

# The Mercurian



*A Theatrical Translation Review*  
Volume 1, Number 4

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*The Mercurian* is named for Mercury who, if he had known it, was/is the patron god of theatrical translators, those intrepid souls possessed of eloquence, feats of skill, messengers not between the gods but between cultures, traders in images, nimble and dexterous linguistic thieves. Like the metal mercury, theatrical translators are capable of absorbing other metals, forming amalgams. As in ancient chemistry, the mercurian is one of the five elementary “principles” of which all material substances are compounded, otherwise known as “spirit”. The theatrical translator is sprightly, lively, potentially volatile, sometimes inconstant, witty, an ideal guide or conductor on the road.

*The Mercurian* publishes translations of plays and performance pieces from any language into English. *The Mercurian* also welcomes theoretical pieces about theatrical translation; rants, manifestos, and position papers pertaining to translation for the theatre; as well as production histories of theatrical translations. Submissions should be sent to: Adam Versenyi at [anversen@email.unc.edu](mailto:anversen@email.unc.edu) or by snail mail: Adam Versenyi, Department of Dramatic Art, CB# 3230, The University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill, Chapel Hill, NC 27599-3230. For translations of plays or performance pieces, unless the material is in the public domain, please send proof of permission to translate from the playwright or original creator of the piece. Since one of the primary objects of *The Mercurian* is to move translated pieces into production, no translations of plays or performance pieces will be published unless the translator can certify that he/she has had an opportunity to hear the translation performed in either a reading or another production-oriented venue.

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A correction for “Translating Cultures: Bridging the Ancient and Modern through Trans-adaptation and Performance” from The Mercurian Vol. 1 No. 3: Regretfully, in preparing and re-ordering the paper for publication, recognition of Dr. James Wells’ contribution to the initial conception and organization of the project was inadvertently removed, including phrasing from the original grant application co-written by Dr. Wells that became part of the language of the paper. The authors regret the omission, and wish to thank Dr. Wells for his contribution to the project. James Wells is now a Visiting Assistant Professor of Classics at Hamilton College.

### Editor's Note:

This long –delayed issue of *The Mercurian* marks the completion of the first volume of the journal. When it was launched a year or so ago I had no idea what its reception would be, but have been immensely gratified by the strong support of both contributors and subscribers. *The Mercurian* continues to be an experiment and I thank all of you who have come along for the ride. While the electronic newsletter distribution format seems to have worked effectively up until now, it is also clear that it has its limitations. I am currently in discussion with the Department of Dramatic Art at the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill about creating a web presence for the journal on our departmental site that would create the possibility of greater access to the journal. More to come on that later.

This issue begins with three brief pieces from a roundtable on "Translation into Production" that took place at the Association of Theatre in Higher Education Annual Conference in August 2008. Jason Yancey and Kathleen Jeffs discuss their quite different approaches to staging Spanish Golden Age plays for contemporary audiences, while Robert Gander ruminates about his experience re-imagining Alfred Jarry's *Ubu Roi* for a contemporary audience at a small mid-western college. Kathleen Dimmick's translation Raymond Roussel's 1926 surrealist text *Heliocentric* and Edward Gauvin's translation of Haitian expatriate Jean Métellus' experimental piece *Toussaint L'Ouverture* continue this issue's focus on translating diverse performance forms. Finally, the issue concludes with Anatole Bilenko's translation of Ukrainian writer Neda Nezhdama's 1998 "black comedy for a national tragedy" *He Who Opens the Door* that in several ways prefigures some of the events recently witnessed in former states of the Soviet Union.

As the theatre is nothing without its audience, *The Mercurian* welcomes your comments, questions, complaints, and critiques. Deadline for submissions for consideration for the first issue of Volume 2 will be February 1, 2009.

--Adam Versényi

### *Translation for Production Roundtable*

In August 2008 Allison Horsley and Adam Versényi organized a roundtable entitled "Translation for Production: Difficult Dialogues and the Art of Multi-Disciplinary Collaboration" for the annual conference of the Association of Theatre in Higher Education in Denver, Colorado. The roundtable departed from the notion that the art of staging a translation reflects the art of the theatre itself: collaboration. While a translator remains in dialogue with the source text throughout the process of translation, as other collaborators come aboard, the dialogue surrounding the translation itself changes to reflect the needs of production and accommodate new perspectives. What challenges face a director, actors, designers, choreographer, playwright, dramaturg, and translator when moving a piece of translated theatre or performance text through the production process? How do collaborators from different disciplines view their role in a translation process, and how do they develop a shared language to achieve their common goals?

By opening a dialogue between theatre practitioners from different fields we hoped to discover how those different perspectives affect participation in the process of translation, gain new insights into how collaborators may improve communication with one another in the process of production, and expand what translation for performance means from others' perspectives. In a world increasingly reliant on shared language, it seems particularly timely to raise a conversation about how we come together as artists to share stories.

Participants in the roundtable included directors, dramaturgs, and playwrights whose working languages included English, Spanish, Russian, and German; and whose approaches to translation focused on the "text" of translation, cultural adaptation, bilingual communication, and the challenges faced by those who translate centuries-old texts for modern audiences. The

dialogue amongst the participants was wide-ranging, lively, and fruitful for all concerned. With the next couple of issues *The Mercurian* will publish participants' notes for the roundtable. We begin with Jason Yancey and Kathleen Jeffs different approaches to staging Spanish Golden Age plays, and Robert Gander's experience of re-imagining Alfred Jarry's *Ubu Roi* for a contemporary audience.

Directing the *Comedia* in the Twenty-first Century:

Translating Culture through Performance

Jason Yancey

In the fall of 2001 I collaborated in the creation of a Spanish Golden Age theater troupe sponsored by the department of Spanish and Portuguese at Brigham Young University in Provo, Utah. This fledgling effort, realized almost entirely by students, began by interpreting the phenomenon of performance as a union of three critical components: the text, the performer and the audience. Historically, each of these elements contributed directly and actively to produce Spain's theatrical experience. Playwrights such as Lope de Vega or Calderón de la Barca wrote according to the tastes and expectations of their audiences. Familiar or famous actors that interpreted their roles within a specific cultural climate then mounted the written text on stage. In writings such as Lope's *Arte nuevo* or Tirso's *Cigarrales de Toledo* we learn that successful productions necessarily achieved a harmonious balance on all three fronts. Today, on the other hand, in an effort to reconstruct a "historically accurate" representation of classical theater, a director will on occasion do violence to the text and its performers as if to force the play into a more palatable product for consumption by a passive audience. I feel this approach to the *comedia* often fails because it disrupts the original formula by shifting the burden of production entirely onto the performer and/or the text thereby ignoring the tremendous contribution that seventeenth-century theatergoers had in the development of the actions on stage. These directors essentially cut out one of the play's major characters. Since the text represented the only constant between my production and Lope's we chose to preserve the original Spanish of the text and instead translate the performer and the audience in an effort to help them behave the way the text expected them to behave.

To help us achieve this translation I applied Michael Heim's theory of Virtual Reality. Heim's study looks at the relationship between computer programs and users and identifies what he calls the three I's of a virtual system. First, he states that the framework of programming in the system (what I call the text in a performance) must be constructed so as to immerse the user, making her understand that she has been transported into another world. Second, the system will offer the user choices that establish an interactive relationship as it accepts input from the user (the audience is free to interact). Lastly, the system must demonstrate information intensity so that when the user makes a choice the program will recognize the contribution and respond intelligently (these are actors responding to audience participation). The culturally translated performance on stage then becomes a matter of programming my actors and my audience inside the system of the text so that it replicates the original, interactive experience in a seventeenth-century corral.

From 2001 to 2005 I directed 4 full-length *comedias*, one *loa* and one *entremés*, that toured to elementary schools, middle and high schools and universities in five western states. My last production, Lope's *El caballero de Olmedo* (*The Gentleman of Olmedo*) was selected to open the 2005 Chamizal Siglo de Oro Drama Festival held annually in El Paso, Texas.

Following Heim as a model we employed a number of programming strategies. Beginning with our performers, the students did extensive research into every aspect of the production, including scenic design, costumes, props, staging choices, company and playhouse histories, as well as the political climate of the day. In rehearsals we did a great deal of exercises to develop improvisation skills as well as a heightened stage awareness that would allow them to alter the blocking as needed. We studied and used *lazi* from the *commedia dell'arte* tradition and played with the actor's identity as both character and performer. At every step we placed an

emphasis on the abundance and availability of choices where we allowed, at times even demanded, audience members to participate in the performance on stage.

Programming the audience required a great deal more preparation. Each student in the project produced a research article that was then published in a study guide for audience members to read before the play. Furthermore, we sent outreach groups to classrooms, cafeterias, libraries, gymnasiums, auditoriums and even a juvenile correctional facility where we gave a brief description of why the Golden Age was cool, who the key playwrights were and what a *comedia* looked like. After performing a brief scene from our play the group selected volunteers to produce an impromptu *comedia* of their own.

We also altered the performance space so as to replicate the *corral* environment. Our performances were typically staged outdoors in a patio space that roughly approximated that of the corral. One year we went a step further by dividing the audience according to gender the way a traditional corral performance would have done, allowing all the men to sit in the front of the house while the women sat in the back. Additionally, we provided the audience with hundreds of small beanbags representing vegetables they might throw at the performers. We even gave them coins they could either give to actors or use to purchase traditional theater snacks. To maintain the peace we staffed the performance with guards dressed in armor that, when necessary, handcuffed and relocated rowdy patrons to the stocks and clergymen that interrupted the performance periodically to censor inappropriate content.

Keeping in mind that our audience often spoke little or no Spanish the performers made frequent, unscripted asides in English. This helped to keep the audience listening attentively, even when they did not entirely understand the dialogue. It also provided a point of contact with the play that they could readily understand and enjoy. As an additional attempt to bridge the

language barrier the students produced a short, simplified comic book version of the play with drawings and captions that helped the audience to grasp the essential plot points of the story on stage.

This process revealed a number of dramatic discoveries. Surprisingly, I found that our audiences behaved almost exactly the same way that historical, first hand-accounts describe the afternoon atmosphere in a *corral*, even when they were entirely unfamiliar with what that behavior should be. The tiny, packed-in space became a cockpit of energy and rowdiness that erased any notion of a fourth wall. Even more surprising, the women often proved louder than the men. Audience members not only teased the performers but they began to interact with each other at times with such enthusiasm that the play hardly seemed the focus of attention. Instead, it became the thread that brought everyone together and the source material for adaptation and improvisation. Actors relished the variety of interaction offered from each new audience that produced a different show every night. The actors, once appropriately programmed, made new and clever choice that I had never seen in rehearsals but that worked because they were in harmony with the system.

Perhaps most important to me, as a director, my audience experienced a real and personal connection with a literally foreign and unfamiliar play written nearly 400 years ago. Each student that participated in this project became a budding *comedia* scholar with a passion for the genre. The production stimulated new awareness in our audience as well. At a predominately Hispanic elementary school in Tucson, Arizona, one child remarked with surprise to learn of literature written in Spanish. He thought all literature was written in English.

I attribute the success of these productions in large part to the brilliance of the original programming. Lope, Tirso, Calderón and others were formidable and uncommonly gifted

playwrights that crafted their plays so as to maximize their enjoyment within the a specific cultural construct. They knew the program. Even though the majority of our actors had never participated in a play before the text possessed a built-in program for success that we discovered not by translating the language but rather by translating ourselves.

#### References

Heim, Michael. *The Metaphysics of Virtual Reality*. New York: Oxford UP, 1993.

## The Evolution of Translation Values from Pre-Production through Rehearsal

Kathleen Jeffs (née Mountjoy)

New College, Oxford

In the spirit of developing a model for ideal collaboration between a translator, director, and dramaturg in bringing Spanish Golden Age drama to the English stage, in this short piece I will focus on the way our translation values changed over the course of three productions. In each case, values shifted from close attention on accurately translating precise phrasing and punctuation to the need for smooth, clear, dramatic language for the stage. It is thus all the more important for the pre-production work to be of high quality, to develop a well-wrought text that can withstand the pragmatic needs of cutting and changing during rehearsals. The early establishment of an efficient collaborative model between the production's director, translator, and dramaturg ensures a better chance of creating such a text.

The first two Golden Age productions that I worked on, Lope de Vega's *The Dog in the Manger* (*El perro del hortelano*) translated by David Johnston, and Cervantes's *Pedro, the Great Pretender* (*Pedro de Urdemalas*) translated by Philip Osment, were very different from each other in that the directors had distinct roles in shaping the translations.<sup>1</sup> The director of *The Dog in the Manger*, Laurence Boswell, modified the translation during rehearsal, with the help and permission of the translator, who kept in touch with the evolution of the text by email through

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<sup>1</sup> The Spanish Golden Age Season opened on 14 April 2004 at the Swan Theatre in Stratford-upon-Avon with the performance of *The Dog in the Manger* (Lope de Vega's *El perro del hortelano*). The other plays in the season included *Tamar's Revenge*, James Fenton's translation of *La venganza de Tamar* by Tirso de Molina, Sor Juana Inés de la Cruz's *House of Desires* (*Los empeños de una casa*), directed by Nancy Meckler and translated by Catherine Boyle, and Philip Osment's translation of Miguel de Cervantes's *Pedro, the Great Pretender* (*Pedro de Urdemalas*), directed by Mike Alfreds, which opened on 1 September.

me and the assistant director.<sup>2</sup> In contrast, Philip Osment, translator of *Pedro, the Great Pretender*, worked with that play's director, Mike Alfreds (known for his work with Shared Experience) before rehearsals began to come up with a script that needed minimal changes during the rehearsal process, and Osment was present for the first few weeks of rehearsal to make such changes as were necessary. The third production I will discuss in this essay was a triptych of three short *entremeses* (one-act plays) by Cervantes that I directed at the Edinburgh Fringe Festival in 2005.<sup>3</sup> After a long pre-production phase of adaptation, translation, and improvisation, we came up with a model of "devised translation" which is a fusion of those techniques. Over the course of preparing the texts, rehearsing with the actors, and mounting the productions, the translation values changed in all three processes. Let us now turn to an example from each production.

The degrees to which the translation needs to be literal and how far it can stretch to accommodate the "deep" questions of the play are crucially at issue in *The Dog in the Manger*. In this play, Diana writes a sonnet-letter to her secretary, with whom she is starting to fall in love. Here Diana states that it is mere envy to fall in love based only upon seeing the object of love being adored by someone else, and that to feel such jealousy before being in love is impossible. Yet, somehow it has happened; her love has proceeded from jealousy, from the pain felt upon learning that she has been less lucky in love than a woman less attractive than herself. She feels jealousy, yet has no one to love nor does she have anyone to love her, and for this reason she is miserable. Teodoro reads her letter aloud:

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<sup>2</sup> Boswell recently wrote a new version of Lope de Vega's *Fuente Ovejuna* and directed it for the Canadian Stratford Shakespeare Festival, 19 June to 4 Oct. 2008. I served as consultant to him again during his translation process, emailing text and suggestions back and forth in the months running up to the production.

<sup>3</sup> Our production, entitled *Spanish Interludes*, included translations of Cervantes's *El retablo de las maravillas* (*The Marvellous Puppet Show*), *El viejo celoso* (*The Jealous Old Man*), and *La guarda cuidadosa* (*The Watchdog*) and played at the Burton-Taylor Studio in Oxford from 15-19 February 2005 and at C Central in Edinburgh from 5-14 August of that year.

Lope de Vega	Johnston Draft 2.1	Johnston Performance Script
<p>Amar por ver amar, envidia ha sido; y primero que amar estar celosa es invención de amor maravillosa y que por imposible se ha tenido. De los celos mi amor ha procedido, por pesarme que, siendo más hermosa, no fuese en ser amada tan dichosa que hubiese lo que envidio merecido. Estoy sin ocasión desconfiada; celosa sin amor, aunque sintiendo; debo de amar, pues quiero ser amada. Ni me dejo forzar, ni me defiando. Darne quiero a entender, sin decir nada. <i>Entiéndame quien puede; yo me entiendo.</i><sup>4</sup> (I. 551-564)<sup>5</sup></p>	<p>To desire at the sight of lovers' desire, to love because they love too, is to burn in the flame of envy's fire, the contagion of madness, but no less true. No impossible urge, for my love springs from the bitter knowledge that my worth is denied where another woman clings to love. And love knows no name or birth. Heart churning with no rhyme, no reason, jealousy without love, deeply feeling this is my love, and love's no treason. I do not give way, nor yet resist, sealing my lips and yet opening them wide to kiss. Those with eyes to see, will see. They'll see this. (14)<sup>6</sup></p>	<p>To desire at the sight of another's desire, to love because they love too, is to burn in the flame of envy's fire; the contagion of madness, but no less true. No impossible urge, for my love springs From the bitter knowledge that my worth is denied where another woman clings to love. And love cares not for name or birth. Heart churning with no rhyme, no reason, love born from jealousy, deeply feeling this is my love, and love's no treason. I do not give way, nor yet resist; sealing my lips but yet opening them wide to kiss. Those with eyes to see, will see. They'll see this. (14)<sup>7</sup></p>

In rehearsal, the actors playing Teodoro and Diana took turns reading out the sonnet-letters to one another. The line “And love knows no name or birth” was immediately changed to the more iambically pleasing “And love cares not for name or birth.” This change was made not only on the basis of sound, but because in this play, the conditions of birth and its power over the object of love keep Diana from declaring her feelings for her secretary. Fear of her love for someone of low estate is at the heart of the plot, and will eventually cause the lackey Tristán to invent a story to gain Teodoro a noble father. This change, then, was made to allow Diana to contend that her love is present despite the quality of her birth and the paltriness of Teodoro’s pedigree. In rehearsal, we asked, “What is the source of this love?” The crucial line in the Spanish is “celosa sin amor,” which is perhaps literally closer to Johnston’s original “jealousy without love,” but Johnston provided “love born from jealousy” in an emailed re-write. This was found in rehearsal to be closer to the running metaphor of love’s parentage that is the central theme of the sonnet.

<sup>4</sup>Dixon notes: “Lope constructed his deliberately mysterious sonnet to lead up to this line, which paraphrases one in Petrarch’s *Canzone CV: ‘Intendami chi po, ch’ i’ m’ intend’ io,’*” *The Dog in the Manger* by Lope de Vega, trans. Victor Dixon (Ottawa: Dovehouse, 1990) 116.

<sup>5</sup> References to the Spanish edition of this play are taken from *El perro del hortelano* by Lope de Vega, ed. Victor Dixon (London: Tamesis, 1981).

<sup>6</sup>David Johnston, “*Dog in a Manger: Draft 2.1*,” unpublished typescript, 2004.

<sup>7</sup> David Johnston, “*The Dog in the Manger: Performance Script*,” unpublished typescript, 2004.

This is an example of the type of translation that is faithful to the pragmatic need to convey the central idea clearly to the audience; Johnston prioritized the most burning question of the scene, which is, “can love be born from jealousy?” Because of this, the dramatic engine of the scene emerged as a contest between Diana and Teodoro, a match of wits. Who is the parent (jealousy), and who the child (love)? The parentage of love and jealousy, and which comes first in a chicken-or-egg debate of primogeniture is commonplace in the Golden Age, as is its Aristotelian answer, which Teodoro provides.<sup>8</sup> This debate, if it is to be communicated not only to actors in the rehearsal room, but subsequently to an audience, must be simplified such that it can be packaged for immediate reception in the theatre.<sup>9</sup> This is not a case of “dumbing down” the sonnet, but of sharpening the language so that it can accurately but succinctly relay the message to the audience. In the case of translating this sonnet-letter, in the rehearsal process for *The Dog in the Manger* the director valued clear conveyance of the ideas, clarifying the arguments posed in a dynamic question-and-answer format.

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<sup>8</sup> “Yo lo concedo;/ mas ya esos celos, señora,/ de algún principio nacieron,/ y ése fue amor; que la causa/ no nace de los efetos,/ sino los efetos de ella” (I. 578-583). “Perhaps so./ But jealousy also has its source,/ and that source, I think, must be love./ Cause and effect, essential logic.” *The Dog in the Manger* by Lope de Vega, trans. David Johnston (London: Oberon, 2004) 38-39.

<sup>9</sup> The script consultant in rehearsal can at times bring in contemporaneous examples of Golden Age works in order to illustrate particularly important themes; in this case, Garcilaso de la Vega’s thirty-first sonnet is a useful corollary to Lope’s two poems; its second half sets up the line of issue between envy, jealousy, and love:

¡O crudo nieto, que das vida al padre  
y matas al agüelo!, ¿por qué creces  
tan desconforme a aquél de que has nacido?  
¡O celoso temor!, ¿a quién pareces?,  
que aun la invidia, tu propia y fiera madre,  
se espanta en ver el monstruo que á parido.

Here envy is the mother of jealousy, and jealousy is love’s issue as well as its source. Examples of this type of view abound in Lope’s plays; we find jealousy normally as a product of love, not engendering it where it has not previously existed, in *El sembrar en buena tierra*, *Porfiando vence amor*, and *El caballero del Olmedo*. See Lope de Vega, *El sembrar en buena tierra*, ed. William L. Fichter (New York: MLA, 1944) 42, 162.

After nine weeks spent rehearsing in Clapham North, in London, the company packed up and made the move to Stratford. Excitement was mounting as the opening of *The Dog in the Manger* grew closer, and rehearsals began in Stratford for *House of Desires*. In Stratford, my role in rehearsals for *Pedro, the Great Pretender* was different from working with the director, Alfreds, than it had been with Boswell. Alfreds’s approach was much less text and language-based than Boswell’s had been. While Boswell changed a great deal of the script while rehearsing it, Alfreds made only minimal changes to the script once it was delivered to the actors. This was because the brunt of the scriptwriting work had been finished before rehearsals began, in an exhaustive translation process involving close collaboration between the translator, Osment, the director, Alfreds, and the academicians attached to the project, primarily Jack Sage and myself. In the following scene, the title character, a trickster dubbed Pedro “the Great Pretender” becomes a professional actor, changing his name to reflect his new vocation.

Cervantes	Osment Draft 2	Osment Performance Script
Volarán los hechos míos hasta los reinos vacíos de Policea, y aún más, en nombre de Nicolás, y el sobrenombre de Ríos: que éste fue el nombre de aquel mago que a entender me dio quién era el mundo crüel, ciego que sin vista vio cuantos fraudes hay en él. (III. 2817-26) <sup>10</sup>	And out beyond the Milky Way they’ll hear of what I do and say that’s how far my fame will carry! What’s more I’ll change my name to Larry My surname? Yes! Olivier! [This was the name surprisingly of him who helped me recognise how very cruel this world can be; that blind man who didn’t need eyes to see the world’s duplicity.] (84) <sup>11</sup>	My fame will fly on the breeze to infernos deeper than Dante’s. I’m changing what I’m called as well my Christian name will be Miguel and as surname I’ll take Cervantes. [This was my master’s name, you see, the one who helped me recognise how very cruel this world can be; that blind man who didn’t need eyes to see the world’s duplicity.] (107) <sup>12</sup>

In the notes to the literal translation, Sage and I appended an explanation of the reference to the actor/*autor*, Nicolás de los Ríos.<sup>13</sup> When Osment turned to Sage for advice on how to translate

<sup>10</sup> References to the Spanish edition are taken from *La entretenida, Pedro de Urdemalas* by Miguel de Cervantes, ed. Florencio Sevilla Arroyo and Antonio Rey Hazas (Madrid: Alianza, 1998).

<sup>11</sup> Philip Osment, “Pedro the Great Pretender Draft Two,” unpublished typescript, 2004.

<sup>12</sup> *Pedro, the Great Pretender* by Miguel de Cervantes, trans. Philip Osment (London: Oberon, 2004).

<sup>13</sup> “2820-1: Nicolás de los Ríos was a well-known director of a travelling troupe of players and (perhaps provisionally) an urban residential company of actors during Cervantes’ lifetime in the latter half of the 16<sup>th</sup> c. and

the reference to Ríos, Sage's first thoughts were for an English or modern equivalent, suggesting "William Shakespeare" or "Laurence Olivier," or even a Spanish option, "Federico García Lorca." In his first version, Osment opted for "Miguel de Cervantes" as the replacement for Nicolás de los Ríos. There then ensued a debate when Sage and I sent comments through on the first version. Though he agreed that it was "appropriately outrageous and funny and will click with our audiences," Sage objected to the use of Cervantes's name as a replacement for the Spanish actor-manager on the grounds that "it does not transmit at least two of Cervantes' essential coups: that Pedro has become what Cervantes was not—(a) a professional 'pretender,' an actor and troupe director (Nicolás de los Ríos) and (b) a real-life person who is no longer alive (N. de los R. died 1610)" (Sage, email 13 May 2004).

So, Osment tried "Laurence Olivier" in the example from Draft 2 above. However, once this version reached Alfreds, it was rejected on the grounds that inviting the audience to stretch to a modern, English reference such as "Laurence Olivier" took them down an unwanted path as they watched the end of the play. Before Osment submitted the version to Oberon to be published, and before he gave a full script to Alfreds to be used by the actors, he reverted to his original choice (Miguel de Cervantes). Translating Pedro's conversion into "Nicolás de los Ríos" to "Miguel de Cervantes," the new reference is only as metadramatic as is any given audience member's familiarity with the referent, and as they will probably be aware that Cervantes wrote the piece they are currently watching, they will be reminded of this fact and pulled out of the "illusion" otherwise created by the play. I would argue that this choice is the best of the options considered by the translator, his director, and the academic consultants, and that Osment was

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early 17<sup>th</sup> c. Died 1610. Cervantes must have had him in mind as a model for his Director of the Troupe (*Autor de comedias*) in this play and perhaps for Cervantes himself" (Jack Sage and Kathleen Mountjoy, "Notes to Literal Translation," unpublished typescript, 4 Dec. 2003).

correct to avoid the insertion of a modern referent such as Lorca or Olivier. If this is in fact the first translation and performance of this play in the United Kingdom, such a choice would have stood out too strongly as one made *in translation*, and its metatheatrical effect, though perhaps stronger, would have been focused on estranging the audience from the production by specifically reminding them that it is a translation they are watching, not the “real thing.” Arguments for retaining the “recent and controversial” effect of Cervantes’s choice of an actor-manager who had recently died are, I believe, not strong enough to justify causing the audience to feel they have been taken in by a clever translator wishing to “update” the play. Instead, the audience wonders, “Did Cervantes write himself into the play at this point?” That is a similar effect to a reference to a recently-deceased actor, in that it is suitably metadramatic and draws the audience momentarily out of the play. The discussion between the translator and his academic advisors, while it ultimately reinforced the translator’s own first instinct, brought us all to a fuller understanding of the precise metatheatrical effect in this short passage upon the audience.

The textual work continued into the first few weeks of rehearsal, but it was only a minor part of the actors’ process. Alfreds spent each morning for the first few weeks of rehearsals in movement and character work, and my role was to research the period and provide explanations for references to Spanish and seventeenth-century customs and vocabulary which were not contextually explained in Osment’s translation. I provided translations of novellas with similar themes and characters to *Pedro de Urdemalas*, and I was much more on hand to explain lines rather than to change them. Osment, the translator, was present for the first two weeks of rehearsal, eliminating the need for the email process of changing lines during *The Dog in the Manger*. The actors were encouraged to build their understanding of their characters through

experimentation with costume, as racks of props and clothes lined the perimeter of the room, so that they might grab a translation of *La gitanilla* (*The Little Gypsy-girl*, a short story by Cervantes with similar themes to *Pedro*) with one hand and a farmer's hat with the other as they made their way around the room, gaining a fuller understanding of the play with every step around the space. In this way the actors were asked (not just permitted) to become generative as well as interpretive artists, such that the creative process of character work was taken on collaboratively by the ensemble.

My experience translating and directing for the Edinburgh Fringe was different again in that our theatre company began as the Oxford University Playwriting and Dramaturgy Society, a group of students mixing with local playwrights and actors interested in writing and editing scripts for performance. As a playwriting exercise, we tried our hand at translation, and we began with one of Cervantes's short plays: *The Marvellous Puppet Show* (*El retablo de las maravillas*). The exercise for the group was to experiment with adaptation at first, re-setting the play in a new location. The play that emerged as the most promising text in the group, by Tom Cameron, had been relocated to Oxford, with Oxford students and local characters. As with any adaptation, there were certain issues that were difficult to translate. A central theme in *The Marvellous Puppet Show* is *limpieza de sangre* (purity of blood). The importance of being an Old Christian, with documentation proving that one was both born in wedlock, and not a covert Muslim or Jew, was well-known to audiences of Cervantes's time, but difficult for the group to translate to a modern setting. In the original play, the hoaxers Chanfalla and Chirinos convince the credulous townsfolk that only those with purely Christian blood will be able to see their puppet show. We

discussed ideas of ethnic tensions in Oxford and the UK, and the conversations were fruitful, but there are challenges on the stage that one cannot always see around a table.

Cervantes	Cameron	Performance Script
<p>CHANFALLA: Vamos; y no se les pase de las mientes las calidades que han de tener los que se atrevieren a mirar el maravilloso retablo.</p> <p>BENITO: A mi cargo queda eso, y séle decir que, por mi parte, puedo ir seguro a juicio, pues tengo el padre alcalde; cuatro dedos de enjundia de cristiano viejo rancioso tengo sobre los cuatro costados de mi linaje: ¡miren si verá el tal retablo!</p> <p>CAPACHO: Todos le pensamos ver, señor Benito Repollo.</p> <p>JUAN: No nacimos acá en las malvas, señor Pedro Capacho.</p> <p>GOBERNADOR: Todo será menester, según voy viendo, señores Alcalde, Regidor y Escribano.</p> <p>JUAN: Vamos, autor, y manos a la obra; que Juan Castrado me llamo, hijo de Antón Castrado y de Juana Macha; y no digo más en abono y seguro que podré ponerme cara a cara y a pie quedo delante del referido retablo.</p> <p>CHIRINOS: ¡Dios lo haga! (138-39)<sup>14</sup></p>	<p>ROB: Certainly, but make sure that our condition is met.</p> <p>BENITO: I'll take care of that side. For my part I haven't got a drop of posh blood. My family's had a house in Brixton ever since I can remember.</p> <p>NICK(Y): A house?</p> <p>ROB: Brixton?</p> <p>JUAN: A family?</p> <p>BENITO: When I say a house I mean...a mate's shelter in a car park. We had a piece of cardboard which we put in the gaps between cars, and we slept underneath the cars. And when I say Brixton I mean near Brixton it wasn't a town exactly, just this car park, where all the other gangs lived...And when I say a car park I mean there were two cars that had been all but smashed to pieces for thirty years. I won't have any problems seeing the show.</p> <p>JUAN: Well, none of us will, Benito, none of us ever had the slightest sniff of privilege. I don't know where I was born or how- I couldn't be surer of the drugs having their effects on me.</p> <p>NICK(Y): I hope you're not wrong. (4)<sup>15</sup></p>	<p>CHANFALLA: Let's go, but make sure that all of you who dare to see the marvellous show remember the conditions that must be met.</p> <p>BENITO: I'll take care of that side. For my part I feel quite safe in submitting to the test. I haven't got a drop of Jewish blood. My father was the mayor of this town before me; four generations of our Christian family have lived in the same house in this town for as long as I can remember. I won't have any problems seeing the show.</p> <p>JUAN: Well, none of us will, Benito; none of us was born in a barn either.</p> <p>GOVERNOR: I'm assured it will be very entertaining, my good Mayors.</p> <p>JUAN: Let's go, director! For Juan Castrado they call me, son of Anton Castrado and Juana Macha, and I am confident that I will be able to stand face to face with these puppets.</p> <p>CHIRINOS: I wouldn't doubt it for a moment. (4-5)<sup>16</sup></p>

Cameron adapted the anti-Semitism of Cervantes's townsfolk into a fear of being taken for nobility in a culture of "street cred." While this did resonate with an aspect of Oxford life, most of the Society members felt that Cervantes's satiric jab at racial prejudice was stronger and more widely relevant to twenty-first century issues of immigration, alienation and Muslim communities of post-September 11<sup>th</sup> British culture. The adaptation distorted the clarity of

<sup>14</sup> References to the Spanish edition are taken from *Entremeses* by Miguel de Cervantes, ed. Florencio Sevilla Arroyo and Antonio Rey Hazas (Madrid: Alianza, 1998).

<sup>15</sup> Tom Cameron, "The Marvellous Puppet Show," unpublished typescript, 2005.

<sup>16</sup> Oxford University Playwriting and Dramaturgy Society, "The Marvellous Puppet Show," unpublished typescript, 2005.

Cervantes's message, some members contended.<sup>17</sup> In an attempt to reclaim consensus and drive the project forward, we returned to the original, improvising scenes including the one above *without* a script; the new text emerged by substituting Cameron's "posh blood" for the simple language of Benito's claim, "I haven't got a drop of Jewish blood." Our performance script, above, used much of Cameron's adaptation, but returned the setting and references to those of the original, i.e. the competing claims that "four generations of our Christian family have lived in the same house in this town for as long as I can remember." Though we remained concerned that our audiences would take offense and not see the parody conveyed, the characterization of the townsfolk as overstuffed rustics in tights with big moustaches carried the atmosphere of ridicule clearly in performance.<sup>18</sup>

It remains now to compare the three translation methods and evaluate the models of collaborative translation in each. Because I as script consultant was able to work more closely with the translator in rehearsals for *Pedro, the Great Pretender*, spending time on the text together outside of the room while the director and the actors focused on other aspects of the play's world, we could remain confident that the text would not be altered outside of the translator's control, and I believe the text to have stayed more consistently close to the original because it was so finely filtered. There was more time to experiment with the problematic structure of the play because, attention off line-changes in rehearsal for the most part, the big picture was more in focus and we were less frequently hunched over the script counting newly-

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<sup>17</sup> Views expressed by John O'Neill and Sam Thompson, among others.

<sup>18</sup> The BBC Oxford reviewers wrote: "Their accessible, free-flowing interpretation loses none of the author's subversion and self-mocking irony. [...] The first of the three interludes, the Marvellous Puppet Show (El retablo de las maravillas) combines pure farce with an uncomfortably accurate observation of conformity and religious intolerance" ([http://www.bbc.co.uk/oxford/stage/2005/02/spanish\\_interludes.shtml](http://www.bbc.co.uk/oxford/stage/2005/02/spanish_interludes.shtml)).

written lines to check for scansion as in rehearsals for *The Dog*. Our “devised translation” method worked for a production involving three plays, intermittent song and dance, and an energetic Fringe atmosphere of experimentation, but I would have to test its strengths as a model for a full-length play translation, in which sustained consistency would be valued more than immediate reception and comedic panache.

The future looks bright for the translation and performance of Golden Age drama. In both America and the UK the number of productions is on the rise.<sup>19</sup> In my current research assistant capacity for the web resource “Out of the Wings,” I am charged with translating excerpts from one hundred Golden Age *comedias* and *entremeses* in the next three years.<sup>20</sup> Developing the ideal collaborative model of a director, translator, and dramaturg, I like to think of this site as providing the first meeting with an electronic dramaturg. Its purpose is to provide access to a wide variety of plays, offering excerpts of translations and contextual information. The model of translation in the three processes I have described above shares key values with the “Out of the Wings” site: the translations are designed to be clear, written for performance, yet faithful to the original. As the project is very new, time will tell how well it serves to introduce new audiences to Spanish plays by drawing in new directors, translators, and theatre companies, and how well my ideal collaborative model will re-form in productions sparked by the resource.

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<sup>19</sup> For recent reviews see the performance-oriented journal, *Comedia Performance*. See also, *The Comedia in English: Translation and Performance*, ed. Susan Paun de García and Donald Larson (Woodbridge: Tamesis, 2008) and *The Spanish Golden Age in English: Perspectives on Performance*, ed. Catherine Boyle and David Johnston with Janet Morris (London: Oberon, 2007).

<sup>20</sup> <http://www.outofthewings.org/>

## **Ubu Translated**

By Rob Gander, Chair

University of Nevada, Reno

The original production of Alfred Jarry's, *Ubu Roi*, created pandemonium at the Theatre de l'Oeuvre on its opening night. As a professor, I can tell you students don't generally think of theatre as riot-inducing, though we often discuss those rare uprisings in theatre history, eagerly attempting to prove an ancient art form a vibrant vehicle of change. Contemporary theatre is, more often than not, greeted with yawns rather than raised fists, whether it's in the academic, professional or community venue.

Is it possible to rile an audience now the way Jarry did over a century ago in Paris, France? What better vehicle than *Ubu* to find out. In preparation, I examined translations written by Barbara Wright, Cyril Connelly and Simon Watson Taylor, Martin Danziger, Kenneth Slater, and Maya Slater.

Each English version has its merits. The infamous opening line spoken by Ubu himself, *Merdre* (with an extra "r" that inexplicably infuriated Jarry's opening night audience in 1896) is translated alternately as "Shite", "Pshit", "Pschitt", "Pschitter", and "Shee-yit." The different versions of the added consonant are fascinating, yet none of them would, it seemed to me, cause a contemporary audience to riot.

Ubu's right-hand man is alternately named Captain Bordure, Captain MacNure, Captain M'Nure, and finally, Sexcrement.

Ubu's trademark catch phrase was interpreted traditionally as "By my green candle," "By My Crusty Staff," and also as "By my green snot." Each is a reference to his syphilis-ridden penis, but I wasn't sure a contemporary audience would make that connection no matter which translation we used.

Ubu's name itself was open to interpretation. Pere Ubu? Pa Ubu? Ubu? Perhaps the ultimately vulgar Papa Turd? What to do?

Out of frustration, I began the arduous task of compiling a script in a word document that referenced the best (or worst?) of each of the translations. I sat for innumerable hours, typing out a guide that listed all the alternatives, often like a laundry list in parentheses line by line by line.

The intended audience was the student body of a small liberal arts college in mid-Ohio. As an aging professor, I quickly determined that I was not the best person to gauge what would, or would not, offend a group of students. I soon conceded that the decision about what would rouse the ire of students needed to be made not by me, but by other students. It became clear that final decisions would need to be made about which translation to use after the casting process was complete, thereby allowing me to poll the student cast on which translation was most likely to penetrate.

When the cast was in place, I made copies of the (multiple) scripts I had compiled and entered a week-long read through of the play. Which translation would most likely recreate the original intentions and reactions that Jarry's play had in 1890's France now that it was being transported to 2006 Ohio? With some reluctance, the students eventually indicated that none of the versions I had on paper would produce a riot. Though I didn't realize it until they pointed it out, neither Pshit, Pshitter, or Shee-yit was likely to upset a contemporary audience accustomed to seeing anything and everything on You Tube.

Assuming my desires were completely foiled, I began to lose faith that we could recreate the same effect for a contemporary student audience. Finally, one of the students pointed out that perhaps the first line could be manipulated and changed so that it *would* impact our target audience. We generated a long list of contemporary euphemisms for excrement. We compiled slang terms for human waste until no one in the room could come up with another. That was the first line of what would become our new translation of *Ubu the King*. A translation not fashioned after the original French of Jarry, but based on the five existing English versions we'd read—combined with our desire to recreate not a literal or literary version of Jarry's text, but rather to recreate a similar impact on our audience--quite a different thing altogether. As the lead actor read through the first line (now a litany of contemporary expletives) it had no resemblance to any of the versions we had read—but it certainly had a powerful impact. I was personally taken aback. We were on our way.

Slowly and painstakingly we went through every line of the script in the same way. The stage manager and each of the actors furiously took notes as we read through all versions, discussed what the desired impact was, and then translated the intentions into a current vernacular. As mentioned before, it took the better part of a week to complete the first draft, though the work did not stop there. As the student actors continued to rehearse, they stumbled across new vulgarities better suited to offend which we eagerly folded into the script, which became ever more worrisome to me. Had we gone too far? Not only in regard to the sensibilities of our audiences, who I began to think might actually revolt, but also in terms of translation?

With an increasingly closer opening night, I'd somehow allowed the actors to write and rewrite a classic play. I began to wonder if we'd overstepped our bounds. I have no experience as a dramaturge, let alone a translator. We had agreed to pay the royalties for one version of the script (not to be mentioned here), but we were actually performing a new translation that had no resemblance whatsoever to the script we had contracted. Was this legal, ethical or pedagogically sound?

In time, I began to read about translation and was thrilled to discover a book by Sirku Aaltonen, titled, *Time Sharing on Stage: Drama Translation in Theatre and Society*. In it Aaltonen argues that a script should retain some portion of its "foreignness." To my relief, Aaltonen also "compared texts to rented apartments where tenants may make comparable changes to their living quarters. Like tenants, translators as readers redecorate texts when they move into them." In essence, we had moved into an apartment completely redecorated, knocked down a wall or two and painted new colors. It's not dissimilar to a joke told by Michael Davis when referring to a sharp axe that is part of his juggling routine: *This is the original hatchet that George*

*Washington used to chop down the cherry tree—except I replaced the handle (long pause) and the axe head. But it still occupies the same space.*

Intuitively, the group had created a third-generation translation of the play that preserved the original intention, even as it changed every word of the play. It was an exciting process that provided the actors with great ownership of the piece. The only thing left was to see how audiences would respond. Would they be offended? Could we make them stand and jeer? Leave the theatre? Would they riot?

The response was very strong. The more expletives the actors uttered, the more titillated the crowd became. The more filthy the play became, the louder the audiences laughed. Simulated sex acts? Hysterical. Beheadings? Delightful. Though none of us understood it completely, and still don't, the audiences not only didn't riot, they had such a good time we could hardly get them to leave the theatre. We had a hugely popular hit on our hands. We'd failed miserably in our attempt to get people to walk out of the theatre angry. Even elderly theatre patrons couldn't get enough of the vulgarities. Somehow we'd failed miserably, and at the same time, succeeded wonderfully.

We felt our impromptu translation was closer to the original than any of the others we'd read. Perhaps it's the audience that has changed in the hundred or so years that separated Jarry's original production from our own.

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## HELIOCENTRIC

(LA POUSSIÈRE DE SOLEILS)

A play in Five Acts and Twenty-four Scenes

by Raymond Roussel

Translated and Adapted by Kathleen Dimmick

LA POUSSIÈRE DE SOLEILS was first presented at the Theatre de La Porte-Saint-Martin, Paris, February 2, 1926

### SYNOPSIS

Julien Blache, a retired colonel, has arrived in French Guyana with his daughter, Solange, to claim a vast inheritance left him by his recently deceased uncle. However, the uncle, a brilliant misanthropist, has converted his fortune into precious stones and hidden them. Thus begins a bizarre treasure hunt, as Blache and his colleagues follow the complex trail of clues left by the uncle into encounters with remarkable local characters. Meanwhile, Solange pursues a romantic affair with a young foundling, Jacques, who is in search of his identity. In the end, though nearly defeated by the villain Zumeranaz, Blache recovers the fortune, Jacques reclaims his birthright, he and Solange swear their eternal love, and all return happily to France.

Born in Paris in 1877, Raymond Roussel developed his unusual theory of writing (detailed in the posthumous How I Wrote Certain of My Works) over a thirty-year career, during which he wrote short stories, poems and two novels, Impressions of Africa and Locus Solus. He also wrote two plays for the theatre, both of which failed in production but were championed by a group of notable artists and surrealist writers, including Apollinaire, Duchamp, Picabia, and Breton. His final work, a long poem, New Impressions of Africa, was published before his death in 1933. Largely ignored during his lifetime, Roussel's work has nonetheless continued to influence writers in France and America, from Breton and Aragon to Alain Robbe-Grillet, Michel Foucault, Georges Perec and John Ashbery.

In his Introduction to Death and the Labyrinth, Foucault's study of Roussel, Ashbery writes of La Pousiere de Soleils:

"The play ... is a collection of anecdotes ... the pretext is provided by the clues in a treasure hunt which eventually lead to the discovery of a will. The thread of narration is passed from one character to another, resulting in a lilting and oddly dramatic language. There is, of course, no more attempt at plot or characterization than in the novels. And yet the plays are

theatrical in a curious way. The anecdotes cast on the characters who tell them an unearthly glimmer that is like a new kind of characterization. And these stories, cut up and distributed among the speakers, somehow propel us breathlessly forward. The plays are among the strangest and most enchanting in modern literature."

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### CAST

#### MEN:

BLACHE, a retired colonel  
REARD, a local guide  
COURNALEUX, a deformed man  
ZUMERANAZ, a money-lender  
THE IDIOT, a local character  
GARIOT, an antique dealer  
JACQUES, in love with SOLANGE  
VILLENAVE, a lawyer  
FUZELIER, a fortune teller  
KLEOSSEM, a native sorcerer  
MARCENAC, BLACHE's former orderly  
LEONCE, works for ZUMERANAZ  
FLURIAN, an evangelist  
VALDEMONT, descendant of Honore d'Ufre  
FRENU, bar owner  
ANGELICUS, a native boy, works for GARIOT  
HIAZ, a foreign consul and stamp collector  
TWO SERVANTS

#### WOMEN:

SOLANGE, BLACHE's daughter, in love with JACQUES  
OSCARINE, works for ZUMERANAZ  
BULUXIR, an ancient dwarf

IGNACETTE, an albino shepherdess  
THE COLLECTOR

LA POUSSIÈRE DE SOLEILS was first presented at the Theatre  
de La Porte-Saint-Martin, Paris, February 2, 1926  
The present time, in French Guyana

ACT I

Scene 1

A living room in the tropics.

VILLENAVE

... In summation, since your uncle, Guillaume Blache, died without leaving a will, you, Julien Blache, will receive his entire estate, valued at 340,000 francs.

BLACHE

Is that all?

VILLENAVE

That's all.

BLACHE

Monsieur Villenave, I'm greatly surprised. My uncle was immensely wealthy, having acquired many properties in Guyana during his forty years here.

VILLENAVE

Yes, but you know what a terrible blow he sustained when he saw his wife and only son die during the epidemic ten years ago.

BLACHE

Crushed by this unjust stroke of fate, he sank into an incurable misanthropy ...

VILLENAVE

... and, according to certain rumors, he converted his considerable fortune into precious gems ...

BLACHE

... he must have chosen a very special hiding place for this treasure ...

VILLENAVE

... one that would allow it to remain intact, and even increase in value, in some safe place that would never be found, even after his death.

BLACHE

So the general opinion ...

VILLENAVE

... is that somewhere here in Guyana there is a splendid collection of gems which should now belong to you.

BLACHE

But my uncle spent a great deal of money ... How did he pay for everything? ...

VILLENAVE

By selling the gems one by one according to his needs.

BLACHE

Unhappy man! Because of his hatred for the human race, he has hidden away a fortune so no one can profit from it! ...

VILLENAVE

Did Monsieur Blache harbor any resentment against his family?

BLACHE

None. My father and I corresponded affectionately with him. But all the letters we sent to him after the double loss of his wife and son remained unanswered. From that day forward, we were identified with the horror that the whole world inspired in him.

VILLENAVE

So it seems clear, no one has escaped the compass of his animosity.

BLACHE

Can you give me any more information about these gems?

VILLENAVE

Alas! I don't have any information concerning their whereabouts other than some speculation ... But who knows, with some searching and a little luck ...

BLACHE

Thank you, Monsieur Villenave.

(VILLENAVE leaves by a side door.)

MARCENAC

Well, Colonel ...

BLACHE

Well, my brave Marcenac ...

MARCENAC

This lawyer has nicely revealed ...

BLACHE

Yes ... I was expecting a sizable inheritance ... Certainly not for myself ... A retired colonel has no great desire for wealth ... But I would have loved to see the fortune grace my daughter, my beloved Solange, the only one who keeps me in this world ... along with you, my old orderly, my right arm.

MARCENAC

Be that as it may, colonel, we have no cause to regret leaving Paris several weeks ago ... What a wonderful trip! The days have flown by since our arrival in Guyana, and I for one am happy to remain here, in Sinnamarie.

BLACHE

Yes, and this property merits inspection, before I see to its sale.

MARCENAC

And besides, Colonel, don't you have a moral obligation to attempt the impossible --

SOLANGE enters through a door at the back.

SOLANGE

What are you talking about? ... Hello, father ... Hello, Marcenac.

BLACHE

Your great uncle's legacy contains only this estate ... But it is said that he buried the bulk of his fortune, which he had converted into precious stones, in a secret hiding place.

SOLANGE

And you want to try and find it?

BLACHE

Yes; Isn't it my duty to you to do so?

SOLANGE

I suppose I need such a large dowry to attract a husband?

BLACHE

Certainly not! But nothing is too good for my Solange, and to be able to enhance your wedding vows with a fortune!

SOLANGE

Then you'd like to undertake this treasure hunt?

BLACHE

With all my heart.

SOLANGE

In that case I want it too and would like to join the search.

MARCENAC

Look! Here comes Reard, our faithful interpreter and guide.

BLACHE

Just the man to help us ... No one knows the people and the history of this place better than he.

REARD enters.

REARD

Monsieur Blache, what projects do you have in mind for today?

BLACHE

Oh! ... It's no longer a question of sight-seeing or excursions .. the lawyer Villenave was here ...

REARD

I bet he spoke to you about a certain collection of gems hidden by your uncle ...

BLACHE

Yes ... and I thought that you might know how to lead me to it.

REARD

At your command.

BLACHE

First of all, isn't there someone among my uncle's associates who might remember something about these gems?

REARD (after thinking for a moment)

Perhaps old Kleossem.

BLACHE

Old Kleossem?

REARD

A renowned sorcerer, from the Elekeik tribe. A strange gentleman who, from rubbing shoulders with the white man, has become both visionary and charlatan.

SOLANGE

He visited my grand-uncle? ...

REARD

... frequently ... your uncle chose him to do research for a certain local ethnographic work. Kleossem was a tireless worker and, to your uncle's delight, a great lover of literature.

MARCENAC

Would this old man help us?

REARD

Yes ... on the condition that you offer him a consideration.

BLACHE

Where and when could I find him?

REARD

Most likely in his hut, in the company of his dwarf Buluxir, who assists him in his consultations. ... I can take you there right away ... Moreover, the route we'll take is picturesque ...

BLACHE

All right! Let's go ...

Scene 2

The interior of Kleossem's hut.

BLACHE

So, Kleossem, we're agreed on the amount?

KLEOSSEM

Agreed.

BLACHE

And do you think you can help me?

KLEOSSEM

Yes, certain memories begin to agitate me. Guillaume Blache, during his last weeks, had a special preoccupation.

SOLANGE

He knew he was close to death?

KLEOSSEM

Various things he said led me to feel certain that he did. Sometimes he appeared close to making a confession -- as if it were burning on his lips -- as if remorse was forcing him to speak.

MARCENAC

If such a confession were written down -- well, wouldn't this legitimize our hope of finding a clue?

KLEOSSEM

That's my way of thinking.

BLACHE

So will you work with us?

KLEOSSEM

First I must know if I have the approval of the powers above.

REARD

(softly, to BLACHE, SOLANGE and MARCENAC)

Don't cross him. He is sincere in his beliefs, and nothing will dissuade him from this preliminary consultation.

SOLANGE

What is this golden tree?

REARD

A tekurujou.

MARCENAC

It appears to inspire great respect in Kleossem.

REARD

The tekurujou is the totem of the Elekeik tribe.

BLACHE

I thought only an animal could serve as a totem.

REARD

The tekurujou is the only known exception.

SOLANGE

This tree is indigenous to this region? ...

REARD

... and sacred to the Elekeiks, who nourish it with special attention and shape it into harmonious forms ...

MARCENAC

... like yew trees?

BLACHE

So, this one here? ...

REARD

... is the totem par excellence. The sorcerer honors it as the king of trees by periodically powdering its leaves with a light blanket of gold dust.

SOLANGE

Why does he shake it from the top?

REARD

So that a little of the gold dust will fall on the black cloth stretched underneath.

BLACHE

And this is the process for consulting the sacred tree?

REARD

Yes; then he crouches down to examine the figures traced in the dust, and he reads the omens revealed there.

MARCENAC

Is this bird also going to be consulted?

REARD

Undoubtedly. It is a regulus, or kinglet, the name everyone here gives to the wren on account of its beautiful royal headdress. It embodies the spirit of the Elekeiks.

SOLANGE

The bottom of its cage is oddly covered ...

REARD

... with a sort of crude celestial planisphere -- which Kleossem will now reveal.

Kleossem lifts out a light grill. The bird positions itself on the planisphere, then returns to the top of the cage. Kleossem replaces the grill.

REARD

He examines the specific constellation upon which the kinglet landed, and from that he will draw his learned conclusions.

KLEOSSEM

Buluxir ...

REARD

He's calling his dwarf.

KLEOSSEM

... are you awake?

BULUXIR (off stage)

Yes.

Pulling aside a curtain, KLEOSSEM reveals an alcove where a dwarf rests on a divan.

SOLANGE

My God! What a ruin!

REARD

It is said that she's more than one hundred years old.

SOLANGE

Is she white or a native?

REARD

Her mother was the wife of a highly placed civil servant here. She had galvanized the colony around a salon, in which she performed plays. During the intermission of a certain oriental play, her husband saw her, through a crack in a door, in the arms of a native. This native had been chosen to play the role of a eunuch, and was engaged in proving to her that he had by no means entered deeply into his character.

MARCENAC

The husband caused an uproar?

REARD

No, but a terrible cold anger obsessed him. He administered, in precise doses, a large amount of arsenic to the guilty woman, without anyone suspecting ...

BLACHE

... that he had killed her?

REARD

But on her deathbed she gave birth to a dwarf. The child was easily recognized as the daughter of the native, who took her in.

MARCENAC

And the husband?

REARD

He was acquitted. As for the dwarf, over the years she became the object of a sort of cult. For the Elekeiks, half-breeds are a symbol of brotherhood, combining as they do a little of the genius of the white race with their own native blood. In addition, Buluxir's intelligence appeared to develop fabulously, in direct proportion to the deterioration of her body. So she was placed with the tribe's sorcerer, and all who came to consult him would also seek her advice. Over time, her word took on absolute authority.

SOLANGE

Other sorcerers followed the first one?

REARD

And for each she became an invaluable partner.

BLACHE

Kleossem appears to meditate religiously on what she says.

KLEOSSEM approaches BLACHE.

KLEOSSEM

The outlines in the gold dust from the tekurujou tree and the choice made by the kinglet among the stars of the planisphere are fully favorable to you. As for Buluxir, she approves of your project and wishes you success. Thus, I am at your command.

BLACHE

Thank you, Buluxir.

BULUXIR (coming toward them)

You are most welcome.

KLEOSSEM (offering to support her)

Be careful ...

BULUXIR

Don't worry, Kleossem; I can still hold myself up, in spite of my one hundred and six years.

BLACHE

I bet you lead people to think you're older than you really are.

BULUXIR

Not at all ... and even though my birth may be forgotten, this marble tablet attests to my great age.

SOLANGE

These two parallel lists? ...

BULUXIR

... constitute a pair of chronologies: this one lists the warrior chiefs of the tribe, that one the religious leaders.

BLACHE

The Elekeiks live under a two-man regime?

BULUXIR

From time immemorial. The names of all the leaders were regularly carved in twin lists on a piece of marble chosen for its durability. I recovered this marble tablet from the debris of an earthquake whose date, well known because of its many victims, proves that I do not pretend to be older than I am.

BLACHE

So be it, I gladly admit that you are 106 years old. In view of your great experience, could you shed some light on our enterprise?

BULUXIR

First, some general advice: ask yourself if you might have a potential adversary in this business.

BLACHE

This leads to another piece of advice, of a more particular nature?

BULUXIR

Yes: beware of Zumeranaz ...

She returns to the alcove, lies down on the divan and closes her eyes. KLEOSSEM lowers the curtain in front of the alcove.

BLACHE (to REARD)

Who is this Zumeranaz?

REARD

A shady character, who runs a seedy hotel. He poses as a money lender but in reality trades in stolen goods.

SOLANGE

Do you think she was right to warn us about him?

REARD

To be sure, yes; a man like that, hearing certain rumors, might get the better of you.

MARCENAC (to KLEOSSEM)

Do you think the same?

KLEOSSEM

Surely. Zumeranaz is a nasty sort. Moreover, Buluxir would not have named him without the strongest possible reasons.

BLACHE

So he bears watching. Come, Kleossem; let's see what we can find back at my uncle's house.

KLEOSSEM

I am with you.

Scene 3

Zumeranaz's lodging, the office of his hotel. At the back, glass doors lead to the stairs. French windows on the side lead directly to the street. ZUMERANAZ is alone, arranging papers. LEONCE and OSCARINE enter.

LEONCE

Zumeranaz ...

ZUMERANAZ

Look who's here! Leonce and Oscarine!...

LEONCE

Look what we've brought you! ...

OSCARINE

Well! What do you say?

ZUMERANAZ

A load of silverware! ...

LEONCE

... that we took from old Frechou's house. How much will you give us?

ZUMERANAZ

Two thousand francs.

LEONCE

Two thousand! That's less than half of what it's worth!

OSCARINE

Don't be so stingy, Zumeranaz -- we're your best suppliers.

ZUMERANAZ

You forget that for the last two years I've let you stay in my hotel for nothing ...

LEONCE

... where we live in a one-room garret that could hardly be more disgusting.

OSCARINE

Besides, you should be proud that the daughter of a baron...

ZUMERANAZ

Oh! you're always talking about your noble birth ... Too bad your mother was a thief like you and your noble father disowned you forever.

LEONCE

Come on, Zumeranaz, give us three thousand ...

ZUMERANAZ

Here ... take twenty five hundred ... take it ... (points toward the silverware) or take that back ... (LEONCE takes the money.) Now, if you want to make some real money, all you need to do is help me with something new.

OSCARINE

The Guillaume Blache business ....

ZUMERANAZ

Yes; we must find the gems before the nephew does ... I told you, Oscarine, to go through those old things your dying mother left you. The deceased Baron of Pieran, your oh-so-noble father, used to visit Guillaume Blache often, so ...

OSCARINE

I've done it ...

ZUMERANAZ

Well? ...

OSCARINE

And in fact, I found something that will probably interest you.

ZUMERANAZ

What is it? ...

OSCARINE

... a letter written by Guillaume Blache to the Baron.

LEONCE

... in beautiful gold ink ...

ZUMERANAZ

(taking the letter from OSCARINE)

Oh! ... postal employees have no respect. The postmark has nearly obliterated an entire word. (He reads the letter.) "You reproach me for my solitude and my misanthropy; alas! everything is finished for me; the present is odious, and I see in the past only my wife and son. I devote myself to a thousand little objects that were theirs. Among my relics is a bottle of gold ink given by my wife to our son. Today, my old friend, I wanted to use this dear ink myself ..." (He interrupts himself.) All this is very touching, but I don't see anything that resembles a clue.

OSCARINE

Continue.

ZUMERANAZ (reading)

"And, since by some miracle I have become a little sociable again, I want to make one last gesture to you, my learned friend. You know that I possess, among other curiosities, the skull of Ambrose, the Italian Renaissance poet. Suffering from consumption in his youth, he was sure of dying before the first ray of glory could touch him. Unsure of his reputation after death, he found the means of preserving his masterpiece from oblivion. In his will, he demanded that his sonnet should be engraved on his skull, around the forehead area, which of course had given birth to it. His strange instructions were obeyed, rendering both his name and sonnet famous. This skull, held by various collectors, finally fell into my hands. As I recall, the story of this doomed poet profoundly attracted you. So someday I want the skull and the sonnet to be yours. After my death, which I feel is imminent, claim it by producing this letter ..." (He stops reading.) Well? ...

OSCARINE

Well, couldn't this bequest hold a mysterious significance?

LEONCE

They say that certain feelings of remorse might have prompted Guillaume Blache to disclose the whereabouts of his fortune. If he had left a clue about the hiding place, wouldn't he choose an old friend as his beneficiary?

ZUMERANAZ

So examining the skull for a secret interpretation of the sonnet might give us some information?

LEONCE

Perhaps.

OSCARINE

Judge for yourself.

ZUMERANAZ

The Baron never claimed his legacy?

OSCARINE

Being discrete, he tried to avoid any indication of eagerness in the matter. He had just made the initial inquiry when he was carried away by typhoid fever ...

ZUMERANAZ

... which he caught from your mother, who died from the fever as well.

LEONCE

Then we must get hold of the object itself ...

ZUMERANAZ

That's up to you. When you find it, bring it to me, and we will decipher its secret. Go up to your room; I see two of my tenants coming, and it's better if they don't see us in conference.

LEONCE and OSCARINE exit toward the stairs. ZUMERANAZ puts the silverware aside.

Scene 4

Blache's living room.

SOLANGE is playing a Scottish air on the piano. JACQUES appears outside and leaps through the French windows.

SOLANGE

Monsieur Jacques ...

JACQUES

Mademoiselle Solange ... Well! You see that I, a true philistine in terms of music, recognized the signal from the very first note. [As if reciting a lesson.] "A Scottish dance in C sharp minor in which a double measure is followed by a triad." Those are the exact words, which I have engraved on my memory.

SOLANGE

I expressly chose an appropriate tune for us --- the one I had sung for you.

JACQUES

You would not believe how clearly the sound carried from here to my office -- we must have some acoustical phenomenon as our accomplice.

SOLANGE

But why surround ourselves with all this secrecy? My father is a good man; he loves me -- and I'm sure he will not oppose my inclination toward you.

JACQUES

Oh! I implore you again, don't tell him about me. As long as he remains unaware of my existence, he cannot reject me.

SOLANGE

But why would you think ...

JACQUES

What chance do I have, a modest law clerk, with you, who may one day be an heiress? And then, have you forgotten: I am a foundling.

SOLANGE

What does it matter -- you are faithful, energetic, and my father is above petty prejudice.

JACQUES

Foundling! ...

SOLANGE

Was there no identifying mark among your swaddling clothes?

JACQUES

None; only an alder flower, tattooed on my shoulder, where it will remain forever ...

SOLANGE

.. and which seems to prove that you were not abandoned without someone intending to find you one day. Moreover, you were immediately taken in by a worthy couple who had just been devastated by the loss of their only son.

JACQUES

It doesn't matter ... I could never be so bold ... But the room where I work faces your room, and when my glance encountered yours through our open windows, the shock was so great and so sweet that I could not restrain myself.

SOLANGE

And my eyes responded to yours with a sudden and wholehearted confidence ...

JACQUES

Oh! The first words we exchanged that very evening ...

SOLANGE

Unaccustomed to this climate, I had gone out in the evening, in search of a little sea breeze. Upon reaching the strand, I saw groups of people all around, gazing up at the heavens, where a

magnificent paraselene, a bright spot on the edge of the moon, appeared. A thousand questions on my lips, I joined one group ...

JACQUES

... and I followed you. I bless that heavenly event, which allowed me to discover the charm of your voice and smile.

SOLANGE

And soon, separated from the group, we strolled aimlessly, exchanging our first confidences ...

JACQUES

Oh, those intoxicating moments! It seemed to me that I had always known you ... and I've been in a fever waiting for this opportunity, to talk with you a second time!

SOLANGE

I left my father puzzling over some plan regarding a certain Zumeranaz and hurried to give you the signal ... But now I see him coming ...

JACQUES

Your father! ... I'll hide ... you'll call me by playing the Scottish tune? ...

SOLANGE

... as soon as I can.

JACQUES

Good bye, Solange ...

SOLANGE

Good bye, Jacques ...

JACQUES leaves. BLACHE and KLEOSSEM enter.

SOLANGE

What have you done with Marcenac and Reard?

BLACHE

Reard proved to have some good information. He told us about one of Zumeranaz's victims, a former councilman who was ruined by the money lender. As he hates him so much, he would make an excellent spy. I sent Marcenac and Reard to sound out this potential recruit and brought Kleossem here to rummage around for some clues. Well! Kleossem, where should we begin?

KLEOSSEM

By looking in this library for a volume of Aesop, bound in green.

BLACHE

What size?

KLEOSSEM

Fairly large.

SOLANGE (taking down a book)

This must be it ...

KLEOSSEM (taking the book)

Yes; I am remembering one of those moments we were speaking of earlier, when a longing to disclose something seemed to overcome your uncle. He held this book in his hands, as powerless to open it as he was to speak.

BLACHE

So we must examine it carefully ... (He opens the book.) Ah! A drawing on the first page ...

KLEOSSEM

It is your uncle's bookplate.

BLACHE rapidly ruffles through some pages.

BLACHE

Nothing in particular here.

SOLANGE (indicating the bookplate)

If there is a secret it lies in this.

BLACHE

Yes; and we should scrutinize this figure carefully. (He uses a magnifying glass.) We see a bust of a woman ...

KLEOSSEM

It is of Manon Lescaut. (Gesturing toward the books.) There is a very rare copy of that novel here, the only one remaining from the first edition. It contains an episode deleted from all the others: that of the young sculptor Partelet, who, surprised by the unexpected appearance of an old, very rich rival, was forced to jump from Manon's window, fracturing his leg so badly that it had to be amputated. During his convalescence, Partelet sculpted a small bust of Manon, in tribute to her beauty. The sculpture was wrought from his own thigh bone, which he had claimed after the operation. He was happy to think that this piece of himself would belong forever to the famous coquette.

BLACHE

This bookplate indeed shows the bust in question, and here below is a description by the author, the Abbe Prevost.

KLEOSSEM

Guillaume Blache was very proud of his rare Manon, which he considered the jewel of his library, and to enhance its value even further, he chose a bookplate that was expressive of the book itself. This did indeed render it exceptional.

SOLANGE

Indeed ... so all the books here carry the same bookplate?

KLEOSSEM

All of them.

SOLANGE

So, we should look for some particular detail in it, to see if it holds any information for us.

KLEOSSEM

That's right ... Let's compare this bookplate with another ...

He takes a book from the shelf and lays it down, opening it in front of BLACHE, who studies the comparison meticulously.

BLACHE

Nothing ... The two subjects appear identical ...

KLEOSSEM

Test the paper for transparency ... (He does.)

BLACHE

Wait! ... The image of the bust changes! ... Behind the face appears the image of a skull ... (He turns the page.) Ah! ... on the other side someone has drawn a death's head, the position of which corresponds to that of the bust.

KLEOSSEM

Undoubtedly it's the work of Guillaume Blache.

SOLANGE

What could have been his purpose? To create a meditation on the fragility of beauty, whose ultimate fate is decline and death?

BLACHE

A plausible goal -- but such an artful deception might hide a clue. Let's look further. (He scrutinizes the other side of the page with the magnifying glass.) Ah! I can make out, on the forehead of the skull, a series of horizontal strokes which, by design, suggests a text. (To SOLANGE.) Could it be an allusion to the famous skull we saw in your room?

KLEOSSEM

The skull of Ambrose! ... In fact, this sketch resembles it -- perhaps now the next layer of the mystery will be revealed ...

SOLANGE

I'll go get it ... (She leaves.)

BLACHE

Assuming this is a clue, why do you suppose my uncle put it in this book above all others?

KLEOSSEM

It was the book he kept by his bedside ... Perhaps, one agonizing night, when insomnia and remorse ...

SOLANGE runs in.

SOLANGE

The skull has disappeared! ... Someone has stolen it! ...

BLACHE (searching in his vest)

Stolen! But it was in a locked glass case ... and here is the key!

SOLANGE

The glass has been cut. Someone must have entered through an open window -- everything else in my room is intact.

KLEOSSEM

Oh! ... Zumeranaz is behind this ...

Scene 5

Gariot's shop and the street in front.

REARD and MARCENAC enter.

REARD

This is the shop.

MARCENAC

You're right, I recognize the sign: a reproduction of the Joueurs de Brehan by Debu-court.

REARD

Let's go in. (They enter the shop.)

GARIOT

Gentlemen ...

REARD

Monsieur Gariot, we've come to you on the advice of my friend Bertrand Alhinc.

GARIOT

With what intention? ...

REARD

... to propose an alliance with you.

GARIOT

An alliance?

MARCENAC

Against a man whom you despise and we hold in suspicion: Zumeranaz.

GARIOT

Zumeranaz! Oh! Yes, I hate Zumeranaz!

MARCENAC

Exactly what are your grievances against him?

GARIOT

My grievances? ... Listen ... I was young, well educated ... luck had always smiled on me and I already held a seat on the town council ... A wonderful career lay ahead of me .. Alas! Because of the extravagant tastes of my mistress, whom I adored, I borrowed money from Zumeranaz ... God knows at what rate of interest! ... The day it came due, nothing could persuade him to be lenient. I was prosecuted, stripped of everything I owned and forced to resign from the council ... And now I am a shopkeeper ... a shopkeeper! ... a dealer in curios ... Ah! how I hate Zumeranaz! ... But your grievances, what are they?

MARCENAC

In truth, we have nothing definite yet. But my employer, Colonel Blache, fears Zumeranaz might anticipate him in the discovery of certain gems ...

GARIOT

... I've heard people speak of them ... Well, I am your man ... you can depend on me to undermine Zumeranaz in any way I can ...

REARD

It will be necessary to spy on him, and with discretion...

GARIOT

My little assistant Angelicus will be a great help in this.

MARCENAC

Angelicus? ...

GARIOT

He's an Elekeik boy -- a good worker, though a little unreasonable about his wages ... He was an orphan taken in by the Dominican Fathers, who passed him on to me. Gifted with a strange and powerful soprano voice, he often sings at mass --- and sings a particularly lovely Panis angelicus -- the word "angelicus" carries so pleasantly through the air that certain people have given it to him as a pretty surname. This has resulted in the loss of his native name, which in any case was ugly and difficult to pronounce.

MARCENAC

So you think this little savage is crafty enough to serve us?

GARIOT

Yes, because even though he's been raised with us, he remains an Elekeik at heart, and reverts to the primitive at the least provocation ... Here, he's coming back from an errand.

ANGELICUS enters.

GARIOT

Angelicus ...

ANGELICUS

Sir ...

GARIOT

Well, what have you brought me! ...

ANGELICUS

Monsieur Rabeyrol's bill back again ... which he says he will pay tomorrow.

GARIOT

Another delay! ... When will it end! ... Tell me, Angelicus, do you know Zumeranaz?

ANGELICUS

Yes ... a nasty man in a nasty hotel ...

GARIOT

You and I are going to spy on him, on his actions and movements, toward a purpose that I will explain to you. Are you ready to use your best tricks against him? ... (ANGELICUS is silent.) You have nothing to say?

ANGELICUS

They say that Zumeranaz is a terrible scoundrel.

GARIOT

What they say is true.

ANGELICUS

(pointing to a painting hanging on the wall)

But if he repents before he dies he could become a very great saint, and I would regret having taken sides against him.

GARIOT (to REARD and MARCENAC)

He's alluding to this painting, "The Advent of the Elect", which was done shortly after the execution of Cartouche.

MARCENAC

The figure depicts the famous bandit? ...

GARIOT

... who at the last moment gave voice to a celebrated repentance. The painter of the sacred canvases of Soalhat uses as his theme the advantage the repentant sinner has over the just on the road to paradise. We see Cartouche, the sinner par excellence, as the first to leap through the door guarded by Saint Peter. Now Angelicus, born a pagan but raised a Christian, reveres certain icons of sainthood -- this painting being one. And so he is afraid of doing injury to Zumeranaz, who could repent late in life and become the equal of the venerable Cartouche.

REARD

Rest assured, Angelicus; these two guilty men are very different. In baring his soul, Cartouche revealed a noble nature, capable of transformation; whereas Zumeranaz, hopelessly mired in his petty schemes, can only die unrepentant.

ANGELICUS

It's true!

GARIOT

So ... you will assist me?

ANGELICUS (after reflecting a moment)

Yes, sir, I will assist you.

CURTAIN

END OF ACT I  
ACT II

Scene 1  
Blache's garden.

BLACHE (leafing through a document)

To sum up, friends, there is little to learn from Gariot's report.

MARCENAC

Very little, in fact ...

REARD

However, Gariot and Angelicus have clearly gone to extraordinary lengths in their surveillance of Zumeranaz.

BLACHE

Yes -- poking their noses in his very windows -- how long will this escape his notice! And still we have nothing that leads us to the skull, or any proof that Zumeranaz stole it.

ANGELICUS enters.

ANGELICUS

I have news! ...

MARCENAC

Hello! ... Angelicus! ...

BLACHE

Some news, you say?

ANGELICUS

Just now, I overheard Zumeranaz in his office, conferring with Leonce and Oscarine ...

BLACHE

Well? ...

ANGELICUS

It was Leonce who robbed you on Zumeranaz's orders.

REARD

And did the skull reveal its secret to them?

ANGELICUS

By examining it closely, especially the forehead, Zumeranaz saw that certain letters in the sonnet were marked with a slight scratch. When put in a row, these letters formed the word "sepia."

MARCENAC

"Sepia"? (He thinks for a moment, then goes into the house.)

BLACHE

This discovery led him ...

ANGELICUS

To think that you might possess a sepia drawing that would clarify everything. He ordered Leonce to break in here again, find it and bring it to him. I came here as fast as I could to warn you.

BLACHE

There is, in fact, a sepia drawing in the parlor.

MARCENAC (returning)

Here it is.

BLACHE

It is rather a fine piece of work, whose subject has always intrigued me. What is this stone that bears the imprint of a bizarre skeleton of a bird?

REARD

I recognize it: It's called "The Stone of the Pterodactyl." The stone is one of our local curiosities; we show it to tourists. The side containing the fossil was revealed by the famous earthquake that the old dwarf Buluxir spoke about. Its discovery has caused a debate among certain scholars, some of whom have gone so far as to declare the fossil, the largest known skeleton of a bird with antediluvian teeth, artificial.

BLACHE

There is no other sepia drawing here. Evidently, we are meant to concern ourselves with this stone.

MARCENAC

We should visit it right away ...

REARD

Perhaps we should question Cournaleux about it first.

BLACHE

Cournaleux?

REARD

A pathetic creature afflicted with such a horrible grimace that the sight of him terrifies children and endangers pregnant women. He has made a name for himself as a fortune-teller, and lives alone amidst the debris that surrounds the Stone of the Pterodactyl, fleecing the tourists that come to visit it. As he has become so closely associated with the stone, it's possible that Guillaume Blache wanted to call attention to him.

BLACHE

On to the Stone of the Pterodactyl!

They leave by the side gate. JACQUES appears at the back gate.

JACQUES

Solange! ...

SOLANGE appears on the steps.

SOLANGE

Jacques! ... I was waiting till my father had gone to give you the signal. (She opens the gate.)

JACQUES

I couldn't wait any longer ... There's something I want to tell you!

SOLANGE

Good news?

JACQUES

Yes: Finally I can give you a present worthy of you ... this prayerbook ...

SOLANGE

A prayerbook? ... But it's wonderful! And what a marvelous diamond clasp! ... Can I really ...

JACQUES

Oh, I beg you, accept it ... It was the last, tattered possession of a woman who, reduced by financial reverses, finally put it up for auction. So popular was the good woman that the raffle tickets were all the rage. I bought one and ... I won! ... Oh, don't refuse me the joy of giving you this cherished object! ...

SOLANGE

Of course not. ... From this moment it is mine ...

JACQUES

Oh! I am so happy!...I dreamt of giving it to you, and then to win it ... I feel a strange intoxication, as if I were utterly unique, the one chosen from among many ...

SOLANGE

I have known that feeling too ...

JACQUES

Because of an auction?

SOLANGE

No, a competition ... (She removes a trinket from around her neck) to which I owe this relic.

JACQUES

A competition? ...

SOLANGE

... among the eldest students in my convent. We were to write an essay on the moral lesson to be drawn from a sacred trilogy we had recently performed before a roomful of parents and friends. One of the members of the audience was Father Ojalvon.

JACQUES

Ah, the famous missionary ...

SOLANGE

Yes, and as he was taking his leave, he showed us a relic he had brought back from China. He gave it to the mother superior, who decided to make it the prize of the competition.

JACQUES

And your composition won first place?

SOLANGE

Yes. Now, you must accept this relic from me in return.

JACQUES (accepting the relic)

Oh, how could I refuse it, when I feel the very warmth of your body from it, from this object that you wear so intimately? Oh, thank you ... thank you [he kisses the relic] What happiness I take away with me ... Goodbye, Solange ...

SOLANGE

Goodbye, Jacques ...

JACQUES

In future, I will try to wait for the signal! ... (He leaves.)

Scene 2

The Stone of the Pterodactyl. A rough deserted site.

REARD, BLACHE and MARCENAC enter.

REARD

Here we are.

BLACHE

That's the Stone of the Pterodactyl?

REARD

Yes, and the road we've just followed is called the "Route of the Authenticators."

MARCENAC

The Route of the Authenticators? What a name!

REARD

The only ones who take it are those partisans who consider the stone authentic. These devoted postulants are members of "the authenticators," one of two warring camps. The other camp, the "apocryphists" reject them utterly. ... Ah! Here is Cournaleux.

MARCENAC

God! What a monster!

BLACHE

I can understand why one would not want him around!

COURNALEUX enters.

COURNALEUX

Hello, gentlemen. Who would like me to tell their fortune? ... Who would like a dose of this mysterious powder that reveals your previous lives? ... Who would like to hear the songs of the angels through this special acoustic tube of my own design? ... Who would like ...

REARD

Stop! Cournaleux, we haven't come here to test your powers, but to find out if you know anything about the late Guillaume Blache.

COURNALEUX

About Guillaume Blache? ... Oh, yes, I can say something about him! ... I can tell you about all the times he was helpful to me, and how I worship his memory.

BLACHE

But his misanthropy ...

COURNALEUX

... never prevented him from bringing me an occasional gift.

MARCENAC

Why did he favor you this way?

COURNALEUX

Because of the affection that united his son, Raoul, and me.

BLACHE

His son Raoul was your friend?...

COURNALEUX

... and overwhelmed me with kindnesses. The first time he was brought here to see the stone, he knew, with a child's innate goodness, how to conquer the fear that the sight of my face inspires. He smiled. Until that day, I had never seen a child smile at me. Now that year, in a crag in the Stone ... here (He points out the place.) ... a swallow came to perch, a greedy little fellow who gobbled up the many little treats I brought it ...

REARD

... and you even trained it a little, I remember; I can still see it coming when you called, landing on your hand and eating from it.

COURNALEUX

To amuse Raoul, I made my clever little bird do some tricks for him -- and she quickly won him over. After that, Raoul often came to visit and we became great friends. Every year, after the swallow had flown north, Raoul was sad, and he would question me closely about its long journey. Oh, how he would tremble when the time came for its return!

MARCENAC

And finally he waited in vain?

COURNALEUX

No, it died here, and he lovingly preserved it, with his father's help -- insisting on a painstaking naturalness.

MARCENAC

Of course, Colonel, that's the bird in the beautiful glass cabinet in your room.

BLACHE

Evidently.

COURNALEUX

My poor little Raoul, I can't think of him, and of his friendship to me, an outcast, without crying ...

BLACHE

I now understand the exception Guillaume Blache made in your case. But tell me, did anything in particular occur, outside of his normal kindness to you, shortly before his death?

COURNALEUX

Yes, indeed. He gave me this book. (He takes a volume from a sack containing his fortunetelling apparatus.) It's an old prayer book of black masses, with lewd engravings throughout. Guillaume Blache rightly thought that I could use its cabalistic nostrums in my consultations.

REARD (to BLACHE)

Surely this will put us back on the trail.

BLACHE

(to COURNALEUX, after examining the book)

Did you turn down the corner of this page?

COURNALEUX

No, I don't know anything about that.

BLACHE

So Guillaume Blache must have done it -- this page should be examined. ... I don't see anything ... Text and etchings, everything seems to be untouched ...

MARCENAC

Wait! I see something ...

BLACHE

What? ...

MARCENAC

A finely traced circle around the picture of a woman brandishing an instrument of flagellation...

BLACHE

Let's see ... what can we draw from this?

REARD

Listen ... Guillaume Blache would not have pointed directly to the sparrow we've just been talking about! But the sparrow and the martin are nearly synonymous, and martin is a word that also refers to just such an instrument of flagellation ...

COURNALEUX

And my sparrow was of the martin family, a fact that Guillaume Blache himself told me.

REARD

Now, there is no longer any doubt ...

BLACHE

You are right, Reard ...I think we have the next link in the chain.

Scene 3

Valdemont's drawing room.

A SERVANT enters with BLACHE and REARD.

SERVANT

I'll tell the master of the house that you are here.

BLACHE

Please, take my card. (The SERVANT leaves.)

BLACHE

Let's hope Monsieur Valdemont won't think me indiscreet!

REARD

Rest assured; he has an amiable nature.

BLACHE

The next step is crucial. After we returned from our visit to the Stone of the Pterodactyl, I brought Cornaleux's sparrow out of my cabinet, and by examining it closely, found its secret.

REARD

In the form of a tiny roll of paper hidden in one of its long wing feathers ...

BLACHE

... with a short passage from d'Urfe's l'Astree. I examined the text very carefully, hoping to find some special interpretative mark, when you told me that here among the elite in Sinnamarie is a certain Louis Valdemont, who is a descendant of Honore d'Urfe'.

REARD

And so you thought, as did I, that he would be the one to decipher this new document.

BLACHE

And now we're here in his home; let's hope we aren't wasting our time.

VALDEMONT enters.

VALDEMONT

Hello, Reard.

REARD

Hello, Monsieur Valdemont. Let me introduce Monsieur Blache.

VALDEMONT (shaking his hand)

Sir ... I'm flattered that you came to see me.

BLACHE

Thank you, Monsieur Valdemont.

VALDEMONT

I knew your uncle ...

BLACHE

It is about him that I wished to speak to you.

VALDEMONT

Formerly, our relations were regular enough. In particular, as a man of letters, he was interested in an old collection I had -- the first drafts of the letters of Honore d'Urfe', my ancestor.

BLACHE

These friendly relations no doubt ended well before his death.

VALDEMONT

You allude to the sorrowful and bitter life that he led. Indeed, I stopped seeing him at that time.

BLACHE

And this rupture was final?

VALDEMONT

No, I saw him one more time ... My God, it wasn't very long ago ...

BLACHE and REARD look at one another.

BLACHE

What were the circumstances?

VALDEMONT

One day, much to my surprise, he appeared here, full of anxiety. After reproaching himself for his long silence, he confessed a need to see again the letters of Honore d'Urfe' -- so I gladly let him see them.

BLACHE

How did he use them? ... I beg you to try and remember ...

VALDEMONT (thinking)

Let's see ... sitting at this very table, he forced himself, out of politeness, to converse a little with me ... Then, appearing to search through about a third of the letters, he ended up considering only one of them, which he looked at for a long time.

BLACHE (anxiously)

Would you be able to recognize that letter?

VALDEMONT

No.

BLACHE (disappointed)

Ah!

VALDEMONT

But I do recall that in putting the packet back together, he put that letter on top ... and now that I think about it, he did so with a bit of affectation, as if he wanted me to notice.

REARD

Has the packet been rearranged since?

VALDEMONT

No one has touched it.

BLACHE

Could I look at that letter, for a moment?

VALDEMONT

Certainly. (He unlocks a drawer and takes out a packet of letters.) Here it is. (He gives the letter to BLACHE.) It is indeed one of the most curious; it is from Urfe' to the poet Lemenager, a colleague as well as a friend.

BLACHE (reading)

"You will be amused, my dear Lemenager, when you hear about the work I've been devoting myself to recently. You know that the very wealthy Marquis de Trintignac has the honor of having as his guest a member of the Danish royal family, the Princess Hul ... Well, he is preparing a sumptuous party in her honor and has invited the most celebrated artists from Paris. Now the Princess, an extremely enthusiastic woman, was dying to perform in the entertainment herself. And the Marquis, desirous of the honor of appearing on stage with her royal highness,

offered me the challenge of composing an elegiacal interlude for two persons." (To REARD.)  
You hear this, Reard?

REARD

Every word.

BLACHE

It would be even better if you would read it with me over my shoulder; that way, if a clue escapes one of us the other will catch it.

REARD

Here I am.

BLACHE (continues to read)

"So I composed a tender dialogue in rhyming verse between a shepherd and his shepherdess, choosing as a setting a sparkling spring morning. But alas! the manuscript was returned to me with a request to change my morning to evening. Her highness, being part albino, needed all manner of veils when she went out, and could only tolerate filtered light in her apartments. Because of this disability she would be unable to bear the strong footlights required by my `sparkling morning.' And so in my verses I replaced `blue sky' with `dark sky,' `clear morning' with `exquisite evening,' and further, `exuberant awakening' with `recumbent drowsiness.' You can see me here, searching for new rhymes,

BLACHE (cont'd)

counting the syllables on my fingers ... And you'll laugh at your unfortunate friend, who could never wish any such task on you.

-- Honore d'Urfe'."

REARD

I've followed it carefully, Monsieur Blache, and I see nothing in it.

BLACHE

Nor can I ... except for these two fingernail marks underlining the words "shepherd" and "albino", respectively.

REARD (animated)

You're saying ... there are fingernail impressions under the words "shepherd" and "albino"?

BLACHE

Yes ... Look ... But why wouldn't Guillaume Blache use ink, as he did with Cournaleux's prayerbook?

REARD

Ah! ... but on this valuable letter, which he could only handle for a few moments, and under the watchful eye of its owner? ...

BLACHE

Ah ...

REARD

So instead of ink, two fingernail scratches are quickly made.

BLACHE

But these two words -- "shepherd" and "albino"?

REARD

... for me, they're a complete revelation. Come, let's take our leave.

BLACHE

(to VALDEMONT, who has been reading another letter by Ufre'.)  
Thank you very much, Monsieur Valdemont. Here is your letter.

VALDEMONT

Were you able to find anything useful?

BLACHE (shaking his hand)

Yes ... we leave both satisfied and grateful.

Scene 4

IGNACETTE, in a grotto. BLACHE and REARD enter.

REARD

Here we are.

BLACHE

What! ... This grotto? ...

REARD

... is the retreat of the recluse Ignacette, the child of poor farmers ... she is clearly the one Guillaume Blache meant by his two fingernail marks.

BLACHE

Ah! This young woman I see below ... she is an albino ...

REARD

And a shepherdess. Because of her fear of full daylight, she takes refuge here, letting her goats graze on the outer slopes.

BLACHE

She seems remarkably self-possessed.

REARD

Oh, she's been an important person since the day when, resting here with her eyes closed, she heard someone speaking to her soto voce. At first she thought she was dreaming, but then certain images struck her, more powerful than the ones we associate with dreams.

BLACHE

Who was speaking?

REARD

The Virgin -- brilliantly illuminated by a celestial light which, miraculously, did not hurt Ignacette's eyes. Mary, the patron saint of the sea and sailors, told Ignacette that a ship had run aground on a reef, giving the bearings of the ship's location before she disappeared. A distraught Ignacette flew from the grotto and ran to town to recount the vision. A rescue party left immediately, found the ship easily, and brought back the entire crew alive.

BLACHE

She must have become famous!

REARD

Oh, famous indeed. True, it was said that the shipwrecked men had thrown bottles into the sea, with messages describing their whereabouts, but no one suspected Ignacette of having found one. In any event, the aura of the miraculous quite carried the day.

BLACHE

So people believe in the miracle?

REARD

And as proof, this statue of Mary was erected in the grotto, which became a sacred destination for pilgrims. The hill itself is sacred, as is the grass that grows there. Sacred too are the goats, and sacred is their milk, which Ignacette, close to sainthood herself, sells at an exorbitant price. She is even accused of raising the bottom of the pewter measuring jug ...

BLACHE

Wait a minute ... Someone who would practice this kind of deception might well be capable of concealing documents ...

REARD

Indeed.

BLACHE

In order to pursue the matter, let's buy a little of her ruinous drink.

He approaches Ignacette.

REARD

Some milk, Ignacette. (IGNACETTE serves them.)

IGNACETTE (pointing to BLACHE)

Who is this man I'm seeing for the first time?

REARD (aside, to BLACHE)

She knows all the faces in the countryside.

BLACHE

My name is Julien Blache.

IGNACETTE

So Guillaume Blache? ...

BLACHE

... was my uncle.

IGNACETTE

He came here often on his walks, and I remember two of his visits in particular.

REARD (aside, to BLACHE)

So she will speak of him.

IGNACETTE

The first time I refused to give him milk.

BLACHE

Why?

IGNACETTE

He came during a thunder storm ... I was prostrate on the ground, my hands over my eyes -- Oh, those blinding bolts of lightning, what torture they inflict on me ... even through my eyelids and my hands.

BLACHE

And Guillaume Blache? ...

IGNACETTE

... went away ...

REARD

And his second visit?...

IGNACETTE

Is still fresh in my memory. He came to teach me a Breton prayer that he found in a book about fishing. It struck him as perfect for me, given my fear of lightning and my standing with the Virgin.

BLACHE

The prayer is addressed to Mary? ...

IGNACETTE

... intended to be used during a storm, it entreats Her to send a moment of calm.

BLACHE (to REARD)

The Calm ... but this is the title of the famous painting by Neraudau ... the prize of the little museum here in Sinnamarie that we visited on our first outing.

REARD

That's right! ... Here, Ignacette, here is the price of your milk.

Scene 5

ZUMERANAZ's hotel.

LEONCE enters.

ZUMERANAZ

Well, Leonce! Have you brought the sepia drawing?

LEONCE

No, I was not even able to get onto the property.

ZUMERANAZ

Damn! ...

LEONCE

A young woman was there. As I neared the house, I saw her open the gate to her lover. Rather than waiting around idly, I followed Reard and one of the others to Ignacette's grotto, where I overheard a conversation.

ZUMERANAZ

From which you learned? ...

LEONCE

... About a certain painting called "The Calm."

ZUMERANAZ

Ah! ... "The Calm" of Neraudau.

LEONCE

From the grotto they returned to town ... and I saw them enter the museum ...

ZUMERANAZ

... Where I will now go myself.

LEONCE

What about the sepia drawing?

ZUMERANAZ

Forget the drawing! ... It is no longer anything but a useless link in the chain forged by Guillaume Blache.

OSCARINE enters.

OSCARINE

Ah! ... Thank God, I've found you together ... Listen to me ... We're facing disaster ...

LEONCE

Oh! ... Again with your superstitions ... From morning till night she sees omens in everything.

OSCARINE

Just now, taking the short cut by Fenard Hill, I saw the Idiot.

ZUMERANAZ

Ah! That beggar is not as "touched" as he seems ...

OSCARINE

Sometimes he's mad, sometimes not. When deranged he predicts success and happiness; when rational he always foretells doom.

LEONCE

I hear his sanity depends on the size of the donation.

OSCARINE

I offered him something as I always do, hoping to hear him babble about good fortune ... but, oh, horrible, the words he spoke made perfect sense.

ZUMERANAZ

And this is what disturbs you?

OSCARINE

Listen ... he knows of our designs on Guillaume Blache's estate and says if we don't give him a substantial donation, something terrible will happen to us ... I gave him the entire contents of my purse, but it didn't satisfy him. (LEONCE makes an angry gesture.) ... Oh! Please believe me, both of you: We must give him more money ... or we will be lost.

ZUMERANAZ

Give money to that scoundrel!

LEONCE

That clown! ... You're a lunatic ...

OSCARINE

I'm not! ... Oh! You'll regret this!

ZUMERANAZ

I'm going to the museum ... keep watch till I return.

Scene 6

An arid mountain top.

JACQUES enters, followed by SOLANGE.

JACQUES

You aren't too tired from the climb?

SOLANGE

No, only a little out of breath.

JACQUES

We've reached the summit. You can see the ocean below, but be careful, it's a very steep drop.

SOLANGE (draws back after looking down)

Oh! It's terrifying!

JACQUES

Solange, thank you so much for coming with me on this adventure.

SOLANGE

You were so ardent, Jacques.

JACQUES

All lovers must come here once, and can't we consider ourselves such, since I have your vows and you have mine?

SOLANGE

We can, Jacques. (She points to a statue carved in the rock.) Who is this woman? ...

JACQUES

... She is Saenca, a Spanish woman ... or more precisely an Iberian, given the time in which she lived.

SOLANGE

An Iberian?

JACQUES

She was shipwrecked here in a violent storm. She had left her betrothed back in her country, and the two had sworn, in parting, that nothing except death could break their engagement.

SOLANGE

She was afraid that her lover, in not hearing from her, would think she had died? ...

JACQUES

And threw herself from this cliff, so that her lover would not disgrace himself by betraying his oath.

SOLANGE

And that is why her statue was erected on this spot ...

JACQUES

Yes. A stone, on which she had engraved and dated a short confession to her fiancé, was found by the Elekeiks and later fell into the hands of the early settlers, who passed the story of her dramatic suicide down through the generations.

SOLANGE (looking at the statue)

Her act deserves just such a commemoration.

JACQUES

And because Saenca's arrival, however accidental, greatly predated that of Christopher Columbus, she became an extraordinary heroine, close to a goddess. As the settlers didn't know what she looked like, they simply carved her in the classical posture of a woman with her hands over her eyes, crying -- an excellent choice for a fiancée left alone forever. She is revered as the patron saint of betrothed couples, who make a pilgrimage here, which they say brings them luck. Now you understand why I so wanted to go on this adventure with you...

SOLANGE

I do understand ... And I am happy to have come ... especially as we have such a view ... I must risk another look into this abyss, now that I know the drama that took place in this elemental theater. (She leans over the edge of the cliff.) Oh! Poor Saenca! ... I could never perform such a sacrifice ... Was her body ever found? ...

JACQUES

No, but the Elekeiks did find an ivory statuette that had belonged to her. The sculptors made a stylus from it (he takes an ivory stylus from the foot of the statue), which the couples who visit use to engrave their thoughts, names and dates.

SOLANGE

And we'll do the same?

JACQUES

To what end? ... Won't we remember this exquisite moment without doing that?

SOLANGE

Oh! Yes ... forever!...

JACQUES

Besides, I don't feel we should inscribe our names on this wall today.

SOLANGE

Do you feel that it would be trifling with Saenca's memory?

JACQUES

No, but to express our vows in a place so exposed -- wouldn't this compromise the secret of our love? ... Rather, let's swear our eternal constancy in the presence of Saenca, the sublime fiancée ... Solange, Jacques is yours forever ...

SOLANGE

Jacques, Solange belongs to you forever.

CURTAIN

END OF ACT II

ACT III

Scene 1

A verdant island. BLACHE, REARD and MARCENAC enter.

REARD

Well, gentlemen, are you enjoying our excursion?

MARCENAC

The sea crossing was very tranquil.

BLACHE

And this island is lovely.

REARD

I told you coming here would not be onerous.

BLACHE

Thank god! Well, so far the thread of our search has not been broken. Leaving the grotto of Ignacette, we went to the museum to see "The Calm," that marvelous painting by Neraudau. It shows the head of a beautiful child smiling at a toy while two brilliant tears roll down his cheeks. It is accompanied by a latin phrase taken from the work of Rovilius on the mutability of the human spirit -- De animae humanae mobilitate -- emphasizing the ease with which children move between tears and laughter.

REARD

After going through Rovilius' work carefully in your uncle's library, we found a unique marginal commentary in his hand that alludes to the Zones of Humor on Avenelle Island ...

BLACHE

... where we have just arrived, and at the very time you stipulated -- the close of day.

MARCENAC

I saw a village in the distance, not too far away.

REARD

That is Tolay, the center of Flurianism, a new religion which is practiced throughout the island. Its leader and founder, Dr. Flurian, comes here every day at dusk. Standing on top of his preaching hill, surrounded by the crowd, he makes a slow, continuous circle as he speaks, so that by the end he has seen everyone face to face.

BLACHE

And these thin white symmetrical sections? ...

REARD

... are called his "zones of humor." Knowing that his listeners need periods of calm in order to maintain a state of positive receptivity, and fearing he might neglect that need in the passion of his preaching, he drew these three vivid geometric designs here on the ground. When he crosses one, he forces himself to stop and deliver one of his little specialties -- a humorous aside that elicits laughter from the crowd.

BLACHE

Thus both orator and disciples testify to the mutability of the soul, which would have delighted Rovilius, and it is these very "zones of humor" that my uncle alludes to in his marginal notes in De animae humanae mobilitate.

MARCENAC

Someone is coming ... could it be Dr. Flurian?

REARD

It is ... In fact, as the sun is beginning to disappear, he will soon deliver his sermon.

MARCENAC

How old is he? He looks like he has a young man's head on an old man's body.

REARD

He is close to sixty, but still very much the dandy. He uses artificial means to preserve his youth.

MARCENAC

Ah! He is lucky with women?

REARD

So it is said.

BLACHE

But his religion? ...

REARD

... advocates the most advanced ideas and allows free marriage -- even temporary unions.

MARCENAC

So he welcomes romantic involvements? ...

REARD

... and lies so outrageously about his age that one time a newspaper, in citing the year of his thesis, observed that he must have written it in diapers.

FLURIAN enters.

REARD

Doctor, hello.

FLURIAN

Good evening, Reard. (To BLACHE and MARCENAC) Gentlemen ...

REARD (presenting his two companions)

Monsieur Blache ... Monsieur Marcenac.

FLURIAN

Monsieur Blache, yesterday I read something about your arrival in Sinnamarie, and the sight of your name ... Your uncle came here toward the end of his life -- to this very place, and at this same time of day -- and approached me, whom he did not know.

BLACHE

Like us, he chose to meet you at a propitious time and place.

FLURIAN

Once, when I was preaching on the circuit, I stopped in Sinnamarie and addressed a large crowd ...

REARD

... grouped in a circle, as I remember, around a small, artificial elevation created specially for you, and on which you had drawn three humor zones ...

FLURIAN

... following a rule to which I invariably adhere. The next day my sermon appeared in the local press, but it was heavily edited according to the political bent of each paper.

REARD

In fact, Flurianism is embraced by two factions: one secular and progressive; the other conservative, advocating traditional practices.

FLURIAN

And what one paper omitted, the other retained, and vice-versa ...

BLACHE

The censor Anastasia herself had never seen such butchery!

FLURIAN

That very idea occurred to the illustrator Varlet, whose parody of the incident ended up on the cover of a humor magazine. Under the title "Anastasia and her Double Harvest," he drew the grinning old hag carrying an enormous two-sided purse -- the conservative deletions from my sermon pouring out of one pocket, the progressive cuts from the other.

BLACHE

A drawing intended to amuse you ...

FLURIAN

... and I had the pleasure of seeing the original, which Guillaume Blache brought to me at the time of our encounter.

MARCENAC

He bought it from Varlet? ...

FLURIAN

... and, to heighten its value, he asked me to sign it. I willingly agreed, though without quite understanding the motive behind either his purchase or his request.

BLACHE

Perhaps it had to do with the nature of secrets. Thank you, Doctor, I think this will prove useful ... But here comes your crowd of followers ... We'll leave you now and mingle with them.

Scene 2

Gariot's shop. MARCENAC enters.

MARCENAC

You're here alone, Monsieur Gariot?

GARIOT

Yes, I've just returned from the museum ... where I saw Zumeranaz studying "The Calm" by Neraudau.

MARCENAC

Damn! Zumeranaz knows "The Calm"...

GARIOT

He looked worried, and returned to his hotel lost in thought. Now Angelicus will take his turn at sentry duty ... Brave boy!

MARCENAC

You are very sure of him?

GARIOT

Of course! Why do you ask?

MARCENAC

Because Colonel Blache wondered if it was wise to have a boy of his age and race as a confidant ... and I came here in part to tell you of his apprehensions.

GARIOT

What does he fear?

MARCENAC

That Zumeranaz will turn him against us.

GARIOT

Angelicus! ... act villainously! ... Quite the opposite scruple is in him. I had proof of it only yesterday. He handed me this gold piece he found in the lining of a Louis XV vest he had been cleaning. It must have gone unnoticed for nearly two centuries.

MARCENAC

He resisted the temptation ...

GARIOT

Yes; and it happens to be one of those famous Triton coins which can no longer be found today. Now Angelicus would have known the importance of this find, but he immediately brought this rare item to me, when he could easily have kept it. Oh! ... I would trust him without wavering for an instant.

MARCENAC

This story will certainly ease the Colonel's fears, and I will report it to him faithfully.

GARIOT

Send him my regards, Monsieur Marcenac.

MARCENAC

I leave you to your accounts, Monsieur Gariot.

Scene 3

A private garden.

BLACHE is seen at the gate, followed by REARD. He approaches and rings the bell. A SERVANT opens the gate.

BLACHE

Give this letter to the consul. I've asked him to grant me an audience.

SERVANT

Come in, gentlemen. I expect Monsieur Hiaz will be able to see you shortly.

SERVANT leaves.

BLACHE

Perhaps here, Reard, your deductions will be proven correct!

REARD

Think about it ... I could not have been mistaken. Last evening, by dint of patient searching, we located the drawing described by Doctor Flurian. This picture of Anastasia, made even more valuable by the Doctor's signature, had been carelessly folded, enclosed within a dried lily, and covered over with gold powder, no doubt from old Kleossem's stock. How could I not immediately think of the golden lily on the violet-colored Turzilo-Selirdian flag?

BLACHE

And rising early this morning, we have reached the capital of that country ... But what do you make of this flag, so comically placed in the very center of the garden?

HIAZ enters.

REARD

Careful ... Here comes the consul ... Good day, Monsieur Hiaz.

BLACHE (bowing)

Sir ...

HIAZ

Gentlemen ... I see my flag surprises you ...

BLACHE

I confess that ...

HIAZ

Well, I don't want you to think that its peculiar location in the middle of our garden is the result of a lack of taste. In the old days, a deep ditch separated the hostile consulates of Turzil, represented by a blue flag embroidered with a gold nugget, and Selirdia, represented by a red flag embroidered with a white lily. These were two prosperous little countries of Central America, cousins but also rivals, who derived their wealth, respectively, from the exploitation of gold and from the cultivation of the lily.

BLACHE

And the ditch was filled in? ...

HIAZ

... following a year of war, Turzil annexed Selirdia and took the name "The Republic of Turzilo-Selirdian." I became, by the merger, the sole head of the two governments.

BLACHE

And so in the middle of the old border you erected this symbolic flag? ...

HIAZ

... which is the product of a union -- the blue and the red yielding the violet color, and the lily taking on the gold accent of the nugget ... But now, what brings you here? Is it about your uncle?  
...

BLACHE

Yes ... Did you know him?

HIAZ

Only as stamp collectors know each other ... You are inheriting a beautiful collection from him.

BLACHE

Indeed ...

HIAZ

I too have assembled some curious specimens. In fact, Guillaume Blache wrote to me recently proposing an exchange. His letter contained an Okleate stamp from 1872, which I placed in my appointment book, where I can revisit its charm each day.  
(He shows BLACHE and REARD the stamp.)

BLACHE

It is strangely seductive, even to a layman like myself.

REARD

Who is this person?

HIAZ

Rylkar the First, sovereign prince of Okleatie, a common man who usurped the throne. He was famous for changing political sides at will, suiting his rhetoric to the taste of current public opinion. Here in this stamp, his features are given to a huge soap bubble from which a tiny body dangles, with straw stuffing falling out of its drawn and quartered parts.

BLACHE

What a clever way to criticize the opportunistic politician -- a little balloon full of hot air that responds to every breath.

REARD

This is the first time I have seen a caricature of a chief of state on a stamp.

HIAZ

The drawing was such a success in Okleatie that Rylkar the First proclaimed it the national stamp, choosing as always to flatter rather than censor the taste of the people.

BLACHE

So you consented to the exchange with Guillaume Blache. It would be important to me to know what stamp you gave him in return.

HIAZ

The very one he asked for, which surprised me because I gained a great deal in the exchange. It was a similar Okleate stamp, but a more recent issue by two years.

REARD

It also carried the image of Rylkar the First?

HIAZ

No. The former soap bubble was soon corrupted by his power and became a crushing despot. He raised so many new taxes that two offices had to be opened for their collection -- one by day and one by night -- creating such widespread dissent that the people revolted, cutting short the life of Rylkar I.

BLACHE

Thus giving birth to a new stamp?

HIAZ

The one I gave your uncle ... It depicts the fierce aspect of a revolutionary Okleate as the northern wind. In one blow, the rebel's breath destroys the two evil tax offices, one represented by a sun, the other by little asterisks representing stars.

BLACHE (to REARD)

Let's try to remember that.

REARD

Don't worry; I have just made some notes.

HIAZ

Have I had the pleasure of satisfying you?

BLACHE (taking his leave)

Entirely, Monsieur Hiaz; we will no longer impose upon your time.

Scene 4

A red cliff framing the entrance to a grotto.

JACQUES enters, followed by SOLANGE and MARCENAC.

JACQUES

Stop!

MARCENAC

Ah! What an agreeable word to hear ... at least for me, the only one present who doesn't have the legs of a twenty year old.

SOLANGE

My poor Marcenac, you're going to regret having become our confidant.

MARCENAC

Certainly not, Mademoiselle Solange. On the contrary, I hold a slight grudge against you for not confiding in me earlier; after all, I was present at your birth.

SOLANGE

Jacques is so afraid that our secret will be discovered.

MARCENAC

But I believe as you do that the Colonel will not object to his proposal.

SOLANGE

You see, Jacques.

JACQUES

Oh! ... let's prolong this sweet mystery while we can.

MARCENAC (to JACQUES)

Well then, why did you decide to have an old spoil sport like me join you today?

JACQUES

Because I loved the idea of seeing you and Solange in this chapel where we will be married.

SOLANGE

What! ... here? ...

JACQUES

Yes Solange, right here ... does the place displease you?

SOLANGE

Far from it ... it's splendid and wild ... and what a surprise to see an altar in such an inaccessible place ...

JACQUES

... it became a sacred spot after a young fisher girl, later known as St. Nottine, was miraculously saved from a tidal wave here.

MARCENAC

... and is it inundated at high tide?

JACQUES

Completely ... that's why the ancient word "salve" is engraved on the wall near the threshold. When the tide covers that word it is dangerous to linger here.

SOLANGE

A marriage in a coral grotto! ... How enchanting!

MARCENAC

Doubtless many would want to marry in this place.

JACQUES

Oh! But only certain people have the right to marry here -- those who, like me, survived a certain voyage aboard the Geraldine.

SOLANGE

You were in danger, Jacques?

JACQUES

Yes, Solange, very great danger ... Mid-way to Quienne Island, a squall drove us toward a barrier reef. Our situation was so similar to that of Saint Nottine, who was saved from the tidal wave, that we implored heaven for her protection. And miraculously, instead of being dashed to pieces, our ship found an open passage -- and so the Geraldine is now depicted here in Nottine's sanctuary, (he points to the back of the grotto), in miniature, as a votive offering.

MARCENAC

So whoever was on board during that famous storm ...

JACQUES

... can, as a member of that privileged crew, receive all the sacraments here, under the wing of their protectress.

SOLANGE

From this day forward, Jacques, I dedicate myself to the cult of Saint Nottine, who saved you and who will bless our union.

#### Scene 5

A barren place. At the back, a cross behind an iron railing. THE COLLECTOR sits at a table, doing needlework. BLACHE and REARD enter.

REARD

Yes, Monsieur Blache ... The more I think about it, the more I am convinced that we are still on the right track.

BLACHE

So, according to you, the three asterisks underlined on the Okleate stamp we found in my uncle's collection ...

REARD

... Can only refer to the three stars engraved on this cross.

BLACHE

Is it the grave of an unknown man?

REARD

On the contrary, a very well-known man around here: the fisherman Francois Patrier. Before this barrier was erected, there was only a small sign warning of the quicksand below. One day a young butterfly collector, absorbed in his chase, failed to notice the sign. On hearing the cries of this foolish boy, Francois Patrier rushed to his rescue but immediately fell into the deadly grasp of the sands himself.

BLACHE

He sank down? ...

REARD

... Alas, yes -- and soon all he could do was hold the boy above his head, as they both cried for help. The sand had just reached his lips when some men appeared above and climbed down to them.

BLACHE

It must have taken them several minutes! ...

REARD

And, knowing that they would arrive too late to save him, Francois Patrier made a final request of the boy. Anxious that his actions not be seen as motivated by a desire for fame, he asked that only three simple stars be engraved on a cross to mark the place where he would soon perish.

BLACHE

And when the rescue party arrived?

REARD

Only his two hands were visible, still holding the boy aloft. The men were able to save the boy, but Francois Patrier disappeared forever.

BLACHE

The boy communicated Patrier's last request? ...

REARD (pointing to the cross)  
... which was faithfully executed.

BLACHE  
Indeed ... three stars ... without even a date ...

REARD  
But soon his request placed too great a constraint on the general desire to honor such a hero. As his precise instruction applied only to the cross marking his grave, it was decided that erecting a statue to him in the town would not contradict his wishes.

BLACHE  
And so a subscription drive was launched? ...

REARD  
... and is not yet closed. Donations are received here every day, and placed in this urn. Five francs is set as the minimum, which can only be increased exponentially by the number five.

BLACHE  
So, to offer more than five francs? ...

REARD  
... you must choose among donations of 25, 125, or 625 francs -- with nothing preventing the sum from getting to 3,125, or 15,625, or ... let's hold it there! ... It was hoped that this progression of large numbers would appeal to wealthy subscribers.

BLACHE  
We should find out if my uncle ... How can we get information from this woman?...

REARD  
Do you want to start by subscribing? ...

BLACHE  
Certainly ... and with all my heart.

REARD (approaching the COLLECTOR)  
This is Monsieur Blache, who would like to contribute ...

COLLECTOR  
"Blache" ... I already have this name in one of my ledgers. (She thinks.) In five squared ... or cubed ... cubed perhaps ...

REARD (to BLACHE)  
You see ... the donations are carefully registered ... there is a series of ledgers, all decorated with the number five -- five by itself, then five squared, five cubed, etc., ending with five to the sixth power.

BLACHE

And, as is fitting, the leders decrease in size in direct proportion to the size of the donation.

COLLECTOR (after leafing through the ledgers)

Ah! ... Here is the name ... Just as I thought, it appears in the third ledger ...

BLACHE (taking out his wallet)

Well, I'll carry on the family tradition and subscribe in the amount appropriate to that ledger.

CURTAIN

END OF ACT III

ACT IV

Scene 1

Fuzelier's House

JACQUES enters.

JACQUES

Are you Monsier Fuzelier?

FUZELIER

Yes.

JACQUES (unfolding a letter)

I received this letter from you.

FUZELIER

Ah! ...

JACQUES

Is it true? ... You can clear up the mystery surrounding my birth?

FUZELIER

Yes. Do you happen to know who I am?

JACQUES

I am aware that you have a reputation as a fortuneteller, and you give consultations to credulous people.

FUZELIER

Yes ... when I saw the growing number of superstitious white people who were resorting to the Elekeik sorcerer Kleossem, I had the idea of giving him some competition ...

JACQUES

But what is the link to my birth ...

FUZELIER

Here it is. One evening, a veiled woman brought to me the product of a clandestine confinement -- her infant son. Only by abandoning the child could she protect him from mortal danger.

JACQUES (excitedly)

And before giving him up, she wanted? ...

FUZELIER

... to bestow upon him my supernatural protection. So I put on my consultation garb -- the bizarre costume of an ambassador from the beyond ... I fix my gaze on this stone in my ring and go into a trance. Then, using my powers of mimicry, I issue forth commands from invisible superior beings.

JACQUES (increasingly attentive)

And these commands? ...

FUZELIER

... were thus: "Consider the case of Jorgenskjold, called the Norwegian Moses, found new-born, asleep in a small boat held fast on the river bank by the lowest branches of an alder tree."

JACQUES (struck)

An alder tree! ...

FUZELIER

Without which Jorgenskjold would have perished in his little boat.

JACQUES

And you concluded? ...

FUZELIER

... that, in order to protect her child's life, I should include something about this species of tree.

JACQUES

But the alder doesn't exist in our country ...

FUZELIER

Indeed ... So I took the child to an Elekeik tattoo artist and soon brought him back here to his mother, with the flower of an alder tree tattooed on his shoulder.

JACQUES

This new-born baby is, consequently, me ...

FUZELIER

Yes. Over the next few days I followed the news accounts until I learned that a child with a tattoo on its shoulder had been taken in by a couple I had recommended to your mother.

JACQUES

Is there anything else that would help me in my search?

FUZELIER

Yes: the message from beyond, which she wrote down during my inspired dictation.

JACQUES

Do you still have it?

FUZELIER

Here it is ... and you may keep it.

JACQUES

Oh, thank you!... Thank you, Monsieur Fuzelier...If I can ever find a way to repay you ...

Scene 2

The interior of Kleossem's hut.

BULUXIR'S VOICE

Kleossem ...

KLEOSSEM

Buluxir? ... (He opens the curtain to the alcove.) You're just now waking up?

BULUXIR

Yes ... (KLEOSSEM helps her to rise and brings her forward.) Tell me, did something happen here just now? ... While I was sleeping, I thought ...

KLEOSSEM

Indeed, Monsieur Blache and Monsieur Reard were here, going over everything with me again, since I was the only person who Guillaume Blache allowed near him at the end of his life.

BULUXIR

Does some difficulty stand in their way?

KLEOSSEM

Yes. They've been trying to explain the generosity of a certain donation made by Guillaume Blache, in spite of his sworn misanthropy.

BULUXIR

And have you solved the problem?

KLEOSSEM

I hope so. The amount of the donation, five cubed, reminded me of a collection of colorful cubes that were his son's favorite playthings. These cubes were among the many keepsakes that Guillaume Blache would study in my presence ... But what's this? Here are Monsieur Blache and Monsieur Reard again! ...

BLACHE and REARD enter.

KLEOSSEM (Cont'd)

Well, gentlemen? ...

BLACHE

We set ourselves to the task. One arrangement of the child's cubes depicts a revolutionary mob, under this title: "Un Decadi". Below it, a piece of text condemns the recklessness of '93, when the people celebrated the holiday while the guillotine did its bitter work.

KLEOSSEM

But I don't see anything of use to you in this ...

REARD

Listen ... One of the cubes, when turned slightly, completed the picture of a patch of blue sky and the Phrygian cap of a happy boy.

BLACHE

Understanding that this configuration was exceptional, we tried to draw something from it, but in vain ... so we came back to consult with you.

KLEOSSEM (thinking)

Let's see ... the patch of sky showed nothing remarkable?

BLACHE

Nothing.

KLEOSSEM

And the Phrygian cap, was it plain?

BLACHE

No, it carried the tri-color cockade.

KLEOSSEM (excitedly)

A cockade!

REARD

Have you seen one? ...

KLEOSSEM

... Perhaps ... (He goes to BULUXIR's alcove and returns with a photograph, a cockade decorating the frame.)

REARD

What's this? ... A photograph of Antonine Rogissart?

KLEOSSEM

Yes.

REARD

How do you come to have it?

KLEOSSEM

It doesn't belong to me but to Buluxir. More than fifty years ago she knew the celebrated Antonine Rogissart ...

BULUXIR

... who at that time was already close to death. She often came here to gather documentary evidence about Elekeik rituals.

BLACHE

She was studying the origins of Elekeik beliefs? ...

BULUXIR

... for a destructive purpose. She and her free-thinking colleagues founded The Society of Eveites, a cult that practiced a grotesque religion of contradictory beliefs from around the world. For example, they sacrificed a cow, not to some pagan idol, but to Jesus.

BLACHE

Her dream was for all men to become Eveites? ...

BULUXIR

... and to call themselves sons of Eve, members of one united family.

BLACHE

Now this photograph ...

BULUXIR

... she sent me as a souvenir of our last interview, in a frame bearing an "eveite" cockade -- a multi-colored design around an abbreviation of "Libre Pensee." The capital letters were oddly

doubled together: half of the "L" was drawn in a fantastic manner, half of the "P" was tucked into the obtuse angle of the "L".

BLACHE

But did Guillaume Blache see this souvenir?

KLEOSSEM

Yes, in this very alcove ... he loved to supplement my stories with Buluxir's for his own work on the Elekeiks, and the two of them would chat for hours -- she stretched out here, he sitting over there on her cushion ...

BLACHE (taking the photograph)

... this cockade calls for further study ...

They examine the photograph carefully.

Scene 3

BLACHE's living room.

At the piano, SOLANGE rises as MARCENAC enters.

MARCENAC

Mademoiselle Solange, I just ran into Monsieur Jacques, who seemed very preoccupied ... anxious even ... he wrote this note for you.

SOLANGE

A note ... (she unfolds the note and reads it.) "Alas, my dear Solange, I don't know when I will see you again. Something unexpected threatens to take up all of my free time. Oh, how I love you! -- Jacques." He gave you this without saying anything?

MARCENAC

Yes ... and then he ran off.

SOLANGE (thinking)

Something unexpected ... (apprehensively) Oh, my God! Could it have something to do with the Negro League?

MARCENAC

A league with branches in both the Americas ... so Monsieur Jacques...

SOLANGE

... serves in the local Sinnamarie division -- a committed group that has tangled, more than once, with the military.

MARCENAC

You haven't tried to make him resign?

SOLANGE

Yes, but my Jacques is devoted to the goal of the League: to eradicate all the hated vestiges of the period of slavery -- which the blacks in America are still victims of today.

MARCENAC

Yes, I know ... but I have heard that these reprisals can end in bloodshed ...

SOLANGE

Oh, damn Firmin Vargel!

MARCENAC

Firmin Vargel? ... Oh, yes ... the founder of the League, who was moved by the plight of his half-brother, Sam Yenor, the son of a black father.

SOLANGE

Jacques is infatuated with The Brotherhood, the manual of the League, wherein Firmin Vargel systematically elevates blacks over whites by choosing shrewd examples of the dissolute lives of white people and contrasting them with the meritorious lives of blacks.

MARCENAC

I've seen this book in a shop window: its cover shows a white man and a black man, their right hands clasped together...

SOLANGE

The union formed by the author and his brother -- both dead now -- served as both an example and a symbol for the league.

MARCENAC

Perhaps I should talk to Monsieur Jacques and tell him these theories are fruitless and misguided ...

SOLANGE

No ... he'll only fly into a rage if you do ... Oh God! ... How can I stop him ...

MARCENAC

But first, are your fears real? ... Do you have any actual reason to believe ...

SOLANGE

Yes, alas! I do have ... the day before yesterday the division staged a demonstration ...

MARCENAC

You saw it?

SOLANGE

Yes. Jacques had told me about it, hoping we could meet there.

MARCENAC

And as his company passed by, you saw him ...

SOLANGE

... marching close to the head of the column. Jacques was one of the standard bearers, carrying the League's talisman -- a platform on which waxen images of Firmin Vargel and Sam Yenor are standing under a golden arbor, their right hands joined.

MARCENAC

A good means of propaganda, this pompous display of a white Castor and his ebony Pollux ... Did our young standard bearer discover you in the crowd?

SOLANGE

Yes ... and we were able to meet when the procession stopped to sing a hymn to universal concord.

MARCENAC

But now you're afraid that this demonstration will lead to ...

SOLANGE

I fear it ... Oh! Marcenac, I won't refuse your offer after all ... Go see Jacques, talk to him ... tell him how anxious I am ...

MARCENAC

I'll go, Mademoiselle Solange ... And on my word as a military man, I shall faithfully carry out my mission.

CURTAIN

END OF ACT IV

ACT V

Scene 1

The terrace of a bar.

BLACHE and REARD enter and hesitate before choosing a table.

REARD

Here Monsieur Blache ... let's sit here.

BLACHE

You aren't discouraged are you?

REARD

On the contrary, my faith has grown stronger. The initials "L" and "P" from "Libre Pensee" on Rogissart's Eveite cockade could refer to only one name: Louis-Philippe ...

BLACHE

You therefore ...

REARD

... thought of the Frenu tavern ... and now we're here.

BLACHE

Now wait ... It was in front of a tavern of this very name that the newly crowned Louis-Phillipe clinked glasses with a worker. From the terrace, the worker had seen the king pass by on foot, like a good bourgeois, with his umbrella under his arm. The man raised his glass and shouted: "Sire, to your health!"

REARD

Indeed.

BLACHE

Celebrated throughout the land, this toast increased the popularity of the new sovereign.

REARD

And Frenu's bar became famous as well. Now there was another Frenu, second cousin to the other one, who wanted to exploit the event. He easily borrowed money, built a tavern here, and had this sign painted ...

BLACHE (looking at the sign)

... in which the citizen-king, facing a worker, wets his august lip with cheap wine.

REARD

But trading on this famous gesture was not all. The cousin emphasized his family connection ...

BLACHE

... with this phrase: (reading the sign) "Frenu's Place, cousin to the Great Frenu"...

REARD

... followed by these seductive words: (reading the bottom of the sign): "We Give Credit." The establishment flourished under a Frenu dynasty, whose current representative I see coming toward us.

FRENU enters.

FRENU

Monsieur Reard ... Monsieur Blache, no doubt ...

REARD

Indeed ... but how ...

FRENU (to REARD)

I knew you would bring the nephew of poor Guillaume Blache to me.

BLACHE

... he came here often? ...

FRENU

Yes ... and he would take a table in the corner and sit, alone and silent.

BLACHE

He never broke this silence?

FRENU

Never.

BLACHE (insistent)

Never?

FRENU (after thinking)

Yes ... one time ... the last time ... he asked me for Fables Through the Ages, a collection of poems by Savignol, a local writer. He was a bohemian, a contemporary of the romantic poets, and a frequent if insolvent patron of Frenu the First, my great grandfather. When asked for payment, Savignol would simply point to the sign ...

REARD

"We Give Credit."

FRENU

Finally one day, at the end of his patience, Frenu the First refused him service point-blank.

BLACHE

And the poet? ...

FRENU

... soon returned to good favor by dedicating a collection of poems to Frenu the First. Each poem, one page in length, referred to a fable, not only through its meaning, but also pictorially, in the way the text was laid out on the page.

BLACHE

These fables in free verse were published? ...

FRENU

... and met with great success, which increased the value of the original manuscript -- it became the treasure of this place.

BLACHE

Could you bring me this curiosity along with a mug of beer?

FRENU

Certainly. (He leaves.)

REARD

I think there will be a clue in this manuscript.

BLACHE

If only we can recognize it.

FRENU returns.

FRENU

Here are the poems. (He gives the manuscript to BLACHE, and pours two glasses of beer.)

BLACHE

Thank you. (He leafs through the manuscript.) Indeed, the irregular pattern of the verses creates recognizable forms. In fact, it reminds me of the Pegasian stunts that once caused such a stir ... Ah, now we come to the more recent past, to our grandmother's fairy tales.

FRENU

You're right ... and here, for example, is the gnome Jab ...  
(He recites from memory):

So, so little was he  
That his basket could only carry  
A single wild strawberry

BLACHE

Yes ... one can easily recognize the gnome's figure in profile...

FRENU

And, with his head facing front, we can see the point of contact between his cheek and the humble strawberry, which fills the basket he carries on his stooped back ... Now, on his last visit here, the silent Guillaume Blache suddenly holds forth with great eloquence about this very point of contact, and also about the mother of Achille Mages, who, when she was pregnant, would stare for hours at this same silhouette in verse.

REARD

Why in fact, the famous Achille Mages was born with a strawberry mark on his cheek!

FRENU

And so the association was indeed apt.

REARD (to BLACHE, in a low voice)

I know what our next step should be ... Let's finish looking at the poems ... and go.

BLACHE (low, to REARD)

Very well ... Besides, I still have to pay. (Aloud) Here you are, Monsieur Frenu.

FRENU (taking the money)

Thank you, Monsieur Blache. (He returns the money.) But I insist that for you, Monsieur Credit will not have been merely a fable.

Scene 2

ZUMERANAZ's hotel.

OSCARINE enters.

OSCARINE

Catastrophe! A catastrophe is coming! ...

ZUMERANAZ

What happened?

OSCARINE

Zumeranaz, I've just seen The Idiot.

ZUMERANAZ

Agh! Again with your Idiot ... Is it not enough that you and Leonce serve me so badly? ... Must you also wear me out with your stupidities when I'm trying to outsmart Reard and Blache ...

LEONCE enters.

LEONCE

Zumeranaz! ... Listen. Just now, I overheard Blache and Reard at Frenu's Bar ...

ZUMERANAZ

Well?...

LEONCE

Their conversation with Frenu pointed them to Achille Mages.

ZUMERANAZ

Ah! ... Ah!

LEONCE

As evening was coming on, they decided to continue their search tomorrow ...

ZUMERANAZ

... Giving us the opportunity to make the first move ...

LEONCE

Achille Mages ... I remember people talking about him when I was a child ...

ZUMERANAZ

Wait ... I'm trying to remember ... (He thinks a moment.)

OSCARINE (Aside)

Oh! ... I hope he doesn't!

ZUMERANAZ

I've got it! ... The young Achille Mages, who knew English, had become secretary to Mr. and Mrs. Whimster, recently expelled from British Guyana for conspiring against the government in a plot to free the colony.

LEONCE (thinking)

Mrs. Whimster, a beautiful woman, was idolized by her husband ...

ZUMERANAZ

... and inspired him to devise the plot.

LEONCE

In fact, the couple directed their conspiracy by letter from here.

ZUMERANAZ

Yes ... and that is why they hired a secretary.

OSCARINE (Aside)

Alas, they seem to be getting somewhere!

ZUMERANAZ

Now, the beautiful English woman and the young Frenchman soon ...

LEONCE

I understand.

ZUMERANAZ

In order to see each other in secret, they would go, by separate routes, to the Grottos of Estyne ...

LEONCE (excitedly)

The Grottos of Estyne! ...

ZUMERANAZ

The husband, informed by an anonymous letter, lay in wait for them, a revolver in his pocket. He hid behind a column surrounded by their footprints in the soft, wet sand.

LEONCE

Ah, yes! ... And when the two guilty ones approached the column, the husband killed Achille Mages with a shot fired at point blank range ... But alas! is there nothing we can ...

OSCARINE (Aside)

No, nothing ... and I begin to feel reassured.

ZUMERANAZ

Wait ... in order to avoid a scandal, though he certainly would have been acquitted, our Englishman threw the body to the bottom of a well in the grotto, and Achille Mages was declared missing.

LEONCE

Oh! this well ... an idea is coming to me ...

OSCARINE (aside)

Oh! Have I rejoiced too soon?

ZUMERANAZ

One day, a suspicious odor prompted a search, and Achille Mages's corpse, half-eaten by insects, was found in the well. He was identified by a certain strawberry birthmark that had remained intact on his left cheek.

LEONCE

And this led to an investigation, which resulted in the arrest and subsequent acquittal of Whimster.

ZUMERANAZ

Yes ... and the family of Achille Mages commissioned a profile of him, along with an inscription. It was carved in the stone wall above the well, and clearly shows the famous strawberry birthmark.

LEONCE

The conversation at Frenu's Bar also dealt with this mark.

ZUMERANAZ

So there's no longer any doubt ... we must explore the well ...

LEONCE

This time, we should find the treasure itself.

ZUMERANAZ

We'll need a light ...

LEONCE

I have my lantern.

ZUMERANAZ

We'll need a rope ...

LEONCE

A rope ... (He thinks a moment.) On our way, we'll take the one from the well of Saint Odile in the marketplace ...

OSCARINE (blocking the door)

No ... No ... Don't go ... I'm afraid ...

LEONCE (roughly pushing her aside)

Go on, you stupid thing ... Get out of the way ...

ZUMERANAZ

Stay here and wait for us ...

(ZUMERANAZ and LEONCE leave.)

OSCARINE

Oh! All is lost!

Scene 3  
BLACHE's garden.

JACQUES

Oh! Solange, what an incredible series of events! ... Fuzelier's note led, not to my mother, but to her devoted maid, Catharina Soares ...

SOLANGE

... who declares you to be the only descendant of the great Brazilian General Dordio, who was favored by the Emperor Don Pedro II with the right of primogeniture.

JACQUES

But, oh, what terrible revelations came to light! Shortly after his marriage, my father died mysteriously, and the right of primogeniture passed to his younger brother, whom my mother suspected of foul play. Knowing she was pregnant, my mother fled Rio and came here, where she gave birth to me in secret.

SOLANGE

And fearing for your safety, she abandoned you the very day following her confinement ...

JACQUES

... bringing on a terrible illness, from which she died. Now a lawyer has established my identity, thanks to my alder flower tattoo (he touches his shoulder), and the collective testimony of the tattoo artist, Fuzelier, and Catharina Soares --all of whom will soon receive proof of my gratitude.

SOLANGE

And the Brazilian government stands ready to recognize you as the rightful heir to Dordio's estate. What's more, you are the beneficiary of five annuities, as your uncle died leaving only daughters as his heirs.

JACQUES

And so, with your permission, oh, what happiness!, I was able to ask Monsieur Blache for your hand.

SOLANGE

And I, who had imagined you marching off ...

JACQUES

Happily, Marcenac found me ...

SOLANGE

... and eased my worries.

JACQUES

I am so very happy, Solange.

SOLANGE

And I am happy too, Jacques ... and the thrill of finally making my engagement public is increased by the pleasure of seeing my father's joy at the discovery of the famous gems ...

BLACHE, MARCENAC and REARD enter.

BLACHE

... which I was on the verge of losing! ... My dear Marcenac, I will never forget that night ... Angelicus here at the gate ... (pointing to the main gate of the garden)

REARD

... he was so excited, he broke the doorbell!

BLACHE

Then he told us how he followed Zumeranaz and Leonce to the well in the Grottos of Estyne. He saw Leonce emerge from the well, holding a strongbox by the handle with his teeth. And then Zumeranaz opened the strongbox and let out such a roar! Ah, Angelicus, the brave young detective!

MARCENAC

Later, we arrived at Zumeranaz's place with the police ... After a suspicious delay, Zumeranaz opens the door: "What cashbox?" he says, and denies everything ... A search is conducted ... the strongbox is found ... Leonce and Zumeranaz pull out knives ... they are restrained and arrested ... all to the accompaniment of strange cries from Oscarine: "Oh! the Idiot! ... Oh! fate! ..."

BLACHE

All praise to Angelicus! ... Without him, Zumeranaz would have had time to hide the strongbox ...

REARD

Yes ... we very nearly ran aground, and so close to port.

BLACHE

And now, the box resides here in a sturdy safe, my right to the treasure well established by the name "Guillaume Blache" engraved on its lid, and by a confession written by my uncle found under his mattress.

MARCENAC

His confession is so very odd! ...

BLACHE

And so poignant! ... By careful design, he laid a trail that would lead, ultimately, to the treasure, thereby satisfying his conscience; at the same time, the diabolic subtlety of this trail satisfied his misanthropy. Imagine the work involved -- moving backwards step by step, doubling every clue, creating two points of departure -- one which we followed, and the other picked up by

Zumeranaz. Oh yes, this confession is very poignant; we can only pity and forgive him, given the magnitude of his distress.

MARCENAC

Yes, surely such suffering goes some distance toward excusing his hatred of mankind!

REARD

Look! I see Gariot and Angelicus coming toward the gate.

BLACHE

Wonderful ... I invited them to join our celebration this evening ... Monsieur Gariot, Angelicus, come in ...

GARIOT and ANGELICUS enter.

GARIOT

Monsieur Blache, we hurried to answer your invitation.

BLACHE

(to MARCENAC, REARD, GARIOT and ANGELICUS)

And I was in a hurry to bring you, my four collaborators, together, in order to tell you, with the solemnity which becomes formal occasions, that I will shortly set aside appropriate amounts of the recovered fortune for each of you. This will not be a mere gratuity, but a substantial bit of capital.

MARCENAC

Ah, Colonel ... your affection for me will always be my most precious possession! ...

REARD

Monsieur Blache, I am confused ... I did no more than fulfill my duty as a guide ...

ANGELICUS

Oh, bless you, Monsieur Blache ... I will be able, thanks to you, to do something for my people ...

GARIOT

Thank you for your generosity, Monsieur Blache ... but, above all, I thank you for destroying my enemy: "Zumeranaz in prison ... Zumeranaz in prison..." Oh, what pleasure it gives me to say that!

BLACHE

Regarding Kleossem, I had established in advance the exact agreement between us -- and he has already received payment.

REARD

Alas! there is nothing more to detain you here, Monsieur Blache ... and so you will be leaving us ...

BLACHE

I am touched by the regret in your voice ... It's true, this estate was sold yesterday, and soon I'll leave for good ... with Marcenac, with this young couple ...

JACQUES

... and with my adopted parents, who have happily decided to come with me. Yes, we soon sail for France, where we'll all live together. Isn't France my true country? ... Am I not French in my heart as well as by my education?...

SOLANGE

This "soon" is relative, Jacques. We should first be united here, in the coral grotto ... Have you forgotten? ...

JACQUES

Forgotten ... me? ... I, who dream everyday of our marriage in that magical setting! ...

MARCENAC

And where, as you predicted, I will be your witness.

JACQUES

(listening to a distant clock strike six o'clock)

Six o'clock! ... Oh! I feel such anguish this evening, every time a clock strikes! ... In a few moments, Solange, I must leave you for several days -- Ah, that damned telegram -- my presence in Rio is necessary to claim my birthright. I must leave tomorrow, at dawn! ...

REARD

Once you're down there, will you sue your uncle's family? ... The money they inherited from him should be restored to you by the right of primogeniture.

JACQUES

Heaven protect me from ever persecuting those innocents!... No, in Rio I will have only one thought: my return ... Oh, Solange, how long my solitary evenings will be, knowing you are so far away! ...

SOLANGE

Oh Jacques, couldn't we choose a star ... a constellation ... and by gazing on it at the same time each evening, even though we're apart, create something of a link between us? ...

JACQUES

A star? ... A constellation? ... I have a better idea. Look up at that nebula ... Do you know what it compares to?

SOLANGE

No.

JACQUES

To an immense cloud of dust, composed of millions of particles, each one a sun ... Of these millions of suns, many are more extravagant than ours -- large, fiery, luminous, powerful! -- each one the pivot of a universe! ... Seen from here, these millions of suns form a cloud of dust! ... Well now, doesn't this interstellar dust win over just one particular star or constellation -- a vast field where our gazes will meet on a beautiful night ... and linger in our dreams? ...

SOLANGE

A field of sunbeams where my gaze will join yours ... Yes ... Oh, Yes! ... A subtle joining that, alas!, will do little enough to ease the suffering of our separation ...

JACQUES

Oh yes!, so little! ... and that little inspires such terror in me!

BLACHE

Come now, children, have courage ... In just a few more days you will have the rest of your lives to contemplate, side by side, in the calm of the beautiful evenings ... eternities of star dust!...

CURTAIN/END OF PLAY

KATHLEEN DIMMICK

A director and dramaturg, Kathleen Dimmick spent four seasons as Resident Dramaturg at the Mark Taper Forum in Los Angeles and American Conservatory Theatre in San Francisco, where she worked on both classic and contemporary plays. She has directed a variety of new plays, including premieres by Quincy Long for the Atlantic Theater Company in New York City and ASK Theatre in Los Angeles, and by Judy Blume for the Kennedy Center in Washington, D.C. She has served as Resident Director for New Dramatists, a playwright development organization. As a production dramaturg, she has worked with directors JoAnne Akalaitis, Robert Woodruff and Garland Wright at The Guthrie Theatre, New York Theater Workshop, and Theater for a New Audience. She has taught theater at Pomona College, Bard College, Dartmouth College and Eugene Lang College, a division of the New School for Social Research, and currently teaches at Bennington College.

## *Toussaint L'Ouverture*

by Jean Métellus

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(Présenté at the Salon du Livre in Paris on March 22, 2003)

The absence of stage directions, set descriptions, or any detailed *dramatis personae* (those below are my own), conspire with an incantatory, declamatory dialogue to induce in the reader's ear the almost outsized echo of a voice alone in the void, uttering an oratorio of determination and suffering. Here is the mythic saga of Toussaint L'Ouverture, a hero of black freedom, one of the first to dream it, who died at 59 years of age in a French prison in the mountains of the Jura distant from his island home, and whose entire political and military career occurred in the last 19 years of his life. Yet the play in its less primal, more nuanced scenes of political choreography—every step polite, every meaning elegantly veiled—recalls the ironic and well-spoken historical work of Robert Bolt.

### CHARACTERS

TOUSSAINT L'OUVERTURE, military and political leader of two intertwined revolutions: the first, to achieve liberty for slaves, and the second, to secure independence for Haiti

CATINAT, a Haitian revolutionary and witness to history

OGÉ'S MOTHER, the aged mother of François Ogé, an *affranchi* or emancipated slave. The Society of Friends of the Black People was co-founded by her son, living in France, to promote the cause of liberty in the colonies. Upon his return to Haiti, François Ogé and his comrades were extradited from the Spanish territory and sentenced to torture and execution.

SONTHONAX, one of two French Commissioners named by the Convention in 1792 to preside over the Second Civil Commission. He is a believer in the principles of the French revolution.

## Act I, Scene 1

*TOUSSAINT, alone.*

**TOUSSAINT:** I lived for forty years as a slave in the mountains and on the plains, a coachman and a trusted servant, on the lands of Bayon Libertat.

God rest the soul of my godfather Pierre Baptiste, the old negro from Haut du Cap, who taught me to read and write, and who gave me Father Raynal's Philosophical and Political History of the Settlements and Trade of the Europeans in the Indies. What an extraordinary book! I still know certain passages by heart:

“If personal interest prevails among nations and their masters, nonetheless another power exists. Nature speaks more powerfully than philosophy or personal interest. There exist already two colonies of runaway Negroes, protected by treaty and by force from attacks. They are like the lightning that precedes the thunder. They are missing only a leader. Where is this great man, whom nature owes to her afflicted, oppressed, and tormented children? Where is he? Undoubtedly he will arise; he will show himself, he will lift up the sacred standard of liberty. Around this venerable banner will gather the companions of misery. More impetuous than the raging torrents, they will leave everywhere behind them the indelible traces of their just wrath. Everywhere shall the name of the hero, who shall have restored the rights of the human race, be blest; in all parts trophies erected to his glory.”

From then on, I believed in the force of the word. By virtue of the words I read, the wrongs I suffered because of my sickly body, the messages which came to me from time to time, out of the blue, I understood that I was to be a leader with all the riches and infirmities of leaders: subject by day to the admiration of many, and in the shadows to the treason of a few.

Who can forget that for many years from Santo Domingo a man, a slave who called himself the messenger of God, a Mahdi, the Muslim Makendal, tiraded against the land? Doubtless he was betrayed, defeated, captured, broken on the wheel, but none, white or black, in Santo Domingo,

have forgotten his prediction, which to more than one has seemed the true shape of things to come... One day, during a gathering, he put three handkerchiefs—yellow, white, and black—into a vase. Here are the first inhabitants of Santo Domingo, he declared, showing the yellow handkerchief. Then pulling on the white he said, here are the present inhabitants, and here, at last, are those who will remain the indisputable masters of the isle, and so saying, he triumphantly shook out the black handkerchief. This prophecy will become reality. The fight will be long and harrowing, but it has already begun.

## **Act II, Scene 1**

*CATINAT and OGÉ'S MOTHER.*

**CATINAT:** I come from meeting Toussaint Bréda. With every day that passes he changes so; even his name has changed. Men no longer call him Bréda but Toussaint L'Ouverture, for wherever he goes doors open for him, barriers fall for him, the meek rise up to join him.

**OGÉ'S MOTHER:** What kind of a man is this?

**CATINAT:** As a child, he was frail, and they called him Jumblestick to mock him. But he built up his strength by swimming and riding; he soon proved so able a rider that they called him the centaur of the swamps. He is convinced it is his destiny to lead, he sees himself as a Spartacus of the blacks. He is versed in the art of healing men and animals with herbs. His part in the preparation for the great slave revolt has gone unnoticed, for he even saved his masters from the wave of riots after Bois-Caïman's gathering. He is an honorable man who knows the value of patience, but also of action.

**OGÉ'S MOTHER:** What has he done since?

**CATINAT:** Biassou's eye fell upon him, and he became his lieutenant; they are both in the service of Spain. He so distinguished himself that he was promoted first. The Spanish officers,

intrigued by him, taught him to discipline the bands of slaves and teach them the arts of war. Soon he was given an army of four thousand blacks whom he led, many times, to victory: at Dondon, which he seized at the end of June 1793, at Ennery, where he fought the French general Desfourneaux, and finally at Gonaïves, where he was hailed as conqueror. It was thus the Spanish accorded him, in reward, a sword of honor, several decorations, and the rank of lieutenant general in the royal armies of his majesty the King of Spain.

During one of his mad trances, Boukman predicted that Toussaint would be the commander-in-chief of the entire island.

**OGÉ'S MOTHER:** Was he really mad?

**CATINAT:** I don't know what else to call it. Biassou and Jean-François, who were once his superiors, grew so jealous of him that they plotted to reduce his stature in the eyes of Spaniards, and then to take his life: he was fired on, but never hit, while his younger brother Jean-Pierre was killed on the spot. That, too, Boukman predicted.

**OGÉ'S MOTHER:** What else did Boukman say?

**CATINAT:** That Toussaint would not die from a bullet but perhaps from treason.

**OGÉ'S MOTHER:** And is this possible?

**CATINAT:** In this country, everything is possible.

**OGÉ'S MOTHER:** An emissary from General Laveaux, the acting governor, came to see me; he spoke of my son Vincent with great warmth and emotion, and brought me a letter to be given to Toussaint. Laveaux gave me reason to hope again.

**CATINAT:** You are right to take heart; the acts of certain Frenchmen give us good reason. From Camp Furel, Toussaint made an impassioned plea: "My friends and brothers, my name is

Toussaint L'Ouverture, perhaps you have heard it spoken. I have undertaken vengeance, that liberty and equality shall reign in Santo Domingo. I labor, that it shall be so. Join with us, my brothers, and fight with us for the same cause!"

**OGÉ'S MOTHER:** This letter burns my hands to carry and I fear being followed in my daily wanderings.

**CATINAT:** Your task—to deliver this letter unto Toussaint—is difficult. He crosses the Spanish line only to take towns from the French, to station his officers there; then he returns to the Spanish side. But he will soon return to Gonaïves. Then you will have your chance to deliver your letter. He will know which side to choose then.

**OGÉ'S MOTHER:** I will heed your advice, Tinat; I have nothing to lose but what little breath remains to me, for they have already sent my children before me to heaven or to hell!

**CATINAT:** Madam, they are surely in heaven!

#### **Act IV, Scene 1**

*SONTHONAX and CATINAT.*

**CATINAT:** Sir Commissioner, we were moved to see this morning the excesses of courtesy shown by the English General Maitland to Toussaint L'Ouverture. All the maneuvering carried out by questionable emissaries come to treat with Maitland in the name of the Directorate have failed. The Englishman has confessed to being chased from his every position in the interior by General L'Ouverture.

**SONTHONAX:** Has Maitland surrendered everything, then!

**CATINAT:** He has ceded town after town because he no longer feels the equal of General L'Ouverture.

**SONTHONAX:** I have kept to myself during the negotiations, not wishing to disturb the general, who clearly wishes himself to be the sole captain of his ship.

**CATINAT:** Any other action would have upset him, even hindered him.

**SONTHONAX:** I understand his need for a single, embracing, even exclusive power very well.

**CATINAT:** Maitland went very far in the negotiations.

**SONTHONAX:** Very far, you say...how far?

**CATINAT:** Maitland has solemnly promised that no English troop of any sort will attack, under any pretext, the isle of Santo Domingo.

**SONTHONAX:** And he will keep his word?

**CATINAT:** He went so far as to propose a proclamation of independence for the island, and offered General L'Ouverture the crown of this new state: Haiti.

**SONTHONAX:** I beg you to repeat yourself.

**CATINAT:** You heard me perfectly. The general's response was worthy of the dignity he has always shown.

**SONTHONAX:** That is to say?

**CATINAT:** He refused categorically.

**SONTHONAX:** Did you know that I have just been elected Deputy of Santo Domingo to the National Assembly in Paris?

**CATINAT:** Of course! Laveaux as well.

**SONTHONAX:** But unlike him, I think my place is here, and not in France.

**CATINAT:** Naturally. You are highly popular here, among the newly liberated: they would not wish to hear of your departure.

**SONTHONAX:** All my colleagues at the Commission have also urged me to favor my office as Commissioner over my term as Deputy. They know that with my departure, the colony will know one less white man beloved by the blacks: he who first dared to proclaim liberty for one and all.

**CATINAT:** I understand. But the general seems to need room to maneuver.

**SONTHONAX:** If he wishes it, I will leave. I will continue to defend the cause of the newly liberated at the Assembly. But the general has not spoken to me clearly of his wishes; I only understood that the general was happy to see me elected the Deputy representing Santo Domingo.

**CATINAT:** In fact, he gave his lieutenant Christophe the formal order to have you, you and Laveaux, elected by any means possible.

**SONTHONAX:** I had suspected it.

**CATINAT:** Surely such a man as yourself needs little more in which to clearly see the notice of his dismissal.

**SONTHONAX:** What do you mean, a dismissal? Nothing has been said in a clear manner.

**CATINAT:** Diplomatically, your election was clear, even eloquently so. In your place, I should not ask to hear more said to your person.

**SONTHONAX:** Your reply partakes of a subtle politic.

**CATINAT:** I believed you more insightful.

**SONTHONAX:** You see before you a man devoted to liberty and resolutely opposed to all injustice. I have no ulterior motives. I understand only what is said clearly.

**CATINAT:** From what I know of General L'Ouverture, he will not tarry in expressing himself more openly if what I for now only infer proves part of a larger plan.

**SONTHONAX:** What larger plan?

**CATINAT:** The general wishes to have a free hand, in a country with a free people.

**SONTHONAX:** Is that not also my wish?

**CATINAT:** In politics, everything is relative.

#### **Act IV, Scene 10**

*TOUSSAINT, alone.*

**TOUSSAINT:** Spreading their lies and slander about me, they took me away and left me here, naked as a worm.

They took everything from me, even my watch, a gift from Maitland during the magnificent reception once thrown in my honor. I handed over to Bonaparte's valets the few coins in my pockets. And what was I to tell my interrogators who, knowing I had been kidnapped in an ambush, continued to ask me if I had arms or ammunition at my disposal?

I was issued a so-called civilian outfit with stains and stripes like a rhesus' hide that, when we governed, were given only to common prisoners. Then we called such dress the monkey's clothes, to humiliate those who had not done their duty for the Republic.

Now, after so many years and so much vigor offered to the Republic, I wear the monkey's clothes.

They have buried me alive at the bottom of a freezing cell in view of eradicating my works, my plans, my person.

Bonaparte wishes to destroy me because he cannot abide the idea of liberty for men of color.

They have taken ink and paper from me.

I have only a bed without a curtain, a small chest, nearly empty, a tiny table and two chairs.

I have been abandoned to silence and my memories.

To whom shall I speak?

I am at the end of my strength,

The pains in my head make life impossible,

Diverse pains travel my body,

My every thought reminds me that I am a thinking man;

The pains in my head and body keep me from looking to the left and the right, I who once took everything in at once, in a single glance.

I am forced to turn around completely to see who comes from the south, or the north,  
and no longer can I bend forward or backward; these are but occasions for suffering.

I cough with each breath.

My stomach hurts me with each sip of water.

I vomit in fits with each bite of bread.

My jailers ignore my rank and station, calling me only by my first name, Toussaint, as though  
they wished to reduce me to their vulgar condition.

But this incessant persecution, all these humiliating measures shall not break me.

I am the first of the Blacks, the Precursor, the shape of things to come.

It is said that when André Malraux died, on his bedside table was a copy of *Au Pipirite Chantant* (To the Singing Manakin), Jean Métellus' first book of poems, his breakthrough work. Métellus, born in 1937, is a writer of the post-Duvalier Haitian diaspora, which resulted in his emigration to Paris in 1959. His work has been translated into a number of European languages, but only his 1982 novel, *The Vortex Family*, has thus far appeared in English. His most famous work remains his 1981 novel, *Jacmel au Crépuscule* (Jacmel at Dusk), an ode to his hometown, where he was a professor of medicine before being forced to leave. His emigration, while allowing him the freedom to escape the regionalist image imposed on writers of certain countries, did not attenuate his close ties to his homeland. He is also a practicing neurologist specializing in speech disorders.

Edward Gauvin translates children's graphic novels for First Second Books and ongoing comics series for Archaia Studios Press. His work on fabulist Georges-Olivier Châteaureynaud, the author's first appearance in English, may be seen at *AGNI Online* and among other pieces at *Words Without Borders*. His work has also appeared in *Two Lines*, the PEN World Voices Festival, and Les Assises du Roman, an international conference on the novel at the Villa Gilet in Lyon. In 2007 he was a fellow at the American Literary Translators (ALTA) conference.

**HE WHO OPENS THE DOOR**  
**A black comedy for a theater of national tragedy**

**Cast:**

**1st Woman, Natalia,** aged 30-32

**2nd Woman, Victoria,** aged 25-26

*The action takes place in a morgue during a cold season in present-day Ukraine.*

**PROLOGUE**

*Reception room of a morgue. Doors on left and right. There can be a couple of cots in the room. In the middle of the room a woman sits at a desk, singing a popular song coming from a player; she leafs the pages of a magazine, probably a magazine intended for women.*

**1st Woman:** What things they invent here – makes you either gasp or cry. Now, that looks good and erotic, I'd say. But it fits her like the saddle a cow. It would fit me, though. (*Tidies her hair and takes a critical look at her own figure*). But, begging your pardon, for what occasion could I wear it – to entertain the dead? Pfui! In this dratted morgue it's the only thing that comes to your mind. (*Turns over the pages of the magazines*). Oh, exercises for breasts. That's just what I need, because soon I'll be able to see my boobs only through a microscope. (*Leaves the desk and begins exercising*). Good, but how am I supposed to bring those breasts into motion? (*The sound of something creaking comes from behind the stage. She listens intently*). Are my breasts creaking, or what? (*Again the creaking sound*). Oh no, it must be mice. (*The creaking sound grows stronger*). Mice they might be, but they're carrying on like some clamorous pigs. I must poison them with something: mightn't get rid of them, but it'll surely undermine their health. What if they're rats? (*Again the creaking sound*). I was told that this would be a cushy job, quiet and clean, with a peaceable clientele with no complaints into the bargain. The only unpleasant thing would be the smell. Enough of that! Mice or rats, let's relax. (*Puts on earphones*).

*In that instant a door opens on the right side of the stage. A half-naked woman wearing a tag on a foot appears in a weird light. The 1st Woman lets out a stifled cry and collapses in a faint. The 2nd Woman cautiously enters the room and looks around. She is nice-looking but with traces of a recklessly spent night. At first she does not notice the 1st Woman.*

**2nd Woman:** Hey, where am I? Looks like a shoddy office to me. Or is it a sobering-up station? And where is everybody? Could I be the only drunk in town? Or is the Dry Law in force? I, for one, like dry wine. Why is it so cold in here? (*Only now notices that she is almost naked*). Good gracious, they could've have covered me with something at least. (*Sees a pile of bed sheets, wraps a sheet around herself like a Greek tunic*). I'll be dressed in "antique" style. (*Sees a ledger on the table*). Ledger of Morgue No.5. Oh my, this is a morgue! Dear girl, you've been drunk up to your waterline. Your memory's a blank, with bits and pieces of intellect still intact. Halloo, anyone alive in here? What a stupid thing to ask in a charnel house, isn't it? (*Sits down on a chair and notices the 1st Woman*). Oh, and could that be a ... (*Takes a closer look*). Doesn't

seem to be breathing. Now what charnel house is this? It's a pigsty, not a charnel house, what with corpses lying around at every step in the way of living people and all sorts of drunkards gadding about, although I'm almost sober by now. I must move her to some other place, because it's somehow inhuman leaving her in this place.

*Drags the 1st Woman to the cot. Just then the 1st Woman opens her eyes. The 2nd Woman starts in horror and retreats to a safe distance.*

### Scene 1

**2nd Woman:** Begone! Stay where you are and don't come near me.

**1st Woman:** (*Bewildered*). Oh, excuse me, but you seem to be a corpse.

**2nd Woman:** What? I'm hearing that from a corpse myself.

**1st Woman:** But you died. How come you are talking? What's this, a dream?

**2nd Woman:** Certainly not, although it could be a dream of the eternal variety. You're seeing me because, beg your pardon, you, too, gave up the ghost.

**1st Woman:** Where am I?

**2nd Woman:** What an insolent lot those corpses are nowadays. Here's she kicked the bucket and asks such questions. You're in the sweet by-and-bye, in the afterworld as it were.

**1st Woman:** So who are you then?

**2nd Woman:** There could be several options: still a corpse, already a corpse, or simply a corpse.

**1st Woman:** Do you mean that I'm already a ...? How come?

**2nd Woman:** Because you ceased to live.

**1st Woman:** No, I don't want to ... (*Tears well up in her eyes*).

**2nd Woman:** (*Approaches and comforts her*). Everyone has to go through that. No need to be so upset about it. Living nowadays is an expensive pleasure, what with having to buy this and that. But all a corpse needs is a coffin.

**1st Woman:** (*Through tears*). Do you know how expensive coffins are today?

**2nd Woman:** It won't be you buying it, but your hubby. You'll be just lying in the coffin in peace and quiet, without worrying about clothing and feeding your mortal flesh. He'll be bringing flowers to your grave. Did he give you flowers frequently during your lifetime?

**1st Woman:** Oh, but I didn't bid him farewell. It'll be such a blow to him.

**2nd Woman:** A blow you say? Oh no, he'll heave a sigh of relief. Imagine a man having to stick to one skirt all his life. You enjoyed yours, so let him enjoy his as a free man.

**1st Woman:** Wait a minute! How did it all happen? I was healthy, after all.

**2nd Woman:** You just said it, lady – in the past tense. What kind of health do you expect in such an environment as ours? The soil is filled to bursting with pesticides and herbicides. The air, beg your pardon, stinks of shit to high heaven. H<sub>2</sub>O, in the true sense of the

formula, doesn't seem to exist at all. Once you're filled with that shit up to your gills, it's curtains.

**1st Woman:** But I did exercises to keep my breasts in good shape, didn't indulge – well, almost – in drinking, and regularly took all those health pills.

**2nd Woman:** What a waste of money! Usually, it all ends in a thumping heart attack – and you turn up your toes.

**1st Woman:** My God, what language you use. How can you joke at such a time? Don't you really have anything to regret?

**2nd Woman:** Right now I do. But what's the sense of bawling? Whom are you trying to move to tears? Nobody cares a straw about you in this world. I'd rather meet the next world with a stiff lip and rosy cheeks instead of a bluish pale face.

**1st Woman:** (*Rushes to a mirror to have a look at herself*). By the way, I don't look like a corpse at all, and there's nothing of a bluish pale face you mentioned.

**2nd Woman:** Did you expect an immediate effect? That'll take a couple of days. You'd better take care of something more essential. Do you have a place at a cemetery?

**1st Woman:** No.

**2nd Woman:** What about relatives? Nowadays you can be put to bed with a shovel together with some relatives.

**1st Woman:** (*Sighs*). No, regrettably, they all are still alive.

**2nd Woman:** So the next stop would be a crematorium.

**1st Woman:** To be burned alive just like that?

**2nd Woman:** First, not alive but dead. And second, why not? It's better to burn up quickly than, beg your pardon, rot away boringly for a long time.

**1st Woman:** Brrrr... listen, don't you have any other subjects to talk about? Why are we sitting here just like that? Where's the Paradise, Hell, the light at the end of a tunnel, or at least anything similar to a decent afterlife?

**2nd Woman:** We're probably waiting for someone to take care of us. Just imagine what a lot of people are doddering off life's stage! Probably there must be a long waiting line.

**1st Woman:** Will you be the last in the line?

**2nd Woman:** Could be.

**1st Woman:** I'll be the next in line then. Right now I'm nervous.

**2nd Woman:** Nothing to be nervous about, because you've got everything behind you already.

**1st Woman:** So what should we do now?

**2nd Woman:** Doing anything now is out of place. Relax and ... how should I put it? ... oh yes, find repose. By the way, what about getting acquainted? After all, we're on our last trek together. My name's Victoria, and what's yours?

**1st Woman:** Natalia... Natalia Heorhivna.

**2nd Woman:** Na-ta-lia He-or-hiv-na... Imagine how nice the first name and patronymic would look in gilded letters on granite? And under all that the epitaph: "From the sincerely grateful descendants!"

**Natalia:** But I don't have any descendants.

**Victoria:** So be it: "In memory. Honor and glory be yours for ages to come."

**Natalia:** Amen... I won't live that long.

**Victoria:** Sure, you'll die much earlier. Here's another version of an epitaph: "You'll live in our hearts" period.

**Natalia:** It lacks warmth and sounds too formal to me.

**Victoria:** My, my, are you difficult to please. Do you have a nice photograph for the tombstone?

**Natalia:** No, except the one for a passport. I'm not too photogenic and my figure is not ...

**Victoria:** You've got a good enough figure ... for a coffin. And the main thing is that it has some economical advantages: a narrower coffin, less expensive and less fabric for dressing you up.

**Natalia:** Indeed, I have nothing decent to wear. Truth is, I came by a fur coat not so long ago.

**Victoria:** Oh no, wearing a fur coat in a coffin is indecent and, perhaps, it would be too warm in it.

**Natalia:** I also bought a brand new swimming suit, a colorful one with flowers.

**Victoria:** No, flowers won't do. You'll need something black or dark blue. What a lingering Soviet habit we indulge in by putting off everything for later on.

**Natalia:** But death came so unexpectedly.

**Victoria:** It's something everyone is being warned of today ... in advance. We seem to have been taught everything. Want to drive a car? Good, take a three-month training course, pass exams, and only then you'll be issued a driving license. But nobody is being prepared for death. I think there should be some courses and exams for this purpose. If you failed to take a course, don't be in a hurry to pay the debt of nature.

**Natalia:** That's exactly what I'd string along with. I'm still a greenhorn in this respect. What if I won't be accepted?

**Victoria:** Why ask me? I know as much as you do...

**Natalia:** But you seem to know all the facts of life ... as if you died dozens of times.

**Victoria:** Know why? It's because of my logical thinking. For some reason I've got a headache right now. What if thinking too much is harmful for corpses?

**Natalia:** For corpses nothing is harmful anymore.

**Victoria:** A sober thought, I'd say. I have to take something against the headache (*looks for some pills on the desk, swallows a couple, sits down at the desk and falls asleep*).

**Natalia:** Let me have some, too. All these weird happenings have made my head spin (*also takes some pills*). Their taste reminds me of my soporific... Maybe I'll find some repose ... (*goes to a cot and lies down*).

(Fadeout)

## Scene 2

**Natalia:** (*wakes up, gradually gets on her feet, rubs her eyes, takes in the room, notices Victoria, walks up to her, and coughs slightly to wake her up*). Excuse me, but what are you doing here?

**Victoria:** (*half-awake, not understanding what's going on*). Where am I? Now wait a minute... I went out with Tolik. Do you know him?

**Natalia:** (*irritated*) I don't and I don't want to.

**Victoria:** Good for you. He's a rare scum – made me drunk and then walked out on me. Or was it the other way around? When I came to me senses, it was cold. Then I saw corpses all around ... and you seemed to be one of them. Now I'm recalling it all. Your name is Natalia.

**Natalia:** Right, and yours is Victoria. So it wasn't a dream, was it?

**Victoria:** What dreams are you talking about? Look at me. In my eyes there's frost, on my leg is a tag, and I'm a typical representative of the family of corpses. You don't look any better.

**Natalia:** This is absurd. Me, a corpse?

**Victoria:** No, you were simply gadding about nearby and decided to drop into Morgue No.5 – a wonderful attraction sight with such a refreshing cool!

**Natalia:** Morgue No.5? But that's the place I work at as a medical orderly. Does it mean that I'm alive?

**Victoria:** Why then were you lying around like an ordinary corpse?

**Natalia:** I wasn't lying around. I just fainted at your sight, taking you for a ghost, although this is a morgue and live corpses are a rarity around here. You're the first one I've seen.

**Victoria:** I'm really thrown out of gear. Am I alive, a corpse, or a ghost?

**Natalia:** We could pinch each other (*pinches Victoria*).

**Victoria:** Ouch, it hurts!

**Natalia:** Of all the people to complain.

**Victoria:** Let's suppose we're alive. But how have we come to be here?

**Natalia:** Wait a minute. You mentioned about a booze-up. Maybe you became dead drunk, got chilled to the bones in the street, and they picked you up as a corpse.

**Victoria:** How then did a medic confirm my death?

**Natalia:** It's a wonder how he didn't confirm his own death yet. He goes on a bender at his workplace and everything else then runs by autopilot.

**Victoria:** Why do they keep such people?

**Natalia:** Nobody's every complained about it. You're the first one. Thank God that you landed here, but not in a crematorium. You'll have to drink less.

**Victoria:** I didn't get into the habit yet. So we're alive, aren't we?

**Natalia:** Thank God we are. All is well that ends well.

**Victoria:** I'd even say all that doesn't end. (*Both laugh*). Oh, but I must phone back home lest they worry...

**Natalia:** Don't tell them, though, where you're phoning from.

**Victoria:** May I? (*Tries to phone, but fails*). The line seems to be dead.

**Natalia:** How come? Let me try (*tries to phone, but fails as well*). That's strange, not a single buzz. Never mind, there's a public telephone around the corner.

**Victoria:** (*Goes to the door where she stops short*). Oh my, but I can't go outdoors in such wear. I'd be lucky not be hauled off to a nuthouse or raped.

**Natalia:** Wait! The clothes are in the outer room. You were dressed upon arrival, I hope?

**Victoria:** Sure, once upon a time. It's a striped suit.

**Natalia:** (*pushes the door, but it proves to be closed*). What the hell! It's closed. Or is this somebody's foolish joke? Wait! There's an emergency exit here. (*Runs to the opposite door, tries to open it, but it's also closed*). Why are you standing there rooted to the floor? Give me a hand. (*Both try to open the door, but all in vain*).

**Victoria:** Well, well, that's a pretty pass. I wonder how long we'll be stuck in this hole. By the way, what time is it?

**Natalia:** (*produces a watch*). It stopped. Must have hit the floor when I blacked out. Do you have a watch?

**Victoria:** The only thing I got is a tag (*raises her foot and inspects the tag*). Just what I thought – it's got the number 13 on it. With such a number they even won't let you die in a human way.

**Natalia:** What should we do now? And the main thing, what does it all mean?

**Victoria:** What about breaking down the door?

**Natalia:** It's hopeless. The door's steel-plated.

**Victoria:** What a stupid country to live in. Why should a morgue have steel-plated doors? To keep out the body snatchers? Or to prevent the dead from running away?

**Natalia:** No, that's not the reason. This used to be a bomb shelter in case of a nuclear, chemical or such like attacks. Somewhere there's an instruction on this point.

**Victoria:** (*finds the instruction*). Here it is (*studies the instruction, Natalia joins her*).

**Natalia:** (*reads*). In case of danger of an attack, the security system is activated and the door is blocked...

**Victoria:** Do you mean that ...?

**Natalia:** I don't mean anything. I just read what's written here. Maybe it's something incidental.

**Victoria:** And the dead telephone line – is it also incidental?

**Natalia:** Good Lord, it gives me the creeps. I just can't believe it.

**Victoria:** When the nuclear power station at Chernobyl blew up nobody believed it either.

**Natalia:** What if it's blown up again?

**Victoria:** Who knows. In any case going outdoors is dangerous. Anything could be out there: chemical contamination, radioactive fallout, epidemics...

**Natalia:** Where could that garbage have come from? Everything seemed to be quiet...

**Victoria:** The explanation is simple. The Americans got sick of China's expansionist ways and hit it with a nuclear rocket. The Russians stood up for their Chinese comrades and retaliated. So the Americans put on a nuclear missile attack on Moscow. Now all that radioactive shit is raining down on our heads.

**Natalia:** I'm surely down on my luck to have landed in Morgue No.5 at such a time. I believed this would be the end of my professional ambitions, but now it might be much worse than that.

**Victoria:** Depends how you look at it. At first we seemed to be dead, while everyone else was alive, but now it's perhaps the other way around.

**Natalia:** Do you really believe that we're the last people on earth?

**Victoria:** It could be a possibility. Who knows.

**Natalia:** Why would God leave just two females alive? Makes no sense to me. Noah, for one, brought on board his ark a pair of each creature. Of what use can the two of us be?

**Victoria:** The ways of God are truly unfathomable. What if thereby He wanted to put an end to all wars? Once I saw a film where girls were reared in test tubes. You any good at biology? What's artificial insemination?

**Natalia:** I'm a medic, after all. Artificial just means artificial, but you still need a man to achieve the desired outcome. (*Presently the telephone rings piercingly. The sound makes the women start*).

**Victoria:** Pick it up! This is supposed to be your workplace.

**Natalia:** (*Picks up the phone and responds in an expressionless voice*). Hello... yes ... yes ... (*replaces the receiver, keeps silent*).

**Victoria:** Well, who phoned?

**Natalia:** I don't know ...

**Victoria:** Was it at least a man's or a woman's voice?

**Natalia:** A man's, it seems.

**Victoria:** Thank God, one man's still alive. What did he say?

**Natalia:** They just left and will be here soon.

### Scene 3

**Victoria:** Are they coming to pick up a corpse?

**Natalia:** No, in that case they would've said it differently. They're coming for me, or for us?

**Victoria:** And what would that mean?

**Natalia:** If I only knew...

**Victoria:** At least the telephone has been switched on (*picks up the receiver*). Hey, it's off-line again.

**Natalia:** Maybe it's done intentionally to have the phone operate only one way. A weird hocus-pocus, I'd say.

**Victoria:** Now let's mull it over logically: if we're alive, so it's somebody's nasty joke and we just have to wait out until it runs its course.

**Natalia:** And what if we're ... not alive?

**Victoria:** The more reason to wait. There's nothing else we can do.

**Natalia:** (*sits down, waits for a while*). But I can't be sitting and just twiddling my thumbs! (*Jumps to her feet*). Let's do something!

**Victoria:** Do you have any cigarettes?

**Natalia:** Yes. So what?

**Victoria:** You said that we should do some. So let's have a smoke (*Natalia produces two cigarettes, lights one and the other, and then crumbles hers*). What's the matter?

**Natalia:** I won't smoke. What if all this is real ... and there'll be the Last Judgment? Smoking is a sin.

**Victoria:** If it's real, you've already sinned up to the hilt. So it won't help you any. You can just as well give yourself up to all the joys of life – oops, beg your pardon – of death.

**Natalia:** (*produces another cigarette and lights it*). Sounds convincing.

**Victoria:** One cigarette more or less doesn't make any difference. You'd better be concerned about something more serious... Say a pray, if you are a believer.

**Natalia:** (*assumes a prayer's pose and barely moves her lips in a prayer*). And why don't you repent?

**Victoria:** I see no sense in it. Whether I repent or not I'll land down there (*points to the floor*). I failed to abide by God's commandments. No sooner did I marry than my marital life became sour and we parted, I was kicked out of college, and what followed was a merry-go-round of living. But then I got crammed to the scuppers with all the ups and downs of life.

**Natalia:** Still, if you repent sincerely... Maybe this place is a sort of purgatory. They didn't come for us on purpose so as to give us another chance.

**Victoria:** You say so because you're more than a match for me – working hard all your life from sunup to sunset, living with one man, probably never deceiving him, eh?

**Natalia:** Not a lot you know about me, do you? I would've have been better off had I deceived him than this ....

**Victoria:** This what? (*Pause*). All right, if you don't want to say it, don't.

**Natalia:** Listen, what if I repent to you? It'd be like confessing to a priest.

**Victoria:** Just a minute (*stubs out her cigarette*). Now repent.

**Natalia:** To make a long story short, I had two abortions ... in my salad days, so to speak. I got pregnant from a boy I met by chance ...

**Victoria:** That's enough for an explanation. What about the second?

**Natalia:** That's when I was already married. We were renting one room and lived in such squalor that I decided against childbirth. Later on I saw my baby boy in my dreams. You know, it seemed like a snowstorm was raging and somebody knocked on the door, saying quietly, "Mommy, let me in, I'm scared..." I opened the door, but there was nobody outside... That would rouse me from sleep and make me weep bitterly. I was told that any abortion spells the end of a marriage. A woman has to pay for interrupted childbirth, for life, let alone for everything else that follows.

**Victoria:** And for a child as well. Almost everybody is resorting to abortions. That's what's life like. But with me it was much worse than that. When I was pregnant, my mate deceived with me a broad and so I send him packing. He left, all right, but my baby girl was born dead – got herself entangled in the umbilical cord. They say that once it feels guilty of something, it hangs itself.

**Natalia:** Can they really understand such things "there"?

**Victoria:** Better than we. You know, it would have been better had I done an abortion – less suffering for both me and my baby girl, especially for her...

**Natalia:** Listen, a lot of sins are forgiven for suffering.

**Victoria:** Makes no difference to me after all I've been through. (*The telephone rings, both of them freeze*).

**Natalia:** Pick up the phone, quick! But this time ask everything in great detail. Pick it up or it'll stop ringing.

**Victoria:** (*picks up the receiver*). Hello... who's there? Yes... I just want to ... (*replaces the receiver*).

**Natalia:** What did he say?

#### Scene 4

**Victoria:** "Don't worry, we'll be there soon," he said and added not to take any thoughtless steps and keep out of harm's way.

**Natalia:** Wait a minute! If we're to keep out of harm's way, doesn't it mean that we're alive?

**Victoria:** Indeed, what steps, the more so thoughtless, can a corpse take? It's clear as daylight.

**Natalia:** Sounded to me like the assurances of a medic: please, don't worry, everything will be all right, and if your leg will be cut off up to your ears, you don't need it anyway, do you? Got the drift? Did you get plastered often?

**Victoria:** Only now and then.

**Natalia:** But I was a real boozehound. Delirium tremens – that's what we're suffering from, my dear.

**Victoria:** What? You must be out of your mind.

**Natalia:** Of course, I am. My job's a nervous affair with a lot of stress and fatigue. So there's never enough glue to keep me in one piece.

**Victoria:** What are you raving about? Do you mean that we're some screwballs?

**Natalia:** There might be two options: either we're screwballs, or the screwballs out there are much worse than we.

**Victoria:** Let's assume it's so... Why then did they lock us up here?

**Natalia:** Because we've got the manic-depressive syndrome. We're sort of publicly dangerous types.

**Victoria:** Why not in a nuthouse, but in a morgue?

**Natalia:** It's an on-the-job method of treatment, I guess.

**Victoria:** But I'm not performing any work here!

**Natalia:** It might also be a temporary arrangement.

**Victoria:** What then does the phrase "keep out of harm's way" mean?

**Natalia:** So that you won't ram your head against a wall and destroy public property?

**Victoria:** My head's public property?

**Natalia:** No, the wall, or those dratted doors (*rushes to a door, but stops short*).

**Victoria:** (*thoughtfully*). What kind of a screwball am I, if I can think soberly?

**Natalia:** You'd better keep mum about your sober thinking. Whose obsessive idea about the nether world was it, but not yours?

**Victoria:** And who carried on about a nuclear winter around one separately taken morgue?

**Natalia:** Well, as far as I can make out, you're a typical schizoid paranoiac, while I'm a paranoid schizophrenic.

**Victoria:** Good Lord, sounds so idiotic ... it seems to be true. Listen, you're a medic and must know the ropes. I'm aware that I've got a loose screw, but tell me how and when it became loose.

**Natalia:** Well, I'm not a psychiatrist. Did you ever have a feeling that someone was pursuing you?

**Victoria:** (*tries to recall*). It happened. Whenever I put on a mini skirt, some stud would stick to me and dog my footsteps all the time.

**Natalia:** And what about a long skirt?

**Victoria:** Depends how long. Whenever with a deep cleft, the effect was the same.

**Natalia:** See: obtrusive ideas with persistent associations.

**Victoria:** Oh, mommy, I don't want to land in a loony bin.

**Natalia:** Don't be so wrought up. The patients are always better off than the medical personnel – all you do is lounge around and rest. It's the nurses that have to be pitied, since they're on the move all the time, attending to the complaints of the crazies. Why do you think I got a job at the morgue? Everyone here is happy and doesn't complain. Dead patients are a hundred times better than the living ones.

**Victoria:** Hey, I know what you're sick of! Necrophilia.

**Natalia:** Are you out of your rocker? I've never touched them so much as with a finger.

**Victoria:** So it's platonic necrophilia. Phase One.

**Natalia:** I think that with you it's the last phase of wackiness. (*Pause, quiet*). Listen, I know what we should do to have them let us out of here. Let's pretend that we're on the way to recovery, understand?

**Victoria:** (*nods in agreement, says loudly*) I'll never drink again!

**Natalia:** And I'll never come near a corpse. I'll quit this dead house tomorrow. No, right away today!

**Victoria:** Just the smell of liquor makes me sick.

**Natalia:** And I get sick of the smell of these stiffs.

**Victoria:** To prove my point, I'll join a sobriety society.

**Natalia:** And I'll make the worst move by joining an ambulance team, or else work in analyses reception instead of this charnel house. (*As the telephone rings, says quietly*) What if they heard us?

**Victoria:** Come on, pick up the receiver and talk to him like a medic to a medic.

**Natalia:** Hello... yes (*pause*). Excuse me, but won't you tell me ... (*replaces the receiver*).

**Victoria:** Well, what did the doctor say?

**Natalia:** I think it wasn't a doctor. He said that they were late and that we should make up our minds...

## Scene 5

**Victoria:** Make up our minds about what?

**Natalia:** I don't know. But if they consider us schizos, they would've said something else. Schizos don't make up their minds; it's something that's done for them by others.

**Victoria:** Exactly... make up your minds... sounds like an appeal on a ballot slip.

**Natalia:** Hey, you hit upon a good idea. What if it's a coup?

**Victoria:** What coup?

**Natalia:** A political coup d'état, of course. While the higher-ups are locked in a power struggle, the masses have been cooped up in their homes lest they pull a different way. Therefore we have to make up our minds whether we support "our side" or "their side."

**Victoria:** But where is this "our side" and "their side"?

**Natalia:** Does it make any hell of a difference to you? It won't be any worse than it is now.

**Victoria:** Why so?

**Natalia:** Or they might at last put this country in order by jailing some, wasting others – enough to make us breathe easier.

**Victoria:** And what if they jail or waste us?

**Natalia:** Why us, and what for?

**Victoria:** If they knew what for, they would've done it a long time ago. We were told to make up our minds, which means we have to find out who the Left and the Right are.

**Natalia:** Can't you put it more clearly?

**Victoria:** What a feather-brained character you are. The Left are for making everyone much the same and be equally bad off and they are also for an all-out unification with different fraternal peoples, while the Right are a peculiar breed of patriots who want us to be bad off as well, but selectively, and for them the fraternal peoples are the ones with the fattest bank accounts.

**Natalia:** Which means that everyone will be down at the heels?

**Victoria:** Who knows. So if we don't make up our minds, everybody will be under the screw, especially you and me. Is that clear enough?

**Natalia:** Just about. Most likely the freaks we're dealing with are from the Left.

**Victoria:** Shush ... (*says quietly*) mind what you say. They might be eavesdropping on us.

**Natalia:** (loudly) I'm, too, for a bright tomorrow ... or, still better, for a bright today... when everyone – on a per capita basis – will have equally a yacht, villa, and a Mercedes car.

**Victoria:** (*quietly*) What are you raving about? What Mercedes car?

**Natalia:** If that's not to your liking, let it be a bicycle for everyone or, still better, a skating board ... of a red color! It's less expensive and will take care of the fitness problems. Also, there's absolutely nothing we've lost in NATO. Why should we have to be losers all the time?

**Victoria:** Imagine some nice Western troops entering the picture. Oops – I wanted to say some friendly fraternal troops. We'd be living in clover then.

**Natalia:** When?

**Victoria:** When all those dratted nightclubs, casinos, discothèques and other capitalist survivals are razed from the face of the earth.

**Natalia:** Right you are, because they rob you of sleep. With our failing health we're the least fit to be whirling and twirling the whole night through.

**Victoria:** And winning anything in a casino is like milking a he-goat into a sieve. The bastards are rigging the machines, cogging the dice, and double-crossing the gamblers. A lot of times I tried to win – all in vain. Those swindlers should be thrown behind prison bars.

**Natalia:** Instead of casinos we should have theaters, concert halls, or picture galleries!

**Victoria:** Right. Also, prostitutes should have fixed working hours – either in the daytime or at night. And they should have a trade union to care of their days off, sick leaves, vacations, and everything else working people should be entitled to.

**Natalia:** It wouldn't be bad to send them off on indefinite leave. For all time to come! Enough of that whoredom! A husband should bring his wages to his family instead of spending them on floozies. As it is, our money's not worth a fig nowadays.

**Victoria:** Money is not the main thing, though.

**Natalia:** Not even when you got a lot of it?

**Victoria:** The main thing is for the heart to sing.

**Natalia:** Hey, that's a fine idea. Let's sing a revolutionary song. (*Gives Victoria a wink and says under her breath*) Once they hear it, they'll be moved and let us free.

**Victoria:** Let's strike up the The Internationale (*sings quietly*) ... *Arise, you prisoners of starvation! Arise, you wretched of the earth! For justice thunders condemnation: a better world's in birth!* That's all I remember. (*March around the room, singing la-la-la instead of the lyrics, then stop marching*). We could also build a fire and ... (*whispers*) burn all the compromising capitalist trash like, for instance, this typical porno magazine. (*Picks up the magazine, but Natalia tries to take it back*).

**Natalia:** It's not a porno but a usual women's magazine (*snatches the magazine out of Victoria's hands*).

**Victoria:** What about this broad stringed with what should look like a swimming suit?

**Natalia:** Is she supposed to wear a fur coat in summer? (*Hides the magazine in a desk drawer*). It just entered my mind that it's not the Left we're dealing with...

**Victoria:** Who then?

**Natalia:** Try to recall how the man addressed you.

**Victoria:** He said *Pani*<sup>1</sup>. Yes, he did, and in Ukrainian besides.

**Natalia:** See. It's the Right, of course. The Left wouldn't be torturing their tongues to squeeze a Ukrainian word out of their mouths. Makes me sick listening to those benighted members of Parliament who can't piece together a simple phrase in Ukrainian. The tongue of the Russkies is the only one they seem to know.

**Victoria:** Uh-hu, and with a lot of cant. Yes, we're dealing with the Right...

**Natalia:** Oh my, what a flood of gibberish we had let loose here.

**Victoria:** No, a bright future of the communist variety would make a hash out of our lives.

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<sup>1</sup> *Pani* – the Ukrainian for Lady, Missis – *Tr.*

**Natalia:** Yes, we've had enough of that friendship of peoples. And, apart from everything else, you won't get far on a skating board.

**Victoria:** People in the West have a decent life. Perhaps we, too, might come into something decent one day. The main thing is to advance in the right direction.

**Natalia:** For a starter let's shape the image of a genuine Ukrainian woman.

**Victoria:** Do you have any embroidered blouses by any chance?

**Natalia:** Do you think that embroidery is a favorite pastime among the dead?

**Victoria:** Oh, how sarcastic we are. I was just curious. All right, let's have a closer look at the main things – our ancestry, for one. What's your surname?

**Natalia:** Varletenko, by my husband's name.

**Victoria:** (*laughs*) What a husband with such a surname to bump into. Did it take long to find him? (*Says seriously*) For our situation, though, it's an ideal surname. It captures so beautifully the national character, so to speak. And what's your maiden name?

**Natalia:** Daturaman.

**Victoria:** Oh, that's a worse case.

**Natalia:** Not at all. It's part Latin of what means jimsonweed.

**Victoria:** Sure, and also goes as a hallucinogen. Has a Jewish ring about it, too. Are there any Jews among your ancestors?

**Natalia:** None as far as I know... Will they be really filtering my ethnic background so much?

**Victoria:** You bet! Right down to seven generations. I knew one a character who was always asking everyone whether he was a Ukrainian. Once I invited him to hear Verdi's *Rigoletto* at the Opera. "Is he a Ukrainian?" he asked. "Who," I said, "Verdi or Rigoletto?" Said he: "Both." Funny, isn't it?

**Natalia:** Not at all. And what's your surname?

**Victoria:** (*Picks up the morgue ledgers*) I might as well be a corpse, temporarily, with a stamped document to confirm it.

**Natalia:** You needn't be a corpse temporarily, but for a much longer time. (*The telephone rings, both women freeze*). Pick it up, it's your turn now. Try to guess by his voice what party he belongs to.

**Victoria:** And the color of his boxers, yes? (*Picks up the receiver*). Hello... (*long pause*). Whoa, we're stuck ...

**Natalia:** Already? Where? Are they of the Left or the Right?

**Victoria:** I don't know. We got stuck here, while they got stuck in a traffic jam. We were told to be prepared for everything, perhaps even for the worst.

## Scene 6

**Natalia:** For the worst? Good God, what could be worse than the mess we're in? We've been dead, went for screwballs, and lived through a nuclear war and two coups. For how long yet will they be driving us up the wall?

**Victoria:** Mind you, it's we who cooked up all this.

**Natalia:** This damned uncertainty – I can't stand it any longer. I'd do anything just to get out of this dump.

**Victoria:** Anything, you say? All right, strip then.

**Natalia:** Have you gone off your rockers for good?

**Victoria:** No, just got an idea that has to be checked. Do you want to crack this puzzle? (*Natalia recoils*). Don't be so shaky: I'm a square as far as sexual orientation is concerned.

**Natalia:** What did you think up? All right (*begins to undress*), though it's cold in here.

**Victoria:** Never mind, soon it'll be hot for you.

**Natalia:** What do you mean?

**Victoria:** (*looks her over critically*). You've got a nice enough figure, with everything in its proper place.

**Natalia:** How much longer will I be freezing like that? What don't you explain what's up at long last?

**Victoria:** You can get dressed now. We invented the hell knows what, while everything has a simple and banal explanation. Look at it this way: a nice chick like you or me, for instance, suddenly lands in an out-of-the-way place. Why pay the broads anything? Lock up a stray woman, build up a psychological pressure for a couple of hours, and she'll do anything to get out of here, just like you said.

**Natalia:** You know ... that muffled voice sounded very much like a hood's ... Mommy dear, what are we to do now?

**Victoria:** There's only one way out .... you know what I mean.

**Natalia:** Are you seriously suggesting that we...

**Victoria:** I'd hate it, of course, but when it'll come to...

**Natalia:** We have to get out of here.

**Victoria:** That we tried already. Is there any place we can hide in here?

**Natalia:** Probably only among the corpses. But I won't join their company. Anyway, finding us among them will be easy.

**Victoria:** I won't join them either. So there's no choice for us.

**Natalia:** I'll resist, yell, put up a fight. In the end, I'll threaten to call the police.

**Victoria:** What a foolish frame of mind. You might as well yell your head off and nobody will hear you. Don't you ever read the papers? If it's done on the quiet, they carry off their dirty job and scam. But once there are any threats, you're bumped off and curtains. One corpse less or more makes no difference – it's stuck into a cooler and no one's the wiser.

**Natalia:** You're wrong on that point. We keep strict records.

**Victoria:** Would that make you any happier? Better endure half an hour of unpleasant feelings than turn into a stiff. I can't boast much about a school of hard knocks, but what I've gone through here is enough for me.

**Natalia:** But I can't make myself do it with the first man I come across.

**Victoria:** Listen, lady, this won't be a visit to the dentist. All you've got to do is simply go through the motions.

**Natalia:** How?

**Victoria:** Once a rake offered to do something nice-nice to me. I said that I had another partner for this purpose, to which he suggested: "So just make believe that it's him, not me. It won't rattle me."

**Natalia:** Did you agree?

**Victoria:** Of course not. But ours is a different case. There's no reason to assume a negative posture. They mightn't be some ugly apes, but nice-looking men.

**Natalia:** A nice-looking man can find for himself a woman anyway. (*The telephone rings*)

**Victoria:** Will you pick it up?

**Natalia:** Let it be you. You know better what's what...

**Victoria:** (*picks up the telephone*). Hello ... (*a long pause, replaces the receiver, goes rigid*).

## EPILOGUE

**Natalia:** Well, what did he say? (*Pause*). Why do you keep silent? (*Pause*). Don't scare me. Was it what you thought? (*Victoria shakes her head*). What then? Who was it? Speak up, don't torture me!

**Victoria:** I don't know... He said that they changed their minds and won't come.

**Natalia:** But why?

**Victoria:** He didn't say, but added, "You can choose yourself – either leave or stay."

**Natalia:** Well, I'll be! Wait a minute. Do they know at least that we're locked up?

**Victoria:** (*still thoughtfully*) It seems to me they know about us much more than we suspect. Maybe something we ourselves don't know.

**Natalia:** So we're back to reference point zero: we don't know who we are, where we are, what'll happen to us, and who and when will open the door.

**Victoria:** Just a moment: he suggested that we could leave. Try that door again.

**Natalia:** I'm sick of trying. All right, I'll try so that you won't have any doubts. (*Pushes the door, it proves to be unlocked, and she almost tumbles outside*). Well, I'll be jiggered! There's some tunnel and a light at its end.

**Victoria:** (*runs to the second door, it's open as well*). I seem to see a street and the crack of dawn. Take a look at your watch, quick!

**Natalia:** But ... (*produces her watch and puts it to her ear*). It's ticking! Is it really the end of our plight? Are we really free?

**Victoria:** The end, you say? Nothing doing – it's just the beginning.

**Natalia:** Yet another scenario? What beginning do you have in mind?

**Victoria:** The worst. Remember he mentioned about the worst?

**Natalia:** Why the worst?

**Victoria:** Don't you understand? They gave you a choice.

**Natalia:** What's so bad about it?

**Victoria:** They threw to us that choice like a bone to a dog. Here, take that freedom and choke on it! You can leave, or you can stay. You can be alive, you can be dead. It's all a choice of your own. Nothing's coming from above or from below. Mere nothing! There's nobody you can complain about your troubles and mistakes. You don't have to adapt to any circumstances. It's you who's creating these circumstances. Your words, your steps, your shadows – they're all exclusively yours. We waited all the time for the one who'd open the door – in vain. And the most horrible thing of all is that the telephone won't be ringing any more – they just passed us by. It's the worst thing they could do...

**Natalia:** What will be with us now?

**Victoria:** I don't know...

*(Both women embrace each other firmly in the middle of the stage. The doors remain wide open. The light coming through them is different, like from different worlds. There is an illusion of a severe draft. The women stand still, uncertain what to do next. Slow fadeout).*

Translated and adapted from the Ukrainian  
by Anatole Bilenko

**Neda Nezhdana** (Nadia Miroschnychenko) was born in 1971 in the city of Kramatorsk, Donetsk Region. A playwright, culturologist, art critic and translator, she graduated from the Art School of Kiev (1982-1986), the Institute of Foreign Languages of Kiev (French philology, 1988-1993), and the Mohyla Academy of Kiev (culturology, 1992-1995).

She is the author of two collections of poetry Trees and People (*Dereva i liudy*, 1993) and Roll-O'-Cherry (*Kotyvyshnia*, 1996) and also compiled and contributed her plays to the dramatic art anthologies In Anticipation of the Theater (*V chekanni teatru*, 1998), In Search of the Theater (*V poshuku teatru*, 2003), Our Drama (*Nasha Drama*, 2003), The Strike of Illusions (*Straik iliuziy*, 2004), On the Other Side of the Pause (*Potoibich pauzy*, 2005), and the almanacs Modern Ukrainian Plays (*Suchasna ukrainska dramaturhia*, 2006-2007).

In all, Neda Nezhdana wrote 16 plays, the main ones being The Eleventh Commandment, or the Night of Buffoons (*Odynadtsiata zapovid, abo Nich blazniv*, 1995), But I'll Betray You After All (*I vse-taky ia tebe zradzhu*, 1996), He Who Opens the Door (*Toi, shcho vidchyniaye dveri*, 1998), Honore, and Where's Balzac? (*Onore, a de Balzac?*, 1999), The Whimsical Messalina (*Khymerna Messalina*, 2000), The Next to Last Judgment Day, or the Holiday of Dead Leaves (*Peredostanni sud, abo Sviato mertvoho lystia*, 2001), A Million Little Parachutes (*Milion parashutykiv*, 2002), The Suicide of Loneliness (*Samohubstvo samotnosti*, 2003), When the Rain Returns (*Koly povertayetsia doshch*, 2004), and The Return to Never (*Povernennia v nikoly*, 2006).

Most of her plays were staged about 50 times in Ukraine, Russia (Moscow, Yekaterinburg), Poland (Cracow, Gniezno), and the US (New York, La Mama Theater).

Her plays and critical articles have been translated into Russia, Polish, English, German and Spanish and published in Ukraine, Russia (*Kovcheg*, No.5, 2005), Poland (*Dialog*, July 2007), Germany (*Theater der Zeit*, No.5, 1999), and in the US (*The Expanding Circle* (*Translations/Transmutations*, vol.45, No.2, 2002).

Many times she has been prizewinner of festivals in Ukraine, Russia (International Festival of Modern Dramatic Art "Liubimovka," Moscow, 2004), Poland (New European drama Festival, Poznan, 2005), Lithuanian (Riva Festival, Klaipeda, 2001), and France (View from Ukraine Festival, Paris, 2006 and 2007).

He Who Opens the Door and A Million Little Parachutes have been included in the catalogues of Europe's best plays in 2004 and 2006 (*The European Theatre Today: Plays*).

Neda Nezhdana is President of the Confederation of Playwright of Ukraine and member of the Council of La Maison d'Europe et d'Orient, Paris.

He Who Opens the Door has been staged a total of 14 times in Ukraine, Russia and Poland.

**Anatole Bilenko**, born 1939 in Kiev. In 1943-1954 resided in Germany and the US where he gained most of his secondary education. In 1967 he graduated from the Department of Translation at the Taras Shevchenko University of Kiev and embarked on the career of a professional translator in 1964. He is a member of the Ukrainian Writers Union, has over 20 books of Ukrainian, Russian and Belorussian fiction translated into English to his credit, and holds the Ivan Franko Prize for Literary Translations. His latest literary translations are featured in the *Ukrainian Literature* journal (a project of Prof.

**Maxim Tarnawsky of Toronto University) published by the Shevchenko Scientific Society in New York, N.Y., USA  
([www.UkrainianLiterature.org](http://www.UkrainianLiterature.org), vol.1, vol.2).**