: I steal from your abominable play? A preposterous accusation. Why, I've been wandering lonely as a cloud for years, all over Cumbria and Somerset. Ask anyone.
- STRINDBERG: 'Lonely as a cloud.' What a ridiculous conceit. A cloud is not lonely. It is also not happy, or indignant, or easily embarrassed, or secretly amused. A cloud is a phenomenon of nature - and therefore wicked, malevolent, cunning, a curse on man and an engine thwarting his every design.

WORDSWORTH: I will not hear Nature so vilely abused. Nature has all the innocence of a babe – she is bliss, she is inspiration, she is the emblem of the infinite soul. We're talking about rainbows here, of sunsets and star-clad nights and bright mornings filled with echoing birdsong.

STRINDBERG: This is mere prissiness, Wordsworth – swooning like a girl at dewdrops, gaping at the passing clouds. While all the time the snake Life lays her black eggs in your spleen, gnawing on your vitals, gorging on your blood, slurping up your bile...

SWERDLOW: (URGENTLY) I think this might be a good time for a little tea break. We'll resume the workshop in a few minutes, gentlemen. Tea and cakes...over there...this way please.

(SOUND OF THEM DISPERSING, THEN OF CUPS AND SAUCERS AND DISHES CLINKING, AND OF FAINT CONVERSATION WHICH SOON BECOMES MORE DISTINCT.)

An Eccles cake, Mr Goethe?

GOETHE: (FORCEFULLY) Nein, danke!

SWERDLOW: Ah.

(PAUSE)

(ELSEWHERE:)

MILNE: Tea, Mr Wordsworth?

WORDSWORTH: Yes, thank you, Milne.

MILNE: Milk?

WORDSWORTH: Please.

(MILNE POURS IT.)

(WITH APPROVAL) Fresh country milk. (THEN, RECITING) 'For lo! The udder yields its lactic tide / Abundant, from the bovine underside.' Some lines of my own. From 'Reflections on Seeing a Cow / Being Milked in a Pasture Just Outside Keswick in Early Autumn'.

MILNE: Ah. Very gripping. Sugar?

WORDSWORTH: Thank you. Seven lumps please.

(THE LUMPS ARE DROPPED IN.)

My sister usually prepares my tea. A wonderful woman, 'a violet by a mossy stone'.

MILNE: Is she?

WORDSWORTH: Oh, yes. Attentive, sympathetic, an inspiration. Are you a married man, Milne? (*remembering*) Oh, of course you are: that little son of yours ... Craig, was it?

MILNE: I think you mean Christopher. Yes, I am.

WORDSWORTH: Dorothy isn't really free anyway. She and Coleridge (MY FRIEND) have an understanding. A misunderstanding in my view. (WITH PLEASURE) Ah look, Windermere bilberry loaf.

MILNE: So it is. Lovely.

(THEY EACH TAKE A SLICE AND SIP AND CHEW.)

WORDSWORTH: Such a dull crowd here today. To be frank, Milne, I dislike the company of writers – vacant, vain, citified sots. A group of publishers – yes of course, that could be a truly rewarding experience. A roomful of starving country beggars – certainly, they always have an enormous fund of wisdom to impart, easily transmuted into blank verse. A grove of ancient trees – they express their own deep philosophy to those who will look and listen and feel. But writers... (HE SIGHS.)

MILNE: In that case, I wonder that you've come here today, Mr Wordsworth.

WORDSWORTH: I am an unregarded, unpublished genius, Milne. My agent insisted I attend in the hope of making myself 'marketable' - much against my own wishes I may say, and those of my beloved sister.

MILNE: Who are you with?

WORDSWORTH: My agent? Louise Bouffant of Sheldrake and Muldiver in Ullswater. And you?

MILNE: Sidney Kravetnik. He's at Ashvail, Mastodon and Quezmore. I used in be with Neil Runcible of Ridgeway, Bland and Futon on Regent Street, a lovely man, absolutely topping, but such a pessimist.

WORDSWORTH: So is Louise. Mind you, I can see her point. No one these days seems all that bothered about sheep and trees and clouds, never mind the lesser celandine. 'Tis very sad.

MILNE: I greatly admired your 'Daffodils' poem. Have you written many others?

WORDSWORTH: Hundreds of odes. Over a thousand sonnets on ecclesiastical and geographical topics alone.

MILNE: I see. Strindberg was very tactless about your poem I thought.

WORDSWORTH: Did you? I agree. (WITH REPUGNANCE) I cannot abide Swedes. ...I speak, of course, of the people not the root vegetable. Indeed, I composed a sequence of poems in praise of root vegetables only last spring. If you're interested, I think I can remember most of them.

MILNE: Truly? I'd be honoured. Such a ... boldly original choice of subject.

WORDSWORTH: (CLEARS HIS THROAT GRANDLY) 'Behold it splendid in the distant field / Yon solitary Turnip! Eve and morn...

(HIS VOICE FADES, AND WE ARE
ELSEWHERE)

STRINDBERG: So your agent advised you to come here too?

ELIOT: Yes, Mr Strindberg.

STRINDBERG: Who are you with, Mr Eliot?

ELIOT: Noorish and Keppleman of Bristol. And you?

STRINDBERG: (VERY SWEDISHLY) Hasseltrad and Spoondenfjord of Upsula. (HE SIPS SOME TEA.) Tell me, what did you think of my play?

ELIOT: Very powerful, Mr Strindberg. It was like dwelling in someone else's nightmare – a madman's perhaps. Full of horrible moments and terrible scenes. Tremendously upsetting.

STRINDBERG: (PLEASED) Too kind.

ELIOT: More tea, Mr Strindberg?

STRINDBERG: No thank you. Well, I must say I admired your novel. Strong, masculine, bold, forceful, forthright and coldly logical.

ELIOT: (DELIGHTED AND RELIEVED) Did you really think so? Thank you so much for those generous words. To be frank, Mr Strindberg, I hadn't shown *Middlemarch* to anyone at all before. It's been my great secret.

STRINDBERG: Has it indeed?

ELIOT: (IN REFLECTIVE MOOD) When I was a child, all my writing was secret. Father, you see, was a strict Evangelical and strongly disapproved of fiction. I had to hide from him all the manuscripts of my three-volume novels – sometimes in my toy-box, sometimes in my dolly cupboard.

STRINDBERG: (SYMPATHETICALLY) My dear fellow.

ELIOT: But I was found out, Mr Strindberg, betrayed by a trusted nanny. As a result, when I was five I was sent away to boarding school, to curb my wild spirit. Yet even there I secretly continued to write, exposing – in one of my novels of the period – the network of bullying and exploitation that is at the core of the infant playground, and its relationship to the struggle between Capital and Labour in the wider world.

STRINDBERG: I see.

ELIOT: In more recent times, of course, I've been far more open about my novels, though sadly no publisher has as yet shown any interest in them – *Adam Bede*, *The Mill on the Floss*, *Silas Marner*. Yet *Middlemarch* seems so ambitious an undertaking... great themes, many characters and such complexities of plot – I've often doubted that I was quite equal to the task. The very thought has often reduced me to tears. But now – to have received such encouragement from a man like you... I'm most grateful, Mr Strindberg.

- STRINDBERG: Do call me 'August'. Like the English month.
- ELIOT: Thank you, I shall.
- STRINDBERG: And, like the English month, I have my bright periods as well as my occasional thundery showers. *(pause)* And I hope I may call you 'George'.
- ELIOT: (IMPULSIVELY) I'd rather you call me ... 'Mary Ann Evans'.
- STRINDBERG: Would you? It seems rather a liberty. Unless...
(REALISING AT LAST) You mean to say you are a woman?
- ELIOT: (WHISPERING) Yes.
- STRINDBERG: Of course. That explains so many things: your voice, your clothes, your sausage curls – not to mention your prominent matronly bosom. (FONDLY REMEMBERING) You know, for a while I thought of calling myself 'Leticia' – 'Leticia Beauregard-Samuels of 15 The Chase, Merton'. I don't know why. Just a sudden urge that came over me, that sprang out of my guts, out of the seething sod of my bowels, out of the sweaty coils of my secret pulsating innards. You know the feeling.
- ELIOT: 'George Eliot' is my *nom de plume*. It's so no one will know I'm a woman. Women, you see, are often underestimated as writers. You *will* keep my secret.

STRINDBERG: Not a word, I promise you. My dear Mary Ann Evans, shall we drink a toast to our new friendship? I have a flask here of my favourite Swedish schnapps – Frupelstrood, a speciality of the Upper Transrandabander region. Pure as rage, harsh as fate, sudden as revenge. Here, I'll fill your teacup.

(SOUND OF GURGLING LIQUID)

ELIOT: I think not, August, but thank you.

STRINDBERG: No? I shall, if I may.

(HE GULPS IT DOWN INSTANTLY.)

Marvellous. But have a little swallow, my dear. Please do. In my country – and, indeed, out of my country – it is considered a great insult to the Swedish nation and to our glorious ancestors if such an offer is declined.

ELIOT: Is it?

STRINDBERG: Come, we shall toast your achievement – your *Middlemarch*.

ELIOT: Well, in that case, just a drop.

STRINDBERG: Good.

(A BRIEF GURGLE INTO A CUP FOR HER,
ANOTHER BIGGER GURGLE FOR HIM.)

STRINDBERG: To Middlemarch.

ELIOT: To *Middlemarch*.

(THEY DRINK. ELIOT GASPS LOUDLY.)

(BARELY ABLE TO SPEAK) Lovely.

STRINDBERG: Are you married, Mary Ann?

ELIOT: (STILL RECOVERING FROM THE DRINK) No.

STRINDBERG: Excellent. So you have eschewed the marriage knot. The marriage *noose*, strangling desire, murdering impulse. Nor am I married – now.

ELIOT: I do live with a man however, a Mr Lewes. (PAUSE) In sin, as it happens.

STRINDBERG: Do you?

ELIOT: Not *much* sin, to be honest. Lewes is a good man, but in truth we never exchange intimate familiarities. Greetings in the morning – yes of course, handshakes upon retiring, affectionate glances at birthdays, passionate discussions of social issues, but nothing more. It is our way you see, or at least *his* way.

STRINDBERG: Yet a fine woman like you with a superb mind and such beguiling sausage curls – some men would find you irresistible. Genius allied with intelligence and allure – what more could one desire?

ELIOT: (VERY PLEASED) 'Genius, intelligence and allure'? Mr Strindberg ... August...

STRINDBERG: Tell me. Have you ever been to my country? – to Sweden? (HE PRONOUNCES 'SWEDEN' IN SWOOPING SCANDINAVIAN SYLLABLES.)

ELIOT: I'm afraid not. I've seldom been out of England in fact. I've seen much of Warwickshire, and I know Coventry very well, especially the area round the lending library and the old butter market. My life has been somewhat circumscribed I suppose.

STRINDBERG: But have you never yearned to see the fjords at sunrise? To feel the icy hand of the north wind as it shifts the great snowdrifts beneath the steely, brightening sky?

ELIOT: I've been rather more interested in the living conditions of the farm-workers in the Midlands – their children's want of education, the women's bitter struggle against deprivation and oppression.

STRINDBERG: Women and children and farm-workers? But the fjords offer a real lesson in life! And seen with me, standing at the prow of my ship, 'The Kugglefryer', as it prances through the wintry gales, the ice clinging to your ears, your skin cracking with the cold and the cracks stinging in the salt breeze, drenched to the bone, shuddering with discomfort and howling with pain as you face down the roaring elements...!

(HE SIGHS, INVIGORATED BY THE THOUGHT.)

ELIOT: (THRILLED) The way you put it of course, it sounds very tempting.

STRINDBERG: *Be tempted, my dear Mary Ann. Come with me to Sweden. Now.*

ELIOT: I couldn't, August. I haven't the foundation garments. And then there's Mr Lewes.

STRINDBERG: At least meet me tomorrow to talk it over. Or to say 'farewell'. The Bromley Arms on the High Road. I'm always there for lunch on Thursdays, they do cottage pie. A chat, nothing more. I shall tell you about the ice floes, of the treacherous millrace, and of the great spring thaw, for you have thawed my heart, Mary Ann, my bitter winter is past, the sunlight of your gaze has released me – like a glacier I float free down the open path of my destiny. Be with me, my blazing midnight sun, never to set. Warm this fond heart, melt these adoring eyes into tears. You shall be my muse and I yours. I ask nothing more, my incomparable Mary Ann.

ELIOT: (DISTINCTLY TEMPTED) Oh, August!

STRINDBERG: More Frupelstrood?

ELIOT: Yes please.

(SOUND OF LIQUID GURGLING INTO A TEACUP, WHICH FADES, AND WE ARE WITH WORDSWORTH AND MILNE AGAIN.)

WORDSWORTH: (FINISHING UP A POEM, WITH RELISH) 'And many a lesson can we learn from thee / Thou humble radish, rooted and yet free.'

MILNE: Excellent.

(HE APPLAUDS BRIEFLY.)

Thank you so much, Mr Wordsworth. Your poems on root vegetables are absolutely riveting. Were they published, I feel sure they would cause a sensation. (PAUSE) Care for more tea?

WORDSWORTH: No thank you, Milne.

(HE DRAWS SOMETHING FROM HIS POCKET.)

But perhaps you'd like a bit of this.

MILNE: What is it?

WORDSWORTH: I'm not certain. A tincture I believe. Something Coleridge gave me to try. It's a kind of mild relaxant. He says he can't praise it too highly. 'Honey dew' is how he describes it. 'The milk of paradise.' Good for diarrhoea apparently.

MILNE: None for me thank you, Mr Wordsworth. I'm fine.

WORDSWORTH: I think I may have a drop. Life is so difficult when the world seems almost wilfully blind to one's greatness. Everything reminds me of my failure, Milne, particularly this workshop. And yet, you know, I once wrote, 'All that we behold/ Is full of blessing.' Yes, a touch of the tincture perhaps.

(HE TAKES SOME.)

(WE RETURN TO MRS SWERDLOW AND GOETHE.)

SWERDLOW: Then possibly some Black Forest Gateaux, Mr Goethe?

GOETHE: Nein, danke.

SWERDLOW: No? Well, I suppose after all it is time for us to resume. (SHE LOOKS ABOUT; THEN MORE LOUDLY) Is everyone here? Where is Mr Strindberg? And Mr Eliot?

MILNE: They strolled outdoors a few minutes ago, Mrs Swerdlow. 'To gaze at the sun setting behind the Bromley hills,' I believe they said. Hand in hand, as I recall.

SWERDLOW: Did they, Mr Milne? Mr Eliot is such an eccentric young man. Mr Strindberg is strange too, in his way.

WORDSWORTH: Strindberg is a toxic monster, like a great spider or a scorpion – a Swedish scorpion. If my sister Dorothy were here, she would write something very rude indeed about him in her diary.

SWERDLOW: Still, he is an intriguing figure, Mr Wordsworth, and rather... romantic.

WORDSWORTH: (A BIT WILDLY, THE LAUDANUM BEGINNING TO TAKE EFFECT) Romantic? Strindberg? With his carefully tousled hair and waxed moustache? /, Mrs Swerdlow, / am romantic – a creature of impulse like a summer butterfly or a cloud animated by the breeze, friend of the moon, brother of the raindrop, cousin of the waterfall, son-in-law of the thunderbolt! (HE YAWNS.) You know, Milne, I think I may try another drop of Coleridge's tincture. Are you certain you won't join me?

MILNE: Thank you no, Mr Wordsworth. I'm quite happy with my tea and scone. And I'm very fond of this honey, most exceptional.

WORDSWORTH: (YAWNS AGAIN) I'll just finish it up then, if I may.

(HE DOES.)

(ELIOT AND STRINDBERG ENTER GAILY CHATTING.)

SWERDLOW: Ah, here they are. Mr Eliot, Mr Strindberg – we're reconvening the workshop.

STRINDBERG: (SOFTLY) Now you sit here, my dear, next to me.

ELIOT: (SOFTLY) Forever, August. Do keep hold of my hand.

STRINDBERG: (WHISPERING) Of course. For without it, Mary Ann, I fear I should soon become quite lost in this great world.

ELIOT: (SIGHS FONDLY)

STRINDBERG: And on a finger of that sweet hand of yours I shall soon, if I may, place a ring – my mother's ring.

ELIOT: Oh, August! Will you?

STRINDBERG: It was given her by my father on the day of their betrothal. Sadly, he took it back from her years later when he discovered that she had been false to him – with Anderson, the Danish blue cheese-monger. He also removed the tip of her nose, slit it off with a penknife – the traditional Swedish punishment for such a transgression. The ring, with its cluster of rubies and pale sapphires, I've kept on my mantelpiece for many years. I also have the nose somewhere, in a little pink box. It turns up from time to time.

ELIOT: What a romantic story, August. He must have loved her very much.

STRINDBERG: We Strindberg do *everything* very much, my dear, as you will see.

SWERDLOW: In your places too please, Mr Goethe, Mr Wordsworth, Mr Milne.

(THEY SETTLE IN, AS MRS SWERDLOW
RUFFLES THROUGH HER PAPERS.)

SWERDLOW: Now, we come to Mr Eliot's novel, *Middlemarch*.

ELIOT: Yes, Mrs Swerdlow.

SWERDLOW: Well, this needn't detain us long. It is clearly the work of an amateur, though one of some promise. A few tips. More confusion in your narrative would be welcome, Mr Eliot. Make the reader work a little. Who ever said fiction is fun? No, it is labour - often bitter, unrewarding labour.

ELIOT: Is it?

SWERDLOW: And when your characters speak, Mr Eliot, they should, I feel, swear a good deal more, especially your low, vile, common, country people. Foul language in their mouths is as natural to them as the muck on their boots or the filth under their fingernails.

ELIOT: (OFFENDED) Mrs Swerdlow...

SWERDLOW: Don't worry. I've marked places in the text where such things can be easily inserted, and compiled an alphabetical list of appropriate terms, which I hope you'll find useful.

(SHE BRANDISHES A SHEAF OF PAPERS.)

And now, Mr Wordsworth, what are your views on Mr Eliot's novel?

WORDSWORTH: (PUT TO SLEEP BY THE LAUDANUM, HE LIGHTLY SNORES.)

SWERDLOW: Mr Wordsworth?

WORDSWORTH: (HE SNORES ON, MORE LOUDLY)

SWERDLOW: (DISTINCTLY PEEVED) Perhaps later. Mr Goethe, your observations on Middlemarch please?

GOETHE: Nein!

SWERDLOW: Thank you. Mr Milne?

MILNE: It is a superb work, I think, absolutely topping. So wise and mature, especially from a beardless youth like Mr Eliot, with his little piping voice.

ELIOT: (TRYING TO LOWER HER VOICE) Thank you.

MILNE: Tremendously promising. Loved the style, loved the narrative, loved the characters. A triumph, dear fellow. My warmest congratulations.

ELIOT: (LOW VOICE AGAIN) Thank you again.

SWERDLOW: Now, Mr Strindberg, have you any thoughts?

STRINDBERG: Yes. (PAUSE) Middlemarch is a remarkable novel, indeed quite the worst I have ever read or ever hope to read.

ELIOT: (SHOCKED) August!

STRINDBERG: Meretricious, presumptuous, false and everywhere strident. Its female characters bluestockings and harpies, its male characters utterly unconvincing. The philosophy shallow, the style inane, the plot overblown, the politics malicious and meddling!

ELIOT: (DEEPLY HURT) No, August!...

STRINDBERG: A long and ghastly farrago exhibiting no logic, no promise, and no manliness. Indeed from the evidence on the page I should say that it is the work of a woman.

SWERDLOW: A woman? Mr Eliot a woman? I knew there was something.

STRINDBERG: Undoubtedly a woman – by the name of... What is it, my girl?

ELIOT: (UTTERLY BETRAYED, BEGINNING TO SOB) ...Mary Ann Evans.

STRINDBERG: Then I should advise Mary Ann Evans to return to her bonnets and her embroidery, to her powder puffs and pressed flowers, to her husband if she is fortunate enough to have one – considering her great nose, horse teeth and lantern jaw – and leave writing to those of us who understand the art - and the world.

ELIOT: (SOBS SOFTLY AND HELPLESSLY)

SWERDLOW: I must strongly object, Mr Strindberg. The women of today...

STRINDBERG: (IMPATIENTLY) Surely we have lavished enough time on this wretched subject. Let us speak at last of my play, *The Dance of Death*.

SWERDLOW: (GIVING IN TO HIM) Yes...well, it is growing late. If you have no objection, Mr Eliot. ... Miss Evans?

ELIOT: (WITH HEART-FELT SOBS) But August, you said... We were... You and I on 'The Kugglefryer'... Your father's ring... Your mother's nose... (SHE SNUFFLES, THEN CONTROLS HERSELF.) Go on, Mrs Swerdlow.

SWERDLOW: Very well.

(SHE FLIPS THROUGH HER NOTES.)

Then, Mr Strindberg – just one or two points. To begin with...

WORDSWORTH: (SUDDENLY AND LOUDLY) Lonely as a cloud! (HE SNORES.) Golden daffodils! (HE SNORES AGAIN.) A jocund company!

(HE RESUMES HIS SLUMBERS.)

SWERDLOW: Ah, Mr Wordsworth. (PAUSE) Mr Wordsworth!

WORDSWORTH: (ROUSED FROM SLEEP) Hmm?

SWERDLOW: Have you something to say? About Mr Strindberg's play?

WORDSWORTH: (COMING ROUND, MELLOWED BY LAUDANUM, AND UNCHARACTERISTICALLY AMIABLE) His play? I see. ... Yes, his play. Well, not precisely my sort of thing I suppose. But then, Mr Strindberg seems a truly excellent fellow, a fine writer and a credit to the great country of Sweden. (BURSTING INTO SONG) 'Sweden forever,/ Kingdom so clever,/ Thou art adored/ From fjord to shining fjord.' The Swedish national anthem – my own translation. (DEEPLY MOVED) My friends, we are all countrymen, all authors, all bards together, serving a great ideal – dedicated to 'a visionary power/ Embodied in the mystery of words,' as I wrote so long ago. (LOUD AND AMIABLE AGAIN) So I say, well done Mr Strindberg, good on you mate, and God speed. (HE YAWNS.)

SWERDLOW: Very gracious words, Mr Wordsworth.

STRINDBERG: Very patronising, and strewn with secret meanings. Well, do ask someone else.

SWERDLOW: Certainly. Mr Eliot ... Miss Evans. Your views on Mr Strindberg's play?

ELIOT: I ... I ... (SHE TRIES TO SPEAK BUT INSTEAD BEGINS TO SOB HELPLESSLY.)

MILNE: Miss Evans...my dear woman....

ELIOT: (SHE SOBS ON.)

- STRINDBERG: Not to worry. Just female problems, her time of the month and so forth. She happened to mention it during the tea break.
- MILNE: Did she?
- SWERDLOW: I see. Then, Mr Goethe, would you care to...?
- GOETHE: Nein!
- SWERDLOW: Ah. In that case, Mr Milne?
- MILNE: Thank you. (PAUSE) Let me say that I found Mr Strindberg's play *The Dance of Death* enchanting and utterly delightful. Madcap, zany, hilarious, sweet-spirited. You have a rare gift, sir.
- STRINDBERG: (SHAKEN AND INDIGNANT) This is your view? 'Delightful'? 'Sweet'? 'Madcap and zany'?
- MILNE: Yes, Mr Strindberg. Absolutely topping. Something for the whole family. Indeed we acted it out – my dear wifey and I – for the children. Such a relief from the harshness and cynicism of our age.
- STRINDBERG: (ENRAGED) This ... this to me! To me!
- MILNE: It is a soufflé, delicate to the palate, unfraught with weighty ideas or theories, full of divine absurdities, perfectly scrumptious.

STRINDBERG: (RAVING) It is an indictment of the universe, of the horror that creeps just beneath the surface of things, of the monster whose spiked back can be seen moving through every act, however generous-seeming or magnanimous. It reveals at a stroke the perfidy of woman, the fraud of family ties, the hypocrisy of the bourgeoisie, the dark insidiousness of the working classes, the malignity of nature.

MILNE: And such slapstick! Every time the Captain collapsed, my dear wife and I hooted with delight – as did the little ones – Christopher Robin, Elizabeth Skylark and little Belinda Crested Grebe. Even the baby gurgled with pleasure, rolling about in her pram in an ecstasy of merriment. A joyous family scene, it would have touched your heart. Yes, yours is a rare gift.

STRINDBERG: This to me! To me? (HE GROWLS IN FURY, THEN IN ALARM) Oh, my head! My head!

(MOANING, STRINDBERG COLLAPSES.)

SWERDLOW: He's fainted. Mr Strindberg! Mr Strindberg!

(AFTER A SECOND OR TWO, STRINDBERG COMES ROUND.)

He's revived. Thank Heavens.

STRINDBERG: (GROWLING) What happened?

SWERDLOW: You passed out, Mr Strindberg. Are you all right?

STRINDBERG: Fine, fine. Never better. (DARKLY SUSPICIOUS) What took place while I was unconscious? (TO ELIOT) Were you unfaithful to me?

ELIOT: (SHOCKED) What?

STRINDBERG: I see it in your eyes, hard-hearted vixen! You had sexual relations, did you not... with A A Milne?

MILNE: (GALLANTLY) Mr Eliot was a perfect lady during the entire length of your seizure, sir.

ELIOT: Thank you, Mr Milne. (BOLDLY) Mr Strindberg, I wish to announce that, as of this moment, we are no longer betrothed. I am calling off our engagement.

STRINDBERG: To be treated like this! No one knows how I suffer! No one cares! (HE GROWLS A BIT MORE.)

(PAUSE)

SWERDLOW: (AS SUNNILY AS THE CIRCUMSTANCES PERMIT)
Well, I think we'd best hurry along now. So little time. Mr Goethe, let us talk about your *Faust*.

GOETHE: Nein!

SWERDLOW: (WEARILY) 'Nein'?

GOETHE: (SLIGHT BUT UNMISTAKABLE GERMAN ACCENT)
Nein. I do not wish to discuss it, Frau Swerdlow. *Faust* is no more. I have destroyed the manuscript, and I urge all of you to destroy your copies as well.

SWERDLOW: (SHOCKED) But why, Mr Goethe?

GOETHE: I have come to the realisation, Frau Swerdlow, that it is a complete failure. Indeed, for all that I have written and for all that I might ever write I have nothing but scorn, withering scorn and mocking contempt. I shall write no more. I shall write no more.

SWERDLOW: (GREATLY CONCERNED) Mr Goethe ...

GOETHE: At first I considered killing myself in the German Romantic manner which has served my country so well over the years. But at that moment I was unable to find my pistol amidst the great voluminous folds of my swirling black cloak. Then I thought: no, I shall not end my life, I shall change it, change it utterly. I shall become ... a shepherd, a simple shepherd, piping to my flock, my faithful dog Strudel beside me. Or, on the other hand, I could become ... a Pilgrim for Truth, a lonely wanderer through picturesque landscapes, often seen from behind as I gaze into a sea of clouds from some lofty promontory, the eagles crying above me. (*thoughtfully*) Not an easy choice, my friends.

SWERDLOW: But why?...

GOETHE: Why am I abandoning the literary life? I read everything submitted for today's workshop, Frau Swerdlow, and found one piece of writing to be a gigantic, peerless masterwork, a composition of sublime and incredible genius. I myself could never hope to equal, nay to approach the achievement of one of our number. I now see that, like my Faust, I have lusted after a glory that could never be mine. So I wish to convey my congratulations, indeed my homage to Herr Milne for his story, 'Piglet Meets a Heffalump'. There is grandeur in this deceptively simple tale, my friends; there is elegance and subtlety and truth, and an understanding of the human dilemma that fills the heart with wisdom and wonder.

MILNE: Very kind of you to say so, Mr Goethe. But your *Faust* is a charming thing. Hours and hours and *hours* of pleasure.

GOETHE: Please, Herr Milne. I am unworthy of your praise. Though your generosity of soul, sir, does not surprise me. It is evident in each word of the narrative, in each line spoken by Pooh and Piglet, and in the architecture and scope of the great story itself, which is – let us face it – the story of us all, in every land and every age.

MILNE: But Mr Goethe...

GOETHE: A Titan stands among us, my friends, like a great immemorial oak, and we shrivel in his shadow like mere flowers of a day -- like your 'Daffodils' Herr Wordsworth, your novel Frau Evans, your play Herr Strindberg, and my own feeble *Faust*. Out of respect for the art I love, I shall disgrace it no longer, and I suggest that you all consider your positions as well.

MILNE: But my dear chap...

GOETHE: (SADLY AND RESOLUTELY) Nein, Herr Milne. Nein.
(HE SIGHS DEEPLY)

(PAUSE)

SWERDLOW: (TAKEN ABACK BY GOETHE'S ANNOUNCEMENTS)
Well, thank you, Mr Goethe. And yet, there is no need for you -- for any of you -- to give up your writing. (WITH ENTHUSIASM) No, on the contrary, you must persevere as never before. Next week when you return to the workshop, you will have rewritten your poem Mr Wordsworth, your novel Miss Evans, and your play Mr Strindberg, in the light of what you have learned -- of what we have all learned -- here today. But as for you, Mr Goethe, as you seem determined not to continue with your *Faust*, for next week I want you to unleash your imagination in an entirely different direction. I've been making notes ...

(A RUSTLING OF PAPERS)

SWERDLOW: ...about a quite new idea for you – a book, Mr Goethe, a self-help manual.

GOETHE: Ja?

SWERDLOW: Ja! A confidence-building guide to life, rich with advice and encouragement, inspiring your readers to overcome their doubts and fears and gloomy speculations and to achieve their own desired goals. I promise you that such a project will benefit not only others, but yourself as well. (GRANDLY) You could call it simply, 'The Indomitable Human Spirit'.

(BANG! – A PISTOL-SHOT. GOETHE SLUMPS FORWARD AND FALLS TO THE FLOOR.)

SWERDLOW: Mr Goethe!

ELIOT: (ALARMED AND SOBBING AGAIN) Mr Goethe! Mr. Goethe!

MILNE: Shot himself! Oh, my dear fellow!

(PAUSE)

ELIOT: Do you think ... he's dead, Mrs Swerdlow?

SWERDLOW: It seems likely. In addition to being a poet, dramatist, novelist, philosopher, critic and scientist – as well as optician, tree surgeon, skiing instructor and the finest ventriloquist of his generation – Mr Goethe was a superb marksman, the greatest in all Germany, so they say.

ELIOT: (SORROWFULLY) I see.

SWERDLOW: And at such close range, he could hardly ...

(THE DOOR SWINGS LOUDLY OPEN. THE DOCTOR BURSTS INTO THE ROOM.)

DOCTOR: (SLAVIC ACCENT) Pardon me. I heard a pistol-shot, and I wondered if I could be of assistance. I am a doctor.

SWERDLOW: Are you? Yes, please. This way, Dr.....

DOCTOR: Dr Chekhov. (ESTABLISHING HIS CREDENTIALS) M.B., Moscow University; PhD., Odessa Polytechnic. I'm taking a brush-up course on the pancreas here at West Bromley, just across the corridor. I'll ... have a look.

(A PAUSE AS HE EXAMINES GOETHE.)

He's gone, I'm afraid. Bullet through the heart, poor devil.

(ELIOT SOBS, MILNE SIGHS SADLY.)

Suicide, I shouldn't be surprised. Gun in his hand, scornful smile on his lips. (PAUSE) Was he a German Romantic poet, by any chance?

SWERDLOW: Indeed he was, Doctor.

DOCTOR: (KNOWINGLY) Ah, yes. (WITH INTEREST, GLANCING ABOUT) I say, is this the writers' workshop?

SWERDLOW: Yes, Doctor. Are you a...?

DOCTOR: I dabble. Short stories, farces, melancholy comedies.

SWERDLOW: I see. Not much demand for that sort of thing these days. But come and join us next week, why don't you? -- we have a vacancy at the moment – and bring along some of your work. Perhaps we can extend your range.

DOCTOR: Thank you, I will. And now, if you'll excuse me, I must contact the proper authorities – about the corpse. Dosvedanya.

SWERDLOW: Goodbye, Dr Check-up.

(THE DOCTOR EXITS, CLOSING THE DOOR
BEHIND HIM.)

SWERDLOW: And I look forward to seeing all of you next week as well.
(PAUSE) Mr Wordsworth.

WORDSWORTH: (ASLEEP AGAIN, SNORES HUSKILY)

SWERDLOW: Miss Evans.

ELIOT: (SOBS WEARILY)

SWERDLOW: Mr Strindberg.

STRINDBERG: (GROWLING SOFTLY) To me. This, to me.

SWERDLOW: Mr Milne.

MILNE: Of course, Mrs Swerdlow. Indeed I've just had an idea for a new story, based on something the late Mr Goethe said – about my being like a great immemorial oak-tree. Pooh climbs a tall oak in the middle of the forest to steal some honey but a branch breaks and he tumbles down as the bees go, 'Buzz, buzz, buzz!' (HE SIGHS WITH DELIGHT.) I'll write it up and bring it along next week. And I do so look forward to hearing your views on it, my friends - such a valuable process.

(WORDSWORTH RENEWS HIS SNORING,
ELIOT HER SOBBING AND STRINDBERG HIS
GROWLING.)

SWERDLOW: So, Mr Milne, you feel that today's workshop has been a rewarding experience?

MILNE: (WITH RELISH) Most certainly, Mrs Swerdlow. Quite marvellous. Unmissable. Memorable. Inspiring. Tremendous. (PAUSE) Absolutely topping.

(AFTER A BRIEF PAUSE, CHAMBER MUSIC AS
BEFORE.)

END