

After the Flood

A Grand Errand

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DRAMATIS PERSONÆ

Maxime: an award-winning scenarist

Beatrix: an aquiline heiress

Priest: a metropolitan pastor

Deacon: his assistant

Bartender: a sympathetic supporter of Maxime

Joanne: waitress and younger sister to Bartender

Mercutio: a leading-man

Villain: a gentle soul

Primadonna: a woman of many mood swings

Understudy: a little wisp of a girl

Eunuch: a soprano

Chaste Maiden: a young nun

Abbess: her superior

Hieronymus: a rare book-dealer

Patron: a restaurant-owner

Patriarch: a refugee

Dilettantes, seminarians, parasites, harlequins, kooples, extras etc. etc.

SCENE: Paris

PREFACE

Adieu to the cloudless skies, the intense azures, the scenic coastline of Tunis; bienvenue to the sunless streetscapes, the wet weather, the ominous mausoleum of Paris...

Adieu Silvio strolling the beaches, composing in the open air, living the southern life; bienvenue M. Maxime Delacroix kneeling in cathedrals, pacing ill-lit interiors, haunting the legendary libraries...

Adieu Beloved, the beautiful bather, the bodacious, bronzed to perfection, slow in the best sense of the word; bienvenue Beatrix, the fair, the flaxen-haired, the fleet-footed, best friend of literary men, erudite, exquisite...

Adieu Roman marble, upright runners, lightsome hallways, Classic virtue; bienvenue medieval relics, anemic Elaines, fervid flagellants, Christian charity...

Or such is the import/export business between north and south...

But if Tunis be the soil of sunbathers, spa-lovers and lay-a-beds; Paris is the cesspool of brilliant bohemians, men and women in a mysterious malaise, living between squalid studios and the literary institution called cafés...

Which is why Paris is also the scene of the most spectacular poetasters in modern literature...

Like the busted Baudelaire who once contemplated the thousand fires of sundown on a pure polished portico, the promontory of his Libyan kingdom; but who, wearying of perfection, languishing for distinction, soon returned to the arena of erring souls in need of religious succour, the urban inferno of capital cities...

So, we too find ourselves in the city of twilights, the capital of Belle-Letters, of *Les Feuilles Morte* and *Les Fleurs du Mal*: Grey Paris...

Because there's nowhere in the world we'd rather be well-received...

Indeed, we too could never be separated from northern cities without secretly longing for the solemn vigils, the discrete dress, the fast-flitting *passantes*, the endlessly interesting streets...

So, here we are, Paris, winter, where Fame's bestowed on the most-deserving, where Education's the most important ornament a person can possess, where the Philosopher's crowned king of the cafés, where the Cross surmounts every enduring edifice; and, most importantly, where, *through the tarantula's work, prayers are offered up to the rainbow... After the Flood.*

*From the coastline of Carthage to the old city nights
From Notre Dame to Sacré Coeur dominating the city heights
From the fabulous fire of Phoebus to the cold city lights
Follow me, Reader, hear the sounds, see the sights...*

ACT ONE

SCENE ONE: Cathedral, Winter

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In a pew of Saint Nicholas-Du-Chardonnet, front row, a lone soul weeps bitter tears...

Reclining with religious languor and intoning a prayer of his own creation is none other than Maxime Delacroix, self-styled scenarist to the stars...

He beats his breast; he offers up a litany of somewhat self-centered petitions: quicken me, strengthen me, enliven me etc.

He's so rapt in his own words, he doesn't notice, a moment later, when an elderly lady sits down in ear shot and begins taking notes. She's Abbess...

Neither does he notice, another moment later, when the tower-of-a-man with the tiniest assistant in train emerge from the rectory. They're Priest and Deacon...

In a kind of pious dupery, they take opposite aisles to the grand doors and reconvene by the many machine-lit candles. Soon Priest opens our sequel...

Priest: There he is: Maxime Delacroix. At it again...

Deacon [concerned]: What's ailing him?

Priest: It's complicated...

Deacon: Cmon. Too complicated for a deacon-of-nine in the middle of memorizing the Vulgate?

Priest: Mere memorization won't help us in a case of such strange entanglement...

Mummed, Deacon starts reading from a moleskin. He looks up and down, intermittently, from the paper to Maxime...

Deacon: I still can't believe it. He's even slighter in real life...

Priest: Read me everything we have on so far; refresh my memory...

Deacon: OK. Here's some of the *purpureus pannus* from his recent confessions. Let's see. Here he accuses himself of having come "out-of-pocket" to initiate a standing-ovation; here he accuses himself of having come "out-of-pocket," same expression, to guarantee the orchestra was

underway in time for his acknowledgements; here he accuses himself of hiring a troupe of accomplices to sing his praises in the sumptuous chambers of the Grand Casino...

Priest: Bof. What else?

Deacon: Hmm. To have used an entire southern province as a "stepping-stone" to the Gold Coast of Glory; and then to have "spring-boarded" that success to winning himself an audience in the Coliseum of Goth. Huh? It's like he lives in a realm of strange involuted metaphor...

Priest: Psh. By the way he beats his breast you would think his sins were mortal...

Deacon: Wait. It gets worse. To have abused an assortment of strange stimuli as a means to some unnamable end; and then to have showed no compassion for a certain special someone who couldn't keep up with his depravity; and who would drag her tiny feet on the bustling boulevards with the saddest expression on her beautiful round face. Huh? I don't understand...

Priest: I see. Please, recount, one more time, the night of ceremonies on the Cote d'Azur that robbed him, once for all, of his g-d-given anonymity. Please. Between my many more-important obligations, I have no time to follow these outlandish celebrity exploits...

Deacon: OK. Here's an account of his infamous acceptance speech: Maxime was waiting in the lobby, with the hard-working help, dressed for success but not expecting to win when the Presenter, stunning, silk-sashed, the woman of his adolescent dreams, now in the hoar-frost of her career, suddenly called his name...

Priest: Cut the asides... I have places to go, people to see...

Deacon [resuming]: So he emerges from the far end of the auditorium and commences towards the stage, a single finger in the air, as if he were parting a sea of applauding simps. I'm paraphrasing but, in a word, what an entrance!

Priest: And when he arrives onstage...

Deacon: There he delivers the tenderest expression-of-thanks, from memory, without a single flashcard in hand. Little by little, imperceptibly, the orchestra kicks in; and twas then, on the point of his all-important parting words, Père, it happened: the deed that endeared all Europe overnight; the deed that would seal his stardom for all eternity. See. Whether he overheated from the footlights or whether he was overwhelmed by some inner emotion, we'll never know but, Père, if you can believe, when he moved to leave... Maxime... he fainted!

Priest nods; he's simply unmoved by the melodramatic, somewhat anticlimactic, sequence of events...

Priest: Theatrics. He practiced that fainting-spell in front of the mirror, over and over, for weeks on end...

Deacon [*as if he learned in a brutal moment of disillusionment there was no Pere Noel*]: No...

Priest [*softening*]: Poor soul. All I know is every day, without fail, come hell or high water, he can be seen reading beside the other seminarians in the library..

Their heart begins to bleed for this strange solitary figure: Maxime Delacroix...

Deacon: How he beats his sorrowful breastplate...

Maxime beats his breast and lifts his tear-stained chin to the heavens. He punctuates whatever words were tripping on his poetic palette and rises to his feet...

Here he comes, M. Maxime Delacroix, strutting down the aisle, looking suiting up for the outdoors in full stride, neither left nor right, face like flint...

Priest [*in a frenzied whisper*]: Quick! Make like we were talking 'bout the work overhead!

He points to the scaffolding...

Deacon [*without missing a beat*]: Nine months of renovation? What? Make the men work overtime!

Maxime politely address Priest...

Maxime: Pardon me, Père, is there a bulletin somewhere with the Advent hours?

Priest [*points*]: There is. Over there...

Maxime: Oh. Obviously. Many thanks. Have a nice evening...

Exiting, he throws an ample amount of scarf-fabric round his neck and accidentally, unknowingly swipes the chiseled-chin and sunken cheek-bones of Priest with the fringes of it...

Priest [*half-insulted, half-amused*]: Until next time...

Outside, on the porch, in the somber dusk of a winter afternoon, Maxime watches as a pageant of Parisian pedestrians go their several ways until,

suddenly, in the general pandemonium of the outside world, he hears an isolated sound of strenuous effort at his back...

Abbess feigns to struggle with the porch steps; without hesitating, he offers her an iron-cast arm...

Abbess *[in thanks]:* God bless you...

Maxime *[profoundly obliged]:* Anytime. The pleasure's mine...

Then he begins the brisk trek home...

SCENE TWO: *Street, Twilight*

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At the corner of Boulevard Saint Germain and Rue des Bernardins, Maxime comes to a standstill. In every direction a tapering perspective of ashen trees leaves meets his lonely gaze. Then he marches ahead. Opposite is a corner café, windows frosted over. He looks inside...

In conversation is a young and intelligent-looking group of lady colleagues. They huddle around a soft-bound book. On the cover is a sketch, of a few choice lines, representing a marble statue, a silver scooter, a crescent moon and a thin-clad lay-a-bed with a head of hair which seems to recall a bathing Bathsheba. Last of all, superimposed on the white-and-blue background, is the image of its author, in the attitude of an arrogant idler, with a rose-pink plume at his lip...

See Maxime smile; his heart fills with warmth; he begins to soliloquize...

Maxime: Incredible. Everywhere else I'm a lousy laughing-stock; here I'm considered a real life auteur. Thank G-d. Paris is probably the last-standing hot-house of serious entertainers. O God protect those souls who haven't transplanted themselves here; they're in danger of being nipped in the bud, of dying on the vine, in vain, for lack of simple support...

At first he's almost angered at the idea; but then he acquiesces to the order of things...

Maxime: Anyway. At least we escaped...

Moving on, he struts down Rue des Bernardins, the crooked ruelle that he must call home for the foreseeable future; he's walking in the middle of the street when he hears an old-time horse-and-carriage ramping n' rattling at his back. He puts up his hood. It slows and seems to scan his slender person; then passes. Quiet. Maxime mysteriously mutters to himself...

Maxime: Soon enough... sire... soon enough...

He moves on. At the corner of Rue des Bernardins and Quai de la Tournelle is a miserable bohemian tenement building. On the leeside is a low unmarked doorwell, with a time-stained lintel; on the riverside is the entrance of yet another corner-café, open and serving...

He lives on the fifth and uppermost floor; so he thinks of this quayside café as a kind of second living-room; because that's where he goes for his evening expresso. But before he can turn the corner, he's stopped by a heart-breaking sound...

Here, a ragged beggar, a refugee, has taken shelter from the searching wind that blows off the Seine. He's Patriarch...

Patriarch *[teeth chattering]:* For pity's sake...

Profoundly pained, Maximes covers this shivering skeleton with the fashionable overcoat off his own back. Then, he hopelessly lifts his eyes to heaven...

Maxime: Lord! The poor are yours to keep...

Then, before catching cold, he rounds the corner and enters the cloudy café...

SCENE THREE: *Café, Nightfall*

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Inside, behind the bar, an aproned man dries a glass. He's Bartender. He sees the scenarist threading his way to the countertop, shivering cold. A sly yet good-natured grin plays on his mouth and moustache as he asks...

Bartender: Express?

Maxime: The fifth and final...

And, without further ado, he's served to a tiny cup of steaming speed, no silverware, no saucer. Then and there, he puts back the shot and waits for its vivifying virtues to take effect. The cup's whisked away. He seems crushed...

Maxime: Nothing...

Bartender *[with a compassionate note in his counsel]*: Friend. Don't let it get you down. This grise can be so depressing...

Maxime *[shrugging his shoulders]*: Psh. Depressing? What's that?

Bartender *[arching an eyebrow]*: Ha. That's when M. Maxime Delacroix, eternal optimist, walks into the room without as much as commenting on our new Christmas lights. I installed them myself this morning. How do you like?

Maxime *[looking around, bemused]*: Hmm. I hardly noticed...

Bartender: See what I mean? It's unlike the Maxime we've come to know. Even my sister said so. Lately, you've been beside yourself, a shadow of yourself, so to speak...

Maxime *[evading the question]*: Speaking of which, where is the sweet-faced, grease-stained Joanne. It's really a wonder how she can work and study at the same time...

And, all of a sudden, the little lynx of lady comes struggling up from the cellar, charged with a crate of red wines. She unloads everything at the overrun service area. Next moment, she mindlessly embraces Maxime on both cheeks. She's Joanne...

Maxime *[sillily]*: In the south we offer our loved ones sometimes three, sometimes four kisses...

Joanne *[to her brother]*: I'll never understand where he finds his confidence; but then again, he grazes in the fair fields of Belle-Lettres, a man of perfect leisure, uninterrupted, for days on end. Who

wouldn't be self-assured? He's all but crowned himself the king of comedy...

Maxime [*soberly*]: Heavy the head that wears the crown...

Joan: It never ends. Brother, I need vacation-time. To better compete with these ironic rambler; or else they'll forever have the upper-hand. I need to level the Elysian field! Excuse me, Maxime, I have to work. Don't let me soil your expensive woolen-wear. By the way, where's your coat?

Maxime: Long story...

But behold, that moment, while she's charging herself with a tray that bears bread & butter, half-carafe & glass, a tress of her thinning brown hair slips the band of its bonnet. Then and there, Maxime replaces it with a gentle touch of his hand. For a second, Joan seems to soften towards him...

Joanne: I know. It needs washing. I haven't had time. Anyway. Make yourself at home. Bof. I'm pretending not to see those slap-happy Englishmen. Bof. They won't stop with that asinine air-pen. Addition. That's all they ever learned. Anyway. How about something to take upstairs? Something warm?

Bartender [*proudly*]: We skinned the fouls ourselves...

Maxime [*with a look of disrelish*]: Do you have any Bronzino?

Bartender [*pompously*]: As much as I admire the Mannerist's for their masterful placement of hands and wrists, personally I find their inability to paint a simple heir-apparent a little troubling...

Maxime: Funny. I mean the Mediterranean catch...

Bartender: Ha. Serves me for angling to impress Maxime Delacroix, art-historian to the stars. So sorry. No Bronzino... not now nor ever

Maxime: Then, I ate already...

Joanne [*concernedly*]: When? Last summer? You look even thinner than usual, Maxime. I dare say *anorexic*...

Maxime [*to Bartender*]: You didn't tell me she wanted to be a quack...

Bartender [*to his sister*]: Ana-what?

Maxime and Bartender share a little laugh at the poor girl's expense...

Joanne [*defending herself*]: Go ahead. Mock me. Call me clinician, sterile, anemic, cold; but this is the new vocabulary sweeping the

continent. You don't want to be left behind in the march-of-progress, do you?

Bartender *[with a glass and towel in hand]*: Don't I...

Maxime *[changing course]*: No, never. I'm good. Thank you again. You'll never know how much these little gestures mean to me...

Joanne: Pas de souci. Anyway. You know where to find us. Excuse me for a second...

With that, Joanne goes over to a gluttonous table in the corner. She takes their order...

Posting up, both elbows on the zinc countertop, Maxime watches the waitress work. Then, suddenly, he seems struck with some unlooked-for, unhoped-for inspiration; suddenly, he seems a-hungered with an otherworldly appetite. He whirls around and makes a mad, though muted, hand-motion with his thin wrist and fingers, as if he were pinching a quill-feather in the air...

Maxime: Please! Something to write with!

Next moment, Bartender brings out a black ball-point and playfully says...

Bartender: At least something, or someone rather, can still stir the embers. But remember, Maxime, she's my little sister. I don't care how many awards you've won. Did you hear me, Maxime? What? Where in the world? Maxime! My pen!

But Maxime's already long gone; he's already out-the-door and half-way up the winding stair that leads to his escritorio...

SCENE FOUR: *Apartment, Night*

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A spiral staircase leads Maxime to the fifth floor landing. He lets himself into an apartment, lit only by the streetlamps below. Once inside, he crosses the room, doubling as a bedchamber and study, and sits down at his desk. Beyond, he sees the filthy flood of the river Seine. He sets to work...

Soon, over his shoulder, he hears the soft sound of someone sitting up in bed. A lithe long-limbed lady rises to her feet. In nothing but a shrunken chemise that barely buttons across her small breasts, she crosses the room. On her way to the kitchenette, she passes a fair-skinned hand through Maxime's proud, patented pompadour. Yes. She's Beatrix...

Maxime [without turning]: Ah, Beatrix, descendent of the only man in Milan who could repulse a plague with nothing but his own pious prayers and personal charm...

After a spell of silence, she asks...

Beatrix: Is the tobacco somewhere?

Maxime: It's here...

By now he's rolled himself a cigarette; he begins to divague...

Maxime: Helas. Voila. A winter-of-discontent. I always wondered what that meant. Well. Here we are. Not a soul on the quay. No friends and family on the Corniche...

Beatrix: I'm running out for dinner. I'm just gonna throw something over this. Come with me...

Maxime: I'm OK...

Beatrix: Cmon. It's right over the bridge...

Maxime: I'm OK...

Beatrix: So serious. What are you writing? You must have chanced upon some sensational sentence...

Maxime: I can't believe no one chanced upon it before!

She re-crosses the room and begins to read over his shoulder...

Beatrix: Exquisite... like an epistle of old...

Maxime: I have to deliver these overseas. Pronto...

Beatrix: By pigeon?

Maxime: In person...

Beatrix: How come?

Maxime: How come? Why, I can't leave the work of G-d knows how many endless hours in the hands of some hapless courier, let alone some Parisian pigeon...

Beatrix: Fair enough...

Enamoured with his commitment to romantic errands, she wraps two slim arms around his neck. Glancing from the super-serious expression on his face to the stack of books and papers on his desk, she asks again...

Beatrix: Shall we get going?

Maxime: OK. Let me just retouch this one apostrophe. I won't be a minute...

Beatrix: Take your time...

Time passes. She looks over the poorly upholstered arm-chair in the corner...

Beatrix: Tell me, Maxime, is there a reason we're the only pseudo-celebrities on earth that live in this kind of squalor?

Maxime: Ample reason. Anyway. Aren't you overjoyed to be the only religious royalty that can live in a low-down lazaretto like the Latin Quarter? I know I am...

Beatrix: You must have me confused with someone else...

Maxime: Well. Then why is a horse-and-carriage with the most ancient coat-of-arms combing the streets, looking for you?

Beatrix: Ha. Astute as ever. Well, then, here's our chance. Let's head out. Before it comes back around...

Maxime [*in agreement*]: Allons. Let's go...

He put down his pen, puts out his cigarette and stands up. He follows her out. On the landing, she puts up her capuche. In its furred frame, he studies the rare imperfections of her face. He asks...

Maxime: Do we need a reservation?

Beatrix: Not since your fainting-spell...

Maxime: Ugh. Don't remind me...

SCENE FIVE: *Street, Night*

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They hit the street. No one's out. The bitter cold's keeping everyone indoors...

Their way lies across three bridges that connect the Latin Quarter to the Ile Saint Louis and the Marais, where the safe haven of a resto awaits them...

But not a full second into their crossing, the voice-of-distress stops Maxime in his tracks...

In a heap, huddled together is Patriarch and his family, wife and child. He calls out with a tremulous lilt...

Patriarch: Oh! For the love of Christ!

Maxime sees this small family by the wayside; he's emotionally impaled, so to speak, by the call for succor. So, then and there, he covers this haggard gypsy woman with the scarf from around his own neck. Patriarch points...

Patriarch: Oh! The children!

At a loss, Maxime turns to Beatrix who's been leaning elegantly against the building wall. Deftly, he removes her somber-colored cashmere scarf and covers the child with it. She smiles a soft smile. She comments, quite casually...

Beatrix: That was a gift...

Maxime [to Patriarch, urgently]: Go. Seek shelter. Use my name. Maxime Delacroix...

And so, with that, Maxime and Beatrix brave the winter night; they commence their brisk, quick trek over the widest and windiest stretch of the Seine. To their left, half in shadow, Notre Dame looms solemn. Maxime laments...

Maxime: Alas. A church should never close...

Beatrix [ruefully]: I know...

They walk in lock-step; a feeling akin to true love...

SCENE SIX: *Resto, moments later*

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Across the Seine, a little resto, all mirrors and windows, shines like a beacon of warmth...

Our street-swift scenarist peers in to see if a cast of familiar faces is already seated; and, as expected, a party of at least fifteen, diners, drinkers and dramaturges, Maxime's Tragicomedians, hold down a long overflowing table...

They enter and a stir-crazy cry goes up...

Extra #1: Well, look who the wicked wind blew in!

Extra #2: Make room for the master of Mauvais Gout, Mister Maxime Delacroix!

Extra #3: Living proof that on the rare occasion Talent receives Recognition the-worm-of-a-man can win himself an heiress!

The table erupts with kindly laughter. At the head, a leading-man takes over. He's Mercutio...

Mercutio: Bravo. That's what I call poetic justice. Excuse the mess, Maxime. Tiens. I can't sit anymore. Patron! Please. A glass for Maxime Delacroix, the man responsible for our recent spell of high spirits; winner of the Absurdest Romantic Comedy of 189-. Ha. What year are we in anyway?

Extra #4: Your guess is as good as mine...

Mercutio: Peu import. For M. Maxime Delacroix, without whom we'd be forced to walk out on a bill of this amount. Kidding, Patron. Cmon. That's the wine speaking. I wouldn't dream of it. I wore an apron once myself. Patron, please!

A punctilious, mustachioed-man presides over the madness. He's Patron...

Patron: Have Madame and Monsieur come for dinner or drinks this evening?

Mercutio: Have a glass with us, Maxime, for once...

Beatrix [to Patron] I haven't eaten all day...

Here an imposing buxom beauty in middle-age chimes in. She's Primadonna...

Primadonna: He starves her...

Patron [to Beatrix]: Here's the menu. I advise the game. Have a look. In the meantime, Monsieur, word on the quai is you're in the throes of a new scenario. Is it true?

Here a mean-mugged but soft-spoken, kind-eyed actor chimes in, teeth stained red. He's Villain...

Villain: We're waiting in the wings, Maxime!

Maxime [*somewhat sullenly*]: Quai, Patron, I have one in the works...

Here the little wisp of a young lady pipes up in a bird-like squeak. She's Understudy...

Understudy: Cmon. Give us a sample, Maxime! One of the more memorable lines! Just one! Half-one...

Primadonna [*poignantly*]: ... if Delacroix has the wind-power for his own periods...

Understudy [*coming to his defense*]: Short-of-breath? Maxi? Never. No one's so capable of soliloquizing!

Primadonna: Aloud? He nearly fainted last time...

Understudy [*combatively*]: Maxime could be the mouthpiece for a whole marionette!

Primadonna: I see you eying my spot, young gun; but you don't have the pipes...

Mercutio: Ladies, please. We're in public. Tho' that's ever stopped you before...

Beatrix [*to Patron*]: Well. I'll have the ox-tongue and your driest red, si vous plait

Patron: Fine choice. And for Monsieur?

Maxime [*beyond wry*]: Well, I would have the tongue of an Oxonian but without a Chardonnay it'd taste like ash on my palette...

Not knowing quite what he said or meant, Patron returns to his original question...

Patron: So... nothing for the moment?

Maxime: Nothing...

Patron: Right way...

He leaves. Mercutio nearly died with soundless laughter; he's all but clapping...

Mercutio: Bravo, Maxime. That wasn't even funny. What? Still haven't surfaced from a session of sweet silent thought?

Maxime [*repenting his pastiche*]: Helas. What's wrong with me? I need something to loosen up, to lighten up a lil'. Excuse me, Patron. So sorry. I couldn't decide. Could I have twelve oysters and a glass of white?

Unsure if he's being serious or not...

Patron: I'm sorry, Monsieur, I'm not sure quite what you mean...

Mercutio: Patron, have you no electric pearls and liquid sunshine in here?

Patron: No, messieurs, my apologies...

Mercutio: Compromise, Maxime. When in Paris, poison yourself like a...

Maxime: Hmm. Yes. Maybe compromise's what's missing from my life. OK. I'll have a red, whichever she's having...

Patron: Right away...

Horatio: Good man. Come. A little red never hurt no one...

Beatrix knowingly shakes her head...

Beatrix: Prepare yourself for the world's most melancholy violin...

Here an effete, cross-legged eunuch chimes in, like the stem of a wine-glass. He's Castrato...

Castro: Cmon, Maxime. Give us a glimpse of our upcoming antics. But, please, not another romance. Damn. Look what happened last time. Why, we made one frivolous flight-of-fancy and everyone assumes we're out-of-touch idlers in some ivory tower; as if we've never suffered cruel reverses, heart-breaking deceptions, unrequited love...

Primadonna [*bristles*]: Psh. Unrequited love? What could you know of forlorn love and its torments? A castrato can have whoever he wants, whenever he wants, wherever he wants. No, you've never been the apple of Cupid's arrow; you've never had to repine; you've never worn the widow's weeds; but, nonetheless, please, Maxime, he's right, no more comedies...

Villain: Speak for yourselves! I'd rather make a career out of light-hearted, fun-loving Comedy sooner than burden audiences with deathly melodrame...

Primadonna: Psh. Audiences? Please. Listen, Maxime, cast me and the castrato in a star-crossed affair and we'll cast the pearls of high poesie in the sty of those comedy-loving swine...

Mercutio: Whoa. Easy, luscious one. Maxime was right not to debut with a vaulting nut-shell, a moribund melodrama. Why. The longest careers always debut with an arrogant artist as a young man, of a literary temper, a pedestrian city, an overarching ambition, a sensational co-starring actress and, sometimes, a narrator that can introduce caprices like a chorus in classical plays. Romance, in a word...

Extras [*ironically*]: Interesting...

Mercutio [*continuing, undaunted*]: Hear me out. Notice. Everytime an author opens with a morose melodrama, tell me, what becomes of him? First, he's hailed, he's interviewed, he's awarded; and then he disappears. Why. He has no staying-power. Now, on the other hand...

Extras: We see you've given this some thought...

Mercutio [*continuing*]: See. Wishing to teach before he entertains; wishing to indoctrinate before he endears, the drama-loving author's soon heard of no more. Everytime. That's because in the Fine Arts, there's a law, an unwritten law that goes: what's quickest to ripen is quickest to...

Maxime [*all sodden*]: What he said...

Suddenly concerned for the soulful, far-away voice of Maxime, he stops...

Mercutio: Maxime? Where did you go?

As though accustomed to his frailty, Beatrice intervenes...

Beatrice [*softly*]: What's on your mind, Maxime?

Maxime [*almost inaudibly*]: O, Red Wine, Spirit Divine, I could never've deserved so caring a companion, had I not invented her myself...

Beatrice [*uncomprehending*]: Invented her yourself? How so?

Maxime: See, in the arts, by a certain alchemy, it's possible for a creature of one's imagination to mysteriously appear on the scene. I mean you, Bea...

Beatrice: Alchemy? Creature? Don't be so hard on yourself, Maxime. You won me over with your commitment to the written word...

Maxime [*quotes vaguely*]: Oh, Beatrice, the brilliant, the beautiful, I loved you before I knew your name, so in a voice, so in a shapeless flame...

Beatrice [*to Horatio*]: Damn. He's not making sense. I have to get him home. Cmon, Maxime, let's head back...

But, at that moment, loud-rounding the corner is our bright-emblazoned horse-and-carriage. It comes to an abrupt stop at the curb. Armed men in colorful uniforms, like the Swiss Guard, pour out of its suicide doors, rolling out the red carpet for a leading-man even handsomer than Mercutio. He's the Prince of Monaco. He storms inside...

The Prince [*indignantly*]: Where is she? Where's Maxime Delacroix, the shameless thespian. I won't allow an upstart to whisk away yet another member of our great family; let alone my lawfully-wedded wife!

Castrato [*manning up*]: Upstart? Hardly! Man, I won't let you refer to our aimless author, our master scene-smith, like that. Here he is! In the flesh! A hunnid pounds of pure demi-urge, of pure Genius; and he won't stand for such abuse; he won't take that sitting down; will you, Maxime?

Maxime [*doe-eyed*]: I won't?

The Prince, holding a somewhat doctored picture of Maxime, looks back and forth, from the page-six image to the puny person...

The Prince: Why. He's even more contemptible in real life. Women, what do you see in this jester? Why. He calls Carthage a Monte Carlo; the Stade-des-Sport, a Coliseum. His coat of arms is nothing more than a pair of swinging Sicilian lemons. He's ridiculous...

Castrato [*righteously*]: A pair of great, glorious lemons!

Understudy [*defending her hero*]: Plus he's earned degrees from all the best schools on earth: from Oxford, from the Sorbonne, from the Vatican. Didn't you, Maxime?

Cut to Maxime looking bleakly...

The Prince: Don't be so gullible, slender one. He's never set foot in a classroom. He's a corrupter of youth. Isn't that so, Delacroix? If that's even your real name...

Maxime [*to Understudy, sweetly*]: Perhaps not but, mark my words, sweetness, we're gonna win honorary degrees from every trellised school of note, of worth. I swear on my life...

The Prince [*dismissively*]: Nonsense. A child could write these silly scenarios. Why. There's not a bone of talent in his tiny body. Time's up, Maxime. Let take this outside.

Mercutio [*stepping in*]: I'll second you, Maxime!

The Prince [*sizing him up*]: At least here's a physique I can respect. It's almost beneath me to cut down this wisp-of-a-scenarist, beneath my dignity...

Mercutio [*coaching Maxime*]: OK. Stand straight. Shoulders back. Yeah. Who needs three middle names when you have money and merit? That's the American way. Here. Lemme fix your collar; unless that's the style. There. Now you look the part. Let's go. [*To the Prince*]. After you. Attend us outside. Ladies, first...

The Prince [*to his entourage*]: I'mma make short work of these clown...

Maxime rallies. See him rise to the occasion; but his knock-knees give out. Mercutio props him up...

Maxime: Here I come. But first. Patron. Check please. [*Signaling with an imaginary pen in the air*]. A round for everyone. Put it on my tab. Here's my autograph. It might be worth something, someday. Thanks a million...

He smiles. Mercutio helps him outside. The Prince stands in readiness. Here he's handed a double-barreled family-heirloom that's said to have cut down Ronsard, Rossini and Rostand in the past. Brandishing it, the Prince begins...

The Prince: Beatrix, it's nothing personal. I'm bound in duty. Plus, sales soar when an authors gunned down in the prime of life. It's a science. He'll thank me from heaven. I won't be long. Let's leave together...

Beatrix [*firmly*]: Sir. My love goes to the loser... whoever comes out lifeless from this contest...

The Prince [*to his entourage*]: Well. Maybe it's for the best. Definitely for the best...

Maxime [*to Prince*]: Here I stand, Sire. Allons. Come to the point. I promised to have everyone in bed before daybreak. Plus, M. Maxime Delacroix, he wasn't born to be sped by anything less than this so-called "white queen of arms..."

He brandishes Patron's Montblanc...

The Prince [*rolling his eyes*]: Fine. It's your life. Shoot to immortalize. At the stroke of...

The suspense mounts for a moment until the belfry of Saint Gervais, looming over the scene, strikes three. A shot's heard in the arrondissement. Everyone waits for the smoke to clear, for the dust to settle. Finally, Maxime's stretched out on the pavement; so much for strong language. The Comedians see their future go up in smoke. No one could've foreseen this unfortunate turn-of-events. Primadonna and Understudy look to one another for support...

The Prince [*somewhat sadly*]: It's unfortunate. I liked him. But he brought this on himself. Anyway, Comedians, consider me your royal patron. Here. Tiens. [*Writes a check*]. That should tide everyone over till the next scenarist comes along. Come. Don't look so sad. Console each other. Clean him up. [*To Beatrix*]. Come, my Love, ride home with me...

But rolling onto his back, Maxime utters a few inaudible words, as if in a sleep. Everyone turns to where he's been half-forgotten on the pavement. Beatrix runs to his side; she falls to her knees. Breathing laboriously, beating the breastplate on his bird-like breast, Maxime mutters...

Maxime: Ouf. Please. Unclasp the back. What a weight off my chest. Literally...

Beatrix [*stunned*]: What? You've been wearing a metallic-vest all this time? No wonder you were always so feeble and soft-spoken. True, you would often say "the breastplate-of-righteousness" but I thought that was just a form-of-expression; I thought you were just asthmatic. No, a literal breastplate...

Maxime [*breathing easily again*]: Beatrix, I've never been completely open and honest with you... or anyone for that matter. I'm so sorry. If you can find it in your heart to forgive me, I'll change...

Beatrix [*hushing him*]: Shh. Save your breath. Before you promise me a mansion. Come. Let's get out of here...

The Prince [*to his entourage, somewhat touched by their tenderness*]: Come. There's no words. Let's leave these small-timers to themselves. We have better places to be...

So, The Prince and his royal retinue pack up and pull out. Everyone hurrahs. The comedians run to the side of their champion. Villain arrives first...

Villain [*exultant*]: Unbelievable! Truly unbelievable!

Castrato [*arriving next*]: Maxime! You outdid yourself this time. A royal stipend! We're made! For life!

Understudy [*arriving next*]: I thought you were no more, Maxime!

Primadonna [*arriving next*]: I thought my heart would break in half...

Mercutio [*arriving next with a glass of fresh-squeezed lemonade*]: Good man. Drink up. Courtesy of the house. Get him to bed. For a very well-deserved, well-earned rest...

Beatrix: Shall well?

Maxime: Yes, lets...

Mercutio and Beatrix get him onto his feet. He immediately walks on ahead, albeit with a little limp. Beatrix shakes her head and overtakes her man...

And so, heiress and scenarist walk home, alone, arm-in-arm. Everyone applauds...

Last but not least, Patron, patting his inner pockets, realizes...

Patron: Wait. Who stole my pen?

THE CURTAIN FALLS ON ACT ONE

ACT TWO

SCENE 1: Cathedral, Midwinter

♫

Muffled, booted, somber-colored, Maxime stands in the back of Saint Nicolas-du-Chardonay, cold and quiet, silent save for the sound of a page-turning...

He's engrossed by a stack of particolored pamphlet left by God knows who. Wrapt by its splendid pictures of Roman ruins and southern seascapes, he forgets for a moment where he even is. Then, he goes on to read its opening paragraph...

"Weary of the vast, pallid winding-sheet that shrouds our great city from Fall to Spring? Weary of the overcast skies that once caused our great poet to call Paris a passionless prison? Then come away for an unforgettable frolic, a pilgrim's progress, thru the sun-soaked South, home of the church's first fathers...

Join us for tour thru the sacred sites of Sicily and Carthage where the likes of St. Paul, St. Cyprian St. Augustine once sowed the good seeds of our gospel. Don't be left ashore as we get underway. Years from now you may remember this invitation as the spark that ignited a new zeal, a new fervor for the things of heaven..."

Throughout this spell-of-enchantment, Priest and Deacon have been leaning against opposite sides of a great pillar; Priest leering at Maxime, Deacon looking for answers from his earthly superior...

The normally sleek-combed and composed Priest has been violently disheveled as after an unexpected altercation. Deacon tugs at his tattered sleeve, imploring, with pellucid upturned eyes and asks...

Deacon: Master, who were those rogues that all but bowled me over on their way out? Those weren't our workmen. Who were they? Father. Tell me...

Priest [sullenly]: Collectors. Debt-collectors...

Deacon [uncomprehending]: But we pay our ten percent to Cesar...

Priest: No. Those hard-hearted philistines were looking for Maxime Delacroix...

Deacon: Maxime? But he's never knowing hurt another man in his life. What could they have wanted?

Priest: Naivety, you'll understand... when you're older

Deacon: Master! Tell me! What happened while I was away?

Priest: Apparently Maxime's in trouble, in deep trouble. He's in deep debt...

Deacon: Impossible. Maxime's set for life. Look what he leaves in the alms-basket...

Priest: It seems he's a hopeless spend-thrift...

Deacon [bewildered]: Spend-thrift?

Priest: Yes; and those creditors went straight for our coffers. Naturally, I interposed. Sblood. Over my martyred body. Damn. Those contributions could've clothed a whole week's worth of the homeless. All gone...

Deacon: Master, your cheek's bruised!

Priest [stifling his fury]: Psh. I could've taken those jackals if I didn't swear to be an instrument of peace. Sblood. I would've offered them the other cheek of my white...

Deacon Father! You're hurt! You're bleeding...

Priest [scornfully]: Anyway, they weren't laying hold of Maxime, our Maxime; no, not on my watch. Look. The bum. Completely oblivious...

And, look, there's Maxime, lost in the winding ways of this strange brochure; and he may have followed the stream of floral language even further if it hadn't been for a slender light-veiled lady who enters that moment. She's Chaste Maiden...

She enters with a sweet shiver as if to escape the winter weather but really she's in close league with Priest and Abbess to shepherd Maxime back into the sheepfold. Helas. His eye wanders from the page to the place where she's standing; then, after a contemplative moment, he resumes his brochure, respectful of a young nun's inviolate privacy. Priest chuckles...

Priest: Unfortunately, he prefers to be in fairer company, like most great-souled artisan. Good man...

Deacon: Don't we all?

Priest: Not for my part. Anyway. Careful. Here he comes...

And here come's Maxime, the artist adrift, half-reading, half-hailing...

Maxime: Excuse me, Father, sorry to interrupt. Have you seen these brochures before?

Priest *[with a swift, scornful glance]*: Yes. Those were intended for aupairs and the elderly; not for serious scholars... such as yourself

Deacon *[intrigued]*: Can I see? Hmm. A pilgrimage? Five-star accommodations? No way...

Priest: Yes way. Mother Church is never without novel means of shepherding her sheep back into the fold...

Deacon: Inoui. I never thought I'd see the day. Listen to this...

"We invite all wander-lusting souls to scatter their worldly cares to the four winds and join us aboard a commercial cruise-liner on a quest for the footprints of great saints past, beyond the horizon, in the south..."

Priest *[half-disdainful, half-disgusted]*: Spare me...

Deacon: Wait. There's more...

"Embark from the Port of Marseille for the incredible coastline of Carthage on a tour to be led by an authorized man-of-the-cloth, an acclaimed man-of-culture and an innocent assistant..."

Priest *[sarcastically]*: Sounds familiar...

But, behold, Maxime seems to've been transported to cradle of Christendom. He seems to see a limitless expanse of sea and sky separated only by a fine horizon-line; he seems to see a white-and-blue mansion and a sun-bleached doorstep; but no sooner is he a foot away from setting down a bundle-of-letters but his vision is pierced by the gravel-voice of Priest...

Priest: Fool, you failed to mention, every tour, without exception, embarks under the auspice of a real-life sacred relic. You ask: what's real-life? Why, a relic confirmed by the best authorities, after a century of scrutiny; not a handful of dust that was wafted on the wings of angel when everyone was asleep. Read the fine-print...

Silence. Maxime's completely crest-fallen. His vivid vision has altogether vanished. Not wishing to betray too much dejection, he asks innocently...

Maxime: But where does one come across a real-life relic now-a-days?

Priest: They're mostly all in the south...

Deacon: The irony. Why do you ask?

Maxime: No reason. I found myself flipping thru these leaflets. Nevermind. I should get going. By the way, is that rain I hear? Up overhead...

And in fact, for the last few back-and-forth's, raindrops have been falling on the roof...

Priest [looks up]: Indeed. We're redoing the roof. Hence all the scaffolding...

Deacon: Cause some prophesize another great flood, a grand crue, like the one of legend...

Priest [annoyed]: Please. These were in the works long before the hysterics. See, we're not to be swayed by every breeze of public stupidity. But, here, take my umbrella, if worse comes worst. I have a spare somewhere. Just be sure to return it...

Maxime [touched]: Aw. You're too kind. Please, let me make a donation. I have ample...

Priest and Deacon exchange a knowing glance...

Maxime: Here. It's the least I can do...

And he would have cut a crazy check if Chaste Maiden hadn't suddenly interposed. See her whispering to Priest and pointing to where the church's sprung a leak. Priest excuses himself...

Priest: Excuse us. We seem to have a problem. Sorry. We need these baskets. Next time...

Maxime [worriedly]: Please let me know if I can be of help...

Priest: We got it. Here. Take this ridiculous pamphlet. Don't forget your umbrella. Adieu...

And so Priest, Deacon and Chaste Maiden run with all the alms-baskets to the dripping leaks...

Look. Maxime's left holding the silly particolored piece of paper. He sighs as if he were deceived by yet another false scent; nevertheless, he genuflects and lets himself out onto the street...

Then, after searching the clouds for a sign, he makes his way up the Montagne Saint Genevieve, to the public library.

SCENE 2: Quayside Café, Off-hours

ψ

In the mournful hours between lunch and dinner, when kitchens close, Bartender's seen behind the zinc-colored bar in an attitude of animal anger. On the countertop we see the trace of a hostile altercation: broken glass, red wine that hasn't been wiped away and a few drops of blood from his snarling top lip. His inner rage is in stark contrast with the surrounding stillness...

A moment later, in rushes his disheveled sister, a mop of thin hair plastered to her cheek, frazzled from her long commute. For the first few seconds, while she closes her flimsy umbrella, she doesn't notice the mess...

Joanne: Brother. Please. Not a word. I know what you're thinking. Unreliable. Last as usual. But, G-d forbid I set aside a little time for my studies. Damn. Call me snob but I wasn't born to work in the sweat of my brow like a bitter baleful Martha. Psh. Bad service! Lettem eat brioche. They can wait!

Then noticing nothing's ready for the evening rush...

Joanne: Brother, what the hell happened here? You're bleeding...

Bartender [*tasting the blood with the tip of his tongue*]: I must not have locked the door. I wasn't paying proper attention...

Joanne: Brother, there's wine everywhere. Attention to what? What happened? Who was here?

Bartender: Collectors. Debt-collectors...

Joanne: But our great grandparents were part of the Paris Commune: all for one and one for all... or however the saying went. We pay more than our fair share to the city...

Bartender: No, sister, they came for our favorite customer, Maxime Delacroix, the one and only. Apparently he's been exploiting the import/export business between north and south, high and low, light and dark, warm and cold, and in the process, running up a great mound of debt. Like nobody's business...

Joanne: Maxime? Master Scene-Smith? But we've never accepted a single cent from him, no matter how much he insists...

Bartender: Well. Not everyone's so scrupulous. It seems everytime he calls for a writing-utensil it's supposed he's footing the bill for the entire salon...

Joanne [*stunned*]: Mon Dieu, but that's like every other second...

Bartender: Helas...

Joanne: But how can that be? Maxime has no need of money; he's a libertine; he's a rising star of Belle-Lettres. Does he owe a large amount?

Bartender: Astronomical...

Joanne: Oh no. I should have known. I should never've accepted that expensive oxblood journal from him; it never leaves my side. He was encouraging me to write down everything I see, to pursue my dreams. I thought, since his acceptance speech, he had no more need of filthy lucre...

Bartender [*with a bloody grin*]: Apparently he needs it more than ever...

Joanne: Oh dear; and now he's being hunted by a bunch of hard-hearted ruffians...

Bartender: Helas. Hell-hounds. Now I never excelled at story-telling, like the boy wonder, but I sent these creditors off on a false trail. Next time I'll be better prepared with this bulbous American baseball bat...

He brandishes a Yankee bat behind bar...

Joanne: Where he is? Where's Maxime? Is he upstairs? We have to warn him...

Bartender: Psh. Cmon. You know better than that. He won't be here for another two hours. He's like a machine. You can set a clock by that automat. Right now, I bet you, he must be in the grand reading-room, plotting his next composition. Until he's in need of his evening espresso...

Joanne [*feelingly*]: Le pauvre. What's the secret of his tireless determination?

Bartender [*knowingly*]: Despair. Tout simplement...

SCENE 3: Cirque, Off-Hours

ψ

In a dressing-room of the Cirque d'Hiver, Understudy flits here and there, talking to herself...

In one hand is a perfumed picture of Primadonna; in the other a piece of unblotted paper, a page of Maxime's newest manuscript...

In a single lightbulb, blaring above, she starts to soliloquize...

Understudy: No. Not Maxime. True, he's polite, he's peaceable but he would never stand for her charades, those tirades, that indolence. Primadonna. Psh. No range. No nuance. No complexity. Why, she's nothing more than a Lamenting Mother, a Mourning Widow, a Spiteful Sorceress. She drove her former husband to drink. Poor man. Like the shrew who embittered St. Shakespeare. Her husband, he was a composer too, not unlike Maxime, only a little less outlandish, a little less talented; and yet she would never stop scolding him. She would seize every opportunity to rage in his innocent ear: monster, imposter, selfish, sexless, you low-down debtor, unworthy to lick the boot of your illustrious predecessors! All while he worked away, the poor man, undismayed; that is, until one day he couldn't any longer; he simply couldn't; he sunk into Acheron oblivion, never to be heard from more. Poor man...

Here, Understudy holds up the piece of manuscript paper and reads a long line. Then she continues...

Understudy: No. Not Maxime. He's proof against, deaf to, those awful interruptions. No, when he writes those original odes to every conventional mode of Beauty, he doesn't mean it. That's his secret. See he simply uses Primadonna for the whetstone of his art; she's a lyrical exercise. Little else. It's obvious. Why. Look who he's surrounded by: a set of the most independent, high-minded, slack-wearing, street-walkers in the city. Who look and talk like me! Not her!

Here, Primadonna, in all fur, comes floating in, imperious. Seeing Understudy, this broken twig of an actress, in her changing room, she turns violent...

Primadonna: Biche. What are you doing here? Are you cursing a picture of me? What's in your skinny, sick-looking hand? Mon Dieu. That's Maxime's sprawling signature. What? Have you stolen a copy of his imaginative toil? Do you think a runt such as yourself can replace a pure-bred matron like me? What? Cuz you've never needed sixteen hours of beauty-sleep? What? Cuz you've never been the plaything of Nature?

Cuz you've never known the terrible tyranny of a full moon? Pip-squeak. You'll never know the depths of high drama. Move, twig...

Understudy [*fighting back*]: Woman, I won't be bossed around. Are you permanently pregnant or something? Constantly craving some sweet? Pathetic. Big biche. Don't be misled by his past performance. His Beloved's no lay-a-bed, no lack-a-day, no Primadonna. No bag-of-wind!

Primadonna [*furious*]: Biche. No respect for your betters!

Understudy: Betters? Elders!

And the two would've come to blows had not Castrato, that instant, stumbled through the door, tattered and torn, from a brutal beating..

Castrato [*reeling*]: A tissue. Please. Someone. I've just been man-handled..

Distressed, they let go of each other and run to his side, where he's swooned, fallen..

Understudy: Eunuch! What happened? Who did this to you? Here. Take my handkerchief..

Primadonna [*pushing her*]: Out of my way, twig. He needs mothering, smothering. Here. Take my teet..

Castrato [*equally revulsed*]: Bof. Keep your tired handkerchief; keep your haggard teet. Biche, I broke a rib. I was coming down the street, skipping in the rain, when...

A terrible cough shakes his whole frame...

Understudy: Shh. Save your strength. You're shivering..

Primadonna: Be strong. Don't speak. Where does it hurt?

Castrato: They were twice, thrice my size. I flew back. Like that. My head went smack on the pavement. They were looking for Maxime, our Maxime, ten of them..

Understudy: Help me prop him up!

Primadonna: Here's a pillow. Whose they? Who did this to you?

Castrato [*fading fast*]: Collectors. Debt-collectors. It's no laughing matter. Of course, I couldn't keep a straight face. Maxime? Money? I never associate the two. He carries himself like a libertine, with private means, like the exception to every rule, exempt from every excise... but then again... when I come to think of it... he never really gave me reason to assume so...

Understudy [*in shock*]: Goodness. He was always bringing me new books; he would always stress the importance of a good education; he would spare no expense...

Primadonna [*equally so*]: Wherever we went, he was always paying for things; he would never consult a price-tag; he would never blink at a price-quote...

Castrato: There you go. So I started piecing it all together. If Composition takes Time and Time is Money then, it follows, logically: Productivity leads to Debt...

Understudy: Goodness Grace, he's not productive; he's prolific!

Primadonna: So you're saying we're doomed?

Castrato: Doomed. Plus, while I was lying there, in the rain, I had a premonition. I saw Maxime, our sweet Maxime, underwater, the Seine had overrun its banks; the river had burst all bounds. Ladies, we were in for a great flood, like the one of myth...

Understudy: He's delirious. Hold him tight...

Primadonna [*with her big bosom*]: Here these should help...

Here Mercutio, all handsome, all debonair, enters the room, looking for his luscious co-star, to while away the winter hours, when he sees Castrato in her arms. He laughs a little before he sees something's amiss...

Mercutio: Ha. Brilliant. Who would've known? But, then again, indeed, expect the unexpected. Wait. What's wrong? What happened? Were you twinkle-toeing on the rooftop again? Man. I told you a trillion times those eternal scenes shouldn't be taken too literally; not by feather-weights such as yourself. Do you have a death-wish or something? Don't hurt yourself...

Understudy [*frantically*]: He was blindsided... outnumbered... in the street... ten to one!

Primadonna: They were in search of Maxime! They came to collect! He's deep in arrears...

Mercutio: What in the world? Maxime's made of money. Poetry's a rich-man's sport...

Understudy: Or a poor man's with no regard for the future...

Primadonna: See. He's addicted to something called Credit. Remember, he's not from here; he's from a far-off country, home of the free-

wheeling, where a little flick of the wrist and everything goes away. Like in a blaze of inspiration...

Mercutio [*stunned*]: Damn. That's not good. Maxime's addicted to inspiration. He breathes the stuff... or he dies

Primadonna: We haveta warn him!

Understudy: Where is he? He moves so mysteriously...

Mercutio: Please. Maxime? Mysterious? He runs on rails. After the library, it's straight to the cathedral; then it's straight to the expresso-machine. On repeat. For eternity. Let's pray his day-planner doesn't fall into the wrong hands...

Castrato: Don't even joke!

Understudy: That would spell the end of us all!

Primadonna: He'd be like a sitting duck...

Mercutio: Ha. Have no fear, ladies. Maxime and I live for this kind of entanglement; we're almost unhappy without it. Miserable. I know what to do. In the meantime, please, ladies, tend to the good eunuch. He outmanned them all. The cowards...

Understudy: Dauntless Castrato!

Primadonna: The people's champion!

Here, in comes Villain, with his frightful face, hearing some kind of commotion...

Villain: Hello? Friends? Is everyone rehearsing without me? Hmm. Am I no fun? Too innocent? Too lamb-like?

Suddenly seeing the fall-out...

Villain: Wait. What? Can it be? Is Primadonna crying real tears? Impossible. Madame. Never in my life...

Mercutio: Bonhomme, they'll explain. I'm on my way to meet Maxime. In the Fifth; in extremis...

Villain: OK...

Mercutio: Really. What a sweetheart. Who would believe? Anyway. Allons. Maxime's in more trouble than I thought. Not a moment to lose. C'est parti!

And so he bounds out of the building...

SCENE THREE: *Library, Off-hours*

☹

Alone at a back table of the grand reading-room, behind a stack of books no person couldn't possibly read in a single sitting, is the studious shadow of Maxime...

Today, he reads from several venerable traditions including seventeenth century Anglican sermons, eighteenth century enlightened libertinage and the twentieth century American exile. He breathes easy...

Whenever he takes a break from this communion with the dead commonly called Reading, he's offered a glimpse, out the wet-washed windows, of the Paris Pantheon whose Roman dome is surmounted by a most-beautiful cross. Rain cascades from the gutters...

It seems Maxime's amassing a whole arsenal of anecdotes and attitudes, of current and archaic phrases, to be used, artfully used, in some upcoming composition. He writes in a sprawling hand, sprawled in his seat...

He's the only layman in the building but he came camouflaged in a coat of somber colors not unlike clericals. Now and then, he utters some inaudible lines under his breath but he's among friends; no one seems to mind...

That is, no one except a heavy-set librarian whose been brow-beating him, unnoticed, all this time. Silence. She seems to have taken issue, very grave issue, with his arrogant appearance, his angular attitude, his dandified demeanor, as if she's been harboring a hidden grudge against him for many months now; and today it's simply too much...

So when her withering regards return to her unregistered, unrespected, she decides to approach him, to reprimand him, first in the hushed undertones of a library, then, if necessary, in full attic fury...

Listen. You can hear her heavy tread echoing around the room. Next moment, she's standing over Maxime, like a big beetle...

Librarian *[in a severe whisper]:* Pardon me, Monsieur, a word with you. See, here in the library, we have certain rules, stricter than the Commandants. They regard the posing and posturing of princely provocateurs. Notice. None of the other students seem to be reclining, idling, gesticulating... for effect. For the sake of elegance. That's because...

Someone shushes her.

Librarian [*stunned*]: Sblood! Who dares shush me! See, Monsieur, you're already sowing the seeds of insolence... simply by your presence

Seminarian #1: I don't see how...

Seminarian #2: Is he committing an indecorum of some sort?

Librarian [*further infuriated*]: Can't you see? He's cutting a figure! Consciously cutting a figure, as if he were in a photo-shoot or something... using table-and-chair like props... its offensive... an insult to the less privileged students...

Seminarian #1: He's not bothering me...

Seminarian #2: Me neither...

Librarian: Who asked you! Monsieur Delacroix, look what you've done. They disregard all authority... thanks to you... Monsieur... are you even listening me?

Regretting his repartee before it even leaves his mouth...

Maxime: Half-listening...

Librarian [*boiling over*]: Diable! There's no place for insolence in a religious library! Fix your collar! Straighten your sleeve! Sit straight! I order you!

Trying to rectify the situation, in the simplicity of his heart...

Maxime: Madame. Sorry. Believe it or not, since I took a bullet for the Thespian Theater, I haven't been able to sit straight... to sit properly... cuz of the shooting pain... it's that simple... I mean no disrespect

Librarian [*speechless, white with anger*]: Are you kidding me?

Maxime: Ask anyone...

Librarian [*asking abstractedly*]: Is he making a mockery of me and my post; me and the powers of a librarian?

Seminarian #1: I watched it from my window; you would've paid money, real money, to see such a shoot-out...

Seminarian #2: I was already asleep but I heard he stood up to that heir-apparent with all the courage of a chirping canary; like the stuff of fable...

Librarian [*like the calm before a storm*]: What is this? A brotherhood of bad men? No, I won't allow a lousy, listless libertine to lounge around my library. Monsieur. Perhaps you'd be better served in one of

the city's corner cafes, where thespian and dilettante, poseur and posturer, prince and provocateur, pretend to read!

Maxime [*sitting even deeper in his chair*]: Madame, I won't stand for that kind of abuse. Literally won't stand...

Librarian [*fuming*]: Monsieur, I'm running out of patience. Don't make me bring out the pointer-finger of our patron saint, the pious St. Genevieve, forever preserved in a priceless reliquary, for the rare occasions when the Lord's librarian needs to strike religious fear in the loins of insolent little street urchins like yourself!

Seminarian #1 [*curiously*]: Hmm. But wasn't Genevieve martyred for answering back to some tyrannical bureaucrat with the enervating composure of a saint?

Seminarian #2 [*adroitly*]: That was either her or one of her sisters...

But Maxime's hardly hears these scholarly asides; he seems to be lost in rollicking reverie, with a real-life relic, resplendent, sparkling in his hands, like a ray of hope. All he can say is...

Maxime [*humbly*]: Reliquary?

Librarian [*hot-blazing*]: Yes. Indeed. That houses the remains of our powerful protectrice; and which is only unveiled on the rare occasion we, the Library, need to humble little bowery boys like you into the dust!

Maxime [*to anyone and no one*]: But does one have to commit a strident outrage in order for this perfectly preserved pointer-finger, this priceless relic, to be produced, to be brought out...

Seminarian #1: Or by appointment. If you're a student...

Seminarian #2: Sadly, you don't qualify...

Librarian: ...but who needs a holy relic when this pointer-pistol [*her index finger's like an inch away from the poet's eye*] possesses virtue enough to expel a little Beelzebub like you, into outer darkness, now and forever!

Maxime [*leaning back*]: Hey. Watch where you point that thing...

Here, to his eternal regret, Maxime somewhat crosses the line and puts a literal libertine daisy in the smoking barrel of it, much like Michelangelo's First Man, in the Sistine Chapel, with limp whimsical wrist...

At first she's stunned, utterly stunned; then she flies off the handle, unhinged...

Librarian *[going wild]*: Incorrigible! Never in the long history of adolescent outrage has such a line been kriss-krossed! O Vengeance! Eternal adolescence! Unaging race of little devils!

Here she begins slipping into a kind of trance...

Librarian: Oh. Oh. I once loved a little devil, a little rebel like you... in the first bloom of youth; I've never been the same since; I've never fully forgotten...

Coming back to the present...

Librarian: Effeminate men! So shirtless in the summer sun... so easy on the eyes... like a wolf in sheep's skin!

Seminarian #1: This is getting out of hand...

Seminarian #2: Mam, please, there's still time; get yourself to a nunnery...

Going far away again...

Librarian: But I know better now... real men are reserved... erect... they wouldn't wear three-quarter sleeves... or read poetry... in the middle of the workweek...

Coming back even angrier...

Librarian: Monsieur! I order you! Sit straight! Are you even listening to me?

Seminarian #1: Mam, please, you're making a scene...

Seminarian #2: Mam, please, you're crying uncontrollably...

Librarian *[entirely exhausted]*: Am I? At last. I haven't cried in forever. Ah. Finally. I feel free to live again. Excuse me... Monsieur... accept my apologies... you're the only playwright who can melt so much grief; it's like the weight of the world gave way. Monsieur? Maxime? Where did he go? He was just here...

But Maxime's already threading through the rain with the next step of his strange struggle fixed firmly in his mind; see he's circling back to the Cathedral with the missing link of his Mediterranean mission within reach; why, he has everything except his umbrella...

SCENE FIVE: *Cathedral, Off-hours*

☹

Above, on the scaffolding, Priest and Deacon are doing everything in their power to stem the tide, to plug the leak; to little avail. Desperately, Deacon asks...

Deacon: Master, where are the men?

Priest: They walked off. They won't work for free...

Deacon: Why, those little...

Priest: Enough. Please. Gimme something to prevent these chubby, fun-loving cherubims from leaking, peeing all over the place. Something. Anything...

Handing him some of the travel-brochures from his back-pocket...

Deacon: Use these!

Priest: Perfect. Plug away!

Below, Chaste Maiden, who's been rushing to and fro, emptying the alms-buckets, full to overflowing, calls out...

Chaste Maiden: Father! We're in need, desperate need, of more buckets!

Priest [*half to himself*]: We're in need of a miracle...

Deacon [*bemoaning*]: Oh. It's a bonafide hydra's head up here!

Priest: ...more holes than a Delacroix plot-line

Deacon: Speak of the...

And, on cue, in strides M. Maxime, Mighty Maxime, flush with the most high-flying, death-defying hopes. Naturally, he doesn't think to look for Priest and his auxiliary on the scaffolding, so he calls out in a full, unbridled voice...

Maxime: Monsignor! It's me...

Priest [*resonantly*]: Monsieur...

Maxime [*looking up*]: Pere? What are you doing up there? Where are the men?

Priest [*bitterly*]: Don't let's...

Maxime: OK. See. I've come on an errand of the first importance. Father, I would like to lead a south-bound pilgrimage... with you and the little man by the side... as soon as possible...

Priest [*lost*]: What are you saying?

He pitches. He launches...

Maxime: Come with me... ASAP... come cross our common mother... in the footsteps of such-and-such a saint... to the cradle of our convictions... to brighter shores... to greener pasture!

Priest [*sardonically*]: I have my hands full at the moment...

But Deacon's hooked...

Deacon [*turning to Priest*]: But, Father, I've never left the Periphery...

Maxime [*in full swing*]: Come. Instead of looking out at the usual streetscape, these tragic scenes of desolation, come see the virginal vault overhead, the heavenly horizon. Come escape the horrid winter weather. The north is no country for sensitive souls such as ourselves...

Deacon [*pleadingly*]: Father, I have a weak constitution...

Priest [*dismissively*]: No you don't...

Maxime: Plus, on board, we'll boast a whole portable feast of Fine Literature, of Belle Letters, for us to enjoy...

Deacon [*to Priest*]: Father, eight-days a week, I peruse the many masterpieces of Mother Church; but, it's incredible, I can hardly pronounce the famous foreign names; I can hardly pinpoint the foreign places; perhaps I should see that famous hotbed of saints with my own bespectacled eyes. Shouldn't I? Because the world's more than the library, the exercise-room and River Seine... no offense, Maxime... wouldn't you say?

Maxime [*double-teaming Priest*]: He has a point...

Priest [*thawing*]: That's all well and good but a pilgrimage requires a pitiful party boat; a crack cruise-ship. Where on G-d's green earth, landlocked in the heart of France, do you expect to chance upon such a monstrosity?

Maxime: Good question. Why. Simple. We would take the overnight to far-famed Marseille; there, early in the morning, when big boats embark, we would simply commandeer a full-fledged cruiseship and repaint it for our purposes...

Priest [*unconvinced*]: Really? Maxime. Gone are the days when a single poet with force of character can simply step on the scene, like the Country Parson, and commandeer a ship. There's bureaucracies, clearances, fact-checks in place. To prevent upstarts like you from...

Deacon *[to his point]*: Indeed, Maxime, it's been especially hard to emulate the great commanders of yore ever since that hapless Italian captain, in the sway of a mysterious Moldavian beauty, hit land, ran aground and abandoned ship. Remember? Near Naples, n'est pas? It made the news...

Maxime *[with a wave of his thin hand]*: Friends. Leave the commandeering to me. With your talent for paperwork, Deacon; with your pious prayers in case of emergency, Priest; and with my flare for instant invention, we have what it takes to lead a profitable pilgrimage... in the deepest sense of the word!

Priest wipes the rain from his serious brow...

Priest: Lord. I would settle for the shallowest, these days. Look. Maxime. The roof's leaking left and right. I worry it might collapse... of its own weight

Maxime *[naively]*: But what happened to the endowment I made a couple months ago? For this precise purpose...

Priest *[somewhat angrily]*: Don't lets...

Here, handsome as ever, in strides the broad-shouldered Mercutio. He's drenched. He sees Maxime. Unused to the silent solemn etiquette of church, he hollers out...

Mercutio: Maxime! There you are. Talking to yourself again? Ha. Well. I'll come to the point. Creditors, debt-collectors came. Yea. It seems you've been signing away, come-what-may, the credit-worthiness of our troupe. I wasn't sure if you were well-aware...

Maxime *[a little grimly]*: Aye... on the strength of my future earnings

Mercutio *[shocked]*: Maxime, you don't mean intentionally? Max. I knew you loved a good gambit but... this is... this is... over the top. Comrade, what's possessing you? Your scorn for worldly cares? Your love of showmanship? Your need for attention. I daresay...

Maxime: None of the above. To keep the fire to my feet...

Priest *[resonantly]*: Good man...

Mercutio *[taken aback, seeing Priest]*: What on earth? Why am I not surprised? Of course there's a ghostly confessor in your corner, whispering all kinds of encouragement in your earnest, eager ear. Observe. Wherever a poet with a tout-petite streak-of-genius warms to the Faith, the flame of his fearlessness is fanned a hundred fold!

Deacon fans himself with a brochure...

Mercutio [*pursuing his train of thought*]: Dear Father, with all due respect, you're worse than we, actors, are; at least we, actors, return to earth after the curtain call, after the encore. We go about our inoffensive way; but you guys live and breathe the highest possible language, all day, every day; you never break character...

Priest [*paternally*]: Son, all the world, visible and invisible, is the stage of our salvation or our ruination in the eyes of an All-Seeing, All-Hearing G-d. So act accordingly...

Mercutio [*overwhelmed*]: Ouf. What a paralyzing thought...

Priest [*comfortingly*]: What an invigorating thought, my son...

Horatio [*shakes free*]: Well, Monsignor, nevertheless, with that said, Maxime, you word-crazy, stir-crazy composer, I've scheduled an early-morning appointment with a nearby doctor, a head-doctor, next Sunday. She's supposed to be very helpful. See, you confess the highest aspirations of your soul and she puts everything in its proper perspective. I heard she work wonders. I knew a writer-actor who went. A week later he quit his catatonics and became a certified insurance lawyer. Today's he's very plain, very punctual, things everyone can respect...

Maxime [*sardonically*]: Great. Let's meet there. If I'm a little late, start without me...

Mercutio [*quite tenderly*]: Maxime. We're friends. Aren't we? Why the constant sarcasm? It's out-of-place in a charity-loving soul. I only want what's best for you and your troupe. I'm just trying to help...

Maxime [*clearly offended*]: Me, Maxime Delacroix, scenarist of the century, confess to some cute lil' unlettered hack? Quack? Who hasn't risked financial ruin for her flock? Who hasn't made the ultimate sacrifice of celibacy? Who hasn't suffered for twenty years in an ice-cold cloister? Man, you must be kidding? I'd rather...

Priest [*resonantly*]: He only confides in me...

Horatio [*seeing his folly*]: Nevermind. At least I tried. I'll cancel. Let's move on. Maxime. Creditor, debt-collectors came. They want your well-read head on a silver Salome platter of sorts. I wasn't there. Castrato bore the brunt of it. They made a man of him. His career's over...

After a profound rueful pause...

Maxime [*feeling horribly*]: No. Not the Castrato,

Mercutio: Yes. The age of innocence...

Maxime [*with sorrowful eyes upturned*]: Good Lord. Afflict me. Not the troupe. Not the eunuch. He wouldn't hurt a fly. [*To everyone and no one*]. I have to do something: or else...

Mercutio: The extras too...

Maxime [*like a light*]: I know! Pere. I'll be back. In the meantime, please, consider my proposition. We would be leave before Easter; you would just have to wait for me in Malta... for a long lover's minute... while I swim with a stack-of-letters, in a ziplock, to former Sidon. I'll be back in time for the mid-morning lecture; no one'll know I left. Then we'll cross the ancient world. Don't go anywhere. I'll be back. I'll have more information by then...

Priest: ...and what of the all-important relic?

Maxime: I'll need to enlist the deacon. He's perfect for the role. All the proceeds will go to renovating the roof; for the common good, the greater good, for the greater glory of G-d! But first things first. Mercutio...

Mercutio: Mon ami...

Maxime: Meet me tonight, Chez Julienne, where else, in time for last call. Please. We have to plot. Take a water-taxi. Don't be late. Send me the bill...

Mercutio: Sure thing...

Next moment, in strides Bartender, equally unused to the hushed atmosphere of a church. He's sees Maxime. He halloes...

Bartender: Maxime! I knew where you'd be; I would've bet my whole brasserie; but to more pressing matters. Damn. Maxime. Debt-collectors came. I won't mince words. It's seems you're in enormous debt; I took a bad beating...

Seeing Bartender black-and-blue, Maxime moans...

Maxime: What have I done? So many innocent bystanders; but I'll make amends! If I have to do a nose-dive into nonsensical Neptune. OK. Everyman to his respective station. Till next time. [*Signing himself*]. I'm off...

And with that, Maxime, Horatio and Bartender head in their several directions; Priest and Deacon take a closer, more careful look at the bright brochures; Chaste Maiden continues to empty the collection-baskets. Everything escalates, at an ever more alarming rate...

SCENE SIX: *Street, Rain*

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Maxime heads straight for his garret. He has a lot to do. He has to prepare everything for his upcoming pilgrimage, put the finishing-touches to his pathological epistles and free compose, for some future purpose...

But nearing home he's sees a scene of unspeakable sorrow unfolding in front of his door. It seems he's arrived in the aftermath of yet another brutal beating. Patriarch lies prone, flat on his back, surrounded by an ever-growing number of relatives that murmur among themselves in a foreign language. Immediately, Maxime threads his way to his muddied, bloodied gypsy and falls to his knees. Woe-begone, he exclaims...

Maxime: No! Not you too! My homeless person! Will it never end? Endless unlooked-for consequences! Tell me, someone, what happened? Nevermind. I know full well. Don't just stand around. Help me!

Wife [*saying something*]: ...

Maxime [*somehow understanding*]: Yes, I see he's unconscious, woman. Thanks for the insight. Damn. Would you quit with the endless I-told-you-so's for a sweet second? Good G-d. He could've pointed upstairs... with nothing but a shiftiness of the eyes... but no... he held out... you should be proud... at least in front of the children...

Children [*saying something*]: ...

Maxime: Kids, your father took a serious blow for me... for someone he hardly knew. No. He wouldn't set a cowardly example for you guys. 'Cuz a life without honor's not worth living. [*To the cousins*]. What? No one came to his rescue? You just let him be ambushed? Say something for yourselves. You seem strong enough...

Cousin [*saying something*]: ...

Maxime: Helas... I shouldn't talk... aren't I as bad? I should never of... nevermind... there's still time... all he needs is a good night's sleep... safe from the elements... everyone... follow me... upstairs... there's room on the floors. Please. Just promise to be as hushed as humanly possible... come, lend me a hand... don't drop him... work with me... from the waist... heave-ho!

And so Maxime leads the whole refugee family upstairs...

Soon, at the fifth floor landing, the caravan comes to a halt, like a border blockade, as Maxime unlocks the door and begins to welcome everyone in. He insists everyone make themselves at home...

Once everyone's stretched out and asleep on the hard-wood floors, he sits; he works...

SCENE SEVEN: *Apartment, Night*

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And so Maxime, relentless scenarist, sits and works. For the moment, creditors, cruise-liners, romantic errands, seem remote. His next rendezvous' not for hours. Time passes. Rainfall lulls the scene into a reposeful slumber.

Listen. His miserable bohemian apartment is strewn with sleeping souls. The sound of their laboring breath is somehow a source of wonderful reassurance, as if we were surrounded by extended family.

Look. His bed's made tighter than a monk's monastic cot. Beatrix, the brilliant, seems to be out somewhere, out-and-about; so it's like he has the house to himself, sort of...

And so we behold the artist at work...

With infinite pains, with countless back-and-forth's, Maxime selects each and every pearl of his poetic necklace. Sometimes, so seamless is a single sentence that it strikes even himself as spontaneous...

He slowly exhausts himself...

But not a moment too soon, as if coming to his otherworldly rescue, Beatrix enters, searching for somewhere to hang her trench...

It's quite a long rain-soaked second before she sees their quaint garret's turning into, or has already turned into, a homeless shelter...

As always, Maxime opens with stilted, high-flown apostrophe...

Maxime: Beatrix, the brilliant, the beautiful, last in a great line of saints, all your artistic attributes were G-d-given, were inwardly imparted. Indeed. They run in your pure unspotted blood, a hallowed heritage, down the generations...

Beatrix [*smiles*]: And it ends here. The only children I'mma bring inna this low-down world are the children of my own unbounded imagination. Lord. Who would shuffle so much awful experience onto a defenseless little thing? I'll never understand...

Maxime: And that's what I love about you, Beatrix. [*Points*]. Careful. Watch your step...

It's then she sees what's really taking place...

Beatrix [*Half-amused, half who-knows-what*]: Never in all my...

Maxime: Sh. Trust me. It isn't permanent. Once the rain subsides and they're rested, we'll have the whole place to ourselves again, like proper adults... not to worry

Beatrix [smiles]: Who's worried of a few leprous homeless in their living-room? A few flesh-eating louses. Hm. This one's lesions are running all over our rug...

Maxime: Helas. BB. Those black-and-blues were intended for me. They nearly found out our address; but this heroic homeless man stood up to them; he prevented them from ransacking my precious parchment. See. They're hot on my trail, those hard-hearted philistines. They want to put an end to my insouciance... once for all

Beatrix [bewildered]: Who in the world do you mean? You're loved and lauded wherever you go...

Maxime: BB, I haven't been entirely up front with you; then again, I never outright lied to you either; it's hard to explain; but in faith it'll be fully addressed in a little book that I have in the works, tentatively titled, *The Seven Refinements of Lying* or *The Blood of Bullocks*. I haven't decided yet...

Beatrix: Maxime, what have you gotten us into?

Maxime: Into debt... in so many words... but don't you worry about a thing...

Beatrix: Debt? I don't understand. Aren't you artful aristocracy? Or something of the sort? In your own words...

Maxime: Artful, indeed, but that was a high-flying feint, a frivolous flight-of-fancy, a fabulous form-of-expression; the fact remains I have a cabal of ruthless creditors looking for me in every lamp-lit corner of Paris: and like carrions, they're closing in on their impoverished prey every minute...

Beatrix [bemused]: So all this while we've been in debt?

Maxime: Yes. Hiding in plain sight; or rather, in the plentiful folds of Our Lady...

Maxime sets his sight on Notre Dame...

Beatrix [still somewhat indifferent]: Hmm. Damn. So be it. Ainsi-soit-il...

Smiling, she points to Patriarch...

Beatrix: Is he's using my Céline as a sling..

Maxime [*a little nervously*]: Yes. Only for the night. Come. Don't undress. I have to go meet Mercutio. Why, where else? I have a scheme for out-smarting these creditors once for all. I promise. Come. I love this full-length trench on you. Shall we?

Maxime obliges her, one arm at a time, and ushers her out...

Maxime: You know, BB, a lesser heiress would've been horrified by a homeless family in her apartment but not you; that's what I love about you, dearest...

Beatrix: Come. Let's go. Before we catch sisyphus or something. Look. Unbelievable. The rain. Soon we'll need a blindfolded ferryman to get us to the Marais...

Maxime: I heard the obelisk is already one-eighth under water?

Beatrix: Like Maxime's characters...

Maxime: That reminds me. I have to make a quick stop first. It's on the way...

Beatrix: Where to?

Maxime: The book-dealer...

Beatrix: Maxime, now's really not the time...

Maxime: I beg to differ...

And so Maxime and Beatrix brave the winter rains...

SCENE EIGHT: *Street, Rain*

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So, come rain, come ruin, Maxime makes a little detour. Passing the imposing shadow of Notre Dame, passing the bust of the great Goldoni, the Serenissima's much-beloved librettist, midway across the roaring flood of the Seine, he veers off to the île Saint Louis...

Above a bookstore, closed for the night, a single candle burns. Everyone else's asleep. It fills Maxime with more measureless optimism. He thrilled...

Maxime: Look! He's awake!

Beatrix: What did you order?

Maxime: Imagine my excitement: Da Ponte's heart-warming memoirs! Every page packed with excellent edifying, entertaining escapades. Look! There's the book-lover. In soft slippers and scarlet skull-cap. Ha. Holla! Hieronymus! It's me! Your only...

After a long silent second, a palsied hand opens the window. First to appear is a puppy poodle, black eyes beaming joy; and then, the man himself, Hieronymus, broke-back with burden of time and intelligence, that weariness of the flesh. Seeing Maxime, soaked to the skin, a malin smile curls his lip...

Hieronymus [*fixing his spectacles*]: Why, who else would wake a respectable establishment at this hour of night? On a whim...

Maxime [*honored*]: Respectable? Ha. Who are you kidding? What? Because you use a standing-desk? Far cry!

Hieronymus [*feigning offense*]: Mais, Monsieur, so what I read with a passion? A consuming passion. So what I traffic in theater? In the Absurd. Does that mean I don't deserve plain and simple respect? That anyone, at any time of night, is free to call on me? I have hours too, you know...

Puppy [*joyfully*]: Woof!

Maxime: Ha. At least someone missed me! Dear friend, excuse me, I would've been here sooner but one thing led to the next and now it's... it's... what time is it anyway?

Hieronymus: It's after midnight, Maxime; but as we say: he who loves, loses count...

Beatrix: I lost count how many umbrellas he's...

Maxime: Navré, so sorry, mon vieux. I'll cut to the chase; I need to place another order; I need everything there is on overseas travel in the eighteenth century... every English and French adventurer... every world-class escapade... you have my credit card... spare no expense!

Hieronimus: Now I remember why I put up with his ungodly hours. It's good to be working with an author who's passed the eternal need of advances. I'll see if they can be expedited... overnighted... even if it cost more than the books themselves. Is a humble one percent too much for my services?

Maxime: One percent! Hieronimus! I'm insulted. The person responsible for procuring me so much vicarious experience, so much excitement is worth at least fifteen! Psh. Who do you think I am? Where's your sense of self-worth?

Hieronimus: Fifteen it is! Consider it done! Tout suite! The book-business runs so much smoother for a man-of-means. Why should I lift a finger for a penniless poet? That's the all-important secret of your success: incentivize!

Maxime: It's like investing in oneself... when no one else will... everything'll come together... one way or another... sooner or later... but for the time being... si vous plait... get me grand tours, libertinage, pilgrimage: everything there is!

Hieronimus: Copy! Ah Maxime Delacroix! Where would I be without you? Dare I ask... is another one your elegant awe-inspiring antics afoot? Another far-fetched fainting-spell? That one was so well-executed. Bravo. I tell everyone that M. Maxime Delacroix buys from me. I'm so proud...

Maxime [*suddenly afeared*]: Please, kind sir, try not to share my movements with too many prying people. They could reach malevolent ears. Please. Keep your doors locked at all time. I'll cover any loss of business...

Beatrix [*shaking her head*]: It's all making sense...

Maxime [*while waving goodbye to the puppy*]: I'll be in touch. Rest assured. If anyone asks... say I took my business elsewhere... like the snob I am

Hieronimus [*smiling from ear to ear*]: Whatever you say...

Puppy [*sad to see him go*]: Woof!

And so, Maxime and Beatrix, Master Scene-Smith and Miss Benevolence, turn on their heels, retrace their steps and head straight for Chez Julienne...

SCENE NINE: *Resto, Night*

☹

Sitting by himself, amidst upturned chairs, we see Mercutio, anxiously looking at his time-piece. Time passes. He's solus except for some waitresses sweeping and an elegant couple in the far corner lounging like lesbians in love...

Usually free of all apprehension, tonight he's worried something may have happened to Maxime. In his uncertainty, he opens a banter with Patron who's in the back, out of sight, occupied with the many details of closing time...

Mercutio: Patron! Please, another demi... and a board of charcuterie... before the kitchen closes... in case they skipped dinner...

Patron [*without appearing*]: Perhaps Monsieur would prefer a tin of sardines?

Mercutio [*appalled*]: Oh yeah? Since when do you care a wit for what anyone wants? Since when? Since he practically purchased this whole establishment with a stroke of his silver stylo? Psh. Shameless. I'm beginning to see where all his hardly-earned money went. Anyway, they should be here any minute now...

Patron [*unwittingly*]: Perhaps he's been detained...

Mercutio [*shuddering*]: Maxime, detained? What a horrible thought. No, his lateness is the stuff of legend. He probably stopped somewhere on the way... in some hallowed house-of-worship... that or he stopped to contemplate some overlooked intricacy of imperial architecture... that or he's home reading. No, he's not detained...

Patron [*indifferently*]: Perhaps not...

Suddenly ecstatic, Mercutio stands up...

Mercutio: Nevermind, here he comes! The wait is over. Thank heavens! Maxime! Man of the hour!

Maxime [*looking relieved*]: Thank God. I half-expected to find you ransacked...

Mercutio: Not yet; you've been so successful casting yourself as a serious student that no one would think to look for you in a Parisian public house...

Maxime [*looking warily around*]: Let's not announce it to the world...

Mercutio: No one heard me, Maxime, mystery man; no one needs to know that you're five fathoms deep in debt... that you're being hunted by a pack of hungry hell-hounds... that they're hot on your trail...

Maxime [*further embarrassed*]: Please. Not so loud. It's a little unnerving to hear one's... literary laundry... aired in such a matter-of-fact manner...

Mercutio: Cmon. Before now I never knew someone so indifferent to what people thought...

Maxime: Well. That's because I never cared until perfectly-innocent people started getting beaten up...

Mercutio: Well, be that as it may, I've been thinking; I have a proposition. Don't get upset. I have a straightforward plan to resolve your mounting money problems. Listen. I know it's 'unworthy our vocation,' to use a Delacroix declamation, but it's the right thing to do. So here it goes. Instead of composing another unprofitable masterpiece, why don't we author a popular screenplay? Why don't we compromise?

Silence. Maxime seems to be fighting tears-of-rage...

Maxime [*seething*]: Popular?

Mercutio [*sensing an explosion*]: Did I say the wrong thing?

Maxime [*like a ticking time-bomb*]: Compromise?

Mercutio: Now, Maxime, we're in public...

Maxime [*like a pure mangy misanthrope*]: Never! Never! And give those petty, well-pleased, pearl-glutting swine, those passionless philistines, the satisfaction of seeing me, M. Maxime Delacroix, half-man, half-hot-blazing, stoop to considerations of common lucre! I'd rather...

Mercutio [*putting his hands up*]: Please, Maxime, don't be impossible...

Maxime [*white with anger*]: I, too, Mercutio, came with a rather straightforward plan of putting these my meager money problems to rest... Yes, in faith, I intend on staging, faking, counterfeiting my own desperate death... a veritable show-stopper... yes... nothing less than a firework display!

Beatrix: Again?

Mercutio: The first time you nearly...

Maxime: That was a run-thru; this time's for good. Listen. These creditors will settle for nothing less than my complete humiliation. See, I've been an author up till now; it's time I turn player, turn actor. For the final scene. For the finale...

Beatrix: This doesn't bode well...

Maxime [*raising a cupless health*]: So here's to heroic ends! Here' to far stretching horizons! Patron! Where is he? Three verres! Your finest champagne!

Patron [*appearing with a tray*]: Our very finest...

Mercutio: I guess I knew you couldn't be contented with the writer's life; I knew it was simply a matter of time before you called for a deadly dose of action...

Maxime: So it is. Ainsi-soit-il. Friends, expect action in Act Three like Ol' Paris hasn't seen since The Count of Monte Cristo. [*Raises a glass*]. All for sun and sun for all!

Beatrix: I guess that means me too...

Maxime [*salutes*]: Friends. This is for every composer, in every imaginable medium, that ever fell in the clutches of genius-hungry Mammon!

By this time, Maxime the Majestic's made such a commotion that the innocuous couple in the corner can't help but be curious. Cooly, they come up and ask...

Koople #1: Excuse us. Messieurs. Madame. We were keeping to ourselves in the corner when we seemed to notice a few familiar faces... like the faces of childhood friends...

Koople #2: We couldn't quite believe our eyes; in our midst were two antiheros of independent cinema. But where were the fast-flashing scooters, the silk-skinned goddesses, the Roman antiquities, the steaming couscous? Why, it's rare, you're even handsomer and more huggable in real life!

Patron: Demoiselles, please, this is really no time for mindless adulation. They're in the middle of very serious business...

Maxime: Serious? Patron. Speak for yourself...

Mercutio: I've never refused a few autographs...

Koople #1 [*believing she sees a royal*]: No, is it possible? In common street-clothes, a member of our religious royalty? So it's true you carried his little lifeless frame into an ornate rococo antechamber of

the Grand Casino and resuscitated the great award-winner from his infamous fainting spell?

Koople #2: ...and he woke with the inspiration for a new masterwork on his lips?

Beatrix: Quite true...

Koople #1: We just came from the theater... we see everything that comes out... bof... more of the same... more sorry case-studies... it's really unfortunate... you're the only tragicomedians with a flair for the unforeseeable!

Koople #2: We literally can't wait for your next outrage!

Maxime: That's very kind of you. I'm truly humbled. [*Side-eying Mercutio*]. To think you would have had me, Maxime Delacroix, the reinventor of romantic adventure, *compromise*! Psh. For shame! See how the obsession with credit-worthiness unnerves an entertainer? Friend. Where's your good judgement? I thought better of you. Swear, Mercutio, by our faithful friendship, no nominal money-problem will ever fright you out of penning or performing an absurd scenario again!

Mercutio [*moved*]: I swear, Maxime, by the benevolent Mother of Muses who's never been known to abandon her valorous votaries, I'll never so much as entertain the idea of composing a single commercial artwork... ever again... so assist me Dieu.

Maxime: Amen. Hallelujah. That's why we're digging a grave in the Cemetery Montmartre, yes, next to other playwrights of note, and then letting those craven-hearted creditors read in the city's obituaries that the immortal spendthrift-of-genius, M. Maxime Delacroix, be now no more! That's my big idea...

Patron: Brilliant. Who'll be in charge of penning the adieus?

Maxime: Leave the in-memoriams to me. Don't I think of everything? So that should put an end to my promethean, gargantuan spending-habits. That should lay these my money-matters to rest. Pun totally intended...

Koople #1: I can't believe we're assisting at the birth of a new antic!

Koople #2: The birth of a baby Hercules!

Maxime: Front Row. Good Mercutio, please, begin digging us a little ditch. Something simple. Somewhere sequestered. Please. Fetch Villain. Why. What's that look for? Cmon. It'll all come together... always has, always will

Mercutio: OK...

Maxime: Cmon. Man. If the heart is pure, there's really no need to be afraid of a cemetery after dark, in the rain. It's simply a place where souls rest...

Mercutio: If you say so...

Maxime [to Beatrix]: Beatrix, Sovereigness, I haven't forgotten about you. How could I ever? Now I've never asked for your help in the past but would you be so good as to start collecting the many handwritten letters I've left here and there around the apartment? See, I should have said something sooner but, come Lent, me and some people from the Church will be commandeering a Mediterranean cruise-liner and crossing the antique world, barring any unforeseen events. It sounds crazier than it is...

Beatrix [a pique-annoyed]: Damn, Maxime, I coulda been with my complaisant cousins passing azure afternoons on the water but instead I'm here in the Marais, in the dead of winter, in the small hours of morning, plotting something or other 'bout a cruise-ship and a second death. What do you want me to say?

Maxime: Beatrix, incredible infantata, I'm so very sorry. Why do you lower yourself for a screen-writer of so little worth? I don't deserve such a dignified companion...

Beatrix [acquiescing]: No, I would be happy to help. I wouldn't trade our freezing-cold powerwalks thru the rain, thru the northerly night, for all the flushed firesides in the world; for all the cashmere money can buy...

Maxime: Don't worry. We're gonna have cashmere and camphire galore. Patron! This calls for more champagne. Two more verres! Patron! Where is he?

Patron [deafened]: Right beside you...

Maxime: A round for everyone! I'll be footing the bill. What's a few thousand francs to a dead man like me?

Patron: Words from the wise...

Koople #1: Now that's the hard-living, hard-plotting, hard-praying poetaster we know...

Koople #2: ...and love!

Patron comes back bearing a big emblem-blazoned bottle...

Patron: Ah. I've been saving such a beaute for a special occasion like a new-born prince... like a royal wedding... but it will better serve to

celebrate the commencement of Act Three. Maxime Delacroix's third and final act!

Maxime: Pop it, Patron.

He raises a bleary-eyed health...

Maxime: Here's to new friends! Here's to the upcoming exploits of Act Three!

Everyone hurrahs...

Maxime [*sips*]: Ah. Crisp. Now. People. I have a rendezvous in the morning. Bright and early. [*Sips*]. Perhaps I should've said something sooner but we'll be borrowing, stealing, *comme vous voulez*, a real-life relic from the library. Helas. At the expense of a single, oblivious, heart-broken librarian...

Horatio [*shaking his head*]: He's more obscure than Mallarme...

Beatrix: I haven't the faintest clue what he's up to...

Koople #1: Incredible. Damn. Who'll believe that we passed an evening with Maxime and the Tragicomedians! The city's finest! The living legends!

Koople #2 [*to Mercutio*]: Would you sign the inside of this playbill?

Mercutio: It would be my pleasure. What's today's date?

Maxime: Hell if I know...

Mercutio [*improvising, thinks, inks*]: Well. Here goes nothing. To the importance of divine intervention... to the house of low-repute. Damn. Fill in the rest...

Maxime: Pas mal. Not bad. Posterity will wonder what we were sipping when you wrote those lines...

Mercutio: Armand de Bergerac, 1999

Maxime: Ah. It's like nectar... like Ambrose... lighter than air. Patron, you shouldn't have...

Patron [*obligingly*]: Only the best for Monsieur...

Beatrix [*to Maxime*]: What time do you have to be up?

Maxime: The earlier, the better...

Beatrix: Then let's head home...

Maxime [*a last sip*]: Yes, let's...

*And so the curtain falls, once again, on our eager, earnest thespian;
eager to please, everyone and everything; earnest in the eyes of the
All-Seeing..*

END OF ACT TWO

ACT THREE

SCENE ONE: *Library, Morning*

☞

Next morning, Priest and Deacon, diligent duo, peek inside the grand reading-room, as if to see whether their audience is indulgent or unforgiving. G-d knows. It's quite a suspenseful second before Deacon says...

Deacon: I can't believe you're letting this happen...

Priest: It's for the greater good...

Deacon: But why's a relic so crucial in the first place?

Priest: ...cuz who would trust a hapless cicerone with their eternal welfare?

Deacon: ...and so I need to make a scene in front of everyone?

Priest: Until she summons what we came for...

Deacon: ...then we translate the relic onto a commercial cruise-liner?

Priest: In so many words...

Deacon: ...and if she balks?

Priest: Improvise.

Deacon: Really?

Priest: What's the alternative?

Deacon: Script it...

Priest: Unlikely...

Deacon: But how come I'm the one who needs to cause the scene?

Priest: It builds character...

Deacon [*pshawing*]: Where's Maxime anyway?

Priest: Posting up on the steps of the Pantheon...

Deacon: Psh... like the armchair auteur he is... anyway... there's the funeral knell... I'm on... I'm up... wish me well...

Priest: Bring the house down...

And so, in goes Deacon. He sets the tone for his first-ever outrage by hopping the entry-turnstile. Then, he swaggers with pronounced self-assurance to where Maxime the Maestro's known to sit. There, he speaks down his horn-rimmed nose to someone twice his size...

Deacon: Mec, I reserved the aisle...

Seminarian #1 *[to his near-neighbor]*: Is this little brethren telling me to move?

Seminarian #2 *[smiling]*: I like his attitude...

The seminarians make room for him...

Deacon *[continuing his onset]*: No one minds if I smoke?

Seminarian #1: Not in the least...

Seminarian #2: I like the smell, in fact...

Deacon *[with the strike of a match]*: Ah. The only thing better than walking and talking is smoking and reading...

Seminarian #1: So true...

Seminarian #2: Especially if it's winter...

Deacon *[quoting the Charleville truant]*: Psh. What's the change-of-seasons to a soul who seeks an eternal sun?

Seminarian #1: Beautiful...

Seminarian #2: Only a mystic could've written those lines...

So Deacon sits with his feet on the table, blowing rings-of-smoke into the frigid air...

Deacon *[growing impatient]*: What? Is this self-service or something? Where's my Collected Screenplays of Molière? Where's the lazy-eyed librarian?

Seminarian #1: Ha. Not so loud...

Seminarian #2: He seems to remind me of someone...

Deacon: What? Am I expected to read, write AND to retrieve the masterpiece myself? What? Like a reader, writer and amanuensis in one? All at the same time?

Seminarian #1: Many authors weren't above it...

Seminarian #2: Tho, then again, many were...

Deacon [*taking offence, referring to himself*]: What? Is this the deportment of someone born to be an amanuensis, an assistant?

Seminarian #1 [*conciliating*]: Of course not...

Seminarian #2: Don't get defensive little friend...

Deacon [*doubling-down*]: Excuse me? Is he calling my mother the bearer of a note-taking assistant?

Seminarian #1: I wouldn't dare...

Seminarian #2 [*laughingly*]: Come now...

Deacon [*indignant*]: What? Because I was born in the north... that means I'm a stranger to motherly love?

Seminarian #1: Listen we're all Romans here...

Seminarian #2: We share a common mother...

Deacon [*tripling-down*]: ...and that I won't throw down a gallant glove in her defense?

Seminarian #1: There's not a doubt in my mind...

Seminarian #2: Little friend, you're the soul of honor...

Deacon [*hitting even higher heights*]: ...that I'll simply let someone insult the fruit of her womanly womb?

Seminarian #1: It never crossed my mind...

Seminarian #2 [*stifling laughter*]: Ridiculous...

Deacon: I mean. Damn. What am I? No. I'll be damned if I take five fleetin' minutes from my reading n' writing to serve in the role of someone's assistant! Lord! Where's the lil' librarian? Where's the haggard harlot? Madame! Woman! Bring me the Collected Works of ribald Rabelais. All twelve volumes!

All this time, Librarian's been unable to locate the precise trouble-maker. Why? Because he's too small for the rustic table. Nevertheless, she's begun to froth...

Librarian: Excuse me?

Deacon: Woman! Are you blind and deaf? Moche to boot! Where's the collection of Commedia Buffa I commanded a moment ago? Bring me all forty-five volumes! Pronto!

Librarian [*baffled*]: Is he talking to me?

Deacon: Woman! Yes. Who else was created to be the earthly aid of dons? Why aren't you half-way up the library ladder?

Librarian: Am I hearing voices? Where's it coming from?

Deacon: Yes, a voice from the back bleachers, woman, crying retrieve my comedies!

Librarian: But I can't quite identify..

Deacon: Look harder, you Huguenot harlot! Where there's smoke, there's a kid akimbo..

Librarian *[mystified]*: It's like a voice from the past. I need my glasses...

Deacon: ...better to see the shelves full of famous names? Double-time, woman!

Librarian: I smell cigarette...

Deacon: All of a sudden? This is already number six...

Librarian *[eyes swimming]*: I need a stronger prescription...

Slipping into a trance...

Librarian: Is it he? The little street-urchin who once stole my heart...

Deacon: In the flesh...

Librarian: Impossible...

Deacon: Once a cherub, always a cherub...

Seminarian #1 *[like a light]*: That's who he reminds of!

Seminarian #2: He's a little Maxime! Down to the tilt of his neck...

Librarian *[increasingly entranced]*: Impossible. Pinch me...

Deacon crabs his index and opposable thumb...

Deacon: No. These pincers were meant for penning masterpieces and footing bills. For shame. Woman. I wouldn't pinch your sorry flesh with a ten-foot pole...

Seminarian #1 *[sympathizing]*: She's still reeling from her first heartbreak...

Seminarian #2 *[tenderly]*: I feel bad...

Librarian *[reflecting]*: Oh. How I've withered. How is he still so pristine?

Deacon sees his gold-paved path to glory...

Deacon: Are you on the clock, woman? Please, listen up. I need every illicit libretto of the priest, Lorenzo Giacometti Casanova. Today, woman! Is this a spelling-bee or something? Why. LIBRETTO: that's Libertine n' Ghetto all rolled into a single spliff... like the tobacco of an English opium-eater. Am I making myself clear? Please! In my lifetime, woman...

Librarian [*dizzying*]: He never aged. Whereas I'm an older woman...

Seminarian #1 [*pityingly*]: This is ungentlemanly...

Seminarian #2 [*nodding*]: Cruel almost...

Deacon's pressing on to the finish...

Deacon: Now, woman! Am I speaking a foreign language to you? [*Casting about*]. What? Is there an ash-try *nowhere* in this whole silly study-hall? Where would you have me ash, wiche?

He ashes into a waste-paper basket. By now, Librarian's profoundly entranced...

Librarian: SSS. His tongue's sharper than ever; it still stings. How I've waited for this moment. To slice it off!

Seminarian #1: He's awakening the female furies!

Seminarian #2: ...like he's courted destruction...

Deacon: Useless, thy name is Woman! Please! Quit hovering. Get a move on...

Seminarian #1: SSS. Sharp like a rapier's point...

Seminarian #2: Stings like a bee...

At last, Librarian's looking directly at the little agitator...

Librarian [*fuming*]: How dare you...

Deacon [*aside to himself*]: Finally!

Librarian: Sirrah. This is a holy library: no talking, no smoking, no picture-taking and most adamantly, no posturing! Who do you think you are?

Deacon: Gilgamesh!

Librarian: Oh. How I've suffered from your vif tongue-lashings in the past. But no longer! No, not today! Today I cut off, I castrate that pretty pink tongue of yours...

Deacon: Oh this...

Librarian [aghast]: Zip it! This instant! I'm not the personal secretary of some self-important scenarist!

Deacon [petulantly]: Woman. Self-importance should be a section unto itself in every brassiere of this stinking city...

Librarian [shivers]: How he stresses his "esses" like a slivering Serpent, a brazen Beelzebub! Excuse me, Mister! Have you never seen pictures of Our Lady trampling the Insidious One underfoot?

Seminarian #1: Oh Lord. The wicked wind of all wrath is carrying her away...

Seminarian #2: Like a trembling leaf...

Deacon: I have. Bring me everything M. Ruskin ever wrote on the Notre Dames of Goth!

Librarian: Zip it! Sir! I haven't lived half-a-century to be ordered around by a Deacon of nine!

Deacon [pertly]: Nine-and-a-half...

Librarian's coming to a boil...

Librarian: Silence! Fiend! This is a house of serious study; not a den of dilettantes, consumed with cutting figures!

Seminarian #1: Figures with attitude...

Seminarian #2: F.U.T.W...

Librarian: Silence! I expected better from you. Young men, you're supposed to be serious scholastics scholars; you're better than this dapper dabbling dilettante; yes, you're better than this oil-slick serpent!

Deacon: Miss, I denounce all affiliation with the Insidious One...

Seminarian #1: Does no one else see the absurdity of this situation?

Seminarian #2: Where's the harm in commanding a volume of assonant authors...

Librarian: What? Will no one come to my defense?

Silence. Crickets.

Deacon: Hmm. Hear that? The people have spoken. Unanimous decision. Double-time, woman. Before I get upset. Please...

By now, Librarian's slipping back into the trance of time past...

Librarian: Please? That's how he used to bring me around by degrees. That was the magic word... when we were innocent urchins... in the secret niches of Home... where my thrice-precious maidenhead was whisked away... once for all. Time's so mysterious. I was so much taller than him. Nothing's changed. Someone pinch me...

Deacon: Bof. Fine. If you insist. Whatever it takes. For posterity's sake. Please. Turn around. Where's your pin-cushion?

Pinches...

Seminarian #1: Mon Dieu...

Seminarian #2: I heard thunder...

Librarian, she's stunned. First, she utters some bewildered words...

Librarian: No, he didn't...

Deacon: Indeed I did...

Librarian: ...with his smoking-hand

Deacon: ...smoking, writing and regaling hand.

Then, she unleashes a torrent of buried emotions...

Librarian: Fiend! Off with his venom-tipped tongue! Off with his limp wrist! Heaven revenge the honor of thy handmaid! Unloose the pious pointer-finger!

And in comes the blessed remains of Saint Genevieve: Patron Saint of Paris...

Seminarian [in awe]: There it is...

Seminarian [reverently]: This is the first time I've...

Librarian: Now, Lord, in the name of our city's patron saint whose pointer-finger is preserved to check the insolence of self-styled scenarists such as this piece-of-shiest, I unlock this pristine relic...

Deacon [under his breath]: Finally!

Librarian: To strike the fear of Gawd into this... bad, bad boy!

Deacon [in a loud whisper]: Now!

When in swoops Priest and replaces the pointer-finger with a cigar...

Priest: My apologies...

Librarian: Huh?

*And they run off, Priest and Deacon, with the little reliquary.
Librarian's left holding the cigar, solus, all alone...*

Librarian [*in self-reproach*]: No one loves me...

Seminarian #1 [*consoling her*]: That's not true...

Seminarian #2 [*soothing her*]: We love you...

Librarian: Aw...

Seminarian #1: Sorry we weren't more helpful...

Seminarian #2: So sorry...

Librarian: Don't apologize. It's me...

Seminarian: At least the relic will be in good hands...

Seminarian #1: That's debatable...

Seminarian #2: At least the relic will be in capable hands...

Seminarian: That's for sure...

Librarian [*consoled*]: At least...

They hug her...

SCENE TWO: *Quayside Café, Rush-Hour*

☹

Enter Priest, Deacon and Maxime in the highest of spirits. They head straight for the bar. In their possession is a radiant reliquary: bedazzling, see-through...

They hoist Deacon onto the zinc, his thin legs dangling. He's out of breath, exhausted...

Overjoyed, Maxime lets out...

Maxime: You little closet thespian, you! That was an abomination! But it worked!

Priest [*clapping him on the back*]: That was one for the ages. You're a natural...

Deacon's head hangs heavily...

Maxime: Not many people could've exhibited so much calm and composure in the moment!

Priest: I almost interposed. [*Playfully*]. Who knew you smoked?

Deacon coughs a guttural cough, his whole frame rattled...

Maxime: That quote from Rimbaud was a master-stroke...

Priest: She looked ready to explode...

Deacon breathes heavily; like he had black lung...

Deacon: I feel strange inside...

Maxime: Helas. That's called Conscience, friend; she rears her wholesome head after uproarious scenes like these...

Deacon [*thinking back*]: Poor thing, she doesn't deserve this kind of abuse...

Maxime [*sweetly*]: No, she doesn't...

Priest: But, my son, we were in need of a relic, a bonafide relic and thanks to your charades we have the missing piece of our plotline. It was simply a means to an end...

Deacon: I know but still... I feel bad

Priest: Aye, acting's not for everyone. I, for one, never had the stomach. But *Good*, I emphasize, can and does come from it...

Deacon [*curiously*]: *Good*?

Priest: Yes. The *Summum Bonum*, the Ultimate Good, my little Latin scholar. Plus, between us, that petty overlord of a Librarian prolly needed a little lesson in self-control. I mean really. What's so wrong with smoking and reading, with learning and leaning, anyway? To put things in perspective. It's perfectly harmless...

Maxime: My opinion exactly...

Deacon laughs a painful laugh...

Maxime: Laugh it up, little one. It's the best medicine...

Here Bartender who's been serving someone else but can't resist side-eyeing these two-and-a-half men-on-a-mission, begs to be excused and asks...

Bartender: Will someone tell me why there's a clot of bloody flesh on my bar?

Priest *[sternly]*: It's a sacred relic, sir...

Maxime *[ecstatically]*: Cuz we're a-going on pilgrimage! Like in the Parson's Tale!

Bartender *[plain lost]*: Huh? I'm being serious. Why is it pointing at me? I'm trying to work...

Priest: Who's stopping you?

Deacon: You shoulda seen me whisk it away! On enemy turf!

Bartender: One at a time. Don't tell me Make-Shrift Maxime purchased it for some g-d-awful price at auction or something. To prove his magnanimity...

Priest: No. If Maxime so much as reaches for his wallet in my presence, I'mma...

Deacon *[sternly]*: We already canceled his credit cards...

Maxime *[learning for the first time]*: Hey...

Priest: Don't worry. We're keeping a close watch on him...

Deacon: Closer than the eye itself...

Maxime *[rouging]*: Anyway. Enough about me. To more pressing matters. Should we put this hallowed casement on ice or something? I've never been responsible for a relic before...

Bartender: How would I know? Father. Please. Tell me. Do you see anything... what's the word... sacrilegious... in bringing a holy relic into a bar?

Deacon [*suddenly fearful*]: Now that you mention it...

Priest [*pushing back*]: Psh. Man, I won't be lectured in right-or-wrong by some blasé bartender who's never been seen in Sunday Morning Mass. Never once. Do you suppose I don't have a pious purpose for everything I do?

Bartender [*on the defense*]: Pere... I simply mean... aren't we in the presence of a... what's the word... in the presence of a... hmmm... miracle?

Everyone's suddenly intimidated by the object...

Maxime [*clearing the air*]: Dear friends. Don't panic. Sacrilege is a strong word. Remember. We had an understanding. We would employ this... comment dire... miracle... this stolen-Good... either-or... for the purpose of a pilgrimage; then we would use the rich revenue to renovate the cathedral; then we would reopen the doors to Greater Paris, to the general public; in an act of pure philanthropy. Remember? We were going to spread the wealth. Does that answer your question?

Bartender [*doubly lost*]: Pilgrimage?

Maxime [*offering him a brochure*]: Here. A picture's worth a thousand words...

Bartender [*reads*]: ...a south-bound pilgrimage. Hmm. Why am I not surprised? The never-ending story...

Maxime [*pointing eagerly*]: Read the fine print. A relic's required...

Bartender [*reading further*]: Well, it goes on to say you'll need a *Maker's Dozen*, very clever, of other subscribers. Read here. I'm not making this up. Tell me, Maxime, where do you hope to lasso eleven likeminded pilgrims in the capital of Free-Thought?

Maxime: Leave the lassoing to me. [*Counting on his fingers*]. Why. We're four; and here comes Chantel number five...

Here, Jeanne emerges from the wine-cellar, apron around her waist. Immediately, she takes issue with the myriad-minded Maxime who's made himself a motely-to-the-view...

Jeanne: Well. Look who it is... the hardest working wit in Paris. Both actor and author; pimp and prostitute. Where have you been?

Maxime [*generally*]: She's never happy with me...

Jeanne: Why, that's because everyone's too understanding with you. I know what you need. Yes. You need a stern woman in your life. To keep you chastised...

Maxime [*trying to ingratiate himself*]: You look especially nice this afternoon...

Jeanne [*trying futilely to fix her hair*]. Ugh. Maxime, everyone can't afford to keep a tanning-bulb in their abat-jour; I have to work for a living...

Maxime [*looking at his colorless wrist*]: Mine musta blew a fuse...

The absurdity causes our favorite waitress to laugh a little...

Jeanne [*softening*]: Tho' you do make me laugh from time to time...

Maxime: Helas. My sole recompense...

Jeanne [*transitioning to real concern*]: But, Maxime, tell me. Do you know that a gang of gargoyles, of gross grey suits, are roaming the arrondissement seeking to ground you into submission?

Maxime: I do. I'm massively underwater...

Jeanne [*unused to the candor*]: Well, then. What are you going to do?

Maxime [*ecstatic*]: Why, we're a-going on pilgrimage! Here. Have a brochure...

Jeanne [*reads*]: This reads like a ridiculous invention of Maxime Delacroix...

Maxime [*half-honored*]: Doesn't it...

Jeanne: Yet the more I read, the less ridiculous it sounds...

Here he takes her by the hand...

Maxime: Yes. Indeed, Jeanne. Please. Join us for a veritable virée thru time and eternity; thru history and mystery. Would I ever lead you astray?

Jeanne [*half to herself*]: I might never have another chance...

Maxime: Certainly never with so outrageous a Deacon in tow...

Deacon [*ashamed*]: I'll never live this down...

Jeanne [*resolved*]: Count me in!

Priest [*elated*]: Do you feel that? Why, that's what I call momentum!

Deacon: I feel it!

Maxime: Amazing! As for me, I'm meeting Mercutio in the Cimetière Montmartre. Seriously. See. We have very grave business together. Ha. Damn. I'm late. But rest assured, I'll be back. Be ready!

Jeanne [*enthusiastically*]: Ready when you are!

And so, without further ado, he beelines thru the rain, alone, up the other hill, to Montmartre..

SCENE THREE: *Graveyard, Night, Rain*

☹

See Mercutio and Villain, sleeves rolled up, spades in hand, digging away. Villain opens perhaps our longest and most felicitous scene to date...

Whistling while he works...

Villain: Why, with brilliant ideas like these who needs a proper profession?

Mercutio: Ha. Don't overexert yourself. We need to save some strength for the upcoming acts. We're in for fireworks...

Villain: Weather permitting...

Mercutio [*in simple pain*]: Damn. Merde. My wrist. The mud's making everything like twelve-times heavier. Blast you, Maxime Delacroix. What's keeping him anyway? He should've been here by now...

Villain: I never quite understood the scheme myself; I spose its out-of-my-depth. But, Mercutio, how could he have spent everything? He's always so responsible...

Mercutio: Are we talking about the same person?

Villain: For the most part responsible...

Mercutio: Tell me. What responsible person counterfeits a fainting-spell, sleeps next to an heiress, steals an incorruptible relic, commandeers a cruise-liner and still finds time to write lullabies? That's not the half-of-it...

Villain: Well, when you put it like that...

Mercutio: He's the epitome of a prodigal spender; and now he's come to a crossroad. He needs our help...

Villain: He would do the same for us...

Mercutio: Certes. To be honest, I'm surprised we haven't staged a cemetery scene sooner. I mean. Given his goût for the classics. But, tell me, whose tombstone is this? Moldering in the rain...

Villain [*squinting*]: I think that's Dumas, the younger, voice of the streets...

Mercutio: G-d rest his soul. The elder's buried in state, in the Pantheon. See. Maxime specified 'open-air' in his last will-and-testament. I'm co-executor. Of course, he would've preferred something

real rococo, with wonderful weeping cherubims in the south but he had to settle for a simple stone slab, this drab tablet, overlooking the bleak city of Sodom. Too bad. We were pressed for time. I mean. The mud's unbelievable...

Here, a public pall-bearer, idle, without a charge, tramps onto the scene...

Pall-Bearer: ...like the mud slung by incompetent critics

Mercutio [*startled*]: Who in the world...

Villain [*equally so*]: Where did that come from?

Pall-Bearer [*reading the famous names*]: Ah. Dumas Fils. He was considerably lighter than his father. Corporally-speaking...

Mercutio: Perhaps; but it was from Dumas Senor, Greater, that Maxime learned the art of romance. Sometimes I can't read his 'Speronaro' without seeing Maxime, like a modern Ahab, on the prow of a clipper-ship. I believe he even played Debonair Dartagnan in an adolescent production of the Three Dons...

Pall-Bearer: Who are we talking about?

Mercutio: M. Maxime Delacroix, the First. In fact, sirrah, lo, behold his peaceful, oh-so-painful plot. He came to an untimely end. We're beside ourselves with grief...

Pall-Bearer [*without removing his hat*]: Do you mean that little louse who ran away with first prize for absurd screen-writing on the Côte D'Azure? Really? Is this his tasteless tombstone? His eternal epitaph? A single sentence? What? After a lifetime of great gregarious grandstanding? Shameless. He wouldn't've been worthy to unlace the bulbous ballet-slipper of Dumas, the Bigger...

Mercutio: Psh. Don't you see we're in mourning, you feelingless fool? Cmon. Let the dead rest in peace...

Pall-Bearer: But, tell me, with no more than a single full feature-length to his name, how can he be compared with the most prolific blusterer in Belle-Letters? At least Dumas, Lesser completed a number of little period-pieces; whatever one's opinion of Art Nouveau illustration...

Horatio [*cornered*]: Perhaps; but without Verdi and Piave his camellias would've wilted on the shelf, unknown to the world, like the rest of Bohemia. No. Not so. Maxime's only in need of a manic musical score to win him some commercial success in the Fenice...

Villain [*sadly*]: Some much-needed commercial success...

Mercutio *[continuing, in grief]*: But, nevermind, Monsieur, now he'll never overtake Senior or Junior; now he'll forever remain a one-hit wonder. See. He was in the middle of a follow-up performance; but whatever; who cares? Nothing's matters except who we were in the eyes of G-d...

Villain: Amen...

Pall-Bearer *[plainly]*: The real wonder is how a beautiful heiress left her entire fortune and fabulous former life for an extra-mince, Roman-nosed, semi-anonymous scenarist...

Mercutio *[indignant]*: Well, maybe she fell in love with his uncompromising life of the spirit, his playful sense of humor, his promethean power-of-expression. Plus, his anonymity was never going to be permanent...

Pall-Bearer: Well, it's permanent now...

Villain *[stung]*: Listen, you callous, stiff-necked wretch, Maxime's alive and well! Never better, in fact; and he'll be making a dramatic appearance any minute now...

Pall-Bearer: I won't hold my breath...

Here, Maxime enters with an incredulous smile on his face...

Maxime: Ah. Faithful friends. A lil' flapping flag would've sufficed! Ha. Here. Give me a shovel. Let's take turns...

Pall-Bearer *[scared witless]*: Un-unbelievable... his very voice... like in his books. Impossible. Oftentimes, he would be seen taking his sieste on the gravesite of some lesser-known Paris poetaster; as if he were praying for their eternal repose; but now I see he was really summoning their sick-spirits from beyond; he was really prying into the secrets of life and death. Like a necromancer of naught!

Maxime *[generally]*: Who is this trembling idiot?

Villain *[his anger subduing into annoyance]*: He won't leave without a Jacques Handcock...

Maxime *[signing his sinewy forearm with a water-proof sharpie]*: Ugh. Fine. There it is. Now. Get going. Damn. Am I doomed to a lifetime of interruption? Man. I can't dig graves and suffer fools, all at the same time...

Pall-Bearer *[turning to run]*: Oh Lord! Never let me fall under the Fiend's enchantment!

He runs off...

Mercutio: ...idiot

Maxime: ...that'll teach him to pry into my trade secrets. OK. Back to work...

After only a second of shoveling...

Maxime: Damn. Is there no one we could've hired for the heavy-lifting?

Mercutio [*in disbelief*]: Maxime. This is precisely the kind of insouciance which is plunging us into debt! Cmon! Heave-ho. Heave-ho. Don't give up now!

Villain: Whistle while you work, Maxime. Heave-ho!

Maxime [*reading askance*]: Damn. Who took the liberty of writing my epitaph?

Mercutio [*offended*]: It's supposed to be an imitation of your style and manner...

Maxime: Damn. Is this how I sound to everybody? It's a travesty...

Mercutio: No one's gonna read it anyway...

Maxime [*looking around*]: Damn. Could you have chosen a more secluded spot? I said sequestered... not isolated

Mercutio [*growing impatient*]: Nothing opens up on the main avenue for a generation...

Maxime [*the first we see of his petulance*]: Damn. But even Dumas Fils is figuring higher than me in the rows of fame...

Mercutio [*flat-out*]: Well, where's your modern-classic, where's your Free-Falling Woman, Maxime?

Maxime [*feeling aggressed*]: What? You couldn't've preferred la-la Traviata to our comedy-of-errors, to our beloved?

Sensing their true position, throwing down the shovel, turning thespian...

Maxime: Psh. That's it. I'm through. No. Not me, not Maxime, I won't live for low-applause. Please. Efface my name and profession. Consider me a common sod. I'll see everyone in the hereafter. Here's where I lay down and...

But before he can fully lay down and die, Pall-Bearer returns with a procession of salon-like literary men whose ringleader is nobody less than the fifth generation Dumas, the great-great grandson...

Pall-Bearer [*pointing wildly*]: See! What did I tell you! Maxime Delacroix! The necromancer! The walking-dead! He's here to heist your

heritage! Your family jewels! Your trade-secrets! Just Heaven! We can't let him get away with it!

Villain [to Maxime]: You're a popular man in Paris...

Maxime: Damn. More enemies?

Mercutio: Coming out of the woodwork...

Pall-Bearer: See! No rest for the wicked! No sleep here or hereafter! He's paying the eternal price for creating a strife of voices, a cast of characters, in his soul. See! Here's a prime example of eternal punishment. Whereas we, the talentless, sleep like babies. Monsieur Maxime, I present to you M. Dumas the Fifth, scion of the illustrious literary family, next in line to the throne, your natural peer and adversary...

Maxime: Ravi...

Dumas the Fifth: Hmm. Fancy finding Maxime Delacroix, city-slick scenarist, knee-deep in a ditch, like a plagiarist desperate to cover his own tracks. Psh. Simply pathetic. Ill-lettered American urchin. I see you're not up-to-date, au courant, with contemporary belle-literature; you're not especially fond of our delightful literary séances, are you?

Maxime: Can't say I am...

Villain [to Mercutio]: Is this the grandson of Alexander the Great? Darling of the salons?

Mercutio: Psh. He's no better than an estate manager...

Dumas the Fifth [unstooping]: Tell me, Maxime, man of mystery, what brings you and your troupe of half-wits to the great eternal resting place of Paris?

Maxime: Well. See. I been burying a modest mound of debt before I'm thrown in the Bastille...

Dumas the Fifth: Cmon. Do you suppose no one's going to notice the unmistakable swagger of Maxime Delacroix in the libraries, in the department stores? You can't go anywhere anymore without people coming up to you...

Maxime: And that's why I'll be saying adieu to Paris for a while. I won't be called Maxime anymore. I won't be donning these fur-lined overcoats any longer...

Dumas the Fifth: But, cmon, you know there's nowhere else in the world where men-of-letters are so warmly welcome; everywhere else they're

called by a less glorious name; they're called men-of-leisure; or worse, lazy...

Maxime: But, see, I'll be going where everyone loiters long afternoons in the lee of a yew. I'll blend right in. Of course, I'll have twelve volumes of Von Ranke in my satchel...

Dumas the Fifth: Cmon. Who are you kidding? Life without hustle-and-tussles would be unlivable for Maxime...

Maxime: Perhaps; but listen. Let's not get off track. I could ask you the same question. What brings you and your procession of pretty parasites to the Cimetière Montmartre?

Dumas the Fifth: Well. We heard there was a beleaguered white wraith wallowing next to my father's grave but now I see it's simply the impoverished shade of a die-hard dunce...

Maxime looks forlornly down at the tombstone...

Maxime: Ah. Dumas Fils. A man of genuine comedic genius. Indeed. He must have called me son a thousand times. Why, once, in a prophetic moment, he whispered to my soul that an arrogant American would be his rightful heir; that an assonant American would inherit the affectations of his great grandsire...

Parasite #1 [*insulted*]: Psh. How he belittles his betters! How he belittles the importance of patrimony!

Parasite #2: Alex! Avenge him! Your fathers must be turning in their grave!

Maxime: Listen. Grandfils. Paris isn't big enough for the both of us; but because of the love which I bear to Dumas Senior and Junior, I'll be leaving the capital of Belle-Letters... to pursue a career the south. Paris is all yours; but here's a lil' bit of free advice: keep your cheap opinions to yourself...

Villain: Ouf. Brutal...

Mercutio [*riling up*]: Finally! Fighting-words...

Dumas the Fifth [*starting to stoop*]: Come. My comrades. Watch me make short work of these sentimental wannabes. One. Two. Three. Where's the white-glove of my family's famous honor?

Mercutio: Stuffed in your baby-briefs, pretentious Parisian. Comrade. Pass me a shovel. Come. Time to make room in the tomb of anonymous imitators...

Maxime [to the Parasites]: He's originally Marseillaise. His liver's easily inflamed...

Parasite #1 [changing this tune]: What are we? Sweat-wet street-fighting men?

Parasite #2: Where are we? A putrid piazza where passions runs high?

Dumas the Fifth: Psh. What do I care? The Dumas' were famous because they could write with one hand and swing a billyclub with the other. I inherited their partiality for the romantic melee, for the fanciful fracas...

Maxime [to Mercutio]: You take the stouter; you know the routine...

Mercutio: Aye, captain...

And so a bespattered pas-a-deux begins. Mercutio seizes a Parasite by the arm; Villain intimidates the other with his frightfully furrowed face. Maxime and Dumas Five wrestle in the mud, so close they could almost kiss...

But, amidst so much confusion, the shovel ends up square on Maxime's head. He stops struggling...

Simultaneously, Mercutio succeeds in throwing the two Parasites off the stage. Dumas Five runs for his life. Villain lands a handful of sodden earth on his cowardly coat-tails...

Then, the scene's silent except for the sound of rain...

Maxime sits up. He stares into a puddle. He reflects...

Villain [running to his side]: Maxime! Say something. Blink if you hear me...

Mercutio: Maxime. What's the matter?

Maxime [upset]: Mec! A shovel hit me. Damn. Gimme a moment. My head's spinning...

Mercutio: Well. Now you know how we feel... reading your scripts

Villain [patting his pomaded pompadour]: Max, you need to be extra careful. This storehouse of useless anecdote's uninsured. We depend for our livelihood on it's working properly...

Maxime [unlistening]: What am I doing? I'm out of control. All I'm missing is a beret...

Villain: Don't beat yourself up, Maxime...

Mercutio: Maybe we should have went with a mini-mausoleum...

Maxime [*reflecting*]: Damn. So much for Dumas Fils. Phantom friend. So much for fickle Fame. Tell me, Mercutio, if he was so very well-loved in his lifetime, why is his final resting-place all but abandoned?

Mercutio: We're here... aren't we?

Maxime [*feeling the force of his words*]: Aye...

A moment of silence ensues...

Maxime: Tell me, Mercutio, what comes next?

Mercutio: You didn't plan any further?

Maxime: No...

Mercutio: Weren't you sposed to meet Beatrix, the Brilliant in the morning, Hôtel Jacquemart André, to pass an uncomplicated moment together?

Maxime: Uncomplicated?

Villain: Ha. Cmon. Take my hand...

And so Villain and Mercutio, on either side, escort their antihero off the scene...

SCENE FOUR: *Hotel Jacquemart-Andre, Early Morning*

☹

On no sleep, Maxime enters the Hotel Jacquemart-Andre, a lush Rococo mansion, dripping wet, idle wild...

Hear the faint orchestral music, the undertones of conversation, the clink of imported porcelain, the rustle of crinoline; smell the peony-like Belle-Epoque potpourri...

See the lobby shine with a gloss of propriety and order where someone just come from a cemetery might feel out-of-place; aye, everyone but Maxime. He's come in search of his better half, his Beatrix. He approaches the reception desk...

At first, the concierge, on a rotary phone, doesn't recognize the romanesque romancier; but, then, a moment later, he realizes it's no other than the great award-winner, M. Maxime Delacroix, a former frequenter...

Concierge [*in a quite correct English accent*]: Monsieur? Maxime? Goodness. You're a motely mess. What's with these rank Raf Simmon weeds? I've always known you to bathe twice a day...

Maxime: Excuse me. Normally I prefer clean work; but the past week's been especially brutal...

Concierge [*mystified*]: But, Monsieur, tell me, where have you been of late? Why. You're no longer to be seen in the arrondissement. The boulevard misses its sweet scenarist-in-residence...

Maxime: I moved. I moved on. But, please, where's Beatrix the blue-blooded?

Concierge: I believe her Altesse is sitting by the window... her usual silent self... with a loose-bound bundle of letters on her lap... like a lovely orchid... like a lonely pale-skinned...

Without staying to hear his litany...

Maxime: Many thanks...

Concierge [*seeing his trail of dirt*]: But Monsieur! Careful! You're making a mess of our...

But Maxime's crossing the room to where Beatrix, back straight, eyes adroit, sits and reads. Rain streams down the window. Quite smoothly, Maxime takes a seat across from her. At first, she sees only a filthy figure in her periphery and says...

Beatrix: Please. Pathetic Papo. If you'd like a picture, hide in the hedge-growth. I'm in the middle of something. For once. Let me read in peace...

Then, looking more closely over her horn-rims and seeing her magic roommate...

Beatrix: Ha. Max? Really? This is a first. Where have you been? You didn't come home last night...

Maxime [*the acme of nonchalance*]: Nowhere, my favorite cimetière; but of course, we ran into trouble; why, we ran into ol' Dumas Five. Yes. He took issue with the presumption of our screenplays. It turned into an inheritance battle... you know, who would be the next generation of romantic aventurier... comme d'habitude... otherwise I would've been here sooner...

Beatrix [*smiles*]: Droll. First rainfall... then relics... now romantic rumbles; but, tell me, what became of the man, the Maxime, who could write sweet, simple lines like these?

Displaying some of his letters...

Maxime [*reads a little*]: Bof. Tasteless. Who wrote this tripe? No sense of shame. No, not me, I would never bring such unornamented lines into the world...

Beatrix [*smiles*]: Ha. They're signed Maxime Delacroix, the most ridiculous nom-de-plume in greater Paris...

Maxime: Bah, I must've been lunatic...

Beatrix: On the contrary, you once wrote so sweet; but since you've become a serious écrivain, I stress the vain, you've become more a strange acquired taste...

Maxime [*pained*]: You have a point...

Beatrix [*smiles*]: Anyway. I believe you're onto something...

Maxime: I better be; or else we're wasting away in a chambre-de-bonne, for nothing...

Beatrix: Ha. That studio suited two people perfectly. Until it turned into a hostel for the fatherless and widow...

Maxime: Fair enough; but I couldn't say no...

Beatrix: Max, I never minded a sudden access of charity; but it's not cool to invite a caravan of refugees into our apartment and then leave for hours and hours on end on some imperative, unnamable errand. I had

to do all the cleaning, the actual work-of-mercy, all by myself. It's too much for one person...

Maxime [*ruefully*]: Lord. I'm so profoundly sorry. Forgive me. It might sound far-fetched but I been working behind the scenes to convey these wandering refugees to a warmer latitude, where it's easier to be homeless. Working tirelessly. But speaking of which... how's Patriarch?

Beatrix: He's recovering. The irony. His parents were stowaways on a container ship and soon he'll be returning to the Plentiful Land, the ticket-holder-of-honor...

Maxime: Indeed. His parents came in search of better life; not knowing that wasn't to be found in big inhospitable cities. They're forced to take shelter in the merciless streets. It's tragic. They'll be happier in an oriental olive grove...

Beatrix: Perhaps so; but I still don't see the necessity of a cruise-ship when I offered a hundred times to let everyone use my personal craft; but Maxime prefers to complicate things... to make grand errands more difficult for himself... as if he needed something to exaggerate. Tell me, is this cracked cruise-liner slated to make a stop in Old Carthage? Ha. I already know the answer...

Maxime [*in the affirmative*]: Even better. I intend on swimming from Malta. Back stroke. Desperate people cross those waters all the time. Easy. And then I'll head back before anyone misses me. Mission accomplished...

Beatrix [*laughs*]: Sure. Easy. Like a stroll in the woods. You know, sometimes, when I read these swan-like lines, I recall what really happened. For instance, I remember when you spoke these selfsame words to the woman in the ticket-window of the Royal Cinema. Tell me, is everyone who writes epistles so promiscuous with their praises? Yes. Tell me, is she the kind of woman, girl from what I gather, who would be offended; or worse, wounded, hurt, by this strange platonic promiscuity? See. I mention Plato because it's no secret you're a celibate. Ha. Cmon, Maxime. Don't rouge. Don't blush. No one overheard me...

Maxime [*feeling his face*]: Phew. Is it warm in here? Well. Offended? That's none of my concern. I'm in the business of capturing romantic sentiment; but wounded? Hurt? Helas. There's the rub...

Beatrix: Well. Women are wisening to fact that Maxime's nothing more than a bare-faced flirt...

Maxime [*with mock outrage*]: Psh; and so much more! Why, I'd sleep with this whole silent dining salon if it meant settling a score! Garçon! My usual suite!

Beatrix [*laughs*]: A less convincing actor never took the stage; you shoulda stayed behind the scenes, Maxime...

Maxime. Helas. So true. I know better now. Cmon, Love. Let's head home. I'll clean the house...

But before he can take her by the hand, a middle-aged waiter steps up and says...

Garçon [*punctiliously*]: Monsieur, you called?

Maxime: No. I wasn't being serious...

Garçon: I'm confused. Shall I reserve Monsieur's usual suite or no?

Beatrix [*smiling*]: Usual suite?

Garçon: Indeed, Madame. For exclusive auditions...

Maxime [*rouging*]: Bah. He's just playing around; just straight-facing us; he's like the Swiss-guard. Damn. This is exactly what Plato tried to expel from the Republic... people blurring the line between truth and fiction...

Garçon: France is a republic, monsieur...

Maxime: Incredible. He won't break character for a second...

Garçon: Monsieur, sir, would you like us to ready your usual six-room suit? Overlooking the Parc...

Beatrix: Six-rooms, hein?

Garçon: Indeed, Madame. They have to practice somewhere; the other actresses. See. He's known to host the most extravagant read-throughs in all hotel history...

Beatrix: Oh? The other actresses? Ha. So much for cross-dressing. Why, it seems you've been caught in the web of your own unwise devices, Maxime. I can't wait to see how you'll extricate yourself...

Maxime: Mais, non. Do you really believe this joker? You know their hearts are a cellar of secret resentment. He's vying to be the next first-class scenarist in the Occident; and he chose this moment to step up. When he sees I'm with someone... when he sees I'm exhausted...

Garcon: Mais, oui, monsieur. Last nite, you invited every silk-sashed woman in the parlor-room for an audition-like after-party. Madame, it was a downright Roman bacchanal...

Beatrix: Oh, this is getting good...

Maxime: Cmon. Is it even possible to dig a grave and host a whole afterhours audition in a single winter weeknight?

Garcon: Why, anything's possible in the make-believe world of Maxime Delcroix...

Maxime: Cmon. It would be impossible, physically impossible, to accomplish all that in a matter of a few witching hours; simply impossible. Psh. I need as much sleep as the next necromancer. [To Beatrix]. Come. Let's leave. I need a thirty-minute bath in oblivion. Will you join me?

But before they can seal their loving friendship with a brisk bisou, a party of half-dressed harlequins, drunk and jovial, float into the room. Everyone "aww's" on seeing the childish, cherub-cheeked playwright...

Harlequin #1: Aww. How are you cuter every time we meet?

Harlequin #2: Aww. Maxime. Poet and player in a quaint hundred-pound package!

Harlequin #3: Garcon! Please. A round of your bright and bubbliest. On the suite of Maxime Delacroix!

Harlequin #4: I never sleep better than in the master-suite of Magic Maxime...

Maxime [to Beatrix]: Uhh. I've never seen these dessous-chic-queens in my life...

Harlequin #1: Max! Perhaps he doesn't remember me with clothes on. Listen. Last nite, after inviting me upstairs for a recital of his new script, from time to time complaining of his chronic exhaustion, his constitutional loneliness, he's suddenly dumbstruck. POW. Then and there, he builds himself a make-shift escritorio and proceeds to write thru the nite; till I could no longer keep my eyes open. So strange! But I had the whole bed to myself and here's the mattress is so very comfortable...

Harlequin #2: Funny! He never touched me either!

Harlequin #3: You too? Listen to this. Four-in-the-morning, Phoebus nowhere in sight, I wake and there's self-made Maxime poring over a parchment-paper in a pair of Raybans, complaining of the pains of composition... how no one understands... except me... of course

Harlequin #4: Ha. That's because he's a flaming faggot; a faerie fire-brand. Don't take it personal...

Harlequin #5 [*a little rotund one*]: Maxime? Are we talking about the same person? Why, last nite, he ran me through to the hilt, full tilt, for three hours straight till I couldn't walk down the Faubourg without drawing awkward looks. See, sometimes, he's simply disconsolate, like a child crying for his bib; especially through-out the lonely hours of night when everyone else is asleep. Aww. He's so adorable. Why, I couldn't remove his improvising mouth from my bright pink teet...

Here begins a little jealous infighting...

Harlequin #1: Liar! In your dreams! Maxime wouldn't put his pen down long enough to kiss the plumpest, blue-veined breast!

Harlequin #2: Maxime, you should know, this biche, she stole your library-card and has been removing books without your knowledge...

Harlequin #5: He always encouraged me to spare no expense on my education. He said take out everything and anything...

Harlequin #3: But it takes her twelve-months to finish a book. Think of the overdue fees!

Harlequin #5 [*fighting back*]: ...coming from the one who steals his stationary and signs outrageous IOU's in his name!

Harlequin #3: He always encouraged me to take full advantage of everything a five-star hotel has to offer!

Harlequin #4: Including the spa!

Garcon [*interposing*]: Ladies! Please. Keep your voices down. It seems pretty straight-forward. See. Maxime's not the first composer to seek solace in the companionship of strange bedfellows... nor will he be the last. Miserable lot...

Maxime [*to Beatrix, hurriedly*]: I can explain...

Beatrix [*with mock disapproval*]: To the hilt, hein? Full tilt, ha? Who said chivalry and the chevalier were dead? Shall we get the hell out of here?

Maxime [*quite gratefully*]: Yes. Let's. Garcon, check, please...

Garcon [*instantaneously*]: Bien sur. Here's monsieur's bill for the previous three months of hotel-life...

Maxime [*marveling at the amount*]: Tip included?

Garcon: Not if monsieur's a true spendthrift, living only for heroic gestures...

Maxime [*in wonder*]: My G-d. The laundry fees alone would bankrupt a lesser playwright. Well. So be it. Where do I sign?

But before he can sign his life away, in storms Abbess, all out of breath...

Abbess [*deeply distressed*]: Monsieur! I came as fast as I could. Chaste Maiden... the crass Creditors... they have her... in the Tour Saint Jacques. We have to free her before... before they pluck her precious maidenhead; before she's deflowered. [*Faulting herself*] Oh Lord, we should've intervened sooner! Yes! At heart, he's a regular religious man! But now look where we are!

Maxime's suddenly aggrieved, deeply aggrieved, at the thought of Chaste Maiden in captivity...

Maxime: No. Not Chaste Maiden. But she's the soul of purity. No. Those brutes have her? All because of me? M. Maxime? No. How could I be so careless, so reckless, so fleckless, so preposterous!

Here he laments; but another moment and he addresses himself to the task at hand...

Maxime: But, Abbess, mark my words, we'll be debt-free once more; even if I have to serve seventy-years of bland office-work. Where is she? Atop the Tour Saint Jacques? That strange, mysterious monument? As ambitious and useless as one of my screenplays. Are there even any slanted stairs to the top? Well. When has that ever stopped me before? Abbess, hide in my executive suite; I keep a shrine in the cabinet. Please. Pray for me. I won't let those callous creditors lay a finger on her chastity. No. That I promise you. Now. I'm off. Crosstown! But first...

Here he hurriedly raises a pointer-finger and thumb to his lips, as if he were sipping from a tiny cup, pinky apart...

Maxime: Garcon! Espresso! Plural!

Next moment, he downs three consecutive espressos, ink-black, before they can cool. He's suddenly surging with optimism...

Maxime: Psh. Debt-collectors? I'mma run rings around those heavy, hard-hearted tree-trunks. Garcon! Where is he? Reserve me a speed-boat. Please. Right away! Money's not an object...

Garcon [*obliging*]: Will monsieur opt for the insurance?

Maxime: Psh. Forget insurance. Too costly. Charge everything to my suit.
Tout de suite!

Garcon: Your wish is my command...

Maxime: Merci. [*Taking Beatrix by the hand*]. Altesse, before I vanish into the record-breaking rain, please, more invigorating than any espresso, let me steal a single sweet kiss...

Beatrix [*consenting*]: One kiss...

They kiss in front of everyone...

Maxime: ...and all the torment of composition's repaid

Harlequins [*in unison*]: Aww...

So Maxime springs into action...

Maxime: Garcon! Please. They'll recognize a lithe lil' tooth-pick like myself. Let me borrow this...

Here, he snatches a plush cushion from the sofa and stuffs his shirt, to look like a hunchback. For a moment, he admires himself in a rich infinity mirror...

Maxime: Now. How's that, Victor Hugo? My best Quasimodo. Abbess. Is it a crime to trespass on church property in a suchlike situation? It shouldn't be...

Abbess [*faintly*]: But it is...

Nevertheless, her words were without effect because Maxime's already behind the wheel of a brand-new, warm-wood-paneled speed-boat, racing to the aid of pious purity...

SCENE FIVE: *Tour Saint Jacques, Cataract*

☹

As the dungeon door closes upon her...

Chaste Maiden [*shouting*]: Perspiring brutes! Yeah, you heard me! My Maxime's gonna wipe those lecherous looks off your sick orbless skulls with a single swoop of his cape! a single swift veronica! Maxime, the Matador! You watch!

The belfry goes quiet. She's alone. She soliloquizes...

Chaste Maiden [*gently again*]: So, he's addicted to something called Credit... so what? So is everyone that's hopeful for the future. So is everyone with great expectations. But what if he...

Her mind misgives...

Chaste Maiden: No. Methinks I see... impolite Maxime... dead? By his own hand? No. Impossible. He's not the type to suicide. I'd sooner believe he drove himself to death... in his headlong race to Greatness. Yes. I would sooner believe he worked himself to an early grave... in a single intensive sitting. Yes. That sounds more like the Maxime I know. Yet... on the other hand...

Her mind misgives again...

Chaste Maiden: Yet... on the other hand... there's said to be a kind of honor... which cannot bear the laceration of conscience... when once reputation's tarnished... when once it's conscious of wrong-doing. Why. That sounds like Maxime too. Oh, the soul's so full of contradictions! Especially his...

She paces the room, a prey of wayward worries...

Chaste Maiden: So, he's amassed an enormous amount of debt... so what? It's not worth taking one's life over. Oh. How my mind misgives. Why. Maxime's the very soul of honor... a stoic of heroic proportions... with a hand permanently poised to despatch himself, on command, without hesitation... if it means cleansing his reputation of all misdeeds, misstatement... in a glorious blaze of self-violence! Mon Dieu. Poor, proud, pitiful poet! Desperate ill-advised deed! My lonesome little Maxime...

Here, Maxime, in the homespun costume of a Hunchback, lets himself in...

Maxime [*in character*]: Don't mind me...

Chaste Maiden: Who's there? Watch yourself! I may look weak but in reality I am armed with a heavenly host of arch-angels awaiting the moment to swing low, to interpose, for a handmaiden!

Maxime [*reassuring her*]: Peace. Mademoiselle. I mean no harm. I work here. This is like my office...

Chaste Maiden [*somehow comforted by his kindly voice*]: Work here?

Maxime: Yes. The late-shift. For a little pocket-money. For a little peace of mind...

She's suddenly flooded with a saintly concern for others...

Chaste Maiden: Good Lord. What's wrong with your shoulders?

Maxime: Helas. From hunching over a lifetime of manuscripts...

Chaste Maiden [*in wonder*]: So you're the one who rings the bell every five minutes?

Maxime: Till I'm relieved at first light. It pays the bills. Plus it supplies my daily exercise. It's a pretty good opportunity. I have time to myself... that I consecrate to private study

Chaste Maiden: Somehow you seem so familiar...

Maxime [*elusively*]: Perhaps we've passed each other in the street... on the way to G-d knows where. See, we're in a metropolis of a million people... all perfect strangers... but, you know, for so many people it's impossible not to stare at my deformity...

Chaste Maiden [*sympathizing*]: Poor thing. You're laboring under a frightful cross. Oh. Those sorry stooped shoulders. Here. Let me rub them...

Maxime [*recoiling*]: Don't worry. I feel nothing. It's only unsightly for others...

Chaste Maiden [*sweetly*]: Brother, never shrink from the soft touch of a sibling. I find you and your hunchback beautiful. [*Drawn towards him*]. Because beauty-of-person's so superficial...

Maxime [*growing amorous n' careless*]: So true...

But, thankfully, she hear the echo of many footsteps. She straightens up...

Chaste Maiden: Shh, someone's coming. Stand behind me. [*Shouting*]. Remember, carnal-minded men, every time a bestial brute ravished an innocent nun in the Book-of-Martyrs, their souls were eaten away with

the worm of remorse! And worse, their flesh with the punishment of plague!

She trembles with righteous rage. Tearful, she quotes...

Chaste Maiden: Brutes! Try me! Voyez comme le ciel protège l'innocence! Pussies...

The footsteps seem to subside; but, soon, she loses herself in a transport of grief...

Chaste Maiden: Maxime, my Maxime. Oh. How he used to quote from his mentor, bewigged Beaumarchais; but, for my money, Maxime was deeper, funnier, richer. But, nevermind, now he's no more...

Maxime: Helas. No more costume-shopping in the Bon Marches; no more fourteen carat figaros...

Chaste Maiden [*surprised by his familiarity*]: You knew him?

Maxime: Intimately...

Chaste Maiden [*disgusted*]: Eww. Promiscuous scenarists! He *knew* everybody. Foul philanderer! And he simply assumed a religious sister could be counted in the number of his casual acquaintance, his causal conquests! The presumption! I spit on his grave!

Maxime [*rushing to explain himself*]: No! Mademoiselle! Nothing of the sort. Never ever. He was simply a friend to the sisters-of-mercy; he relied on their constant intercession...

Chaste Maiden [*indignant*]: Well, he'll receive none from me!

Maxime [*visibly aggrieved*]: Oh, Mademoiselle. Go easy on the mec. Why. He was susceptible to the most passing slight; yes, the littlest grimace could cut him to the quick...

Chaste Maiden: As it should! Listen to this. It gets worse! Once I overheard him in a public house... surrounded by a troupe of no-good nobodies... the center-of-attention... as always... and every other word out of his hellish mouth was 'putain-de-mere, son-of-a-biche, whoreson wretch.' See. He would say anything, anything for a laugh. Disgraceful, despicable...

Maxime [*devastated*]: No, sister, he begs forgiveness; he was free-falling; he was carried away...

Chaste Maiden: Excuses, poor excuses. Then explain why I've seen him, in the Cathedral, cross his head, adamantly, cross his heart, passionately, but fail to cross his motely mouth? His wondrous words?

He would miss his Apollonian lip by a hairsbreadth... as if he feared a correct tongue would sink his chances of a Goncourt...

Maxime: Mademoiselle! That's simply good hygiene... here in the big insalubrious cities... what with many millions of people... constantly coughing? Forever sniffing. No. He runs the risk of losing precious work-weeks to the common cold!

Chaste Maiden [*staunchly*]: No. No. It's symbolic of his profession... second oldest in the world. He's not a *homme serieux*... he stoops to conquer. [*Dramatic pause*]. Like a slut...

Maxime [*sunk in defeat*]: Oh. Mademoiselle. Please. Excuse me while I throw myself out a window...

But soon she relents...

Chaste Maiden: Oh, but, nevermind, he's worm's food now, peppered with frivolous folly, unprepared, in a shallow grave; in the icy circle of the self-violent. Oh. Oh. Had I known he was so desperate, I wouldn't have given him such a hard-time...

Maxime [*forgetting himself*]: Are those tears, sister?

Chaste Maiden [*crying*]: No...

Maxime [*holding her*]: Sister...

She starts crying a river...

Chaste Maiden: Oh. It's not his fault if the world's cruel, cold place; where we have to be cruel and cold ourselves in order to survive. No. He would never knowingly wrong a soul; unless it was the one residing in the temple of his own bony body... like a robust emboldened Sampson, bringing the building down on his own cute curly-topped head! No. I'll never believe that stoic suicide's an unpardonable crime if the magic Maxime Delacroix's in the great rollcall of its perpetrators. Oh Lord. Let these pious prayers shorten the term of his torment. Lettem come to his rescue... he would do the same for me...

Maxime [*crying himself*]: C'est sure... sister... c'est sure...

They embrace. They fall silent...

Chaste Maiden: Listen to the rain...

Maxime: It's really coming down...

Cue cataract.

Chaste Maiden: Heaven's angry. Sh. Are you sure we've never met? Somehow, I feel safe in your arms...

Maxime *[a tear streaming down his cheeks]*: I'm complimented, sister, deeply complimented...

Chaste Maiden: From the moment you called me sister... something in the timbre of your voice... I had the feeling that I was in the arms of a close friend. Tell me, friend. Have you always been hunchbacked?

Maxime *[choked with tears]*: From birth... sister... from birth...

Chaste Maiden *[pressing tighter]*: Let it out. I feel like we've known each other since the crib, yes, since forever. *[Kissing his tears]*. Let it out. It's healthful for the soul... like an intimation of the All-Merciful...

She presses tighter and suddenly senses something's off...

Chaste Maiden: Wait a second. I never knew hunchbacks to be so soft?

She seems to be squeezing a cushion of some kind...

Chaste Maiden: Huh? Hol' up. What in the world? Those swimming, bright-brown eyes... Maxime!

Maxime *[unmasked]*: Who?

She commences to hit him repeatedly...

Chaste Maiden: Maxime! You! You! I should've known from those pearl-white implants! From that cute cherubic smile! Shameless scenarists! This is a new low!

Maxime *[laughing nervously]*: Neverfear, Maxime's here...

Chaste Maiden *[pushes him]*: Don't you touch me, Maxime! You fiend! If you could see yourself...

Maxime: This? It's meant to be playful...

Chaste Maiden *[deadly serious]*: No one's laughing...

But, thankfully, he hears a serious stampede of footsteps nearing the top-floor...

Maxime *[alerted]*: Hear that? Creditors. They're coming to collect. Its high-time we go...

Chaste Maiden: But there's only one exit!

Maxime: Hmm. Not if I have anything to say about it. Now. Lemme see. *[Seeing a coil of rope]*. Psh. Who do you think I am? A silly suicide? No. I'd sooner swing from a moldering medieval tower! Hang on!

Chaste Maiden: Maxime! This is not a midday episode of the Three Muscatels! This is real life!

Maxime: Says who? Hold on to me! [*Distracting her*]. See. I spent my formative years in the circus... a thespian's like an alley-cat... always lands on its feet... we have nine lives. Trust me. Close your eyes! Hieronymus! Here we come!

And, so, Maxime and Chaste Maiden, holding on for her life, swing out the window and land quasi-gracefully, wholly miraculously, in that purring speed-boat below...

SCENE SIX: *The Book-Dealer's Boutique, Burning*

☹

Livid, Priest overturns a stack of banned books, with a loud crash. Deacon feeds a veritable bonfire-of-vanities, a real-live auto-de-fe with the illicit content. Hieronymus hides behind the register, in a dotard's dismay...

Hieronymus [*literally quaking in his pantoufles*]: Please! I'm feeble with age; I've overstayed the world's welcome. Please. I'm a withered old man...

Priest [*in a righteous fury*]: So you're the plug who's been supplying our innocent chorister, our blue-breasted Maxime, with his stash of illicit librettos! So, you're the fiend who's been fueling his dreams of outlandish adventure! Canaille! What? Every English and French aventurier that ever crossed Christendom in search of love, leisure and polite letters! [*Reading a spine*]. Mon Dieu. This is nothing but buffoonery...

Deacon [*making a revolted-like face*]: Pure trash...

Hieronymus: Please! That's my retirement nest! My life's savings!

Deacon: Père, it's time we clean the streets of these pernicious book-dealers...

Hieronymus [*panicked*]: Don't kill the messenger! He was so insistent. He kept saying everything was for the 'greater good'... that these famous memoirs would be going towards a 'good cause'... the cause of causes! Why. He couldn't get enough; I couldn't restock them fast enough; he kept coming back for more. They were literally flying off the shelf...

Priest: Lemme guess, he was your best customer...

Hieronymus: Sometimes my sole customer. But, mon Pere, many of these memoirist were shining examples of Enlightenment, promoters of travel, virtue, education; where's the harm in skimming through their European escapades?

Priest: Psh. Peddling-pedant. Skim? Maxime? Hardly. Who delves deeper? Were you aware, mon vieux, that because of these frolicsome espades we were compelled to lift a pious relic from its rightful place in the library; in order to launch a pretty pilgrimage to the far-famed seaboard of Old Rome? Yes, old man, you heard me; and all so the sole customer of Parisian book-stalls can live out his fantasy of becoming an overseas aventurier?

Hieronymus [*completely bewildered*]: What? I'm not following...

Priest: Simpleton. In the illogical mind of Maxime, emphasis on the ill, we were under the necessity of securing a religious relic in order to spearhead a pilgrimage to the Promised Land. Damn, man, have a little imagination...

Hieronymus [*further confused*]: You lost me...

Priest: Fool. He's been infected by the spirit of scrupleless expediency, by the spirit of romance. Helas. He seems to believe a confessional artist is free to commit whatever conneries he pleases so long as he repents afterwards; even worse, *feels* repentant. So we were compelled to plunge a studious seminary into pure pandemonium; and now we're on the point of commandeering a commercial cruise-liner; all so he can courier... personally courier... a bundle of love-letters to his former fiancé...

Hieronymus [*in disbelief*]: No...

Priest: Man. He's fallen ill from these volumes...

Deacon: And you, old scoundrel, have been aiding and abetting his dangerous reading habits...

Hieronymus [*lost in remorse*]: Oh no, oh no. What have I done? He's out of control. I've created a monster. Near-sighted Maxime. You say he lifted a what?

Priest [*to Deacon, impatiently*]: Produce the relic!

All this while he's been perusing an eighteenth century enlightened exploit...

Deacon [*smiling to himself*]: Hehe. C'est marrant...

Priest [*with redoubled fury*]: Boy! The relic before I come over there and...

Deacon returns the book to its place on the mantelpiece and produces from his breast pocket the relic wrapped in a sorry tissue...

Deacon: Fresh as when it was first severed from the lily-white wonder of her hand...

Hieronymus [*nauseated*]: Please tell me that's a prosthetic...

Priest: This is a real incorruptible pound of flesh, mon vieux...

Deacon: ...with a virtue to correct incorrigible little devils no matter their advanced age...

Beholding his forbidden books, ablaze; and sorrowing...

Hieronymus: Oh. Oh. My entire rare-book collection; my precious stock-pile; up in smoke. Gone. Goodbye...

And in fact, the hard-bound mound has been engulfed by infernal flames. But then, swoosh, the showroom's thrown open, creating a wind-tunnel that causes burning bits of parchment paper to fly everywhere. Voila, Maxime and Chaste Maiden, appear on the scene. Volubly, Maxime calls out...

Maxime: Hieronymus! My books!

Hieronymus: Monsieur! Maxime! Save my boutique!

Maxime: Damn. Someone help me! Empty those crates! Filled with my bilingual books. For when I first meet the Borromeo family. There! Dump'em!

Chaste Maiden: Let me help...

Maxime [*handing her a littler crate*]: Here. Go for water! Douse the flames!

So, Maxime and Chaste Maiden throw water on the burning banned books. But, then, naturally, the stuff begins big-billowing with smoke...

Hieronymus [*further dismayed*]: Oh! My medieval wall-hangings! Lord! What's worse? The scourge of fire or water? Cough, cough. I can't breathe!

Priest: Psh. Don't be so dramatic...

Chaste Maiden [*to Maxime*]: Go console him...

Maxime [*to Hieronymus*]: Don't worry. We'll rebuild. Business'll come back...

Hieronymus [*despairing*]: Will it, Maxime? Will it?

Chaste Maiden [*interposing*]: Either way. Maxime's thru with this intellectual nonsense... the constant name-dropping... the obscure references... the unending footnotes. See. He's going to build a summer school, a language school, on the site of this historic curiosity shop like a Phoenix rising from its ashes... a real service to the community... as his penitence. Aren't you, Maxime?

Maxime [*hearing this for the first time*]: I am?

Chaste Maiden [*sternly*]. He is; and he's going to put you on salary, Hieronymus...

Hieronymus [*deeply moved*]: You would do that for me?

Maxime [*resolutely*]: Friend, it's the least I can do... after all the trouble I've caused...

Hieronymus [*blubbering*]: I can't thank you enough...

Priest: Bof. Stop sobbing. Be a man...

Chaste Maiden [*seeing the relic*]: Is that what I think it is?

Maxime [*nodding in the affirmative*]: We meant well...

Chaste Maiden [*speechless*]: Maxime. Return her...

Maxime: Soon enough, sister, soon enough. But first we cruise the southern seas!

Chaste Maiden: Can I come?

Maxime: I thought you'd never ask...

Hieronymus [*following suit*]: Can I come?

Maxime: The more, the merrier. Everyone, follow me!

He casts a last look at all the burning books...

Maxime: Goodbye Laurence Sterne, comic cleric. Allons!

Priest [*with the last word*]: What a sermonizer he was...

And so they all high-tail to the train-station...

SCENE SEVEN: *Train-Station, Outside, Rain*

☹

In front of the Gare-du-Nord, Mercutio and Villain wait and worry. Commuters hie left and right for their several churning trains. Setting down a suitcase and rubbing his shoulder, Villain says...

Villain: Damn. Is he really coming?

Mercutio: Friend. If I learnt anything from working with Maxime in the past it's that when he says he'll be somewhere, he'll be there. Don't lose faith...

Villain: Perhaps but times were simpler then... promises were easier to keep... now everything's become more and more... complicated...

Mercutio: Maxime's the simplest man I know...

Villain: But that's not saying much... we're a company of comedians... emotional mercenaries... we profiteer in complexes...

Mercutio [*peering into the rain*]: Still...

Villain [*looking skeptical*]: I mean... it's becoming less and less of a sure thing, less and less of a sure-fire foregone conclusion, that a happy ending's in store for us...

Mercutio [*annoyed*]: Well. If he doesn't show in the next ten minutes, I'll treat you to a happy ending... Place Pigalle... in lieu of the real thing...

Villain [*not laughing*]: Can we be serious a moment? Cmon. He's been contracting debt... like it's nobody's business... to fund his next experimental screenplays... expecting to be rewarded for his pains... or to be officially buried first... face-down... for creditors to "kiss his f****s..." we laugh... but it's a serious matter...

Mercutio: Ha. Infamous spender he is... n' after all those hours in the Moulin... it's a wonder he contracted no worse...

Villain [*not laughing*]: Very funny. I mean. We should've intervened sooner. Why. I have less and less confidence these... let's call a spade a spade... wild ideas of his... will work out... in the end...

Mercutio [*still peering*]: Have a little faith...

As if in the eye of a storm, commuters pass Mercutio and Villain on their way to the terminal. Rain falls. Time passes. Suddenly, Villain thinks he sees their great guide. Elated, he cries...

Villain Wait! There he is! With the rubber rain-boots!

Mercutio: Psh. Maxime doesn't wear rubber; he wouldn't be caught dead in that footgear...

Villain [*deflated*]: I could've sworn...

Mercutio [*feelingly*]: Come... stand next to me... under the awning... you're getting wet...

Villain [*visibly despairing*]: I mean... honestly... we have no real assurance... no real guarantee... besides his bone-bare word-of-honor... whatever that means in a profession like ours... that he's really on his way. True. True. He mentioned, once, in passing, like that, the Gare Du Nord... but with seemingly no forethought...

Mercutio: ...seemingly.

Villain: Not to mention... that was yesterday... that's a lifetime in wit years... so much could've happened between then and now...

Mercutio: Five more minutes... then there's an inexpensive oyster bar... a côte...

Villain [*hopeless*]: We're not going to make it...

Mercutio [*to himself*]: Cmon. Where's the Maestro? What are you, Maxime? You're taking forever; you better not be putting the finishing touches on some never-ending sentence... while we worry ourselves sick. Maxime. Time's running out...

But here Villain thrills again, tho' this time skeptically...

Villain. It couldn't be... I won't be fooled twice... crossing the street... that would be too good... even for his Spoiled Highness. Tell me, would Maxime be at the head of a strange crew of petite-bourgeois, refugees, priests and royalty? There... against traffic... jaywalking in the middle of the...

Mercutio [*suddenly elated*]: Thank Heaven! That sounds right to me. Maxime! You g-dless wretch. Bravo. Here you are. In the nick of time...

And indeed, Maxime, all smiles, simply strolls up with the most-motely of crews in tow, all casual, carefree, as if their little world wasn't collapsing...

He tips an invisible hat...

Maxime: Mecs! Top of the evening to youse; sorry to keep everyone waiting. How late are we?

Mercutio: I almost left...

Seeing the refugees...

Mercutio: Hello. Who knew you had so many brothers and sisters? The resemblance is really...

Maxime: Cousins. Don't mean to cut you off but where's the rest of Delacroix's Dozen?

Mercutio: Hm. Diva and Understudy went to the little ladies room. Castrato, I regret to inform you, won't be joining us. Why. He met someone. He feels you'll never amount to anything...

Maxime: Damn. Then we're one soul short. Neverfear. I'll think of something. Now. To more pressing matters. Tell me, is there time for a verre?

Villain [*lashing out for once*]: No! Maxime! Emphatically, no! Cmon. No sense of urgency! No concept of money! How you survive is a mystery to me...

Maxime: OK. OK. I didn't realize...

Villain [*finally flaring up*]: First, you wanted to be shot down by the Emir of Monaco: we acquiesced; then, you wanted to be buried in the Cimetière Montmartre: we acquiesced; then, you wanted to be remembered as a great sailor of seas: we acquiesced! But now I'm putting my foot down! No! Emphatically, no! There's NO time for a verre!

Priest [*interposing*]: OK. OK. There'll be plenny of time to strangle this little wit on the open seas; but, now, to more pressing matters: which track are we?

Deacon: Hell if I know...

Chaste Maiden [*taking him by the hand*]: Come. Let's go see...

Maxime [*making peace*]: Again. So sorry. I have to be more punctual. Serious. Your time's precious to me. Thanks for coming. Thanks for putting up with me...

Villain [*begrudgingly*]: Ugh. Sorry for getting on your case...

Maxime: OK. Now, where were we? That's right. We have a train to catch. The last train to Marseille! Adieu Paris! Adieu to your rhumes and brumes... to your sullen, sunken looks... to your weeks of grise. Inspire someone else. But, wait. What's going on? What's happening? I think I see a glimmer... a glimmer of... hope?

Mercutio [*enraptured*]: Mon Dieu. The sun's coming out!

And, indeed, inouï, as far as the eye can see, the rooves of Paris begin to gleam with golden beams of sundown...

Maxime [*transfixed*]: Truly, Paris is the most beautiful city in the world...

Mercutio: I don't wanna leave...

But, suddenly, Priest is forced to tear everyone away. He points desperately...

Priest: Maxime! Our pursuers! The creditors! Here they come! Run for your life!

And, indeed, long-expected, a squad of debt-collectors are in heel-toe march toward the train-station. Peace-making Maxime desires confront them head on...

Maxime: Ugh. I'm tired of running, monsignor; I'm tired of these creditors constantly interrupting my contemplation; I'm tired of crossing their sickly specter at every street-corner. Come. Let's meet these money-changing fiends in the open field... here and now... en pleine rue!

Mercutio [*restraining him*]: Maxime, Michael's my witness, I've never shied away from a throw-down in all my life; but these refugees are counting on us to free them from this ugly urban hell-hole; plus, Deacon's counting on us to offer him a grand tour of antiquity; cmon, we're responsible for others these days. Let's dip out. Let these collectors incur a little loss. We have things to see; we have places to be...

Maxime [*looks to Priest*]: Your call...

Priest [*sensibly*]: Its better we flee...

Maxime: OK. Then that settles it. But first things first; inventory. Relic?

Villain: Check...

Maxime: Subscriptions?

Villain: Check...

Maxime: My moveable library?

Villain: Check...

Maxime: Well. Then, that's everything! Friends. Pilgrims. We can still make it; but we have to run; we have to sprint; 'cuz time's no longer on our side; but we're not souls to be weighed down by a little poor credit, are we? No, not the Delacroix Dozen! Now. There's a timetable; it's totally intransigent; the train leaves regardless; so, we have no

choice but to make it. Good people, gird your loins. Mystic Marseille.
Here we come!

So everyone runs, sprints really...

SCENE EIGHT: *Train-Station, Inside, Commotion*

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In front of a timetable, Deacon and Chaste Maiden stand and read. Commuters streak to and fro. They look lost...

Deacon: Hmm. Maybe he meant Montpellier?

Chaste Maiden: Anyway, we're not really commandeering a cruise-liner, are we?

Deacon: I have a relic that suggests we are...

Chaste Maiden: Hmm. But when he speaks of *commandeering* something; what is it he means...

Deacon: Good G-d, I never know with these comedians; but he's fond of the expression.

Chaste Maiden: I mean... wouldn't you say he's been going a little... hmm... what's the right word... *overboard*... in recent months?

Deacon: What do I know? Do you see Marseille anywhere? Could he have meant...?

Chaste Maiden: Cmon. How hard is it to read a timetable?

Deacon: Torture. Gimme a minute...

Chaste Maiden: We don't have a minute!

Deacon [*casting about*]: Damn. I need a second pair of eyes; but everyone's in a hurry...

Here, Maxime and his Pilgrimage crash onto the scene...

Maxime: Come! We'll ask someone! Please! Run! We're being pursued!

To other commuters...

Maxime: Excuse us. So sorry. Coming through...

Here, Primadonna and Understudy exit the washroom. They're already bickering...

Primadonna [*proudly*]: Psh. I won't be rushed...

Understudy [*urgently*]: Please! What don't you understand about 'we're late?'

Primadonna: Girl. I knew Maxime when you were in the womb. We're not really going anywhere...

Understudy: But he's for real this time!

Primadonna: Hmm. Then tell me where the tickets are...

Understudy [*struck speechless*]: Why. He must've reserved seats... in advance

Primadonna [*laughing her to scorn*]: Slim chance...

Understudy [*suddenly despairing*]: So we're running like madwomen... for nothing?

Primadonna [*with bitter irony*]: For the thrill of it...

Understudy [*crushed*]: But I brought a sky-blue bikini...

Again, Maxime and his Pilgrimage crash onto the scene...

Maxime: Ladies! Please! Let's get a move-on. You'll have twelve hours to bicker on the train. Bises. Let me help you. Good G-d, Diva! What's in your bag? We're only going for three weeks...

Primadonna: Mind your business...

Understudy [*a little angrily*]: Maxime, is this some kind of sick illiterate sport? What? A poet, eleven pilgrims and no one thinks of train-fare?

Our poet looks towards the ticket-window and sees a line around the corner...

Maxime: Hmm. You have a point. [*Improvising*]. We'll buy them onboard. For the triple the price. Uh-huh. Yes. Let's hope they accept America Express. Now. Please! Slim one! Come! Run! To the quais! [*To the commuters*] Please. Let us pass. Make way...

They cross someone in uniform...

Maxime: Sir! Please! We're looking for the south-bound to Marseille! Direction Cote d'Azur!

Station-Master [*blasé, pointing*]: Everything's listed. Up top...

Maxime: But, sir! I need someone to read for me!

Station-Master [*languidly*]: Hmm. Let me see. Incoming or outgoing...

Maxime: Outgoing, man!

Station-Master [*wistfully*]: Ah. The fortunate few... free to travel... I haven't been on vacation since... I can't remember when... since my honeymoon... a long time ago...

Maxime [*inquiring*]: So, sirrah, you have a special someone waiting for you, at home, after work?

Station-Master: No. She left me...

Maxime [*elated*]: As I expected. Drop everything! Follow me! Come see the...

Station-Master: But I have no money...

Maxime: Come as you are! But we're running out of time! Where's Marseille? I can't read!

Station-Master [*points*]: The furthestmost... but the whistle blew!

Maxime: We can still catch it. Everyone! Double-time!

Here, Hieronymus shouts out...

Hieronymus: Maxime! Behind you! They're gaining on us!

And indeed, the creditors are hot on their heels...

Maxime [*rallying hard*]: Everyone hurry!

Diva [*huffing and puffing*]: I can't run anymore. Someone carry me...

Understudy: Push, woman! I said wear flats!

Mercutio [*despairing*]: Helas. The show's over, Maxime; we have nowhere to turn...

Maxime [*rallying harder*]: Keep moving! Don't stop! I see the home-stretch!

But Hieronymus seems to have stopped; he seems to've formed a life-changing resolution...

Hieronymus: Run, Maxime. We'll take the fall; but never say Literature did you dirty...

Puppy [*firmly*]: Whoof!

Maxime: Hieronymus! Puppy! Come! Run! They're holding the door for us!

Hieronymus [*quite tranquilly*]: Start fresh, Maxime; it's for the best. Go on...

Maxime [*desperately*]: Hieronymus! Puppy! No!

Mercutio interposes...

Mercutio: Maxime! The train's in motion. We have to jump!

Station-Master [*thrilled*]: ...to leap!

Priest: Take my hand...

Maxime: But what if I fall?

Deacon: You won't...

Beatrice: We'll catch you...

Maxime: So be it. Here goes nothing. Hieronymus! I'll never forget you!

And then and there, poet and pilgrim take a leap of...

Puppy [*approvingly*]: Whoof!

SCENE NINE: *Marseille, Cruise-Ship, Sun-Shine*

☺

Under the ultramarine sky of Marseille, our Parisian pilgrims miraculously mount the upper-deck of a steam-ship, all leaping and bounding for joy, all attitude, all eagerness, no one more amazed than Maxime...

Maxime: That actually worked?

Villain: Was there ever a doubt!

Understudy: That teaches me to mistrust the seriousness of Maxime Delacroix!

Primadonna: Always as good as his word...

Chaste Maiden: ... sweeping the faithless and mistrustful off their feet!

Abbess: ...rescuing the crabbed and palsied from a long winter of soul!

Deacon: ... initiating the young into a life of adventure!

Bartender: ...never forgetting where he came from!

Joanne: ... no lover left behind!

Priest: Holy Lord. We were within seconds of serving a life of hard-labor...

Leading-man Mercutio takes the floor...

Mercutio: Thank heaven. Anti-climax would've satisfied the bland Parisian taste-buds; but we, slap-silly southerners, we would leave a Theater unsatisfied, cheated, without a chase-scene, a close-call, a rollicking litany of exclamation points!

A tear fills his eye...

Mercutio: Ah. Holy Lord. Marseille. Home sweet home. Damn. I almost became a mute minimal pantomimist myself back there; but, no, this is not the chiseled-chin of a café comic. Ah. Feel the healthy Meridian air. Ah. How often health-of-body and health-of-soul seem to go hand-in-hand. Indeed. Action's our natural element. Those intellectual scenarists would cue curtain-call after three-acts of uninterrupted conversation! Talentless twits! Wouldn't they, Maxime?

But, apart, Maxime's lost in pale blue eyes of Beatrix; they seem to be in the middle of a deep exchange...

Maxime: Sea and sky aren't of a deeper hue, a deeper blue, Beatrix...

Beatrix *[blinks]*: Oh these?

Maxime: Indeed. The root of all my restlessness, my single-mindedness, my madness...

Beatrix: Cute but when am I gonna see these feelings in letter-form? Like you wrote for this lovely littoral figure...

Displaying his bow-tied letters...

Maxime: Beatrix. Better than a paltry letter, I'm preparing a whole screenplay, three original acts, set in Paris, with a burlesque of extras, in which you'll star...

Beatrix: Thanks but a letter's so intimate compared to a screenplay. It's like a private exchange of vows...

Maxime: Maybe but, rather than a pining private correspondence, you belong in a myriad-paged screen-play, on a special pedestal, in front of a praising public, the praise of posterity, your pure-blood an inspiration to all...

Beatrix: Well. That's a pretty prosaic compliment compared to these triple strophe apostrophes...

Maxime: No, Beatrix, everything else is passing; but a screenplay's eternal. Yes, indeed, your long-stride, your sleek, swift speech have been a greater inspiration to me than all the thin-veiled Graces of Greece; because, before we crossed paths, in that tin-tinseled casino, I never met a person who could run romantic errands with me; indeed, every flash of your refined opinions, Beatrix, every discretion of your drab dress seemed to spur me on. Helas...

A curlew cries...

Maxime: Beatrix. Lolling and strolling would've made me miserable. I have a need for speed... like you wouldn't believe... as tho' I were falling behind in some all-important immortal race; a race for a rare immortal crown. Helas. It breaks my heart but other heroines can't seem to understand. No. They'd rather recline poolside. No. Beatrix. Quick-walking, slick-talking are worth more to me than the darkest bronze skin or the fullest black hair. No, we were a dynamic duo; yes, we were in life's race together...

Beatrix [*significantly*]: We certainly were...

Silence. Sea-sounds...

Beatrix: But, Maxime, I never envisioned a life in the public eye; I never sought a public life for myself. Cmon. Please. A cruise-liner's no place for a princess. Why, I need the privacy of a small, intimate craft; a white-sailed craft...

A warm wind blows...

Beatrix: But, Maxime, like most men-of-merit, you love fame and virtue; you don't love wealth and privacy. Helas. That's why you have more in common with the priest and performer than the prince and professional; perhaps that's why you feel a real obligation to this phantom public, this troupe, these people, these Parisian pilgrims; but, for me the constant cycle of poverty, performance and triumphal parades would be wearying, wearisome, Maxime. Cuz, all my life, since my broadcasted birth, I've known nothing but the loathsome imposition of public curiosity, the tedium of renown, the constant attention. That's why I would prefer a private scholar, with private means, with a private, if not expensive, yacht. See what I mean, Maxime? It's only natural. I'm sorry...

Pulling the lovelorn face of a hopeless little bowery boy...

Maxime: No. BB. Do you mean...

Beatrix: Yes, Maxime. I believe with my whole regal soul you're on the point of making a great splash in the world; yes, quite literally. But even tho' we're the same age, thirty-three, we're in very different phases, different stages, of life...

Protesting, sensing the end...

Maxime: No, BB, I swear, once this is over, once this romantic errand is run, I have every intention of receding into a prestigious châteaux, in the Lake Country, where we can live reclusive, live exclusive; where we can reign king and queen!

Beatrix: Perhaps for a time, for a breathing-space, but once you're rested and replenished, the prospect of newer, and yes, truer antics will reawaken the restless, unrelenting cherub in you; and then your love of public life will rekindle, like the embers of a winter fire, like a fabulous phoenix...

Maxime: No. Beatrix. Don't leave me. Who else has the experience, maturity, complexity, to be serenaded by my half-popular, half-prestigious songs? Please. Who else has the learning, education, sophistication to fire my soul with exalted sentiments? Don't leave. Please. What? After all the long walks in the street, all the long talks in the brasserie. No. Don't...

In a transport of grief, with the upturned eyes of a love-struck Saint Sebastian, stung by the many vicious tongues of conscience, he gripes, he groans...

Beatrix [smiles]: Don't worry, Maxime. Soon those soft swimming eyes, bowed with the whole weight of futility, will be filled, once again, with boundless, unbridled Hope. You ham. Cmon. I know how you love to play the wind-whipped, wave-lashed American Ahab in the company of

plebeians and pensioners. That's simply who you are. But here's where we part...

His last stand, his last-ditch effort...

Maxime: No! BB! Don't! Do you really prefer a personal private craft? Why, then I'll shuttle you across the seas in a rowboat, unassisted, with the loneliest serenade on my lips! I will! Beatrix! Please! I'll change!

Beatrix [*smiles*]: Don't change. Don't do anything differently. Simply remember, Maxime, next time you're in some awe-inspiring award-show, look for a slim, soft-skinned woman in the wings, in the opera-box, clapping to see Merit triumph. Hurray. Maxime, my Maxime. Please. Goodbye...

She waves goodbye; she goes...

Maxime [*helplessly*]: No...

A beautiful breeze blows. Seabirds circle. Tears fall. Mercutio steps in...

Mercutio: Excuse me, Maxime?

Maxime [*whimpering*]: Yes?

Mercutio: We haven't come so far to turn back now, have we?

Patriarch [*piping up*]: Not for my part...

Villain [*proudly*]: See, Maxime, you've given a voice to the voiceless!

Understudy [*beguiled by the brochure*]: But, Maxime, tell me, are we commandeers or stowaways? I mean. What happened to five-star accommodations?

Diva: Speak for yourself. Divas sleep in the captain's quarters...

Joanne: Is there room for a third thot?

Bartender: Behave yourself, sister...

Mercutio [*with a brotherly affection*]: Maxime, say something...

Maxime makes peace. He straightens up and says...

Maxime: Ah. Goodbye, Beatrix. OK. Pilgrims. Is there time for a valediction? I won't be excessive. Humor me; indulge me. In these momentous penultimate moments, why, it's a supreme pleasure to be surrounded by so many supportive people, so many friends...

Dries a tear...

Maxime: See, since Cannes, since the Cote D'Azur, I've haven't been myself... I've been a shadow of myself... so to speak... owing to the wet

winter weather... owing to the mysterious weight of conscience... if you will...

He pauses; he fetches the profoundest of sighs...

Maxime: Damn. Memory. On the night of ceremonies, when I lost consciousness, I could never have foreseen the series-of-events that would be set in motion; why, we were minor celebrities overnight; we made it; all our anonymity over; but nothing could've prepared me for being thrown... all at once... into the limelight, the blinding light. Why, it was simply overpowering; plus, I was super-super nervous; I thought I could walk with perfect veteran confidence; for a second it worked; but then when it counted... I fell... like a kid taking its first steps; I fainted. Helas. The rest is history...

He pauses; he shivers with shame; but, here, Mercutio throws a loving arm around his neck...

Mercutio. Now. Maxime. That fainting-spell is currently being used in every theater conservatory on the continent as a model for modern sincerity. Sincerity's the rage; confidence is no longer king; it's insufferable to many; it doesn't interest anymore; it's considered completely passé. And all thanks to you!

Villain: A thousand times thank you, Maxime! Because of you we're in high demand!

Maxime [*in disbelief*]: Really?

Everyone [*in a kind of unison*]: Yes... indeed... what a windfall...

Maxime: Well. That's the best news I've got all day. That's amazing. Anyway. That doesn't concern me anymore. That was my last burlesque. That stunt. No. Never again...

Here he address Priest who's been looking warily at the "No Leaning" sign that figures prominently in the scene...

Maxime [*continuing*]: See, Priest, I would like to compose a piece of religious poetry; yes, a lil' piece that rhymes. Yes. That's my next horizon. I would like to write my Private Devotions...

Priest [*waving him back*]: Please. Don't lean against the rail...

Maxime [*continuing*]: Because playwriting's a thankless profession. Spoken Poetry: that's what's next for me; no more of this terrible exertion; this insane expense of spirit; page upon page of pure soul; it's exhausting; plus, it's nothing but a burden, an imposition to others. Why, it doesn't educate; it doesn't edify; it doesn't even entertain. Rien de rien. That's why I started making a few new forays into a new medium; sometimes called the Sick Sixteen. Yes. That's the future for me...

Here he produces seven moleskins, every color of the rainbow, filled with a panoply of pearl-grey notes...

Deacon [*concernedly*]: Here, let me hold those. Before you...

Maxime [*unheeding*]: Here, let me open to a page. Helas. How apropos...

Star of the sea, Common Mother, most modest
Throw open eternity for the thespian soul so spotless
Loving Lady, Maiden Marseille, all-excelling
Will I live or die? There's no...

Everyone [*in a more perfect unison*]: Maxime!

But, parbleu, Maxime just did a kind of unscripted, uncoordinated backflip into the deep blue sea, leaving posterity with the most suggestive of mysteries to ponder...

FINIS

OBITUARY, Le Figaro

In loving memory of Maxime Delacroix...

Yesterday Paris mourned the loss of its most well-loved, well-known scenarists, the trouble-making Maxime Delacroix.

Monsieur came to an untimely end on the Cote D'Azur when he fell head over heels off a commercial cruise-liner while exerting his lesser-known skills as a Mediterranean cicerone before a band of Paris pilgrims.

According to his roommate, the beautiful and brilliant Beatrix Borromeo, he had expressed a wish in recent months to "move away" from the frivolous world of screenwriting towards the more serious domain of melodramatic monologue; but when asked to expand upon this mysterious statement, Her Altesse could only reiterate that should his enemies seek to disturb the sweet repose of his soul with this kind of constant questioning, she would call down Shakespeare's strange tombstone curse on their little loins...

As the cortege climbed from the Theatre-de-la-Ville to the Rue-Des-Martyrs, a pair strong handsome heroes, a Mercurial Marseillaise and an Anonymous Priest flanked the coffin so jealously that when a prying paparazzi overstepped the bounds of decorum in order to snap a so-called "quick-pic" of the Deceased, his poor camera and precious film-reel were summarily smashed and tossed in the Seine...

Similarly, forming the rear-guard of this procession, this very colorful thespian caravan, a Primadonna, Understudy and Waitress instantly interposed when a ragged beggar on the roadside tried to throw himself on the coffin with the wail of "oh brother, oh brother" by smothering him in their combined bosoms...

Furthermore, following at a mournful distance, were the Patron of a nearby brasserie, known for being the scene of the Deceased's most unbridled spending-sprees, and the Somber Bartender of a cute quayside café. When we asked these bonhommes whether the fourth and fifth arrondissement would ever recover from the loss of such an unstinting customer, former simply responded, "non..." and the latter added, somewhat morosely, echoing the common lament: "no one will ever be able to outspend him..."

Lastly, seated on the particolored coffin itself, a deacon-of-nine silently seconded their assertion; he seemed convinced that Monsieur's vice of prodigality, liberality and largess were simply part-and-parcel of the virtuous sense of self-sacrifice he all-too-deeply imbibed through countless hours consecrated to reading the lives of saints...

Either way, since M. Delacroix has been succeeded by no kinsmen, it turns out all his outstanding obligations have been completely forgiven.

Though Maxime's many creditors expressed the fear that debt-forgiveness sets a terrible moral precedence to the next mint of large-living scenarists, a spokesperson went on to say that in the case of such an extraordinary talent, they would be willing to "let it go..."

Helas. Hearts were brimming with suchlike sentiments when the procession arrived at the Deceased's new-made grave. Reds were poured. Tears were shed; but perhaps none as sweet as those of a Modest

Maiden and Elderly Abbess, dressed in all sinless white, who threw rose-petals over Monsieur, their Maxime, and retouched the thick-caked cosmetics on his cherubic cheeks...

Indeed, the Innocent Maid seemed to express the feelings of all Paris when she moaned: "how I loved him..."

So long, Maxime...