

“THE STRING”

DRAMA IN ONE ACT

BY

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BEING A DRAMATIZATION SUGGESTED
BY AND FOUNDED UPON GUY DE
MAUPASSANT'S MASTERPIECE ENTITLED

“LA FICELLE”

Published by

THE AMES & ROLLINSON PRESS
203 BROADWAY, NEW YORK

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“THE STRING”

CHARACTERS.

Master Hauchecorne of Breauté.....A crafty old miser
Master Maladain of Goderville.....A harness maker
Master Jourdain of Goderville...Proprietor of the Tavern
Monsieur Le Curé of Goderville.....Beloved by all
Master Ferrand of Goderville.....The crier of the town
Sergeant.....Of the Constabulary
Mons. Le Maire, of Goderville....A just and honest man
Louis.....A boy from the village of Breauté
A Drummer and Peasants.

“THE STRING”

THE SCENE.

The marketplace, Goderville, Normandy, France. On the right a fine old Norman house, the tavern of Jourdain. It is of half timbered construction, with projecting roof. At the back of scene a row of similar roofs project beyond the stalls and litter of the market. On the left stands a large, two-wheeled cart, from which the horse had been withdrawn; the cart is filled with baskets containing produce. In center stage a stool and heavy saddle.

Time—The present.

Curtain.

Discloses Master Maladain seated center stage repairing a saddle; he is humming an old folksong as he proceeds with his work. (For words and music of this folksong, see the author.)

The town clock strikes the hour of eleven.

SCENE I.

Enter Louis, L.

A bright young country lad about fourteen years of age, clad in the typical blouse, berret and sabots.

LOUIS.

Good-morning, Master Maladain, has my father passed this way?

MALADAIN.

(Busy with his work.)

No.

LOUIS.

He said that he would meet me here before the Angelus.

MALADAIN.

Ah, well, 'tis but eleven; have patience—he may come. What news from Breauté?

LOUIS.

Oh! there's never anything new in that sleepy old village.

MALADAIN.

Then 'tis worse than Goderville?

LOUIS.

Yes, and if I ever save enough money I shall leave it.

MALADAIN.

Then you are not contented there?

LOUIS.

No, not I. I wish to travel, see the world; I've had enough of drudgery. If I had five hundred francs, the farm would not see me again, I promise you.

LOUIS.

(Starts to go, then hesitates.)

Master Maladain.

MALADAIN.

(Inquiringly.)

Well?

LOUIS.

Would you prefer to be born lucky or rich?

MALADAIN.

(Much amused.)

That's an odd question. Well, I think I should prefer to be born rich. And you, Louis?

LOUIS.

Oh! I should prefer to be born lucky, for then I should be rich as well; don't you think so?

MALADAIN.

Perhaps, but fortune favors few of us. Who knows but you may be the next?

LOUIS.

One can never tell; they say that I am lucky—but—I don't know why.

(Louis passes to L., when he observes some straw near the cart; he carelessly kicks the straw aside, and as he does so sees a large black pocketbook at his feet. In surprise he picks it up and opens it.)

(Aside.)

Five hundred francs! It cannot be Maladain's, yet I'll make certain. *(Hesitating.)*

LOUIS.

(*Aloud.*)

Master Maladain, if you had five hundred francs, would you not like to visit Paris?

MALADAIN.

That I would, my boy, but, as I have never had that much in all my life, I never expect to get there.

LOUIS.

(*Aside.*)

The pocketbook is not his, that is certain. (*Aloud.*) Well, if you hear of me in Paris some fine day, don't be surprised—I shall get there. Au revoir, Master Maladain, au revoir.

Exit Louis, R.

MALADAIN.

(*Aside.*)

Poor boy, he has the fever. Ah, we all get it at his age—but at mine—well, our native village has its attractions.

(*He looks toward L. and sees the Curé approaching.*)

SCENE II.

Enter Monsieur le Curé, R.

A stout, jovial cleric in the typical cassock and hat. He advances toward Maladain, who is at work.

Good-morning, Master Maladain, how comes it you were not at mass last Sunday?

MALADAIN.

Work, Mons. le Curé—work.

CURE.

A poor apology.

MALADAIN.

But by work we live.

CURE.

True, but we must find time to nourish our souls.

MALADAIN.

But our bodies also require nourishment. Therefore, we are forced to work, whether we will or no. God knows we in these parts need not be envied.

CURE.

Alas, 'tis true. The peasants work from daylight until dark to earn their meagre fare, yet they are happy.

MALADAIN.

Aye, because they know no better. Few can read or write, and here they come each market day to learn what little news we have to tell them from the great world without.

CURE.

And precious little have we to tell. Nothing short of a revolution will arouse these people from their lethargy. However, all are industrious, thrifty, sober and honest—that is more than one can say of those bred in the cities.

MALADAIN.

Thrifty, sober and industrious they are, because necessity compels them to be—but honest—all—ha, ha, ha—you do not know your flock as well as I.

CURE.

You malign my people, Master Maladain; I know them better than you do, sir. There is not one in the parish to whom I would not willingly entrust my pocketbook.

MALADAIN.

Then you do not know old Hauchecorne, Monsieur le Curé.

CURE.

I know him to be a thrifty, industrious old farmer.

MALADAIN.

Oh, he's thrifty enough.

CURE.

People may envy him for being rich, but that is the price one has to pay for being more provident than his neighbors.

MALADAIN.

Bah! Then you do not know him at all.

CURE.

Well, why do you dislike him?

MALADAIN.

Because he has acquired his wealth by parsimony and dishonesty. There is not a trickier, craftier old devil in all the parish.

CURE.

(Displeased.)

Indeed? I see plainly that you are no friend of his. But here comes Master Jourdain—let us hear what he has to say.

SCENE III.

Enter Jourdain, from Tavern, R.

He is the proprietor of the tavern and wears a large white apron and gaudy waistcoat.

JOURDAIN.

Good-morning, Monsieur le Curé.

CURE.

Good-morning, Master Jourdain. We are just discussing the character of one of my flock; perhaps you can help us.

JOURDAIN.

Whom do you mean?

CURE.

Why, Master Hauchecorne, of Breauté. Do you know him?

JOURDAIN.

Indeed, I know him well. I buy poultry from him.

CURE.

Then you know him to be a worthy old farmer, do you not?

JOURDAIN.

I know him to be a niggardly old knave, sir. Why, he's the greatest miser in the parish.

CURE.

Surely, one may be economical without being a rascal.

JOURDAIN.

Oh, if you dealt with him you would soon be convinced of his rascality.

CURE.

Then, why do you deal with him?

JOURDAIN.

I buy where I can buy the cheapest. But, believe me, he would cheat his best friend.

MALADAIN.

There, Monsieur le Curé, are you convinced?

CURE.

(*Hesitating.*)

No.

MALADAIN.

Well, watch the old rogue yourself; some day you will have ample proof.

JOURDAIN.

And for fear that you may imagine that we are prejudiced, ask any one in the town who deals with him; they all will tell you the same tale.

CURE.

(*Reflecting.*)

I am very sorry to see that he has such an evil reputation; but, believe me, the devil is not as black as he is painted. Oh, no!

MALADAIN.

Perhaps not, but don't lend the devil your pocket book. Ha, ha, ha!

CURE

(*Seriously.*)

Ah! the curse of an evil reputation—few men can live that down; for here, alas, sweet charity is but a myth.

JOURDAIN.

(*Kindly.*)

Come, Monsieur le Curé, let us moralize upon something more agreeable. Come, join me in a glass of wine. I expect the old fox here this morning—then you may speak with him and convince yourself.

CURE.

(*Sadly.*)

Lead on, I shall follow you.

Exeunt Jourdain and Monsieur le Curé. They enter tavern, R.

MALADAIN.

(*Looks to L. and sees Hauchecorne approaching.*) (Aside.)

Speak of the devil and he's sure to come. Bah! I'll be off.

(*He gathers up his stool and saddle and enters the inn, R.*)

SCENE IV.

Enter Hauchecorne, L.

HAUCHECORNE.

(Leading a donkey drawing a cart loaded with poultry. He addresses the donkey in his Norman patois.)

Whoa la, ma biche, enfin nous sommes arrives,
et ce n'est pas trop tot, car j'ai bien faim, et tu, ma
biche, et tu?

(He continues speaking in his patois, at the same time feeding the donkey, when suddenly he stoops and with great difficulty picks up a little piece of string. As he is recovering himself, he turns and observes Maladain looking at him from the doorway of the tavern; he pretends to be looking for something of more value.)

MALADAIN.

(Aside.)

The old rogue has found something of value,
that is certain.

HAUCHECORNE.

(Stealthily puts the string in his pocket. Aside.)

A little piece of string—that will be useful.
Maladain would not have picked it up.

(He looks defiantly at Maladain.)

MALADAIN.

What was it that you picked up, Master Hauchecorne?

HAUCHECORNE.

(Hotly.)

None of your business.

MALADAIN.

Oh, it's none of my business, eh?

HAUCHECORNE.

You attend to your affairs and I'll attend to mine.

MALADAIN.

Oh! very well, and so I shall. Here's the bill for that halter you bought over a month ago. (*He hands him a scrap of paper.*) I would like the money.

HAUCHECORNE.

You'll never get it from me. I've told you before that the headstall broke the first time I tied the beast with it; you swindled me when you sold it to me. I'll never pay you for it—never—never.

MALADAIN.

Well, you will either pay me or return the halter; if you don't, I'll have the law on you.

HAUCHECORNE.

So you would like to browbeat an old man, eh? Oh, I'll give you all the law you want, but I'll never pay you for that halter. Do you hear me?

MALADAIN.

(*Hotly.*)

We shall see, Master Hauchecorne, we shall see.

Exit Maladain. He enters the tavern, R.

HAUCHECORNE.

(*Aside.*)

Oh, yes, we shall see; he can bully others, but he cannot bully me—that's what makes him mad.

(*The Angelus—chimes—announces the hour of midday; Hauchecorne crosses himself, looks up and sees Jourdain coming out of the tavern. Aside.*)

I thought Master Jourdain would not deal with me again—he, he, he!—but here he comes—he, he he!

SCENE V.

Re-enter Jourdain, from tavern, R.

JOURDAIN.

You are late this morning, Master Hauchecorne.

HAUCHECORNE.

(*Makes no reply.*)

JOURDAIN.

What do you ask for your capons?

HAUCHECORNE.

What's that to you? You will not buy—you did not like the last I sold you.

JOURDAIN.

No, they were tough enough—but these look younger. (*Takes a fine fowl and examines it.*) I'll bet this one weighs four kilos.

HAUCHECORNE.

Four kilos, indeed! That will tip the scales at six; it's the finest bird of the lot.

JOURDAIN.

No doubt you are very much attached to your barnyard pets, but I suppose you will sell them for silver of the Bank of France? Come, I will give you thirty sous each, for six birds.

HAUCHECORNE.

(*Indignantly.*)

Would you rob a poor old man? Why, that fowl is worth five francs, if it is worth a sou.

JOURDAIN.

Nonsense, this is Goderville—not Paris; you never got over fifty sous for a fowl in all your life.

HAUCHECORNE.

(*Seizing the capon from Jourdain.*)

Well, I'll get fifty sous for this one, or I'll know the reason.

JOURDAIN.

But I want six. Here, I'll make it forty sous each. (*Shaking a handful of silver in his face.*) Come, that's more than they are worth.

HAUCHECORNE.

(*Hesitating.*)

You drive a hard bargain, Master Jourdain, but I'll accept it if you will let me pick them out for you.

JOURDAIN.

No, no, you old fox. I'll pick them out for myself. (*He picks six of the best and puts them in his pannier.*)

HAUCHECORNE.

You're a hard man to deal with, Master Jourdain.

JOURDAIN.

Oh, not half as bad as you are, sir. Here are twelve francs. (*Hands him the money.*)

HAUCHECORNE.

(*Hauchecorne eagerly takes the coin and is very busy counting it when a commotion is heard off R. They both move in that direction to learn the cause. However, Hauchecorne returns promptly and lifts a capon from the pannier, and is in the act of throwing it into the cart when the Curé comes out of the tavern and observes him.*)

CURE.

(*Aside.*)

Ah, ha! so you sell a capon with one hand and filch it with the other.

(*The Curé passes to L.*)

JOURDAIN.

(*Returns.*)

A colt has broken loose. (*He takes up his pannier.*) I shall see what damage has been done.

Exit Jourdain, R., with his pannier.

HAUCHECORNE.

So he would only pay me forty sous each for the pick—eh, well, I have the best of the bargain. (*Holding up a fine fowl.*) He, he, he!

(*He exits, talking to his donkey in his Norman patois, oblivious of the presence of the Curé.*)

Exit Hauchecorne, R.

SCENE VI.

Re-enter Maladain, R.
MALADAIN.

(To the Curé.)

There goes the old fox talking to his donkey like a chimpanzee. He is evidently in good spirits over something.

CURE.

(Innocently.)
What do you think it can be?

MALADAIN.

I've an idea it's over something he picked up here half an hour since.

CURE.
You mean a moment ago?

MALADAIN.
No, I mean before the Angelus.

CURE.

(Aside.)

Evidently he did not see him take the capon. Do you know what it was that he found, Master Maladain?

(Their conversation is cut short by the sound of a drum and the voice of the town crier off scene.)

FERRAND.

(*Off scene.*)

Know ye! know ye! That there has been lost in this marketplace a pocketbook containing five hundred francs and some papers. The finder is requested to return the same to his Honor the Mayor and receive a reward of twenty francs. Hear ye! hear ye!

(*Enter Ferrand, the Crier, R., followed by a boy with a drum. He is about to pass on when he is stopped by Maladain.*)

MALADAIN.

(*To the Crier.*)

Where did you say the pocketbook was lost?

FERRAND.

Here in the marketplace about noon yesterday.

MALADAIN.

Who was the owner of the pocketbook?

FERRAND.

A Monsieur Houlbreque of Mannerville.

MALADAIN.

Why, I saw him here on this very spot, yesterday—he was bargaining with Master Reverdy for his Pércheron.

FERRAND.

Yes, he bought the horse and paid Reverdy. That is the last he ever saw of his pocketbook; at least, that is all the information he could give us.

Exit Ferrand and the drummer, L.

MALADAIN.

(Draws Curé closely to him.)

It's enough—that is Reverdy's cart, and right there is where I saw Hauchecorne pick up something only half an hour since. I challenged him at once.

CURE.

Well, what did he say?

MALADAIN.

He berated me and told me to mind my own business.

CURE.

Then you could not ascertain what he found?

MALADAIN.

No, but you may be sure it was something of value or he would not have denied it. But here comes the old rogue now—you shall hear for yourself.

SCENE VII.

(Re-enter Hauchecorne, R. Passes up stage when he sees Louis coming from direction in which the crier and drummer made their exit.)

(Re-enter Louis, L., his eyes on the ground and evidently trying to avoid Hauchecorne.)

HAUCHECORNE.

(To Louis.)

Looking for the pocketbook, eh?

LOUIS.

(Taken aback.)

Ye—s—s.

HAUCHECORNE.

Well, remember to return it to the Mayor, if you find it, for if you don't (pointing his finger at him) and you are found out, you will be arrested for a thief. (Fiercely.) Do you understand?

LOUIS.

(Louis quails under the fierce gaze of Hauchecorne and runs off in terror, R.)

Exit Louis, R.

HAUCHECORNE.

(*To Maladain.*)

Did you hear the news? A pocketbook containing five hundred francs has been lost—have either of you seen it?

MALADAIN.

No, Master Hauchecorne, we have not found it, but we think we know who picked it up.

HAUCHECORNE.

Who was it?

MALADAIN.

Oh, ha, ha, ha!—he wonders who it was.

HAUCHECORNE.

Well, who was it?

MALADAIN.

(*To the Curé.*)

The sly old fox would like to throw us off the scent. (*To Hauchecorne.*) I don't suppose you found anything here half an hour ago?

HAUCHECORNE.

Well, if I did, that was none of your business.

MALADAIN.

That's what you told me before.

HAUCHECORNE.

Yes, and I'll tell it to you again. Things have come to a pretty pass when one cannot pick up a little piece of string without being taken for a thief.

MALADAIN.

Oh, then you picked up a little piece of string.
Eh, ha, ha, ha!—oh, tell that to those who don't know
you. Allez, mon gar, allez.

HAUCHECORNE.

(*Earnestly, to the Curé.*)

I swear, by the holy mass, I found nothing but
this little piece of string.

(*Showing it.*)

CURE.

(*Curé looks at him gravely and shakes his head.*)

HAUCHECORNE.

(*Piteously.*)

Oh, don't let him poison your mind against me!
I swear by the good Lord that I only picked up this
little piece of string.

(*Maladain laughs at him.*)

CURE.

(*Kindly.*)

No one shall form my judgment for me, Master
Hauchecorne, whilst I have eyes to see and ears to
hear. Come, attend to business, there are some cus-
tomers looking for you.

HAUCHECORNE.

(*Gratefully.*)

There, I knew you were my friend.

CURE.

(*Aside.*)

Aye, perhaps the only one in Goderville. (*To Maladain.*) I shall go to the Mayor and learn more of this affair. Rest you here.

Exit Curé, R.

SCENE VIII.

Re-enter Jourdain, R.

JOURDAIN.

(Angrily, aside.)

I can't explain it. I've returned by the same route, yet it's not to be seen.

MALADAIN.

What's the matter now, Jourdain?

JOURDAIN.

Why, I've lost one of my fowls. I bought six fine capons from old Hauchecorne a few moments ago, placed them in my pannier myself, and when I counted them again, there were but five.

MALADAIN.

Ha, ha, ha! First it's a pocketbook and then it's a capon.

JOURDAIN.

I don't understand.

MALADAIN.

No? But when you deal with old Hauchecorne you should keep your eyes open.

JOURDAIN.

(Surprised.)

You don't suppose he stole it?

MALADAIN.

I have little doubt of it; he is a sly old dog, and glories in such tricks.

JOURDAIN.

I can hardly believe it.

MALADAIN.

Oh, you flatter yourself that you are more clever than he, Jourdain, but you are not. I don't think I would say much about this affair—you will be the laughing stock of the town.

JOURDAIN.

H—m—m—no, but I shall confront the old rascal, Maladain.

MALADAIN.

Do as you please, but you may be sure he will never give you any satisfaction.

SCENE IX.

Enter Sergeant of Police, L.

MALADAIN.

What news, Sergeant?

SERGEANT.

Strange news, indeed, sir. His Honor the Mayor, upon returning from lunch, discovered the pocketbook lying upon his desk.

MALADAIN.

The devil you say!

SERGEANT.

The finder left no note, and evidently does not wish the reward.

JOURDAIN.

But why did he deliver it anonymously?

SERGEANT.

I do not know. Enough, it has been found and returned to the owner.

MALADAIN.

No, it is not enough—I will tell you why, Sergeant. The rogue who discovered the pocketbook knew that he had been seen; he wished to keep it, but dared not, so he left it on the Mayor's desk and said nothing.

SERGEANT.

You are probably correct, monsieur; but it matters not. The owner has regained his property. He will no doubt be more careful in the future.

(*He is about to exit.*)

JOURDAIN.

Pardon, Sergeant, did his Honor the Mayor discover a fine capon by the side of the pocketbook upon his return from lunch?

SERGEANT.

No, why the devil should he?

JOURDAIN.

Because I lost one on my way home.

SERGEANT.

Well, you have no sympathy from me, sir. A wallet may be lost, but the man who loses a capon must have been drunk.

(*Exit Sergeant of Police, R. They all laugh at Jourdain.*)

MALADAIN.

You see, Master Jourdain, he knows your weakness. But here comes your man—let us hear what he has to say.

SCENE X.

(Re-enter Hauchecorne from direction Sergeant went out.)

HAUCHECORNE.

(Rubbing his hands and chuckling to himself.)
Oh, aye—oh, aye, it has been found.

MALADAIN.

(To Jourdain.)
He seems well pleased.

HAUCHECORNE.

(To Maladain.)
Well, what have you to say, now that you are proved a fool?

MALADAIN.

(Mocking him.)
Oh, aye—oh, aye! The lost is found, but the finder did not wait for his reward.

HAUCHECORNE.

Then he was a fool.

MALADAIN.

Oh, not at all—he was a sly old dog. He did not wish it known that he had kept it since the Angelus.

HAUCHECORNE.

How do you know he picked it up before the Angelus?

MALADAIN.

(*Looking him straight in the eyes.*)

Because I saw him.

HAUCHECORNE.

(*Dumfounded.*)

You saw him? You mean me, you rat?

MALADAIN.

(*Nodding his head.*)

Ah—ha—

HAUCHECORNE.

(*To Jourdain.*)

I swear, by the good God, I never saw that pocketbook.

MALADAIN.

Oh, he never saw the pocketbook—ha, ha, ha!

JOURDAIN.

(*Hotly.*)

Will you swear before the good God that you never lifted a capon from my pannier?

HAUCHECORNE.

(*Flies into a furious passion.*)

Ah, you all hate me because I am rich, because I do not waste my cash on baubles, do not smirk and play the hypocrite, go to mass to get forgiven, then return to drown myself in sour wine. Behind

my back you call me thief—a liar—knaves—you laugh at my economies, my crippled form you make your idle jest; you mock, you sneer, you slander and revile, and yet you envy what by patient toil I've gained. Oh, hell itself is much too good for such as you!

JOURDAIN.

(Amazed.)

Holy Mother of God, hear him rave!

MALADAIN.

Your reputation is well known, yet you complain. Bah! find us one who will believe your story of the string, and we will both apologize.

JOURDAIN.

Come, you old swaggerer, you may call us all the names you please, but find us one who will believe you.

HAUCHECORNE.

(Furiously.)

You think I have no friends?

MALADAIN.

Well, if you have, we should like to meet them.

HAUCHECORNE.

You shall see that my word is just as good as yours, you hypocrites.

JOURDAIN.

God forbid that your reputation should be as good as ours. Prove your boast, you old swaggerer.

(The peasants of the marketplace, hearing the quarrel, one by one gather around the contestants, listening first to one and then to the other.)

Re-enter Ferrand, L.

HAUCHECORNE.

Ah, Master Ferrand, you know me well—defend me from these slanderers.

FERRAND.

What's the matter, daddy?

MALADAIN.

Why, this old fox here would like to make us believe that he only found a piece of string, and I will swear that he picked up a pocketbook.

HAUCHECORNE.

'Tis a lie, I tell you—a lie!

FERRAND.

Well, what difference does it make, daddy, now that the pocketbook has been found and returned to the owner?

HAUCHECORNE.

They believe that I am a thief.

FERRAND.

Oh, that's it, is it?

HAUCHECORNE.

Tell them I am not. Tell them that you know me better than they do—tell them they lie—tell them—

FERRAND.

There, now, daddy, don't mix me up in this affair; you know there is always one who finds a thing and another who returns it, and no one is the wiser.

HAUCHECORNE.

(*Furious.*)

'Tis a lie, I say—I never saw the pocketbook.

FERRAND.

But there is a man who saw you pick it up, and his word is just as good as yours.

HAUCHECORNE.

He's a coward and a liar. Oh, if only the Mayor were here, he would tie your slanderous tongues.

FERRAND.

Well, daddy, you have your wish, for here he comes.

SCENE XI.

Enter his Honor the Mayor, R.

HAUCHECORNE.

(Rushing toward him.)

Your Honor, justice, justice, I demand!

THE MAYOR.

(Surprised.)

What is the matter?

JOURDAIN.

'Tis the affair of the pocketbook, your Honor.

THE MAYOR.

Oh, yes, I know, I have just left Monsieur le Curé. *(To Hauchecorne.)* So they believe you found it and returned it anonymously, eh?

HAUCHECORNE.

(Pleading.)

'Tis false, 'tis false. I swear by the good God that I never saw that pocketbook.

THE MAYOR.

Well, what do you wish?

HAUCHECORNE.

Tell these slanderers that they lie; tell them that my word is just as good as theirs, that—that—that—

THE MAYOR.

(*Interrupting.*)

There, there, my good man, what you say may be the living truth; but pray remember, Master Hauchecorne, that your reputation for veracity is not of the best.

JOURDAIN.

Your Honor is quite right—he would cheat his best friend; he has a bad reputation. I will swear it was he who filched a capon from my pannier not half an hour since. Oh, see him deny it!

HAUCHECORNE.

Ha, ha, ha! (*Laughing wildly.*) So my reputation is not as good as his—and who gives me this reputation, these lying, scurvy dogs, who envy what I have?

THE MAYOR.

(*Sharply.*)

Well, our town has many such, but, unfortunately for you, they are our best citizens.

HAUCHECORNE.

Ha, ha, ha! (*Laughing wildly.*) Oh, they are all alike.

THE MAYOR.

No, Master Hauchecorne, you are wrong; your evil reputation is your Nemesis. But, sir, you have the privilege of every citizen of France born since the Code Napoleon.

HAUCHECORNE.

What's that?

THE MAYOR.

The right to prove your innocence.

(*All laugh at his discomfiture.*)

MALADAIN and JOURDAIN.

(*Laughing.*)

Well said, your Honor, well said.

HAUCHECORNE.

(*Furious.*)

A pest upon a law that shelters only slanderers, while honest men must prove their innocence. A curse upon you all, I say—a curse upon you! Canaille—Canaille—Canaille!

FIRST PEASANT.

He's raving mad.

SECOND PEASANT.

'Tis feigned—he thinks to throw them off the scent.

THIRD PEASANT.

Oh, he's a clever rogue.

HAUCHECORNE.

(*To the crowd.*)

There's not a man among you all (*looking up, pauses*)—but no, thank God, here comes one.

SCENE XII.

Re-enter Monsieur le Curé, R.

HAUCHECORNE.

(In agony, rushes up to the Curé.)

Ah, Monsieur le Curé, you are the only friend I have; for God's sake, defend me from these slanderers—they drive me to distraction.

CURE.

Calm yourself, my good man, calm yourself!

HAUCHECORNE.

Tell them that you know me well—that my word is just as good as theirs—that I am an honest man—an honest man.

CURE.

In truth I know you well; and more—your word is just as good as theirs. But when you ask me to affirm your honesty—alas, that I cannot, in all conscience, do.

HAUCHECORNE.

(Gives a cry of despair.)

Ah—a—a—a—

(All laugh at Hauchecorne, but their mirth is cut short by the Curé, who pities the poor old man.)

CURE.

Peace! Peace, I say!

HAUCHECORNE.

(*Crying, in rage.*)

There's not a man among them all. They call me liar, thief, a knave—they laugh at my economies —my crippled form they make their idle jest—they mock, they sneer, they slander and revile. Ha, ha, ha!

(*Laughing wildly he falls in a swoon at the feet of the Curé.*)

CURE.

He faints—some brandy—quick!

MALADAIN.

(*Maladain enters the tavern and returns with a flask and a glass; they administer some brandy. The Mayor lifts up the poor old man.*)

THE MAYOR.

(*To one of the peasants.*)

Send a doctor here at once.

CURE.

(*To the Mayor.*)

Think you this is serious?

THE MAYOR.

I fear it is an apoplectic fit—see how he trembles.

Re-enter the Sergeant, R.

SERGEANT.

(*Saluting.*)

Your Honor, I have found a boy who confesses that he discovered the pocketbook under yonder cart today before the Angelus.

ALL.

(*Greatly surprised.*)

Ah—a—

THE MAYOR.

I fear you bring the news too late, Sergeant. Detain the boy and learn the details of the case.

(*Exit Sergeant, surrounded by the crowd.*)

CURE.

Ah, thank God, he revives a little. Courage, courage, good Master Hauchecorne, you are vindicated at last. (*In surprise to the Mayor.*) He does not hear me.

Re-enter Louis, L.

LOUIS.

(*Pushes his way through the crowd and looks at the stricken man.*) (*Aside.*)

He is dying.

Exit Louis in terror, R.

THE MAYOR.

Another drop of brandy, Maladain.

(*He administers it.*)

MALADAIN.

He wishes to speak.

HAUCHECORNE.

(In trembling voice.)

See, your Honor, 'twas but a little piece of string—a li'l piece of string.

(He raises himself up as if he would say more, but with a convulsive shudder falls back dead.)

THE MAYOR.

Good God, he's dead!

1. *(The Bourdon strikes one. They all uncover and kneel about the dead man, the Curé in the center.)*

CURE.

Ah! The curse of an evil reputation—few men can live that down; for here, alas, sweet charity is but a myth.

2. *(The Bourdon strikes again.)*

CURE.

Toll on, toll on, thou solemn messenger of death; the ears of this poor man will never hear you more.

3. *(The Bourdon strikes for the third time.)*

CURTAIN.

(As the curtain descends, the folksong sung by Maladain at the opening of Scene I is played by the orchestra.)