

Georges Feydeau's
A FLEA IN HER EAR

A New Version
By
Charles Edward Pogue

CAST OF CHARACTERS

(In order of appearance)

CAMILLE CHANDEBISE

ANTOINETTE PLUCHEUX

ETIENNE PLUCHEUX

DR. FINACHE

LUCIENNE HOMENIDES DE HISTANGUA

RAYMONDE CHANDEBISE

VICTOR EMMANUEL CHANDEBISE

ROMAIN TOURNEL

DON CARLOS HOMENIDES DE HISTANGUA

EUGENIE

AUGUSTIN FERRAILLON

OLYMPE FERRAILLON

BAPTISTIN

HAMISH, A SCOTSMAN

POCHE

SETTING

Paris, La Belle Epoque

ACT ONE

Chandbise drawing-room, afternoon

ACT TWO

The Palais du Paradis Hotel, early evening

ACT THREE

Chandbise drawing-room, later that evening

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ACT ONE

The drawing-room of the Chandebises' house. Afternoon. A double-door main entrance is up C. Beyond is a hall and corridors leading both R and L. Doorways, up RC and up LC, flank this entrance, leading to other areas of the house. Downstage R, French doors lead to a balcony. Downstage L is another door leads to Chandebise's private study.

A young man, CAMILLE CHANDEBISE, rummages through a file cabinet above the French doors. He pulls out a folder.

CAMILLE

Ah! he...e...ah! (*Ah! Here we are!*)

Camille has a cleft palate and has difficulty pronouncing his consonants. He goes to a desk up R of the French doors, ANTOINETTE, the maid, feather duster in hand, creeps in from the up L door and coquettishly stalks him. As Camille bends over the desk to write in the file, she slides her duster between his legs.

CAMILLE

Ooo...ahhh...eee!

He spins around and Antoinette corners him in a clinch against the French doors. Smiling, Camille squirms delightedly as she tickles him suggestively with the duster.

CAMILLE

Oh...u ah ee ix! (*Oh...you naughty minx!*)

ANTOINETTE

Sweet talker. Give us a kiss.

He does.

ETIENNE (O.S.)

Come in, Doctor Finache!

The main entrance doors swing open and ETIENNE, the butler, ushers in DR. FINACHE who carries a folder. Antoinette whirls about and Camille whirls behind the curtains flanking the downside stage of the French windows.

ETIENNE

Monsieur Chandebise is out. But Camille is in, I believe. Antoinette! What are you doing in here at this hour?

As Etienne admonishes her, she flicks her duster along the curtain at Camille's crotch level. Not visible to the others, Camille's face pops from behind the curtain, grimacing in torturous ecstasy. He tries to bat the duster away, his protruding arm shielded by Antoinette's body.

ETIENNE

This room is to be done while the Master's at breakfast before he comes in here to work.

ANTOINETTE

I forgot my feather duster and came to get it.

ETIENNE

Forgot it! What if there had been a client in here this morning! A fine image for the Premiere Parisian Insurance Company! An office cluttered with cleaning implements! What would the master say or Monsieur Camille?

ANTOINETTE

Don't know about the master, but Camille would say: Ooo..A eh-er us-er. (*Oh. A feather duster.*)

Finache laughs, enjoying the impersonation.

ETIENNE

Out! How dare you mock your betters. And look at this curtain all askew.

He grabs her duster and knocks the curtain about. Antoinette pops in front of him with mock meekness and retrieves the duster.

ANTOINETTE

I'm sorry, Etienne. Give us a kiss, so I know you forgive me.

He gives her an imperious peck and gestures her off with a pointed finger. She exits.

FINACHE

My, you rule her with an iron hand.

ETIENNE

Only way to handle a wife, sir. Let them know who's boss. Besides, I can't let her slovenliness reflect on the way I run this household. Just because I put a ring on her finger doesn't mean she can wrap me around it too.

FINACHE

(sees Camille's shoes below the curtain)

No, indeed. The rest of the household must've gotten a lick and a promise if she just now noticed her duster missing.

This observation cracks Etienne's hauteur. He glares at where she exited, then smiles at the doctor, trying to recover his bravado.

ETIENNE

Heh! Heh! I knew that was just an excuse. She's always snooping about trying to catch me with the cook.

FINACHE

Oh! Anything in her suspicions?

ETIENNE

Sir! With the exhausting responsibilities the master entrusts me, I've barely time to attend to my wife. Besides, have you seen the cook? No, Antoinette's unreasoning jealousy is because of her unwavering devotion to me. As loyal as a poodle, she is!

Camille, behind the curtain, sniggers. Finache coughs to cover the noise.

FINACHE

How reassuring.

ETIENNE

Oh, look at that curtain!

Finache swats at it before Etienne can attend to it and kicks Camille's feet underneath.

FINACHE

There. That's got it. Well, since Monsieur Chandebise is not here....

ETIENNE

Oh, have a seat, Doctor, I don't mind passing the time with you...

FINACHE

Lucky me...But all those exhausting responsibilities you have...

ETIENNE

When one runs a tight household, brief moments of respite arrive. And we're having such a stimulating conversation.

FINACHE

Alas, I need to pop around the corner and polish off a patient.

ETIENNE

Doctor!

FINACHE

Don't be absurd, man. Finish his exam, not his existence. After all, he has an abundance of ailments and a bundle of money. Think I'd kill the golden goose? I'll be back. If Chandebise returns before me, give him this report and tell him to insure the Spaniard. No risk there. The man's a veritable bull.

ETIENNE

The Spaniard...Oh, you mean Don Carlos Hom...hommen...

FINACHE

...Homenides de Histangua.

ETIENNE

Yes, yes...de His...a...whatever. His wife is in the parlor, right now, waiting for Madame.

FINACHE

Met her at dinner the other night. As healthy as her husband. Pity I wasn't examining her. Lovely woman...you can indulge your brief respite in a stimulating conversation with her. Much prettier than me. That'll stoke your wife's jealousy. Adieu!

ETIENNE

A moment, doctor. Since you are medical officer for the master's insurance company...and as I work for the master...I was wondering if I might impose on your expertise and...

FINACHE

...get some free medical advice....

ETIENNE

Well, all in the family, so to speak...

FINACHE

What's the complaint?

ETIENNE

(presses sides of his abdomen)

Here on either side of the stomach. A pressure.

FINACHE

(jabs his stomach sharply)

Feel that?

ETIENNE

Well, of course. That hurt.

FINACHE

Good. Probably your ovaries.

ETIENNE

Really? Serious?

FINACHE

Ought to have them out.

ETIENNE

Not so fast! Let's not go slicing. If they're mine, I'm hanging on to them.

FINACHE

Always free to get a second opinion.

He jabs Etienne once more. LUCIENNE
HOMENIDES DE HISTANGUA enters up C.

LUCIENNE

Excuse me. Are you sure Madame Chandebise is returning?

ETIENNE

Positive, Madame, she very specifically instructed me, if Madame de His...his..

(mumbles the name he can't pronounce)

Tell her to wait, I must see her urgently.

LUCIENNE

Yes, that's what her note to me said. I guess...Oh, Dr. Finache, excuse me...

FINACHE

(kisses her hand)

Beauty needs no excuse, Madame de Histangua. Enchanted to see you again. I had a delightful encounter with your husband this morning.

Oh?

LUCIENNE

FINACHE
Insurance examination. My congratulations, Madame. A fine specimen, your husband.

Overwhelming.

LUCIENNE

FINACHE
What a physique!

Overpowering.

LUCIENNE

FINACHE
Such stamina.

Exhausting!

LUCIENNE
(flops in a chair)

FINACHE
Ah! But every pleasure has its price.

ETIENNE
That's my wife! Always wanting me to pay the price for her pleasure. She needs a man like Madame's husband.

Lucienne cocks a questioning eyebrow to Finache about this impudent servant. Finache smiles and shrugs.

FINACHE
Simple enough, if Madame is agreeable and her Spanish Bull is willing to accommodate...

ETIENNE
Doctor, really!

LUCIENNE
((laughing at Finache's leg pull)
My bull may be a bit headstrong for others, Doctor. Best keep him in my own pasture. Thank you all the same.

FINACHE
Pardon, Madame! It's my stimulating friend Etienne here. He stimulates me to be a naughty boy. Well, I'm off.

He grabs his hat and snaps it against the curtain and Camille, still hidden.

ETIENNE

I'll see you out. Doctor, about my ovaries...

FINACHE

An enema should clean them out..

(to himself)

Your brains too...

ETIENNE

Hmmm?

Etienne sees Finache out. Camille peeks from the curtains, not seeing Lucienne slumped in the chair. Thinking he's alone, he creeps out and returns to his papers at the desk. Bored, Lucienne flips through a magazine. Camille flips a page from his papers. Lucienne flips another. Camille flips another; then Lucienne another. They flip again. Aware the snap of pages doesn't coincide with their turning, both turn faster, then each searches for the page-flipping echo. Seeing each other, they both shriek, leap up and Camille's papers go flying. He kneels, frantically gathering them up.

CAMILLE

Oh...ooo...(Oh...no...)

Lucienne rushes to help him.

LUCIENNE

Excuse me, sir, I didn't hear you come in. You should have made your presence known.

CAMILLE

Ay ih-eh ee oo. (*I didn't see you.*)

Startled by his gibberish, Lucienne squeals and recoils, dropping her gathered papers. Camille retrieves them, crawling toward Lucienne.

NOTE: FROM THIS POINT ON, WHEN CAMILLE SPEAKS IN HIS CLEFT PALATE VOICE, HIS LINES WILL BE ITALICIZED.

CAMILLE

Oh, what a mess! Silly me! So sorry to have frightened you, Madame.

Lucienne, warily retreats as Camille crawls toward her, smiling idiotically. She gestures placatingly, as if she might pat his head to hold him at bay.

LUCIENNE

There! There! Stay calm. Please, I didn't mean to upset you.

CAMILLE

No. No, madame. Not your fault.

Still worried, she thrusts a chair between her and the advancing Camille. He rises and bows.

CAMILLE

Camille Chandebise. Are you here to see my uncle, the company director?

Slightly reassured by his bow, Lucienne forces a smile.

LUCIENNE

Sorry, I don't understand. I'm French. French.

CAMILLE

Me too! Me too!

LUCIENNE

Sorry, I speak Spanish! A little English!

CAMILLE

Stick with French. We both understand it.

LUCIENNE

(not understood a word)

I'm sure Etienne the valet could help you. I'm just waiting for Madame Chandebise.

CAMILLE

Oh, she should be here soon. I'll get out of your way. Nice talking to you..

He gathers his work and exits up R. Etienne enters up C.

ETIENNE

Madame is not bored, I trust.

LUCIENNE

Anything but...The Chandebises don't have any relatives off their rocker tucked away in an attic room somewhere?

ETIENNE

Certainly not, madame. Why do you ask?

LUCIENNE

I thought one might have escaped. The strangest young man was in here just now. Speaking in some barbaric tongue. Ho...Eee...Hoo...Haa...

ETIENNE

Ah! Camille. Strange, true, madame. But I fear a physical affliction, not a mental one. Cleft palate. Can't form his consonants. The master's nephew. He gave the lad a job as his secretary. Who else would hire him?

LUCIENNE

Yes, only vowels might be an impediment in the business world.

ETIENNE

He's a bright boy and a hard worker. Still not to be able to speak eloquently our beautiful language...But I've learned to understand him...

LUCIENNE

One can take lessons for it?

ETIENNE

The ear gets attuned, Madame. And I make an effort. A little patience, a little concern. Helps his confidence. It also a social impediment, poor lad. Never been with a woman.

LUCIENNE

Well, on your slack days, your wife might want to help him out.

ETIENNE

Madame, please. Even if the shy lad were so inclined, my wife Antoinette is as faithful as a poodle...a poodle!

LUCIENNE

I had a poodle named Antoinette once. Ran off with a Great Dane. Had a litter of ugly brutes. But they had real panache.

A door slams and RAYMONDE
CHANDEBISE sweeps in.

RAYMONDE

Ah! Lucienne, you waited. Good. Off, Etienne. No disturbances. If I need anything, I'll ring.

Etienne exits.

RAYMONDE

Oh! What a day I've had. Dear Lucienne, thank you for waiting. I don't know who else to turn to. Such a ghastly disaster!

LUCIENNE

That bad. Don't keep me in suspense. Out with it.

RAYMONDE

My husband is having an affair.

LUCIENNE

Victor Emmanuel?

(bursts out laughing)

RAYMONDE

What's so funny? This is how my oldest friend reacts to my crisis?

LUCIENNE

You're joking. Why Victor Emmanuel adores you.

RAYMONDE

Well, of course, he does. But he adores someone else too. For all I know several someone elses. A whole harem of someone elses. But I'll catch the slippery snake at it.

LUCIENNE

You've proof?

RAYMONDE

Not yet. But we'll get it.

LUCIENNE

What do you mean "we"?

RAYMONDE

Lucienne, you're my oldest, dearest, bosom friend. Surely you wouldn't deny me.

LUCIENNE

We haven't seen each other in ten years!

RAYMONDE

Years cannot diminish the bonds forged in convent school. Oh, those nuns!

LUCIENNE

Well, when you put it that way.

RAYMONDE

Yes, and though sweet little Lucienne Vicard may have become Madame Lucienne Homenides de Histangua, a longer name does not change the loyalties of the heart. Who else to grant a great favour but a great friend.

LUCIENNE

I'm...touched...

RAYMONDE

So what do I do?

LUCIENNE

Do?

RAYMONDE

To trap my husband?

LUCIENNE

Is he trappable? What makes you think he's unfaithful?

RAYMONDE

My husband is an ardent and attentive husband. And I mean attentive!

LUCIENNE

And ardent...

RAYMONDE

Indeed. And suddenly from one day to the next, all that ardour just evaporated. Ever happened to your husband?

LUCIENNE

I wish. I could use an occasional rest.

RAYMONDE

Hah! That's what you think until it happens. But it's true. Even the most intense, sublime...

LUCIENNE

Ardour?

RAYMONDE

Yes! Can get a little monotonous and sometimes you stare at the ceiling..

LUCIENNE

Or the floor, depending..Or the pillow. Or the wall. Or the dark, if the lights are out. Or even his eyes, if they are open. They make such funny faces when...

RAYMONDE

Yes, whatever you're staring at...

LUCIENNE

Sometimes our eyes are closed. Suppose we make funny faces too?

RAYMONDE

Eyes opened or closed, you sometimes think, it's too perfect! Oh, for a small grey cloud to blight such serenity. I've even considered taking a lover just for something to fret over.

LUCIENNE

You? A lover?

RAYMONDE

Have him all picked out. My husband's best friend. You met him at dinner the other night. Romain Tournel.

LUCIENNE

No! That primped out, pretty puppy?

RAYMONDE

He's my puppy and he dotes on me. I've but to snap my fingers and he'll...

LUCIENNE

Sit up and beg?

RAYMONDE

Wagging his tail.

LUCIENNE

Oh, he is a puppy!

RAYMONDE

Why shouldn't I have an affair now that Victor Emmanuel is having one?

LUCIENNE

Because you adore Victor Emmanuel despite your panting puppy waiting to roll over.

RAYMONDE

Of course, I adore my husband. All the more reason to be furious. How can I deceive him, if he's deceived me first? That's not deception, just retaliation.

LUCIENNE

A unique moral philosophy. But you've still no proof about any of this.

RAYMONDE

A tempestuous torrent of passion just shuts off? Pfft!

A complete drought?
LUCIENNE

Not even a dribble.
RAYMONDE

Still not proof.
LUCIENNE

What about these?
RAYMONDE

She pulls a pair of suspenders from her handbag.

Suspenders! Let me guess. Your husband's.
LUCIENNE

Got it in one. I gave them to him for his last birthday.
RAYMONDE

And how do these incriminating items place your poor husband's head in the guillotine?
LUCIENNE

It's not his head I'll place there. Poor husband indeed. Scoundrel! These came in the morning post. They were in a packet I opened by mistake.
RAYMONDE

How did you open it by mistake?
LUCIENNE

It wasn't addressed to me, but Victor Emmanuel.
RAYMONDE

Makes perfect sense. Please proceed.
LUCIENNE

Do you know where they came from?
RAYMONDE

Waiting with bated breath.
LUCIENNE

The Palais du Paradis!
RAYMONDE

Heavenlyname.
LUCIENNE

Devilish business.

RAYMONDE

Which is?

LUCIENNE

An hotel.

RAYMONDE

Sordid?

LUCIENNE

Salacious!

RAYMONDE

Suspicious?

(holds up suspenders)

LUCIENNE

Certainly.

RAYMONDE

Oh, if you had seen the place! Tarted up like an obscene doll house. The frou-frou!

LUCIENNE

You've been there?

RAYMONDE

Detective work. Why I'm late. Interrogating the management. The proprietor had amnesia.

LUCIENNE

Affliction of the profession.

RAYMONDE

Do you know what the odious creature said to me? "Madame, if I divulged my clientele to the whim of every nosy stranger, I'd have no clientele."

LUCIENNE

Can't fault his business logic.

RAYMONDE

Ohh! This pandering proprietor, this tawdry hotel...
(holds up suspenders)

These! And "pfft"! Is it clear now, dear Lucienne, why I am so antsy, have a bee in my bonnet, this flea in my ear!

LUCIENNE

Yes. You're infested.

RAYMONDE

That's why I rely on you! A woman of the world. Wise in these matters.

LUCIENNE

Hang on! Hardly that.

RAYMONDE

Don't be modest. Tell me what I must do!

LUCIENNE

Well...You could confront your husband.

RAYMONDE

That's it? The benefit of your vast experience? You know he'll only lie! No one lies worse than a man...unless it's a woman.

LUCIENNE

I suppose you're right. The only way the sexes can get along is either lying with each other or lying to each other...Ah!

RAYMONDE

An inspiration?

LUCIENNE

A device! In a novel I read once. A pretty stale trick, but then it was a pretty stale novel. Still we're only trying to fool a man. You write a letter to your husband...an anonymous love letter, as if from another woman. Bait it with some heady perfume and in the end suggest a rendezvous.

RAYMONDE

A rendezvous?

LUCIENNE

To which you show up. If he does too...

RAYMONDE

Proof!

She sets Lucienne down at a small desk behind the sofa.

RAYMONDE

Start scribbling.