

**IN RUSSET MANTLE CLAD**

A play by Terry Kroenung

© 2003

**Maitre**

You are a fine hand with a blade...Mademoiselle, but I doubt even you can parry a bullet. I invite you to try.

**Misere**

I invite **you** to draw your sword and step out here.

**Maitre**

I accept your challenge. But of course, as your social superior, I am forbidden to soil my blade on you.

**Misere**

Oh, come on. You can...turn the other cheek.

*(Alphonse and Pierre laugh. Maitre's glare silences them)*

**Maitre**

I'm afraid that's what you'll be screaming halfway through your upcoming, and long overdue, initiation. But I am getting ahead of myself.

**Misere**

I'm going to get your head **for** myself.

**Maitre**

Bold words should be backed by bold deeds, lady. Since you are so keen to fight, may I present my chosen representative? *(Pierre shoves Angelique forward)* The darling of the repertory stage, performing in her greatest--and sadly--final role...Angelique Delacroix.

**Misere**

Hiding behind a woman's steel? Is this the vaunted Hussar courage? What would the Colonel have to say about this, I wonder?

**Maitre**

It might be instructive to find out, but unfortunately our geriatric commander is at a party with Marshal Ney. Simply unavailable till morning, I'm afraid.

**Misere**

I will not give you the satisfaction. You want to watch women fight, crawl back to the brothel you were born in.

**Maitre**

Ohhh! Meow! If only your prospects for survival matched your tongue. You will fight, my haughty little bitch, or you will be shot dead where you stand.

**Misere**

You'll turn cold-blooded murderer just to soothe a wound to your pride?

**Maitre**

No, I will be doing my duty executing a pair of deserters. The Sergeant here saw and heard you planning it last month. Well within regulations.

**Misere**

Your sudden conversion to protector of the Armee's virtue is nothing short of miraculous.

**Maitre**

As would be your survival, were it to happen. Let's go. You have a duel to fight.

**Misere**

No. If we're dead anyway, why play your childish little game?

**Maitre**

You've been so deucedly charming, I haven't been able to get to the incentive. The loser of your exchange will ...well, lose, and the winner will get a day's head start. I fancy a bit of hunting after our great victory.

**Angelique**

We're supposed to believe you'll keep your word?

**Maitre**

Ah, Alphonse, so little faith among the enlisted men these days. I worry for the future of the Armee.

**Alphonse**

As do I.

**Pierre**

How **will** the Empire survive?

**Maitre**

Not your problem. None of you will live to see the sunset.

*(Lieutenants all laugh)*

**Alphonse**

Didn't I say I liked him...her...from the first? She fights! Two pistols on her and still she fights!

**Maitre**

You've proved your point. You have balls after all. Much good may they do you. Sergeant, if she isn't fighting the other woman in ten seconds, shoot her.

*(Maitre makes a move toward the Sergeant. Angelique stops her)*

**Angelique**

Misere...no. Come on, let's give them a show.

**Maitre**

You misunderstand. There will be no "show". The moment I suspect either of you is not really trying to kill, we will shoot you both in the head. Give her your sword, Pierre.

*(Pierre arms Angelique, steps UR with Alphonse. Maitre and the Sergeant step UL. Misere removes her cape, drops it downstage)*

**Angelique**

You know, I never liked breeches roles. Too contrived.

**Misere**

Tough audience this morning.

**Angelique**

Well, the provincial crowds are always lacking in refinement.

**Misere**

Do your best. Don't give them a reason to shoot.

**Angelique**

As if they would need one.

**Misere**

Forget it's me.

**Angelique**

Close my eyes and think of France?

**Misere**

Or at least of someone worth skewering.

*(Both laugh and salute)*

**Maitre**

I'm glad you're amused. Now amuse **us**. The sun is coming up. Allez!

*(They fight. They do not hold back. After several spirited exchanges, they end up in a brief corps-a-corps)*

**Angelique**

Take my horse. Then we're even.

**Misere**

What?

*(They push off. Misere lunges. As she does so, Angelique purposely drops her sword and opens her arms wide, taking Misere's point. She falls at C. This is a full-speed reprise of the slow-motion fight in silhouette that opened the play)*

**Misere** *(kneeling beside Angelique, cradling her)*

You little fool! What were you thinking?

**Angelique**

I was thinking that I'd be "quality" for once. Was it believable?

**Misere** *(tearfully)*

Bravo.

**Angelique** *(looking SL)*

"But look, the morn..." *(dies)*

*(Misere moves DC, picks up her cape, starts to lay it over Angelique. Maitre and the others move in)*

**Maitre**

Touching. Heart-rending. A death scene worthy of the immortals of the theatre.

**Misere**

She **is** immortal. She **is** quality. None of you are either.

*(She spins, whirling the cape into the Sergeant's face. As he struggles to clear it, she ducks under his arm, grabs his pistol hand, and squeezes his finger on the trigger. Pierre*

*falls. Alphonse fires, but the bullet is taken by the Sergeant. Misere lets him fall, dives for the sword she left on the ground. Alphonse has drawn his sword, cuts at her, misses as she rolls. She comes up with both her sword and Angelique's. Alphonse falls after a brief exchange at RC. Maitre draws his sword at RC and waits)*

**Maitre**

Well, this wasn't in the script **I** wrote.

**Misere**

I'm just an amateur actress. Sometimes I forget my lines.

**Maitre**

And your place.

**Misere**

You have five thousand francs of mine.

**Maitre** *(patting his pocket)*

Right here. Come and collect it.

*(They salute. Crossfade to DC spot. Misere walks into it, her cape draped over one arm)*

**Misere**

Bonaparte went on to greater glory, before his inevitable decline. All stars fall, the scientists say. I wasn't there for the end. I buried poor Angelique in a German churchyard that night and took my leave of the Grand Armee. Went back to high-waisted dresses and all the feminine frippery I was expected to wear. Found a good man—there are some, believe it or not—who gave me a home and a daughter. Little Angie helps me run the bookshop. I bought it for exactly five thousand francs. *(tosses a gold coin in the air, catches it)* And I had one franc left over.

*(She smiles, unfolds the cape, swirls it over her head. As it comes around in front, completely obscuring her, the lights black out)*