

WAR OF THE BUTTONS
Jonathan Dorf

freely adapted from LA GUERRE DES BOUTONS by Louis Pergaud

List of Characters

The Townies

CHARLIE, the leader, around 15 years old

GENE, Charlie's age

HUGO, a year younger but in the same grade, smart but no klutz

SIGGY, Hugo's age, a refugee from Bosnia living with his aunt and uncle (note: Siggy's nationality is written ambiguously so that he could be, in consultation with the author, from a different but similarly resonant country)

TICKER, 12 years old, an imp

TRACE, Gene's twin sister

EMMA, a little younger than Trace

The Preps (all are Charlie's age)

J. ROBERT WALKER, Charlie's prep counterpart

PRESTON MORRIS, the bully of the group

SCOTT ANDREWS, Walker's roommate and a bit of a coward at times

TERRENCE NELSON, hyper and seeming as if he knows something we don't

BANK TELLER, GENE'S FATHER, HUGO'S FATHER, PREP SCHOOL HALL MASTER, MR. CROON, all played by one male adult actor (in the interest of allowing more actors to participate—for example, in a school production—these characters could be played by multiple actors)

The play uses multiple settings that should be more suggested than fully realized. The settings are a street (several different ones), a bank, Ticker's bedroom, the ice cream factory (inside and outside), a food market, the preps' dorm and the townies' school. Several other settings appear during the non-real time scenes (for example, Hugo's bedroom appears in the middle of the ice cream factory). It is crucial that the play move fluidly from setting to setting. A good idea would be to divide the stage into playing areas that remain constant.

The play should run without intermission.

(Author's Note: It is crucial that the set and staging allow the play to run continuously. Elizabethan staging, with the stage separated into playing areas, is the most plausible solution. Somewhere in America not so long ago. A steamy mid-afternoon the week before Labor Day. CHARLIE, fourteen or fifteen years old, sits on a suitcase on a sidewalk and holds an ice cream cone. He's sturdy and has the spark of a natural leader. A pile of luggage surrounds him. He taps his foot and looks as if he's waiting for someone. Beat. Enter HUGO, a year younger and a little smaller than Charlie, brainy but not unathletic.)

CHARLIE

Seen my parents?

(Hugo shakes his head and wipes his sweaty face on his shirt.)

My Dad says he's gotta' stop by the bank, and to get him an ice cream cone.

HUGO

How come he still likes ice cream?

CHARLIE

He says wait for him with our stuff. His cone's gonna' melt.

HUGO

I'll eat it.

(Hugo sits on a suitcase after making sure it'll support his weight.)

Your Dad get a job in the place you're moving to?

CHARLIE

I think. Maybe.

HUGO

Where you moving to?

CHARLIE

I don't know.

HUGO

Where's your Mom?

CHARLIE

She went with him. He said they needed to talk.

HUGO

That's what my Mom said right before she left.

(beat)

Ticker's gonna' have to stop making fun of the preps. Without you, who's gonna' bail him out?

CHARLIE

He's fast. He could call 'em rich fairies and run.

(Hugo opens a suitcase and inspects its contents.)

HUGO

How come you didn't tell me you were movin'?

CHARLIE

'Cause I didn't know 'til this morning. I woke up, and my Mom's packing.

HUGO

(holds up a T-shirt)

This is my shirt. Remember, you ripped yours sneaking into the drainpipe.

CHARLIE

It was your idea.

(beat)

Bank was gonna' take our house anyway. We missed the last couple payments.

HUGO

And you didn't say no, you weren't gonna' move?

CHARLIE

They didn't ask.

HUGO

Sucks. If my Dad said we're moving just like that—

CHARLIE

You'd move. Hold this cone

(holds out the cone)

a sec?

HUGO

It's melting. It'll get all over me. My Dad'll think I was eatin' ice cream before dinner.
(beat)

Can I have a lick?

CHARLIE

I thought your Dad—

HUGO

As long as it's not all over me, he won't know.

(Hugo takes the cone. Charlie cleans his fingernails with a pocketknife he pulls from his pants. Hugo takes a lick, then another one, then a bite.)

It's breakin' all over the place.

(Hugo finishes off the cone.)

Sorry.

CHARLIE

You're eating the whole thing.

HUGO

Sorry.

(Hugo holds up an "All-American Ice Cream Company" T-shirt disapprovingly.)

CHARLIE

My Dad got it for free. He just wears it around the house.

HUGO

My Dad got fired, no way I'd wear their T-shirt. It'd be like bein' Jewish and wearin' a swastika. You wouldn't do *that*—would you?

CHARLIE

It's not the same.

HUGO

They fired him—right?

CHARLIE

Yeah, but—

HUGO

And now you gotta' move, so your Dad can find a new job.

CHARLIE

Yeah, but—

HUGO

I read that's what happened to the Jews in Germany. They all lost their jobs and had to move.

CHARLIE

We're not Jewish.

HUGO

I'm not sayin' you're Jewish. Only it's like that.

CHARLIE

They closed the whole plant down. Everybody lost their jobs. Not just my Dad.

HUGO

I'm not sayin' it's just against your Dad. It's like the whole town—

CHARLIE

The ice cream factory was the whole town—pretty much. You're lucky your Dad works at the Prep. Only thing 'round here that's gettin' richer.

HUGO

My Dad says the factory closed 'cause it wasn't makin' enough ice cream.

CHARLIE

They made plenty 'a ice cream.

(as if he can taste each one)

Vanilla. Chocolate. Strawberry. Fudge swirl. Marshmallow. Rocky Road.

HUGO

Yeah, but they're makin' more in newer factories. Bigger ones. Do you know what school you're goin' to?

CHARLIE

If I don't know where I'm movin' to, how am I gonna' know what school I'm goin' to? Wish he'd hurry up.

(Enter a BANK TELLER, played by an adult actor and perhaps rolling out a bank counter. He carries an ice cream cone. Charlie puts on his father's T-shirt and plays his father. He steps forward to greet the Bank Teller.)

TELLER

Next.

CHARLIE

I'd like to close out this account.

(beat)

I'm doing a terrible thing.

TELLER

I don't take it personally.

CHARLIE

Not the account. My son. My wife and I are leaving our son. He's sitting on the sidewalk keeping an eye on our luggage.

(beat)

We're not going back for him. We're leaving town.

TELLER

What about your luggage?

CHARLIE

I paid a week's salary for those suitcases. Now I feel even worse: our luggage and our son.

(beat)

I told him get me an ice cream cone. He's probably waiting there with that cone.

TELLER

Hopefully he won't take it personally.

CHARLIE

The town's gone kaput. I lost my job.

TELLER

Ice cream factory?

(Charlie nods.)

And you still eat the stuff?

CHARLIE

I feel guilty, but I like the taste. Nothing like Rocky Road.

(The Teller hands him a few bills and coins.)

Not much here.

TELLER

Good luck.

CHARLIE

If you see our son, would you tell him we love him?

TELLER

What's his name?

CHARLIE
Charlie.

TELLER
How 'bout "nothing personal, Charlie?"

CHARLIE
Would you?

(The Teller nods, hands Charlie the new ice cream cone.)

TELLER
We're out of lollipops.

CHARLIE
Thank you.

TELLER
Nothing personal, Charlie.

(The Teller exits, and Charlie, holding the ice cream cone, steps back into his conversation with Hugo.)

HUGO
I can't believe school starts next week.

CHARLIE
Preppies'll be showin' up any day.

HUGO
I saw a couple of Beamers and Benzes goin' up there this morning.

CHARLIE
Already?

HUGO
Fall sports practice.
(imitates a preppy)
Muffy, would you pass me the croquet mallet?

CHARLIE
Sorry, old chap, I'm smack dab in the middle of tea-time. See if Jeeves will play with you.

(Offstage YELLING. TICKER, a twelve year old imp, dashes on chased by SCOTT ANDREWS and PRESTON MORRIS, both much bigger and closer to Charlie's age, though neither is as big as Charlie. Not really afraid of the preps, Ticker isn't above using Charlie as cover. Andrews and Morris wear polo-style shirts, while Ticker's tank top and shorts scream poverty. Hugo steps closer to Charlie.)

TICKER

Your Mom's a big fat cow! She's a big fat cow, and your Dad's an ugly little midget.

ANDREWS

You're dead!

MORRIS

Least he knows who his Dad is.

TICKER

Shut up.

CHARLIE

That's low.

MORRIS

It's true.

TICKER

Is not.

MORRIS

Who's your Dad then?

CHARLIE

Leave him alone.

MORRIS

Fine.

(Morris makes a crashing sound, as if two cars collide.)

Andrews, what's that sound?

ANDREWS

I don't know.

MORRIS

Sounds like an *accident*.

TICKER
Shut up!

CHARLIE
That's enough!

(Beat. Andrews and Morris take a step back.)

MORRIS
What's with the suitcases?

ANDREWS
This a garage sale?

CHARLIE
I'm movin'.

MORRIS
(to Ticker)
What you gonna' do when he's gone?

TICKER
I'll *call* him.

MORRIS
Call him from your Daddy's if you ever find out who it is.

(Ticker leaps at Morris, who headlocks him.)

TICKER
Take it back.

MORRIS
Little psycho.

(Charlie hands Hugo his cone.)

CHARLIE
Don't eat it.

(Andrews sees someone coming from offstage.)

ANDREWS
(sotto voce)
Walker!

CHARLIE
Get off him.

(Morris lets go of Ticker.)

TICKER

(half under his breath)

Fairy!

(Ticker dashes offstage. Enter J. ROBERT WALKER, Charlie's prep school counterpart, wearing a loosened tie, a button-down shirt and a backward baseball cap. With him is MATT NELSON, dressed preppie and about the same age. Nelson looks as if he knows something we don't and seems hyper.)

CHARLIE

J. Robert Walker.

WALKER

Charlie.

CHARLIE

You're back early.

WALKER

Soccer practice. Don't need it to beat your team, but—

CHARLIE

I don't play soccer.

WALKER

Your *school's* team.

TICKER (off)

Come on! They've got Charlie surrounded! They tried to jump me, but I got away!

WALKER

I hear they're knockin' down the factory.

CHARLIE

Not 'til next summer. What do you want?

TICKER (off)

There's millions of 'em. Hurry! Mow the lawn later, Siggy!

WALKER

Tomorrow afternoon after soccer practice by the old ice cream factory. Unless you're chicken.

CHARLIE

Ask Hugo. Soon as my Dad gets back, I'm leavin'.

(Morris and Andrews make chicken noises. Enter Ticker with a group of town kids, all Charlie's age: GENE, very much a follower; TRACE, Gene's twin sister, beautiful with little flashes of tomboyishness; EMMA, much more shy, and SIGGY, who chooses not to speak.)

TICKER

(balls up a fist)

All right—who wants some?

(Ticker feints at Andrews, who flinches.)

NELSON

(to Emma)

How's it goin'?

EMMA

Hi.

TICKER

Who's next?

(Charlie grabs Ticker by the neck, holding him back before he can attack. Nelson drops to his hands and knees and barks at Ticker in mocking imitation.)

ANDREWS

Down boy.

Like what you see? Hit the back button and follow the instructions to order a perusal copy of the full script!