

The Life of
Monsieur de Molière

Mikhail Bulgakov

Translated by Mirra Ginsburg



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Mikhail Bulgakov (1891–1940)



Afanasy Ivanovich Bulgakov,
Bulgakov's father



Varvara Mikhailovna Bulgakova,
Bulgakov's mother



Lyubov Belozerskaya,
Bulgakov's second wife



Yelena Shilovskaya,
Bulgakov's third wife

Translator's Preface

MIKHAIL BULGAKOV'S *The Life of Monsieur de Molière* is more than a biography. It is a book by one artist about another, with whom he feels a deep affinity. There is much besides their craft that links these two men across the centuries. Both had a sharp satirical eye and an infinite capacity for capturing the absurd and the comic, the mean and the grotesque; both had to live and write under autocracies; both were fearless and uncompromising in speaking of what they saw, evoking storms with each new work; and both shared what Bulgakov calls "the incurable disease of passion for the theatre".

Bulgakov – playwright, novelist and short-story writer – was born in Kiev in 1891, the son of a professor of the Kiev Theological Academy. Graduating from medical school in 1916, he practised medicine for a short time, then abandoned it for writing. In 1921 he went to Moscow, a city ravaged, cold and starving after the upheavals of war and revolution, and immersed himself in its miraculously teeming literary life. For several years he worked as a reporter and contributor of short satirical pieces to newspapers and periodicals, writing his first major novel, *The White Guard*, at night. Only the first part of the novel appeared in 1925. Its characters were members of the Russian intelligentsia. Because Bulgakov treated them with sympathy as human beings swamped by the cataclysms of the time, the novel provoked an outburst of abuse from Communist critics, who branded him a "neo-bourgeois", an "internal émigré" and an "apologist for the class enemy". Despite this, the Moscow Art Theatre invited him to dramatize the novel and produced the play in 1926, under the title of *The Days of the Turbins*. The success of the play was instant and enormous, but, like the novel, it was followed by a storm of violent criticism.

As in Molière's case, this set the pattern for Bulgakov's entire subsequent career: a series of brilliant works, success and the inevitable storm of abuse; plays accepted for production, rehearsed, then banned at the last moment; occasional brief lifting of the bans and

their reimposition; and a constant struggle to speak and to be heard. Ironically, the seventeenth century dealt with Molière far more kindly than the twentieth dealt with Bulgakov. Molière was able to write and to produce his works despite the scandals they provoked, thanks to the benevolent patronage of his spoilt, capricious King. A great admirer of the theatre, the King was undisturbed by the playwright's thrusts at groups that, for his own purposes, he desired to keep in check. Bulgakov had to cope with a totalitarian state and a totalitarian ideology that would not tolerate dissent or original vision.

By 1930 Bulgakov was completely barred from either publication or production. In despair, he sent a letter to the government, asking permission to go abroad. To him, he said, the ban on his writing was tantamount to a death sentence. However – he went on – if he were not allowed to leave, he begged to be given work in his other field, the theatre, as a director, an actor, an extra, or even a stagehand. Bulgakov was assigned to the Moscow Art Theatre as an assistant director and literary consultant, and continued in this capacity for several years. He was also permitted to dramatize the works of other writers, among them Gogol's *Dead Souls* and Cervantes's *Don Quixote*. The latter, significantly, was the last of his works to be produced in his lifetime.

Commenting admiringly on Molière's courage and persistence after the banning of *Tartuffe*, Bulgakov writes: "And what did the author of the luckless play do? Did he burn it? Or hide it? No. As soon as he recovered from the Versailles scandal, the unrepentant playwright sat down to write the fourth and fifth acts."

Further, prophetically, he says: "Yes, the play was banned, but it was impossible to stop its distribution, and it began to spread throughout France in handwritten copies. Moreover, rumours about the play reached other European countries."

Like his hero, Bulgakov, barred from his public, had the strength and courage to go on writing, and he left a large body of work that first began to come to light decades after his death, some of it, indeed, in handwritten or typewritten copies.

A lifelong admirer of Molière, Bulgakov worked on a play about him from 1930 to 1936. The play was admitted to production and its première took place in February 1936. After seven performances – successful, as usual – and attended, as usual, by a barrage of official criticism, the play was withdrawn from the repertory.

The biography, dated 1932–33, was not published until 1962, thirty years after it was written and twenty-two years after its author's death. "Who can illumine the tortuous paths of a comedian's life?" Bulgakov asks in *The Life of Monsieur de Molière*. "Who will explain to me why a play that could not be performed in 1664 and 1667 could be performed in 1669?"

One of the principal themes of *The Life of Monsieur de Molière* – the relation of the artist to his art and to society, especially a repressive society – runs through much of Bulgakov's work. It is found in his novel *The Master and Margarita*, in his play on Pushkin's death, *The Last Days*, in his play on Molière, *The Cabal of the Hypocrites* and in other works. Another concern that is often evident is anxiety over the fate of manuscripts, of works already created but kept from publication or production. In *The Master and Margarita* Bulgakov's Satan, Woland, says majestically: "Manuscripts don't burn." In *The Life of Monsieur de Molière* Bulgakov speaks of the disappearance of all of Molière's manuscripts and letters – "as though conjured away into thin air."

Written during an extremely difficult period in Bulgakov's life and without any immediate hope of publication, *The Life of Monsieur de Molière* is nevertheless a work of grace and warmth. Like Yevgeny Zamyatin – another of that infinitesimally small group of creative artists who retained their integrity in the face of all pressures to conform – Bulgakov was not only a master stylist, but also a master of many styles. With great subtlety and sensitivity his writing reflects the spirit, the colour, the rhythm, the very tone of the time and the characters he writes about.

In *The Life of Monsieur de Molière* the point of view is modern, yet also intimately of the period, as though Bulgakov were equally at home in both centuries, as though he were indeed both in the Moscow of the 1930s and also wearing a long kaftan and writing with a goose quill. He is bound by no conventions, formal or academic. His attentive presence is felt throughout. He steps as easily out of his time into Molière's as he does into the reader's company. With complete and charming spontaneity he addresses his characters, or his readers, and this spontaneity is so artful that barriers of time and distance disappear. Bulgakov simply walks by the reader's side, and his occasional comment, wry or ironic or affectionate, is as welcome as the voice of a good friend.

The author's extensive research, his striving for absolute authenticity of fact and detail, never weigh down the narrative. Molière's difficult and dedicated life is treated with the insight and imagination of a brilliant novelist and playwright. "The artist must love his subject", wrote Bulgakov. Because of this love, because of Bulgakov's art and warmth and great sympathy, Molière emerges before us as a living, struggling and ultimately tragic presence. And his biography reads like an absorbing novel, illuminating both the subject and the author. How infinitely moving, then, are Bulgakov's closing lines in which, suffocating in the vast prison of the spirit that Russia had become, he takes leave of the neglected bronze figure of his hero, sitting over a dried-out fountain in Paris: "There he is! It is he, the King's comedian, with bronze bows on his shoes. And I, who am never to see him, send him my farewell greetings."

The Life of
Monsieur de Molière

Prologue

My Conversation with a Midwife

What can prevent me from laughingly telling the truth?
Horace

*Molière was a famous writer of French comedies during
the reign of Louis XIV.*

Antioch Kantemir

A CERTAIN MIDWIFE, who had learnt her art at the Maternity House of Divine Charity in Paris under the tutelage of the famed Louise Bourgeois, attended the most charming Madame Poquelin, née Cressé, on 13th January 1622, at the birth of her first child, a premature male.

I can safely say that, were I able to explain to the estimable midwife just who it was that she was helping to bring into the world, she might have injured the infant, and hence France, in her flustered condition.

And now – I am dressed in a kaftan with huge pockets, and in my hand I have a goose quill, not a steel pen. Wax candles burn before me, and my mind is inflamed.

“Madam,” I say, “be careful as you turn the infant, don’t forget that it is premature. This infant’s death would mean the gravest loss to your country!”

“Good God! Madame Poquelin will have another!”

“Madame Poquelin will never have another like him, nor will any other lady for several centuries to come.”

“You amaze me, sir!”

“I am amazed myself. But you must realize that three centuries hence, in a distant country, I shall remember you only because you held the son of Monsieur Poquelin in your arms.”

“I have held infants of much nobler birth in my arms.”

“Ah, but what do you mean by ‘noble’? This infant will become more famous than your reigning King, Louis XIII; he will become more famous than your next king, and that king, madam, will be called

Louis the Great or the Sun King! My good lady, there is a distant land, unknown to you, which is called Muscovy. It is inhabited by people who speak a language strange to your ear. And before long the words of him you are helping into the world will reach this land. A certain Pole, the jester of Tsar Peter I, will translate them into the barbarian tongue, not from your language, but from the German.

“The jester, nicknamed the Samoyed King, will scribble clumsy lines with his scraping quill. Translator to the Russian Tsar, he will endeavour in his crude words to render in the tongue of Muscovy the lines of your infant’s comedy *The Precious Ladies Ridiculed*.

“The *Roster of Such Comedies as Are Reposited in the Department of Ambassadors to Foreign Courts, as of this Thirtieth Day of May, of the Year 1709* names, among others, the following: the clownish *About the Doctor Who Was Thrashed* (also known as *A Doctor Against His Will*), and *The Breed of Hercules, with Jupiter as the Chief Personage*. We recognize them. The first is *The Doctor in Spite of Himself*, another comedy by your infant. The second is *Amphitryon*, also by him. The same *Amphitryon* which will be played by Monsieur de Molière and his comedians in Paris in 1668, in the presence of Pyotr Ivanov Potemkin, Ambassador from the court of Tsar Alexei Mikhailovich.

“And so you see that the Russians will learn in this very century about the man you are now helping into the world. O, link of ages! O, currents of enlightenment! This infant’s words will be translated into German, into English, into Spanish and Dutch. Into Danish, Portuguese, Polish, Turkish, Russian—”

“But is this possible, sir?”

“Don’t interrupt me, madam! Into Greek! Into modern Greek, I mean. But also into ancient Greek. Into Hungarian, Romanian, Czech, Swedish, Armenian, Arabic!”

“You astound me, sir!”

“Oh, that isn’t all. I can name you dozens of writers translated into foreign languages who do not even deserve to be published in their own. But this one will not only be translated. He will himself become the subject of plays, and your own compatriots will compose dozens of them. Plays about him will also be written by Italians – among them Carlo Goldoni, who is said to have been born to the applause of the Muses himself – and by Russians.

“And not only in your country, but also in others will writers imitate his plays and compose variations on them. Scholars in diverse lands will write detailed analyses of his works, seeking step by step to reconstruct the mysterious thread of his life. They will prove to you that the man who is now showing but faint signs of life in your arms will influence many writers of future centuries, including my compatriots – unknown to you, but known to me – Griboedov, Pushkin and Gogol.

You’re right: that man will come through fire unharmed
 Who spends a single day with you,
 Who breathes the air you breathe
 And keeps his reason sound.
 Away from Moscow! Never to return.
 I flee without a backwards glance, to travel the wide world
 And seek some quiet corner where an injured heart can rest!

“These lines are from the end of *Woe from Wit* by my compatriot Griboedov.

“And now hear this:

And I, weighed down by injustice and betrayed by all,
 Shall leave this pit where vice is king,
 And go to seek a corner in a distant land
 Where one is free to be an honourable man!

“These are lines from a play by this very Poquelin, *The Misanthrope*, to be translated one day, almost two hundred years from now, by the Russian writer Fyodor Kokoshkin.

“Is there a similarity between these endings? Ah, good God! I’m not an expert, let scholars look into the matter! They will tell you how closely Griboedov’s Chatsky resembles Alceste the Misanthrope, and why Carlo Goldoni is considered a pupil of your Poquelin, and how Pushkin as a youth had imitated this Poquelin, and many other clever and interesting facts. I myself know little about it.

“But I am concerned with something else: my hero’s plays will be performed for three centuries on all the stages of the world, and no one can tell when people will stop performing them. This is what interests me! Such is the man this child will grow into!

“Oh, yes, I wanted to speak about the plays. A most estimable lady, Madame Aurore Dudevant, better known as George Sand, will be among those who shall write plays about my hero.

“In the finale of her play Molière will rise and say:

“I want to die at home... I want to bless my daughter.”

“And Prince Condé, approaching him, will say:

“Lean on me, Molière!”

“And the actor du Parc, who, incidentally, will no longer be among the living at the time of Molière’s death, will cry out, sobbing:

“O, to lose the only man I have ever loved!”

“Ladies are known to write with sentiment, there’s not much to be done about it! But you, my poor and bloodied master! You did not want to die anywhere – either at home or away from home! And it is highly doubtful that, when the blood gushed from your mouth, you gave expression to a wish to bless your daughter Esprit-Madeleine, who is scarcely of any interest to anyone!

“Who writes more touchingly than ladies? Why, some men. The Russian author Vladimir Rafailovich Zotov will provide an equally soul-felt finale.

“The King is coming. He wishes to see Molière. Molière! What’s happened to him?”

“He died.”

“And the Prince, running to meet Louis, will exclaim:

“Sire! Molière is dead!”

“And Louis XIV will remove his hat and say:

“Molière is deathless!”

“Who can gainsay these words? Yes, a man who has now lived more than three hundred years is surely deathless. But the question is whether the King recognized it.

“In the opera *Arethuse*, composed by Monsieur Campra, it was proclaimed:

““Gods rule the heavens, and Louis rules the earth!”

“The one who ruled the earth had never removed his hat before anyone but ladies, and would not have come to visit the dying Molière. And indeed, he did not come, nor did the Prince. The one who ruled the earth regarded only himself as deathless, but I believe he was mistaken in this. He was mortal like everyone else, and hence, blind. Were he not blind, he might have come to the dying man, for he would

have foreseen the remarkable things to happen in the future and would, perhaps, have wished to touch true immortality.

“He would have had a glimpse, in the Paris of my time, of the sharp corner where the streets of Richelieu, Thérèse and Molière converge, of a man sitting motionless between the columns. Below the man – two women of light marble, with scrolls in their hands. And still lower – lions’ heads over the dried-up basin of a fountain.

“There he is, the cunning and enchanting Gaul, the King’s comedian and playwright! There he is, in a bronze wig and with bronze bows on his shoes! There he is, the king of French drama!

“Ah, dear lady! Why do you talk to me about the high-born infants you have once held in your arms? You must realize that the child you are holding now in the Poquelin home is none other than Monsieur de Molière! Ah! I see you understood me. Be careful, then, I beg you! Tell me, did he cry out? Is he breathing?... He is alive!”

1

In the Monkey House

AND SO, on about the thirteenth of January, 1622, the first child, a sickly infant, was born in Paris to Monsieur Jean-Baptiste Poquelin and his spouse, Marie Cressé Poquelin. On 15th January he was christened in the church of Saint-Eustache and named, in honour of his father, Jean-Baptiste. Neighbours congratulated Poquelin, and it became known in the upholsterers' guild that yet another upholsterer and furniture merchant had come into the world.

Every architect follows his own fancy. At the corners of the pleasant three-storey house with a pointed roof sloping down on either side, situated on the corner of Rue Saint-Honoré and Rue des Vieilles-Étuves, the street of the Old Baths, the fifteenth-century builder had placed wooden carvings of orange trees with neatly trimmed branches. Along these trees stretched a chain of tiny monkeys plucking the fruit. Naturally, the house became known among Parisians as the monkey house. And the comedian Molière had to pay dearly later on for these marmosets! Many a well-wisher was to say that it was no wonder the elder son of the estimable Poquelin had chosen the career of a buffoon. What, indeed, could be expected of a man who had grown up in the company of grimacing monkeys? Nevertheless, the future comedian never renounced his monkeys; and in his later days, designing his coat of arms – Heaven alone knows what he needed it for – he depicted on it his long-tailed friends, the guardians of his childhood home.

This home was situated in the noisiest commercial section in the centre of Paris, not far from Pont-Neuf. The house was owned by Jean-Baptiste the father, Upholsterer and Draper to the Royal Court, who both lived and conducted his business in it.

In time the upholsterer attained yet another title – that of Valet to His Majesty, the King of France. And he not only bore this title with honour, but also secured its succession for his elder son, Jean-Baptiste.

It was rumoured on the quiet that Jean-Baptiste the father, in addition to selling armchairs and wallpaper, engaged in lending money at handsome interest. I see nothing prejudicial in that for a merchant. But evil tongues asserted that Poquelin the elder somewhat overdid it in regard to interest extracted, and that the playwright Molière depicted his own father in the image of the revolting miser Harpagon. And Harpagon was the man who tried to palm off on a client all sorts of rubbish in lieu of money, including a crocodile stuffed with hay, which, he suggested, could be suspended from the ceiling as a decoration.

I refuse to believe these empty gossip-mongers! The dramatist Molière did not malign his father's memory, and I will not malign it either.

Poquelin the father was a merchant, an eminent and respected member of his honourable guild. He sold his wares, and the entrance to the monkey shop was adorned with a flag bearing, yet once more, the image of the monkey.

The darkish first floor, taken up by the shop, smelt of paint and wool, coins tinkled in the cash box, and all day long a stream of customers arrived to choose rugs and wallpaper. Among the customers were both bourgeois and aristocrats. And in the back, in the workshop with windows looking out upon the courtyard, the air was dense with dust, chairs were piled on chairs, everything was littered with pieces of furniture wood, scraps of leather and fabric; and in the midst of this chaos Poquelin's master workmen and apprentices were busily at work with hammers and scissors.

The rooms on the second storey, above the flag, were the mother's domain, filled with the sounds of her constant, light coughing and the rustle of her heavy skirts. Marie Poquelin was a woman of substance. Her chests were filled with expensive dresses, cuts of Florentine materials, underwear of the finest linen. In the drawers she kept necklaces, diamond bracelets, pearls, emerald rings, gold watches and costly table silver. When she prayed, Marie fingered a rosary of mother of pearl. She read the Bible, and was even said – although I do not put much credence in it – to have read the Greek writer Plutarch in abridged translation. She was quiet, amiable and educated. Most of her forebears had been upholsterers, but there had also been occasional men of other professions, such as musicians and lawyers.

There was also in the upstairs rooms of the monkey house a fair-haired, thick-lipped boy. He was the eldest son, Jean-Baptiste. Sometimes he came down to the shop and the workshops and interfered with the apprentices, plying them with endless questions. The master workmen laughed good-naturedly at his stuttering, but were fond of him. At times he sat by the window, resting his cheeks on his fists, and looked at the dirty street where people hurried to and fro.

On one occasion, his mother, passing by, patted him on the back and said:

“Ah, my contemplator...”

And one fine day the contemplator was sent off to the parish school. At the parish school he learnt precisely what could be learnt in such a school; namely, he mastered the first four rules of arithmetic, learnt to read freely, assimilated the rudiments of Latin, and became acquainted with many interesting facts related in the *Lives of the Saints*.

And life went on, peacefully and happily. Poquelin the elder was growing wealthier; there were now four children, when suddenly misfortune struck the monkey house.

In the spring of 1632 the delicate mother took ill. Her eyes began to glitter and looked strangely troubled. Within a single month she became so thin that she was scarcely recognizable, and ominous red spots bloomed on her pale cheeks. Then she began to cough blood, and a succession of doctors, mounted on donkeys and wearing sinister tall caps, began to frequent the monkey house. On 15th May the plump contemplator sobbed loudly, wiping his tears with grimy fists, and the entire household sobbed with him. The quiet Marie Poquelin lay motionless, her arms crossed on her breast.

When she was buried, it was as though a constant twilight settled over the house. The father fell into distraction and melancholy, and his first-born saw him several times sitting alone on dark summer evenings, crying. The contemplator would get upset and wander all over the house, not knowing how to occupy himself. But then the father stopped crying and began to frequent a certain family by the name of Fleurette, and the eleven-year-old Jean-Baptiste was told that he would have a new mother. Soon after that Catherine Fleurette, the new mother, appeared in the monkey house. At this point, however, the family left the monkey house, because the father had bought a new one.

2

The Story of Two Theatre-lovers

THE NEW HOUSE WAS SITUATED in the marketplace itself, in the district where the famous Saint-Germain fair was usually held. And in the new place the enterprising Poquelin displayed his goods with even greater flair. In the old house Marie Cressé had governed the home and borne children; in the new one she was replaced by Catherine Fleurette. What can be said about this woman? Nothing, it seems to me, either bad or good. But because she had entered the family as a stepmother, many of those who were interested in my hero's life began to say that the younger Jean-Baptiste had been ill-treated by Catherine Fleurette, that she was a bad stepmother, and that it was she who had served as the model for Béline, the faithless wife, in Molière's comedy *The Imaginary Invalid*.

I believe all this to be untrue. There is no evidence that Catherine mistreated Jean-Baptiste, and none to prove that Béline was she. Catherine Fleurette was not a bad second wife, and she fulfilled her mission on earth: a year after the wedding, she bore Poquelin a daughter, Catherine, and two years later another, Marguerite.

And so Jean-Baptiste was a pupil at the parish school and finally graduated from it. Poquelin the elder decided that his son had broadened his horizons quite sufficiently and ordered him to start paying attention to the business of the store. Jean-Baptiste began to measure cloth, to use hammer and nails, and to banter with the apprentices. And in his free time he read the well-worn little book of Plutarch left from the days of Marie Cressé.

And now, in the light of my candles, I see a gentleman of bourgeois appearance on my threshold, in a modest but respectable kaftan, in a wig, and with a cane in his hands. He is very lively for his years, with bright, alert eyes and good manners. His name is Louis, his surname Cressé. He is the father of the late Marie, and hence the grandfather of the younger Jean-Baptiste.

By occupation Monsieur Cressé was also an upholsterer. But Cressé was not a court upholsterer; he was a private merchant and conducted his trade in the Saint-Germain market. He lived in a suburb of Paris, where he owned an excellent house with a good deal of land. On

Sundays the Poquelin family usually went to visit the grandfather, and the children retained happy memories of these visits.

Well, then, the old Cressé and the young Jean-Baptiste became great friends. What could have bound the old man and the youngster together? Perhaps the Devil himself? Yes, surely, that was his work! Their mutual devotion, however, did not go unobserved for very long by Poquelin the elder, and soon provoked his glum astonishment. It turned out that both grandfather and grandson were passionately in love with the theatre!

On the free evenings, when the grandfather came to Paris, the two upholsterers, old and young, would exchange mysterious glances, whisper something, and leave the house. It was easy to discover where they turned their steps. They usually proceeded to the Rue Mauconseil, where the King's players were giving performances in the low-ceilinged and gloomy Hôtel de Bourgogne. The estimable grandfather Cressé had firm connections with the elders of a certain society whose members were bound by both religious and commercial ties. This society was called the Fraternity of the Lord's Passion, and possessed the privilege of presenting mystery plays in Paris. It was this Fraternity that had built the Hôtel de Bourgogne, but at the time when Jean-Baptiste was a boy it no longer presented the mysteries, but leased the Hôtel to various groups of actors.

And so grandfather Cressé would pay a visit to one of the elders of the Fraternity, and the estimable upholsterer and his grandson would be given free seats in one of the unoccupied loges.

The leading actor at the Hôtel de Bourgogne theatre at that time was the famous Bellerose. The troupe presented tragedies, tragicomedies, pastorals and farces, and the foremost playwright of the hotel was Jean de Rotrou, a great admirer of Spanish dramatic models. Grandfather Cressé derived the greatest pleasure from the acting of Bellerose, and the grandson applauded heartily together with his grandfather. The grandson, however, preferred the farces to the tragedies enacted by Bellerose. These crude and light farces, borrowed for the most part from the Italians, had found in Paris most excellent performers, who freely juggled topical comments in their comic roles.

Yes, to the misfortune of Poquelin the elder, grandfather Cressé had shown the boy the way to the Hôtel de Bourgogne! And together with his grandfather when he was a boy, and with comrades when he had

grown into a youth, Jean-Baptiste had managed to see a great many marvellous plays at the Hôtel.

The famed Gros-Guillaume, who appeared in the farces, struck the boy's imagination with his flat-topped red beret and white coat barely closing over his monstrous belly. Another celebrated figure, Gaultier-Gargouille, dressed in a black camisole with red sleeves, with huge spectacles on his nose and a walking stick, also had the Bourgogne audience in stitches. Jean-Baptiste was equally impressed by Turlupin, with his inexhaustible store of tricks, and Alizon in the roles of ridiculous old women.

In the course of several years an endless number of figures whirled past Jean-Baptiste's eyes as in a carousel – pedantic doctors, old misers, bragging and cowardly captains, masked or made up with flour and paint. To the wild laughter of the audience, frivolous wives deceived their grumbling, stupid husbands, and comic bawds chattered away like magpies. Cunning, light-footed servants led aged Gorgibuses by the nose, old fogies were thrashed with sticks and stuffed into sacks. And the walls of the Hôtel de Bourgogne shook with the roaring laughter of Frenchmen.

Having seen everything that could be seen at the Hôtel de Bourgogne, the infatuated upholsterers would proceed to another large theatre, the Theatre on the Swamp – the Hôtel du Marais. This playhouse was the home of tragedy, in which the famous actor Montdory excelled, and of high comedy, the best examples of which were composed for this theatre by the most eminent dramatist of the time, Pierre Corneille.

It was as though the grandson of Louis Cressé was immersed in turn in different waters. At the Bourgogne, Bellerose, adorned in finery like a rooster, declaimed in sugary, tender tones. He rolled his eyes; then, fixing them at some invisible distant point, he would wave his hat in a graceful gesture and recite his monologues in a sing-song, so that it was impossible to tell whether he was speaking or singing. And at the Marais, Montdory would shake the walls with his thunderous voice and gurgle, dying tragically.

The boy returned to his father's house with fevered, glittering eyes, and at night he dreamt of the buffoons – Alizon, Jacquemin Jadot, Philippin and the famed Jodelet with his chalk-white face.

Alas! The Hôtel de Bourgogne and the Swamp did not exhaust all possibilities for those sick with the incurable disease of passion for the theatre.

At the Pont-Neuf and in the market district trade proceeded at full swing. Paris grew fat with it and spread out, growing more and more beautiful, in all directions. In the shops and in the street before them life ran riot, dazzling the eye and setting up a ringing in the ears. And where the Saint-Germain fair spread its tents, it was a veritable Babel. Din! Clatter! And the filth, the filth!

“My God, my God!” the crippled poet Scarron exclaimed about the fair. “The mountains of filth that can be raised all over by rear ends unfamiliar with underpants!”

All day long the crowds shuffle, walk, mill about! The townsmen and their pretty women! The barbers in their shops busily shave, soap chins, pull teeth. Riders rise above the dense mass of pedestrians. Doctors, as ponderous and self-important as crows, ride by on mules. Royal musketeers, with the golden arrows of their insignia emblazoned on their coats, sit lightly on their cantering mounts. Capital of the world, eat, drink, trade, grow! Hey you, rear ends unfamiliar with underpants, come here, to the New Bridge! Look, they are setting up tents and draping rugs over them. Who is this, shrilling like a pipe? A crier. “Do not delay, sirs, hurry, the show is just about to begin! Don’t miss the chance! Here only, and nowhere else, can you see the marvellous marionettes of Monsieur Brioché! There they swing over the dais on their cords! See the sensational trained monkeys of Fagotin!”

In the various stalls by Pont-Neuf there are street doctors, pullers of teeth, corn surgeons and quack apothecaries. They sell the people panaceas against every illness, and often, the better to draw attention to themselves, they enter into compacts with itinerant street actors, or even with actors playing in the theatres, and the latter give entire performances demonstrating the miraculous properties of the cure-alls.

There are solemn processions. Comedians, dressed up and adorned with dubious, rented finery, ride by on horses, shouting advertisements and calling the people. Street urchins follow them in flocks, whistling, diving in and out among the feet of the crowd and increasing the general pandemonium.

Thunder, Pont-Neuf! Amid your din I hear the birth cries of French comedy, born of the charlatan father and the actress mother. It screams piercingly, and its coarse face is powdered with flour!

All of Paris is agog over the mysterious, astonishing Cristoforo Cantugi, the purveyor of “orviétan”, who has engaged an entire company and opened a series of shows in a booth. There, with the aid of a group of Punchinellos, he has begun to sell his universal nostrum:

Nowhere else, you may be sure,
 Will you find a better cure!
 Orviétan, orviétan!
 Come and buy orviétan!

Masked buffoons swear in voices gone hoarse with shouting that there is no sickness in the world that cannot be cured by magical orviétan. “It will save you from consumption, it will drive away the plague, any itch and any ache!”

A musketeer rides past the booth. His thoroughbred stallion squints with a bloodshot eye, foam drips from his bit. Strangers to underpants bar his way, cling to the saddle. Voices howl from the orviétan booth:

Monsieur le capitaine,
 Won't you buy some orviétan?

“A plague on you! Out of my way,” cries the guardsman.

“Let me have some orviétan,” says a certain Sganarelle, tempted by the extravagant promises. “How much is it?”

“Sir,” replies the charlatan, “orviétan is priceless! I cannot take money from you, sir!”

“Oh, my good sir,” answers Sganarelle, “I realize that all the gold in Paris will not pay for this little box. But I could not possibly accept it as a gift. Here is thirty sous, if you please, and kindly give me my change.”

As dark-blue evening settles over Paris, lights go on. In the show booths tallow candles drip in smoky, cross-shaped sconces, torches with swirling tails shed flickering light.

Sganarelle hurries home, to the Rue Saint-Denis. He is pulled by his coat tails in all directions, urged to buy antidotes for every poison on earth.

The bridge clamours with a thousand noises.

And making their way through this human mass are a venerable grandfather and his adolescent companion in a crimped collar. And no one knows, and the actors on the boards do not suspect who it is that is

being jostled in the crowd before the charlatan's booth. Jodelet at the Hôtel de Bourgogne does not know that one day he will be a member of this youngster's company. Pierre Corneille does not know that in his declining years he will be happy when this boy accepts his play for production and pays him, a playwright gradually sinking into poverty, money for the play.

"Shouldn't we take a look at the next booth, too?" the grandson asks in civil, melting tones.

The grandfather vacillates – it's late. But he cannot resist:

"Oh, well, let us step in."

In the next booth an actor does tricks with a hat: he whirls it, folds it up into unusual shapes, crumples it, throws it up into the air...

And now the bridge is all lit up, and lanterns float throughout the city in the hands of pedestrians, and the piercing cry "Orviétan!" still lingers in the ears.

And it is very possible that in the evening the Rue Saint-Denis witnesses the finale of one of Molière's future comedies. While Sganarelle or Gorgibus was buying orviétan, with which he hoped to cure his daughter Lucinde of her love for Clèante or Clitandre, Lucinde had naturally run off with this Clitandre and married him!

Gorgibus raves! He was deceived! He was hoodwinked! He throws the damned orviétan in the face of his maid! He threatens!

But jolly fiddlers will appear, the servant Champagne will break into a dance, Sganarelle will make peace with the accomplished fact. And Molière will write a happy end to the evening, with lantern illumination.

And so, thunder, Pont-Neuf!

3

Should the Grandfather be Given Orviétan?

ONE EVENING Cressé and his grandson came home, excited and, as always, somewhat mysterious. Father Poquelin was resting in his armchair after a day's work. He asked where the grandfather had taken his favourite. And, of course, they had been at the Hôtel de Bourgogne to see a play.

“What’s all this running to the theatre?” asked Poquelin. “Are you planning to turn the boy into a comedian?”

The grandfather put down his hat, deposited his cane in the corner, was silent a while, and then said:

“I wish to God he could become as fine an actor as Bellerose.”

The Court Upholsterer’s jaw dropped. After a silence, he enquired whether the old man was serious. But since Grandfather Cressé was silent, Poquelin himself went on to enlarge on the theme in ironic tones.

If, in the view of Louis Cressé, one could aspire to become like the comedian Bellerose, why not go further? Why not follow in the steps of Alizon, who clowned and capered on the stage, imitating old market women for the amusement of the townsmen? Why not smear one’s face with some white trash and glue on a monstrous moustache, like Jodelet?

And, generally, why not play the fool instead of attending to business? After all, the Parisians paid for this at the rate of fifteen sous per person!

An excellent career, indeed, for the son of the Court Upholsterer, who is known, thank God, to all of Paris! Wouldn’t the neighbours gloat to see the younger Monsieur Poquelin, who was to inherit the title of Royal Valet, on the stage! Everybody in the upholsterers’ guild would split his sides with laughter!

“Forgive me,” said Cressé mildly. “Do you mean to say that theatre should not exist?”

But Poquelin denied any such meaning. There should be a theatre. Even His Majesty, may the Lord prolong his days, recognizes the theatre. The Bourgogne troupe was granted the title of Royal Company. All that was very well. He, Poquelin himself, was not averse to visiting the theatre on a Sunday. But he would say that the theatre existed for Jean-Baptiste Poquelin, and not vice versa.

Poquelin munched his toasted bread, washed it down with wine, and inveighed against the grandfather.

Yes, one might go even further. If one found no employment in His Majesty’s troupe – and not everybody, good sirs, is a Bellerose, who is said to own twenty thousand livres’ worth of costumes alone – then why not go and play at the fair? One could spout indecent jokes, make insinuating gestures, why not, why not? All the neighbours in the street would point their fingers!

“But pardon me, I am jesting,” said Poquelin. “But then, of course, you were jesting too?”

But no one knows whether the grandfather was jesting, just as no one knows what the young Jean-Baptiste was thinking during his father’s monologues.

“Queer people, those Cressés!” the Court Upholsterer thought to himself as he turned sleeplessly in his bed. “To say such things in the boy’s presence! It would not have been proper, but the old man should really have been told that those were stupid jests!”

He could not sleep. The Court Upholsterer and Royal Valet stared into the dark. Ah, but all of those Cressés were alike! His first wife, may she rest in peace, was also full of fantasies and also adored the theatre. But the old wretch was sixty! Honestly, it was ridiculous! He should be taking orviétan, he’s falling into his second childhood!

All those worries. And the shop. Insomnia...

4

Not Everybody Likes to Be an Upholsterer

AND YET, I feel sorry for poor Poquelin! Really, he seemed to be under a curse! In November 1636 his second wife died too. Again he took to sitting in the dark with his misery. Now he would be altogether alone. And he had six children. And the shop was on his hands, and the upbringing of all the children. Alone, always alone. He could not marry a third time...

And to add to it all, soon after the death of Catherine Fleurette something seemed to have come over his first-born, Jean-Baptiste. The fourteen-year-old lad went into a strange decline. He was working in the shop; there could be no complaint against him, he did not idle away his time. But he moved, Heaven forgive me, like a marionette from Pont-Neuf. He lost weight; he took to sitting at the window and looking outside, although there was nothing there, either new or interesting, to be seen; he lost his appetite...

It was time to have a talk with him.

“What is it? Tell me what’s wrong with you,” asked the father, adding in a strained voice, “You are not sick, I hope?”

Baptiste stared at his square-toed shoes and was silent.

“The troubles I have with you children,” said the poor widower. “What shall I do with you all? Don’t keep me worrying, tell me.”

Baptiste raised his eyes to his father, then looked out of the window and said:

“I don’t want to be an upholsterer.”

Then he thought for a while, and evidently deciding to cut the knot at one stroke, he added:

“I feel a deep repugnance for it.”

After another pause he added:

“I hate the shop.”

And as a final blow at his father, he concluded:

“With all my heart and soul!”

After which he fell silent. And his face assumed a foolish expression. In fact, he did not know what would follow his announcement. Perhaps a slap in the face from his father. But there was no slap.

There was an interminable pause. What could be done in such an unheard-of situation? A slap? No, a slap would not solve anything. What could the father say to his son? That he was a fool? There he stood like a hitching post, and his face looked blank. But the eyes did not seem to be stupid, and they glittered like the eyes of Marie Cressé.

He doesn’t like the shop? Perhaps he only imagines it? He is still a boy, at his age one cannot speak of what one likes or does not like. Perhaps he is simply a little tired? But he, the father, is still more tired, and he has no help from anyone, he has turned grey with cares...

“But what do you want?” asked the father.

“To study,” answered Baptiste.

At this moment someone knocked softly at the door with a cane, and Louis Cressé entered the room in the twilight.

“There,” said the father, pointing at the fluted collar. “He does not wish to help me in the shop, you see, he wishes to study.”

The grandfather began to speak in mild, conciliatory tones. Everything, he said, would turn out for the best. If the young man was unhappy, then, of course, it was necessary to do something about it.

“But what?” asked the father.

“Why not simply send him to school?” exclaimed the grandfather.

“But he graduated from the parish school!”

“Ah, what’s the parish school!” said the grandfather. “A boy of his abilities...”

“Leave the room, Jean-Baptiste, I shall have a talk with your grandfather.”

Jean-Baptiste went out. And a most serious conversation took place between Cressé and Poquelin.

I shall not repeat it to you. I shall merely exclaim: oh, Louis Cressé of hallowed memory!

5

For the Greater Glory of God

THE FAMOUS COLLÈGE DE CLERMONT, later known as the Lycée Louis-le-Grand, was indeed quite unlike the parish school. The Collège was maintained by members of the powerful Order of Jesus, and it must be admitted that the Jesuit fathers did their job brilliantly – “for the greater glory of God” – like everything else they put their hand to.

The Collège, headed by its rector, Father Jacobus Dinet, was attended by nearly two thousand boys and youths of noble and bourgeois families. Three hundred were resident students, the rest lived at home. The Society of Jesus educated the flower of French youth.

The fathers taught courses in history, classical literature, the juridical sciences, chemistry and physics, theology, philosophy and Greek. As for Latin, that goes without saying. The students at Clermont not only read and studied the Latin authors constantly, but were required to converse in Latin during recess hours between classes. You can easily understand yourself that under such conditions it was not difficult to assimilate this language so essential for human culture.

Special hours were devoted to dancing lessons. At other hours the halls resounded with the clash of rapiers: French youths were learning to wield weapons so that they might defend the honour of the King of France in mass battle, and their own – in single combat. On gala occasions the resident students presented plays by ancient Roman authors, chiefly Publius Terentius and Seneca.

Such was the educational institution to which Louis Cressé had sent his grandson. Poquelin the father could by no means complain that his

son, the future Royal Valet, was in bad company. The roster of Clermont students included the names of many high-born families; the highest nobility sent its sons to the Clermont *lycée*. At the time when Poquelin was attending the Collège, Clermont boasted of three princes among its students, one of whom was none other than Armand de Bourbon, Prince de Conti, the brother of another Bourbon, Louis Condé, Duc d'Enghien, later known as the Great. In other words, Poquelin was a fellow student of a personage of Royal blood. This alone would suffice to prove that the teaching at the Collège de Clermont was of a high level of excellence.

It must be noted, however, that the youths of blue blood were segregated from the sons of the wealthy bourgeois, of whom Jean-Baptiste was one. Princes and marquises were boarders at the *lycée*, with their own servants, their own instructors, their own separate hours of study, as well as their own separate classrooms.

It must further be said that Prince Conti, who will subsequently play an important role during the wanderings of my restless hero, was seven years younger than Jean-Baptiste. He was sent to Clermont as a young boy and, naturally, never had any contact with our hero.

And so Poquelin the younger immersed himself in the study of Plautus, Terence and Lucretius. According to custom, he let his hair grow down to his shoulders and wore out his wide trousers on the school bench, stuffing his head with Latin. The furniture shop was veiled in mist; he found himself in an altogether different world.

"It must be the will of fate," muttered Poquelin the elder, falling asleep. "Well, then, I shall have to turn the business over to the second son. And this one may, perhaps, become a lawyer, or a notary, or something along that line."

Did his boyhood passion for the theatre die out in the heart of the scholar Baptiste? Alas, not in the least! Breaking out of the grip of Latin during his free hours, he would still hurry off to Pont-Neuf and the theatres – this time not in his grandfather's company, but with several of his fellow students. And during his years at the Collège, Baptiste became thoroughly acquainted with the repertory of the Swamp and the Hôtel de Bourgogne. He saw Pierre Corneille's plays *The Widow*, *Place Royale*, *The Palace Gallery* and the famous *The Cid*, which won its author wide renown and the envy of his fellow writers.