

EXTRACT
The system
of
Dr. Tarr
and
Professor Fether

a play by
Alex Broun

adapted from the short story by
Edgar Allan Poe

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Cast

POE - a writer

MONSIEUR MAILLARD - the superintendent of the *Maison de Sante*

EUGENIE SALSAFETTE - his niece

MADAME JOYEUSE)

) – guests of Monsieur Maillard

MONSIEUR DE KOCK)

Setting

A *Maison de Sante*, southern France.

Time

Evening, 18-

A large table piled high with silver trays of food and crystal goblets of wine. In the centre sits a large silver candelabra.

Music. The cast, all elaborately dressed in high fashion of the 18th century, step grandly through a dance.

*The music finishes and they bow to each other. **POE** has been dancing with a young woman, **EUGENIE**.*

POE: (BOWS) Thank you *Mademoiselle*.

EUGENIE: The pleasure is all mine kind *Monsieur*.

EUGENIE MOVES OFF. MONSIEUR MAILLARD APPROACHES. UNDERNEATH THE ORCHESTRA CONTINUES TO PLAY.

POE: Is that the exquisite young woman I saw playing piano in the parlour earlier?

MAILLARD: The same.

POE: And is she ...?

MAILLARD: No. Oh, no - a member of my family - my niece, and a most accomplished young woman. As are all my distinguished guests at this evening's occasion. How do you find our establishment?

POE: It seems to be one of the finest run Asylums in all of France. And I have visited many. But do I understand then that the 'soothing system' of which I have heard so much is no longer in force?

MAILLARD: We have concluded to renounce it forever.

POE: You astonish me! The excellent administration of your affairs here is well understood in Paris and I thought -

MAILLARD: We found it absolutely necessary to return to the old usages. The danger of the soothing system was, at all times, appalling; and its advantages have been much overrated. I presume you are conversant with the soothing practice - with its details.

POE: At third or fourth hand.

MAILLARD: The system, in general terms, was one in which the patients were *menages-humored*. We contradicted no fancies. On the contrary, we not only indulged but encouraged them. *Argumentum ad absurdum*. We have had men, for example, who fancied themselves chickens. The cure was, to refuse him any

MAILLARD: (CONT) other diet for a week than that which properly appertains to a chicken. In this manner a little corn and gravel were made to perform wonders.

POE: And you had no punishments of any kind?

MAILLARD: None.

POE: And you never confined your patients?

MAILLARD: Now and then.

POE: But you have now changed all this?

MAILLARD: The system had its disadvantages, and even its dangers. It is now, happily, exploded throughout all the *Maisons de Sante* of France.

POE: I am very much surprised.

MAILLARD: Believe nothing you hear, and only one-half that you see. It is clear that some ignoramus has misled you. I am happy to introduce to you a system which, in my opinion, and in that of everyone who has witnessed its operation, is incomparably the most effectual as yet devised.

POE: What is it called?

MAILLARD: (INDICATING TABLE) I will tell you more in good course, but now I must insist you sample our provincial fare.

MAILLARD RETIRES TO ANOTHER PART OF THE STAGE. **POE** SAMPLES FOOD FROM THE TABLE. **MONSIEUR DE KOCK** APPROACHES.

DE KOCK: Try the *veal a la Meneshoult*, with cauliflowers in *veloute* sauce. (INDICATING GLASS) It goes perfectly with the *Clos de Vougeot*.

POE: I am not particularly partial to veal, however, I will try some of the rabbit.

DE KOCK: A very delicious *morceau*. (CALLING) Pierre, change this gentleman's plate, and give him a side-piece of the *rabbit au-chat*.

A **WAITER** APPEARS WITH A FRESH PLATE.

POE: The what?

DE KOCK: *Rabbit au-chat*.

POE: Upon second thoughts, I will just help myself to some of the ham. (**TO DE KOCK**) I have been informed, in Paris, that the southern provincialists are a peculiarly eccentric people. I will have none of their *rabbit au-chat* and, for that matter, none of their *rabbit-au-cat* either.

DE KOCK: I am from the southern provinces.

POE: (QUICKLY, BOWING) My apprehensions are immediately and fully dispelled.

DE KOCK: So what brings you to the *Maison de Sante*? Interest or necessity?

POE: The former. I had heard of Monsieur Maillard's "soothing system" but sadly I find it has been dispensed with.

DE KOCK: And for the best. Lunatics on the loose. It cannot be allowed to stand. Imagine, we had a fellow here that fancied himself a tea-pot.

MAILLARD DEMONSTRATES THE HUMAN TEA-POT, LAUGHTER FROM THE OTHERS.

POE: There is scarcely an insane asylum in France which cannot supply a human tea-pot.

DE KOCK: But our gentleman was a Britannia-ware tea-pot, and was careful to polish himself every morning with buckskin and whiting. And then we had a person who had taken it into his head that he was a donkey - which allegorically speaking, you will say, was quite true. For a long time he would eat nothing but thistles. Then he was perpetually kicking out his heels-so-so –

DE KOCK DEMONSTRATES, BRAYING LOUDLY. HE NEARLY KICKS MADAME JOYEUSE STANDING NEARBY.

JOYEUSE: Mr. De Kock! Please keep your feet to yourself! You are nearly as great a donkey as the poor unfortunate imagined himself. (**TO POE**) You should not waste your time on tales of donkeys. We had a patient, once upon a time, who very pertinaciously maintained himself to be a Cordova cheese, and went about, with a knife in his hand, soliciting his friends to try a small slice from the middle of his leg.

EUGENIE DEMONSTRATES, MORE LAUGHTER.

JOYEUSE And a woman who took himself for a bottle of champagne, and always went off with a pop and a fizz.

JOYEUSE PUTS HER RIGHT THUMB IN HER LEFT CHEEK, AND WITHDRAWS IT WITH A SOUND RESEMBLING THE POPPING OF A CORK, AND THEN, CREATES A SHARP HISSING AND FIZZING IN IMITATION OF THE FROTHING OF CHAMPAGNE.

DE KOCK: And then then there was Petit Gaillard, who thought himself a pinch of snuff, and was truly distressed because he could not take himself between his own finger and thumb.

EUGENIE DEMONSTRATES, MORE LAUGHTER.

JOYEUSE: And Jules Desoulieres, who went mad with the idea that he was a pumpkin. (**JOYEUSE DEMONSTRATES**) He persecuted the cook to make him up into pies - a thing which the cook indignantly refused to do. For my part, I am by no means sure that a *pumpkin pie a la Desoulieres* would not have been very capital eating indeed!

POE: You astonish me!

DE KOCK: Ha! ha! ha!"

JOYEUSE: (JOINING IN) he! he! he!-

TOGETHER: hi! hi! hi!- ho! ho! ho!- hu! hu! hu! hu!

THEY LAUGH MANIACALLY, ABRUPTLY THEY STOP. BEAT.

DE KOCK: You must not be astonished.

JOYEUSE: And then then there was Bouffon Le Grand. He grew deranged through love, and fancied himself possessed of two heads.

MAILLARD DEMONSTRATES.

DE KOCK: One the head of Cicero; the other a composite, Demosthenes' from the top of the forehead to the mouth, and Lord Brougham's from the mouth to the chin.

DE KOCK LEAPS ON THE TABLE.

DE KOCK: And then there was an ignoramus who mistook himself for a frog. I wish you could have seen him. Sir, if that man was not a frog, I can only observe that it is a pity he was not.

DE KOCK IMITATES A FROG. HE PUT HIS ELBOWS UPON THE TABLE AND DISTENDS HIS MOUTH AND ROLLS UP HIS EYES AND WINKS THEM WITH EXCESSIVE RAPIDITY, MAKING A CROAKING SOUND.

MAILLARD APPEARS BESIDE THE TABLE. HE WHISPERS A FEW WORDS IN DE KOCK'S EAR. DE KOCK CEASES "CROAKING" WITH GREAT SUDDENNESS, AND SINKS BACK TO THE FLOOR.

JOYEUSE: And then there was Boullard, the tee-totum. You would have roared with laughter to see him spin. He would turn round upon one heel by the hour -

SHE BEGINS TO SPIN AROUND AND AROUND LIKE A TOP TILL SHE CRASHES INTO THE TABLE AND FALLS TO THE FLOOR.

JOYEUSE: Madame Joyeuse was a more sensible person, as you know. She found, upon mature deliberation, that, by some accident, she had been turned into a chicken-cock; but, as such, she behaved with propriety. She flapped her wings with prodigious effect- so- so- and, as for her crow, it was delicious! (BECOMING A CHICKEN) Cock-a-doodle-doo!- cock-a-doodle-doo!- cock-a-doodle-de-doo-dooo-do-o-o-o-o-o!

MAILLARD: Madame Joyeuse, I will thank you to behave yourself! You can either conduct yourself as a lady, or you can quit the table forthwith.

MADAM JOYEUSE BLUSHES UP TO THE EYEBROWS, AND SEEMS EXCEEDINGLY ABASHED. SHE HANGS DOWN HER HEAD BUT SAYS NOT A SYLLABLE IN REPLY.

POE: Madame Joyeuse?

EUGENIE APPEARS BESIDE THEM.

EUGENIE: Oh, Madame Joyeuse was a fool! Not like Eugenie Salsafette. She was a very beautiful and painfully modest young lady, who thought the ordinary mode of *habiliment* indecent, and wished to dress herself, by getting outside instead of inside of her clothes. It is a thing very easily done, after all. (BEGINNING TO DISROBE) You have only to do so- and then so- so- so- and then so- so- so- and then so- so- and then-

MAILLARD: (TRYING TO STOP HER) *Mon dieu! Ma'm'selle Salsafette!* That is sufficient! You will soon be upon a par with the Medicean Venus.

POE: (LOOKING AT **EUGENIE**) *Ma'm'selle Salsafette...?*

SUDDENLY WE HEAR A SERIES OF LOUD SCREAMS AND YELLS, FROM OFF. THE ORCHESTRA IS CUT OFF.

DE KOCK, JOYEUSE AND **EUGENIE** "GROW AS PALE AS SO MANY CORPSES, AND, SHRINKING WITHIN, SIT QUIVERING AND GIBBERING WITH TERROR."

POE: What was that?

MAILLARD: A mere *bagatelle*. The lunatics, every now and then, get up a howl in concert; one starting another, as a bevy of dogs at night.

THE OTHER GUESTS TITTER, TRYING TO SOUND AT EASE.