

# THE MADWOMAN OF CHAILLOT

## CHARACTERS

(IN ORDER OF APPEARANCE)

THE WAITER  
THE LITTLE MAN  
THE PROSPECTOR  
THE PRESIDENT  
THE BARON  
THERESE  
THE STREET SINGER  
THE FLOWER GIRL  
THE RAGPICKER  
PAULETTE  
THE DEAF-MUTE  
IRMA  
THE SHOELACE PEDDLER  
THE BROKER  
THE STREET JUGGLER  
DR. JADIN  
COUNTESS AURELIA, *The Madwoman of Chaillot*  
THE DOORMAN  
THE POLICEMAN  
PIERRE  
THE SERGEANT  
THE SEWER MAN  
MME. CONSTANCE, *The Madwoman of Passy*  
Mlle. GABRIELLE, *The Madwoman of St. Sulpice*  
MME. JOSEPHINE, *The Madwoman of La Concorde*  
THE PRESIDENTS  
THE PROSPECTORS  
THE PRESS AGENTS  
THE LADIES  
THE ADOLPHE BERTAUS

ACT ONE: The Café Terrace of *Chez Francis*  
ACT TWO: The Countess' Cellar—21 Rue de Chaillot

## ACT ONE

SCENE: *The café terrace at Chez Francis, on the Place de l'Alma in Paris. The Alma is in the stately quarter of Paris known as Chaillot, between the Champs Élysées and the Seine, across the river from the Eiffel Tower.*

Chez Francis has several rows of tables set out under its awning, and, as it is lunch time, a good many of them are occupied. At a table, downstage, a somewhat obvious BLONDE with ravishing legs is sipping a vermouth-cassis and trying hard to engage the attention of the PROSPECTOR, who sits at an adjacent table taking little sips of water and rolling them over his tongue with the air of a connoisseur. Downstage right, in front of the tables on the sidewalk, is the usual Paris bench, a stout and uncomfortable affair provided by the municipality for the benefit of those who prefer to sit without drinking. A POLICEMAN lounges about, keeping the peace without unnecessary exertion.

TIME: It is a little before noon in the Spring of next year.

AT RISE: The PRESIDENT and the BARON enter with importance, and are ushered to a front table by the WAITER.

THE PRESIDENT. Baron, sit down. This is a historic occasion. It must be properly celebrated. The waiter is going to bring out my special port.

*The Baron.* Splendid.

*The President* [Offers his cigar case]. Cigar? My private brand.

*The Baron.* Thank you. You know, this all gives me the feeling of one of those enchanted mornings in the *Arabian Nights* when thieves foregather in the market place. Thieves—pashas. . . . [He sniffs the cigar judiciously, and begins lighting it.]

*The President* [Chuckles]. Tell me about yourself.

*The Baron.* Well, where shall I begin?

*The STREET SINGER enters. He takes off a battered black felt with a flourish and begins singing an ancient mazurka.*

*Street Singer [Sings].*

Do you hear, Mademoiselle,  
Those musicians of hell?

*The President.* Waiter! Get rid of that man.

*Waiter.* He is singing *La Belle Polonoise*.

*The President.* I didn't ask for the program. I asked you to get rid of him. [*The WAITER doesn't budge. The SINGER goes by himself.*] As you were saying, Baron . . . ?

*The Baron.* Well, until I was fifty . . . [*The FLOWER GIRL enters through the café door, center.*] my life was relatively uncomplicated. It consisted of selling off one by one the various estates left me by my father. Three years ago, I parted with my last farm. Two years ago, I lost my last mistress. And now—all that is left me is . . .

*The Flower Girl [To the BARON].* Violets, sir?

*The President.* Run along. [*The FLOWER GIRL moves on.*]

*The Baron [Staring after her].* So that, in short, all I have left now is my name.

*The President.* Your name is precisely the name we need on our board of directors.

*The Baron [With an inclination of his head].* Very flattering.

*The President.* You will understand when I tell you that mine has been a very different experience. I came up from the bottom. My mother spent most of her life bent over a washtub in order to send me to school. I'm eternally grateful to her, of course, but I must confess that I no longer remember her face. It was no doubt beautiful—but when I try to recall it, I see only the part she invariably showed me—her rear.

*The Baron.* Very touching.

*The President.* When I was thrown out of school for the fifth and last time, I decided to find out for myself what makes the world go round. I ran errands for an editor, a movie star, a financier. . . . I began to understand a little what life is. Then, one day, in the subway, I saw a face. . . . My rise in life dates from that day.

*The Baron.* Really?

*The President.* One look at that face, and I knew. One look at mine, and he knew. And so I made my first thousand—passing a boxful of counterfeit notes. A year later, I saw another such face. It got me a nice berth in the narcotics business. Since then, all I do is to look out for such faces. And now here I am—president of eleven corporations, director of fifty-two companies, and, beginning today, chairman of the board of the international combine in which you have been so good as to accept a post. [*The RAGPICKER passes, sees something under the PRESIDENT'S table, and stoops to pick it up.*] Looking for something?

*The Ragpicker.* Did you drop this?

*The President.* I never drop anything.

*The Ragpicker.* Then this hundred-franc note isn't yours?

*The President.* Give it here. [*The RAGPICKER gives him the note, and goes out.*]

*The Baron.* Are you sure it's yours?

*The President.* All hundred-franc notes, Baron, are mine.

*The Baron.* Mr. President, there's something I've been wanting to ask you. What exactly is the purpose of our new company? Or is that an indiscreet question . . . ?

*The President.* Indiscreet? Not a bit. Merely unusual. As far as I know, you're the first member of a board of directors ever to ask such a question.

*The Baron.* Do we plan to exploit a commodity? A utility?

*The President.* My dear sir, I haven't the faintest idea.

*The Baron.* But if you don't know—who does?

*The President.* Nobody. And at the moment, it's becoming just a trifle embarrassing. Yes, my dear Baron, since we are now close business associates, I must confess that for the time being we're in a little trouble.

*The Baron.* I was afraid of that. The stock issue isn't going well?

*The President.* No, no—on the contrary. The stock issue is going beautifully. Yesterday morning at ten o'clock we offered 500,000 shares to the general public. By 10:05 they were all snapped up at par. By 10:20, when the police

finally arrived, our offices were a shambles. . . . Windows smashed—doors torn off their hinges—you never saw anything so beautiful in your life! And this morning our stock is being quoted over the counter at 124 with no sellers, and the orders are still pouring in.

*The Baron.* But in that case—what is the trouble?

*The President.* The trouble is we have a tremendous capital, and not the slightest idea of what to do with it.

*The Baron.* You mean all those people are fighting to buy stock in a company that has no object?

*The President.* My dear Baron, do you imagine that when a subscriber buys a share of stock, he has any idea of getting behind a counter or digging a ditch? A stock certificate is not a tool, like a shovel, or a commodity, like a pound of cheese. What we sell a customer is not a share in a business, but a view of the Elysian Fields. A financier is a creative artist. Our function is to stimulate the imagination. We are poets!

*The Baron.* But in order to stimulate the imagination, don't you need some field of activity?

*The President.* Not at all. What you need for that is a name. A name that will stir the pulse like a trumpet call, set the brain awlirl like a movie star, inspire reverence like a cathedral. *United General International Consolidated!* Of course that's been used. That's what a corporation needs.

*The Baron.* And do we have such a name?

*The President.* So far we have only a blank space. In that blank space a name must be printed. This name must be a masterpiece. And if I seem a little nervous today, it's because—somehow—I've racked my brains, but it hasn't come to me. Oh! Look at that! Just like the answer to a prayer . . . ! [*The BARON turns and stares in the direction of the PROSPECTOR.*] You see? There's one. And what a beauty!

*The Baron.* You mean that girl?

*The President.* No, no, not the girl. That face. You see . . . ? The one that's drinking water.

*The Baron.* You call that a face? That's a tombstone.

*The President.* It's a milestone. It's a signpost. But is it pointing the way to steel, or wheat, or phosphates? That's

what we have to find out. Ah! He sees me. He understands. He will be over.

*The Baron.* And when he comes . . . ?

*The President.* He will tell me what to do.

*The Baron.* You mean business is done this way? You mean, you would trust a stranger with a matter of this importance?

*The President.* Baron, I trust neither my wife, nor my daughter, nor my closest friend. My confidential secretary has no idea where I live. But a face like that I would trust with my inmost secrets. Though we have never laid eyes on each other before, that man and I know each other to the depths of our souls. He's no stranger—he's my brother, he's myself. You'll see. He'll be over in a minute. [*The DEAF-MUTE enters and passes slowly among the tables, placing a small envelope before each customer. He comes to the PRESIDENT'S table.*] What is this anyway? A conspiracy? We don't want your envelopes. Take them away. [*The DEAF-MUTE makes a short but pointed speech in sign language.*] Waiter, what the devil's he saying?

*Waiter.* Only Irma understands him.

*The President.* Irma? Who's Irma?

*Waiter [Calls].* Irma! It's the waitress inside, sir. Irma!

*IRMA comes out. She is twenty. She has the face and figure of an angel.*

*Irma.* Yes?

*Waiter.* These gentlemen would . . .

*The President.* Tell this fellow to get out of here, for God's sake! [*The DEAF-MUTE makes another manual oration.*] What's he trying to say, anyway?

*Irma.* He says it's an exceptionally beautiful morning, sir. . . .

*The President.* Who asked him?

*Irma.* But, he says, it was nicer before the gentleman stuck his face in it.

*The President.* Call the manager! [*IRMA shrugs. She goes back into the restaurant. The DEAF-MUTE walks off, left. Meanwhile a SHOELACE PEDDLER has arrived.*]

*Peddler.* Shoelaces? Postcards?

*The Baron.* I think I could use a shoelace.

*The President.* No, no . . .

*Peddler.* Black? Tan?

*The Baron* [Showing his shoes]. What would you recommend?

*Peddler.* Anybody's guess.

*The Baron.* Well, give me one of each.

*The President* [Putting a hand on the *BARON's* arm]. Baron, although I am your chairman, I have no authority over your personal life—none, that is, except to fix the amount of your director's fees, and eventually to assign a motor car for your use. Therefore, I am asking you, as a personal favor to me, not to purchase anything from this fellow.

*The Baron.* How can I resist so gracious a request? [*The PEDDLER shrugs, and passes on.*] But I really don't understand . . . What difference would it make?

*The President.* Look here, Baron. Now that you're with us, you must understand that between this irresponsible riff-raff and us there is an impenetrable barrier. We have no dealings whatever with them.

*The Baron.* But without us, the poor devil will starve.

*The President.* No, he won't. He expects nothing from us. He has a clientele of his own. He sells shoelaces exclusively to those who have no shoes. Just as the necktie peddler sells only to those who wear no shirts. And that's why these street hawkers can afford to be insolent, disrespectful and independent. They don't need us. They have a world of their own. Ah! My broker. Splendid. He's beaming.

*The BROKER walks up and grasps the PRESIDENT's hand with enthusiasm.*

*Broker.* Mr. President! My heartiest congratulations! What a day! What a day!

*The STREET JUGGLER appears, right. He removes his coat, folds it carefully, and puts it on the bench. Then he opens a suitcase, from which he extracts a number of colored clubs.*

*The President* [Presenting the *BROKER*]. Baron Tom-mard, of our Board of Directors. My broker. [*The BROKER*

bows. So does the *JUGGLER*. The *BROKER* sits down and signals for a drink. The *JUGGLER* prepares to juggle.] What's happened?

*Broker.* Listen to this. Ten o'clock this morning. The market opens. [As he speaks, the *JUGGLER* provides a visual counterpart to the *BROKER's* lines, his clubs rising and falling in rhythm to the *BROKER's* words.] Half million shares issued at par, par value a hundred, quoted on the curb at 124 and we start buying at 126, 127, 129—and it's going up—up—up—[*The JUGGLER's* clubs rise higher and higher.]—132—133—138—141—141—141—141 . . .

*The Baron.* May I ask . . . ?

*The President.* No, no—any explanation would only confuse you.

*Broker.* Ten forty-five we start selling short on rumors of a Communist plot, market bearish. . . . 141—138—133—132—and it's down—down—down—102—and we start buying back at 93. Eleven o'clock, rumors denied—95—98—101—106—124—141—and by 11:30 we've got it all back—net profit three and a half million francs.

*The President.* Classical. Pure. [*The JUGGLER bows again. A LITTLE MAN leans over from a near-by table, listening intently, and trembling with excitement.*] And how many shares do we reserve to each member of the board?

*Broker.* Fifty, as agreed.

*The President.* Bit stingy, don't you think?

*Broker.* All right—three thousand.

*The President.* That's a little better. [*To the BARON.*] You get the idea?

*The Baron.* I'm beginning to get it.

*Broker.* And now we come to the exciting part . . . [*The JUGGLER prepares to juggle with balls of fire.*] Listen carefully: With 35 percent of our funded capital under Section 32 I buy 50,000 United at 36 which I immediately reconvert into 32,000 National Amalgamated two's preferred which I set up as collateral on 150,000 General Consols which I deposit against a credit of fifteen billion to buy Eastern Hennequin which I immediately turn into Argentine wheat realizing 136 percent of the original investment which naturally accrues as capital gain and not as corporate income thus saving twelve millions in taxes.

and at once convert the 25 percent cotton reserve into lignite, and as our people swing into action in London and New York, I beat up the price on greige goods from 26 to 92—114—203—306—[*The JUGGLER by now is juggling his fireballs in the sky. The balls no longer return to his hands.*] 404 . . . [*The LITTLE MAN can stand no more. He rushes over and dumps a sackful of money on the table.*]

*Little Man.* Here—take it—please, take it!

*Broker* [*Frigidly*]. Who is this man? What is this money?

*Little Man.* It's my life's savings. Every cent. I put it all in your hands.

*Broker.* Can't you see we're busy?

*Little Man.* But I beg you . . . It's my only chance . . . Please don't turn me away.

*Broker.* Oh, all right. [*He sweeps the money into his pocket.*] Well?

*Little Man.* I thought—perhaps you'd give me a little receipt. . . .

*The President.* My dear man, people like us don't give receipts for money. We take them.

*Little Man.* Oh, pardon. Of course. I was confused. Here it is. [*Scribbles a receipt.*] Thank you—thank you—thank you. [*He rushes off joyfully. The STREET SINGER reappears.*]

*Street Singer* [*Sings*].

Do you hear, Mademoiselle,  
Those musicians of hell?

*The President.* What, again? Why does he keep repeating those two lines like a parrot?

*Waiter.* What else can he do? He doesn't know any more and the song's been out of print for years.

*The Baron.* Couldn't he sing a song he knows?

*Waiter.* He likes this one. He hopes if he keeps singing the beginning someone will turn up to teach him the end.

*The President.* Tell him to move on. We don't know the song.

*The PROFESSOR strolls by, swinging his cane. He overhears.*

*Professor* [*Stops and addresses the PRESIDENT politely*]. Nor do I, my dear sir. Nor do I. And yet, I'm in exactly

the same predicament. I remember just two lines of my favorite song, as a child. A mazurka also, in case you're interested. . . .

*The President.* I'm not.

*Professor.* Why is it, I wonder, that one always forgets the words of a mazurka? I suppose they just get lost in that damnable rhythm. All I remember is: [*He sings.*]

From England to Spain

I have drunk, it was bliss . . .

*Street Singer* [*Walks over, and picks up the tune*].

Red wine and champagne

And many a kiss.

*Professor.* Oh, God! It all comes back to me . . . ! [*He sings.*]

Red lips and white hands I have known

Where the nightingales dwell. . . .

*The President* [*Holding his hands to his ears*]. Please—please . . .

*Street Singer.*

And to each one I've whispered, "My own,"

And to each one, I've murmured: "Farewell."

*The President.* Farewell. Farewell.

*Street Singer and Professor* [*Duo*].

But there's one I shall never forget. . . .

*The President.* This isn't a café. It's a circus! [*The two go off, still singing: "There is one that's engraved in my heart." The PROSPECTOR gets up slowly and walks toward the PRESIDENT'S table. He looks down without a word. There is a tense silence.*]

*Prospector.* Well?

*The President.* I need a name.

*Prospector* [*Nods, with complete comprehension*]. I need fifty thousand.

*The President.* For a corporation.

*Prospector.* For a woman.

*The President.* Immediately.

*Prospector.* Before evening.

*The President.* Something . . .

*Prospector.* Unusual?

*The President.* Something . . .

*Prospector.* Provocative?

*The President.* Something . . .

*Prospector.* Practical.

*The President.* Yes.

*Prospector.* Fifty thousand. Cash.

*The President.* I'm listening.

*Prospector.* *International Substrate of Paris, Inc.*

*The President* [Snaps his fingers]. That's it! [To the BROKER.] Pay him off. [The BROKER pays with the LITTLE MAN's money.] Now—what does it mean?

*Prospector.* It means what it says. I'm a prospector.

*The President* [Rises]. A prospector! Allow me to shake your hand. Baron. You are in the presence of one of nature's noblemen. Shake his hand. This is Baron Tomnard. [They shake hands.] It is this man, my dear Baron, who smells out in the bowels of the earth those deposits of metal or liquid on which can be founded the only social unit of which our age is capable—the corporation. Sit down, please. [They all sit.] And now that we have a name . . .

*Prospector.* You need a property.

*The President.* Precisely.

*Prospector.* I have one.

*The President.* A claim?

*Prospector.* Terrific.

*The President.* Foreign?

*Prospector.* French.

*The Baron.* In Indo-China?

*Broker.* Morocco?

*The President.* In France?

*Prospector* [Matter of fact]. In Paris.

*The President.* In Paris? You've been prospecting in Paris?

*The Baron.* For women, no doubt.

*The President.* For art?

*Broker.* For gold?

*Prospector.* Oil.

*Broker.* He's crazy.

*The President.* Sh! He's inspired.

*Prospector.* You think I'm crazy. Well, they thought Columbus was crazy.

*The Baron.* Oil in Paris?

*Broker.* But how is it possible?

*Prospector.* It's not only possible. It's certain.

*The President.* Tell us.

*Prospector.* You don't know, my dear sir, what treasures Paris conceals. Paris is the least prospected place in the world. We've gone over the rest of the planet with a fine-tooth comb. But has anyone ever thought of looking for oil in Paris? Nobody. Before me, that is.

*The President.* Genius!

*Prospector.* No. Just a practical man. I used my head.

*The Baron.* But why has nobody ever thought of this before?

*Prospector.* The treasures of the earth, my dear sir, are not easy to find nor to get at. They are invariably guarded by dragons. Doubtless there is some reason for this. For once we've dug out and consumed the internal ballast of the planet, the chances are it will shoot off on some irresponsible tangent and smash itself up in the sky. Well, that's the risk we take. Anyway, that's not my business. A prospector has enough to worry about.

*The Baron.* I know—snakes—tarantulas—fleas . . .

*Prospector.* Worse than that, sir. Civilization.

*The President.* Does that annoy you?

*Prospector.* Civilization gets in our way all the time. In the first place, it covers the earth with cities and towns which are damned awkward to dig up when you want to see what's underneath. It's not only the real-estate people—you can always do business with them—it's human sentimentality. How do you do business with that?

*The President.* I see what you mean.

*Prospector.* They say that where we pass, nothing ever grows again. What of it? Is a park any better than a coal mine? What's a mountain got that a slag pile hasn't? What would you rather have in your garden—an almond tree or an oil well?

*The President.* Well . . .

*Prospector.* Exactly. But what's the use of arguing with these fools? Imagine the choicest place you ever saw for an excavation, and what do they put there? A playground for children! Civilization!

*The President.* Just show us the point where you want to

start digging. We'll do the rest. Even if it's in the middle of the Louvre. Where's the oil?

*Prospector.* Perhaps you think it's easy to make an accurate fix in an area like Paris where everything conspires to put you off the scent? Women—perfume—flowers—history. You can talk all you like about geology, but an oil deposit, gentlemen, has to be smelled out. I have a good nose. I go further. I have a phenomenal nose. But the minute I get the right whiff—the minute I'm on the scent—a fragrance rises from what I take to be the spiritual deposits of the past—and I'm completely at sea. Now take this very point, for example, this very spot.

*The Baron.* You mean—right here in Chaillot?

*Prospector.* Right under here.

*The President.* Good heavens! [He looks under his chair.]

*Prospector.* It's taken me months to locate this spot.

*The Baron.* But what in the world makes you think . . . ?

*Prospector.* Do you know this place, Baron?

*The Baron.* Well, I've been sitting here for thirty years.

*Prospector.* Did you ever taste the water?

*The Baron.* The water? Good God, no!

*Prospector.* It's plain to see that you are no prospector! A prospector, Baron, is addicted to water as a drunkard to wine. Water, gentlemen, is the one substance from which the earth can conceal nothing. It sucks out its innermost secrets and brings them to our very lips. Well—beginning at Notre Dame, where I first caught the scent of oil three months ago, I worked my way across Paris, glassful by glassful, sampling the water, until at last I came to this café. And here—just two days ago—I took a sip. My heart began to thump. Was it possible that I was deceived? I took another, a third, a fourth, a fifth. I was trembling like a leaf. But there was no mistake. Each time that I drank, my taste buds thrilled to the most exquisite flavor known to a prospector—the flavor of— [With utmost lyricism.] Petroleum!

*The President.* Waiter! Some water and four glasses. Hurry. This round, gentlemen, is on me. And as a toast—I shall propose International Substrate of Paris, Incorporated. [The WAITER brings a decanter and the glasses.

*The PRESIDENT pours out the water amid profound silence. They taste it with the air of connoisseurs savoring something that has never before passed human lips. Then they look at each other doubtfully. The PROSPECTOR pours himself a second glass and drinks it off.] Well . . .*

*Broker.* Ye-es . . .

*The Baron.* Mm . . .

*Prospector.* Get it?

*The Baron.* Tastes queer.

*Prospector.* That's it. To the unpracticed palate it tastes queer. But to the taste buds of the expert—ah!

*The Baron.* Still, there's one thing I don't quite understand . . .

*Prospector.* Yes?

*The Baron.* This café doesn't have its own well, does it?

*Prospector.* Of course not. This is Paris water.

*Broker.* Then why should it taste different here than anywhere else?

*Prospector.* Because, my dear sir, the pipes that carry this water pass deep through the earth, and the earth just here is soaked with oil, and this oil permeates the pores of the iron and flavors the water it carries. Ever so little, yes—but quite enough to betray its presence to the sensitive tongue of the specialist.

*The Baron.* I see.

*Prospector.* I don't say everyone is capable of tasting it. No. But I—I can detect the presence of oil in water that has passed within fifteen miles of a deposit. Under special circumstances, twenty.

*The President.* Phenomenal!

*Prospector.* And so here I am with the greatest discovery of the age on my hands—but the blasted authorities won't let me drill a single well unless I show them the oil! Now how can I show them the oil unless they let me dig? Completely stymied! Eh?

*The President.* What? A man like you?

*Prospector.* That's what they think. That's what they want. Have you noticed the strange glamor of the women this morning? And the quality of the sunshine? And this extraordinary convocation of vagabonds buzzing about protectively like bees around a hive? Do you know why it

is? Because they know. It's a plot to distract us, to turn us from our purpose. Well, let them try. I know there's oil here. And I'm going to dig it up, even if I . . . [He smiles.] Shall I tell you my little plan?

*The President.* By all means.

*Prospector.* Well . . . For heaven's sake, what's that?

*At this point, the MADWOMAN enters. She is dressed in the grand fashion of 1885, a taffeta skirt with an immense train—which she has gathered up by means of a clothespin—ancient button shoes, and a hat in the style of Marie Antoinette. She wears a lorgnette on a chain, and an enormous cameo pin at her throat. In her hand she carries a small basket. She walks in with great dignity, extracts a dinner bell from the bosom of her dress, and rings it sharply. IRMA appears.*

*Countess.* Are my bones ready, Irma?

*Irma.* There won't be much today, Countess. We had broilers. Can you wait? While the gentleman inside finishes eating?

*Countess.* And my gizzard?

*Irma.* I'll try to get it away from him.

*Countess.* If he eats my gizzard, save me the giblets. They will do for the tomcat that lives under the bridge. He likes a few giblets now and again.

*Irma.* Yes, Countess. [IRMA goes back into the café. The COUNTESS takes a few steps and stops in front of the PRESIDENT'S table. She examines him with undisguised disapproval.]

*The President.* Waiter. Ask that woman to move on.

*Waiter.* Sorry, sir. This is her café.

*The President.* Is she the manager of the café?

*Waiter.* She's the Madwoman of Chaillot.

*The President.* A madwoman? She's mad?

*Waiter.* Who says she's mad?

*The President.* You just said so yourself.

*Waiter.* Look, sir. You asked me who she was. And I told you. What's mad about her? She's the Madwoman of Chaillot.

*The President.* Call a policeman. [The COUNTESS

*whistles through her fingers. At once, the DOORMAN runs out of the café. He has three scarves in his hands.]*

*Countess.* Have you found it? My feather boa?

*Doorman.* Not yet, Countess. Three scarves. But no boa.

*Countess.* It's five years since I lost it. Surely you've had time to find it.

*Doorman.* Take one of these, Countess. Nobody's claimed them.

*Countess.* A boa like that doesn't vanish, you know. A feather boa nine feet long!

*Doorman.* How about this blue one?

*Countess.* With my pink ruffle and my green veil? You're joking! Let me see the yellow. [She tries it on.] How does it look?

*Doorman.* Terrific. [With a magnificent gesture, she flings the scarf about her, upsetting the PRESIDENT'S glass and drenching his trousers with water. She stalks off without a glance at him.]

*The President.* Waiter! I'm making a complaint.

*Waiter.* Against whom?

*The President.* Against her! Against you! The whole gang of you! That singer! That shoelace peddler! That female lunatic! Or whatever you call her!

*The Baron.* Calm yourself, Mr. President. . . .

*The President.* I'll do nothing of the sort! Baron, the first thing we have to do is to get rid of these people! Good heavens, look at them! Every size, shape, color and period of history imaginable. It's utter anarchy! I tell you, sir, the only safeguard of order and discipline in the modern world is a standardized worker with interchangeable parts. That would solve the entire problem of management. Here, the manager . . . And there—one composite drudge grunting and sweating all over the world. Just we two. Ah, how beautiful! How easy on the eyes! How restful for the conscience!

*The Baron.* Yes, yes—of course.

*The President.* Order. Symmetry. Balance. But instead of that, what? Here in Chaillot, the very citadel of management, these insolent phantoms of the past come to beard us with their raffish individualism—with the right of the

voiceless to sing, of the dumb to make speeches, of trousers to have no seats and bosoms to have dinner bells!

*The Baron.* But, after all, do these people matter?

*The President.* My dear sir, wherever the poor are happy, and the servants are proud, and the mad are respected, our power is at an end. Look at that! That waiter! That madwoman! That flower girl! Do I get that sort of service? And suppose that I—president of twelve corporations and ten times a millionaire—were to stick a gladiolus in my button-hole and start yelling—[*He tinkles his spoon in a glass violently, yelling.*] Are my bones ready, Irma?

*The Baron [Reprovingly].* Mr. President . . . [*People at the adjoining tables turn and stare with raised eyebrows. The WAITER starts to come over.*]

*The President.* You see? Now.

*Prospector.* We were discussing my plan.

*The President.* Ah yes, your plan. [*He glances in the direction of the MADWOMAN'S table.*] Careful—she's looking at us.

*Prospector.* Do you know what a bomb is?

*The President.* I'm told they explode.

*Prospector.* Exactly. You see that white building across the river. Do you happen to know what that is?

*The President.* I do not.

*Prospector.* That's the office of the City Architect. That man has stubbornly refused to give me a permit to drill for oil anywhere within the limits of the city of Paris. I've tried everything with him—influence, bribes, threats. He says I'm crazy. And now . . .

*The President.* Oh, my God! What is this one trying to sell us?

*A little OLD MAN enters left, and doffs his hat politely. He is somewhat ostentatiously respectable—gloved, pomaded, and carefully dressed, with a white handkerchief peeping out of his breast pocket.*

*Dr. Jadin.* Nothing but health, sir. Or rather the health of the feet. But remember—as the foot goes, so goes the man. May I present myself . . . ? Dr. Gaspard Jadin, French Navy, retired. Former specialist in the extraction of ticks and chiggers. At present specializing in the extrac-

tion of bunions and corns. In case of sudden emergency, Martial the waiter will furnish my home address. My office is here, second row, third table, week days, twelve to five. Thank you very much. [*He sits at his table.*]

*Waiter.* Your vermouth, Doctor?

*Dr. Jadin.* My vermouth. My vermouths. How are your gallstones today, Martial?

*Waiter.* Fine. Fine. They rattle like anything.

*Dr. Jadin.* Splendid. [*He spies the COUNTESS.*] Good morning, Countess. How's the floating kidney? Still afloat? [*She nods graciously.*] Splendid. Splendid. So long as it floats, it can't sink.

*The President.* This is impossible! Let's go somewhere else.

*Prospector.* No. It's nearly noon.

*The President.* Yes. It is. Five to twelve.

*Prospector.* In five minutes' time you're going to see that City Architect blown up, building and all—boom!

*Broker.* Are you serious?

*Prospector.* That imbecile has no one to blame but himself. Yesterday noon, he got my ultimatum—he's had twenty-four hours to think it over. No permit? All right. Within two minutes my agent is going to drop a little package in his coal bin. And three minutes after that, precisely at noon . . .

*The Baron.* You prospectors certainly use modern methods.

*Prospector.* The method may be modern. But the idea is old. To get at the treasure, it has always been necessary to slay the dragon. I guarantee that after this, the City Architect will be more reasonable. The new one, I mean.

*The President.* Don't you think we're sitting a little close for comfort?

*Prospector.* Oh no, no. Don't worry. And, above all, don't stare. We may be watched. [*A clock strikes.*] Why, that's noon. Something's wrong! Good God! What's this? [*A POLICEMAN staggers in bearing a lifeless body on his shoulders in the manner prescribed as "The Fireman's Lift."*] It's Pierre! My agent! [*He walks over with affected nonchalance.*] I say, Officer, what's that you've got?

*Policeman.* Drowned man. [He puts him down on the bench.]

*Waiter.* He's not drowned. His clothes are dry. He's been slugged.

*Policeman.* Slugged is also correct. He was just jumping off the bridge when I came along and pulled him back. I slugged him, naturally, so he wouldn't drag me under. Life Saving Manual, Rule 5: "In cases where there is danger of being dragged under, it is necessary to render the subject unconscious by means of a sharp blow." He's had that. [He loosens the clothes and begins applying artificial respiration.]

*Prospector.* The stupid idiot! What the devil did he do with the bomb? That's what comes of employing amateurs!

*The President.* You don't think he'll give you away?

*Prospector.* Don't worry. [He walks over to the policeman.] Say, what do you think you're doing?

*Policeman.* Lifesaving. Artificial respiration. First aid to the drowning.

*Prospector.* But he's not drowning.

*Policeman.* But he thinks he is.

*Prospector.* You'll never bring him round that way, my friend. That's meant for people who drown in water. It's no good at all for those who drown without water.

*Policeman.* What am I supposed to do? I've just been sworn in. It's my first day on the beat. I can't afford to get in trouble. I've got to go by the book.

*Prospector.* Perfectly simple. Take him back to the bridge where you found him and throw him in. Then you can save his life and you'll get a medal. This way, you'll only get fined for slugging an innocent man.

*Policeman.* What do you mean, innocent? He was just going to jump when I grabbed him.

*Prospector.* Have you any proof of that?

*Policeman.* Well, I saw him.

*Prospector.* Written proof? Witnesses?

*Policeman.* No, but . . .

*Prospector.* Then don't waste time arguing. You're in trouble. Quick—before anybody notices—throw him in and dive after him. It's the only way out.

*Policeman.* But I don't swim.

*The President.* You'll learn how on the way down. Before you were born, did you know how to breathe?

*Policeman* [Convinced]. All right. Here we go. [He starts lifting the body.]

*Dr. Jadin.* One moment, please. I don't like to interfere, but it's my professional duty to point out that medical science has definitely established the fact of intra-uterine respiration. Consequently, this policeman, even before he was born, knew not only how to breathe but also how to cough, hiccup and belch.

*The President.* Suppose he did—how does it concern you?

*Dr. Jadin.* On the other hand, medical science has never established the fact of intra-uterine swimming or diving. Under the circumstances, we are forced to the opinion, Officer, that if you dive in you will probably drown.

*Policeman.* You think so?

*Prospector.* Who asked you for an opinion?

*The President.* Pay no attention to that quack, Officer.

*Dr. Jadin.* Quack, sir?

*Prospector.* This is not a medical matter. It's a legal problem. The officer has made a grave error. He's new. We're trying to help him.

*Broker.* He's probably afraid of the water.

*Policeman.* Nothing of the sort. Officially, I'm afraid of nothing. But I always follow doctor's orders.

*Dr. Jadin.* You see, Officer, when a child is born . . .

*Prospector.* Now, what does he care about when a child is born? He's got a dying man on his hands. . . . Officer, if you want my advice . . .

*Policeman.* It so happens, I care a lot about when a child is born. It's part of my duty to aid and assist any woman in childbirth or labor.

*The President.* Can you imagine!

*Policeman.* Is it true, Doctor, what they say, that when you have twins, the first born is considered to be the youngest?

*Dr. Jadin.* Quite correct. And what's more, if the twins happen to be born at midnight on December 31st, the older is a whole year younger. He does his military service a year later. That's why you have to keep your eyes open.

And that's the reason why a queen always gives birth before witnesses. . . .

*Policeman.* God! The things a policeman is supposed to know! Doctor, what does it mean if, when I get up in the morning sometimes . . .

*Prospector* [*Nudging the PRESIDENT meaningfully*]. The old woman . . .

*Broker.* Come on, Baron.

*The President.* I think we'd better all run along.

*Prospector.* Leave him to me.

*The President.* I'll see you later. [*The PRESIDENT steals off with the BROKER and the BARON.*]

*Policeman* [*Still in conference with DR. JADIN*]. But what's really worrying me, Doctor, is this—don't you think it's a bit risky for a man to marry after forty-five?

*The BROKER runs in breathlessly.*

*Broker.* Officer! Officer!

*Policeman.* What's the trouble?

*Broker.* Quick! Two women are calling for help—on the sidewalk—Avenue Wilson!

*Policeman.* Two women at once? Standing up or lying down?

*Broker.* You'd better go and see. Quick!

*Prospector.* You'd better take the doctor with you.

*Policeman.* Come along, Doctor, come along. . . . [*Pointing to PIERRE.*] Tell him to wait till I get back.

Come along, Doctor. [*He runs out, the DOCTOR following.*]

*The PROSPECTOR moves over toward PIERRE, but IRMA crosses in front of him and takes the boy's hand.*

*Irma.* How beautiful he is! Is he dead, Martial?

*Waiter* [*Handing her a pocket mirror*]. Hold this mirror to his mouth. If it clouds over . . .

*Irma.* It clouds over.

*Waiter.* He's alive. [*He holds out his hand for the mirror.*]

*Irma.* Just a sec— [*She rubs it clean and looks at herself intently. Before handing it back, she fixes her hair and applies her lipstick. Meanwhile the PROSPECTOR tries to get around the other side, but the COUNTESS' eagle eye drives him off. He shrugs his shoulders and exits with the*

*BARON.* Oh, look—he's opened his eyes! [*PIERRE opens his eyes, stares intently at IRMA and closes them again with the expression of a man who is among the angels.*]

*Pierre* [*Murmurs*]. Oh! How beautiful!

*Voice* [*From within the café*]. Irma!

*Irma.* Coming. Coming. [*She goes in, not without a certain reluctance. The COUNTESS at once takes her place on the bench, and also the young man's hand. PIERRE sits up suddenly, and finds himself staring, not at IRMA, but into the very peculiar face of the COUNTESS. His expression changes.*]

*Countess.* You're looking at my iris? Isn't it beautiful?

*Pierre.* Very. [*He drops back, exhausted.*]

*Countess.* The Sergeant was good enough to say it becomes me. But I no longer trust his taste. Yesterday, the flower girl gave me a lily, and he said it didn't suit me.

*Pierre* [*Weakly*]. It's beautiful.

*Countess.* He'll be very happy to know that you agree with him. He's really quite sensitive. [*She calls.*] Sergeant!

*Pierre.* No, please—don't call the police.

*Countess.* But I must. I think I hurt his feelings.

*Pierre.* Let me go, Madame.

*Countess.* No, no. Stay where you are. Sergeant! [*PIERRE struggles weakly to get up.*]

*Pierre.* Please let me go.

*Countess.* I'll do nothing of the sort. When you let someone go, you never see him again. I let Charlotte Mazumet go. I never saw her again.

*Pierre.* Oh, my head.

*Countess.* I let Adolphe Bertaut go. And I was holding him. And I never saw him again.

*Pierre.* Oh, God!

*Countess.* Except once. Thirty years later. In the market. He had changed a great deal—he didn't know me. He sneaked a melon from right under my nose, the only good one of the year. Ah, here we are. Sergeant!

*The POLICE SERGEANT comes in with importance.*

*Sergeant.* I'm in a hurry, Countess.

*Countess.* With regard to the iris. This young man agrees with you. He says it suits me.

*Sergeant* [Going]. There's a man drowning in the Seine.

*Countess*. He's not drowning in the Seine. He's drowning here. Because I'm holding him tight—as I should have held Adolphe Bertaut. But if I let him go, I'm sure he will go and drown in the Seine. He's a lot better looking than Adolphe Bertaut, wouldn't you say? [*PIERRE sighs deeply.*]

*Sergeant*. How would I know?

*Countess*. I've shown you his photograph. The one with the bicycle.

*Sergeant*. Oh, yes. The one with the harelip.

*Countess*. I've told you a hundred times! Adolphe Bertaut had no harelip. That was a scratch in the negative. [*The SERGEANT takes out his notebook and pencil.*] What are you doing?

*Sergeant*. I am taking down the drowned man's name, given name and date of birth.

*Countess*. You think that's going to stop him from jumping in the river? Don't be silly, Sergeant. Put that book away and try to console him.

*Sergeant*. I should try and console him?

*Countess*. When people want to die, it is your job as a guardian of the state to speak out in praise of life. Not mine.

*Sergeant*. I should speak out in praise of life?

*Countess*. I assume you have some motive for interfering with people's attempts to kill each other, and rob each other, and run each other over? If you believe that life has some value, tell him what it is. Go on.

*Sergeant*. Well, all right. Now look, young man . . .

*Countess*. His name is Roderick.

*Pierre*. My name is not Roderick.

*Countess*. Yes, it is. It's noon. At noon all men become Roderick.

*Sergeant*. Except Adolphe Bertaut.

*Countess*. In the days of Adolphe Bertaut, we were forced to change the men when we got tired of their names. Nowadays, we're more practical—each hour on the hour all names are automatically changed. The men remain the same. But you're not here to discuss Adolphe Bertaut, Sergeant. You're here to convince the young man that life is worth living.

*Pierre*. It isn't.

*Sergeant*. Quiet. Now then—what was the idea of jumping off the bridge, anyway?

*Countess*. The idea was to land in the river. Roderick doesn't seem to be at all confused about that.

*Sergeant*. Now how can I convince anybody that life is worth living if you keep interrupting all the time?

*Countess*. I'll be quiet.

*Sergeant*. First of all, Mr. Roderick, you have to realize that suicide is a crime against the state. And why is it a crime against the state? Because every time anybody commits suicide, that means one soldier less for the army, one taxpayer less for the . . .

*Countess*. Sergeant, isn't there something about life that you really enjoy?

*Sergeant*. That I enjoy?

*Countess*. Well, surely, in all these years, you must have found something worth living for. Some secret pleasure, or passion. Don't blush. Tell him about it.

*Sergeant*. Who's blushing? Well, naturally, yes—I have my passions—like everybody else. The fact is, since you ask me—I love—to play—casino. And if the gentleman would like to join me, by and by when I go off duty, we can sit down to a nice little game in the back room with a nice cold glass of beer. If he wants to kill an hour, that is.

*Countess*. He doesn't want to kill an hour. He wants to kill himself. Well? Is that all the police force has to offer by way of earthly bliss?

*Sergeant*. Huh? You mean— [*He jerks a thumb in the direction of the pretty BLONDE, who has just been joined by a BRUNETTE of the same stamp.*] Paulette? [*The young man groans.*]

*Countess*. You're not earning your salary, Sergeant. I defy anybody to stop dying on your account.

*Sergeant*. Go ahead, if you can do any better. But you won't find it easy.

*Countess*. Oh, this is not a desperate case at all. A young man who has just fallen in love with someone who has fallen in love with him!

*Pierre*. She hasn't. How could she?

*Countess.* Oh, yes, she has. She was holding your hand, just as I'm holding it, when all of a sudden . . . Did you ever know Marshal Canrobert's niece?

*Sergeant.* How could he know Marshal Canrobert's niece?

*Countess.* Lots of people knew her—when she was alive. [PIERRE begins to struggle energetically.] No, no, Roderick—stop—stop!

*Sergeant.* You see? You won't do any better than I did.

*Countess.* No? Let's bet. I'll bet my iris against one of your gold buttons. Right?—Roderick, I know very well why you tried to drown yourself in the river.

*Pierre.* You don't at all.

*Countess.* It's because that Prospector wanted you to commit a horrible crime.

*Pierre.* How did you know that?

*Countess.* He stole my boa, and now he wants you to kill me.

*Pierre.* Not exactly.

*Countess.* It wouldn't be the first time they've tried it. But I'm not so easy to get rid of, my boy, oh, no . . . Because . . .

*The DOORMAN rides in on his bicycle. He winks at the SERGEANT, who has now seated himself while the WAITER serves him a beer.*

*Doorman.* Take it easy, Sergeant.

*Sergeant.* I'm busy saving a drowning man.

*Countess.* They can't kill me because—I have no desire to die.

*Pierre.* You're fortunate.

*Countess.* To be alive is to be fortunate, Roderick. Of course, in the morning, when you first awake, it does not always seem so very gay. When you take your hair out of the drawer, and your teeth out of the glass, you are apt to feel a little out of place in this world. Especially if you've just been dreaming that you're a little girl on a pony looking for strawberries in the woods. But all you need to feel the call of life once more is a letter in your mail giving you your schedule for the day—your mending, your shopping,

that letter to your grandmother that you never seem to get around to. And so, when you've washed your face in rose-water, and powdered it—not with this awful rice-powder they sell nowadays, which does nothing for the skin, but with a cake of pure white starch—and put on your pins, your rings, your brooches, bracelets, earrings and pearls—in short, when you are dressed for your morning coffee—and have had a good look at yourself—not in the glass, naturally—it lies—but in the side of the brass gong that once belonged to Admiral Courbet—then, Roderick, then you're armed, you're strong, you're ready—you can begin again. [PIERRE is listening now intently. There are tears in his eyes.]

*Pierre.* Oh, Madame . . . ! Oh, Madame . . . !

*Countess.* After that, everything is pure delight. First the morning paper. Not, of course, these current sheets full of lies and vulgarity. I always read the *Gaulois*, the issue of March 22, 1903. It's by far the best. It has some delightful scandal, some excellent fashion notes, and, of course, the last-minute bulletin on the death of Leonide Leblanc. She used to live next door, poor woman, and when I learn of her death every morning, it gives me quite a shock. I'd gladly lend you my copy, but it's in tatters.

*Sergeant.* Couldn't we find him a copy in some library?

*Countess.* I doubt it. And so, when you've taken your fruit salts—not in water, naturally—no matter what they say, it's water that gives you gas—but with a bit of spiced cake—then in sunlight or rain, Chaillot calls. It is time to dress for your morning walk. This takes much longer, of course—without a maid, impossible to do it under an hour, what with your corset, corset-cover and drawers all of which lace or button in the back. I asked Madame Lanvin, a while ago, to fit the drawers with zippers. She was quite charming, but she declined. She thought it would spoil the style.

*The DEAF-MUTE comes in.*

*Waiter.* I know a place where they put zippers on anything.

*The RAGPICKER enters.*

*Countess.* I think Lanvin knows best. But I really manage very well, Martial. What I do now is, I lace them up in front, then twist them around to the back. It's quite simple, really. Then you choose a lorgnette, and then the usual fruitless search for the feather boa that the Prospector stole—I know it was he: he didn't dare look me in the eye—and then all you need is a rubber band to slip around your parasol—I lost the catch the day I struck the cat that was stalking the pigeon—it was worth it—ah, that day I earned my wages!

*The Ragpicker.* Countess, if you can use it, I found a nice umbrella catch the other day with a cat's eye in it.

*Countess.* Thank you, Ragpicker. They say these eyes sometimes come to life and fill with tears. I'd be afraid . . .

*Pierre.* Go on, Madame, go on . . .

*Countess.* Ah! So life is beginning to interest you, is it? You see how beautiful it is?

*Pierre.* What a fool I've been!

*Countess.* Then, Roderick, I begin my rounds. I have my cats to feed, my dogs to pet, my plants to water. I have to see what the evil ones are up to in the district—those who hate people, those who hate plants, those who hate animals. I watch them sneaking off in the morning to put on their disguises—to the baths, to the beauty parlors, to the barbers. But they can't deceive me. And when they come out again with blonde hair and false whiskers, to pull up my flowers and poison my dogs, I'm there, and I'm ready. All you have to do to break their power is to cut across their path from the left. That isn't always easy. Vice moves swiftly. But I have a good long stride and I generally manage. . . . Right, my friends? [*The WAITER and the RAGPICKER nod their heads with evident approval.*] Yes, the flowers have been marvelous this year. And the butcher's dog on the Rue Bizet, in spite of that wretch that tried to poison him, is friskier than ever. . . .

*Sergeant.* That dog had better look out. He has no license.

*Countess.* He doesn't seem to feel the need for one.

*The Ragpicker.* The Duchess de la Rochefoucauld's whippet is getting awfully thin. . . .

*Countess.* What can I do? She bought that dog full grown from a kennel where they didn't know his right name. A dog without his right name is bound to get thin.

*The Ragpicker.* I've got a friend who knows a lot about dogs—an Arab . . .

*Countess.* Ask him to call on the Duchess. She receives Thursdays, five to seven. You see, then, Roderick. That's life. Does it appeal to you now?

*Pierre.* It seems marvelous.

*Countess.* Ah! Sergeant. My button. [*The SERGEANT gives her his button and goes off. At this point the PROSPECTOR enters.*] That's only this morning. Wait till I tell you about the afternoon!

*Prospector.* All right, Pierre. Come along now.

*Pierre.* I'm perfectly all right here.

*Prospector.* I said, come along now.

*Pierre* [*To the COUNTESS*]. I'd better go, Madame.

*Countess.* No.

*Pierre.* It's no use. Please let go my hand.

*Prospector.* Madame, will you oblige me by letting my friend go?

*Countess.* I will not oblige you in any way.

*Prospector.* All right. Then I'll oblige you . . . ! [*He tries to push her away. She catches up a soda water siphon and squirts it in his face.*]

*Pierre.* Countess . . .

*Countess.* Stay where you are. This man isn't going to take you away. In the first place, I shall need you in a few minutes to take me home. I'm all alone here and I'm very easily frightened. [*The PROSPECTOR makes a second attempt to drag PIERRE away. The COUNTESS cracks him over the skull with the siphon. They join battle. The COUNTESS whistles. The DOORMAN comes, then the other VAGABONDS, and lastly the POLICE SERGEANT.*]

*Prospector.* Officer! Arrest this woman!

*Sergeant.* What's the trouble here?

*Prospector.* She refuses to let this man go.

*Sergeant.* Why should she?

*Prospector.* It's against the law for a woman to detain a man on the street.

*Irma.* Suppose it's her son whom she's found again after twenty years?

*The Ragpicker [Gallantly].* Or her long-lost brother? The Countess is not so old.

*Prospector.* Officer, this is a clear case of disorderly conduct. [*The DEAF-MUTE interrupts with frantic signals.*]

*Countess.* Irma, what is the Deaf-Mute saying?

*Irma [Interpreting].* The young man is in danger of his life. He mustn't go with him.

*Prospector.* What does he know?

*Irma.* He knows everything.

*Prospector.* Officer, I'll have to take your number.

*Countess.* Take his number. It's 2133. It adds up to nine. It will bring you luck.

*Sergeant.* Countess, between ourselves, what are you holding him for, anyway?

*Countess.* I'm holding him because it's very pleasant to hold him. I've never really held anybody before, and I'm making the most of it. And because so long as I hold him, he's free.

*Prospector.* Pierre, I'm giving you fair warning. . . .

*Countess.* And I'm holding him because Irma wants me to hold him. Because if I let him go, it will break her heart.

*Irma.* Oh, Countess!

*Sergeant [To the PROSPECTOR].* All right, you—move on. Nobody's holding you. You're blocking traffic. Move on.

*Prospector [Menacingly].* I have your number. [*And murderously, to PIERRE.*] You'll regret this, Pierre.

[*Exit PROSPECTOR.*]

*Pierre.* Thank you, Countess.

*Countess.* They're blackmailing you, are they? [*PIERRE nods.*] What have you done? Murdered somebody?

*Pierre.* No.

*Countess.* Stolen something?

*Pierre.* No.

*Countess.* What then?

*Pierre.* I forged a signature.

*Countess.* Whose signature?

*Pierre.* My father's. To a note.

*Countess.* And this man has the paper, I suppose?

*Pierre.* He promised to tear it up, if I did what he wanted. But I couldn't do it.

*Countess.* But the man is mad! Does he really want to destroy the whole neighborhood?

*Pierre.* He wants to destroy the whole city.

*Countess [Laughs].* Fantastic.

*Pierre.* It's not funny, Countess. He can do it. He's mad, but he's powerful, and he has friends. Their machines are already drawn up and waiting. In three months' time you may see the city covered by a forest of derricks and drills.

*Countess.* But what are they looking for? Have they lost something?

*Pierre.* They're looking for oil. They're convinced that Paris is sitting on a lake of oil.

*Countess.* Suppose it is. What harm does it do?

*Pierre.* They want to bring the oil to the surface, Countess.

*Countess [Laughs].* How silly! Is that a reason to destroy a city? What do they want with this oil?

*Pierre.* They want to make war, Countess.

*Countess.* Oh, dear, let's forget about these horrible men. The world is beautiful. It's happy. That's how God made it. No man can change it.

*Waiter.* Ah, Countess, if you only knew . . .

*Countess.* If I only knew what?

*Waiter.* Shall we tell her now? Shall we tell her?

*Countess.* What is it you are hiding from me?

*The Ragpicker.* Nothing, Countess. It's you who are hiding.

*Waiter.* You tell her. You've been a pitchman. You can talk.

*All.* Tell her. Tell her. Tell her.

*Countess.* You're frightening me, my friends. Go on. I'm listening.

*The Ragpicker.* Countess, there was a time when old clothes were as good as new—in fact, they were better. Because when people wore clothes, they gave something

to them. You may not believe it, but right this minute, the highest-priced shops in Paris are selling clothes that were thrown away thirty years ago. They're selling them for new. That's how good they were.

*Countess.* Well?

*The Ragpicker.* Countess, there was a time when garbage was a pleasure. A garbage can was not what it is now. If it smelled a little strange, it was because it was a little confused—there was everything there—sardines, cologne, iodine, roses. An amateur might jump to a wrong conclusion. But to a professional—it was the smell of God's plenty.

*Countess.* Well?

*The Ragpicker.* Countess, the world has changed.

*Countess.* Nonsense. How could it change? People are the same, I hope.

*The Ragpicker.* No, Countess. The people are not the same. The people are different. There's been an invasion. An infiltration. From another planet. The world is not beautiful any more. It's not happy.

*Countess.* Not happy? Is that true? Why didn't you tell me this before?

*The Ragpicker.* Because you live in a dream, Countess. And we don't like to disturb you.

*Countess.* But how could it have happened?

*The Ragpicker.* Countess, there was a time when you could walk around Paris, and all the people you met were just like yourself. A little cleaner, maybe, or dirtier, perhaps, or angry, or smiling—but you knew them. They were you. Well, Countess, twenty years ago, one day, on the street, I saw a face in the crowd. A face, you might say, without a face. The eyes—empty. The expression—not human. Not a human face. It saw me staring, and when it looked back at me with its gelatine eyes, I shuddered. Because I knew that to make room for this one, one of us must have left the earth. A while after, I saw another. And another. And since then, I've seen hundreds come in—yes—thousands.

*Countess.* Describe them to me.

*The Ragpicker.* You've seen them yourself, Countess. Their clothes don't wrinkle. Their hats don't come off.

When they talk, they don't look at you. They don't perspire.

*Countess.* Have they wives? Have they children?

*The Ragpicker.* They buy the models out of shop windows, furs and all. They animate them by a secret process. Then they marry them. Naturally, they don't have children.

*Countess.* What work do they do?

*The Ragpicker.* They don't do any work. Whenever they meet, they whisper, and then they pass each other thousand-franc notes. You see them standing on the corner by the Stock Exchange. You see them at auctions—in the back. They never raise a finger—they just stand there. In theater lobbies, by the box office—they never go inside. They don't do anything, but wherever you see them, things are not the same. I remember well the time when a cabbage could sell itself just by being a cabbage. Nowadays it's no good being a cabbage—unless you have an agent and pay him a commission. Nothing is free any more to sell itself or give itself away. These days, Countess, every cabbage has its pimp.

*Countess.* I can't believe that.

*The Ragpicker.* Countess, little by little, the pimps have taken over the world. They don't do anything, they don't make anything—they just stand there and take their cut. It makes a difference. Look at the shopkeepers. Do you ever see one smiling at a customer any more? Certainly not. Their smiles are strictly for the pimps. The butcher has to smile at the meat-pimp, the florist at the rose-pimp, the grocer at the fresh-fruit-and-vegetable-pimp. It's all organized down to the slightest detail. A pimp for birdseed. A pimp for fishfood. That's why the cost of living keeps going up all the time. You buy a glass of beer—it costs twice as much as it used to. Why? Ten percent for the glass-pimp, 10 percent for the beer-pimp, 20 percent for the glass-of-beer-pimp—that's where our money goes. Personally, I prefer the old-fashioned type. Some of those men at least were loved by the women they sold. But what feelings can a pimp arouse in a leg of lamb? Pardon my language, Irma.

*Countess.* It's all right. She doesn't understand it.

*The Ragpicker.* So now you know, Countess, why the world is no longer happy. We are the last of the free people of the earth. You saw them looking us over today. Tomorrow, the street singer will start paying the song-pimp, and the garbage-pimp will be after me. I tell you, Countess, we're finished. It's the end of free enterprise in this world!

*Countess.* Is this true, Roderick?

*Pierre.* I'm afraid it's true.

*Countess.* Did you know about this, Irma?

*Irma.* All I know is the doorman says that faith is dead.

*Doorman.* I've stopped taking bets over the phone.

*Juggler.* The very air is different, Countess. You can't trust it any more. If I throw my torches up too high, they go out.

*The Ragpicker.* The sky-pimp puts them out.

*Flower Girl.* My flowers don't last over night now. They wilt.

*Juggler.* Have you noticed, the pigeons don't fly any more?

*The Ragpicker.* They can't afford to. They walk.

*Countess.* They're a lot of fools and so are you! You should have told me at once! How can you bear to live in a world where there is unhappiness? Where a man is not his own master? Are you cowards? All we have to do is get rid of these men.

*Pierre.* How can we get rid of them? They're too strong.  
[*The SERGEANT walks up again.*]

*Countess* [Smiling]. The Sergeant will help us.

*Sergeant.* Who? Me?

*Irma.* There are a great many of them, Countess. The Deaf-Mute knows them all. They employed him once, years ago, because he was deaf. [*The DEAF-MUTE wiggles a short speech.*] They fired him because he wasn't blind. [*Another flash of sign language.*] They're all connected like the parts of a machine.

*Countess.* So much the better. We shall drive the whole machine into a ditch.

*Sergeant.* It's not that easy, Countess. You never catch these birds napping. They change before your very eyes. I remember when I was in the detectives . . . You catch

a president, pfft! He turns into a trustee. You catch him as trustee, and pfft! he's not a trustee—he's an honorary vice-chairman. You catch a Senator dead to rights: he becomes Minister of Justice. You get after the Minister of Justice—he is Chief of Police. And there you are—no longer in the detectives.

*Pierre.* He's right, Countess. They have all the power. And all the money. And they're greedy for more.

*Countess.* They're greedy? Ah, then, my friends, they're lost. If they're greedy, they're stupid. If they're greedy—don't worry, I know exactly what to do. Roderick, by tonight you will be an honest man. And, Juggler, your torches will stay lit. And your beer will flow freely again, Martial. And the world will be saved. Let's get to work.

*The Ragpicker.* What are you going to do?

*Countess.* Have you any kerosene in the house, Irma?

*Irma.* Yes. Would you like some?

*Countess.* I want just a little. In a dirty bottle. With a little mud. And some mange-cure, if you have it. [*To the DEAF-MUTE.*] Deaf-Mute! Take a letter. [*IRMA interprets in sign language. To the SINGER.*] Singer, go and find Madame Constance.

[*IRMA and the WAITER go into the café.*]

*Singer.* Yes, Countess.

*Countess.* Ask her to be at my house by two o'clock. I'll be waiting for her in the cellar. You may tell her we have to discuss the future of humanity. That's sure to bring her.

*Singer.* Yes, Countess.

*Countess.* And ask her to bring Mademoiselle Gabrielle and Madame Josephine with her. Do you know how to get in to speak to Madame Constance? You ring twice, and then meow three times like a cat. Do you know how to meow?

*Singer.* I'm better at barking.

*Countess.* Better practice meowing on the way. Incidentally, I think Madame Constance knows all the verses of your mazurka. Remind me to ask her.

*Singer.* Yes, Countess.

[Exit.

*IRMA comes in. She is shaking the oily concoction in a little perfume vial, which she now hands the COUNTESS.*

Irma. Here you are, Countess.

Countess. Thanks, Irma. [She assumes a presidential manner.] Deaf-Mute! Ready? [IRMA interprets in sign language. The WAITER has brought out a portfolio of letter paper and placed it on a table. The DEAF-MUTE sits down before it, and prepares to write.]

Irma [Speaking for the DEAF-MUTE]. I'm ready.

Countess. My dear Mr.— What's his name? [IRMA wiggles the question to the DEAF-MUTE, who answers in the same manner. It is all done so deftly that it is as if the DEAF-MUTE were actually speaking.]

Irma. They are all called Mr. President.

Countess. My dear Mr. President: I have personally verified the existence of a spontaneous outcrop of oil in the cellar of Number 21 Rue de Chaillot, which is at present occupied by a dignified person of unstable mentality. [The COUNTESS grins knowingly.] This explains why, fortunately for us, the discovery has so long been kept secret. If you should wish to verify the existence of this outcrop for yourself, you may call at the above address at three P.M. today. I am herewith enclosing a sample so that you may judge the quality and consistency of the crude. Yours very truly. Roderick, can you sign the Prospector's name?

Pierre. You wish me to?

Countess. One forgery wipes out the other. [PIERRE signs the letter. The DEAF-MUTE types the address on an envelope.]

Irma. Who is to deliver this?

Countess. The Doorman, of course. On his bicycle. And as soon as you have delivered it, run over to the Prospector's office. Leave word that the President expects to see him at my house at three.

Doorman. Yes, Countess.

Countess. I shall leave you now. I have many pressing things to do. Among others, I must press my red gown.

The Ragpicker. But this only takes care of two of them, Countess.

Countess. Didn't the Deaf-Mute say they are all connected like the works of a machine?

Irma. Yes.

Countess. Then, if one comes, the rest will follow. And we shall have them all. My boa, please.

Doorman. The one that's stolen, Countess?

Countess. Naturally. The one the Prospector stole.

Doorman. It hasn't turned up yet, Countess. But someone has left an ermine collar.

Countess. Real ermine?

Doorman. Looks like it.

Countess. Ermine and iris were made for each other. Let me see it.

Doorman. Yes, Countess.

[Exit DOORMAN.]

Countess. Roderick, you shall escort me. You still look pale. I have some old Chartreuse at home. I always take a glass each year. Last year I forgot. You shall have it.

Pierre. If there is anything I can do, Countess . . . ?

Countess. There is a great deal you can do. There are all the things that need to be done in a room that no man has been in for twenty years. You can untwist the cord on the blind and let in a little sunshine for a change. You can take the mirror off the wardrobe door, and deliver me once and for all from the old harpy that lives in the mirror. You can let the mouse out of the trap. I'm tired of feeding it. [To her friends.] Each man to his post. See you later, my friends. [The DOORMAN puts the ermine collar around her shoulders.] Thank you, my boy. It's rabbit [One o'clock strikes.] Your arm, Valentine.

Pierre. Valentine?

Countess. It's just struck one. At one, all men become Valentine.

Pierre [He offers his arm]. Permit me.

Countess. Or Valentino. It's obviously far from the same, isn't it, Irma? But they have that much choice. [She sweeps out majestically with PIERRE. The others disperse. All but IRMA.]

Irma [Clearing off the table]. I hate ugliness. I love beauty. I hate meanness. I adore kindness. It may not seem so grand to some to be a waitress in Paris. I love it. A waitress meets all sorts of people. She observes life. I hate to be alone. I love people. But I have never said I love you to a man. Men try to make me say it. They put their arms around me—I pretend I don't see it. They

pinch me—I pretend I don't feel it. They kiss me—I pretend I don't know it. They take me out in the evening and make me drink—but I'm careful, I never say it. If they don't like it, they can leave me alone. Because when I say I love you to Him, He will know just by looking in my eyes that many have held me and pinched me and kissed me, but I have never said I love you to anyone in the world before. Never. No. [*Looking off in the direction in which PIERRE has gone, she whispers softly.*] I love you.

Voice [*From within the café.*] Irma.  
Irma. Coming.

[*Exits.*]

Curtain

## ACT TWO

SCENE: *The cellar of the COUNTESS' house. An ancient vault set deep in the ground, with walls of solid masonry, part brick and part great ashlars, mossy and sweating. A staircase of medieval pattern is built into the thickness of the wall, and leads up to the street level from a landing halfway down. In the corners of the cellar are piled casks, packing cases, bird-cages, and other odds and ends—the accumulation of centuries—the whole effect utterly fantastic.*

*In the center of the vast underground room, some furniture has been arranged to give an impression of a sitting-room of the 1890's. There is a venerable chaise-longue piled with cushions that once were gay, three armchairs, a table with an oil lamp and a bowl of flowers, a shaggy rug. It is two P.M., the same day.*

AT RISE: *The COUNTESS is sitting over a bit of mending, in one of the armchairs. IRMA appears on the landing and calls down.*

IRMA. Countess! The Sewer Man is here.

Countess. Thank goodness, Irma. Send him down. [*The SEWER MAN enters. He carries his hip boots in his hand.*] How do you do, Mr. Sewer Man? [*The SEWER MAN*

*bows.*] But why do you have your boots in your hand instead of on your feet?

Sewer Man. Etiquette, Countess. Etiquette.

Countess. How very American! I'm told that Americans nowadays apologize for their gloves if they happen to take one's hand. As if the skin of a human were nicer to touch than the skin of a sheep! And particularly if they have sweaty hands . . . !

Sewer Man. My feet never sweat, Countess.

Countess. How very nice! But please don't stand on ceremony here. Put your boots on. Put them on.

Sewer Man [*Complying*]. Thanks very much, Countess.

Countess [*While he draws on his boots*]. I'm sure you must have a very poor opinion of the upper world, from what you see of it. The way people throw their filth into your territory is absolutely scandalous! I burn all my refuse, and I scatter the ashes. All I ever throw in the drain is flowers. Did you happen to see a lily float by this morning? Mine. But perhaps you didn't notice?

Sewer Man. We notice a lot more down there, Countess, than you might think. You'd be surprised the things we notice. There's lots of things come along that were obviously intended for us—little gifts, you might call them—sometimes a brand-new shaving brush—sometimes, *The Brothers Karamazov* . . . Thanks for the lily, Countess. A very sweet thought.

Countess. Tomorrow you shall have this iris. But now, let's come to the point. I have two questions to ask you.

Sewer Man. Yes, Countess?

Countess. First—and this has nothing to do with our problem—it's just something that has been troubling me. . . . Tell me, is it true that the sewer men of Paris have a king?

Sewer Man. Oh, now, Countess, that's another of those fairy tales out of the Sunday supplements. It just seems those writers can't keep their minds off the sewers! It fascinates them. They keep thinking of us moving around in our underground canals like gondoliers in Venice, and it sends them into a fever of romance! The things they say about us! They say we have a race of girls down there who never see the light of day! It's completely fantastic!

The girls naturally come out—every Christmas and Easter. And orgies by torchlight with gondolas and guitars! With troops of rats that dance as they follow the piper! What nonsense! The rats are not allowed to dance. No, no, no. Of course we have no king. Down in the sewers, you'll find nothing but good republicans.

*Countess.* And no queen?

*Sewer Man.* No. We may run a beauty contest down there once in a while. Or crown a mermaid Queen of the May. But no queen what you'd call a queen. And, as for these swimming races they talk so much about . . . possibly once in a while—in the summer—in the dog days . . .

*Countess.* I believe you. I believe you. And now tell me. Do you remember that night I found you here in my cellar—looking very pale and strange—you were half-dead as a matter of fact—and I gave you some brandy . . .

*Sewer Man.* Yes, Countess.

*Countess.* That night you promised if ever I should need it—you would tell me the secret of this room.

*Sewer Man.* The secret of the moving stone?

*Countess.* I need it now.

*Sewer Man.* Only the King of the Sewer Men knows this secret.

*Countess.* I'm sure of it. I know most secrets, of course. As a matter of fact, I have three magic words that will open any door that words can open. I have tried them all—in various tones of voice. They don't seem to work. And this is a matter of life and death.

*Sewer Man.* Look, Countess. [*He locates a brick in the masonry, and pushes it. A huge block of stone slowly pivots and uncovers a trap from which a circular staircase winds into the bowels of the earth.*]

*Countess.* Good heavens! Where do those stairs lead?

*Sewer Man.* Nowhere.

*Countess.* But they must go somewhere.

*Sewer Man.* They just go down.

*Countess.* Let's go and see.

*Sewer Man.* No, Countess. Never again. That time you found me, I had a pretty close shave. I kept going down and around, and down and around for an hour, a year—I

don't know. There's no end to it, Countess. Once you start you can't stop. . . . Your head begins to turn—you're lost. No—once you start down, there's no coming up.

*Countess.* You came up.

*Sewer Man.* I—I am a special case. Besides, I had my tools, my ropes. And I stopped in time.

*Countess.* You could have screamed—shouted.

*Sewer Man.* You could fire off a cannon.

*Countess.* Who could have built a thing like this?

*Sewer Man.* Paris is old, you know. Paris is very old.

*Countess.* You don't suppose, by any chance, there is oil down there?

*Sewer Man.* There's only death down there.

*Countess.* I should have preferred a little oil too—or a vein of gold—or emeralds. You're quite sure there is nothing?

*Sewer Man.* Not even rats.

*Countess.* How does one lower this stone?

*Sewer Man.* Simple. To open, you press here. And to close it, you push there. [*He presses the brick. The stone descends.*] Now there's two of us in the world that knows it.

*Countess.* I won't remember long. Is it all right if I repeat my magic words while I press it?

*Sewer Man.* It's bound to help.

[*IRMA enters.*]

*Irma.* Countess, Madame Constance and Mademoiselle Gabrielle are here.

*Countess.* Show them down, Irma. Thank you very much, Mr. Sewer Man.

*Sewer Man.* Like that story about the steam laundry that's supposed to be running day and night in my sewer . . . I can assure you . . .

*Countess* [*Edging him toward the door.*] Thank you very much.

*Sewer Man.* Pure imagination! They never work nights. [*He goes off, bowing graciously.*]

CONSTANCE, the Madwoman of Passy, and GABRIELLE, the Madwoman of St. Sulpice, come down daintily. CONSTANCE is all in white. She wears an enormous hat graced

with ostrich plumes, and a lavender veil. GABRIELLE is costumed with the affected simplicity of the 1880's. She is atrociously made up in a remorseless parody of blushing innocence, and she minces down the stairs with macabre coyness.

*Constance.* Aurelia! Don't tell us they've found your feather boa?

*Gabrielle.* You don't mean Adolphe Bertaut has proposed at last! I knew he would.

*Countess.* How are you, Constance? [*She shouts.*] How are you, Gabrielle?

*Gabrielle.* You needn't shout today, my dear. It's Wednesday. Wednesdays, I hear perfectly.

*Constance.* It's Thursday.

*Gabrielle.* Oh, dear. Well, never mind. I'm going to make an exception just this once.

*Constance* [*To an imaginary dog who has stopped on the landing*]. Come along, Dickie. Come along. And stop barking. What a racket you're making! Come on, darling—we've come to see the longest boa and the handsomest man in Paris. Come on.

*Countess.* Constance, it's not a question of my boa today. Nor of poor Adolphe. It's a question of the future of the human race.

*Constance.* You think it has a future?

*Countess.* Please don't make silly jokes. Sit down and listen to me. Today we must make a decision which may alter the fate of the world.

*Constance.* Couldn't we do it tomorrow? I want to wash my slippers. Now, Dickie—please!

*Countess.* We haven't a moment to waste. Where is Josephine? Well, we'd best have our tea, and the moment Josephine comes . . .

*Gabrielle.* Josephine is sitting on her bench in front of the palace waiting for President Wilson to come out. She says she's sorry, but she positively must see him today.

*Constance.* Dickie!

*Countess.* What a pity! [*She gets the tea things from the side table, pours tea and serves cake and honey.*] I wish she were here to help us. She has a first-class brain.

*Constance.* Go ahead, dear. We're listening. [*To DICKIE.*] What is it, Dickie? You want to sit in Aunt Aurelia's lap. All right, darling. Go on. Jump, Dickie.

*Countess.* Constance, we love you, as you know. And we love Dickie. But this is a serious matter. So let's stop being childish for once.

*Constance.* And what does that mean, if you please?

*Countess.* It means Dickie. You know perfectly well that we love him and fuss over him just as if he were still alive. He's a sacred memory and we wouldn't hurt his feelings for the world. But please don't plump him in my lap when I'm settling the future of mankind. His basket is in the corner—he knows where it is, and he can just go and sit in it.

*Constance.* So you're against Dickie too! You too!

*Countess.* Constance! I'm not in the least against Dickie! I adore Dickie. But you know as well as I that Dickie is only a convention with us. It's a beautiful convention—but it doesn't have to bark all the time. Besides, it's you that spoil him. The time you went to visit your niece and left him with me, we got on marvelously together. He didn't bark, he didn't tear things, he didn't even eat. But when you're with him, one can pay attention to nothing else. I'm not going to take Dickie in my lap at a solemn moment like this, no, not for anything in the world. And that's that!

*Gabrielle* [*Very sweetly*]. Constance, dear, I don't mind taking him in my lap. He loves to sit in my lap, don't you, darling?

*Constance.* Kindly stop putting on angelic airs, Gabrielle. I know you very well. You're much too sweet to be sincere. There's plenty of times that I make believe that Dickie is here, when really I've left him home, and you cuddle and pet him just the same.

*Gabrielle.* I adore animals.

*Constance.* If you adore animals, you shouldn't pet them when they're not there. It's a form of hypocrisy.

*Countess.* Now, Constance, Gabrielle has as much right as you . . .

*Constance.* Gabrielle has no right to do what she does. Do you know what she does? She invites *people* to come to

tea with us. *People* whom we know nothing about. *People* who exist only in her imagination.

*Countess.* You think that's not an existence?

*Gabrielle.* I don't invite them at all. They come by themselves. What can I do?

*Constance.* You might introduce us.

*Countess.* If you think they're only imaginary, there's no point in your meeting them, is there?

*Constance.* Of course they're imaginary. But who likes to have imaginary people staring at one? Especially strangers.

*Gabrielle.* Oh, they're really very nice. . . .

*Constance.* Tell me just one thing, Gabrielle—are they here now?

*Countess.* Am I to be allowed to speak? Or is this going to be the same as the argument about inoculating Josephine's cat, when we didn't get to the subject at all?

*Constance.* Never! Never! Never! I'll never give my consent to that. [To DICKIE.] I'd never do a thing like that to you, Dickie sweet. . . . Oh, no! Oh, no! [She begins to weep softly.]

*Countess.* Good heavens! Now we have her in tears. What an impossible creature! With the fate of humanity hanging in the balance! All right, all right, stop crying. I'll take him in my lap. Come, Dickie, Dickie.

*Constance.* No. He won't go now. Oh, how can you be so cruel? Don't you suppose I know about Dickie? Don't you think I'd rather have him here alive and woolly and frisking around the way he used to? You have your Adolphe. Gabrielle has her birds. But I have only Dickie. Do you think I'd be so silly about him if it wasn't that it's only by pretending that he's here all the time that I get him to come sometimes, really? Next time I won't bring him!

*Countess.* Now let's not get ourselves worked up over nothing. Come here, Dickie. . . . Irma is going to take you for a nice walk. [She rings her bell.] Irma!

IRMA appears on the landing.

*Constance.* No. He doesn't want to go. Besides, I didn't bring him today. So there!

*Countess.* Very well, then. Irma, make sure the door is locked.

*Irma.* Yes, Countess.

[IRMA exits.]

*Constance.* What do you mean? Why locked? Who's coming?

*Countess.* If you'd let me get a word in, you'd know by now. A terrible thing has happened. This morning, this very morning, exactly at noon . . .

*Constance* [Thrilled]. Oh, how exciting!

*Countess.* Be quiet. This morning, exactly at noon, thanks to a young man who drowned himself in the Seine . . . Oh, yes, while I think of it—do you know a mazurka called *La Belle Polonaise*?

*Constance.* Yes, Aurelia.

*Countess.* Could you sing it now? This very minute?

*Constance.* Yes, Aurelia.

*Countess.* All of it?

*Constance.* Yes, Aurelia. But who's interrupting now, Aurelia?

*Countess.* You're right. Well, this morning, exactly at noon, I discovered a horrible plot. There is a group of men who intend to tear down the whole city!

*Constance.* Is that all?

*Gabrielle.* But I don't understand, Aurelia. Why should men want to tear down the city? It was they themselves who put it up.

*Countess.* You are so innocent, my poor Gabrielle. There are people in the world who want to destroy everything. They have the fever of destruction. Even when they pretend that they're building, it is only in order to destroy. When they put up a new building, they quietly knock down two old ones. They build cities so that they can destroy the countryside. They destroy space with telephones and time with airplanes. Humanity is now dedicated to the task of universal destruction. I am speaking, of course, primarily of the male sex.

*Gabrielle* [Shocked]. Oh . . . !

*Constance.* Aurelia! Must you talk sex in front of Gabrielle?

*Countess.* There are two sexes.

*Constance.* Gabrielle is a virgin, Aurelia!

*Countess.* Oh, she can't be as innocent as all that. She keeps canaries.

*Gabrielle.* I think you're being very cruel about men, Aurelia. Men are big and beautiful, and as loyal as dogs. I preferred not to marry, it's true. But I hear excellent reports from friends who have had an opportunity to observe them closely.

*Countess.* My poor darling! You are still living in a dream. But one day, you will wake up as I have, and then you will see what is happening in the world. The tide has turned, my dear. Men are changing back into beasts. They know it. They no longer try to hide it. There was once such a thing as manners. I remember a time when the hungriest was the one who took the longest to pick up his fork. The one with the broadest grin was the one who needed most to go to the . . . It was such fun to keep them grinning like that for hours. But now they no longer pretend. Just look at them—snuffing their soup like pigs, tearing their meat like tigers, crunching their lettuce like crocodiles! A man doesn't take your hand nowadays. He gives you his paw.

*Constance.* Would that trouble you so much if they turned into animals? Personally, I think it's a good idea.

*Gabrielle.* Oh, I'd love to see them like that. They'd be sweet.

*Constance.* It might be the salvation of the human race.

*Countess* [To CONSTANCE]. You'd make a fine rabbit, wouldn't you?

*Constance.* I?

*Countess.* Naturally. You don't think it's only the men who are changing? You change along with them. Husbands and wives together. We're all one race, you know.

*Constance.* You think so? And why would my poor husband have to be a rabbit if he were alive?

*Countess.* Remember his front teeth? When he nibbled his celery?

*Constance.* I'm happy to say, I remember absolutely nothing about him. All I remember on that subject is the time that Father Lacordaire tried to kiss me in the park.

*Countess.* Yes, yes, of course.

*Constance.* And what does that mean, if you please, "Yes, yes, of course"?

*Countess.* Constance, just this once, look us in the eye and tell us truly—did that really happen or did you read about it in a book?

*Constance.* Now I'm being insulted!

*Countess.* We promise you faithfully that we'll believe it all over again afterwards, won't we, Gabrielle? But tell us the truth this once.

*Constance.* How dare you question my memories? Suppose I said your pearls were false!

*Countess.* They were.

*Constance.* I'm not asking what they were. I'm asking what they are. Are they false or are they real?

*Countess.* Everyone knows that little by little, as one wears pearls, they become real.

*Constance.* And isn't it exactly the same with memories?

*Countess.* Now do not let us waste time. I must go on.

*Constance.* I think Gabrielle is perfectly right about men. There are still plenty who haven't changed a bit. There's an old Senator who bows to Gabrielle every day when he passes her in front of the palace. And he takes off his hat each time.

*Gabrielle.* That's perfectly true, Aurelia. He's always pushing an empty baby carriage, and he always stops and bows.

*Countess.* Don't be taken in, Gabrielle. It's all make-believe. And all we can expect from these make-believe men is itself make-believe. They give us face powder made of stones, sausages made of sawdust, shirts made of glass, stockings made of milk. It's all a vulgar pretense. And if that is the case, imagine what passes, these days, for virtue, sincerity, generosity and love! I warn you, Gabrielle, don't let this Senator with the empty baby carriage pull the wool over your eyes.

*Gabrielle.* He's really the soul of courtesy. He seems very correct.

*Countess.* Those are the worst. Gabrielle, beware! He'll make you put on black riding boots, while he dances the cancan around you, singing God knows what filth at the

top of his voice. The very thought makes one's blood run cold!

*Gabrielle.* You think that's what he has in mind?

*Countess.* Of course. Men have lost all sense of decency. They are all equally disgusting. Just look at them in the evening, sitting at their tables in the café, working away in unison with their toothpicks, hour after hour, digging up roast beef, veal, onion . . .

*Constance.* They don't harm anyone that way.

*Countess.* Then why do you barricade your door, and make your friends meow before you let them come up? Incidentally, we must make an interesting sight, Gabrielle and I, yowling together on your doorstep like a couple of tomcats!

*Constance.* There's no need at all for you to yowl together. One would be quite enough. And you know perfectly well why I have to do it. It's because there are murderers.

*Countess.* I don't quite see what prevents murderers from meowing like anybody else. But why are there murderers?

*Constance.* Why? Because there are thieves.

*Countess.* And why are there thieves? Why is there almost nothing but thieves?

*Constance.* Because they worship money. Because money is king.

*Countess.* Ah—now we've come to it. Because we live in the reign of the Golden Calf. Did you realize that, Gabrielle? Men now publicly worship the Golden Calf!

*Gabrielle.* How awful! Have the authorities been notified?

*Countess.* The authorities do it themselves, Gabrielle.

*Gabrielle.* Oh! Has anyone talked to the bishop?

*Countess.* Nowadays only money talks to the bishop. And so you see why I asked you to come here today. The world has gone out of its mind. Unless we do something, humanity is doomed! Constance, have you any suggestions?

*Constance.* I know what I always do in a case like this. . . .

*Countess.* You write to the Prime Minister.

*Constance.* He always does what I tell him.

*Countess.* Does he ever answer your letters?

*Constance.* He knows I prefer him not to. It might excite gossip. Besides, I don't always write. Sometimes I wire. The time I told him about the Archbishop's Frigidaire, it was by wire. And they sent a new one the very next day.

*Countess.* There was probably a commission in it for someone. And what do you suggest, Gabrielle?

*Constance.* Now, how can she tell you until she's consulted her voices?

*Gabrielle.* I could go right home and consult them, and we could meet again after dinner.

*Countess.* There's no time for that. Besides, your voices are not real voices.

*Gabrielle* [*Furious*]. How dare you say a thing like that?

*Countess.* Where do your voices come from? Still from your sewing machine?

*Gabrielle.* Not at all. They've passed into my hot-water bottle. And it's much nicer that way. They don't chatter any more. They gurgle. But they haven't been a bit nice to me lately. Last night they kept telling me to let my canaries out. "Let them out. Let them out. Let them out."

*Constance.* Did you?

*Gabrielle.* I opened the cage. They wouldn't go.

*Countess.* I don't call that *voices*. Objects talk—everyone knows that. It's the principle of the phonograph. But to ask a hot-water bottle for advice is silly. What does a hot-water bottle know? No, all we have to consult here is our own judgment.

*Constance.* Very well then, tell us what you have decided. Since you're asking our opinion, you've doubtless made up your mind.

*Countess.* Yes, I've thought the whole thing out. All I really needed to discover was the source of the infection. Today I found it.

*Constance.* Where?

*Countess.* You'll see soon enough. I've baited a trap. In just a few minutes, the rats will be here.

*Gabrielle* [*In alarm*]. Rats!

*Countess.* Don't be alarmed. They're still in human form.

*Gabrielle.* Heavens! What are you going to do with them?

*Countess.* That's just the question. Suppose I get these wicked men all here at once—in my cellar—have I the right to exterminate them?

*Gabrielle.* To kill them? [COUNTRESS nods.]

*Constance.* That's not a question for us. You'll have to ask Father Bridet.

*Countess.* I have asked him. Yes. One day, in confession, I told him frankly that I had a secret desire to destroy all wicked people. He said: "By all means, my child. And when you're ready to go into action, I'll lend you the jawbone of an ass."

*Constance.* That's just talk. You get him to put that in writing.

*Gabrielle.* What's your scheme, Aurelia?

*Countess.* That's a secret.

*Constance.* It's not so easy to kill them. Let's say you had a tank full of vitriol all ready for them. You could never get them to walk into it. There's nothing so stubborn as a man when you want him to do something.

*Countess.* Leave that to me.

*Constance.* But if they're killed, they're bound to be missed, and then we'll be fined. They fine you for every little thing these days.

*Countess.* They won't be missed.

*Gabrielle.* I wish Josephine were here. Her sister's husband was a lawyer. She knows all about these things.

*Countess.* Do you miss a cold when it's gone? Or the germs that caused it? When the world feels well again, do you think it will regret its illness? No, it will stretch itself joyfully, and it will smile—that's all.

*Constance.* Just a moment! Gabrielle, are they here now? Yes or no?

*Countess.* What's the matter with you now?

*Constance.* I'm simply asking Gabrielle if her friends are in the room or not. I have a right to know.

*Gabrielle.* I'm not allowed to say.

*Constance.* I know very well they are. I'm sure of it. Otherwise you wouldn't be making faces.

*Countess.* May I ask what difference it makes to you if her friends are in the room?

*Constance.* Just this: If they're here, I'm not going to say another word! I'm certainly not going to commit myself in a matter involving the death sentence in the presence of third parties, whether they exist or not.

*Gabrielle.* That's not being very nice to my guests, is it?

*Countess.* Constance, you must be mad! Or are you so stupid as to think that just because we're alone, there's nobody with us? Do you consider us so boring or repulsive that of all the millions of beings, imaginary or otherwise, who are prowling about in space, there's not one who might possibly enjoy spending a little time with us? On the contrary, my dear—my house is full of guests always. They know that here they have a place in the universe where they can come when they're lonely and be sure of a welcome. For my part, I'm delighted to have them.

*Gabrielle.* Thank you, Aurelia.

*Constance.* You know perfectly well, Aurelia . . .

*Countess.* I know perfectly well that at this moment the whole universe is listening to us—and that every word we say echoes to the remotest star. To pretend otherwise is the sheerest hypocrisy.

*Constance.* Then why do you insult me in front of everybody? I'm not mean. I'm shy. I feel timid about giving an opinion in front of such a crowd. Furthermore, if you think I'm so bad and so stupid, why did you invite me, in the first place?

*Countess.* I'll tell you. And I'll tell you why, disagreeable as you are, I always give you the biggest piece of cake and my best honey. It's because when you come there's always someone with you—and I don't mean Dickie—I mean someone who resembles you like a sister, only she's young and lovely, and she sits modestly to one side and smiles at me tenderly all the time you're bickering and quarreling, and never says a word. That's the Constance to whom I give the cake that you gobble, and it's because of her that you're here today, and it's her vote that I'm asking you to cast in this crucial moment. And not yours, which is of no importance whatever.

Constance. I'm leaving.

Countess. Be so good as to sit down. I can't let her go yet.

Constance [*Crossing toward the stairs*]. No. This is too much. I'm taking her with me.

IRMA enters.

Irma. Madame Josephine.

Countess. Thank heaven!

Gabrielle. We're saved.

JOSEPHINE, the Madwoman of La Concorde, sweeps in majestically in a get-up somewhere between the regal and the priestly.

Josephine. My dear friends, today once again, I waited for President Wilson—but he didn't come out.

Countess. You'll have to wait quite a while longer before he does. He's been dead since 1924.

Josephine. I have plenty of time.

Countess. In anyone else, Josephine, these extravagances might seem a little childish. But a person of your judgment doubtless has her reasons for wanting to talk to a man to whom no one would listen when he was alive. We have a legal problem for you. Suppose you had all the world's criminals here in this room. And suppose you had a way of getting rid of them forever. Would you have the right to do it?

Josephine. Why not?

Countess. Exactly my point.

Gabrielle. But, Josephine, so many people!

Josephine. *De minimis non curat lex!* The more there are, the more legal it is. It's impersonal. It's even military. It's the cardinal principle of battle—you get all your enemies in one place, and you kill them all together at one time. Because if you had to track them down one by one in their houses and offices, you'd get tired, and sooner or later you'd stop. I believe your idea is very practical, Aurelia. I can't imagine why we never thought of it before.

Gabrielle. Well, if you think it's all right to do it. . . .

Josephine. By all means. Your criminals have had a fair trial, I suppose?

Countess. Trial?

Josephine. Certainly. You can't kill anybody without a trial. That's elementary. "No man shall be deprived of his life, liberty and property without due process of law."

Countess. They deprive us of ours.

Josephine. That's not the point. You're not accused of anything. Every accused—man, woman or child—has the right to defend himself at the bar of justice. Even animals. Before the Deluge, you will recall, the Lord permitted Noah to speak in defense of his fellow mortals. He evidently stuttered. You know the result. On the other hand, Captain Dreyfus was not only innocent—he was defended by a marvelous orator. The result was precisely the same. So you see, in having a trial, you run no risk whatever.

Countess. But if I give them the slightest cause for suspicion—I'll lose them.

Josephine. There's a simple procedure prescribed in such cases. You can summon the defendants by calling them three times—mentally, if you like. If they don't appear, the court may designate an attorney who will represent them. This attorney can then argue their case to the court, *in absentia*, and a judgment can then be rendered, *in contumacia*.

Countess. But I don't know any attorneys. And we have only ten minutes.

Gabrielle. Hurry, Josephine, hurry!

Josephine. In case of emergency, it is permissible for the court to order the first passer-by to act as attorney for the defense. A defense is like a baptism. Absolutely indispensable, but you don't have to know anything to do it. Ask Irma to get you somebody. Anybody.

Countess. The Deaf-Mute?

Josephine. Well—that's getting it down a bit fine. That might be questionable on appeal.

Countess [*Calls*]. Irma! What about the Police Sergeant?

Josephine. He won't do. He's under oath to the state.

IRMA appears.

Irma. Yes, Countess?

Countess. Who's out there, Irma?

*Irma.* All our friends, Countess. There's the Raggpicker and . . .

*Countess.* Send down the Raggpicker.

*Constance.* Do you think it's wise to have all those millionaires represented by a raggpicker?

*Josephine.* It's a first-rate choice. Criminals are always represented by their opposites. Murderers, by someone who obviously wouldn't hurt a fly. Rapists, by a member of the League for Decency. Experience shows it's the only way to get an acquittal.

*Countess.* But we must not have an acquittal. That would mean the end of the world!

*Josephine.* Justice is justice, my dear.

*The RAGPICKER comes down, with a stately air. Behind him, on the landing, appear the other VAGABONDS.*

*The Raggpicker.* Greetings, Countess. Greetings, ladies. My most sincere compliments.

*Countess.* Has Irma told you . . . ?

*The Raggpicker.* She said something about a trial.

*Countess.* You have been appointed attorney for the defense.

*The Raggpicker.* Terribly flattered, I'm sure.

*Countess.* You realize, don't you, how much depends on the outcome of this trial?

*Josephine.* Do you know the defendants well enough to undertake the case?

*The Raggpicker.* I know them to the bottom of their souls. I go through their garbage every day.

*Constance.* And what do you find there?

*The Raggpicker.* Mostly flowers.

*Gabrielle.* It's true, you know, the rich are always surrounded with flowers.

*Constance.* How beautiful!

*Countess.* Are you trying to prejudice the court?

*The Raggpicker.* Oh no, Countess, no.

*Countess.* We want a completely impartial defense.

*The Raggpicker.* Of course, Countess, of course. Permit me to make a suggestion.

*Countess.* Will you preside, Josephine?

*The Raggpicker.* Instead of speaking as attorney, suppose

you let me speak directly as defendant. It will be more convincing, and I can get into it more.

*Josephine.* Excellent idea. Motion granted.

*Countess.* We don't want you to be too convincing, remember.

*The Raggpicker.* Impartial, Countess, impartial.

*Josephine.* Well? Have you prepared your case?

*The Raggpicker.* How rich am I?

*Josephine.* Millions. Billions.

*The Raggpicker.* How did I get them? Theft? Murder? Embezzlement?

*Countess.* Most likely.

*The Raggpicker.* Do I have a wife? A mistress?

*Countess.* Everything.

*The Raggpicker.* All right. I'm ready.

*Gabrielle.* Will you have some tea?

*The Raggpicker.* Is that good?

*Constance.* Very good for the voice. The Russians drink nothing but tea. And they talk like anything.

*The Raggpicker.* All right. Tea.

*Josephine* [To the VAGABONDS]. Come in. Come in. All of you. You may take places. The trial is public. [The VAGABONDS dispose themselves on the steps and elsewhere.] Your bell, if you please, Aurelia.

*Countess.* But what if I should need to ring for Irma?

*Josephine.* Irma will sit here, next to me. If you need her, she can ring for herself. [To the POLICE SERGEANT and the POLICEMAN.] Conduct the accused to the bar. [The officers conduct the RAGPICKER to a bar improvised with a rocking chair and a packing case marked FRAGILE. The RAGPICKER mounts the box. She rings the bell.] The court is now in session. [All sit.] Counsel for the defense, you may take the oath.

*The Raggpicker.* I swear to tell the truth, the whole truth, and nothing but the truth, so help me God.

*Josephine.* Nonsense! You're not a witness. You're an attorney. It's your duty to lie, conceal and distort everything, and slander everybody.

*The Raggpicker.* All right. I swear to lie, conceal and distort everything, and slander everybody. [JOSEPHINE ring stridently.]

*Josephine.* Quiet! Begin.

*The Raggicker.* May it please the honorable, august and elegant Court . . .

*Josephine.* Flattery will get you nowhere. That will do. The defense has been heard. Cross-examination.

*Countess.* Mr. President . . .

*The Raggicker* [Bowing with dignity]. Madame.

*Countess.* Do you know what you are charged with?

*The Raggicker.* I can't for the life of me imagine. My life is an open book. My ways are known to all. I am a pillar of the church and the sole support of the Opera. My hands are spotless.

*Countess.* What an atrocious lie! Just look at them!

*Constance.* You don't have to insult the man. He's only lying to please you.

*Countess.* Be quiet, Constance! You don't get the idea at all. [To the RAGPICKER.] You are charged with the crime of worshipping money.

*The Raggicker.* Worshipping money? Me?

*Josephine.* Do you plead guilty or not guilty? Which is it?

*The Raggicker.* Why, Your Honor . . .

*Josephine.* Yes or no?

*The Raggicker.* Yes or no? No! I don't worship money, Countess. Heavens, no! Money worships me. It adores me. It won't let me alone. It's damned embarrassing, I can tell you.

*Josephine.* Kindly watch your language.

*Countess.* Defendant, tell the Court how you came by your money.

*The Raggicker.* The first time money came to me, I was a mere boy, a little golden-haired child in the bosom of my dear family. It came to me suddenly in the guise of a gold brick which, in my innocence, I picked out of a garbage can one day while playing. I was horrified, as you can imagine. I immediately tried to get rid of it by swapping it for a little rundown one-track railroad which, to my consternation, at once sold itself for a hundred times its value. In a desperate effort to get rid of this money, I began to buy things. I bought the Northern Refineries, the Galeries Lafayette, and the Schneider-Creusot Muni-

tion Works. And now I'm stuck with them. It's a horrible fate—but I'm resigned to it. I don't ask for your sympathy, I don't ask for your pity—all I ask for is a little common human understanding. . . . [He begins to cry.]

*Countess.* I object. This wretch is trying to play on the emotions of the Court.

*Josephine.* The Court has no emotions.

*The Raggicker.* Everyone knows that the poor have no one but themselves to blame for their poverty. It's only just that they should suffer the consequences. But how is it the fault of the rich if they're rich?

*Countess.* Dry your tears. You're deceiving nobody. If, as you say, you're ashamed of your money, why is it you hold onto it with such a death grip?

*The Raggicker.* Me?

*Street Peddler.* You never part with a franc!

*Juggler.* You wouldn't even give the poor Deaf-Mute a soul!

*The Raggicker.* Me, hold onto money? What slander! What injustice! What a thing to say to me in the presence of this honorable, august and elegant Court! I spend all my time trying to spend my money. If I have tan shoes, I buy black ones. If I have a bicycle, I buy a motor car. If I have a wife, I buy . . .

*Josephine* [Rings]. Order!

*The Raggicker.* I dispatch a plane to Java for a bouquet of flowers. I send a steamer to Egypt for a basket of figs. I send a special representative to New York to fetch me an ice-cream cone. And if it's not just exactly right, back it goes. But no matter what I do, I can't get rid of my money! If I play a hundred-to-one shot, the horse comes in by twenty lengths. If I throw a diamond in the Seine, it turns up in the trout they serve me for lunch. Ten diamonds—ten trout. Well, now, do you suppose I can get rid of forty millions by giving a sou to a deaf-mute? Is it even worth the effort?

*Constance.* He's right.

*The Raggicker.* Ah! You see, my dear? At last, there is somebody who understands me! Somebody who is not only beautiful, but extraordinarily sensitive and intelligent.

*Countess.* I object!

*Josephine.* Overruled!

*The Ragpicker.* I should be delighted to send you some flowers, Miss—directly I'm acquitted. What flowers do you prefer?

*Constance.* Roses.

*The Ragpicker.* You shall have a bale every morning for the next five years. Money means nothing to me.

*Constance.* And amaryllis.

*The Ragpicker.* I'll make a note of the name. [*In his best lyrical style.*] The lady understands, ladies and gentlemen. The lady is no fool. She's been around and she knows what's what. If I gave the Deaf-Mute a franc, twenty francs, twenty million francs—I still wouldn't make a dent in the forty times a thousand million francs that I'm afflicted with! Right, little lady?

*Constance.* Right.

*Josephine.* Proceed.

*The Ragpicker.* Like on the Stock Exchange. If you buy a stock, it sinks at once like a plummet. But if I buy a stock, it turns around and soars like an eagle. If I buy it at

33 . . .

*Peddler.* It goes up to a thousand.

*The Ragpicker.* It goes to twenty thousand! That's how I bought my twelve chateaux, my twenty villas, my 234 farms. That's how I endow the Opera and keep my twelve ballerinas.

*Flower Girl.* I hope every one of them deceives you every moment of the day!

*The Ragpicker.* How can they deceive me? Suppose they try to deceive me with the male chorus, the general director, the assistant electrician, or the English horn—I own them all, body and soul. It would be like deceiving me with my big toe.

*Constance.* Don't listen, Gabrielle.

*Gabrielle.* Listen to what?

*The Ragpicker.* No. I am incapable of jealousy. I have all the women—or I can have them, which is the same thing. I get the thin ones with caviar—the fat ones with pearls . . .

*Countess.* So you think there are no women with morals?

*The Ragpicker.* I mix morals with mink—delicious combination. I drip pearls into protests. I adorn resistance with rubies. My touch is jeweled; my smile, a motor car. What woman can withstand me? I lift my little finger—and do they fall?—Like leaves in autumn—like tin cans from a second-story window.

*Constance.* That's going a little too far!

*Countess.* You see where money leads.

*The Ragpicker.* Of course. When you have no money, nobody trusts you, nobody believes you, nobody likes you. Because to have money is to be virtuous, honest, beautiful and witty. And to be without is to be ugly and boring and stupid and useless.

*Countess.* One last question. Suppose you find this oil you're looking for. What do you propose to do with it?

*The Ragpicker.* I propose to make war! I propose to conquer the world!

*Countess.* You have heard the defense, such as it is. I demand a verdict of guilty.

*The Ragpicker.* What are you talking about? Guilty? I? I am never guilty!

*Josephine.* I order you to keep quiet.

*The Ragpicker.* I am never quiet!

*Josephine.* Quiet, in the name of the law!

*The Ragpicker.* I am the law. When I speak, that is the law. When I present my backside, it is etiquette to smile and to apply the lips respectfully. It is more than etiquette—it is a cherished national privilege, guaranteed by the Constitution.

*Josephine.* That's contempt of court. The trial is over.

*Countess.* And the verdict?

*All.* Guilty!

*Josephine.* Guilty as charged.

*Countess.* Then I have full authority to carry out the sentence?

*All.* Yes!

*Countess.* I can do what I like with them?

*All.* Yes!

*Countess.* I have the right to exterminate them?

*All.* Yes!

*Josephine.* Court adjourned!

*Countess* [To the RAGPICKER]. Congratulations, Ragpicker. A marvelous defense. Absolutely impartial.

*The Ragpicker.* Had I known a little before, I could have done better. I could have prepared a little speech, like the time I used to sell the Miracle Spot Remover. . . .

*Josephine.* No need for that. You did very well, extempore. The likeness was striking and the style reminiscent of Clemenceau. I predict a brilliant future for you. Good-bye, Aurelia. I'll take our little Gabrielle home.

*Constance.* I'm going to walk along the river. [To DICKIE.] Oh! So here you are. And your ear all bloody! Dickie! Have you been fighting again? Oh, dear . . . !

*Countess* [To the RAGPICKER]. See that she gets home all right, won't you? She loses everything on the way. And in the queerest places. Her prayer book in the butcher shop. And her corset in church.

*The Ragpicker* [Bowing and offering his arm]. Permit me, Madame.

*Street Singer.* Oh, Countess—my mazurka. Remember?

*Countess.* Oh, yes. Constance, wait a moment. [To the SINGER.] Well? Begin.

*Singer* [Sings].

Do you hear, Mademoiselle,  
Those musicians of hell?

*Constance.* Why, of course, it's *La Belle Polonaise*. . . .  
[She sings.]

From Poland to France  
Comes this marvelous dance,  
So gracious,  
Audacious,  
Will you foot it, perchance?

*Singer.* I'm saved!

*Josephine* [Reappearing at the head of the stairs].

Now my arm I entwine  
Round these contours divine,  
So pure, so impassioned,  
Which Cupid has fashioned. . . .

*Gabrielle* [Reappearing also, she sings a quartet with the others].

Come, let's dance the mazurka, that devilish measure,  
'Tis a joy that's reserved to the gods for their pleasure—

Let's gallop, let's hop,

With never a stop,

My blonde Polish miss,

Let our heads spin and turn

As the dance-floor we spurn—

There was never such pleasure as this! [They exit, dancing.]

*Irma.* It's time for your afternoon nap.

*Countess.* But suppose they come, Irma?

*Irma.* I'll watch out for them.

*Countess.* Thank you, Irma. I am tired. [She smiles.] Did you ever see a trial end more happily in your life?

*Irma.* Lie down and close your eyes a moment. [The Countess stretches out on the chaise-longue and shuts her eyes. IRMA tiptoes out. In a moment, PIERRE comes down softly, the feather boa in his hands. He stands over the chaise-longue, looking tenderly down at the sleeping woman, then kneels beside her and takes her hand.]

*Countess* [Without opening her eyes]. Is it you, Adolphe Bertaut?

*Pierre.* It's only Pierre.

*Countess.* Don't lie to me, Adolphe Bertaut. These are your hands. Why do you complicate things always? Say that it's you.

*Pierre.* Yes. It is I.

*Countess.* Would it cost you so much to call me Aurclia?

*Pierre.* It's I, Aurelia.

*Countess.* Why did you leave me, Adolphe Bertaut? Was she so very lovely, this Georgette of yours?

*Pierre.* No. You are a thousand times lovelier.

*Countess.* But she was clever.

*Pierre.* She was stupid.

*Countess.* It was her soul, then, that drew you? When you looked into her eyes, you saw a vision of heaven, perhaps?

*Pierre.* I saw nothing.

*Countess.* That's how it is with men. They love you because you are beautiful and clever and soulful—and at the first opportunity they leave you for someone who is

plain and dull and soulless. But why does it have to be like that, Adolphe Bertaut? Why?

*Pierre.* Why, Aurelia?

*Countess.* I know very well she wasn't rich. Because when I saw you that time at the grocer's, and you snatched the only good melon from right under my nose, your cuffs, my poor friend, were badly frayed. . . .

*Pierre.* Yes. She was poor.

*Countess.* "Was" poor? Is she dead then? If it's because she's dead that you've come back to me—then no. Go away. I will not take their leavings from the dead. I refuse to inherit you. . . .

*Pierre.* She's quite well.

*Countess.* Your hands are still the same, Adolphe Bertaut. Your touch is young and firm. Because it's the only part of you that has stayed with me. The rest of you is pretty far gone, I'm afraid. I can see why you'd rather not come near me when my eyes are open. It's thoughtful of you.

*Pierre.* Yes. I've aged.

*Countess.* Not I. I am young because I haven't had to live down my youth, like you. I have it with me still, as fresh and beautiful as ever. But when you walk now in the park at Colombes with Georgette, I'm sure . . .

*Pierre.* There is no longer a park at Colombes.

*Countess.* Is there a park still at St. Cloud? Is there a park at Versailles? I've never gone back to see. But I think, if they could move, those trees would have walked away in disgust the day you went there with Georgette. . . .

*Pierre.* They did. Not many are left.

*Countess.* You take her also, I suppose, to hear Denise?

*Pierre.* No one hears Denise any more.

*Countess.* It was on the way home from Denise, Adolphe Bertaut, that I first took your arm. Because it was windy and it was late. I have never set foot in that street again. I go the other way round. It's not easy, in the winter, when there's ice. One is quite apt to fall. I often do.

*Pierre.* Oh, my darling—forgive me.

*Countess.* No, never. I will never forgive you. It was very bad taste to take her to the very places where we'd been together.

*Pierre.* All the same, I swear, Aurelia . . .

*Countess.* Don't swear. I know what you did. You gave her the same flowers. You bought her the same chocolates. But has she any left? No. I have all your flowers still. I have twelve chocolates. No, I will never forgive you as long as I live.

*Pierre.* I always loved you, Aurelia.

*Countess.* You "loved" me? Then you too are dead, Adolphe Bertaut?

*Pierre.* No. I love you. I shall always love you, Aurelia.

*Countess.* Yes. I know. That much I've always known. I knew it the moment you went away, Adolphe, and I knew that nothing could ever change it. Georgette is in his arms now—yes. But he loves me. Tonight he's taken Georgette to hear Denise—yes. But he loves me. . . . I know it. You never loved her. Do you think I believed for one moment that absurd story about her running off with the osteopath? Of course not. Since you didn't love her, obviously she stayed with you. And, after that, when she came back, and I heard about her going off with the surveyor—I knew that couldn't be true, either. You'll never get rid of her, Adolphe Bertaut—never. Because you don't love her.

*Pierre.* I need your pity, Aurelia. I need your love. Don't forget me. . . .

*Countess.* Farewell, Adolphe Bertaut. Farewell. Let go my hand, and give it to little Pierre. [*PIERRE lets go her hand, and after a moment takes it again. The COUNTESS opens her eyes.*] Pierre? Ah, it's you. Has he gone?

*Pierre.* Yes, Countess.

*Countess.* I didn't hear him go. Oh, he knows how to make a quick exit, that one. [*She sees the boa.*] Good heavens! Wherever did you find it?

*Pierre.* In the wardrobe, Countess. When I took off the mirror.

*Countess.* Was there a purple felt shopping bag with it?

*Pierre.* Yes, Countess.

*Countess.* And a little child's sewing box?

*Pierre.* No, Countess.

*Countess.* Oh, they're frightened now. They're trembling for their lives. You see what they're up to? They're quietly

putting back all the things they have stolen. I never open that wardrobe, of course, on account of the old woman in the mirror. But I have sharp eyes. I don't need to open it to see what's in it. Up to this morning, that wardrobe was empty. And now—you see? But, dear me, how stupid they are! The one thing I really miss is my little sewing box. It's something they stole from me when I was a child. They haven't put it back? You're quite sure?

*Pierre.* What was it like?

*Countess.* Green cardboard with paper lace and gold stampings. I got it for Christmas when I was seven. They stole it the very next day. I cried my eyes out every time I thought of it—until I was eight.

*Pierre.* It's not there, Countess.

*Countess.* The thimble was gilt. I swore I'd never use any other. Look at my poor fingers. . . .

*Pierre.* They've kept the thimble too.

*Countess.* Splendid! Then I'm under no obligation to be merciful. Put the boa around my neck, Pierre. I want them to see me wearing it. They'll think it's a real boa.

*IRMA runs in excitedly.*

*Irma.* Here they come, Countess! You were right—it's a procession. The street is full of limousines and taxis!

*Countess.* I will receive them. [*As PIERRE hesitates to leave her.*] Don't worry. There's nothing to be frightened of. [*PIERRE goes out.*] Irma, did you remember to stir the kerosene into the water?

*Irma.* Yes, Countess. Here it is.

*Countess* [*Looking critically at the bottle.*] You might as well pour in what's left of the tea. [*IRMA shakes up the liquid.*] Don't forget, I'm supposed to be deaf. I want to hear what they're thinking.

*Irma.* Yes, Countess.

*Countess* [*Putting the finishing touches to her make-up.*] I don't have to be merciful—but, after all, I do want to be just. . . . [*IRMA goes up to the landing and exits. As soon as she is alone, the COUNTESS presses the brick, and the trap door opens. There is a confused sound of auto horns in the street above, and the noise of an approaching crowd.*]

*Irma* [*Offstage.*] Yes, Mr. President. Come in, Mr. President. You're expected, Mr. President. This way, Mr. President. [*The PRESIDENTS come down, led by the PRESIDENT. They all look alike, are dressed alike, and all have long cigars.*] The Countess is quite deaf, gentlemen. You'll have to shout. [*She announces.*] The presidents of the boards of directors!

*The President.* I had a premonition, Madame, when I saw you this morning, that we should meet again. [*The COUNTESS smiles vaguely. He continues, a tone louder.*] I want to thank you for your trust. You may place yourself in our hands with complete confidence.

*Second President.* Louder. The old trot can't hear you.

*The President.* I have a letter here, Madame, in which . . .

*Second President.* Louder. Louder.

*Third President* [*Shouting.*] Is it true that you've located . . . ? [*The COUNTESS stares at him blankly. He shouts at the top of his voice.*] Oil? [*The COUNTESS nods with a smile, and points down. The PRESIDENT produces a legal paper and a fountain pen.*] Sign here.

*Countess.* What is it? I haven't my glasses.

*The President.* Your contract. [*He offers the pen.*]

*Countess.* Thank you.

*Second President* [*Normal voice.*] What is it?

*Third President.* Waiver of all rights. [*He takes it back signed.*] Thank you. [*He hands it to the SECOND PRESIDENT.*] Witness. [*The SECOND PRESIDENT witnesses it. The PRESIDENT passes it on to the THIRD PRESIDENT.*] Notarize. [*The paper is notarized. The PRESIDENT turns to the COUNTESS and shouts.*] My congratulations. And now, Madame— [*He produces a gold brick wrapped in tissue paper.*] If you'll show us the well, this package is yours.

*Countess.* What is it?

*The President.* Pure gold. Twenty-four karat. For you.

*Countess.* Thank you very much. [*She takes it.*] It's heavy.

*Second President.* Are you going to give her that?

*The President.* Don't worry. We'll pick it up again on the way out. [*He shouts at the COUNTESS, pointing at the trap door.*] Is this the way?

Countess. That's the way. [*The SECOND PRESIDENT tries to slip in first. The PRESIDENT pulls him back.*]

The President. Just a minute, Mr. President. After me, if you don't mind. And watch those cigars. It's oil, you know. [*But as he is about to descend, the COUNTESS steps forward.*]

Countess. Just one moment . . .

The President. Yes?

Countess. Did any of you happen to bring along a little sewing box?

The President. Sewing box? [*He pulls back another impatient PRESIDENT.*] Take it easy.

Countess. Or a little gold thimble?

The President. Not me.

The Presidents. Not us.

Countess. What a pity!

The President. Can we go down now?

Countess. Yes. You may go down now. Watch your step! [*They hurry down eagerly. When they have quite disappeared, IRMA appears on the landing and announces the next echelon.*]

Irma. Countess, the Prospectors.

Countess. Heavens! Are there more than one?

Irma. There's a whole delegation.

Countess. Send them down.

The PROSPECTOR comes in, following his nose.

Irma. Come in, please.

The Prospector [*Sniffing the air like a bloodhound.*] I smell something. . . . Who's that?

Irma. The Countess. She is very deaf.

The Prospector. Good. [*The PROSPECTORS also look alike. Sharp clothes, Western hats and long noses. They crowd down the stairs after the PROSPECTOR, sniffing in unison. The PROSPECTOR is especially talented. He casts about on the scent until it leads him to the decanter on the table. He pours himself a glass, drinks it off, and belches with much satisfaction. The others join him at once, and follow his example. They all belch in unison.*]

The Prospectors. Oil?

The Prospector. Oil

Countess. Oil.

The Prospector. Traces? Puddles?

Countess. Pools. Gushers.

Second Prospector. Characteristic odor? [*He sniffs.*]

The Prospector. Chanel Number 5. Nectar! Undoubtedly—the finest—rarest! [*He drinks.*] Sixty gravity crude: straight gasoline! [*To the COUNTESS.*] How found? By blast? Drill?

Countess. By finger.

The Prospector [*Whipping out a document.*]. Sign here, please.

Countess. What is it?

The Prospector. Agreement for dividing the profits. . . . [*The COUNTESS signs.*]

Second Prospector [*To FIRST PROSPECTOR.*]. What is it?

The Prospector [*Pocketing the paper.*]. Application to enter a lunatic asylum. Down there?

Countess. Down there. [*The PROSPECTORS go down, sniffing.*]

IRMA enters.

Irma. The gentlemen of the press are here.

Countess. The rest of the machine! Show them in.

Irma. The Public Relations Counsellors! [*They enter, all shapes and sizes, all in blue pin-striped suits and black homburg hats.*] The Countess is very deaf, gentlemen. You'll have to shout!

First Press Agent. You don't say— Delighted to make the acquaintance of so charming and beautiful a lady . . .

Second Press Agent. Louder. She can't hear you.

First Press Agent. What a face! [*Shouts.*] Madame, we are the press. You know our power. We fix all values. We set all standards. Your entire future depends on us.

Countess. How do you do?

First Press Agent. What will we charge the old trull? The usual thirty?

Second Press Agent. Forty.

Third Press Agent. Sixty.

First Press Agent. All right—seventy-five. [*He fills in a form and offers it to the COUNTESS.*] Sign here, Countess. This contract really gives you a break.

Countess. That is the entrance.

First Press Agent. Entrance to what?

Countess. The oil well.

First Press Agent. Oh, we don't need to see that, Madame.

Countess. Don't need to see it?

First Press Agent. No, no—we don't have to see it to write about it. We can imagine it. An oil well is an oil well. "That's oil we know on earth, and oil we need to know." [He bows.]

Countess. But if you don't see it, how can you be sure the oil is there?

First Press Agent. If it's there, well and good. If it's not, by the time we get through, it will be. You underestimate the creative aspect of our profession, Madame. [The COUNTESS shakes her head, handing back the papers.] I warn you, if you insist on rubbing our noses in this oil, it will cost you 10 percent extra.

Countess. It's worth it. [She signs. They cross toward the trap door.]

Second Press Agent [Descending]. You see, Madame, we of the press can refuse a lady nothing.

Third Press Agent. Especially, such a lady. [THIRD PRESS AGENT starts going down.]

Second Press Agent [Going down. Gallantly]. It's plain to see, Madame, that even fountains of oil have their nymphs. . . . I can use that somewhere. That's copy! [The PRESS AGENTS go down. As he disappears, the FIRST PRESS AGENT steals the gold brick and blows a kiss gallantly to the COUNTESS, who blows one back.]

There is a high-pitched chatter offstage, and IRMA comes in, trying hard to hold back THREE WOMEN who pay no attention to her whatever. These WOMEN are tall, slender, and as soulless as if they were molded of wax. They march down the steps, erect and abstracted like animated window models, but chattering incessantly.

Irma. But, ladies, please—you have no business here—you are not expected. [To the COUNTESS.] There are some strange ladies coming. . . .

Countess. Show them in, Irma. [The WOMEN come

down, without taking the slightest interest in their surroundings.] Who are you?

First Woman. Madame, we are the most powerful pressure group in the world.

Second Woman. We are the ultimate dynamic.

Third Woman. The mainspring of all combinations.

First Woman. Nothing succeeds without our assistance. Is that the well, Madame?

Countess. That is the well.

First Woman. Put out your cigarettes, girls. We don't want any explosions. Not with my brand-new eyelashes. [They go down, still chattering. The COUNTESS crosses to the wall to close the trap. As she does so, there is a commotion on the landing.]

Irma. Countess . . .

A MAN rushes in breathlessly.

Man. Just a minute! Just a minute! [He rushes for the trap door.]

Countess. Wait! Who are you?

Man. I'm in a hurry. Excuse me. It's my only chance! [He rushes down.]

Countess. But . . . [But he is gone. She shrugs her shoulders, and presses the brick. The trap closes. She rings the bell for IRMA.] My gold brick! Why, they've stolen my gold brick! [She moves toward the trap. It is now closed.] Well, let them take their god with them.

IRMA enters and sees with astonishment that the stage is empty of all but the COUNTESS. Little by little, the scene is suffused with light, faint at first, but increasing as if the very walls were glowing with the quiet radiance of universal joy. Only around the closed trap a shadow lingers.

Irma. But what's happened? They've gone! They've vanished!

Countess. They've evaporated, Irma. They were wicked. Wickedness evaporates.

PIERRE enters. He is followed by the VAGABONDS, all of them. The new radiance of the world is now very perceptible. It glows from their faces.

Pierre. Oh, Countess . . . !

Waiter. Countess, everything's changed. Now you can breathe again. Now you can see.

Pierre. The air is pure! The sky is clear!

Irma. Life is beautiful again.

The Raggicker [Rushes in]. Countess—the pigeons! The pigeons are flying!

Flower Girl. They don't have to walk any more.

The Raggicker. They're flying. . . . The air is like crystal. And young grass is sprouting on the pavements.

Countess. Is it possible?

Irma [Interpreting for the DEAF-MUTE]. Now, Juggler, you can throw your fireballs up as high as you please—they won't go out.

Sergeant. On the street, utter strangers are shaking hands, they don't know why, and offering each other almond bars!

Countess. Oh, my friends . . .

Waiter. Countess, we thank you. . . . [They go on talking with happy and animated gestures, but we no longer hear them, for their words blend into a strain of unearthly music which seems to thrill from the uttermost confines of the universe. And out of this music comes a voice.]

First Voice. Countess . . . [Only the COUNTESS hears it. She turns from the group of VAGABONDS in wonder.]

Second Voice. Countess . . .

Third Voice. Countess . . . [As she looks up in rapture, the FIRST VOICE speaks again.]

First Voice. Countess, we thank you. We are the friends of animals.

Second Voice. We are the friends of people.

Third Voice. We are the friends of friendship.

First Voice. You have freed us!

Second Voice. From now on, there will be no hungry cats. . . .

Third Voice. And we shall tell the Duchess her dog's right name! [The voices fade off. And now another group of voices is heard.]

First Voice. Countess, we thank you. We are the friends of flowers.

Second Voice. From now on, every plant in Paris will be watered. . . .

Third Voice. And the sewers will be fragrant with jasmine! [These voices, too, are silent. For an instant, the stage is vibrant with music. Then the DEAF-MUTE speaks, and his voice is the most beautiful of all.]

Deaf-Mute. Sadness flies on the wings of the morning, and out of the heart of darkness comes the light. [Suddenly a group of figures detaches itself from the shadows. These are exactly similar in face and figure and in dress. They are shabby in the fashion of 1900 and their cuffs are badly frayed. Each bears in his hand a ripe melon.]

First Adolphe Bertaut. Countess, we thank you. We, too, are freed at last. We are the Adolphe Bertauts of the world.

Second Adolphe Bertaut. We are no longer timid.

Third Adolphe Bertaut. We are no longer weak.

First Adolphe Bertaut. From this day on, we shall hold fast to what we love. For your sake, henceforth, we shall be handsome, and our cuffs forever immaculate and new. Countess, we bring you this melon and with it our hearts . . . ! [They all kneel.] Will you do us the honor to be our wife?

Countess [Sadly]. Too late! Too late! [She waves them aside. They take up their melons sadly and vanish. The voices of the VAGABONDS are heard again, and the music dies.] Too late! Too late!

Pierre. Too late, Countess?

Irma. Too late for what?

Countess. I say that it's too late for them. On the twenty-fourth of May, 1881, the most beautiful Easter in the memory of man, it was not too late. And on the fifth of September, 1887, the day they caught the trout and broiled it on the open fire by the brook at Villeneuve, it was not too late. And it was even not too late for them on the twenty-first of August, 1897, the day the Czar visited Paris with his guard. But they did nothing and they said nothing, and now—kiss each other, you two, this very instant!

Irma. You mean . . . ?

Pierre. You mean . . . ?

Irma. But, Countess . . .

*Countess.* It's three hours since you've met and known and loved each other. Kiss each other quickly. [*PIERRE hesitates.*] Look at him. He hesitates. He trembles. Happiness frightens him. . . . How like a man! Oh, Irma, kiss him, kiss him! If two people who love each other let a single instant wedge itself between them, it grows—it becomes a month, a year, a century; it becomes too late. Kiss him, Irma, kiss him while there is time, or in a moment his hair will be white and there will be another mad-woman in Paris. Oh, make her kiss him, all of you! [*They kiss.*] Bravo! Oh, if only you'd had the courage to do that thirty years ago, how different I would be today! Dear Deaf-Mute, be still—your words dazzle our eyes! And Irma is too busy to translate for you. [*They kiss once more.*] Well, there we are. The world is saved. And you see how simple it all was? Nothing is ever so wrong in this world that a sensible woman can't set it right in the course of an afternoon. Only, the next time, don't wait until things begin to look black. The minute you notice anything, tell me at once.

*The Ragpicker.* We will, Countess. We will.

*Countess* [*Puts on her hat. Her tone becomes business-like.*] Irma. My bones. My gizzard.

*Irma.* I have them ready, Countess.

*Countess.* Good. [*She puts the bones into her basket and starts for the stairs.*] Well, let's go on to more important things. Four o'clock. My poor cats must be starved. What a bore for them if humanity had to be saved every afternoon. They don't think much of it, as it is.

*Curtain*

## THE APOLLO OF BELLAC

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