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Feydeau

Plays: Two

The Girl From Maxim's
She's All Yours • Jailbird

Translated and introduced by Kenneth McLeish

BLOOMSBURY

Georges Feydeau
Plays: Two

The Girl From Maxim's, She's All Yours, Jailbird

Feydeau was the most successful French dramatist of the *belle époque* and is now widely regarded as one of the greatest of farce-writers and a worthy successor to Molière and Labiche. His series of dazzling hits matched high-speed action and dialogue with ingenious plotting. Reaching the heights of farcical lunacy, his plays nevertheless contain touches of barbed social comment and allowed him to mention subjects which would have provoked outrage in the hands of more serious dramatists. This volume of new, sparkling translations by Kenneth McLeish contains two plays from the peak of his career, *The Girl from Maxim's*, perhaps his best known, and *She's All Yours (La Main passe)*, together with an early work, *Jailbird (Gibier de potence)*.

Georges Feydeau was born in Paris in 1862, the son of the novelist Ernest Feydeau. His first one-act play, *Love and Piano*, was performed when he was 18 and he had his first success with *Tailleur pour dames* in 1887, when he also married an heiress. Among his many plays his best known are perhaps *Le Système Ribadier* (1892), *Monsieur chasse!* (1892), *Un Fil à la patte* (1894), *L'Hôtel du libre échange* (1894), *Le Dindon* (1896), *La Dame de chez Maxim* (1899), *La Puce à l'oreille* (1907), *Occupe-toi d'Amélie* (1908), and *On purge bébé* (1910). He contracted syphilis and was committed to an asylum in 1919 and died in 1921.

by the same author

FEYDEAU PLAYS: ONE
(Heart's Desire Hotel, Sauce for the Goose,
The One That Got Away, Now You See It, Pig in a Poke)

GEORGES FEYDEAU

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The Girl From Maxim's
She's All Yours
Jailbird

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Georges Feydeau Chronology

1862 Born in Paris, December 8
1874 Death of father, Ernest
1871–9 Attended boarding schools
1879 Joined a law firm as clerk
1880 Began to write and recite monologues
1881 *Par la fenêtre* (*Through the Window*), first play to be professionally performed, produced by Rosendaël
1883 *Amour et piano* (*Love and Piano*), Théâtre de l'Athénée
Took post as secretary to Théâtre de la Renaissance
1883–4 Military service
1884 *Gibier de potence* (*Jailbird*), produced by Le Cercle Volney
1887 *Tailleur pour dames* (*Tailor to the Ladies*), Théâtre de la Renaissance – his first hit
La Lycéenne (*The Schoolgirl*), Théâtre des Nouveautés
1888 *Un Bain de ménage* (*A Household Bath*), Théâtre de la Renaissance
Chat en poche (*Pig in a Poke*), Théâtre Déjazet
Les Fiancés de Loches (*The Fiancés of Loches*), Théâtre Cluny
1889 Married Marianne Duran
L'Affaire Edouard (*The Edward Affair*), Théâtre des Variétés
1890 *Le Mariage de Barillon* (*Barillon's Marriage*), Théâtre de la Renaissance
1892 *Monsieur chasse!* (*The One That Got Away*), Théâtre du Palais-Royal
Champignol malgré lui (*Champignonl in Spite of Himself*), Théâtre des Nouveautés
Le Système Ribadier (*Now You See It*), Théâtre du Palais-Royal
1894 *Un Fil à la patte* (*On a String*), Théâtre du Palais-Royal
Le Ruban (*The Ribbon*), Théâtre de l'Odéon
L'Hôtel du libre échange (*Heart's Desire Hotel*), Théâtre des Nouveautés
1896 *Le Dindon* (*Sauce for the Goose*), Théâtre du Palais-Royal

	Les Pavés de l'ours (*A Little Bit To Fall Back On*), Théâtre Montpensier, Versailles
1897	*Séance de nuit* (*Night Session*), Théâtre du Palais-Royal
	Dormez, je le veux! (*Sleep, I insist!*), Théâtre de l'Eldorado
1899	*La Dame de chez Maxim* (*The Girl From Maxim's*), Théâtre des Nouveautés
1902	*La Duchesse des Folies-Bergères* (*The Duchess From the Folies-Bergères*), Théâtre des Nouveautés
1904	*La Main passe* (*She's All Yours*), Théâtre des Nouveautés
1905	*L'Age d'or* (*The Golden Age*), Théâtre des Variétés
1906	*Le Bourgeon* (*The Bud*), Théâtre du Vaudeville
1907	*La Puce à l'oreille* (*A Flea In Her Ear*), Théâtre des Nouveautés
1908	*Occupe-toi d'Amélie* (*Look after Lulu*), Théâtre des Nouveautés
	Feu la mère de Madame (*Madame's Late Mother*), Théâtre de la Comédie Royale
1909	Moved into the Hôtel Terminus, where he lived until 1919
	Le Circuit (*The Circuit*), Théâtre des Variétés
1910	*On purge bébé* (*Purging Baby*), Théâtre des Nouveautés
1911	*Cent millions qui tombent* (*A Hundred Million Falling*), Théâtre des Nouveautés
	Mais n'te promène donc pas toute nue! (*Don't Walk Around Naked!*), Théâtre Fémina
	Léonie est en avance (*Léonie Is Early*), Théâtre de la Comédie Royale
1913	*On va faire la cocotte* (*We're going to play cocotte*), Théâtre Michel
1914	Divorced
	Je ne trompe pas mon mari (*I'm Not Deceiving My Husband*), Théâtre de l'Athénée
1916	Suffered increasing bad health caused by syphilis
	Hortense a dit: 'Je m'en fous!' (*Hortense said: 'I don't care!'*), Théâtre du Palais-Royal
1919	Committed to a sanatorium by his family
1921	Died June 5

Introduction

Feydeau's father, Ernest Feydeau, was a stockbroker and novelist, a friend of Baudelaire, Flaubert and the Goncourt brothers – who mocked him in their *Journals* for an interest in ancient Egypt so passionate that it was 'a form of adultery with him'. He died when his son was eleven, and his wife and her second husband (the drama critic Henri Gouquier) sent the boy to boarding school. At about this time young Feydeau first became fascinated by theatre, and – like his near contemporary Alfred Jarry – wrote skits and sketches to amuse his school friends.

From 1883 Feydeau worked as secretary to the Renaissance Theatre, and his first full-length play, *Tailleur pour dames* (1887), had a successful run there when he was twenty-five. At about the same time he met and married an heiress, and in 1892 he had a hit with *Monsieur chasse!* at the Palais-Royal, the theatre which had previously seen Labiche's greatest triumphs. In the same year, *Champignol malgré lui* opened at the Nouveautés, and it and *Tailleur pour dames* each ran for more than 1000 performances. Feydeau went on to write more than two dozen plays, ranging from one-act sketches to historical spectaculars, and including the *grands vaudevilles* for which he is best known outside France: these range from *Un Fil à la patte* in 1894 to his mature masterpieces *L'Hôtel du libre échange*, *Le Dindon*, *La Dame de chez Maxim* and *La Puce à l'oreille*.

Feydeau's public success was offset by private misery. He spent each afternoon writing or directing, each evening at the show and then at Maxim's (where he had a table permanently reserved); he returned home at three or four in the morning, and began again at noon the next day. His wife shared none of his interests, and eventually asked him to leave. He gambled on the stock exchange, and lost not only the fortune his plays earned but also his valuable art collection. In 1909 he moved to a suite in the Hôtel Terminus (near the Gare St Lazare), and spent ten years there, dividing

his time between the theatre, Maxim's and a succession of whores, from one of whom he contracted syphilis. He stopped writing in 1916; in 1919 he announced that he was Napoleon III, and was committed to an asylum; he died in 1921.

This private anguish is occasionally reflected in the plays. A bitter or bilious note sometimes darkens the hilarity, and collapsing marriages and lonely bachelors are treated with more savagery than the plots seem to warrant. But it hardly impinged on his dazzling public success. He was the most successful dramatist of his generation in France, and regularly had two, three or even four plays running at the same time in Paris. He was an actor and a director whose stage business exactly matched the demonic ingenuity of his plotting and dialogue. By his death he was regarded as one of France's major comic dramatists, a worthy successor to Molière and Labiche, and his work is still performed cyclically at the Comédie Française, two different plays each year.

Feydeau's style

Feydeau was a highly self-conscious stylist. He learned his craft as a schoolboy by writing parodies and imitations of authors he admired, and in later life often wrote scenes and sketches simply as stylistic exercises. He analysed the work of his great forebears and successful contemporaries, borrowing – in a way which can easily be traced – a plot-inflexion here, a type of scene there, a turn of phrase or business somewhere else. Until the late 1890s he regularly worked with collaborators, in the manner favoured by all comic dramatists of the time – not so much sharing the actual writing, as honing ideas together before one or other set the results down on paper. (In Feydeau's case the writing is clearly his own. Each collaborator's role seems to have been mainly to give advice and approval, and in any case by the time of *Le Dindon* he was working, for preference, entirely on his own.)

Feydeau's main sources were Molière, and through him the *commedia dell'arte*, Plautus and Terence. These provided a

repertoire of characters and situations, and above all an attitude to society and human nature, which are the basic stock of farce. His gulled husbands, scheming servants, pompous military men and vacuous idiots may wear the clothes and follow the social conventions of the *belle époque*, but they come directly from this tradition. From Molière, especially, he learned the power of farce to make barbed social comment: he particularly admired *Le Malade imaginaire* and *L'Avare*.

One of the most fertile strands in Molière's output, that of the *comédie-ballet*, had been devised initially as a court entertainment for Louis XIV. These works (*Le Bourgeois Gentilhomme* is typical) frame straightforward satirical farce with extravagant music numbers, often involving pantomime-like characters (such as genies and mad professors), and using an unlikely mixture of ballet skills and slapstick. This tradition was matched, in popular theatre, by the vaudeville, or *voix de ville*. This was satirical street entertainment, in which the manners and ideas of the pretentious were burlesqued in (often bawdy) verse set to popular tunes, and whose grotesque and slapstick action was sometimes – as in *commedia dell'arte* – totally unrelated to the words being said. In Britain, and later in the United States, the style evolved into 'music-hall' and 'vaudeville' respectively; the sketches were separated from the music-numbers (though both remained satirical) and the physical display was split between slapstick (for example drunk-scenes) in the sketches and displays of such skills as plate-spinning or eccentric dancing (and later, striptease) among the other items. In France, the vaudeville tradition was gentrified into a kind of pastoral opera with spoken dialogue (of which Rousseau, no less, wrote an early example), into operettas like those of Offenbach, and into farcical plays satirising the bourgeoisie, with interpolated songs set to popular tunes of the day.

Labiche was the great nineteenth-century master of this last form, and his *An Italian Straw Hat* (usually nowadays performed without the songs) is a characteristic example of the genre. He also perfected a kind of vaudeville without

songs: plays using physical business and rapid crosstalk to satirise bourgeois manners of the time. They were called *grands vaudevilles*, and are the principal link between Molière and Feydeau, and the main influence on Feydeau's style. In his *grands vaudevilles*, Labiche worked consciously to develop character: the puppet-like figures of *An Italian Straw Hat* are the exception in his work. The comedy is motivated by each character's individuality as well as by the needs of the situation: obsession, irritation and obtuseness, and the misunderstandings they engender, motor every play.

Labiche's plots – and Feydeau's after him – were also crucially influenced by the then-current fashion for the 'well-made play'. In this, the plot (usually in three acts) begins with an exposition which tells us the background history of the characters and also that there is a secret whose discovery will change all their lives. It starts at normal pace, but gathers momentum irresistibly until the first-act curtain comes down on confusion (often caused by revelation of the secret in question). There follows a series of *quidproquos*: mistakes, ironies, deceptions, misunderstandings, which always lead to a reversal of the hero's situation, from heights to depths or vice versa. The third act then explores the way this reversal affects every other character, and tidies up loose ends. Thousands of serious 'well-made plays' were written in the late nineteenth century – Ibsen's prose tragedies are outstanding examples – and the style was a main theatrical form in France, seen at its best in the plays of Augier, Becque and Sardou and of course the farces of Labiche. It was particularly valuable to farce-writers, as its discipline corseted the raucousness of vaudeville, allowing slapstick and hilarity to co-exist with a sustained satirical assault on bourgeois morality and convention.

Although Feydeau's main debt is to Labiche, he also learned from three contemporaries in particular. Maurice Hennequin, in the 1870s and 1880s, had great success with lunatic-action farces, successions of non-sequitur dialogue and slapstick confrontation – the original 'doors' French farces and the models for many of Feydeau's second acts (such as

that of *Le Dindon*). Henri Meilhac, 'the Marivaux of the boulevards', and his collaborator Louis Halévy, wrote, among other things, the books for Offenbach's mythological burlesques, and were masters of the difficult art of letting characters speak apparently airy, natural dialogue while actually articulating the most extravagant passions and bizarre ideas. Their scripts flow as evenly and seamlessly as Hennequin's are unpredictable, and their influence can be seen particularly in Feydeau's opening acts, and in the way he brings back dialogue-interest in his third acts, restoring of urbanity which, while never less funny, produces a welcome change of pace from the breakneck slapstick of the second acts.

Feydeau's mastery of the conventions of the well-made play – not to mention his audience's familiarity with the form – allowed him to ironise and parody both it and its component parts, to deal easily and farcically with subjects which, handled by serious dramatists at the same period, evoked howls of outrage and embarrassment. Impotence, for example, is a subsidiary theme in Act Three of *Sauce for the Goose* (where it arises, if that is the word, from Redillon's sexual exhaustion) and it motivates the whole plot of *A Flea in Her Ear* (where, because Chandebise is impotent, his wife suspects – quite wrongly – that he is 'spending himself' with a lover). Another serious subject which runs through all the plays, to the point of obsession, is the status of women: their equality with men and their 'power' within society and especially within marriage and the household. Feydeau's plots may revolve around adulterous intrigues (or, rather, would-be or mistakenly-suspected-to-be adulterous intrigues), but the meat of the plays is often the way a wife takes control, asserts her individual dignity, even sanity, in a lunatic world. Invariably, he gives his women more richness of character than his men; the men bluster, scheme and flail, while the women change and grow. This gives his plays a dimension lacking in other farces – even in such masterpieces as (in English) *The Rivals* or *The Importance of Being Earnest* – and links them with such later writers as Orton, who explores what

might be called the condition of psychological anarchy, or Ayckbourn, in whose plays psychological inadequacy is a recurring theme. It is the essence of farce that such serious matters – indeed any serious matters – should not obtrude, that silliness should rule. But audiences leave a Feydeau play sated in a different way from most other farces, and I believe one of the main reasons is the way he touches on the darkness in human life and the unpredictable obsession not only at the surface but deep down in human character.

Each of the plays included in these two volumes shows a different aspect of Feydeau's art. *Jailbird* (*Gibier de potence*) is an early work, first performed in 1883, at a semi-private theatre club, organised by the twenty-one-year-old author and like-minded friends. It was one item in a miscellaneous programme of monologues, comic songs and daft poems; Feydeau himself directed and took the part of Plumard. The piece shows occasional apprentice touches: the inconsequentiality of some of the jokes, for example, climaxing in the very last line of all, suggests a group of students giggling together rather than a single-minded artist fully in control of his effects. But the themes of Feydeau's major works are all here, and the misunderstandings and dazzle of the dialogue show his mastery even at this early age. In particular, the 'unmasking' scene and the scene where Lemercier and Taupinier try to outboast one another as assassins stand with his most lunatic, most felicitous inventions.

Pig in a Poke (*Chat en poche*) was first performed in 1888, a year after Feydeau's first big 'hit', *Tailleur pour dames*. It is a masterpiece of construction, not so much an arch as continuous escalation of confusion – and the Meilhac/Halévy influence is especially noticeable, in that the characters' apparently ordinary dialogue (the kind of language you might have heard in any drawing-room of the time) belies the astounding content of what the people are saying or the thoughts inside their heads. Examples of Feydeau's scintillating stagecraft in this play are his careful, almost Ibsenish

control over the escalation of the daftness in the first act, the counterpointing in Act Two of the Winstanley/Julie story with the main plot, and the way he keeps back the play's major surprise, the Sistine Chapel business, until the last act, just when we might think that the comic possibilities of the situation had been exhausted. *Pig in a Poke* may be chamber music compared to the grand symphonic structures of *A Flea in Her Ear* or *The Girl from Maxim's*, but it is also one of his most accomplished works.

Now You See It (*Le Système Ribadier*, written in collaboration with Hennequin in 1892), a darker comedy altogether, subverts the vaudeville tradition, even as it follows it, letting the men's obsessions turn them into mechanistic puppets – in a manner English readers may associate with Orton's characters in *Loot* or *What the Butler Saw* – while the heroine's character and personality flower before our eyes. It has one of the smallest casts and tightest constructions of any Feydeau farce. It was one of the author's own favourite plays and he revived it in 1909 under a new title, *Nothing Known.*

The One That Got Away (*Monsieur chasse!*, 1892) is a fine example of Feydeau's 'demented clockwork' style of plotting, an effect much heightened by the smallness of the cast. Act One sets up a dozen criss-crossing situations, and shows us a group of people each of whom has something to hide from at least two of the others. Act Two brings all these people together in a situation where they should never, ever, meet, and is a frenzy of mistaken identities, mock-tragic dialogue and slapstick action involving doors, a closet, a double-bed, a man in underwear and a police chase. (Feydeau, who directed his own plays, always made his actors perform the dialogue of such scenes with utmost seriousness, as if they were high tragedy; the action, by contrast, was speeded up, heightened and mechanistic. Dislocation between the two styles made for hilarity – a production-method still followed in France, where Feydeau's farces are performed in rotation at the Comédie Française, but curiously seldom observed in English-language productions, perhaps because our farce-traditions tend more towards the end of the pier in one

direction or 'high comedy' in the other.) Act Three picks up all the dangling loose ends from Act Two, further twists them and then untangles them while at the same time resolving the 'serious' issues of the play: Duchotel's infidelity and the suspicions of Léontine which set the action spinning in Act One.

Sauce for the Goose (*Le Dindon*), which enjoyed a long run at the Théâtre du Palais-Royal in 1896, is a characteristically 'well-made' *grand vaudeville*, with a lunatic second act framed by gentler material. It is, however, driven by character. Each person is clearly individuated and the differences between Redillon and Potagnac or Lucienne and Clotilde make the point that two individuals can share the same approach to life, or the same response to unexpected events, but show it in entirely different ways. Both this play and *Heart's Desire Hotel* (*L'Hôtel du libre échange*), which dates from two years earlier, make use of the hotel setting in order to create a space situated halfway between the private and the public, a space where desires which cannot be spoken of in a polite bourgeois salon emerge and press for satisfaction. Both plays make hilarious use of rooms with several doors, some of which allow for escape, while others lead only into cupboards or bathrooms. And both plays benefit from the sense that hotel guests have of being constantly observed, even spied on, by people they hardly know. *Heart's Desire Hotel* is justly one of the most famous comedies of assumed identity in the repertoire; the fact that the only couple to achieve any satisfaction is the young Maxime and Victoire, while the older characters remain frightened and frustrated, is entirely in keeping with the traditions of farce going back to classical times.

In most of Feydeau's plays the characters are drawn from middle-class society, but the plot of *The Girl From Maxim's* (*La Dame de chez Maxim*, Théâtre des Nouveautés, 1899) turns on a liaison – or rather two liaisons – between representatives of the respectable middle classes and a show-girl named 'Shrimp' (*la môme crevette* in Feydeau's original). After a series of *quidproquos*, all set off as usual by the terrified attempts of

the respectable married man to find a way out of the embarrassing situation his sex drive, combined with a lot of drink, has landed him in, it is the show-girl who saves the day by her cool-headedness and lack of personal pretensions. In this respect, both this play and *She's All Yours* (*La Main passe*, Théâtre des Nouveautés, 1904) come close to the Naturalist plays of the period in which bourgeois hypocrisy, especially in sexual matters, was satirised in more serious dramatic form. The characters of *She's All Yours* are recognisable people, who might be part of a play by Galsworthy. They are trying to come to terms with the modern world (as the play opens Chanal is trying to record a message on a phonograph) and the dilemmas into which they get themselves are at least partly due to their chronic inability to communicate with one another that recalls Chekhov.

Translation

Translating farce is risky. We are dealing not just with a foreign country, whose customs and manners are only superficially like our own, but with foreign slang, foreign preconceptions and foreign ideas of funniness. This is a major part of the appeal, but it can also give the plays, in translation, a kind of exotic, pseudo-literary gloss lacking in the original. Gogol's The Government Inspector is a case in point. Its humour depends on a clear view of Russian small-town society at a particular moment in time, and the attitudes of people of that place and time to each other, to visitors, dignitaries and servants, are vital to the jokes. But to go at it head-on, to assume that the audience will know, or pick up, every nuance, would be to produce a play in English whose oddness baffled as often as it seduced. The results might be funny, but would weight the play in a way quite different from the original: it would become first and foremost a literary work, a critique, rather than a piece of straightfor¬ward stage entertainment. I have seen foreign-language versions of Ben Travers which unwittingly give the same impression. An alternative method of

translation, regularly followed in Britain until the 1960s, is to resite the farce in a local setting, to English it. (In 1896 *Now You See It* was performed in Drury Lane in a version resetting it among the English aristocracy; in 1959 Coward similarly reworked *Occupe-toi d'Amélie as Look after Lulu!*) This process of adaptation sanitises the foreignness, but it can also choke the original motor of the humour, replacing the original preconceptions and 'givens' with notions from entirely another place and time.

In this volume, I have treated each of the plays slightly differently, though my purpose has been the same each time: to try to recapture the effect I think Feydeau was aiming at, in a form instantly understandable by modern English-speaking audiences. The translation of *Sauce for the Goose* is ninety-eight per cent meticulous. The first exception is the title. *Le Dindon*, to a French audience, means not only 'the turkey' but also the standard farce fall-guy, the character on whom every indignity is dumped – including, in this case, the reversal of fortune on which a 'well-made' play depends. Potagnac's last line, in the original, is, 'It was written [in the stars]: I'm the dindon' – and so he is. The second exception is the characters of Brünnhilde and Soldignac. In the original they are English, and speak a kind of strangulated, invented English which must have been hilarious in 1890s France but doesn't work in 1990s Britain. I began by giving them the kind of plum-in- the-mouth English we are used to in farce, but found that this made them more complex than the simple 'volcanoes' Feydeau had in mind, overbalancing their scenes. In the end I made them German, or rather cod-German, as fake as Feydeau's original English.

Pig in a Poke combines farce and comedy of manners, and it seemed to me that a rigid but unspoken social framework ought to underlie the action. Although that of the original (bourgeois Paris of the *belle époque*) is remote from us, it is paralleled in Edwardian England, and I accordingly reset the play in Camberwell in 1909. Since this made nonsense of Pennyfeather's original

home (southern France), I transposed him first of all to Wales and then, because this hardly seemed exotic enough, to South America. The play also depends, in part, on the absurdities and pretensions of 'polite language' (which is constantly undercut by the basic situation); for this reason I slightly formalised my English, leaning a little towards the style of Pinero, Grundy, or other farce-writers of the period. When I began work on *Now You See It,* I took notice of Shaw's criticism of the 1896 English production mentioned above. He said that the play would be strengthened if it were dovetailed from three acts to two, and if the action were 'rotated' so as to be seen from the wife's point of view rather than those of the husband or lover. When I tried this, I found that it highlighted Feydeau's exposition of her character, making its development central to the plot. I reinforced this by making Summersby (Ribadier in the original) not merely a pompous, hypocritical businessman but an MP working, officially at least, for female emancipation. I made Shaftesbury-Phipps (Thommereux in the original) come home from India, the British Empire, rather than from Batavia, the Dutch Empire. And finally, I replaced two tiny Feydeau characters, a maid and butler, with the invented character of Oriole. Satisfyingly, despite these shifts and redirections, it was possible to leave most of Feydeau's original dialogue intact.

Kenneth McLeish, June 1993
(with additional material by David Bradby)

Translator's note: the original French texts, prepared from the prompt script, were full of indications of the actors' moves in the first production ('he goes two steps up left'; 'she sits' and so on). I have pruned these to a minimum, keeping suggested blocking and business only when they seem integral to character or action.

Kenneth McLeish's great passion was for comedy, and he delighted in the skills it demanded from everyone involved. He intended that these plays should be dedicated to all those professionals and amateurs who worked with him over many years to make people laugh. I am very grateful to David Bradby for his work in completing the introduction.

Valerie McLeish, 2000

The Girl From Maxim's

La Dame de chez Maxim

Characters

Lucien Petypon, *a society doctor*
Gabrielle, *his wife*
Doctor Édouard Mongicourt
Étienne, *Petypon's servant*
Shrimp, *from the Folies-Bergère*
General Petypon du Grelé
Lieutenant Marollier
Varlin, *an insurance agent*
Captain Corignon
Roadsweeper
Curé
Clémentine, *the General's niece, engaged to Corignon*
Émile, *the General's batman*
Chamerot, **Guérissac**, *junior officers on the General's staff*
Dowager Duchess of Valmonté, *an aged aristocrat*
Duke of Valmonté, *her son*
Baroness, **Madame Claux**, **Madame Ponant**, **Madame Hautignol**, **Madame Virette**, *a clan of provincial ladies, intent on good breeding*
Vidauban
Madame Vidauban
Tournoy
Madame Tournoy
Lord Mayor
Lady Mayoress
Children, **Firemen**, **Footmen**, **Officers**, **Porters**, **Wedding guests**

The action takes place in the 1880s. Acts One and Three take place in Petypon's Paris apartment, Act Two in the General's château in Touraine.

Act One

Reception room of **Petypon***'s apartment. R, door to the hall; window. L, door to* **Gabrielle***'s rooms. Centre back, slightly at an angle, large curtained archway leading to* **Petypon***'s bedroom. The archway should be large enough for us to see the bed and other bedroom furniture. Onstage, the usual furniture: tables, chairs, armchairs, sofa, pouffe covered with a tablecloth, office desk, sideboard, bookcase. One other chair is brought in during the action: the 'Ecstatic Chair' (see page 53).*

As the curtain rises, the stage is in darkness, so that we can't yet see the fantastic disorder of the room, as if after a wild party. Doorbell, off. Pause. Then we hear voices in the hall.

Mongicourt (*off*) You're joking. He can't be.

Étienne (*off*) But he *is*, Monsieur.

Enter **Mongicourt** *and* **Étienne**.

Mongicourt (*loudly*) How *can* he be still asleep?

Étienne Not so *loud*, Monsieur.

Mongicourt (*lower*) How *can* he be still asleep?

Étienne It's a *mystery*. He's always up at eight, and it's twelve already . . .

Mongicourt Fast living.

Étienne Pardon, Monsieur?

Mongicourt Not important.

Étienne I thought I heard Monsieur say 'fast living'.

Mongicourt You know what that is.

Étienne Well, *no*, Monsieur. But I do know Doctor Petypon. A perfect gentleman – I'd trust him with my wife.

Mongicourt *You*, married?

Étienne Good heavens, no, Monsieur. And if *that's* fast living, the way Doctor Petypon lives . . .

Mongicourt (*interrupting*) D'you think we could have some light in here? You can't see a thing.

Étienne Of course, Monsieur.

He opens the curtains. The room is in chaos, the sofa overturned, chairs and tables all over the place. A squashed top hat; a collapsed umbrella.

Mongicourt *and* **Étienne** Oh!

Étienne What's been going *on*?

Mongicourt Looks like an orgy.

Étienne But what was he *doing*?

Mongicourt Fast living.

Étienne H'm. If you ask me, *drink* was taken.

Mongicourt Étienne!

Étienne No, Monsieur. Not Doctor Petypon. All he drinks is soda water . . . with a dash of milk to settle his stomach.

Mongicourt (*pointing to the pouffe*) What on earth is that?

Étienne A pouffe, Monsieur. It's temporary. Madame's embroidering a cover. Till then, we're using that tablecloth.

He fusses round the room.

What a mess!

He starts tidying. **Mongicourt** *picks up the remains of the top hat.*

Mongicourt Whatever's this?

Étienne A hat, Monsieur.

Mongicourt Very stylish.

Étienne I don't know *what* he was doing . . .

Mongicourt Never mind what he was doing. I need him. Now. Wake him up. It *is* twelve o'clock.

Étienne You'll have to take the blame, Monsieur.

Mongicourt I'll take it.

Étienne And it'll have to be done by normal sounds.

Mongicourt Pardon?

Étienne Doctor Petypon insists, Monsieur. He *hates* it when people wake him up by, ooh, I don't know, firing pistols.

Mongicourt I'm quite unarmed.

Étienne He likes to come to consciousness gradually. Humming would be good. D'you think we could hum for him, Monsieur?

Mongicourt If you say so.

Étienne Quietly at first, then gradually louder.

Mongicourt Any particular tune?

Étienne No, no. What about – ?

He hums 'Frère Jacques'.

Mongicourt Why that?

Étienne Madame embroiders to it. I find it *haunting.*

Mongicourt Well, if you say so . . .

Étienne Quietly at first, Monsieur.

Mongicourt Yes, yes, whatever.

He and **Étienne** *begin singing 'Frère Jacques'. They start quietly, but end up shouting at the tops of their voices. After some time there is a deep groan. It is impossible to say where from.*

Mongicourt Shh!

Étienne What is it?

Mongicourt Some kind of animal.

Étienne Ah. No. That's Doctor Petypon. He'll be waking up.

Mongicourt Thank God for that.

Petypon (*invisible*) Oh . . . oh . . . oh . . .

Mongicourt Petypon?

Étienne Monsieur?

Mongicourt Hey, Petypon.

Petypon (*still invisible*) Oh . . . oh . . . ergh?

Mongicourt Get up, for heaven's sake.

Petypon (*still invisible*) What time is it?

Mongicourt (*to* **Étienne**) Just a minute. That wasn't from the bedroom.

Étienne It seemed to be behind us.

Mongicourt (*looking all around*) Where are you?

Petypon (*sulkily; still invisible*) Where d'you think? In bed.

Mongicourt It's coming from there.

Étienne I think you're right.

They turn the sofa over. **Petypon** *is revealed in shirtsleeves, tie unfastened, sleeping.*

Mongicourt *and* **Étienne** Oops.

Mongicourt What are you doing down there?

Petypon *opens his eyes, stares blearily and yawns. They recoil.*

Mongicourt What a stink of drink.

Petypon Don't be ridiculous.

He turns over and goes back to sleep.

Mongicourt Hey, Petypon.

He slaps his feet.

Petypon Now what is it?

He sits up and bangs his head on the back of the sofa.

Ow. The bed's caved in.

Mongicourt Ha!

He and **Étienne** *right the sofa completely.*

Petypon This is the sofa.

Mongicourt So it is – and look, you're under it.

Petypon Under it? What d'you mean, under it? It *is* the sofa?

Mongicourt *puts the sofa back over him.*

Mongicourt Oh yes.

Petypon (*struggling angrily*) What are you playing at? Who planted this sofa here?

Mongicourt *lifts a corner of the sofa.*

Mongicourt God moves in a mysterious way . . .

Petypon Get it off me.

The sofa is lifted off. **Petypon** *sits up on the floor.*

Ow. My head.

Mongicourt That's right. They all say that.

Petypon Is it light yet?

Mongicourt Still a glimmer left . . .

Petypon Oh boy, oh boy, oh boy . . . (*To him.*) Oh wow.

Mongicourt Wow indeed.

Étienne Shall I help you up, Monsieur?

Petypon (*irritably*) Étienne, don't *bother* me!

Étienne Monsieur, you can't lie there all day.

Petypon And why not, pray? If I like it there? I lay down here on purpose . . . minutes ago, *seconds* ago . . . My decision. No one else's. Mine.

Étienne Yes, Monsieur. (*Aside.*) Oh dear, oh dear.

Petypon *gets up, helped by* **Mongicourt**.

Petypon And now I'm getting up. My decision. No one else's. If that's all right with you.

Étienne Of course, Monsieur. (*Aside.*) People get so *grouchy* under sofas.

Petypon (*to* **Mongicourt**) This is *highly* embarrassing. Ow. My head.

Étienne Shall I serve breakfast now, Monsieur?

Petypon Ugh. No. How do people *eat* breakfast?

Étienne I couldn't say, Monsieur.

Petypon Where's Madame?

Étienne Madame went out, Monsieur. To Father Dominic, Monsieur.

Mongicourt Still hoping for enlightenment?

Petypon You've no idea. Now she's *seeing* things. (*To* **Étienne**.) You: go.

Étienne Yes, Monsieur. (*Aside.*) We *are* in a mood today.

Exit. **Petypon** *cradles his aching head in his hands.*

Mongicourt Bad, is it?

Petypon (*throwing his eyes up to heaven*) Ee-ooooo . . .

He drags himself to a chair and sits on it.

Mongicourt I warned you. His Lordship demanded to

see the world. Step out . . . flutter his wings . . .

Petypon You snake in the grass! You dragged me round those dens of vice.

Mongicourt Thanks very much.

Petypon D'you think I'd have *dreamt* of it, left on my own? No, no: you said to yourself 'There's a simple, purehearted man, a scholar. Let's take his innocence and snap it, like a butterfly on a wheel.'

Mongicourt All I said was, 'Lucien, I'm dying of thirst. We've just spent two hours in surgery. Complicated case. Before we go home, let's go for a little drink.'

Petypon So where did you take me? Maxim's.

Mongicourt 'A little drink,' I said. You were the one who . . . When *did* you get home?

Petypon God knows.

Mongicourt The quiet ones are the worst. I tried to prise you loose. You wouldn't budge.

Petypon So you slithered away and left me. Snake in the grass.

Mongicourt I practise self-control. Ration myself. That's the secret – knowing when to stop.

He sits on the pouffe.

Look at us. Me – as you see me, now. You – asleep under the sofa.

Petypon Don't rub it in.

Mongicourt By eight o'clock I was visiting my patients. By eleven, I'd seen everyone on the list, including the man we operated on yesterday . . .

Petypon How is he?

Mongicourt No further complications.

He takes out his cigarette case.

Petypon Recovering?

Mongicourt Dead.

He takes out a cigarette.

Petypon Drat.

Mongicourt What did you expect?

Petypon I said it was profitless to operate.

Mongicourt No operations are ever profitless. They may not profit the patient, but they always profit the surgeon.

Petypon You're a cynic.

Mongicourt A professional.

He strikes a match. **Petypon** *leaps to his feet and blows it out.*

Petypon No, no. Pffffff.

Mongicourt Now what?

Petypon Don't smoke. Please, I beg you, don't smoke.

Mongicourt That bad, is it?

Petypon What a way to wake up . . . My head. Ow. And my mouth. Mniam, mniam, mniam.

Mongicourt Classic symptoms.

Petypon You think it's *medical*?

Mongicourt Fur-in-the-mouth.

Petypon Ah.

Mongicourt In Latin, *hangoveria.*

Petypon Yes. Or in Greek . . .

Mongicourt No idea.

Petypon Me neither.

He collapses on the pouffe.

Mongicourt You really knocked it back last night.

Petypon Say that again.

Mongicourt The Curse of Drink.

Petypon No, the Curse of Knowledge. I said to myself: 'A scholar should try everything.'

Mongicourt He gave his all for Science.

Petypon And now look at me.

Mongicourt These are early stages.

Petypon I'm limp. Legs, arms, limp. Quite useless.

Mongicourt Classic *hangoveria.*

Petypon It isn't *fair.*

Gabrielle (*off*) Up at last! Thank goodness. Oh, Étienne, take this shopping. Mind that one, it's fragile. (*Etc.*)

Petypon My God, my wife! Quick, tell me: can you tell that I've . . . ? Do I look as if I've . . . ?

Mongicourt Hardly at all.

Petypon Ah.

Mongicourt You could tell her you were out at a funeral –

Petypon What?

Mongicourt Yours. She *might* believe you.

Petypon Thanks. Just a moment . . . If I . . . (*He runs his hands through his hair, trying to look alert and awake.*) Does that . . . ? Is there any . . . ?

Mongicourt I shouldn't bother.

Enter **Gabrielle**. *She runs to* **Petypon**.

Gabrielle Ah there you are, darling. Up at last. You

really have slept in. Good morning, darling.

She frames his face in her hands to kiss him, and jolts his fragile head.

Petypon Good morning, Gab . . . oh . . . .

Gabrielle Édouard, good morning.

Mongicourt (*with a flourish*) Madame, your servant.

Gabrielle *turns* **Petypon** *to face her.*

Gabrielle Let me look at you a moment . . . No, you don't look yourself at all.

Petypon Don't you think so? I don't know what's the matter. I feel . . . oh, I can't *tell* you how I feel.

Gabrielle You're green. (*To* **Mongicourt**.) What's wrong with him, Édouard?

Mongicourt (*with professional gravity*) Gabrielle, I'm glad you asked. He's suffering from . . . *hangoveria. Extensiva.*

Petypon (*groaning*) Oh.

Gabrielle Dear God, he hasn't . . . ?

Mongicourt (*sombrely*) Gabrielle, I'm afraid he has.

Gabrielle It's serious?

Mongicourt He'll live: I can promise you that.

Gabrielle Oh, thank you. (*To* **Petypon**.) Poor darling . . . you've got *hangoveria.*

Petypon If Édouard says so.

Gabrielle We'll have to look after you. (*To* **Mongicourt**.) What can we give him? A pick-me-up? A glass of brandy?

Petypon (*a shout of anguish*) No, no. (*With a shudder.*) Not alcohol.

Gabrielle (*returning*) What would you recommend, Édouard?

Mongicourt (*importantly*) Ah, Gabrielle. The usual treatment is syrup-of-figs and vinegar.

Gabrielle Syrup of figs. Vinegar. Just a minute.

She makes to go out.

Petypon Hey, no. (*Aside to* **Mongicourt**.) What're you trying to *do* to me . . . ?

Mongicourt (*taking pity*) Fortunately, Lucien has already passed into the secondary stage, the abatement period . . .

Gabrielle Thank God.

Mongicourt A hot drink, perhaps. For us all, perhaps. Lemon tea, perhaps.

Gabrielle (*going upstage*) I'll ring for Étienne.

Mongicourt (*mocking, to* **Petypon**) That better?

Petypon (*to him*) You know I detest lemon tea.

Gabrielle (*cheerfully, to* **Petypon**) I'd never have believed you could wake up in this state. This morning you were sleeping so peacefully. You didn't even notice when I kissed you.

Petypon (*stunned*) What d'you mean? You . . . you . . .

Gabrielle Youyou? What do *you* mean, youyou?

Petypon You . . . you kissed me?

Gabrielle Yes.

Petypon In bed?

Gabrielle Well, naturally. You were fast asleep, rolled up in blankets. All I could see was the top of your head. I kissed it. You do seem surprised.

Petypon (*stunned*) What? No.

Gabrielle (*starting to go again*) Étienne's not coming. I'll fetch the tea.

Mongicourt (*going to the door with her*) I think he needs it.

Exit **Gabrielle**.

Petypon She kissed me in my bed . . . and I was under the sofa.

Mongicourt Baffling.

He sits down, to think better.

Petypon Well?

Mongicourt I said it was baffling.

Petypon (*collapsing on sofa*) Sleepwalking? Can't have been.

Pause. Suddenly a long, noisy yawn is heard from the bedroom.

Voice Aoooooahahahahaha.

Petypon Pardon?

Mongicourt I didn't speak.

Petypon You went 'Aoooooahahahahaha'.

Mongicourt No I didn't.

Petypon You must have done.
Voice (*yawning again*) Ahooo. Ooooaha.

Petypon (*getting up*) Good God.

Mongicourt (*getting up*) You said it.

Voice Aaaaooooaaaah. Ah. Ooooah.

Petypon It's coming from my bedroom.

Mongicourt Entirely.
They rush to the curtains at the back.

Petypon There's someone in there.

They pull back the curtains. Lying on the bed in a shift and little else is a girl with a fresh countenance and blonde hair cut short.

Petypon *and* **Mongicourt** Ooooops.

Shrimp (*sitting up*) Hello boys.

Petypon (*thunderstruck, to* **Mongicourt**) Who *is* she?

Mongicourt (*vastly amused*) Well, well, old man. Well, well, well, well, well.

Petypon (*beside himself*) What? Not. Nothing of the kind. Don't be ridiculous. (*To* **Shrimp**.) Mamzelle . . . who are you? Where did you spring from?

Shrimp Don't be silly. You know exactly where I sprang from.

Petypon (*indignantly*) I've never seen you before in my life. Why are you in my bed?

Shrimp Oh, come on. (*To* **Mongicourt**.) 'Why am I in his bed . . . ?'

Mongicourt He really wants to know.

Petypon Of course I want to know. (*Furiously to* **Mongicourt**.) Must you laugh like that? This isn't funny. (*To* **Shrimp**.) Come on, who are you? And how did you get here?

Shrimp Who d'you think you are, a judge? I'm Shrimp . . .

Mongicourt The Folies-Bergère, that dancer . . .

Shrimp (*patting his cheek*) Aren't you the clever one.

Mongicourt I say.

Shrimp Well, cleverer than *him.* He remembers nothing. The champagne . . . the cab-ride home . . . the sofa . . . the bedroom . . .

Petypon (*aghast*) What . . . ? We didn't. You, me . . . We can't have . . .