

Act One
Monsieur Moineaux's Predicament

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The once-famous and highly experienced actor-manager Stéphane Moineaux closed the cash-box containing the takings from that night's performance of *Le Chevalier Malcontent* and placed it in his office safe. He locked the safe carefully, and suppressed a sigh.

He felt obliged to suppress the sigh because his leading lady, Marianne Jonquille, was sitting on the other side of his desk. She was probably too busy ranting to notice anything as slight as a sigh of regret and incipient despair, but Moineaux was a man who believed in keeping up appearances, even when it was not strictly necessary.

"What, after all, did Monsieur Méténier do?" the tragedienne complained. "Was he the first director to have put on a play about prostitutes? No—you and I had done at least half a dozen in the previous ten years, and there must have been a thousand produced since Murger first launched *La Bohème*. Was he the first to feature a violent murder on stage? No—every melodrama produced since *Le Tour de Nesle* features at least one, and the greater number of them include two or three, if not a dozen. All Monsieur Méténier did in *Fifi* was to employ a cheap trick, securing a bladder full of stage-blood to the victim's collar, so that when the throat was cut the illusion was created that an artery is spurting lavishly. Anyone could have done the same, had they not been concerned to maintain a clean and tidy stage—and even though everyone does, now, *he* still gets the credit for it! Has he moved on? No—he's just doing more and more of the same. If that's *avant-garde* melodrama, it's the only *avant-garde* in history that spends its entire time in barracks, doing the same drill every day on the same parade-ground. It makes me sick. We, on the other hand, have put on a daring combination of the classical and the innovative in the last two years, and what do we get? People turn up their noses. To add insult to injury, we're forever discarding pieces of sticky red carpet and scrubbing gore-stained boards."

The Monsieur Méténier to whom Marianne referred was Moineaux's opposite number at the Grand Guignol, which had opened in the Impasse Chaptal, just around the corner from the Théâtre Tragicomique, in 1897. The Tragicomique had been in trouble before then, but the Grand Guignol's opening had certainly made a significant contribution to the speed of its decline.

Moineaux mustered the most reassuring smile he could contrive, and said: "We mustn't begrudge Monsieur Méténier his success, my dear. Everything that helps to maintain interest in the popular theater will be good for us all, in the long run." That was true enough—except, as Moineaux was only too painfully aware, that he and the Tragicomique were now extremely unlikely to be around long enough to reap any long-term benefits from the Grand Guignol's revitalization of public interest.

"What Méténier does is simply undignified," the actress went on, after taking another gulp of Moineaux's brandy. "There's no art in it at all. What will become of the true genius of our profession if all that audiences want to see is gouts of fake blood, vampire traps and all his other silly *special effects*?"

Marianne had begun to care a great deal about dignity now that she was of an age that made it extremely difficult to maintain a loyal circle of devoted and generous admirers. There was a time when she had only ever dropped into Moineaux's office after a performance to show off her latest cavalier, to demand that some upstart *ingénue* or clumsy scene-shifter be fired, or to proclaim her entitlement to an increase in salary. Nowadays, she only came because she knew that he kept a bottle of brandy in his desk. When the present one ran out, alas—as it was likely to do within the next five minutes—it would not be replaced. That was how bad things were—although, as a good employer and devout gentleman of the theater, Moineaux would have died rather than admit it to anyone else. He would make up a good excuse when Marianne next went grubbing in his drawer for the bottle and failed to find it.

"We shall have to begin rehearsing a new play next week," the actor-manager told his leading lady. "*Le Chevalier Malcontent* hasn't lived up to my hopes."

"Nothing we've put on in the last five years has lived up to your hopes," Marianne observed, with hurtful accuracy. "What's the new one going to be. Not another foul-mouthed farce by that moron in bicycle-shorts, I hope?"

“Monsieur Jarry is an excellent playwright,” Moineaux told her. “He is a little ahead of his time, perhaps, but I believe that he has a future. No, it won’t be anything *avant-garde*. That’s too risky. Nor anything classical; that’s not risky enough. Something new, bold, exciting—but not too much of a gamble.”

“You don’t even *have* a new play, do you?” Marianne said, scathingly. “Time was when writers were clawing one another’s eyes out to get to the head of the queue to show you their work. Now, they’re all knocking on Méténier’s door, despite the fact that the Guignol is the worst-designed theater in Paris and Méténier’s as good an actor as you’d expect of a public executioner.”

These comments were unjust, although it was true that Grand Guignol’s premises had formerly been a painter’s studio, and that its adaptation into a theater had been an awkward and rather unsatisfactory architectural adventure. It was also true that Monsieur Méténier’s chief source of income before his theater’s adaptation had been his service as an assistant to the public executioner rather than his parallel career as an actor. The Grand Guignol had, however, simply absorbed these colorful details into the proud record of its own notoriety.

The Tragicomique had had a long-standing reputation for melodrama before the Grand Guignol opened, but, once Méténier’s reputation had taken off, the sort of plays with which the Tragicomique was associated in the public mind had been reclassified by the critics as “old-fashioned melodrama.” Those that the Guignol put on, by contrast—which were as overloaded with grotesquerie and baroque comedy as they were with extravagant violence—had become “new melodrama” or “*avant-garde* melodrama.”

Instead of the newer theater starting at a disadvantage, with a great deal of ground to make up on its august neighbor, Monsieur Méténier’s establishment had somehow contrived to slip in front of the Tragicomique in the race for survival without ever having to overtake it. As soon as Méténier’s production of Guy de Maupassant’s *Mademoiselle Fifi* had scandalized its audience, the Grand Guignol had acquired the image of a sensational and up-to-the-minute venture, while the Tragicomique had been cast by contrasting implication as the coffin of the obsolete and outworn.

“It’s no good blaming our plight on Méténier,” Moineaux said. “Our fate is in our own hands, and it’s up to us to get back on top. All we need is a single success. The Grand Guignol has been going for nearly two years now, and the newspapers are hungry for a new sensation. All we have to do is provide it. All we need is the right play.”

“Which you don’t appear to have,” Marianne reminded him. She was forced to hold out her glass for a refill, because Moineaux had prudently taken possession of the almost-empty bottle. He hesitated for a moment, but could not bear to let her see that his desperation had reached the point at which he could no longer afford to provide his leading lady with a swig of brandy.

Moineaux knew by now that he had misjudged his response to the competition offered by the Grand Guignol as badly as he had misjudged the danger it posed. At first, he had attempted to rebrand what the critics dismissed as “old-fashioned melodrama” as “classic melodrama,” reviving old favorites by Alexandre Dumas, Frédéric Soulié and Paul Féval. Then he had ventured into the reproduction of authentic theatrical classics, mingling them—cleverly, he had thought—with authentically *avant-gardist* works by the young Alfred Jarry and the even younger Guillaume Apollinaire. By the end of 1898, however, he had been deep trouble. He had told himself—and assured his employees—that things would undoubtedly pick up in the spring, but it was now May. He was on the verge of bankruptcy, teetering on the brink of an abyss from which no return would be possible.

He maintained his smile, however, as he looked at Marianne Jonquille across the desk, and hoped that his pretence of fondness was convincing, given the relative dimness of the muted gaslight and the quantity of brandy she had already consumed.

Twelve years had passed since Moineaux and Marianne had last shared a moment of passion, but the actor-manager continued to play the part of a devoted admirer. He maintained the habit of concealing cruel reviews from his fading star, although she had almost certainly read the one published in *La Presse* after the opening night of *Le Chevalier Malcontent*, which had asserted, with monumental unfairness, that Sarah Bernhardt’s wooden leg had now acquired a greater skill for acting than La Jonquille had ever harbored in her heart, hands and brain combined. Marianne, for her part, did her level best to maintain the pretence, at least in the presence of the company, that hers was an unsullied reputation, and that the magnetism she had once exerted as a beautiful *ingénue* had ripened with time into true thespian artistry.

“I shall find us a play,” Moineaux told her. “A good play... a great play... a *successful* play.”

“How?” Marianne asked, bluntly. “I know you’re in trouble, Stéphane, and so does everyone else. Even your oldest friends are giving preferential treatment to your rivals. No one sends promising young

playwrights to you any more, until they've sent them to everyone else first—not even that scoundrel Lavinière.”

Lavinière was the director of an agency whose typists produced multiple copies of scripts for the use of actors. He knew everyone, and heard all the gossip. He and Moineaux were old friends.

“I haven't seen him in a while, that's all,” the actor-manager said, defensively. “If I drop in on him and butter him up a bit, he'll point me in the right direction. Not that I need to stoop to that, you understand. I've always had good contacts. I've always been able to pick something up when the need became urgent. People used to call it luck, but it's really a matter of knowing the business.”

“Whatever it was,” Marianne said, “you've run very short of it of late. If you're not careful, Méténier will be poaching your company as well as your audience.”

“Have you heard something?” Moineaux asked, anxiously. “He hasn't been talking to Lillette, has he? Or Paul?” He guessed from the way that Marianne looked away, though, that she had merely been expressing the faint and probably futile hope that Monsieur Méténier might come knocking at *her* door.

“Nothing specific,” the actress admitted. “Not that they'd be any great loss—*ingénues* and *jeune premiers* are five francs a dozen. You and I are the heart and soul of the company. All the rest are replaceable.”

Moineaux made no comment on that, although the truth was that no one any longer came to the Tragicomique to see the once-great Stéphane Moineaux, let alone the ever-mediocre Marianne Jonquille. Young women did come to see the raven-haired Paul Damas, however, and men of all ages came to see the porcelain-complexioned Lillette Fevret. They were the most valuable assets the company had. If either or both of them were to depart, the Tragicomique's slide into ruin would surely become unstoppable.

Marianne's face had twisted into a scowl at the thought of Lillette. She still considered herself fully entitled to be queen of the green room, and was nakedly envious of the way that the gentlemen who gathered there before performances flocked around the younger actress. The gentlemen competed for Lillette's smile more ardently than they had ever competed for Marianne's, and Lillette's current protector, the aging but highly-esteemed Comte de Farineux, gloried in his monopoly.

Moineaux had to admit, as he looked at the senior member of his aging company, that Marianne was more crone than queen nowadays. The only reason no one ever called her a witch was that she was as patently incapable of laying a curse as she was of casting any other kind of spell. Lillette, on the other hand, was a princess enjoying the heyday of her abundant charms. Although the days were supposedly long past when gentlemen fought duels over the favors of actresses, Moineaux thought that it was perhaps as well that Xavier de Farineux had enjoyed a fearsome reputation as a swordsman when he was in his military prime. Although he had put away his sword a full 20 years ago, no sane man would ever dare to contemplate calling him out.

While he formed that thought, the actor-manager's eye was inevitably drawn to the poster that had pride of place on his office wall. It showed him in the role of Lagardère in *Le Bossu*, in a production of 1876. He was not, of course, wearing the hunchback disguise that gave its title to the play, but standing up perfectly straight, brandishing his sword like a true *matamore*. He was wearing an expression of supreme pride and confidence that would have daunted the most dastardly villain ever devised by a steel-nibbed pen.

“It'll be a shame if you can't revive the Tragicomique, Stéphane,” the actress said, draining her glass again. She placed the empty glass on the desk, obviously conscious of the fact that there was no longer any prospect of a further refill. “You'll go down with it, I suppose, I'm a free agent, though—and there are a hundred theaters in Paris.” She was making an evident effort to sound confident, but she was not actress enough to convince herself that she really could find a position in another company.

There are a hundred ladies' licherries too, Moineaux thought, in an unlooked-for fit of sudden spite, *where raddled hagwives and disappointed amazons can weep for their lost opportunities and wasted youth*. “Yes, my darling,” he said aloud, forcing himself to be sincere in his mildness. “You could get work in any one of them, I know; it's only nostalgic sentiment that keeps you here. The Tragicomique isn't about to slide into the pit of oblivion, though. The mood of *fin-de-siècle* Paris is one of anticipated renewal, and I must take advantage of that. Everyone expects the old order to crumble away with the last 18 months of the old century, to be replaced by something more youthful, more zestful and more sensational. We must find a way to ride that wave of optimism. I must find us a play that strikes a perfect medium between the traditional and the surreal, the futuristic and the decadent, the classic and the innovative.”

“That won't be easy,” Marianne observed, unnecessarily.

“But it's not impossible.” Moineaux declared, determined to prove that he, at least, was still actor enough to put on a good show of resolution. “There are dozens of up-and-coming writers enthusiastic to

outdo Méténier's adapters. It's just a matter of finding one. There's still time to turn the corner, and to ensure that the Tragicomique will still be thriving when no one remembers the Grand Guignol as anything but a phantom folly briefly raised in the empty space where Rochegrosse used to commit his nightmares to canvas."

"I once posed for Rochegrosse, you know," Marianne said, reflectively. "He wanted to paint me as Sainte-Catherine. I told him that I saw myself more as Sainte-Thérèse, but he didn't understand, so Catherine it was."

Moineaux had seen the late Monsieur Rochegrosse's *Sainte-Catherine*, and thought it perfectly hideous, though by no means ineffective. Rochegrosse had been a follower of Gustave Moreau, specializing in mythological subjects of massacre and martyrdom. Given that Monsieur Méténier's own primary *métier* had been similarly drenched in blood, Moineaux thought, the Grand Guignol's theatrical productions could be seen as the mere maintenance of a tradition—an exotic continuity that the Tragicomique, which had always been a proper theater, run by a committed actor-manager, could not match.

"There must be would-be writers among Lillette's admirers," the committed actor-manager thought aloud. "They must all be avid to write a play for her, to demonstrate her power as an inspirational muse and their own devotion to her worship. But is there anyone *competent* among them? And if there were, how could I extend a tangible lure to them, while de Farineux keeps her on such a tight leash?"

"We're not lost yet, Stéphane," Marianne said, apparently feeling the need to leave on a supportive note as she went forth in search of further alcoholic reinforcement. "The censor will tire of being teased soon enough, and he'll take care of the Grand Guignol for us. The audiences will come back then—they always do."

This blatant falsehood gained nothing in the way of conviction from the dutifully theatrical manner in which the Tragicomique's leading lady closed the door behind her as she concluded her final sentence.