

Signora Fantastici

Madame de Stael

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SIGNORA FANTASTICI
(A DRAMATIC PROVERB)

BY MADAME DE STAEL
(1811)

Translated and adapted by F. J. Morlock

CHARACTERS:

Mr. De Kriegschenmahl, former Swiss officer
Mrs. De Kriegschenmahl, his wife
Licidas
Rodolphe
Signora Fantastici
Zepherina, her daughter
A Commissioner who stutters

The action takes place in a town in the German parts of Switzerland.

NOTE: MR. de Kriegschenmahl and Rodolphe are played with a German accent. Madame de Kriegschenmahl has an English accent.

MADAME DE KRIEGSCHENMAHL:

My friend, if you could stop smoking that pipe you would please me greatly, in truth, greatly. It spoils the odor of the tea. The smoke soils my white dress. In truth, it's quite disagreeable.

MR. DE KRIEGSCHENMAHL:

What do you want, my wife? Each country has its customs. In England you drink warm water all day. It's tasteless, it's insipid! The pipe is more military; it reminds me of my youth. I've been married to you for twenty-five years, Madame de Kriegschenmahl. Can't you get used to me?

MADAME DE KRIEGSCHENMAHL:

For twenty five years your customs have revolted me.

MR. DE KRIEGSCHENMAHL:

For twenty–five yeas your prudery has annoyed me.

MADAME DE KRIEGSCHENMAHL:

That's really polite.

MR. DE KRIEGSCHENMAHL:

It's quite complaisant.

MADAME DE KRIEGSCHENMAHL:

When you were in love with me—

MR. DE KRIEGSCHENMAHL:

When you wanted to marry me—

MADAME DE KRIEGSCHENMAHL:

I was greatly trifled with.

MR. DE KRIEGSCHENMAHL:

I was indeed less annoyed.

MADAME DE KRIEGSCHENMAHL:

We are still happy together.

MR. DE KRIEGSCHENMAHL:

Yes, quite happy.

MADAME DE KRIEGSCHENMAHL:

But sometimes, I should like—

MR. DE KRIEGSCHENMAHL:

What?

MADAME DE KRIEGSCHENMAHL:

Something else.

MR. DE KRIEGSCHENMAHL:

What do you mean, Madame de Kriegschenmahl?

MADAME DE KRIEGSCHENMAHL:

Don't be upset, Mr. de Kriegschenmahl; I have a bounty to ask of you. For twenty–five years we've made a party of whist every night. I'd like to try this French game they say is so gay: Reversi. Do you consent to it, my dear husband? I wouldn't permit myself to do it without your approval.

MR. DE KRIEGSCHENMAHL:

I give it to you.

MADAME DE KRIEGSCHENMAHL:

Ah, how good you are! We could try it with our two sons.

MR. DE KRIEGSCHENMAHL:

Yes. That will be a family match. That's always a pleasure. But haven't you noticed that for some time your cherished son, the one you named Licidas, is 24 years old? On account of this English novel you haven't had time to finish. Well! Licidas de Kriegschenmahl is very rarely at home. Where's this leading?

MADAME DE KRIEGSCHENMAHL:

Licidas is too well brought up for me to suspect his conduct. I'm sure he's busy with the new agricultural course which has just started up. He loves the country, solitude; he's modest and timid. Not the same as your Corporal Rodolphe. Truly, as for me, his mother, he frightens me when he talks.

MR. DE KRIEGSCHENMAHL:

He's a man of sense, my younger son is. He doesn't have the complexion of roses and lillies like your Licidas. He isn't made for domestic life like you and your son; but he's reasonable and I'll go so far as to bet that your Licidas will commit more stupidities than Rodolphe.

MADAME DE KRIEGSCHENMAHL:

Stupidities! What do you mean? My son, who's never left my home and who's decided never to leave us, while Rodolphe spends his life, will I dare say it? in the guard room. Yes, I blush when I think of it.

MR. DE KRIEGSCHENMAHL:

And where would you have him be?

MADAME DE KRIEGSCHENMAHL:

Signora Fantastici

Around his mother, sir. Around his mother.

MR. DE KRIEGSCHENMAHL:

Do you imagine so? But here's Licidas.—What's wrong with him today?

MADAME DE KRIEGSCHENMAHL:

His hair is all undone. He staggers as he walks. My God! Could some misfortune have happened to him?

MR. DE KRIEGSCHENMAHL:

This son, so modest, so timid: would he be drunk somewhere?

LICIDAS: (entering, reciting from the role of Hippolytus)

Friends, what say you? You who've known my heart since my birth. Can you ask me the sentiments of a heart so proud, so disdainful?

MADAME DE KRIEGSCHENMAHL:

What's happened to you my son? How bold your looks are. You make me lower my eyes.

MR. DE KRIEGSCHENMAHL:

My son. Have you lost your good senses?

LICIDAS:

Mother, Father, pardon. But you don't know how beautiful the part is that I was just rehearsing; you don't know the Signora Fantastici and her charming daughter Zepherina. How I pity you!

MR. DE KRIEGSCHENMAHL:

My son, what are you saying to us? These are names I've never heard mentioned and yet I wandered about the country when I was young.

MADAME DE KRIEGSCHENMAHL:

My son, I fear the people of whom you are speaking are not of a society suitable to a well brought up young man.

LICIDAS:

Mother, they are two charming Italians, mother and daughter. They arrived a few days ago, and I've never been so amused until I became acquainted with them.

MADAME DE KRIEGSCHENMAHL:

What are you saying, Licidas? Amused! Is their company worth that of your aunt Ehrenschwand to whose home we go every Monday?

LICIDAS:

A thousand times better, mother.

MADAME DE KRIEGSCHENMAHL:

Better than the Tuesday soirees at your cousin Cunegonde's?

LICIDAS:

Even better.

MADAME DE KRIEGSCHENMAHL:

Is it credible?

MR. DE KRIEGSCHENMAHL:

You will never persuade me that it's more amusing at her place than at this club where we smoke by day sometimes three, sometimes six, sometime nine pipes?

LICIDAS:

Yes, father.

MADAME DE KRIEGSCHENMAHL:

And what's done there?

LICIDAS:

They're putting on a play there.

MADAME DE KRIEGSCHENMAHL:

Ah! My God! That's ruinous. A young man of 24 acting in a play.

MR. DE KRIEGSCHENMAHL:

It's fine for a woman to act in a play; but a man must make war, always war.

LICIDAS:

But father—when we are at peace?

Signora Fantastici

MR. DE KRIEGSCHENMAHL:

That makes no difference.

MADAME DE KRIEGSCHENMAHL:

I would be very upset if you were making war. That's much too rough for my darling son. But act in a play! Truly, that makes me shudder! Never would my mother or my grand-mother have imagined such a thing.

LICIDAS:

If you were to see Signora Fantastici she would please you. She's so animated, so lively! She recites verses, she sings. Her daughter does the same thing. And as for me, I already know the responses; they've taught me to declaim the way they do.

MADAME DE KRIEGSCHENMAHL:

Ah, my God! He's ruined!

LICIDAS:

I intend to follow Signora Fantastici. I intend to go to Italy with her.

MADAME DE KRIEGSCHENMAHL:

Ah, Heaven!

MR. DE KRIEGSCHENMAHL:

Why what's all this, Mr. Licidas?

LICIDAS:

Father, I'm too bored here. Everyone says the same thing here, from the beginning of the year until the end. How are you? they say to Mother. Very well, she replies. The weather's indeed cold today. It's true but last year, about the same time it was much worse. Do you think so, says my old cousin. I am of your opinion, replies my aunt. And the next day it starts all over.

MADAME DE KRIEGSCHENMAHL:

Behold the impertinent!

LICIDAS:

Father is always telling us about the same siege. The one at Troy didn't last as long.

MR. DE KRIEGSCHENMAHL:

Will you stop! If I—

LICIDAS:

Signora Fantastici has a new idea every day. Music, pictures, poetry fill and vary her life. Father and Mother, I really ask your forgiveness but I intend to follow Signora Fantastici.

MR. DE KRIEGSCHENMAHL:

Ah! We shall know how to prevent you. But here is your brother Rodolphe who will set you straight.

RODOLPHE: (entering)

Hello Father—how's the pipe going? Hello Mother, how are your nerves? I pity the fact you have such things. As for me, I don't have nerves, I've got devilishly good health. And you, brother, I find you even more jolly than usual. Would you like to enlist? Here I am quite ready to get you into my regiment.

MR. DE KRIEGSCHENMAHL:

Do you know what he wants to enlist in? It's a troupe of actors.

RODOLPHE:

What? An actor! That's abominable. If he had such an idea I'd run him through with my sword. I don't know much about acting but I imagine that it's unworthy of a soldier. And I don't want to hear it spoken of.

MR. DE KRIEGSCHENMAHL:

That's well reasoned.

MADAME DE KRIEGSCHENMAHL:

My son, you see what you are exposing us to? Now here's your brother going to pass for someone wiser than you.

MR. DE KRIEGSCHENMAHL:

Come, come, Madame. Don't you lament; he's going to set the lad straight. I am going to find my friend the Commissioner. And he will make this Signora Fantastici who puts trouble in all heads—leave.

MADAME DE KRIEGSCHENMAHL:

My dear friend, don't get so excited.

Signora Fantastici

MR. DE KRIEGSCHENMAHL:

My wife, have a care of restraining me, for By Jove, when I set myself to it, I frighten myself.

(to Rodolphe)

So watch over your brother and don't let him leave here.

RODOLPHE:

That's fine, papa.

(Exit Mr. and Mrs. De Kriegschemahl)

RODOLPHE:

Ah, brother mine, so you are playing pranks, too. You who my mother was always citing to me as a model? So at the moment it is I who am your mentor.

LICIDAS:

What do you want, brother? I thought there were only two ways of living in this world. Like my father or like my mother; like you or like me. And I much preferred mine. But since I became acquainted with Signora Fantastici I would really like to resemble her. Come see her with me.

RODOLPHE:

Me? Desert my post! How can you think of it? I am remaining steady here until my father's return. And indeed I will prevent you from leaving.

LICIDAS:

Ah, my God! What a bore! Suppose I were to rehearse during this time the verse that the Signora gave me to learn. It's the declaration of Hippolytus. But it has to be addressed to Aricie. Fine. My brother is precisely at my right. He's what's needed. Stay there Rodolphe, stay there.

RODOLPHE:

Surely I'm staying here. Why are you commanding me to do what I wish?

LICIDAS:

"You see before you a lamentable prince."

RODOLPHE:

Why's he saying "lamentable?" Isn't that the same thing as pitiful? Why are you saying that about yourself? That's very modest.

LICIDAS:

"My bow, my javelins, my chariot all importune me And my idle horses.—"

RODOLPHE:

What? What chariot, what horses are you talking about? You always go by foot.

LICIDAS:

Leave me alone; it's in my part. Shut up!

RODOLPHE:

And what does the princess say to your love?

LICIDAS:

Ah! Do you want me to teach you the reply? That would be charming. You will say to me the word of reclama.

RODOLPHE:

The word of reclama! What the devil sort of statement is that? Isn't it rather the pass word you mean? Every day, I say it to the patrol.— Who's this little girl who's coming towards us? She's dressed funny, but she's pretty. On my oath, she's pretty!

LICIDAS:

It's the charming daughter of Signora Fantastici, Miss Zepherina. They will have pity on my captivity.

ZEPHERINA: (entering)

Hello, Licidas.

LICIDAS:

Hello, Zepherina. Where is Signora Fantastici?

ZEPHERINA:

She's going to come. She's staying in the street to purchase some helmets and some armor in a shop.

Signora Fantastici

RODOLPHE:

Helmets and armor! And what's she intend to do with 'em?

ZEPHERINA:

The first play that we will perform will be entirely military.

RODOLPHE:

Entirely military! My pretty child; and how will you set about it?

ZEPHERINA:

Licidas will be a cavalry man. And you? Why wouldn't you make a second?

RODOLPHE:

Me! Ah—for goodness sake!

ZEPHERINA:

And why not? You think perhaps you have bad form?

RODOLPHE:

No, truly. I don't think that.

ZEPHERINA:

My mother will correct you.

RODOLPHE:

And in what, Miss—if you please?

ZEPHERINA:

To march straight ahead as you are doing, from being rough, clumsy.

RODOLPHE:

Miss, I intend to remain as I am.

ZEPHERINA:

Sir, you are wrong. Look here. Your brother had the air of a ninny.

RODOLPHE:

Oh, that's true.

ZEPHERINA:

Well. Now he has a free and easy bearing.

RODOLPHE:

Not so much so as yet.

ZEPHERINA:

That will come. But let's see what can be made of you.

RODOLPHE:

Nothing.

ZEPHERINA:

What! You cling to minor roles? Would you like to be a guard at the back of the stage?

RODOLPHE:

No, Miss.

ZEPHERINA:

Perhaps you would simply play the bear in *The Hunters and the Milkmaid*.

RODOLPHE:

Miss—

ZEPHERINA:

One of my mother's friends has that part; he won't let you have it.

RODOLPHE:

Miss. I don't wish to play a thing. Not to play anything at all. Do you understand?

ZEPHERINA:

Not possible! What would you do then?

RODOLPHE:

What would I do? By Jove, I'd do what I am. Captain Rodolphe Kriegschenmahl.

ZEPHERINA:

Signora Fantastici

Now that's fine. My mother is also Signora Fantastici; me—Zepherina Fantastici. But you need to be good for something. My job is that of young female leads. And you sir, would you believe it? I think well enough of you to give you the role of Renaldo in Armida.

LICIDAS:

Ah, Zepherina. What are you thinking of? That's mine.

ZEPHERINA:

Let me do it, let me do it. It's necessary to attract beginners. The role will revert to you.

RODOLPHE:

Renaldo and Armida? What's that? That doesn't relate to someone in our social circle? I don't wish to shock anyone.

ZEPHERINA:

No, I assure you, don't worry. But look—try—

RODOLPHE:

This child amuses me; I'd really like to act with her.

ZEPHERINA:

Take off your big boots.

RODOLPHE:

I never take them off. Not even at night.

ZEPHERINA:

Still. Take them off.

RODOLPHE:

I'd really like to, but I'll get cold in my legs.

ZEPHERINA:

Take off your saber.

RODOLPHE:

Miss.

ZEPHERINA:

You will take it back.

RODOLPHE:

Soon! You cannot leave your saber to trifle.

ZEPHERINA:

I would like you to shave your mustaches.

RODOLPHE:

Ah! that no. For goodness sakes, that's contrary to regulations.

ZEPHERINA:

But when I have to put a crown of roses on your head, how's that going to look with mustaches?

RODOLPHE:

Oh! That's true; that will go ill. And yet I love roses, after the smell of tobacco, it's the best odor I know of.

ZEPHERINA:

Seem to go to sleep.

RODOLPHE:

Sometimes I sleep. Often, actually. But I don't seem to be asleep. Must I close my eyes for that?

ZEPHERINA:

Yes, without doubt; I am coming to kill you when you are asleep.

RODOLPHE:

Then return my saber to me, Miss. For in the end that's not fair.

ZEPHERINA:

Your face pleases me. Touch me, and prepared to strike you, I will let the poignard fall.

RODOLPHE:

Ah, now that's charming. If my face pleases you, I can kiss you.

ZEPHERINA:

Signora Fantastici

Ah, no!

RODOLPHE:

So much the worse.

ZEPHERINA:

You are waking up.

RODOLPHE:

I'm awake.

ZEPHERINA:

You rise.

RODOLPHE:

Here I am standing.

ZEPHERINA:

Ah. Not like that. Your actions must be soft, smooth.

RODOLPHE:

But my uniform is so tight that I cannot move my arms except to exercise.

ZEPHERINA:

Exercise! How dreadful! Take off your shirt and put on my shawl in its place.

RODOLPHE:

Your shawl? What's this signify, little witch?

ZEPHERINA:

Obey!

RODOLPHE:

Why look at that! She talks to me like my general.

ZEPHERINA:

I am that, your general. You belong to us.

RODOLPHE:

Me! I am not engaged. I didn't sign my enlistment.

ZEPHERINA:

Dance with me. Hold the end of this shawl. Come on—turn.

(Rodolphe dances with Zepherina; Lcidas watches them laughing.)

RODOLPHE:

Brother, you are laughing. I'm going. (gets wrapped up in the shawl and falls down) Ah, cursed shawl.

(The door opens; Mr. and Mrs. Kriegschendamhl enter with the Commissioner.)

MADAME DE KRIEGSCHENMAHL:

My son. What a state you are in! Has your brother fought with you?

LICIDAS:

No, mother. It's Signora Zepherina who was making him rehearse a lesson in dancing. She was Armida, he was Renaldo.

MADAME DE KRIEGSCHENMAHL:

My son; I never would have believed this of you.

RODOLPHE:

Nor I.

MR. DE KRIEGSCHENMAHL:

Finally, all this is going to finish.

COMMISSIONER:

Yes, yes. Al-All this i-is going to finish.

LICIDAS:

Ah, here's Signora Fantastici

(Signora Fantastici enters)

ZEPHERINA:

Ah, mother. I'm very glad to see you. There's a terrible problem here.

SIGNORA FANTASTICI:

Is the ending approaching? But it's not sufficiently prepared. My dear Licidas, present me to your father and your mother. I will be charmed to know them.

MR. DE KRIEGSCHENMAHL:

Me! That will give me very little pleasure.

MADAME DE KRIEGSCHENMAHL:

And as for me, Madame, I should have wished that the obscurity of our life would spare us all this uproar.

SIGNORA FANTASTICI:

I get it. One is of the abrupt type, like you would say of The Beneficent Bear. The roles of the uncle and the tutor. As to the other, the prudes. These are easy roles. But one has a German accent and the other an English accent. Which serves very well, why very well.

LICIDAS:

Signora. Content yourself with the sons and don't try to bring the father and the mother. That can't be done.

SIGNORA FANTASTICI:

Who told you it cannot be done? It's only a question of tearing men from their habits. You have to make them feel the interest of a new life and the insipidity of their own. You must awaken their imaginations, and they are ours.

MR. DE KRIEGSCHENMAHL:

Come on, Commissioner, do your duty.

COMMISSIONER:

Madame I, I am re—responsible

SIGNORA FANTASTICI:

For what?

COMMISSIONER:

To order you—

SIGNORA FANTASTICI:

To order me! And you are trembling. That tone is not used to command.

COMMISSIONER:

To leave town immediately.

SIGNORA FANTASTICI:

Me? And by what right, I beg you?

COMMISSIONER:

Wha—what right? Am I not the Commissioner of this suburb?

SIGNORA FANTASTICI:

Yes, but only a judge can grant or refuse a travel visa. And the judge will do me justice. He loves the arts, he loves poetry. Beware he doesn't dismiss you for having infringed on his rights.

COMMISSIONER:

It's true wha—what she says, The Signora. It's a sad thing being a subaltern! I was hoping to be a judge in the last election, but a cabal p—p—prevented me.

SIGNORA FANTASTICI:

Do you know the cause of your not being named?

COMMISSIONER:

No. But it appeared to me the public was sh—shocked.

SIGNORA FANTASTICI:

Yes, a very calm shock. But as for me, I will tell you that it is your difficulty speaking that was the cause of it.

COMMISSIONER:

Yes, it's true. I have a—a little trouble speaking. But my mother told me it would give me dignity.

SIGNORA FANTASTICI:

Your lady mother was surely right. But stammering is a great handicap in haranguing the public.

Signora Fantastici

COMMISSIONER:

And what must I do to correct it?

SIGNORA FANTASTICI:

Act in a play.

COMMISSIONER:

Me? Act in a play.

SIGNORA FANTASTICI:

A role of judge.

COMMISSIONER:

A role of judge.

SIGNORA FANTASTICI:

Twice a week. And you'll be judge for 3 hours.

COMMISSIONER:

The Municipal Council only meets once a week.

SIGNORA FANTASTICI:

So you'll be judge twice as long on my stage than on yours.

COMMISSIONER:

Will I be able to wear the same robe?

SIGNORA FANTASTICI:

The same.

COMMISSIONER:

And they'll obey me?

SIGNORA FANTASTICI:

Better than you've obeyed me.

COMMISSIONER:

And will there be riots?

SIGNORA FANTASTICI:

With four lines of blank verse you will calm them.

COMMISSIONER:

Four lines of b—blank verse! Will that imperil the life of an honest man?

SIGNORA FANTASTICI:

Not at all. Not even that of a bad poet.

COMMISSIONER:

Why this is a charming idea! Judge, twice a week. A beautiful gown, power and no danger. Signora, I am yours.

SIGNORA FANTASTICI:

Pass to this side. You, Captain Rodolphe, will never quit my daughter.

RODOLPHE:

No, surely, Signora: she's my Armida. If I go to Italy with her I will still be Rinaldo, right?

SIGNORA FANTASTICI:

Yes, without a doubt. Nevertheless, once in a while you'll lend yourself to the role of Sacripant. You must be versatile in social troupes.

MADAME DE KRIEGSCHENMAHL:

Husband, what's going to become of us? Our children are leaving us. We'll remain alone with each other. How sad that is.

MR. DE KRIEGSCHENMAHL:

Madame de Kriegschenhahl—what will we say to each other when we are alone?

MADAME DE KRIEGSCHENMAHL:

What we've already said, my dear spouse.

MR. DE KRIEGSCHENMAHL:

Ah, I don't know that much. Let's try to appease Signora Fantastici. (to The Signora) Madame, don't carry off my two sons, the consolation of my old age.

SIGNORA FANTASTICI:

That's fair. You must be an excellent father.

MR. DE KRIEGSCHENMAHL:

Ah. She's beginning to listen to reason.

SIGNORA FANTASTICI:

Yes. A father in a play.

MR. DE KRIEGSCHENMAHL:

What, Madame!

SIGNORA FANTASTICI:

If you like you will play aristocratic fathers.

MR. DE KRIEGSCHENMAHL:

Aristocratic fathers! Why, certainly. The Kriegschenhahls are gentlemen from father to son.

SIGNORA FANTASTICI:

What! Your ancestors have all been actors?

MR. DE KRIEGSCHENMAHL:

Madame, what do you mean? Do you mean to offend me?

SIGNORA FANTASTICI:

No, assuredly—but I am taking your sons with me. They please me. I will perfect their education. The younger will play the heroes; the older, tender roles. The former will become stronger, the latter more sweet. And in ten years from now I will send them back to you charmers.

MR. DE KRIEGSCHENMAHL:

Ah, madame. What must be done so as not to separate from them?

SIGNORA FANTASTICI:

Listen, I'm a good person; I don't enjoy causing pain to whoever it may be, but I insist that the rights of poetry be respected in me. Too much prose, sir, too much prose in this house!

MR. DE KRIEGSCHENMAHL:

What! Madame? I cannot order my dinner in prose from Madame de Kriegschenhahl?

SIGNORA FANTASTICI:

Poetry doesn't consist only of verse, but in love for the arts, in enthusiasm and imagination, which raises the soul and the spirit. It proscribes all manner of sentiments, vulgarity, undemocratic ideas under the weight of which you've spent your entire life! Listen to me. I am going to give a party to a charming woman that illness keeps at home and who supports her sufferings with admirable courage. Now that's poetry for heaven's sake, true poetry. Would you play a role in the play we want to perform for her?

MR. DE KRIEGSCHENMAHL:

What are you thinking of, Madame, me?

SIGNORA FANTASTICI:

There will be a siege of a town in it.

MR. DE KRIEGSCHENMAHL:

A siege! And do you think my gout will prevent me from rising to the assault?

SIGNORA FANTASTICI:

We will take care that the ramparts will be easy to approach.

MR. DE KRIEGSCHENMAHL:

And I will take the town?

SIGNORA FANTASTICI:

Without a doubt.

MR. DE KRIEGSCHENMAHL:

Ah, what a pleasure for me; I've always been beaten.

SIGNORA FANTASTICI:

You see plainly that acting repairs the faults of destiny. And you, Madame de Kriegschenhahl, we pray you to accept in our play the role of a respectable woman.

MADAME DE KRIEGSCHENMAHL:

Signora Fantastici

And why so respectable?

SIGNORA FANTASTICI:

Excuse me, I thought—

MADAME DE KRIEGSCHENMAHL:

Do you think that the one wouldn't be as agreeable as the other?

SIGNORA FANTASTICI:

Well! Madame. Play the great flirts. I abdicate and I give them to you.

MR. DE KRIEGSCHENMAHL:

What now, Madame De Kriegschenhahl?

MADAME DE KRIEGSCHENMAHL:

Dear spouse, control your jealous transports. I will be a flirt only on the stage. Everywhere else—you know me.

SIGNORA FANTASTICI:

Now then, here we are all content and we are going to celebrate suitably, the triumph of poetry over prose.

CURTAIN