

The Countess of Escarbagnas

by

Moliere

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'La Comtesse d'Escarbagnas' was acted before the Court at Saint- Germain-en-Laye, on December 2, 1671, and in the theatre of the Palais Royal on July 8, 1672. It was never printed during Molière's lifetime, but for the first time only in 1682. It gives us a good picture of the provincial thoughts, manners, and habits of those days.

PERSONS REPRESENTED

THE COUNT, son to the COUNTESS.

THE VISCOUNT, in love with JULIA.

MR. THIBAUDIER, councillor, in love with the COUNTESS.

MR. HARPIN, receiver of taxes, also in love with the COUNTESS.

MR. BOBINET, tutor to the COUNT.

JEANNOT, servant to MR. THIBAUDIER.

CRIQUET, servant to the COUNTESS.

THE COUNTESS OF ESCARBAGNAS.

JULIA, in love with the VISCOUNT.

ANDRÉE, maid to the COUNTESS.

The scene is at Angoulême.

SCENE I.--JULIA, THE VISCOUNT.

VISC. What! you are here already?

JU. Yes, and you ought to be ashamed of yourself, Cléante; it is not right for a lover to be the last to come to the rendezvous.

VISC. I should have been here long ago if there were no importunate people in the world. I was stopped on my way by an old bore of rank, who asked me news of the court, merely to be able himself to detail to me the most absurd things that can well be imagined about it. You know that those great newsmongers are the curse of provincial towns, and that they have no greater anxiety than to spread, everywhere abroad all the tittle-tattle they pick up. This one showed me, to begin with, two large sheets of paper full to the very brim with the greatest imaginable amount of rubbish, which, he says, comes from the safest quarters. Then, as if it were a wonderful thing, he read full length and with great mystery all the stupid jokes in the Dutch Gazette, which he takes for gospel. [Footnote: After the peace of Aix-la-Chapelle in 1668, this newspaper never ceased to attack Louis XIV. and the French nation. In 1672 Louis XIV. attempted the conquest of Holland.] He thinks that France is being brought to ruin by the pen of that writer, whose fine wit, according to him, is sufficient to defeat armies. After that he raved about the ministry,

spoke of all its faults, and I thought he would never have done. If one is to believe him, he knows the secrets of the cabinet better than those who compose it. The policy of the state is an open book to him, and no step is taken without his seeing through it. He shows you the secret machinations of all that takes place, whither the wisdom of our neighbours tends, and controls at his will and pleasure all the affairs of Europe. His knowledge of what goes on extends as far as Africa and Asia, and he is informed of all that; is discussed in the privy council of Prester John [Footnote: The name given in the middle ages to a supposed Christian sovereign and priest (presbyter) in the interior of Asia.] and the Great Mogul.

JU. You make the best excuse you can, and so arrange it that it may pass off well and be easily received.

VISC. I assure you, dear Julia, that this is the real reason of my being late. But if I wanted to say anything gallant, I could tell you that the rendezvous to which you bring me here might well excuse the sluggishness of which you complain. To compel me to pay my addresses to the lady of this house is certainly reason enough for me to fear being here the first. I ought not to have to bear the misery of it, except when she whom it amuses is present. I avoid finding myself alone with that ridiculous countess with whom you shackle me. In short, as I come only for your sake, I have every reason to stay away until you are here.

JU. Oh! you will never lack the power of giving a bright colour to your faults. However, if you had come half an hour sooner, we should have enjoyed those few moments. For when I came, I found that the countess was out, and I have no doubt that she is gone all over the town to claim for herself the honour of the comedy you gave me under her name.

VISC. But, pray, when will you put an end to this, and make me buy less dearly the happiness of seeing you?

JU. When our parents agree, which I scarcely dare hope for. You know as well as I do that the dissensions which exist between our two families deprive us of the possibility of seeing each other anywhere else, and that neither my brothers nor my father are likely to approve of our engagement.

VISC. Yes; but why not profit better by the opportunity which their enmity gives us, and why oblige me to waste, under a ridiculous deception, the moments I pass near you?

JU. It is the better to hide our love; and, besides, to tell you the truth, this deception you speak of is to me a very amusing comedy, and I hardly think that the one you give me to-day will amuse me as much. Our Countess of Escarbagnas, with her perpetual infatuation for "quality," is as good a personage as can be put on the stage. The short journey she has made to Paris has brought her back to Angoulême more crazy than ever. The air of the court has given a new charm to her extravagance, and her folly grows and increases every day.

VISC. Yes; but you do not take into consideration that what amuses you drives me to despair; and that one cannot dissimulate long when one is under the sway of love as true as that which I feel for you. It is cruel to think, dear Julia, that this amusement of yours should deprive me of the few moments during which I could speak to you of my love, and last night I wrote on the subject some verses that I cannot help repeating to you, so true is it that the mania of reciting one's verses is inseparable from the title of a poet:

"Iris, too long thou keepst on torture's rack
One who obeys thy laws, yet whisp'ring chides
In that thou bidst me boast a joy I lack,
And hush the sorrow that my bosom hides.

Must thy dear eyes, to which I yield my arms,
From my sad sighs draw wanton pleasure still?
Is't not enough to suffer for thy charms
That I must grieve at thy capricious will?

This double martyrdom a pain affords
Too keen to bear at once; thy deeds, thy words,
Work on my wasting heart a cruel doom,

Love bids it burn; constraint its life doth chill.
If pity soften not thy wayward will,
Love, feigned and real, will lead me to the tomb."

JU. I see that you make yourself out much more ill--used than you need; but it is the way with you poets to tell falsehoods in cold blood, and to pretend that those you love are much more cruel than they are, in order to make them correspond to the fancies you may take into your heads. Yet, I should like you, if you will, to give me those verses in writing.

VISC. No, it is enough that I have repeated them to you, and I ought to stop there. A man may be foolish enough to make verses, but that is different from giving them to others.

JU. It is in vain for you to affect a false modesty; your wit is well known, and I do not see why you should hide what you write.

VISC. Ah! we must tread here with the greatest circumspection. It is a dangerous thing to set up for a wit. There is inherent to it a certain touch of absurdity which is catching, and we should be warned by the example of some of our friends.

JU. Nonsense, Cléante; I see that, in spite of all you say, you are longing to give me your verses; and I feel sure that you would be very unhappy if I pretended not to care for them.

VISC. I unhappy? Oh! dear no, I am not so much of a poet for you to think that I ... but here is the Countess of Escarbagnas; I'll go by this door, so as not to meet her, and will see that everything is got ready for the play I have promised you.

SCENE II.--THE COUNTESS, JULIA; ANDRÉE and CRIQUET in the background.

COUN. What, Madam, are you alone? Ah! what a shame! All alone! I thought my people had told me that the Viscount was here.

JU. It is true that he came, but it was sufficient for him to know that you were not at home; he would not stop after that.

COUN. What! did he see you?

JU. Yes.

COUN. And did he not stop to talk with you?

JU. No, Madam; he wished to show you how very much he is struck by your charms.

COUN. Still, I shall call him to account for that. However much any one may be in love with me, I wish them to pay to our sex the homage that is due to it. I am not one of those unjust women who approve of the rudeness their lovers display towards other fair ones.

JU. You must in no way be surprised at his conduct. The love he has for you shows itself in all his actions, and prevents him from caring for anybody but you.

COUN. I know that I can give rise to a strong passion; I have for that enough of beauty, youth, and rank, thank Heaven; but it is no reason why those who love me should not keep within the bounds of propriety towards others. (Seeing CRIQUET.) What are you doing there, little page? is there not an ante-room for you to be in until you are called? It is a strange thing that in the provinces we cannot meet with a servant who knows his place! To whom do you think I am speaking? Why do you not move? Will you go outside, little knave that you are!

SCENE III.--THE COUNTESS, JULIA, ANDRÉE.

COUN. Come hither, girl.

AND. What do you wish me to do, Ma'am?

COUN. To take off my head-dress. Gently, you awkward girl: how roughly yon touch my head with your heavy hands!

AND. I do it as gently as I can, Ma'am.

COUN. No doubt; but what you call gently is very rough treatment for my head. You have almost put my neck out of joint. Now, take also this muff; go and put it with the rest into the closet; don't leave anything about. Well! where is she going to now? What is the stupid girl doing?

AND. I am going to take this into the closet, as you told me, Ma'am.

COUN. Ah! heavens! (To JULIA) Pray, excuse her rudeness, Madam. (To ANDRÉE) I told you my closet, great ass; that is the place where I keep my dresses.

AND. Please, Ma'am, is a cupboard called a closet at court?

COUN. Yes, dunce; it is thus that a place where clothes are kept is called.

AND. I will remember it, Ma'am, as well as the word furniture warehouse for your attic.

SCENE IV.--THE COUNTESS, JULIA.

COUN. What trouble it gives me to have to teach such simpletons.

JU. I think them very fortunate to be under your discipline, Madam.

COUN. She is my nurse's daughter, whom I have made lady's-maid; the post is quite new to her, as yet.

JU. It shows a generous soul, Madam, and it is glorious thus to form people.

COUN. Come, some seats, I say! Here, little page! little page! little page-boy! Truly, this is too bad not to have a page to give us chairs! My maids! my page! my page! my maids! Ho! somebody! I really think that they must be all dead, and that we shall have to find seats for ourselves.

SCENE V.--THE COUNTESS, JULIA, ANDRÉE.

AND. What is it you want, Ma'am?

COUN. You do make people scream after you, you servants!

AND. I was putting your muff and head-dress away in the cup ... in the closet, I mean.

COUN. Call in that rascal of a page.

AND. I say, Criquet!

COUN. Cease that "Criquet" of yours, stupid, and call out "Page."

AND. Page then, and not Criquet, come and speak to missis. I think he must be deaf. Criq
... Page! page!

SCENE VI.--THE COUNTESS, JULIA, ANDRÉE, CRIQUET.

CRI. What is it you want?

COUN. Where were you, you rascal?

CRI. In the street, Ma'am.

COUN. Why in the street?

CRI. You told me to go outside.

COUN. You are a rude little fellow, and you ought to know that outside among people of quality, means the ante-room. Andrée, mind you ask my equerry to flog this little rogue. He is an incorrigible little wretch.

AND. Whom do you mean by your equerry, Ma'am? Is it Mr. Charles you call by that name?

COUN. Be silent, impertinent girl! You can hardly open your month without making some rude remark. (To CRIQUET) Quick, some seats; (to ANDRÉE) and you, light two wax candles in my silver candlesticks; it is getting late. What is it now? why do you look so scared?

AND. Ma'am.

COUN. Well--Ma'am--what is the matter?

AND. It is that....

COUN. What?

AND. I have no wax candles, but only dips.

COUN. The simpleton! And where are the wax candles I bought a few days ago?

AND. I have seen none since I have been here.

COUN. Get out from my presence, rude girl. I will send you back to your home again. Bring me a glass of water.

SCENE VII.--THE COUNTESS and JULIA (making much ceremony before they sit down).

COUN. Madam

JU. Madam!

COUN. Ah! Madam!

JU. Ah! Madam!

COUN. Madam, I beg of you!

JU. Madam, I beg of you!

COUN. Oh! Madam!

JU. Oh! Madam!

COUN. Pray, Madam!

JU. Pray, Madam!

COUN. Now really, Madam!

JU. Now really, Madam!

COUN. I am in my own house, Madam! We are agreed as to that. Do you take me for a provincial, Madam?

JU. Oh! Heaven forbid, Madam!

SCENE VIII.--THE COUNTESS, JULIA, ANDRÉE (who brings a glass of water), CRIQUET.

COUN. (to ANDRÉE). Get along with you, you hussy. I drink with a salver. I tell you that you must go and fetch me a salver.

AND. Criquet, what's a salver?

CRI. A salver?

AND. Yes.

CRI. I don't know.

COUN. (to ANDRÉE). Will you move, or will you not?

AND. We don't either of us know what a salver is.

COUN. Know, then, that it is a plate on which you put the glass.

SCENE IX.--THE COUNTESS, JULIA.

COUN. Long live Paris! It is only there that one is well waited upon; there a glance is enough.

SCENE X.--THE COUNTESS, JULIA, ANDRÉE (who brings a glass of water, with a plate on the top of it), CRIQUET.

COUN. Is that what I asked you for, dunderhead? It is under that you must put the plate.

AND. That is easy to do. (She breaks the glass in trying to put it on the plate.)

COUN. You stupid girl! You shall really pay for the glass; you shall, I promise you!

AND. Very well, Ma'am, I will pay you for it.

COUN. But did you ever see such an awkward loutish girl? such a....

AND. I say, Ma'am, if I am to pay for the glass, I won't be scolded into the bargain.

COUN. Get out of my sight.

SCENE XI.--THE COUNTESS, JULIA.

COUN. Really, Madam, small towns are strange places. In them there is no respect of persons, and I have just been making a few calls at houses where they drove me almost to despair; so little regard did they pay to my rank.

JU. Where could you expect them to have learnt manners? They have never been to Paris.

COUN. Still, they might learn, if they would only listen to one; but what I think too bad is that they will persist in saying that they know as much as I do--I who have spent two months in Paris, and have seen the whole court.

JU. What absurd people!

COUN. They are unbearable in the impertinent equality with which they treat people. For, in short, there ought to be a certain subordination in things; and what puts me out of all patience is that a town upstart, whether with two days' gentility to boast of or with two hundred years', should have impudence enough to say that he is as much of a gentleman as my late husband, who lived in the country, kept a pack of hounds, and took the title of Count in all the deeds that he signed.

JU. They know better how to live in Paris, in those large hotels you must remember with such pleasure! That Hotel of Mouchy, Madam; that Hotel of Lyons, that Hotel of Holland, what charming places to live in! [Footnote: Instead of naming the hotels (= mansions) of the great noblemen, Julia names the hotels (= inns) of the time. She thus shows where the countess had studied the aristocracy.]

COUN. It is true that those places are very different from what we have here. You see there people of quality who do not hesitate to show you all the respect and consideration which you look for. One is not under the obligation of rising from one's seat, and if one wants to see a review or the great ballet of Psyche, your wishes are at once attended to.

JU. I should think, Madam, that during your stay in Paris you made many a conquest among the people of quality.

COUN. You can readily believe, Madam, that of all the famous court gallants not one failed to come to my door and pay his respects to me. I keep in my casket some of the letters sent me, and can prove by them what offers I have refused. There is no need for me to tell you their names; you know what is meant by court gallants.

JU. I wonder, Madam, how, after all those great names, which I can easily guess, you can descend to Mr. Thibaudier, a councillor, and Mr. Harpin, a collector of taxes? The fall is great, I must say. For your viscount, although nothing but a country viscount, is still a viscount, and can take a journey to Paris if he has not been there already. But a councillor and a tax-gatherer are but poor lovers for a great countess like you.

COUN. They are men whom one treats kindly in the country, in order to make use of when the need arises. They serve to fill up the gaps of gallantry, and to swell the ranks of one's lovers. It is a good thing not to leave a lover the sole master of one's heart, lest, for want of rivals, his love go to sleep through over-confidence.

JU. I confess, Madam, that no one can help profiting wonderfully by all you say. Your conversation is a school, to which I do not fail to come every day in order to learn something new.

SCENE XII.--THE COUNTESS, JULIA, ANDRÉE, CRIQUET.

CRI. (to the COUNTESS). Here is Jeannot, Mr. Thibaudier's man, who wants to see you, Ma'am.

COUN. Ah! you little wretch, this is another of your stupidities. A well-bred lackey would have spoken in a whisper to the gentlewoman in attendance; the latter would have come to her mistress and have whispered in her ear: "Here is the footman of Mr. So-and-so, who wants to speak to you, Madam." To which the mistress would have answered, "Show him in."

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