

I

(Records of grievances)

(5 characters are sitting around a table : four farmers -- Hubert, Georges, Raymond and Simone; Mr. Duplessis, in noble's clothing and pen in hand, notes the farmers' complaints in a large notebook.)

The Owl: *(He arrives slowly on tiptoe, dressed as a devil, finger over his lips whispering "Shh! Shh!" The five characters seem to talk amongst themselves as the Owl draws closer to the audience and begins to speak.)*

I am the Owl of Paris. It is September 1788 and these brave people of Nogent sur Seine are making their claims of the king. As for me, I am everywhere and nowhere. I am a witness of sorts. It's beautiful, isn't it? Look at them! They are so touching, so sweet! You know, they don't yet realize that they are making history... not the story of Little Red Riding Hood or Puss in Boots, no, no... they are making history with a capital H. You can feel it in the air like a rising wind, a storm that will stir up all of Europe. Poor, innocent souls, you can hear their murmurs in the evening air, so plaintive and justified. Go ahead, lend an ear, it's so moving... well, I'll step aside and let them argue... Oh, one more thing: try to give them a fair chance. I'll see you soon, my friends, but be good... *(he tiptoes away, just as he came, while the voices are finally heard)*

Hubert: And my cow! My Rosine who gave me all that good milk! I had no more hay to give her and now she's dead. Write that down, Duplessis, write that down!

Mr. Duplessis: Come on, Hubert, that's not our biggest concern! We are here for the men that suffer and die every day, not for cows.

Hubert: Yes, but if I have no more milk, aren't I the one who is suffering?

Mr. Duplessis: Well, all right. His Rosine, do I add it or not?

Georges: No, no! It's salt that we need! Our food is tasteless, and how can we preserve our food? Rosine can go ahead and drop dead; she's not the one that gives us our salt!

Raymond: And these ridiculous taxes! That's even more important! Soup without salt, cows without hay, fine! But look at these old rags, all in tatters. What's more, you remember how cold it was last winter. We froze. These taxes are bleeding us dry.

Hubert: Doesn't my Rosine matter? We said that we would list our grievances. Me, I want hay.

Georges: You're foolish enough to be eating hay. We need salt!

Mr. Duplessis: Let's be serious, gentlemen. If we want the King to see us as credible, we must...

Simone: No, Raymond's right! Taxes, taxes, Taxes!

All: *(chanting)* Taxes! Down with taxes! Taxes!

Mr. Duplessis: Wait! *(He writes)* "Taxes must be lowered so that our farmers may feed their animals and purchase salt..." Does that suit you? *(They nod)*

Georges: Yeah, yeah... but last winter... you remember that flock of buzzards...

Hubert: You're the buzzard...

Georges: You remember how cold we were. We almost starved to death!

Mr. Duplessis: That I'll put down. So I... I'm saying: "find a concrete solution so as to avoid future food shortages."

Simone: Obviously! When you've got eight brats to feed, it's pretty tough! You have to eat!

Mr. Duplessis: Good, good, I've got that all down. I've added "especially for families with children".

Hubert: Marguerite and I don't have children; we don't give a damn!

Mr. Duplessis: No, it's already written, let's not dwell on it.

Hubert: Yes, but cows come before kids!

Raymond: What are you complaining about? You're the richest man in town; you've got some nerve to complain!

Georges: Down with the rich! Give us your money!

Mr. Duplessis: Wait! We aren't talking about inequalities, yet!

Simone: As for me, a fox attacked my chickens! No more chickens, no more hens, no more eggs... it's a disaster. What can we do?

Raymond: It's all the nobles' fault; they don't want anyone to hunt. Talk about a stupid idea, the countryside are crawling with game and we still go hungry.

Hubert: Yes, we should be allowed to kill them!

Raymond: Who's that? The nobles?

Hubert: Of course not, you fool. The wild animals!

Raymond: You're the fool! Just you watch when we go up against the rich!

Mr. Duplessis: (*Indifferent to this exchange, writing*) "We insist" ... does insist suit you?

Hubert: Yes, yes!

Mr. Duplessis: Good, I'll start from the top: "Moreover, we insist upon the right to hunt animals". Do you agree? (*They nod*)

Georges: You will say I'm trying to change the subject, but ... why won't the King come to see us in Nogent?

Simone: He must believe that we've got swine flu! He's afraid of getting sick!

Raymond: Yes, he must be afraid of us! That's for sure!

Mr. Duplessis: Calm down! Calm down! I'll sum it up: "We would like the King to be closer to his subjects so that he may fully understand our difficulties". Does that suit you?

All: Yeah, yeah... If you'll believe that one!

Raymond: All in all, we're lucky you're here, Duplessis! We can't even write...

Simone: Well that's all well and good, but...

Hubert: My cows won't wait! Goodbye, everybody! (*he leaves*)

Simone: And I've left my kids in the yard! (*she leaves*)

Georges: I've got to get my winter stores ready... well, what I have left to eat! (*he leaves*)

Raymond: Hey, wait for me! (*he leaves*)

Mr. Duplessis: (*Slowly stands up, putting down the pen and wiping his brow*). Well, this business won't be a piece of cake. Finally, we'll send this to the King and see what happens, but it will surely cause a commotion in Versailles... they are in for a surprise...

II
(The General Estates)

(The Owl arrives on tiptoe.) Hello, my friends, I'm back! It's quite the affair, my friends, quite the affair indeed! My word! The rumble and roar of riots all through the winter and spring of '89 ... and on the fifth of May, the King called for an assembly of the General Estates! Look! Here comes the delegate from Nogent sur Seine, back to give his report on the first debates *(Mr. Duplessis enters)*; Mister Duplessis, I'm afraid that you have your work cut out for you. Let's see how he goes about presenting all this! Oh, my! What a good sport! *(A crowd arrives, represented by three actors. The delegate steps up onto a chair.)* Let's hope he doesn't fall and break his nose on the ground; that would be quite the bad sign, kids! You can feel it, moaning and groaning, growling and grumbling! Definitely not happy, I'm telling you! But shh! Shh! Let's listen in...

Mr. Duplessis: Oh, my friends, you are going to be quite satisfied!

All: Ah! Finally!

Raymond: Tell us, Duplessis; were there a lot of people?

Mr. Duplessis: Well... well...

Hubert: Was it just you and the King or were there a lot of people?

Mr. Duplessis: Stop joking around!

Hubert: Anyway, Paris is beautiful, right?

Mr. Duplessis: It wasn't in Paris, it was in...

Hubert: In the end, you did go by Paris?

Mr. Duplessis: Yes, but you know...

Hubert: All right, that's fine, that's all I wanted to know. Don't get all worked up!

Simone: The room you were in, was it beautiful or what?

Raymond: Were there women? Were they beautiful?

Hubert: They held mass at the beginning, I know that much...

Raymond: Well, did they talk about the harvests?

Mr. Duplessis: Calm down, my friends, let's calm down. Yes, there were many of us, as representatives of the Third Estate...

Raymond: What's the Third Estate?

Mr. Duplessis: That's us, you nitwit!

Raymond: Don't insult me, all high and mighty! It's because you went to go see the King that...

Mr. Duplessis: The Third Estate is us! Everyone who isn't nobility and doesn't belong to the clergy!

Simone: Hang on, that's a lot of people!

Mr. Duplessis: That's why we have insisted upon having a number of representatives equal to those of the nobility and clergy combined.

Simone: That's good! Very good! Bravo!

Hubert: They say the King fell asleep during one of the sessions. Is that true?

Mr. Duplessis: Yes, it's true. It was during Necker's speech.

Raymond: And who's Necker?

Mr. Duplessis: He's the Director-General of Finance, which is to say that he holds the purse strings... He's the one in charge of the money!

Raymond: Oh, like my wife at home...

Mr. Duplessis: Stop interrupting me!

Simone: *(To Raymond)* Yes, shut up, you. We put together enough money for you to go and represent us, so... give us an answer!

Mr. Duplessis: What's the question?

Hubert: Necker... go on, tell us!

Mr. Duplessis: Well, um, he presented a speech about the state of the kingdom's finances.

Hubert: It's not so great, we know that much... and then?

Mr. Duplessis: So we, that is to say the Third Estate, requested to have our votes counted by head...

Raymond: Go on, explain that too!

Mr. Duplessis: Each representative gets a vote, so we no longer vote by order: the nobility and the clergy and the Third Estate, we each vote individually!

Raymond: Well, that's normal, no?

Mr. Duplessis: Yes, but at first the request wasn't taken into account. The King did this: *(He waves his hand in a gesture of haughty refusal)*

Raymond: He did that? That's not such a good King.

Hubert: And you let him do it like the wimps that you are.

Simone: You know, I told you... I should have been the one to go, I would have told him, the King, about my hens and the foxes.

Hubert: What are you talking about? You can't even read... even then, the king doesn't care about your hens and foxes!

Simone: Of course I can't read... so what... I have a voice like everyone else... I can speak... that's just one more reason to give him a piece of my mind... that's what I would have said to the King.

Mr. Duplessis: There's no need to worry, this is only just beginning... there is talk that we will meet in order to found a National Assembly.

Raymond: You think the King will let that happen? My eye, he will!

Hubert: Yeah, my eye! Well said! As usual, you've been had!

Mr. Duplessis: I see this matter differently, my friends. Believe me, the representatives of the Third Estate will stand firm on this. Trust us!

Raymond: You must be joking, trust, trust... I'd rather talk to my cows; at least they've earned my trust...

Hubert: Yeah, I'm not sure that this is going to work...

Mr. Duplessis: Before you leave, listen to this: Have faith, my friends, we are not alone! We are the whole world, even! Believe me! The whole world!

III

(In Versailles)

Marie Thérèse: What a beautiful day! We should go play outside!

Louis: Where is Mom?

Marie Thérèse: She's in Trianon with her friends.

Louis: And Dad?

Marie Thérèse: His Majesty is in his workshop, making locks and keys.

Louis: Let's go, then, we can go run around in the park!

Marie Thérèse: First, I have a secret to tell you... this morning, I heard people talking...

Louis: What?! You were snooping?

Marie Thérèse: It seems that a revolution is going on in Paris, that people are fighting in the streets, but I don't know why! Don't you think we should tell Dad?

IV

(The taking of the Bastille)

- The Owl: *(He runs into view)* It's me again! I'm all out of breath! Oh my, oh my, that's it, that's it, the fourteenth of July... the people are on the move! You can't hear the cries, the sound of marching feet, the howls. In the middle of Paris itself. They are armed, and quite terribly so. They seem to be going who knows where... but they're going... Wait, I'm listening, my word, my word, what is that I hear? The Bastille? They are going to the Bastille... that's an enormous building... yes, yes; they are in great numbers... armed to the teeth! Oh my, even I'm afraid, the Owl of Paris, I'm shaking in my boots! I'm going to save myself, I'm simply too scared. My word, the Bastille.... They've gone mad... I'm going to save myself... *(He is blocked by assailants coming from the other direction)*
- The mob: *(represented by three or four actors or actresses, rifles in hand)* Bullets! Powder! Bullets! Powder!
- The Owl: You've got rifles!?
- Paul: Yes, but we have no powder!
- The Owl: Neither do I!
- Paul: That's why we're going to the Bastille, they've got some there! Go on, get lost. We want powder! We want bullets!
- The Owl: But why do you want bullets and powder? Who do you want to kill?
- Paul: Shut up, you, or I'll hit you with my rifle!
- Pierre: We want weapons so that we can protect ourselves! If you stay here, Owl, you'll get yourself killed!
- The Owl: The good Lord will protect me... you're not really going to attack the Bastille! That's where the King keeps his particular prisoners.
- Pierre: Exactly so, owl of unhappiness, you don't understand anything! We want bullets and powder to defend ourselves and we are going to set the prisoners free.
- The Owl: But there are only six or seven prisoners in there... Devil take me if I understand anything!
- Pierre: Don't worry about understanding; just do as you're told. Take this rifle... or get lost!
- The Owl: I'm going to step back a little, my friend, but I would like to understand... what are these cannons that you have here?
- Pierre: You think that we will take the Bastille with nothing but forks and teaspoons?
- Paul: *(To the cannoners... off in the wings)* Go on; blow it to pieces for me! Fire!

The Owl: My word! I'm going to cover my ears!

Pierre: That's it, we've got an opening, let's go! Everyone into the Bastille and start attacking the guards!

The mob: Into the Bastille! Into the Bastille!

De Launay: (*appears*) Stop right there, you scoundrels and wretches. (*The mob stops*) Settle down. As governor of the Bastille, I order you...

Paul: You're the governor of nothing! We want bullets and powder!

Pierre: Let the prisoners go, too!

De Launay: But the King would never agree to that!

Paul: What King?

The Owl: Mister De Launay... do as they say! Don't argue! You're risking your life!

De Launay: (*turns towards the wings*) Guards! Guards, to me! Fire on these miserable, flea-ridden upstarts! (*The guards do not appear; loud voices say "We will not fire on the people"*)

The Owl: Save yourself, Mr. De Launay! They are going to...

De Launay: You'll have to go through me, you bunch of... have you lost your minds?

Paul: (*he takes De Launay by the shoulders*) You're the one going to lose his head! Come here. Go on, do your job! (*He leads De Launay to a butcher who has just arrived out of the wings; he has a knife in hand*) No mercy, either!

Pierre: Wait, he has to tell us where to find the bullets and powder.

The Owl: And the prisoners? The King's poor prisoners?

Paul: That's not important; we can find them on our own. All right, get right of him so we can get this over with! (*The butcher disappears with De Launay and returns with his head... a doll's head will do just as well*)

The Owl: How terrible! Such a nice day and someone has to go and die!

Paul: He won't be the last one, you can count on us! No quarter for the enemies of freedom!

The Owl: Poor De Launay, he won't have a chance to see that freedom! Well, if that's the price to pay... oh my, they're setting fires; they're coming in through the holes in the wall and breaking everything... Today, I believe that it's better to be the Owl of Paris than the King of France. I hear them demanding bread. They are hungry. They shout: "Down with the Bastille! Down with the royalty! Long live freedom!"

Pierre: (*returns*) You're still here?

The Owl: Well yes, you see, I haven't left. I am a witness; The Owl of Paris must have eyes everywhere. I am the great witness, do you understand?

Pierre: Yes, take a good look! This is a major event!

The Owl: A revolt?

Pierre: No, Owl, it's a revolution.

The Owl: *(with admiration)* A revolution, a revolution... I'll remember that.

Pierre: You aren't the only one, Owl. *(He shouts)* The whole world will remember this!

V

(Returning to the village)

(The farmers (Hubert, Georges, Raymond and Simone) and Duplessis stand off to the side as the mob rages on, tearing up state documents)

Hubert: No more special privileges!

Georges: Power to the public!

Raymond: Long live freedom!

Simone: Down with tyrants!

Mr. Duplessis: My friends, I have good news from Paris! Listen, listen...

(THE DECLARATION OF THE RIGHTS OF MAN)

(The mob cheers and starts to sing "Ca ira, ca ira")