

## Scene One

[Three Irish famine victims (McKitteridge, Kathleen, and Gerry) sit at a table on a low platform upstage, devouring soup from wooden bowls. They were recruited from the local workhouse and have been waiting all morning to go onstage. A fence separates the famine victims from a downstage walkway. A guard/soup serf stands upstage, holding a bucket of soup and a ladle. An upstage window lets in thin daylight. A ten-count breath of silence settles except for the soup eating and the scratch of Roddy, an illustrator from the *Illustrated London News*, who sketches the scene from outside the DSL fence corner.

Traditional music plays. Victorian French celebrity chef Alexis Soyer leads Lord John Russell's family onto the walkway. Soyer is a handsome salesman with dark brown, curly hair and a beard. Lord Russell is mutton-chopped, hook-nosed and pear-shaped, and Lady Russell is pregnant. Their son, John Russell, is ten, impatient, and holding a balloon. Two famine victims sit up straight and eat more daintily; one still gorges. It is 1847 in Dublin.]

SOYER

Fifty fed per day. One hundred gallons of soup for a mere pound, so a mere pound saves *beaucoup vie*. The five-shilling entrance fee purchases *pain*, bread, as well. Visitors pay admission here to serve society, and they'll sleep better because of it, *n'cest pas?*

[He nods to the soup serf. The soup serf walks along the table, ladling more soup into bowls. The famine victims eat. John, on the walkway between his stiff parents, tugs on his mother's coat.]

JOHN

(Overlapping.) Mummy, Mummy, Mummy - - - [He continues sporadically under.]

LADY RUSSELL

Shhh! For the love of God, child, don't test Mummy so - - -

SOYER

If you are wondering, Lady Russell, the soup is my own concoction, a *consomme* of the lightest touch. Just the tiniest breath of basil, chicken and lemon, the finest clarified *bouillon*, very soothing and good for the humors. Poor lost souls, they need

nourishment, so they can further praise the Lord our Father and blessed St. Brendan and St. Patrick. Your government, they used to send us that Peel's Brimstone, that cornmeal cut with sulfur, but even that's all gone now.

[For a five-count breath, they all watch the famine victims eat. Russell puts a handkerchief over his mouth. John still mutters.]

JOHN

Mummy, Mummy, murder, Mummy, I said I wanted to go to the zoo - - -

LADY RUSSELL

(To Lord Russell.) Darling, didn't you say that Peel was wasting money on that cornmeal - - -

SOYER

Any help from the Queen is hardly a waste - - -

JOHN

The zoo. Where they keep the wild animals. These are people. I see them in the streets. This is boring.

RUSSELL

It's another shilling.

LADY RUSSELL

What's another shilling - - -

RUSSELL

The zoo.

JOHN

Can I feed them? We need popcorn or pips.

RUSSELL

No. I'm sure it's another shilling - - -

JOHN

Look at that big one swallow - - -

RUSSELL

We'll visit the zoo, John Russell, after the press . . . well, after this. I think it's next door, isn't it, Soyer, Phoenix Park?

SOYER

*Oui.*

JOHN

(Overlapping.) Is that a cage?

RUSSELL

Why on earth would people put people in cages? He's helping these people. He's feeding them - - -

LADY RUSSELL

Chef Soyer, do you ever share your recipes? Like the one for your lamb chops? I love them, they're so, so, so - - -

SOYER

*Oui, merci, madam, apres* our "kitchen d'soup tour," you can further contribute to the cause by purchasing my culinary books, *The Poor Man's Regenerator* and *Soyer's Charitable Cookery*. For every copy sold, I donate one shilling to the Irish Famine victims. With those books and a precious bottle of Soyer's Sultana's Sauce, then you can cook - - -

LADY RUSSELL

We have a cook - - -

SOYER

Then your cook can cook like Alexis Soyer in your own home. Come, come, come, more *beaucoup tableau* through these curtains.

(Ushering the Russells offstage left.)

Lord Russell, Prime Minister, I hear the Queen just appointed you her Arborist. What a gold mine that must be, all those trees and lumber. Besides all the wheat import, amazing. You're a lucky man.

RUSSELL

Indeed I am. The Queen honors my family.

SOYER

A reporter from *The Nation* has agreed to briefly meet us in the lobby - - -

RUSSELL

*The Nation!* That nationalistic rag - - -

SOYER

And *The Cork Examiner*.

RUSSELL

That's slightly better.

SOYER

They've brought another man with a camera - - -

RUSSELL

I don't trust those things - - -

SOYER

Very powerful, image - - -

RUSSELL

(Indicates Roddy, the illustrator.) Can't he sketch me with them?

SOYER

He can, but the *Examiner* brought a man. It will be fast, I promise. Just a few minutes.

RUSSELL

I don't have much time . . . How often do you clean them?

SOYER

Clean them? Oh, we supply them with water and soap backstage. Do you want to pose with some?

[Soyer nods to the soup serf as he and Russell exit. The serf escorts the famine victims offstage left.]

RODDY

(Alone, he stands, stretches and pats his pockets in a five-count breath.) Wish I had a cigarette. Or a camera. (He flips to a new sheet in his sketchbook. He cleans his hands. He considers the walls and begins sketching the image of Kathleen in charcoal on the wall, occasionally checking over his shoulder.) Camera can't do this.

[The three famine victim actors re-enter stage right in slightly different peasant clothes, like a different tattered hat or cape. They sit at the table while the serf straightens it. They tuck in fresh napkins in preparation for their next performance.

Roddy returns to his seat. The serf waits for a signal from offstage. McKitteridge shifts on the bench; he's a mountain of a man. Gerry is gangly and freckled.]

MCKITTERIDGE

(To Gerry.) Stop bouncing your knee.

GERRY

I'm not bouncing my knee.

MCKITTERIDGE

Y'are. . . . Had a cousin who was a knee-bouncer. He drank too much tea; five cups a day, back when you could. (To the soup serf.) Aren't you going to serve us?

SOUP SERF

Waiting. [He waits a five-count until he receives the signal and nods to everyone. Traditional music plays.]

RODDY

Here we go again. One, two, three - - -

SOYER (Offstage)

*Depechez-vous! Vite! Vite!*

[He ushers onstage writer Alastair Brown, who is taking notes for his novel, and Protestant-born activist James Stephens who will spread the Fenian movement to Tammany Hall in New York. The serf serves soup to the victims, and they eat.]

SOYER (Cont.)

My finest consomme soup. Very clear and sustaining.

[They all watch the famine victims eat for a five-count.]

BROWN

My God. I hadn't thought . . .

STEPHENS

. . . Do you serve different kinds of soup? With soup things in it? I mean, is there anything in there, I really can't tell - - -

SOYER

*Mais, oui, vraiment*, other soups with soup things exist: onion things, *bouillabaisse*, *bisques*, *vichyssoise*, vegetable things - - -

STEPHENS

But not the potato, not this year, not next year - - -

SOYER

This potato blight is an act of God, Stephens. We have slighted Him, *n'cest pas*, in some way that requires a sweeping - - -

BROWN

They said you were exaggerating. They said, "it's the old thing, the old malady breaking out. It is the national character, the national thoughtlessness, the national indolence."<sup>1</sup> That's what they all said, despite those illustrations and stories - - -

[Gerry stands and McKitteridge pulls him back to his seat.]

SOYER

See for yourself and believe or not. They tell stories of mass graves and empty towns. All they talk about is the stench of death, and they drift in here like ghosts themselves, like they've already gone. Come, come, poor phantoms, these men are a writer and a Fenian, a politician. They like a story. Tell us one, tell us a story, ghost, *s'il vous plait*.

[The three are surprised. Kathleen turns away, hiding under her long, matted hair. She is classically beautiful under a layer of grime.]

MCKITTERIDGE

... Um, bodies line the ditches, sir, where there used to be gorse and heather. There're too many to bury. That's my job, and there's just too many of them. I'm tired of digging day in, day out.

GERRY

... I ship grain to Manchester, to England, to feed their factory workers, wheat that my family should be eating instead of our seed potatoes. They make me. They can. Two hundred years ago, my people, the Friels, we lost our land to King James during the Plantation System in Ulster, but we were allowed to rent back the land we used

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<sup>1</sup> *The Story of Ireland*, Neil Hagerty, Thomas Duanne Books, 2011

to own, until the fields went black. I couldn't feed my boys what I grew. I ache inside like I have a broken heart; a wind blows through the middle of me. So, I either watched my little boys shake with hunger tremors or I go on being a man. We got no pride left in our pockets, do you understand me? Now we dream of kites, potato cakes, and all the lost ones.

STEPHENS

. . . That doesn't sound like indolence.

BROWN

No, God, that sounds brutal. Well, yes, we're exporting wheat, I confess to it, but Britain needs bread. The farmers have left the bread-basket of Cornwall; they went into town to work in factories. We're at war with the Sikh. It rained last summer.

STEPHENS

The British East India Company's at war with the Sikh, you mean, and God knows we have to protect the tea. And old Finality Jack, old Lord Russell, our Prime Minister, refuses to replace Irish wheat. Didn't I see him outside, old Finality?

SOYER

*Oui.*

STEPHENS

What was he doing here?

SOYER

Visiting.

STEPHENS

(Indicating the victims.) That's not their fault. It's like they don't count as people. They matter; their lives matter. They need to feed their children and keep their land like the rest of us. They grow the wheat that Lord Russell steals.

GERRY

Farmers fill the county jails - - -

SOYER

(Overlapping.) Steal is a strong word. I fund the workhouses and - - -

GERRY

They steal so they'll get arrested and fed and there's - - -

SOYER

I feed them better here than the sickening excuse of oatmeal slop dotted with flies they get at the workhouse - - -

GERRY

Typhus.

MCKITTERIDGE

Cattle and crops stolen right out of the fields.

STEPHENS

Something must be done - - -

MCKITTERIDGE

Nothing, nowhere's safe. Doesn't happen any more, safety.

STEPHENS

There's no safe. The government should be teaching people to plant other crops and should be feeding its citizens, isn't that the responsibility of the government, to protect its citizens- - -

BROWN

Well, that's the point, isn't it, they aren't treated like citizens - - -

STEPHENS

No, they're not, but they're people. Have a bit of compassion - - -

BROWN

Well, yes, I hope I do, but it's about resources - - -

STEPHENS

Isn't it always about money? You're a whiz at fundraising, Soyer. You've built an empire, here and in Paris and London, all those fancy restaurants, and there's fat pork barrels of money in America. We have Irish brothers there, in New York and Boston.

GERRY

We're bleeding people out by the village - - -

SOYER

*Oui, oui*, plenty of money in America, plenty. Grows on trees over there, land of opportunity. Millions of hungry people there. We pounded Britain with them six



decades ago and they were nothing, then, nothing, and now it's all rags to riches and gold runs in the gutters! They owe us, no doubt, but Uncle Sam's feeling the pinch of all those Catholics coming from Cork to land in Boston and New York.

STEPHENS

. . . I'll talk to the Fenians.

SOYER

*Merci*, Stephens. Believe me, gentlemen, these empty mouths need your assistance in any form, from spreading the word of our cause to opening your wallet, *s'il vous plait*. Send the word out, *mon ami*. Monsiuer Brown, tell me, are you working on something new?

[He ushers the two men stage left. Brown exits. To the soup serf and nodding to the famine victims at the table as he and Stephens pause at the stage edge.]

SOYER (CONT.)

Give them an extra helping and a bit of bread.

STEPHENS

They deserve it. And more. (To the victims.) Good luck and God bless.

[He pats his pockets and pulls out coins. He can't bring himself to throw them at the victims. McKitteridge stands. Stephens gives the change to Soyer who pockets the money.]

STEPHENS (Cont.)

I'll find help.

[Stephens exits. The famine victims devour their soup. Roddy draws. Five-count silence again except slurping and scratching. Soyer watches them.]

BROWN

(Re-enters.) Oh, right, something new, yes. I'm writing about the workhouses; I wanted to see your setup. Listen, Soyer, noble thing you're doing, you and the Quakers.

SOYER

No one else but us are doing it. Someone must. (He indicates that he and Brown should leave.)

BROWN

Sorry, just a minute, I thought I recognized - - - (He calls over to the illustrator.)

Roddy, old man, is that you?

RODDY

Oh, hello, Brown, haven't seen you in ages. That is you, sorry, concentrating, you know. Hello. Quite a nasty business, this.

BROWN

Indeed. Doesn't get any worse. I saw your work in the *Illustrator*. Didn't know you were in Dublin. I thought you were still on that famine sketching tour through County Cork - - -

RODDY

Got back a few weeks ago. Then Soyer hired me. . . . I saw dying, living and dead lying indiscriminately upon the same floor.

BROWN

Rough. I can't imagine or I should say your work's helping us all imagine. Look here, I'm working on a workhouse piece. Maybe I could tie it to one of your illustrations. They're getting press. They're showing Britain what's happening. Your editors must be decent - - -

RODDY

Oh, the best in the business. I get paid to do what I love. I'm a lucky man. You too. I say, do you have my ottoman that you filched for sentimental reasons when we were together in second year? You know the one I mean.

BROWN

. . . Oh, that ottoman - - -

SOYER

Gentlemen, we are on a schedule. My guests are waiting.

RODDY

Right, sorry, Soyer. Brown, let's catch up at the club, shall we, er, next time we're both back? It's been far too long.

BROWN

I'd like that. But only if the moon's full - - -

RODDY

You're an impossible cad - - -

[Brown exits as he waves to Roddy. Roddy waves back.]

SOYER

(Calling to Brown.) Go into the world and spread the word of our cause.

RODDY

He will. I think he heard it.

SOYER

I hope so. I hope all this does that. (To Gerry.) *Bonjour*. You, sir.

GERRY

Aye, sir.

SOYER

The more I spend on this soggy island, the more I wonder why I stay. I know why I came, for this and for other reasons. I came here for a . . . certain person and that's changing. What did you say? You dream now of kites and potato cakes . . .

MCKITTERIDGE

And the lost ones.

SOYER

Were you farmers?

GERRY

There's not much else to be there, but be a farmer, unless you bury people like him.

SOYER

What did you grow besides potatoes and wheat?

GERRY

Cabbage, apples, pigs.

MCKITTERIDGE

The dead.

SOYER

Apples? I had heard that. I'll try to find you one. (Nods to the soup serf and exits.)

RODDY

Pretty in the country.

GERRY

Um, aye, farming got us outside, I'll say that.

[The serf escorts the second batch of famine victims out. Left alone, Roddy returns to the wall sketch and sharpens a pencil.]

RODDY

He didn't even see you, darling; he's so blind. Isn't it funny what we see and what we don't see and isn't Alastair looking well . . .

[The victims circle backstage to enter stage right in slightly different peasant garb. Gerry holds a swaddled infant. They sit and prepare for their performance for a ten-count. Kathleen sits on the end. ]

RODDY (Cont.)

(To the victims.) Good morning.

KATHLEEN

(Surprised.) Good morning.

GERRY

Top of the morning to ya.

[Pause as the soup serf checks his watch and listens to someone offstage. He waves to Roddy; they confer by the fence.]

RODDY

What? Truly?

[Roddy gathers his sketches, looks confused, and exits. The soup serf serves the victims.]

SOUP SERF

Be back.

[He suddenly exits. Left alone, the victims stop eating and look about. Kathleen stands and begins to step away from the table.]

KATHLEEN

Is that door open?

[Soyer suddenly enters the walkway with Eveline, a white, wealthy woman in her early 20s. He chases her. They embrace passionately; she pushes him away. He body blocks her from the famine victims. The men stop eating, and Kathleen freezes.]

EVELINE

No, Alexis, we're not safe in here, we're not safe anywhere. I know, well, my brothers never would come here, still, we cannot. Oh, I can't breathe - - - You're still sorting through the grief of Emma - - -

SOYER

It's been five years since she passed - - -

EVELINE

But, there's more, so much more than that, oh, you're so gorgeous, and you taste of peppermint and something further away. I've never felt like this before. I didn't know I could, no, I can't - - - my father would murder me or worse, kick me into the streets.

SOYER

Because I'm French?

EVELINE

You're Catholic. My older brother asked about you; he saw us walking at the zoo. If he found out or worse, his Orange Order, found us out, that would be the very end of everything for my family - - - Well, no, it couldn't happen; it's an impossible situation. Please don't ask me. It's not a choice - - -

SOYER

You came here today. You said you wouldn't. You came to me - - -

EVELINE

I had to see you. I know it's shameless and reckless of me - - -

SOYER

I'm in Dublin because of you, Evvy, don't you know that? Oh, your body says yes, that's where the truth lies. Come away with me, come to Paris - - -

[Soyer buries his head in her breasts, and she holds him, shuddering. Upstage, McKitteridge clears his throat. The soup serf enters suddenly and stops.]

GERRY

Excuse me, sir, Monsieur Soyer? *Pardon*. There's a lady present.

[Soyer and Eveline become aware of the famine victims upstage and stop their embrace. Eveline covers her face and turns away.]

SOYER

Sorry. I thought you had left . . . I don't know what . . . I wasn't thinking. I thought I had told the server and the illustrator - - - (To the soup serf.) Please stop the tours. (To Kathleen.) My apologies, *madam* - - -  
[The soup serf exits to stop the tours.]

EVELINE

What is this?

SOYER

The soup kitchen.

EVELINE

But, they're on . . . display. I didn't know you put them on display. (Eveline starts to leave but Kathleen's speech stops her.)

KATHLEEN

I don't blame ya, lady, he's gorgeous, this soup kitchen man, but my Da'd ruin me if I so much as looked sideways at a Protestant. He married me off to a neighbor to win a wee corner of the field. I never much liked that neighbor, and now he's run to America to seek his fortune across the waves, leaving me and our baby daughter behind. In this blur of coffins, my sister tried to fly off with a Prod, and Da locked her in the seed cellar for a week.

EVELINE

Good Lord. Cellars, damp, low, the smell. I'm sorry. I don't know how she lived in that stink, close around her, but empty. It's cold in here, and I don't feel well . . .  
[Soyer tries to hold Eveline, but she pushes him away.]

KATHLEEN

You'll get through this, lady. Shocking what you can push through. My arms are empty. I don't have my baby with me, because she's lying in the garden. We couldn't afford a coffin or a plot in the churchyard. Maybe one day, I'll go back and plant blueberries beside her. I carried her around for a time, and for that time I felt like I was underwater or like the thick air was calves jelly holding me still and upright. But I couldn't do that after a while, she stiffened, and I had to face the facts of life

and pull myself together. It was that or the Magdalene Laundries for me, and I hate washing clothes.

GERRY

This baby's quiet; she's not dead. You can't say that about her. See? How her lips purse as she breathes?

KATHLEEN

I can't bear to look at it.

GERRY

She's a good and quiet girl. Might be safer to be quiet nowadays. Keep to yourself.

EVELINE

Safe? . . . Well. Oh, I don't know how safe I ever was or what to believe any more, but I believe you and I believe that, what you said, would break me . . . that would. Funny how you think something will kill you, but it doesn't. You go on being alive despite the pain; shocking sometimes, really. [She removes a broach from her dress and holds it out to the famine victims.] My mother gave me this. These are emeralds. They've been in my family for generations. She gave me this when I was sixteen, when my family began to sell me off to the highest bidder and I came out into society. I'm widowed already.

[Kathleen slowly rises and crosses downstage into the no man's land next to the walkway. Eveline hands Kathleen the broach through the fence.]

KATHLEEN

Thank you, my lady.

EVELINE

Yes. Turn this into food. Better this lives in stomachs than on my coat and I parade it around, a badge of living without love. Alexis, I am sorry, but I suppose I choose safety. I choose family; home's stronger. And, oh, my God, these are people, Alexis. Shut this thing down. . . . I can't bear to say . . . good . . . bye. Every day I'll pray for us.

[Soyer holds out his hand to her, and Eveline shakes her head and exits.]