

## A THOUSAND CLOWNS

by Herb Gardner

## ACT III

Murray Burns will not conform. He will not take a steady job, he will not keep his apartment neat, he will not provide his precocious nephew, Nick (left in his care years earlier by his sister), with a home environment that meets the standards of the Child Welfare Board. He enjoys his life, and enjoys poking fun at the hypocrisy and stodginess of others. When the Welfare Board threatens to take Nick away, Murray sets out to put on a "reliability" show for them. He will straighten up his apartment and get a job. He walked out of a career as a successful TV comedy writer, but now he asks his brother, Arnold, an agent, to find him another job. When actually confronted with the reality of reentering the false and competitive life he left behind, he walks out of his brother's office. In the excerpt that follows, Arnold comes to Murray's apartment. Murray, resigned that Nick will have to go, is "unstraightening" his straightened-up apartment as Arnold enters. An old recording of a marching band playing "Stars and Stripes Forever" is playing on the phonograph. (Arnold's mention of a "tangerine" in his opening line refers to the fact that on past visits he has always brought fruit with him.)

**ARNOLD, after a moment:** I didn't even bring a tangerine with me. That's very courageous if you think about it for a minute. *Looks over at Murray, who is not facing him; points at record player:* You wanna turn that music off, please? *No reply from Murray.* Murray, the music; I'm trying to— *(No reply from Murray, so Arnold puts attache case and hat on table, goes quickly to record player, turns music off; Murray turns to look at Arnold.)* O.K., I'm a little slow. It takes me an hour to get insulted. Now I'm insulted. You walked out of my office. That wasn't a nice thing to do to me, Murray. *Murray does not reply.* You came into my office like George God; everybody's sup-

posed to come up and audition for Human Being in front of you. *Comes over closer to him, takes his arm.* Aw, Murray, today, one day, leave the dragons alone, will ya? And look at the dragons you pick on; Sloan, Leo, me; silly old arthritic dragons, step on a toe and we'll start to cry. Murray, I called Leo back, I apologized, told him my phone broke down; I got him to come over here tonight. He's anxious to see you, everything's O.K. **MURRAY:** Hey, you just never give up, do you Arnie?

**ARNOLD:** Listen to me, Murray, do I ever tell you what to do—?

**MURRAY:** Yes, all the time.

**ARNOLD:** If you love this kid then you gotta take any kinda stupid job to keep him.

**MURRAY:** Now you're an expert on love.

**ARNOLD:** Not an expert, but I sure as hell value my amateur standing. Murray, about him leaving, have you told him yet?

**MURRAY, softly, realizing Arnold's genuine concern:** Arnie, don't worry, I know how to handle it. I've got a coupla days to tell him. And don't underrate Nick, Arnie; he's gonna understand this a lot better than you think he is.

**ARNOLD:** Murray, I finally figured out your problem. There's only one thing that really bothers you— *(with a sweep of his hand)* Other people. *With a mock-secretive tone:* If it wasn't for them other people, everything would be great, huh, Murray? I mean, you think everything's fine, and then you go out into the street—and there they all *are* again, right? The other people; taking up space, bumping into you, asking for things, making lines to wait on, taking cabs away from ya—The Enemy. Well, watch out, Murray, they're *everywhere*—

**MURRAY:** Go ahead, Arnie, give me advice, at thirty thousand a year you can afford it.

**ARNOLD:** Oh, I get it, if I'm so smart why ain't I poor? You better get a damn good act of your own before you start giving mine the razzberry. What's this game you play gonna be like ten years from now, without youth? Murray, Murray, I can't watch this, you gotta *shape-up*—

**MURRAY, turning quickly to face Arnold, in a surprised tone:** *Shape-up?* *(looks directly at Arnold, speaks slowly)* Arnie, what the hell happened to you? You got so old. I don't know you any more. When you quit "Harry the Fur King" on Thirty-eighth Street, remember?

ARNOLD: That's twenty years ago, Murray.

MURRAY: You told me you were going to be in twenty businesses in twenty years if you had to, till you found out what you wanted. Things were always going to change. Harry said you were not behaving maturely enough for a salesman; your clothes didn't match or something— (*laughs in affectionate memory of the event*) So the next day, you dressed perfectly, homburg, gray suit, cuff links, carrying a briefcase and a rolled umbrella—and you came into Harry's office on roller skates. You weren't going to take crap from anybody. So that's the business you finally picked—taking crap from everybody.

ARNOLD: I don't do practical jokes any more, if that's what you mean.

MURRAY, *grabs both of Arnold's arms tensely*: Practical, that's right; a way to stay alive. If most things aren't funny, Arn, then they're only exactly what they are; then it's one long dental appointment interrupted occasionally by something exciting, like waiting or falling asleep. What's the point if I leave everything exactly the way I find it? Then I'm just adding to the noise, then I'm just taking up some more room on the subway.

ARNOLD: Murray, the Welfare Board has these specifications; all you have to do is meet a couple of specifications—

*Murray releases his grip on Arnold's arms, Murray's hands drop to his sides.*

MURRAY: Oh, Arnie, you don't understand anymore. You got that wide stare that people stick in their eyes so nobody'll know their head's asleep. You got to be a shuffler, a moaner. You want me to come sit and eat fruit with you and watch the clock run out. You start to drag and stumble with the rotten weight of all the people who should have been told off, all the things you should have said, all the specifications that aren't yours. The only thing you got left to reject is your food in a restaurant if they do it wrong and you can send it back and make a big fuss with the waiter. *Murray turns away from Arnold, goes to window seat, sits down.* Arnold, five months ago I forgot what day it was. I'm on the subway on my way to work and I didn't know what day it was and it scared the hell out of me. *Quietly*: I was sitting in the express looking out the window same as every morning watching the local stops go by in the dark with an empty head and my arms folded not feeling great and not feel-

ing rotten, just not feeling, and for a minute I couldn't remember, I didn't know, unless I really concentrated, whether it was a Tuesday or a Thursday—or a—for a minute it could have been any day, Arnie—sitting in the train going through any day—in the dark through any year—Arnie, it scared the hell out of me. *Stands up.* You got to know what day it is. You got to know what's the name of the game and what the rules are with nobody else telling you. You have to own your days and name them, each of them, every one of them, or else the years go right by and none of them belong to you. *Turns to look at Arnold.* And that ain't just for weekends, Kiddo. *Looks at Arnold a moment longer, then speaks in a pleasant tone*: Here it is, the day after Irving R. Feldman's birthday, for God's sake— (*takes hat, puts it on*) And I never even congratulated him. *Starts to walk briskly toward the front door.*

ARNOLD, *he shouts in a voice stronger than we have ever heard from him*: Murray!

*Murray stops, turns, is startled to hear this loud a voice from Arnold. Arnold looks fiercely at Murray for a moment, then Arnold too looks surprised, starts to laugh.*

MURRAY: What's so funny?

ARNOLD: Wow, I scared myself. You hear that voice? Look at that, I got you to stop. I got your complete full attention, the floor is mine now. *Chuckles, awkwardly*: And I can't think of a Goddamned thing to say. *Shrugging his shoulders, picks up his hat from table.* I have long been aware, Murray—I have long been aware that you don't respect me much—I suppose there are a lot of brothers who don't get along. But in reference—to us, considering the factors— (*smiles, embarrassed*) Sounds like a contract, doesn't it? *Picks up his briefcase, comes over to Murray.* Unfortunately for you, Murray, you want to be a hero. Maybe if a fellow falls into a lake, you can jump in and save him; there's still that kind of stuff. But who gets opportunities like that in midtown Manhattan, with all that traffic. *Puts on his hat.* I am willing to deal with the available world and I do not choose to shake it up but to live with it. There's the people who spill things, and the people who get spilled on; I do not choose to notice the stains, Murray. I have a wife and I have children and business, like they say, is business. I am not an exceptional man, so it is possible for me to stay with things the way they

are. I'm lucky. I'm gifted. I have a talent for surrender. I'm at peace. But you are cursed; and I like you so it makes me sad, you don't have the gift; and I see the torture of it. All I can do is worry for you. But I will not worry for myself, you cannot convince me that I am one of the Bad Guys. I get up, I go, I lie a little, I peddle a little, I watch the rules, I talk the talk. We fellows have those offices high up there so we can catch the wind and go with it, however it blows. But, and I will not apologize for it, I take pride; I am the best possible Arnold Burns. *Pause.* Well—give my regards to Irving R. Feldman, will ya? *Starts to leave.*

MURRAY, *going toward him:* Arnold—

ARNOLD: Please, Murray— (*puts his hand up*) Allow me once to leave a room before you do. *Arnold snaps on record player as he walks past it to the front door; exits.*

## BECKET (or THE HONOUR OF GOD)

by Jean Anouilh,  
translated by Lucienne Hill

---

### ACT IV

The play tells the story of Henry II, King of England, and Thomas Becket, archbishop of Canterbury, of the conflicting allegiances that destroy their friendship and that ultimately lead to Becket's assassination by the king.

Henry is a Norman (the people that conquered the native British Saxons). He is crude and untutored with simple goals and passions. He loves Becket, his friend and advisor, and he is determined to win his struggle with the Church for wealth and power. Becket, a Saxon, is wiser, subtler, and more complex. He is devoted to his king who has enriched and protected him (he was Henry's faithful companion in drinking, fighting, and whoring); yet through the years of their friendship his alle-

giance was always tempered by the knowledge that his own conquered people were suffering under Henry's rule.

When his enemy, the old archbishop, dies Henry comes up with a most clever plan. He will appoint his friend Becket to the post, thus bringing the Church and the Saxons fully under his control. But Becket takes his church responsibilities far more seriously than anticipated; most seriously, indeed. For the first time in his life his direction is clear. On the Church's behalf he opposes Henry on a number of crucial issues, and his intelligence and incorruptibility thwart Henry's every strategy.

Feeling betrayed, Henry plots against Becket's life. Becket leaves England seeking the protection of the French king; but soon—realizing the unreliability of that protection and the need to fight his battles on England's soil—he decides to return home. In the scene that follows, Henry and Becket are alone on an open plain in France, battered by wintry winds. They have agreed to meet to try to reconcile their differences—but neither can budge from his position.

KING, *suddenly:* If we've nothing more to say to each other, we might as well go and get warm!

BECKET: We have everything to say to each other, my prince. The opportunity may not occur again.

KING: Make haste, then. Or there'll be two frozen statues on this plain making their peace in a frozen eternity! I am your King, Becket! And so long as we are on this earth you owe me the first move! I'm prepared to forget a lot of things but not the fact that I am King. You yourself taught me that.

BECKET, *gravely:* Never forget it, my prince. Even against God. You have a different task to do. You have to steer the ship.

KING: And you—what do you have to do?

BECKET: Resist you with all my might, when you steer against the wind.

KING: Do you expect the wind to be behind me, Becket? No such luck! That's the fairy-tale navigation! God on the King's side? That's never happened yet! Yes, once in a century, at the time of the Crusades, when all Christendom shouts "It's God's will!" And even then! You know as well as I do what private greeds a Crusade covers up, in nine cases out of ten. The rest of