



THE NIGHT-COMERS

(Les Fleureurs)

By CHARLES VAN LERBERGHE

Orchestra: Funeral March. Roll of muffled drums. A blast of a horn in the distance. Roll of drums. A short psalmodic motive for the organ. Repeated knocks, heavy and dull. Curtain.

The scene represents a room in a poverty-stricken cottage. To the right, against the wall, a great four-post bed with curtains of black serge. In the middle of the further wall, a door; to the left, a window with lowered blind. Near the bed a small, narrow table, bearing a crucifix between two tapers of yellow wax. A night of storm. The rain lashes against the windows. In the distance is heard the whistling of the wind through the trees, and the baying of a dog. As the curtain rises the stage appears to be empty, and is lighted only by the flickering light of the two tapers. Knocks are again heard at the door. A young girl springs hurriedly out of the bed with gestures of fear. She is clad in a night-gown only, with her blonde hair unloosened.

ACT I

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(Les Fleureurs)

To MAURICE MAETERLINCK

THE GIRL. Who is there?

A VOICE OUTSIDE. I.

THE GIRL. Who are you?

THE VOICE. I.

THE GIRL. That's no name: who are you?

THE VOICE. Ah! but . . . I am the man who . . . you know quite well.

THE GIRL. I expect no one.

A VOICE IN THE BED. Child, what is that noise?

THE GIRL. Little Mother, it is the wind.—Is it for me you come?

THE VOICE. Certainly not, little one, most certainly not.

THE MOTHER. Ah, indeed I hear something!

THE GIRL. If you do not give your name I will not open.

THE VOICE. But . . . but . . . it should not be spoken. I am . . . I am the man with the water.

THE GIRL. The man with the water?

THE VOICE. Yes, certainly. Listen!

[Sound of water falling drop by drop.

THE MOTHER. Child, I hear water. I hear something trickling.

THE GIRL. The man with the water?

THE VOICE. Of course; and with the sponge.

THE GIRL. With the sponge? . . . I have nothing to do with all that.

THE VOICE. Excuse me, little one, excuse me . . . it is to wash with.

THE MOTHER. Who is it, my child?

THE GIRL. Little Mother . . . it is . . . a poor . . . a poor man, who asks for alms.

THE MOTHER. Ah! give him something. The poor man! Let him come in and rest a little time—such a night as it is! Ah, my God!

[A loud knocking.

THE GIRL. No! . . . Little mother, I am afraid, we do not know who may come in.

THE MOTHER. That is wrong, what thou sayest is wrong. You must open to him, and give him some bread.

[A loud knocking.

THE GIRL. No!—I am afraid of those who come during the night. Little mother, suppose he were a robber . . . !

THE MOTHER. My child, you must open, do you hear, you must open the door. Who is it? [Smiling.] Ah, mother knows well who it is, my child. She knows that sound.

[A loud knocking.

THE GIRL [alarmed]. You know who it is?

THE MOTHER. Eh, what? Is it not the Seigneur, our good master? He hunts in the night. He is here now, hungry and thirsty, and wearied. Open to him, my daughter, open quickly. I hear the sound of his black horses!

[Trampling of horses in the distance.

THE GIRL. What is that noise? Are you not alone?

THE VOICE. Certainly I am alone! There's no noise . . . ah, yes . . . perhaps, down there . . . it is the sound of those who are coming hither . . . but now, open, open!

[Loud knocking.

THE GIRL. Go away.

THE VOICE. But why will you not open?

THE GIRL. I will never open the door.

THE VOICE. Very good. I will wait.

THE MOTHER. My child, each one says to-morrow, to-morrow; yes, but the other, the other who is there? Will he wait? What one does not know another knows; what one does not see another sees, and it is a great sin and a folly. . . .

My daughter, has he gone, now that I hear him no longer?

THE GIRL [looking at the door]. Yes, mother . . . yes . . . yes . . . he has gone.

THE MOTHER. Ah! may Jesus and the Virgin take him into their good keeping. How the storm rages without. . . . Come, my child, let us pray for him, for that poor man in the dark night; let us say an 'Our Father' and the three collects. Turn the cross towards me a little, yes . . . yes.

[The murmuring of the two women at their prayers is heard, and the click of a rosary in the hands of the old woman. The rain lashes against the window. Ten o'clock strikes slowly. The baying of a dog is heard. The girl blows out the candles. Darkness.

ACT II

The blast of a horn in the distance. The roll of drums. Organ notes. Repeated knocks. The tapers are relit, and the young girl is seen, standing against the bed, motionless, in an attitude of watching, with her face turned towards the door. Some one knocks.

THE GIRL [hurrying towards the door]. Ah! be silent, be silent! do! The poor old mother sleeps now.

[A loud knocking.]

A VOICE OUTSIDE. It is all one to me.

THE GIRL. You said you would wait.

THE VOICE [bursting into a laugh]. I! I have just arrived.

THE GIRL. What! you are not the man of a little ago!

THE VOICE. Certainly not.

THE MOTHER. My daughter—I hear a noise.

THE GIRL [looking towards the door]. That is not true.

THE VOICE. Ah! Indeed!

THE MOTHER. My child, I hear something moving.

THE GIRL [still facing the door]. Who are you, then?

THE VOICE. But . . .

THE MOTHER. Yes, there is something there, yes.

THE GIRL. I expect no one.

THE MOTHER [listening]. Yes, yes, there is something that frets; like that . . . there, under the door; surely, there is something that trails. What is it, my child?

THE GIRL [without looking round]. It is a night bird, little mother. . . . Who are you, then?

THE VOICE. Why . . . the man with the linen.

THE GIRL. The man with the linen?

THE VOICE. Yes.

THE MOTHER. No, no, my child, no, I hear some one speak. Who is there? that is not your voice. No, no, there is some one there! Who is it, my child?

THE GIRL. Little mother, I tell you, it is nothing.

THE MOTHER. Yes, yes, there is some one there. [Some one knocks.] Do you hear! Some one knocks. Who is it? Ask who it is.

THE GIRL. Little mother, it is a man who has strayed and asks his way.

THE MOTHER. Ah! pitiful! On such a night, ah! my God! Open the door quickly, my little one, to this poor man, so that he may rest and eat a little. Ah, my God! Listen. [Some one knocks.] Ah! you must open to him, my daughter, in common charity. Go.

THE GIRL. Little mother, I am afraid. This is the second time; and how can one know who it is that may come in.

THE MOTHER. Have no fear, my daughter; it is right, and we must do what is right.

[Some one knocks.]

THE GIRL [towards the door]. No!

THE MOTHER. Do you not hear the sound of horses?

THE GIRL. What noise is that?

THE VOICE. There's no noise . . . ah, down there? I don't really know. It is the sound of those who are coming hither.

THE MOTHER. But, my child, listen. There is something that rustles below there.

THE GIRL [quickly]. It is the rain against the door, little mother. [A loud knocking.] No!

THE MOTHER. No, no! little mother is not deaf: she could hear grass grow. It is the sound of something that trails; ah! yes, I know it well! It is the beautiful Lady of the Castle, who is there, the beautiful Lady on horseback; she has come! Did she not promise; yes, yes, without a doubt, my daughter, it is she. I hear her distinctly, it is she, open the door quickly.

[Some one knocks.]

THE GIRL [towards the door]. No! [She approaches her mother, whose hand she takes.] Ah! little mother, I am frightened of those who come in the night.

THE MOTHER [after a silence, and looking into her eyes]. Why, my child? Jesus is with us.

THE GIRL. Ah! little mother, what ails you that you tremble thus?

THE MOTHER. It is joy, my daughter, for she is there.

[Some one knocks.]

THE GIRL. I will not open.

THE VOICE. Ah! Name of Names!

THE MOTHER. She who comes is welcome.

THE GIRL. Do not tremble so, little mother.

THE MOTHER [panting]. But this is wrong, oh! oh! oh! this is wrong . . . this is not good cheer, oh! oh! I tell you that you must . . . open! oh! you must open . . . en! Open!

[Some one knocks.]

THE VOICE. So, you will not open?

THE GIRL. No! go away.—Oh! what ails you, little mother, that your hands are cold, so cold?

THE VOICE. Very good. I will wait.

THE GIRL. I will never open the door.

THE VOICE. We will see about that by and by.

THE GIRL. Oh! little mother, you . . .

THE MOTHER [panting and coughing]. My child, I have had a beautiful dream, oh! raise my pillow a little . . . yes, a beautiful dream! I was in Paradise [coughing] and the garden [cough] all the angels [making the movement of dancing with her two hands] . . . danced! [shivering] I with the Holy Virgin [always making gestures which precede her words] I danced . . . in the midst; [cough] a fête, a beautiful fête, oh! oh! oh!

[She makes great efforts to move herself.]

THE GIRL [checking her and wiping the perspiration off her face]. Mother! oh, little mother!

THE MOTHER. In the midst of the flowers of Paradise [cough]—[after a silence, and wrought by a new fantasy].—Has she gone, as I no longer hear her?

THE GIRL [looking towards the door]. Yes, mother, yes . . . yes. . . . He has gone.

THE MOTHER. May God guard her in His holy keeping!

THE GIRL. Yes, little mother, I will pray for him.

THE MOTHER [sinking back slowly]. Yes . . . must pray for her . . . must pray for her [a long indrawn breath] the holy Virgin Mary in her house [cough]. Let us say the 'Pater' and the three collects. Draw the crucifix a little nearer, I no longer see it easily, yes, like that, yes.

[The murmuring of their prayers is heard again, and again the low click of the rosary and the sound of coughing. The rain lashes against the panes of glass. Eleven o'clock strikes slowly. Darkness. The baying of a dog is heard. The daughter blows out the tapers.]

ACT III

Roll of drums. Blast of a horn in the distance. Organ Motive.

Knocks redoubled on the door. Total darkness.

THE GIRL. Ah! my God! ah! my God! be silent there, wretch that you are, you will kill my mother!

[Some one knocks.]

A VOICE [outside]. I'm here.¹

THE GIRL. But I implore you to be silent. Oh, my God, I implore it of you!

THE VOICE. Eh, what? Look you, I've come!

[Loud knocking.]

THE GIRL. But what do you want?

THE VOICE. To enter, of course.

[Loud knocking.]

THE GIRL. But you said you would wait till daylight!

THE VOICE [with dull laughter]. Oh, indeed! as it happens, I have only just arrived! Is this not true, you others?

THE MOTHER. Light the candle, my child.

[A light.]

THE GIRL [still looking towards the door]. It is not true.

¹ Lit.: 'Me v' la!'

THE VOICE. Ah! Sacré, do they make a mock of me here?
 THE MOTHER. My child, light the other candle also, for
 She is there.

[Two lights.

THE VOICE. You are not going to leave me standing here?
 THE GIRL. I have no need of you.
 THE VOICE. Well, well, each in his turn. It's not you I'm
 here for; come now!
 THE MOTHER [looking round her room sadly]. My house
 is not worthy to receive her.
 THE VOICE. Look you, will you open, or shall I force the
 door?
 THE MOTHER. Come, my child . . . pull back the curtain
 . . . and let the sunshine in . . . that there may be a little
 beauty here [waving her arm with a radiant gesture].
 Everything at its best, for She is about to enter!
 THE GIRL. Yes, mother.

[She draws up the blind. Through the illumined window the shadow
 of a hearse is thrown on the wall.

THE MOTHER. What are those shadows?
 THE GIRL. Ah! . . .

[She lowers the blind rapidly.

THE MOTHER. My child, take the holy water.
 THE GIRL [taking the holy water basin and the switch
 towards the door]. No! Who are you?
 THE VOICE. Oh, in the name of all that's holy! the man
 with . . . the thing . . .

THE GIRL [sprinkling the holy water to right and left and
 before the door, while at every step a heavy dull blow
 resounds. The mother crosses herself. After a silence] :-
 What thing?

THE VOICE. I am the man with the coffin, there now!
 THE GIRL [giving a cry]. Ah, the man with . . .

THE VOICE. Yes, yes, do you mean to say I was not expected?

THE MOTHER [in a suffocated voice]. Open the door to her, my girl. She can enter.

THE GIRL. Little mother, it is not a lady . . . it is . . . some one . . . who is pursued and asks for shelter.

THE MOTHER [with a rattle in her throat]. Open quickly to her, my daughter. Oh! oh! open . . . quickly to her, oh! oh! oh! she is very welcome. Water! water! O give me some water!

THE VOICE. By all that's holy, how heavy it is.

[Some one knocks.]

THE MOTHER. Ah, I suffocate, my daughter. . . . Where is the crucifix? . . . I cannot see it any longer. . . . Yes, yes, you must open the door to her.

THE VOICE. It will be sodden ere long.

[Some one knocks.]

THE MOTHER. Go, lay the table, put on the fine cloth. It is here, see here! [In a hoarse voice]: Ho . . . go, go, and gather some flowers; yes, she is there . . . do open to her.

[Violent blows without.]

THE VOICE. Must I break in the door?

THE MOTHER. Yes, there, I see her, I recognise her, oh, beautiful Lady!

[Renewed blows.]

THE VOICE. Now then, you others?

[Voices outside.]

THE MOTHER [with rattling voice]. The beautiful Lady . . . for my eyes, do you see the doors now? . . . There are none! Open . . . [Blows: the door begins to crack.] Yes, she has something there, something there on her shoulder.

[She makes the sign of the cross.]

THE GIRL. Oh, little mother!

THE VOICE. Since I must, then here goes!

[Blows and crackings.]

THE GIRL. Go away! go away whoever you be! Go away, I tell you, I will not open to you, I tell you! Never, never, never! Do you come to kill my mother, you there? [Crashing sounds.] Do you bring death to us? Ah, my God! What have I ever done to you? ah, my God! ah, my God!

[Blows and crashing sounds. She falls on her knees before the door, sobbing bitterly.]

THE MOTHER [making violent efforts to rise]. Enter, beautiful Lady, the day is here, and I am ready.

THE GIRL [on her knees with uplifted hands]. Oh! oh! I am afraid! Cease, I implore you! We are poor women. We have nothing. My mother is ill. You do not come to take us away, do you? You are not wicked men. I will open to you, but tell me, that you are not heartless men? Is it not so? You do not wish my poor mother to die! . . . [The blows and the cracking and crashing sounds are redoubled. Violent dispute outside. A frightful rattle begins in the old woman's throat. The young girl throws herself on her knees by the bedside of her mother.] Ah, little mother, be still: what are you doing? Do not groan so, you will kill me. I am at your knees, near to you, little mother; look, look at me, it is I, your little angel,—why do you not answer me any more?

THE MOTHER. Who art thou, little angel?

THE VOICE. The hour is come! The hour is come!

[Blows and violent cracking and crashing.]

THE GIRL [without rising from the foot the bed]. No, you shall not come, neither you nor the others.

THE VOICE. We shall see.

[Redoubled blows. A piece of wood breaks on the inner side of the door, and falls into the room. Voices in dispute audible outside during the following dialogue.]

THE GIRL. Oh! little mother, how you tremble, how icy your hands are; be not afraid; see, it is thy dear little angel who watches over you; be not afraid, they can do you no harm. Dost thou not know me any longer? Oh! do not look at me

with those fixed eyes, little mother. I am afraid even of thee now.

[The neighing of horses is heard.

THE MOTHER [smiling, and holding her daughter to her breast, points to the door with her right hand]. It is the coach! [The noise of a heavy vehicle drawing nigh. Lights pass before the chink of the door. Disputing voices. Fragments of sentences, mixed with oaths, are heard.] What is the matter? What is it? Will not open! The door shut! Oh! la, la. Where is it? It must be forced. Everything is soaking wet. That corpse! That corpse!

[The attack on the door is recommenced with redoubled blows.

THE MOTHER [listening with gaping mouth]. Holy Virgin Mary!

THE GIRL. Little mother, it is I who kiss you; look at me and bless me! Little mother, thou art in my arms; oh, look at me, do look at me!

[Violent tumult outside. The battered door yields. The girl throws herself against the door, and pushes it back with her hands. Horrible sounds of struggling. Midnight tolls slowly.

ALL THE VOICES OUTSIDE [with satisfaction]. Ah!

[On the last stroke of midnight the old woman gives a loud hoarse cry, and the young girl springs from the threshold, and throws herself on her knees, with open arms towards the bed. The door, yielding to the outer pressure, falls after her with a great noise. A rush of cold air extinguishes the two tapers. DARKNESS.

WILLIAM SHARP.