

Molière

From a photograph by Braun Clément & Co. of the painting by Pierre Mignard, in the Musée de Chantilly.

MOLIÈRE AND LOUIS XIV

By Brander Matthews

I



HE "Impromptu de Versailles" was the first play of Molière's written to the King's order; and it was speedily followed by others, commanded by Louis XIV and composed especially for performance at court. It would be idle to assert that these plays, prepared for particular occasions and cramped by the rigorous limitations of the court-ballet, have greatly raised Molière's reputation with posterity. But the cleverness and the ease with which he carried out the King's wishes, did lift him higher in the favor of the monarch, who had taken all power into his own hands.

Perhaps we must consider these lighter trifles, put together hurriedly to meet the caprice of the King, as the price that Molière paid for the privilege of writing his later and ampler plays to please himself, the richer and deeper comedies in which he was able to express himself more abundantly.

Yet there is no reason to think that Molière was working against the grain in trying to gratify the King, or that he did not find amusement himself in the exercise of his inventive ingenuity. Probably the association with the King and with the court was as pleasant to him as it was profitable. Louis XIV was then young; he had only recently come into power; he was ardent in the pursuit of pleasure. He enjoyed every kind of theatrical entertainment, delighting more

particularly in musical spectacle. He was good-looking and graceful; and he liked to figure in the court-ballets, a form of quasi-drama, which had a general likeness to the English masques, both of them being descended from the same Italian original. Popular at court for several reigns, these ballets had been mostly mythological in theme, as unreal as they were elaborate, setting in action Minerva and Venus, the muses and the graces, satyrs and nymphs. The plot itself was almost always forced and fantastic; and the interest of the spectators was centred on the groups of dancers, who came on at intervals to sing and to caper in character.

In the "*Fâcheux*" Molière had shown how it was possible to get away from the frippery of mythology and to devise a genuine play, which would justify a succession of songs and dances quite as well as the earlier and emptier schemes introducing gods and goddesses. In that comedy-ballet, simple as it was, he had proved that a web of true comedy might be embroidered at will with the interludes of singing and dancing which characterized the ballet. The comedy-ballet, as Molière thus presented it, was less pretentious and less fatiguing than the earlier type with its exaggerated grandiloquence; and it was more amusing because it contained within the spectacle what was after all a real play, however slight this might be and however overlaid this might seem when distended by its extraneous terpsichorean accompaniments.

Stripped of these needless accessories, the "*Fâcheux*" is but a single act. So is the first comedy-ballet, which Molière devised for Louis XIV himself, the "*Mariage Forcé*." It is in one act, in prose; but it was first performed in January, 1664, at the Louvre, with a variety of songs and dances, which expanded it to three acts. It was written for the King; it was produced before him; and it was also performed by him—for he himself appeared as a gypsy in one of the interludes. The plot has the needful simplicity; it turns on a single suggestion, presented from a variety of aspects. *Sganarelle*, the same fixed type that Molière had impersonated more than once before, is a man of fifty, and he is thinking of getting married. But he does not know his own mind two minutes together. He consults a friend: he consults two philoso-

phers, one after the other; he even consults a pair of gypsy girls; he has a disquieting interview with his chosen bride, and he overhears a still more disquieting interview between her and one of her admirers. Finally, he resolves to break off the match; and thereupon the chosen bride's father sends him her gentle spoken brother, who insists either on a duel to the death or a marriage on the spot. And *Sganarelle* accepts immediate matrimony in preference to immediate mortality.

This is the story of the play in one act; yet it lends itself to a host of other consultations and of other misadventures of *Sganarelle*, episodes of singing and dancing, which Molière ingeniously scatters through the action, and which he could omit without loss when the play had to stand on its own merits. There is genuine comedy in the perplexities of *Sganarelle*; and there is rich humor in the two philosophers whom he seeks to consult. The pedant with his mouth crammed with scholastic phrases was one of the accepted types of the comedy-of-masks; but in the hands of the Italians it presented only a caricature of external characteristics. Molière had had a solid training in philosophy himself; the vocabulary of the schools was perfectly familiar to him; and here he turned it to humorous uses, caricaturing the essential qualities of the philosophy then going out of fashion. Having utilized what are really three of the fixed types of the comedy-of-masks, Molière employed again its customary and convenient scene, the open square, with the houses of four of the characters all on the stage together—those of the two philosophers, that of the bride, and that of *Sganarelle* himself. As usual, the acting took place in the neutral ground between the houses, very much as it had done in the "*École des Femmes*."

This summary outline serves to show that the "*Mariage Forcé*" is not one of Molière's more important plays; but it will serve as a specimen of the comedy-ballet which he was often called upon to improvise at the King's command.

II

"THE best title of Louis XIV to the recollection of posterity is the protection he extended to Molière," so Mr. John [Lord] Morley has declared; "and one reason why

this was so meritorious is that Molière's work had a markedly critical character, in reference both to the devout and to the courtier. But Molière is only critical by accident. There is nothing organically negative about him; and his plays are the pure dramatic presentation of a peculiar civilization." The civilization that Molière portrayed was peculiar partly because of the conditions which had prevailed in France during the infancy and youth of Louis XIV, and partly because of the personal character of the King himself.

Francis I had already established the royal authority, breaking down the influence of the feudal nobles in the provinces, and seeking to centre all power in Paris in the hands of the sovereign. Richelieu took up the work of Francis I and made ready to substitute autocracy for mere monarchy. He overrode violently all laws and all customs which might in any way limit the might of the monarch. So thoroughly did he consolidate the kingly power that it survived the weak rule of Mazarin, marred by the petty bickerings and murderous intrigues of the Fronde. Louis XIV lived through the Fronde; and suffered from it and was humiliated by it. What he was then forced to see intensified his resolve that he himself, when he took the government, should be supreme, with no one to gainsay his royal will. He meant to be the focus of everything; to hold all command in his own control; to let no one shine except by reflected light from the throne; to be the centre of the solar system. It was as though he had taken to heart the saying set him as a copy for his boyish writing-lessons: "Homage is due to kings; and they may do whatever they choose."

The reign of Louis XIV, like the reign of Solomon, began magnificently; and both kings, the Frenchman and the Hebrew, survived to see the failure of their rule, the misery of their people, and the pitiful diminishing of their glory. There were not a few great men in France, while Louis XIV sat on the throne; but the King himself was not one of them. He was not a man of much more than ordinary ability, although he was not without a certain sly cleverness. He had a shrewdness of his own; he had abundant taste; he had the knack of saying the right word at the right time; he was wise enough never to uncover

his immense ignorance, the result of his neglected education. He was as lacking in depth of understanding and in breadth of outlook as he was in solidity of knowledge. His dominant characteristics were pride and selfishness; and they united to give him a monstrous egotism, even surpassing that of Napoleon, without being sustained by the soaring imagination and the superb energy of the Corsican adventurer.

He was supremely proud and also superlatively vain, although in most men who are proud the larger vice inhibits the pettier. He erected statues to himself in his own lifetime; and he did not allow any statues to be erected during his reign to any of his predecessors. He created Versailles, where he was free from all comparison with the past splendor of France, and where he caused to be strewn broadcast throughout the decorations, his own boastful emblem, the sun, and his vainglorious motto, declaring that he had "no equal among many!" At Versailles, which he had created, he saw only his own creatures, the courtiers who hung on his nod and who prostrated themselves at his beck. He was jealous of the ablest of his ministers, Colbert and Louvois, at times treating them harshly, while he was more affable toward their feeble successors who had no will of their own, and whom he preferred because he believed that he had trained them himself. He was ever greedy of flattery, although not so insatiable in his youth as he became in his old age, when the only way to the royal favor was by groveling servility. Yet even when he had just ascended to the throne he was always expecting a compliment, almost demanding fulsome eulogy, and never declining it, however gross or abject it might be. He took himself so seriously that this incense seemed to him only what was due to him. He was so well pleased with it that he seems never to have despised those who proffered it.

His selfishness was appalling. In all France he cared for no one and for nothing but himself and his own pride. In public affairs he held himself above all law, overruling every other authority in the state without scruple or hesitation. In his private life he disdained to be bound by any code of morality or even of decency. In his youth he was an ardent sensualist; and in his old age he naturally became a narrow-

minded bigot. He flaunted his amorous intrigues, sometimes two or three at once, in the face of the Queen, in the eyes of the whole court, and even before the people of France. He punished severely the lady in charge who sought to prevent his having access by night to the apartments of the Queen's maids of honor. He legitimated his bastards, even those he had by Mme. de Montespan, the children of a double adultery, which he thus forced on the gaze of the world. He had no consideration for the fatigue or the health even of those whom he cherished, his intimates, his own family. He had no regret, no kindly feeling, no gentle word for the vanquished or for those who no longer pleased him. His own personal caprice was his sole law.

What his sluggish mind and his arid soul most delighted in was the empty ceremonial of Versailles. He found unfailing pleasure in the pettiness of it all. He enjoyed the routine of royalty; and in the incessant direction of all its details he was as hard-working as he was hard-hearted. He was glad to submit himself to rigorous slavery of the prescribed etiquette and he subjected all the nobility to it, enforcing their attendance upon his person, to the neglect of their estates and the ruin of their fortunes. He did everything in public, the cynosure of an adoring group of courtiers. He got out of bed and washed his hands and put on his shirt while a throng of nobles filled his bedroom. Every day had its regulated duties and every hour had its prescribed occupations. Life at Versailles was monotonous and servile; and the sole relief for the emptiness of this parade was the spectacle of envious rivalry for the favor of the sovereign. The King himself did not care if everybody was uncomfortably lodged in the ill-planned and unhealthy palace; he was himself in reality little better off than they were. The outward show with its gaudiness gratified him daily and hourly, so that he gave no thought to the discomfort, the dirt, and the ever-present possibility of disease. He had no more regard for the convenience or the health of the courtiers whose presence in the palace was due to his direct command, than he had for the well-being of the populace of the kingdom, crushed beneath the taxes constantly increasing to pay for the palace, for the support of the courtiers, for the lavish wastefulness of the royal exist-

ence, and for the indefensible wars to which he was urged by his pitiful avidity for mistaken glory.

In the beginning of his reign he gave France what it most needed, order and stability and unity, that it had never had before. Toward the end he laid waste the Palatinate; he ordered ruthless religious persecutions executed by brutal dragoons; and he revoked the Edict of Nantes, which broke up countless homes, sowed discord in countless families, drove out of the kingdom hundreds of thousands of most useful and orderly citizens; and by so doing he deprived France of a most precious element in its population, an element that might have wisely guided the Revolution which his selfish rule made inevitable. Louis XIV was the perfect embodiment of the King by divine right. In him we see this autocratic principle reduced to the absurd. He acted selfishly always, seeking glory in useless war and in ostentatious living; and he never felt any obligation to consider the cost of this glory, such as it was. He has been acclaimed as a great king; but assuredly it is only as a king that he is great. He was despicable in the meanness of his ambition and he was contemptible in the intensity of his selfishness. Behind all his grandeur his essential pettiness stands forth.

III

IF Louis XIV was the King whose character has been summarily indicated in the previous paragraphs and if Molière was the man whose character is known to all the world, how was it possible that they should ever have worked together, that the playwright should have pleased the sovereign, and that the monarch should have sustained the dramatist? The question must needs be put, and it is not easy to answer.

First of all, must it be noted that Molière saw the King only in the earlier years of his reign before the worst characteristics of the ruler had had time to be declared or even to be developed. When Molière died the King was only thirty-five; and it was after Molière's death that the royal selfishness stiffened into habit. The defects of the King's character and the appalling results of these defects were scarcely visible during Molière's lifetime. Molière shared with his contemporaries an inherited regard and

admiration for the kings of France. He had seen the meanness and the misery of the Fronde; and he was glad to behold the reins of government firmly held by a strong hand. In the beginning of the young king's rule there was peace and prosperity in the land; and the monarch got the credit even if Colbert had done the work. There was a general gladness in the air; and the buoyancy of hope. Molière, like the rest of his countrymen, was captivated by the glamour of Louis XIV's youthful grace.

Then Molière was a burgher of Paris, with no love for the arrogant nobles; and he was gratified to see the King take power from them and keep it for himself. This action of the sovereign, while it might raise him to a still loftier position, tended toward a juster equality among his subjects. Molière was no republican; he was no precursor of the Revolution; he was no advanced thinker; he had no aptitude for political speculation; he accepted the framework of government as he found it, glad that the King gave to the country the internal peace it sorely needed. Molière was no sycophant; he had manly self-respect; but he was his own contemporary, after all; and like his contemporaries in France, he unhesitatingly accepted the inequalities of society as he found them. There is no reason to suppose that he perceived the emptiness of rank and the danger that comes from the existence of privileged classes. He had no respect for place in itself, for the foolish courtier, for the dissolute noble; and he took every occasion to laugh at the one and to hold the other up to scorn, pleased that the King permitted this. For the rest, for the system of caste, for the autocracy of the monarch, he cared little, accepting a state of things which must have seemed to him natural.

Furthermore, Molière had a hereditary appointment in the King's household. Chaucer was a "valet of the King's chamber" to Edward III; and Molière had the humbler post of one of the *valets de chambre tapissiers du roi* to Louis XIV. This appointment gave him a personal relation to the sovereign; it imposed on him the occasional task of making the King's bed; it may even account in some measure for the protection now and again extended to him by the monarch, whose pride led him to look with favor on all those attached to his own

person. For this protection, however, it is easy to find other reasons. The King in his youth was very fond of the theatre; and Molière brought back to Paris a type of broadly humorous play, which the monarch greatly relished. This accounts for the bestowal, first of the Petit-Bourbon, and secondly of the Palais Royal. Later, as Molière grew in stature as a comic dramatist and began to put more of the realities of life into his comedies, the King found himself provided with a new form of pleasure. The records show that Louis XIV, as might have been expected, preferred comedy to tragedy; and in acting comedy Molière's company was far superior to the rival organizations. This, in itself, was a reason why the King should afterward take the company under his own patronage. This would explain the King's suggestion of a new character to be added to the "*Fâcheux*"; and also his commanding Molière to retort on his enemies with the "*Impromptu de Versailles*."

Probably Louis XIV, entrenched in his own pride, found pleasure in Molière's exposure of the *précieuse* and of the marquises and of the falsely devout. Probably again, the sovereign was so secure in his supremacy that he felt no fear of any social disintegration, such as would have influenced a usurper like Napoleon, who declared at St. Helena that he would never have permitted the first performance of "*Tartuffe*." Under Napoleon "*Tartuffe*" would have been suppressed and its author exiled; and under Louis XIV it was performed and its author rewarded. This much must be set down to the credit of Louis XIV. That the King really saw and felt the purport of that play is very unlikely; and it is still more unlikely that he ever suspected its author to be more than a clever contriver of comic plays. Molière was manly always, and never servile; but when he was in the presence of the King he knew his place and kept it. Not for nothing had he cultivated his insight into human nature; and we may be sure that he had formed a pretty shrewd guess as to the best way to win the regard of the sovereign and to gain the royal support for the bolder comedy he had resolved to write.

The most open road to the young King's good will was to minister to his pleasures; and it was along this road that Molière advanced. He was prompt to obey the

King's wishes and to anticipate the King's desires. However important the work on which he might be engaged, he was always ready to lay it aside to devise the kind of play that the King wanted, comedy-ballet or spectacle, as the case might be. Whatever the inconvenience to himself, the insufficiency of time, the haste with which he had to fulfil his task, he never hesitated and he never complained. Whatever the King had commanded was executed at once by Molière as best he could. Swift obedience was a quality Louis XIV could well appreciate—as he could also the inventive fertility that Molière revealed in the succession of plays written to order. It is no wonder that the King was willing to do what he could for a servant of his pleasures, who met his wishes at once. To say this is not to say Louis XIV overlooked the difference of rank any more than Molière forgot it.

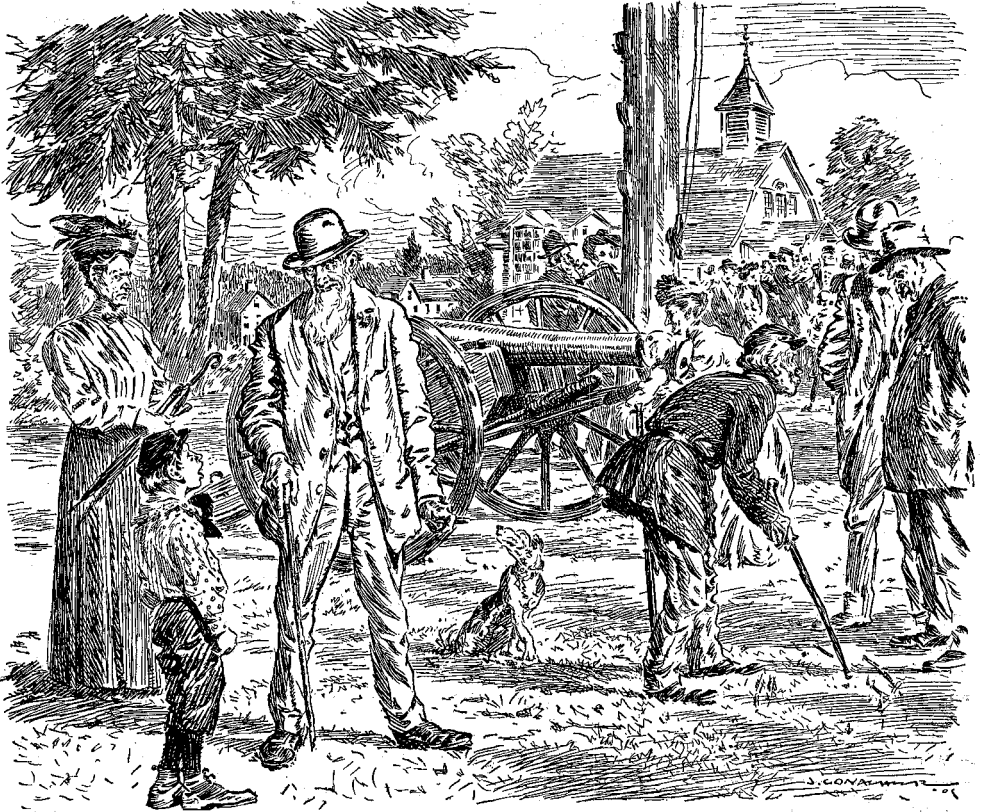
There is a pretty anecdote setting forth the King's discovery that Molière was once breakfastless because his fellow *valets de chambre* refused to eat with an actor and narrating the monarch's magnanimity in thereupon inviting the dramatist to join him in his own royal meal. It is a picturesque legend illustrated in paintings by Ingres and Gérôme. But it is quite impossible to believe without surrendering all we know about the inevitable etiquette and the invincible ceremonial of the court, and without denying the haughty arrogance of the sovereign who was served alone, and who did not allow even the princes of the blood to sit at meat with him. It could not have happened; but if it had happened, the report of an event so monstrous would have reverberated through all the abundant letters and journals of the time. As the case stands, the simple story first emerges a century and a half after Molière's death; and

it appears then in a memoir of slight historic validity, wherein it is credited to the doubtful recollection of an unnamed physician.

There are two other anecdotes, of which one at least is more solidly authenticated, and which reveal more clearly the King's opinion of the dramatist. Grimarest, Molière's second biographer, to whom we are more indebted than many later scholars have been willing to admit, and who displayed a desire to collect all the information accessible—Grimarest, writing in 1705, declared that "within the year the King had occasion to say that there were two men he could never replace, Molière and Lulli." Now Lulli was a wily Florentine, who composed the music for the court-ballets, and who also shone as a buffoon, evoking spontaneous laughter by his antics. Grimarest would not have dared to publish this in the King's lifetime, if he had not believed it to be true. And it sounds highly probable, for it confirms the belief that Louis XIV saw in Molière, not so much the supreme comic dramatist, as the deviser of court-ballets, the adroit minister to royal amusement.

The other anecdote is to be found in the life of Racine, written by his son. The assertion is there made that Louis XIV once asked Boileau who was the rarest of the great writers that had given glory to France during his reign, and that Boileau at once named Molière. To which the King replied, "I should not have thought it," adding with the gracious condescension he seems often to have shown to Boileau—"but you know more about these things than I do." Probably it had never before struck him that Molière was either a great writer or a rare genius, since he had always regarded from a very different point of view the dramatist who was also an actor.





"Grandpaw, why wasn't you to the war?"

THE RETREAT FROM GETTYSBURG

By Nelson Lloyd

ILLUSTRATIONS BY J. CONACHER

"GRANDPAW, why wasn't you to the war?"

It was the hundredth time little Myron had asked the question, and having replied a hundred times to the satisfaction of any fair-minded person, Amos Killiwill felt justified in answering it now with a look of reproach. But it was hurled at him as he stood conspicuous in the dusty-brown clothes of peace amid the warlike blue of the Grand Army, and the eyes bent on him from beneath the brims of many slouch hats seemed to demand a reply. He had to tell again the story which he had been hurling from the housetops these thirty years—how he had wanted to go, but his

brother Bert had stolen a march and slipped away in the night, leaving him to care for their old parents; how Bert had been killed at Gettysburg. But these were not fair minds that he addressed, and the more he descanted on Bert's heroic service the broader were the smiles greeting him on every hand. Then the question was put to him by Mrs. Criddle, and it came with a double cut, for her son was only playing the cymbals in the band, yet as she asked it she looked the picture of the Spartan mother, from the exalted height of the top step regarding him contemptuously as he sat among the women and the children watching the parade. He was with the