

The Figurante

Paul Zameith, who has become, as everyone knows, one of our foremost dramatic authors, was still playing simpletons at the Gaité four years ago. His pale, mild, melancholy face with profound blue eyes could, in fact, pass for that of an imbecile, so much does supreme generosity resemble stupidity for people who are not habituated to seeing its divine expression.

One evening, a grand *féerie* entitled *La Guerre des Fées* was being performed, and Zameith, costumed as a Jocrisse, with the usual russet wig and scarlet smock, was in the wings leaning on a supporting mast. While the final tableau of the first act unfurled its painted canvases and gauzes in the raw glare of the electric light, he was gazing ardently, with eyes charged with amour, at the borders, where a flock of actresses had just been disposed, ready to go on in two minutes. The second transformation of the apotheosis was about to give way to the third, and the background vegetation of waters, seashells, madrepores and Naiads, illuminated in blue, was about to fade away before a fantastic garden of foliage and huge flowers, heightened by gold and silver.

Ready to flee into the azure of painted canvas, three Fays, firmly attached by a laced belt and a brass wire, seemed to be carrying the young princess, reposing horizontally on an iron apparatus espousing the form of her body. In the background, on slender brass wires, were sets of cardboard figures draped with paper, which were going to fly into the distance.

What the Jocrisse was contemplating with fixity, however, was a fourth Fay who, placed near the other three, was not visibly sustained by anything, and appeared to be really flying, like a bird, alongside the three figurantes. Astonishingly beautiful, that strange creature had the relaxed and graceful pose of a divinity borne on clouds, and it was not possible to believe that she was held up by wires passing over pulleys fixed in the body of a trolley. In his quality as a poet, Zameith could see clearly that she was, indeed, floating, but he was not alone in seeing it, and that prodigious spectacle, to which no one paid attention in the tumult of a complicated performance attracted that attention of the director, Jacquemod. Spotting the chief machinist, who was just passing by at that moment, he said: "Tonini. Can you tell me why there are four Fays in flight today instead of three?"

"My word!" said Tonini, amazed. "I have no idea. Positively, there only ought to be three Fays."

"And give me the pleasure," the director continued, "of telling me what is holding that figurante up, and how she's sustained in the air. Show me the wire, if you please."

"There is no wire," said Tonini. "I don't understand..."

It was agreed between the director and the machinist that they would watch the end of the transformation, and that when the women rid themselves of the apparatus that was sustaining them they would obtain the key to the enigma.

At that very moment, however, someone came to fetch both of them, Jacquemod on the part of a shareholder who was bringing him money and Tonini because a rather serious accident had just dismantled a piece of the second act scenery. As for Zameith, standing against his mast, he had fallen into a sudden and surprising slumber, with the result that none of the three men was able to obtain an explanation of what had intrigued their curiosity so forcefully.

When the director was able to come down again, the curtain had just fallen on the end of the act, he found himself next to the fourth Fay, with whom, so great was his impatience, he began to converse on the stage, where the next set of decorations was being disposed, and a whole world of accessories. It was a very singular conversation, for, experienced man of the theater as he was, Jacquemod got in the way of his machinists and was continually bumped by a farm, having great difficulty avoiding a backcloth that fell on his head, or colliding with a grassy bank and putting his foot in an open trap-door, while the figurante, whom nothing touched or brushed, seemed to be fluttering in the midst of all those obstacles, free, airborne and as light as a bright dragonfly.

Jacquemod is a Parisian, witty to his fingertips, skeptical, libertine, unscrupulous in business matters and amorous affairs, who, seeing bankruptcy looming to the right and the left at that moment, was dancing on the tightrope of expedients, sometimes without a balancing-pole, sometimes with any balancing-pole that came to hand, making arrows with any and all wood, and he would have transformed the genius of Doubt into Gogo. Very amiable and obliging besides, the fear of being mocked could have determined him to cut the throat of his best friend.

That lascar is married to a superior woman of angelic bounty, who has scales over her eyes where he is concerned, and who, three days before this little story happened, had rendered him the father of a son. Jacquemod already cherished that little theater director, whom he had named Adolphe in celebration of the success of a famous dramaturge,¹ and to whom he proposed to give an education horribly exempt from prejudice. As for his wife, he loved her as best he could, except that he deceived her continually and had made his theater into a regular harem, where he had the art of creating harmony between his innumerable odalisques, of whom he was able, when necessary, not to be jealous. At home, for his personal pleasure, he read Shakespeare, but he left all literary ideas at the theater door, as one has to leave all hope at the gate of Hell.

Finally, an incorrigible player and a skillful nurturer of illusions, Jacquemod, like Mercadet,² had a Godeau who had brought him thirty thousand francs. His own Godeau was named Gilquin, and the director of the Gaité hoped every day for the chimerical return of that traveler—who, it was said, had become a pirate in the seas of India.

Such was the man who was holding the poor figurante under his inquisitive gaze, and pressing her with curt and cruel questions. She tried hard to give him bad reasons, but Jacquemod knew all the banks, including the Banque de France, and he was one of those cunning individuals whom it is difficult to persuade to believe anything, including and especially the truth. As for lies, he knew them all, as friends with whom he had enjoyed a common purse for a long time.

“Come on, my dear lady,” he said, “Let’s leave this nonsense. I’ve seen you fly in the air quite clearly, and I know that you’re a true Fay. Is that fabric,” he added, “or is that garment not, on the contrary, uniquely made of color and light?”

As he spoke those words he strove to seize the figurante’s robe with both hands, but they only touched emptiness and passed through the intangible tissue. He went on: “Your coiffure and the garland that you wear as a sash are made of living and natural convolvulus; explain to me how picked convolvulus can retain its freshness? At this moment, a fiery radiance is running around your head and kissing your hair—a radiance that comes from nowhere, neither raised stage lights nor electric lamps, since they’re all extinct. You can see that you can’t take me for a dupe.”

“Well, yes,” said the figurant, sadly, “I’m a true Fay, the fay Tyro, granddaughter of the great Urgèle. I’m one of the benevolent creatures who procure humans poise, beautiful dreams, sweet hopes and cheerful thoughts, and only enter your dwellings to prepare you for agreeable surprises. We dance in chorus under the old trees of forests, we flutter over silvery waters in the moonlight, and we drink from the cups of flowers like bees. But alas, as all beings, even subtilized ones, have to conform to the ideal of the times in which they live, and not contradict it in any manner, we’re obliged to remain invisible, or only to appear dressed as peasant women or as ladies. And no one sees us, in order to appreciate our coquetry, clad in our sparkling tunics, crowned with celestial flowers, holding our diamond wands! Here without inconveniencing anyone, I had the joy of resuming my real form, floating in a robe the color of the moon, and I intoxicated myself with the image—crude, it’s true but, in sum, the image—of the games of Titania and Morgane. What harm was I doing, happy in my fashion, not disturbing you at all, taking up such little room, and giving to your gilded gauze and cardboard, by virtue of my mere presence, an ineluctable magical verity?”

“Well,” said Jacquemod, “that pleases you to say, but I have no desire to be vilified by the newspapers. At the moment, I’m on very bad terms with the editors of the *Styilet*, who would like to act as middlemen for all my plays, which I can’t allow them to do because my ticket-seller, who procures me funds, brings me all my plays ready-made. Besides which, I’m engaged with the new schools; I hope to have an experimental drama and a scientific *féerie*, in which everything is unraveled by geography. How would those messieurs view me making pacts with the supernatural? Why not poetry right away, and the hospital in consequence? Understand me; it’s necessary to be reasonable. You’re in my theater; today you’re flying in the air like an eagle; how do I know that you won’t be reciting lyric verse tomorrow? Not to mention that you’ve rendered my Jocrisse mad with amour! What do you expect me to do now?”

“Zameith!” said the fay Tyro. “It’s necessary that he loves me in order to become the man he ought to be; for, without the dream that cradles him, disgust for the theater would have killed him. But I’ll remain for him a dazzling vision, and he’ll never hear the sound of my voice. As for you, my presence here will only bring you good luck.”

“Well,” said Jacquemod, shaken, “I don’t say... What if, for instance, Gilquin were to come back?”

¹ Presumably the prolific Adolphe d’Ennery (1811-1899).

² The wily Mercadet is the eponymous protagonist of *Mercadet, le faiseur* [Mercadet, the fixer] an 1848 play by Balzac. The character Godeau, who never appears, might have been the inspiration for Samuel Beckett’s Godot.

“He’ll come back at half past eleven,” said the Fay. “At this moment it’s quarter past.”

While chatting thus they had passed behind the backcloth into a place that remained obscure. When they found themselves under the light of a gas-lamp again, near the door by which people exit the stage, the director, increasingly astonished, saw that Tyro was no longer dressed as a fay, and was wearing an elegant town costume: an otter-fur plush sombrero ornamented with a bear-paw with genuine claws; an otter-skin pelisse garnished with skunk; laced gloves; green bronze stockings; and high-heeled opera shoes in red morocco. However, no trap-door had opened to allow the passage of a machinist seizing the rings placed at the extremity of a tubular cord, and Jacquemod experienced a certain malaise in sensing the play of a magic whose prodigies were executed without trickery. To begin with, he had the idea of retaining the fay Tyro, who was gazing at him with a sad and pleading expression, but he resisted that virtuous impulse because he had just perceived a columnist for the *Figaro*, the “Monsieur de l’Orchestre,” whose indiscretions he feared.

Nevertheless, he conducted the Fay as far as the door to the street, curious to know whether she would take a cab. Entirely to the contrary; although the weather was serene and bright on that January evening, with no mist or fog, he soon saw the figure of Tyro fade away, vaporize, and finally dissolve into the air.

Only ten minutes to wait! The director had lit a cigar, and was pacing back and forth feverishly, bare-headed, wondering whether Gilquin would come. But at the precise moment when half past eleven chimed on the Gothic churches of the Rue Saint-Martin, an elegantly-harnessed daumont stopped at the theater door. Gilquin got down from it and threw himself into Jacquemod’s arms.

“Let’s go up to your office,” he said.

Scarcely were they there than the former pirate—for he had indeed been one—aligned on a bureau, for the capital and the interest of his debt, fifty thousand-franc bills. The director immediately drew his former associate into the foyer, where he invited the entire troupe to lunch, but at the very moment that he had the idea of ordering it, twenty cooks from Chevet, as white as snow, invaded the staircases carrying manna, silverware, dishes on trays, ice-buckets and candelabras garnished with green candles, following the music of a band, which could be heard some distance away, as in an intermission by Molière. Heroes, knights, comics, clowns and all the women costumed by Grévin³ with low-necked leotards, clad as Snow, Swallows and Bats, like sprites going to take a bath, crowded around the buffet in Jacquemod’s office before poultry, pink hams, galantines, nougats and dried preserves, and champagne flowing in floods.

The most admirable thing was that one of the actresses, having chanced to put her hand in the pocket of her dress, took out a jewel-case containing an adornment in black pearls, and all her comrades had an analogous surprise, of sapphires, emeralds, rubies, diamonds, chrysoprases or chrysoberyls. In the men’s pockets presents were found appropriate to the taste of each; in particular, Zameith had a marvelous Shakespeare complete in a single volume, printed in red on Japanese paper with no name of a printer or editor, bound in light green morocco.

When a great many bonbons had been crunched and a great many toasts drunk to Gilquin and a thousand follies related, the three heroines of the play, the fay Luciole, the fay Terrible and the fay of the Fountain—which is to say, Anna Veyx, Aimée Lua and Séraphine Revenaz—holding their wands in their hands, asked to go and salute in his cradle the little director, which could be done without inconvenience, Laure Jacquemod being very well and already cured of her milk fever. The director consented to that caprice, although the three fays had been his mistresses by turns, but he did not look very closely and was not superstitious. Introduced into the chamber of the charming young mother, the three Fays, after having complimented her, went to the child’s cradle and extended their wands ornamented with tinsel and strass over his head.

“Little Adolphe,” said Anna Veyx, smiling, “I accord you the gift of being as wily and cunning as your father.”

“I,” said Aimée Lua, “accord you the gift of pleasing all women.”

“And I,” said Séraphine Revenaz, “accord you the gift of having a lot of money.”

Those wishes enchanted the director, although he knew that it was only a game and a joke. After having saluted Madame Laure, the three Fays went downstairs, laughing, and, as his wife wanted to rest, Jacquemod extinguished the lamp. Immediately, however, a blue vapor filed the room; it condensed and became the delightful figure of the fay Tyro. The chamber itself was transformed; it had become a vaporous grotto sculpted in a transparent sapphire striped with gold threads, where dazzling stalactites hung down and great crimson flowers opened in the interstices of rocks, while cascades of white light collapsed silently to the sound of a gentle and almost imperceptible murmur. Graciously, elevated in mid-air, the beautiful Tyro leaned her lips over the child’s forehead, and having kissed it gently she said: “Dear child, you will be a poet!”

³ The reference is to the Musée Grévin, a wax museum founded in 1882 by the journalist Arthur Meyer, in imitation of Madame Tussaud’s in London.

“I’m dishonored!” said Jacquemod.