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A Game of Comedy

A Dramatic Sketch in One Act

From the French

By SHERWIN LAWRENCE, COOK

BOSTON
WALTER H. BAKER & CO

A Game of Comedy PS3505 .0558G3

CHARACTERS

Anatole Fromont, (Lead), A Parisian Actor on a Provincial Tour.

PIERRE, (Old Man), His Valet. Marie, (Ingenue), A Laundress.

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COSTUMES AND DESCRIPTION

ANATOLE FROMONT is about thirty-five years old. His face is strong and smoothly shaven, and his dark hair, just turning gray at the sides, is a trifle longer than that of a business man. He wears a fashionable frock coat and silk hat, and presents a figure which he knows is impressive. His manner is stately, and his air a bit grandiloquent. He takes himself quite seriously. In other words, he is a successful actor.

MARIE is a girl of nineteen, graceful, light-haired, slim and with large blue eyes. She is dressed simply. Her manner is timid and she agrees . with Fromont's estimate of himself.: * ; *

Prepare is about sixty, gray-headed and rather shriveled. He is crusty but has a dry sense of humor. He believes in Fromont's ability and rather · enjoys his idiosyncracies. - ·





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A Game of Comedy.

SCENE.—FROMONT'S apartment in Lyons. Door C.; door up L.; fireplace R.; table and easy chair L. C.; wood-basket at fireplace; books on table; chest of drawers at right of C. D.; china plaque on mantel over fireplace; sharp steel paper-knife on table.

(Curtain discovers Pierre setting things to rights.)

PIERRE. And now for his slippers. (Places slippers at fire.) M. Fromont will be in a rage when he comes home. Matinees always make him furious and provincial matinees are the worst of all. Mon Dieu! but monsieur is a great artist! I have been valet to Bisson, Malrivanch and Risel, but never with a man of such absolutely ungoverned temper as Anatole Fromont. O! certainly monsieur is a great artist.

Enter Marie, timidly.

MARIE. Monsieur has not returned?

PIERRE. Goodness! A woman!

MARIE. Does not Monsieur Fromont live here?

PIERRE. No, my girl. He and I exist here. We *live* only in Paris.

MARIE (aside). At last! This is his room! This is his chair! Hamlet's chair—Romeo's chair—Le Cid's chair! Ah!

PIERRE (aside). Humph! At last Lyons becomes interesting. I smell an adventure.

MARIE. Tell me, does monsieur study here?

PIERRE. At times.

MARIE. Do you think he will be long?

PIERRE. He should be here now.

MARIE. Oh, do you think he will see me?

PIERRE. The chances are that if you stay there, and he hasn't become blind, he'll see you as soon as he passes that door.

MARIE. And will he speak to me?

PIERRE. He will speak to me, at any rate. I can hear

him. "Pierre, show this person out."

MARIE. O, monsieur, not that! No, no! Monsieur Pierre, you must have some influence with him. I must speak one word to him, only one. Dear M. Pierre, you do not know me, but I know you. Don't you remember me? I am the little sweetheart of your nephew François.

PIERRE. Ah, now I recollect your face.

MARIE. Will you not use your influence with him? You

can get him to speak to me.

PIERRE. Do you think I am his prime minister rather than his valet? Besides I am afraid I should be doing François a bad turn.

MARIE (indignantly). Monsieur! I am an honest woman! (Pleadingly.) Ah, monsieur! it means so much to me. M. Fromont can tell me if I will do.

PIERRE. Will do?

MARIE. Yes, monsieur. If I can act.

PIERRE. Heavens! An aspirant?
MARIE. It is so hard to work with one's hands all day long.

And the francs come in slowly, O! so slowly.

PIERRE (aside). M. Fromont gives no encouragement to stage-struck girls. Ah, I shall be doing François a good turn after all. (A voice outside, "Pardon, monsieur." FROMONT, outside, answers "Blockhead.") He is coming. Go in there quickly. I will do what I can. [Exit, Marie L.

Enter FROMONT, C.

FROMONT. Pierre, mark my words, this is the last time I ever play in Lyons. Write Despard that I won't play to-night, and that I go back to Paris to-morrow.

Pierre. Surely monsieur does not ——

FROMONT (explosively). Surely monsieur does!

PIERRE. But your engagement!

FROMONT. But my engagement? (In anger.) Gods! am I master of my fortune or are you? Write to Despard! (Changing manner.) O, Pierre! I never was so flouted in all my life. The house was packed, the atmosphere was insupportable. Hundreds of dullards gaping at me. The only actors that were in touch with the audience were Osric and the grave-diggers. Their comedy, God save the mark! was

greeted with smirking satisfaction. The supreme soliloquy did not receive a hand. This put me on my mettle. I played the closet scene with all the fire of my soul in consequence. I was rewarded! How? These Lyonese bestowed upon me, grudgingly bestowed upon me, two curtain calls. Bah! the life I put into that scene was worth a dozen in Paris.

PIERRE (slyly). I appreciate monsieur's feelings.

FROMONT. Yes, and what did I see blazoned on a sign on the Rue de Voltaire on my way home? "Maurice Damas. Dramatic art taught in all branches. Five francs per lesson." Ye gods! Taught! Acting taught! The brain cultivated for drama. Does the locomotive move by the power of the engineer's brain? No! the living coals make it leap forward. The brain controls, but the fire of that iron heart is the power. Till that fire glows with life, the engine is a dead thing. So in our art. The impulse of the heart is the actor's inspiration. The brain may guide and control, but the power is here and here only.

PIERRE. Monsieur feels deeply.

FROMONT. And yet annually M. Damas will graduate a score of pupils who have paid their "five francs per lesson," who will smile complacently and say,—"Yes, thank you, I am an actor. I have M. Damas's diploma." Bah!

PIERRE. Lyons is a dismal city, monsieur.

FROMONT. Yet not altogether uninteresting. Pierre, I saw a face to-day.

PIERRE. Impossible!

FROMONT. As I was driving to the theatre in the midst of a crowd of prosaic provincials, I saw a slip of a girl. She was a slender, graceful peasant, and she had eyes, Pierre, eyes!

Pierre. Most people do, monsieur.

FROMONT. But not eyes like those. There was a soul behind them, Pierre, a soul. She melted away in the throng quickly enough, but I should like to see her again. I would almost repeat this afternoon to do it. But write that letter, Pierre.

PIERRE (as he goes out). Yes, certainly, monsieur is a great artist.

FROMONT (goes to table, pours wine from decanter to glass). To the eyes of the unknown! (Gets a book and sits down; MARIE enters L., unobserved. FROMONT senses the presence of a second person.) Pierre, bring me my Coriolanus. Do you hear? (Pauses.) Blockhead! are you dumb? (Throws

book towards her, then turns around.) My eyes! Pardon me, mademoiselle, I thought it was my stupid servant. Can Anatole Fromont be of service to you?

MARIE. Your valet, M. Pierre, was doubtful of my reception. FROMONT. I am an uncertain character, mademoiselle, but the thunder shower is over, the sunshine has entered, the atmosphere is clear.

MARIE. I'm afraid you will think me forward in coming here. I hardly dared to, myself, but I wanted to ask you something.

FROMONT (aside). Have I been mimicking love all these years to know it in three short minutes. O no, Fromont, you

are not such a fool as all that!

MARIE (embarrassed). I know, monsieur, I am very bold, but I want to ask you if you think, in time,—after years, you know,—if you think I ever could, you know, become clever enough to—to—to—O, monsieur! I want to be an actress.

FROMONT (aside). It is destiny! She wants to be an actress! (To her.) Mademoiselle, when I look into your face I am sure that heaven could not deny you anything. (Aside.) She shall act; she must act!

MARIE. All my life I have longed to become a player.

Then I saw you play Hernani. That decided me.

FROMONT. Allow me to ask, mademoiselle, whether you

wish to be a comedienne or to play tragedy.

MARIE. It must be a fine thing to make every one happy and contented, and to make them laugh and forget their troubles, but I would rather have them sorry for me and make them sympathize with me. I think I should rather play tragedy.

FROMONT. Well, if you have the fire which belongs to the true artist I will take you into my company and develop it my-

self.

Marie. O, monsieur! You overpower me. I never dared

hope so much. Indeed I did not!

FROMONT. But you must let me judge of your talent, and abide by my decision; and above all, keep away from M. Damas! There are so many actors now who have not the right to the name, that their example is a solemn warning against bringing out incompetents. (*Up stage*.)

MARIE. Shall I read to you?

FROMONT. No! That is not a true test. Let me see. I have it! You are a little Parisian milliner.

Marie. No, monsieur! A laundress. Fromont. No, no, no! A milliner.

MARIE. I, monsieur?

FROMONT. Yes, in an impromptu play. You come home after a hard day's work, impatient for the outing your husband has promised you. You enter with a song on your lips. Here is the cradle, with your baby. (Bringing wood-basket.) Here is the table laid for supper (arranges table ornaments, plaque, etc., then tears a leaf from a book and folds it) and here—here is a note. Your husband, Jacques, whom you love ah! so much, has left it. He has gone away forever with the little seamstress down-stairs. Go out, come in, and play this little drama.

MARIE. I hardly know what to do, monsieur, but I will try. (Exit and immediate entrance.) Don't you think the

little milliner would faint?

FROMONT. That is certainly among the possibilities.

MARIE. Then I shall faint. (Exit; enter.) O, I forgot to sing. (Exit; enter.) La, la, la, la, la. (Without expression.) Home at last. How tired I am. Where can Jacques be? Ah! here is a note. O God! O God! (Gro-

tesque faint.) How did you like that?

FROMONT (aside). Poor little girl! (Aloud.) There is more fault in the interpretation than in the conception. (Aside.) How can I tell her? Ah, there is a kinder way. Words would be too cruel. (Aloud.) Mademoiselle, will you permit me to show you more plainly than I could in words just what my suggestion meant? Let us reverse the case. The husband, a sturdy carpenter, comes home. His wife, Marie, has gone away with Henri the clerk of the grocery around the corner. Watch me. (Exit and enter.) Whew! What a run I've had of it! Up four flights of stairs, too. To tell Marie the news, and she's not come home yet. (To wood-box.) Ah, but her Majesty is at home! Bless her. Oh, you're awake, are you, princess? No, your prime minister hasn't got back from the shop yet, I am only an humble subject under the sway of the two sweetest tyrants that ever ruled a man. (Business at box ad lib.) Well, if mamma doesn't come in pretty soon, my news won't keep (c.) and I'll have to go down to the grocery and tell Henri all about it. There's a friend for a man! Ah! but when Marie comes home, looking forward to our walk on the quay, may be I won't surprise her! To think that old Brisemouch should retire and leave me master carpenter, and not tell me a word till the thing was done! (At mirror

over mantel.) Jacques, you're a master carpenter! do you know what that means? It means that Marie won't do any more work for old M. Bobose. It means that her Majesty in the cradle, will have a mother all the time instead of after hours, and kind neighbors for the rest. It means that we'll be two flights nearer the street next month. It means that what we've been toiling for all these years, little wife, you and I, has come at last. Well, I hope that Marie is kept long enough. Probably some crabbed old dowager must have her new bonnet for church to-morrow, never mindful of the tired little fingers that must work, work, work, all day long and stay late for her Sunday bonnet. Well, I'll talk to Babette in the cradle till in pops mamma. (Back to box.) Have you heard what I've been saying, Gipsy? That's right, open your eyes and look at your worthless old papa. How you do grow like the dearest woman in the universe. Yes, you'll be a big girl pretty soon, and bring the sunshine into my life, just like your mother; and when I feel that I can't live without you, you'll fall in love, just like your mother, and go out and marry some worthless good-for-nothing, just like your father. Well, I guess I'll light a pipe, if your supreme ladyship will allow me. Yes? Thanks. Hello, here are my slippers. Ready for my feet. So she has been here and gone. Where, I wonder? O, to one of those eternal customers to deliver a bonnet of course. And the table's laid. Laid for one and only one. like that! Did she suppose I would eat before she came home? Ah, and a little folded note too. Dear little note, and dear hand that penned you! Well, let's see what you say. Ha! ha! ha! ha! ha! etc. So you're playing me a joke, are you, little woman? "My heart bleeds to give you pain. We have waited too long for prosperity. I cannot live like this forever. Poverty is too dull. My happiness is stale. I have gone away with Henri. Don't blame him. Forgive me when you can. Be good to baby." But, really, that isn't a kind joke exactly. It might worry some people; but me, never. Oh no! I'm not such a fool. All the same, I wish Marie hadn't written it. How loud the clock ticks. Fough! I believe that written it. How loud the clock ticks. Faugh! I believe that letter has given me the blue devils. Jove! the fire is down. Baby will be cold. I'll get some wood down-stairs, but, in the meantime I'll trot into our closet and get you a nice warm comforter. (Exit and entrance.) My God! Then it is true. The letter is all true. All the trinkets, all the pretty dresses, everything gone! only a ribbon left. (He picks up the note and reads again.) "My heart bleeds to give you pain. We have waited too long for prosperity. I cannot live like this forever. Poverty is too dull. I have gone away with Henri. Don't blame him. Forgive me when you can. Be good to baby." May the curse of Heaven rest on them! No, no! I don't mean that. Not on her. I loved her, I-I-God pity me! I love her now. But him. Curses on him! A hundred thousand curses on him! My friend, my smiling, courteous, devilish friend! Did he think, artisan though I be, that he could do this and live? I'll hunt them down and kill him like the hound he is. Stay, let him live. His treachery will poison his peace. I know him. He can't be happy long. Ay, let him live and suffer. But for me? What for me? Desolation, dissipation? No, I'll not let the world flout me when there is an easy way out. (Sees dining knife on table.) How sharp it is. (Holds it before him, then looks towards cradle: lets his arm drop.) God! I had forgotten you. I'll live. live for my baby. (Kneels at basket; throws knife away, with sobs which turn to laughter as he rises.) Your servant, mademoiselle.

MARIE (dries her eyes). Monsieur, I have learned my lesson.

I thank you.

FROMONT. My child, you need not thank me. I have only tried to show you an unpleasant truth in a kinder way than words permit.

MARIE. I shall never think that I can act again.

FROMONT. Remember there is more in truth than in mockery, more in life than in imitation, more in love than in mimicry. Put aside your thought of the shadow. Merge yourself in the substance. Glow in the reality of life, of truth, of love.

MARIE. Yes, monsieur. I will go back to my love. My

François.

FROMONT (starts slightly; aside). A phantom vanished. A bubble burst.

MARIE. Adieu, monsieur.

FROMONT. One moment, mademoiselle. I am going to ask you to do me a great favor.

MARIE. If I can.

FROMONT (going to drawer and bringing down a bracelet). This trinket is one of my relics of a dearly loved mother. I ask you to keep it, and sometimes to think of a desolate actor whose life you brightened for half an hour.

MARIE. O monsieur, how beautiful! A thousand, thousand

thanks! How happy François would be to thank you too! Adieu.

(As she goes out she drops a rose which he picks up and plays with.)

Enter PIERRE.

FROMONT. Back from the substance into the shadow. So it goes on, nothing to regard, nothing to love.

PIERRE. You have Pierre.

FROMONT (drily). True, Pierre, I have you, of course.

PIERRE. And monsieur has his art.

FROMONT. My art! Yes! Pierre, you need not send that letter. I will act to-night, and Gad! I'll make those parvenus applaud!

CURTAIN.





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