

## Characters

- Lucia, Roderick's wife
- Roderick, Mother Bayard's son
- Mother Bayard
- Cousin Brandon
- Charles, Lucia and Roderick's son
- Genevieve, Lucia and Roderick's daughter
- Leonora Banning, Charles's wife
- Lucia, Leonora and Charles's daughter, Samuel's twin
- Samuel, Leonora and Charles's son, Lucia's twin
- Roderick, Leonora and Charles's youngest son
- Cousin Ermengarde
- Servants
- Nurses

## SETTING

The dining room of the Bayard home.

## Act

*Close to the footlights a long dining table is handsomely spread for Christmas dinner. The carver's place with a great turkey before it is at the spectator's right.*

*A door, left back, leads into the hall.*

*At the extreme left, by the proscenium pillar, is a strange portal trimmed with garlands of fruits and flowers. Directly opposite is another, edged and hung with black velvet. The portals denote birth and death.*

*Ninety years are to be traversed in this play which represents in accelerated motion ninety Christmas dinners in the Bayard household. The actors are dressed in inconspicuous clothes and must indicate their gradual increase in years through their acting. Most of them carry wigs of white hair which they adjust upon their heads at the indicated moment, simply and without comment. The ladies may have shawls concealed beneath the table that they gradually draw up about their shoulders as they grow older.*

*Throughout the play the characters continue eating imaginary food with imaginary knives and forks.*

*There is no curtain. The audience arriving at the theatre sees the stage set and the table laid, though still in partial darkness. Gradually the lights in the auditorium become dim and the stage brightens until sparkling winter sunlight streams through the dining-room windows.*

*Enter Lucia. She inspects the table, touching here a knife and there a fork. She talks to a servant girl who is invisible to us.*

LUCIA

I reckon we're ready now, Gertrude. We won't ring the chimes today. I'll just call them myself.

*(She goes into the hall and calls)*

Roderick. Mother Bayard. We're all ready. Come to dinner.

*(Enter Roderick pushing Mother Bayard in a wheelchair.)*

MOTHER BAYARD

... and a new horse too, Roderick. I used to think that only the wicked owned two horses. A new horse and a new house and a new wife!

LUCIA

Here, Mother Bayard, you sit between us.

RODERICK

Well, Mother, how do you like it? Our first Christmas dinner in the new house, hey?

MOTHER BAYARD

Tz—Tz—Tz! I don't know what your dear father would say!

*(Roderick says grace.)*

My dear Lucia, I can remember when there were still Indians on this very ground, and I wasn't a young girl either. I can remember when we had to cross the Mississippi on a new-made raft. I can remember when Saint Louis and Kansas City were full of Indians.

LUCIA

*(Tying a napkin around Mother Bayard's neck):*

Imagine that! There! What a wonderful day for our first Christmas dinner: a beautiful sunny morning, snow, a splendid sermon. Dr' McCarthy preaches a splendid sermon. I cried and cried.

RODERICK

*(Extending an imaginary carving fork):*

Come now, what'll you have, Mother? A little sliver of white?

LUCIA

Every last twig is wrapped around with ice. You almost never see that. Can I cut it up for you, dear?

*(Over her shoulder)*

Gertrude, I forgot the jelly. You know—on the top shelf. Mother Bayard, I found your mother's gravy boat while we were moving. What was her name, dear? What were all your names? You were ... a ... Genevieve Wainright.

Now your mother—  
MOTHER BAYARD

Yes, you must write it down somewhere. I was Genevieve Wainright. My mother was Faith Morrison. She was the daughter of a farmer in New Hampshire who was something of a blacksmith too. And she married young John Wainright—

LUCIA

*(Memorizing on her fingers):*

Genevieve Wainright. Faith Morrison.

RODERICK

It's all down in a book somewhere upstairs. We have it all. All that kind of thing is very interesting. Come, Lucia, just a little wine. Mother, a little red wine for Christmas day. Full of iron. "Take a little wine for thy stomach's sake."

LUCIA

Really, I can't get used to wine! What would my father say? But I suppose it's all right.

*(Enter Cousin Brandon from the hall. He takes his place by Lucia.)*

COUSIN BRANDON

*(Rubbing his hands):*

Well, well, I smell turkey. My dear cousins, I can't tell you how pleasant it is to be having Christmas dinner with you all. I've lived out there in Alaska so long without relatives. Let me see, how long have you had this new house, Roderick?

RODERICK

Why, it must be ...

MOTHER BAYARD

Five years. It's five years, children. You should keep a diary. This is your sixth Christmas dinner here.

LUCIA

Think of that, Roderick. We feel as though we had lived here twenty years.

COUSIN BRANDON

At all events it still looks as good as new.

RODERICK

*(Over his carving):*

What'll you have, Brandon, light or dark?—Frieda, fill up Cousin Brandon's glass.

LUCIA

Oh, dear, I can't get used to these wines. I don't know what my father'd say, I'm sure. What'll you have, Mother Bayard?

*(During the following speeches Mother Bayard's chair, without any visible propulsion, starts to draw away from the table, turns toward the right, and slowly goes toward the dark portal.)*

MOTHER BAYARD

Yes, I can remember when there were Indians on this very land.

LUCIA

*(Softly):*

Mother Bayard hasn't been very well lately, Roderick.

MOTHER BAYARD

My mother was a Faith Morrison. And in New Hampshire she married a young John Wainright, who was a congregational minister. He saw her in his congregation one day ...

LUCIA

Mother Bayard, hadn't you better lie down, dear?

MOTHER BAYARD

... and right in the middle of his sermon he said to himself: "I'll marry that girl." And he did, and I'm their daughter.

LUCIA

*(Half rising, looking after her with anxiety):*

Just a little nap, dear?

MOTHER BAYARD

I'm all right. Just go on with your dinner. I was ten, and I said to my brother ...

*(She goes out. A very slight pause.)*

COUSIN BRANDON

It's too bad it's such a cold dark day today. We almost need the lamps. I spoke to Major Lewis for a moment after church. His sciatica troubles him, but he does pretty well.

LUCIA

*(Dabbing her eyes):*

I know Mother Bayard wouldn't want us to grieve for her on Christmas Day, but I can't forget her sitting in her wheelchair right beside us, only a year ago. And she would be so glad to know our good news.

RODERICK

*(Patting her hand):*

Now, now. It's Christmas.

*(Formally)*

Cousin Brandon, a glass of wine with you, sir.  
COUSIN BRANDON

*(Half rising, lifting his glass gallantly):*

A glass of wine with you, sir.

LUCIA

Does the Major's sciatica cause him much pain?

COUSIN BRANDON

Some, perhaps. But you know his way. He says it'll be all the same in a hundred years.

LUCIA

Yes, he's a great philosopher.

RODERICK

His wife sends you a thousand thanks for her Christmas present.

LUCIA

I forget what I gave her.—Oh, yes, the workbasket!

*(Through the entrance of Birth comes a nurse wheeling a perambulator trimmed with blue ribbons. Lucia rushes toward it, the men following.)*

O my wonderful new baby, my darling baby! Who ever saw such a child! Quick, nurse, a boy or a girl? A boy! Roderick, what shall we call him? Really, nurse, you've never seen such a child!

RODERICK

We'll call him Charles after your father and grandfather.

LUCIA

But there are no Charleses in the Bible, Roderick.

RODERICK

Of course, there are. Surely there are.

LUCIA

Roderick!—Very well, but he will always be Samuel to me.—What miraculous hands he has! Really, they are the most beautiful hands in the world. All right, nurse. Have a good nap, my darling child.

RODERICK

Don't drop him, nurse. Brandon and I need him in our firm.

*(Exit nurse and perambulator into the hall. The others return to their chairs, Lucia taking the place left vacant by Mother Bayard and Cousin Brandon moving up beside her. Cousin Brandon puts on his white hair.)*

Lucia, a little white meat? Some stuffing? Cranberry sauce, anybody?  
LUCIA

*(Over her shoulder):*

Margaret, the stuffing is very good today.—Just a little, thank you.

RODERICK

Now something to wash it down.

*(Half rising)*

Cousin Brandon, a glass of wine with you, sir. To the ladies, God bless them.

LUCIA

Thank you, kind sirs.

COUSIN BRANDON

Pity it's such an overcast day today. And no snow.

LUCIA

But the sermon was lovely. I cried and cried. Dr' Spaulding does preach such a splendid sermon.

RODERICK

I saw Major Lewis for a moment after church. He says his rheumatism comes and goes. His wife says she has something for Charles and will bring it over this afternoon.

*(Enter nurse again with perambulator. Pink ribbons. Same rush toward the left.)*

LUCIA

O my lovely new baby! Really, it never occurred to me that it might be a girl. Why, nurse, she's perfect.

RODERICK

Now call her what you choose. It's your turn.

LUCIA

Looloolooloo. Aië, Aië. Yes, this time I shall have my way. She shall be called Genevieve after your mother. Have a good nap, my treasure.

*(She looks after it as the nurse wheels the perambulator into the hall.)*

Imagine! Sometime she'll be grown up and say "Good morning, Mother. Good morning, Father."—Really, Cousin Brandon, you don't find a baby like that every day.

COUSIN BRANDON

*And the new factory.*

LUCIA

A new factory? Really? Roderick, I shall be very uncomfortable if we're going to turn out to be rich. I've been afraid of that for years.—However, we mustn't talk about such things on Christmas Day. I'll just take a little piece of white meat, thank you. Roderick, Charles is destined for the ministry. I'm sure of it.

RODERICK

Woman, he's only twelve. Let him have a free mind. *We* want him in the firm, I don't mind saying. Anyway, no time passes as slowly as this when you're waiting for your urchins to grow up and settle down to business.

LUCIA

I don't want time to go any faster, thank you. I love the children just as they are.—Really, Roderick, you know what the doctor said: one glass a meal.

*(Putting her hand over his glass)*

No, Margaret, that will be all.

*(Roderick rises, glass in hand. With a look of dismay on his face he takes a few steps toward the dark portal.)*

RODERICK

Now I wonder what's the matter with me.

LUCIA

Roderick, do be reasonable.

RODERICK

*(Tottering, but with gallant irony):*

But, my dear, statistics show that we steady, moderate drinkers ...

LUCIA

*(Rises, gazing at him in anguish):*

Roderick! My dear! What...?

RODERICK

*(Returns to his seat with a frightened look of relief):*

Well, it's fine to be back at table with you again. How many good Christmas dinners have I had to miss upstairs? And to be back at a fine bright one, too.

LUCIA

O my dear, you gave us a very alarming time! Here's your glass of milk.—Josephine, bring Mr' Bayard his medicine from the cupboard in the library.

RODERICK

At all events, now that I'm better I'm going to start doing something about the house.

LUCIA

Roderick! You're not going to change the house?

RODERICK

Only touch it up here and there. It looks a hundred years old.

*(Charles enters casually from the hall.)*

CHARLES

It's a great blowy morning, Mother. The wind comes over the hill like a lot of cannon.

*(He kisses his mother's hair and sits down)*

LUCIA

Charles, you carve the turkey, dear. Your father's not well. You always said you hated carving, though you *are* so clever at it.

*(Father and son exchange places.)*

And such a good sermon. I cried and cried. Mother Bayard loved a good sermon so. And she used to sing the Christmas hymns all around the year. Oh, dear, oh, dear, I've been thinking of her all morning!

CHARLES

Shh, Mother. It's Christmas Day. You mustn't think of such things. You mustn't be depressed.

LUCIA

But sad things aren't the same as depressing things. I must be getting old: I like them.

CHARLES

Uncle Brandon, you haven't anything to eat. Pass his plate, Hilda ... and some cranberry sauce ...

*(Enter Genevieve. She kisses her father's temple and sits down.)*

GENEVIEVE

It's glorious. Every last twig is wrapped around with ice. You almost never see that.

LUCIA

Did you have time to deliver those presents after church, Genevieve?

GENEVIEVE

Yes, Mama. Old Mrs' Lewis sends you a thousand thanks for hers. It was just what she wanted, she said. Give me lots, Charles, lots.

RODERICK

*(Rising and starting toward the dark portal):*

Statistics, ladies and gentlemen, show that we steady, moderate ...

CHARLES

How about a little skating this afternoon, Father?

RODERICK

I'll live till I'm ninety.

LUCIA

I really don't think he ought to go skating.

RODERICK

*(At the very portal, suddenly astonished):*

Yes, but ... but ... not yet!

*(He goes out.)*

LUCIA

*(Dabbing her eyes):*

He was so young and so clever, Cousin Brandon.

*(Raising her voice for Cousin Brandon's deafness)*

I say he was so young and so clever.—Never forget your father, children. He was a good man. Well, he wouldn't want us to grieve for him today.

CHARLES

White or dark, Genevieve? Just another sliver, Mother?

LUCIA

*(Putting on her white hair):*

I can remember our first Christmas dinner in this house, Genevieve. Twenty-five years ago today. Mother Bayard was sitting here in her wheelchair. She could remember when Indians lived on this very spot and when she had to cross the river on a new-made raft.

CHARLES

She couldn't have, Mother.

GENEVIEVE

That can't be true.

LUCIA

It certainly was true—even I can remember when there was only one paved street. We were very happy to walk on boards.

*(Louder, to Cousin Brandon)*

We can remember when there were no sidewalks, can't we, Cousin Brandon?

COUSIN BRANDON

*(Delighted):*

Oh, yes! And those were the days.

CHARLES AND GENEVIEVE

*(Sotto voce, this is a family refrain):*

Those were the days.

LUCIA

And the ball last night, Genevieve? Did you have a nice time? I hope you didn't *waltz*, dear. I think a girl in our position ought to set an example. Did Charles keep an eye on you?

GENEVIEVE

He had none left. They were all on Leonora Banning. He can't conceal it any longer, Mother. I think he's engaged to marry Leonora Banning.

CHARLES

I'm not engaged to marry anyone.

LUCIA

Well, she's very pretty.

GENEVIEVE

I shall never marry, Mother.—I shall sit in this house beside you forever, as though life were one long, happy Christmas dinner.

LUCIA

O my child, you mustn't say such things!

GENEVIEVE

*(Playfully):*

You don't want me? You don't want me?

*(Lucia bursts into tears.)*

Why, Mother, how silly you are! There's nothing sad about that—what could possibly be sad about that?  
LUCIA

*(Drying her eyes):*

Forgive me. I'm just unpredictable, that's all.

*(Charles goes to the door and leads in Leonora Banning.)*

LEONORA BANNING

*(Kissing Lucia's temple):*

Good morning, Mother Bayard. Good morning, everybody. Mother Bayard, you sit here by Charles. It's really a splendid Christmas Day today.

CHARLES

Little white meat? Genevieve, Mother, Leonora?

LEONORA BANNING

Every last twig is encircled with ice.— You never see that.

CHARLES

*(Shouting):*

Uncle Brandon, another?—Rogers, fill my uncle's glass.

LUCIA

*(To Charles):*

Do what your father used to do. It would please Cousin Brandon so. You know

*(Pretending to raise a glass)*

"Uncle Brandon, a glass of wine ..."

CHARLES

*(Rising):*

Uncle Brandon, a glass of wine with you, sir.

COUSIN BRANDON

A glass of wine with you, sir. To the ladies, God bless them every one.

THE LADIES

Thank you, kind sirs.  
GENEVIEVE

And if I go to Germany for my music I promise to be back for Christmas. I wouldn't miss that.

LUCIA

I hate to think of you over there all alone in those strange pensions.

GENEVIEVE

But, darling, the time will pass so fast that you'll hardly know I'm gone. I'll be back in the twinkling of an eye.

*(Enter left, the nurse and perambulator. Green ribbons.)*

LEONORA BANNING

Oh, what an angel! The darlinest baby in the world. Do let me hold it, nurse.

*(But the nurse resolutely wheels the perambulator across the stage and out the dark door.)*

Oh, I did love it so!

*(Charles rises, puts his arm around his wife, and slowly leads her back to the table.)*

GENEVIEVE

*(Softly to her mother as the other two cross):*

Isn't there anything I can do?

LUCIA

*(Raises her eyebrows, ruefully):*

No, dear. Only time, only the passing of time can help in these things.

*(Charles returns to the table.)*

Don't you think we could ask Cousin Ermengarde to come and live with us here? There's plenty for everyone and there's no reason why she should go on teaching the first grade for ever and ever. She wouldn't be in the way, would she, Charles?

CHARLES

No, I think it would be fine.— A little more potato and gravy, anybody? A little more turkey, Mother?

*(Brandon rises and starts slowly toward the dark portal. Lucia rises and stands for a moment with her face in her hands.)*

COUSIN BRANDON

*(Muttering):*

It was great to be in Alaska in those days ...

GENEVIEVE

*(Half rising, and gazing at her mother in fear):*

Mother, what is ...?

LUCIA

*(Hurriedly):*

Hush, my dear. It will pass.—Hold fast to your music, you know.

*(As Genevieve starts toward her)*

No, no! I want to be alone for a few minutes.

*(She turns and starts after Cousin Brandon toward the right.)*

CHARLES

If the Republicans collected all their votes instead of going off into cliques among themselves, they might prevent his getting a second term.

GENEVIEVE

Charles, Mother doesn't tell us, but she hasn't been very well these days.

CHARLES

Come, Mother, we'll go to Florida for a few weeks.

*(Exit Brandon.)*

LUCIA

*(Smiling at Genevieve and waving her hand):*

Don't be foolish. Don't grieve.

*(Lucia clasps her hands under her chin. Her lips move, whispering. She walks serenely into the portal. Genevieve stares after her, frozen.)*

GENEVIEVE

*(Sinks down at the table, her face buried in her arms):*

But what will I do? What's left for me to do?

*(At the same moment the nurse and perambulator enter from the left. Pale yellow ribbons. Leonora rushes to it.)*

LEONORA BANNING

O my darlings ... twins ... Charles, aren't they glorious! Look at them. Look at them.

CHARLES

*(Bending over the basket):*

Which is which?

LEONORA BANNING

I feel as though I were the first mother who ever had twins.—Look at them now! But why wasn't Mother Bayard allowed to stay and see them!

GENEVIEVE

*(Rising suddenly distraught, loudly):*

I don't want to go on. I can't bear it.

CHARLES

*(Goes to her quickly. They sit down. He whispers to her earnestly, taking both her hands):*

But Genevieve,

Genevieve! How frightfully Mother would feel to think that ... Genevieve!

GENEVIEVE

*(Shaking her head wildly):*

I never told her how wonderful she was. We all treated her as though she were just a friend in the house. I thought she'd be here forever.

LEONORA BANNING

*(Timidly):*

Genevieve darling, do come one minute and hold my babies' hands. We shall call the girl Lucia after her grandmother—will that please you? Do just see what adorable little hands they have.

*(Genevieve collects herself and goes over to the perambulator. She smiles brokenly into the basket.)*

GENEVIEVE

They are wonderful, Leonora.

LEONORA BANNING

Give him your finger, darling. Just let him hold it.

CHARLES

And we'll call the boy Samuel.—Well, now everybody come and finish your dinners. Don't drop them, nurse; at least don't drop the boy. We need him in the firm.

LEONORA BANNING

*(Stands looking after them as the nurse wheels them into the hall):*

Someday they'll be big. Imagine! They'll come in and say "Hello, Mother!"

*(She makes clucking noises of rapturous consternation.)*

CHARLES

Come, a little wine, Leonora, Genevieve? Full of iron. Eduardo, fill the ladies' glasses. It certainly is a keen, cold morning. I used to go skating with Father on mornings like this and Mother would come back from church saying—

GENEVIEVE

*(Dreamily):*

I know: saying, "Such a splendid sermon. I cried and cried."

LEONORA BANNING

Why did she cry, dear?

GENEVIEVE

That generation all cried at sermons. It was their way.

LEONORA BANNING

Really, Genevieve?

GENEVIEVE

They had had to go since they were children and I suppose sermons reminded them of their fathers and mothers, just as Christmas dinners do us. Especially in an old house like this.

LEONORA BANNING

It really is pretty old, Charles. And so ugly, with all that ironwork filigree and that dreadful cupola.

GENEVIEVE

Charles! You aren't going to change the house!

CHARLES

No, no. I won't give up the house, but great heavens! It's fifty years old. This spring we'll remove the cupola and build a new wing toward the tennis courts.

*(From now on Genevieve is seen to change. She sits up more straightly. The corners of her mouth become fixed. She becomes a forthright and slightly disillusioned spinster. Charles becomes the plain businessman and a little pompous.)*

LEONORA BANNING

And then couldn't we ask your dear old Cousin Ermengarde to come and live with us? She's really the self-effacing kind.

CHARLES

Ask her now. Take her out of the first grade.

GENEVIEVE

We only seem to think of it on Christmas Day with her Christmas card staring us in the face.

*(Enter left, nurse and perambulator. Blue ribbons.)*

LEONORA BANNING

Another boy! Another boy! Here's a Roderick for you at last.

CHARLES

Roderick Brandon Bayard. A regular little fighter.

LEONORA BANNING

Goodbye, darling. Don't grow up too fast. Yes, yes. Aië, aië, aië—stay just as you are. Thank you, nurse.

GENEVIEVE

*(Who has not left the table, repeats dryly):*

Stay just as you are.

*(Exit nurse and perambulator. The others return to their places.)*

LEONORA BANNING

Now I have three children. One, two, three. Two boys and a girl. I'm collecting them. It's very exciting.

*(Over her shoulder)*

What, Hilda? Oh, Cousin Ermengarde's come! Come in, Cousin.

*(Leonora goes to the hall and welcomes Cousin Ermengarde, who already wears her white hair.)*

COUSIN ERMENGARDE

*(Shyly):*

It's such a pleasure to be with you all.

CHARLES

*(Pulling out her chair for her):*

The twins have taken a great fancy to you already, Cousin.

LEONORA BANNING

The baby went to her at once.

CHARLES

Exactly how are we related, Cousin Ermengarde?—There, Genevieve, that's your specialty.—First a little more turkey and stuffing, Mother? Cranberry sauce, anybody?

GENEVIEVE

I can work it out: Grandmother Bayard was your ...

COUSIN ERMENGARDE

Your Grandmother Bayard was a second cousin of my Grandmother Haskins through the Wainrights.

CHARLES

Well, it's all in a book somewhere upstairs. All that kind of thing is awfully interesting.

GENEVIEVE

Nonsense. There are no such books. I collect my notes off gravestones, and you have to scrape a good deal of moss—let me tell you—to find one great-grandparent.

CHARLES

There's a story that my Grandmother Bayard crossed the Mississippi on a raft before there were any bridges or ferryboats. She died before Genevieve and I were born. Time certainly goes very fast in a great new country like this. Have some more cranberry sauce, Cousin Ermengarde.

COUSIN ERMENGARDE

*(Timidly):*

Well, time must be passing very slowly in Europe with this dreadful, dreadful war going on.

CHARLES

Perhaps an occasional war isn't so bad after all. It clears up a lot of poisons that collect in nations. It's like a boil.

COUSIN ERMENGARDE

Oh, dear, oh, dear!

CHARLES

*(With relish):*

Yes, it's like a boil.—Ho! ho! Here are your twins.

*(The twins appear at the door into the hall. Sam is wearing the uniform of an ensign. Lucia is fussing over some detail on it.)*

LUCIA

Isn't he wonderful in it, Mother?

CHARLES

Let's get a look at you.

SAMUEL

Mother, don't let Roderick fool with my stamp album while I'm gone.

LEONORA BANNING

Now, Sam, do write a letter once in a while. Do be a good boy about that, mind.

SAMUEL

You might send some of those cakes of yours once in a while, Cousin Ermengarde.

COUSIN ERMENGARDE

*(In a flutter):*

I certainly will, my dear boy.

CHARLES

If you need any money, we have agents in Paris and London, remember.

LEONORA BANNING

Do be a good boy, Sam.

SAMUEL

Well, good-bye ...

*(Sam goes briskly out through the dark portal, tossing his unneeded white hair through the door before him. Lucia sits down at the table with lowered eyes.)*

COUSIN ERMENGARDE

*(After a slight pause, in a low, constrained voice, making conversation):*

I spoke to Mrs' Fairchild for a moment coming out of church. Her rheumatism's a little better, she says. She sends you her warmest thanks for the Christmas present. The workbasket, wasn't it?—It was an admirable sermon. And our stained-glass window looked so beautiful, Leonora, so beautiful. Everybody spoke of it and so affectionately of Sammy.

*(Leonora's hand goes to her mouth)*

Forgive me, Leonora, but it's better to speak of him than not to speak of him when we're all thinking of him so hard.

LEONORA BANNING

*(Rising, in anguish):*

He was a mere boy. He was a mere boy, Charles.

CHARLES

My dear, my dear.

LEONORA BANNING

I want to tell him how wonderful he was. We let him go so casually. I want to tell him how we all feel about him.  
—Forgive me, let me walk about a minute.— Yes, of course, Ermengarde—it's best to speak of him.

LUCIA

*(In a low voice to Genevieve):*

Isn't there anything I can do?

GENEVIEVE

No, no. Only time, only the passing of time can help in these things.

*(Leonora, straying about the room, finds herself near the door to the hall at the moment that her son Roderick enters. He links his arm with hers and leads her back to the table.)*

RODERICK

What's the matter, anyway? What are you so glum about? The skating was fine today.

CHARLES

Sit down, young man. I have something to say to you.

RODERICK

Everybody was there. Lucia skated in the corners with Dan Creighton the whole time. When'll it be, Lucia, when'll it be?

LUCIA

I don't know what you mean.

RODERICK

Lucia's leaving us soon, Mother. Dan Creighton, of all people.

CHARLES

*(Ominously):*

Roderick, I have something to say to you.

RODERICK

Yes, Father.

CHARLES

Is it true, Roderick, that you made yourself conspicuous last night at the country club—at a Christmas Eve dance, too?

LEONORA BANNING

Not now, Charles, I beg of you. This is Christmas dinner.

RODERICK

*(Loudly):*

No, I didn't.

LUCIA

Really, Father, he didn't. It was that dreadful Johnny Lewis.

CHARLES

I don't want to hear about Johnny Lewis. I want to know whether a son of mine ...

LEONORA BANNING

Charles, I beg of you ...

CHARLES

The first family of this city!

RODERICK

*(Rising):*

I hate this town and everything about it. I always did.

CHARLES

You behaved like a spoiled puppy, sir, an ill-bred spoiled puppy.

RODERICK

What did I do? What did I do that was wrong?

CHARLES

You were drunk and you were rude to the daughters of my best friends.

GENEVIEVE

*(Striking the table):*

Nothing in the world deserves an ugly scene like this. Charles, I'm ashamed of you.

RODERICK

Great God, you gotta get drunk in this town to forget how dull it is. Time passes so slowly here that it stands still, that's what's the trouble.

CHARLES

Well, young man, we can employ your time. You will leave the university and you will come into the Bayard factory on January second.

RODERICK

*(At the door into the hall):*

I have better things to do than to go into your old factory. I'm going somewhere where time passes, my God!

*(He goes out into the hall.)*

LEONORA BANNING

*(Rising):*

Roderick, Roderick, come here just a moment.—Charles where can he go?

LUCIA

*(Rising):*

Shh, Mother. He'll come back. Now I have to go upstairs and pack my trunk.

LEONORA BANNING

I won't have any children left!

LUCIA

Shh, Mother. He'll come back. He's only gone to California or somewhere. Cousin Ermengarde has done most of my packing—thanks a thousand times, Cousin Ermengarde.

*(She kisses her mother)*

I won't be long.

*(She runs out into the hall)*

*(Genevieve and Leonora put on their white hair.)*

COUSIN ERMENGARDE

It's a very beautiful day. On the way home from church I stopped and saw Mrs. Foster a moment. Her arthritis comes and goes.

LEONORA BANNING

Is she actually in pain, dear?

COUSIN ERMENGARDE

Oh, she says it'll all be the same in a hundred years!

LEONORA BANNING

Yes, she's a brave little stoic.

CHARLES

Come now, a little white meat, Mother?—Mary, pass my cousin's plate.

LEONORA BANNING

What is it, Mary?—Oh, here's a telegram from them in Paris! "Love and Christmas greetings to all." I told them we'd be eating some of their wedding cake and thinking about them today. It seems to be all decided that they will settle down in the east, Ermengarde. I can't even have my daughter for a neighbor. They hope to build before long somewhere on the shore north of New York.

GENEVIEVE

There is no shore north of New York.

LEONORA BANNING

Well, east or west or whatever it is.

*(Pause.)*

CHARLES

My, what a dark day.

*(He puts on his white hair. Pause.)*

How slowly time passes without any young people in the house.

LEONORA BANNING

I have three children somewhere.

CHARLES

*(Blunderingly offering comfort):*

Well, one of them gave his life for his country.

LEONORA BANNING

*(Sadly):*

And one of them is selling aluminum in China.

GENEVIEVE

*(Slowly working herself up to a hysterical crisis):*

I can stand everything but this terrible soot everywhere. We should have moved long ago. We're surrounded by factories. We have to change the window curtains every week.

LEONORA BANNING

Why, Genevieve!

GENEVIEVE

I can't stand it. I can't stand it any more. I'm going abroad. It's not only the soot that comes through the very walls of this house; it's the *thoughts*, it's the thought of what has been and what might have been here. And the feeling about this house of the years *grinding away*. My mother died yesterday—not twenty-five years ago. Oh,

I'm going to live and die abroad! Yes, I'm going to be the American old maid living and dying in a pension in Munich or Florence.

COUSIN ERMENGARDE

Genevieve, you're tired.

CHARLES

Come, Genevieve, take a good drink of cold water. Mary, open the window a minute.

GENEVIEVE

I'm sorry. I'm sorry.

*(Genevieve hurries tearfully out into the hall.)*

COUSIN ERMENGARDE

Dear Genevieve will come back to us, I think.

*(She rises and starts toward the dark portal.)*

You should have been out today, Leonora. It was one of those days when everything was encircled with ice. Very pretty, indeed.

*(Charles rises and starts after her.)*

CHARLES

Leonora, I used to go skating with Father on mornings like this. I wish I felt a little better.

LEONORA BANNING

What! Have I got two invalids on my hands at once? Now, Cousin Ermengarde, you must get better and help me nurse Charles.

COUSIN ERMENGARDE

I'll do my best.

*(She turns at the very portal and comes back to the table.)*

CHARLES

Well, Leonora, I'll do what you ask. I'll write the puppy a letter of forgiveness and apology. It's Christmas Day. I'll cable it. That's what I'll do.

*(He goes out the dark door.)*

LEONORA BANNING

*(Drying her eyes):*

Ermengarde, it's such a comfort having you here with me. Mary, I really can't eat anything. Well, perhaps, a sliver of white meat.

COUSIN ERMENGARDE

*(Very old):*

I spoke to Mrs' Keene for a moment coming out of church. She asked after the young people.— At church I felt very proud sitting under our windows, Leonora, and our brass tablets. The Bayard aisle—it's a regular Bayard aisle and I love it.

LEONORA BANNING

Ermengarde, would you be very angry with me if I went and stayed with the young people a little this spring?

COUSIN ERMENGARDE

Why, no' I know how badly they want you and need you. Especially now that they're about to build a new house.

LEONORA BANNING

You wouldn't be angry? This house is yours as long as you want it, remember.

COUSIN ERMENGARDE

I don't see why the rest of you dislike it. I like it more than I can say.

LEONORA BANNING

I won't be long. I'll be back in no time and we can have some more of our readings aloud in the evening.

*(She kisses her and goes into the hall)*

*(Ermengarde left alone, eats slowly and talks to Mary.)*

COUSIN ERMENGARDE

Really, Mary, I'll change my mind. If you'll ask Bertha to be good enough to make me a little eggnog. A dear little eggnog.— Such a nice letter this morning from Mrs' Bayard, Mary. Such a nice letter. They're having their first Christmas dinner in the new

house. They must be very happy. They call her Mother Bayard, she says, as though she were an old lady. And she says she finds it more comfortable to come and go in a wheelchair.— Such a dear letter ... And Mary, I can tell you a secret. It's still a great secret, mind! They're expecting a grandchild. Isn't that good news! Now I'll read a little.

*(She props a book up before her, still dipping a spoon into a custard from time to time. She grows from very old to immensely old. She sighs. The book falls down. She finds a cane beside her, and soon totters into the dark portal, murmuring):*

"Dear little Roderick and little Lucia."

END OF PLAY