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FRANÇOIS DE CUREL  
de l'Académie Française

# LA NOUVELLE IDOLE

PIÈCE EN TROIS ACTES

EDITED

WITH INTRODUCTION, NOTES AND VOCABULARY

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## LA NOUVELLE IDOLE

## PREFACE

For the qualities that make of the drama literature, and not solely an evening's entertainment, no French writer during the past thirty years has stood higher than François de Curel. However, he has not been known in France as one of the most popular playwrights, and in Anglo-Saxon countries his excellence as a dramatic author has rarely been recognized. In both intent and temperament he is too far removed from the commercial theater, and his few popular successes have been won with too much difficulty, for foreign managers to risk importation of his plays. There is special need, then, to make the best of these pieces available for the student and thoughtful reader, since Curel is not only a dramatist whose work is highly salutary and of a type perhaps none too frequent in France or elsewhere, but also one who should be a powerful influence in widening, in the most promising direction, the horizon of modern drama in general.

The text of the present edition follows, with the excision of eight lines, that of Curel's *Théâtre Complet*, volume III, 1920, and is used by permission of and special arrangement with the publishers, Georges Crès et Cie., Paris.

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## INTRODUCTION

### I

#### CUREL'S LIFE AND WORK

François de Curel was born at Metz in 1854. On his father's side he belonged to the oldest Lorraine nobility. His mother was a de Wendel, a family established in the iron and steel business of Lorraine for over two hundred years, and today among the most important steel owners in Europe. His connection with this latter family is of considerable importance, since, because of it, he received a training technical in part, and came into contact with labor problems. However, on account of choosing French nationality after the war of 1870, he was not allowed by the Germans to manage personally his factories in Alsace-Lorraine. Owing to this fact, perhaps, his early interests, equally divided between science and literature, turned in later years entirely to the second field.

Among the most important influences explaining the character of his work are his aristocratic affiliations and sympathies, his enforced leisure, spent largely in reading and in hunting in the forests of his estates, and finally his racial heritage from a province and a people whose characteristics are sufficiently marked to deserve an independent history. Thoroughly French as he is in feeling and sympathy, Curel still seems to have something of the North; he is more meditative, more speculative, more individualistic, and less completely a social being than the usual Frenchman.

Like so many of the young dramatists of his day, Curel was discovered by Antoine of the Théâtre Libre. After trying his hand with no great success at the novel, and after failing to secure representation in the established theaters, he submitted three of his plays, *l'Envers d'une sainte*, *Sauvé des Eaux*, and *la Figurante* to Antoine, and all were approved. The first was presented at the Théâtre Libre in 1892, and although not a great popular success, it won the author unusual praise from the critics. It is a keen and realistic study of character, but unattractive in subject and little dramatic in its scenes and language. *La Figurante* was revised and appeared in 1896 at the Théâtre de la Renaissance, where it had fair success, although it is not among the strongest of Curel's plays. *Sauvé des Eaux* has had a most checkered history. It was rewritten and appeared at the Comédie Française in 1893, under the title *l'Amour brode*. It failed absolutely, Curel again rewrote it under the name *la Danse devant le miroir*, and presented it in 1914 with fair success. It is a play of exceptional personages and of difficult psychology, more suitable perhaps for the novel than for the stage.

While his first play was being rehearsed at the Théâtre Libre, Curel wrote another, *les Fossiles*, which appeared at the same theater in 1892. It is one of the few that seem to have been somewhat influenced in its tone and personages by the Théâtre Libre movement. While its characters are too grandiose (they are really epic) to be despicable like those of the *comédie rosse*, they are atrocious; and in action and psychology the drama is painful. But it is among the strongest and most significant of Curel's plays, the aristocratic spirit being one in which he is most at home. *L'Invitée* (1893) is the only other play that belongs to the early period of Curel. It is quite similar in tone, intent, and effect to *l'Envers d'une sainte*.

Curel's next three plays, written from 1897 to 1902, are the high peaks of his drama; they tower above all the others in power and significance, with the possible exception of *les Fossiles*. The first of these, *le Repas du lion*, was presented in 1897 and rewritten in 1920. It is a complex and somewhat puzzling drama, representing the clash of the aristocratic and the socialistic ideals. Perhaps its final value is less in the clash of these ideals than in the evolution of its leading character, an aristocrat who is drawn into all the strong social currents of modern society—unionism, socialism, charity, and religion—to emerge in the end, by an atavism which the author tries to rationalize, still the aristocrat and autocrat. The treatment and interest of this character have suggested its comparison, not wholly undeserved, with *Hamlet*.

*La Nouvelle Idole*, published in 1895 and played in 1899, is perhaps the most readily comprehensible and thoroughly dramatic of Curel's great plays. It is the one that comes nearest to being a masterpiece, an honor that one hesitates to accord even to the strongest of them, so imperfectly do they fit into the dramatic form.

*La Fille sauvage* (1902) is the author's most ambitious work, the one in which he has put the most philosophy. It is an attempt to give in a single play the whole spiritual history of humanity passing through the ages of superstition, religion, rationalistic doubt, and moral decadence. It is highly symbolic throughout, and although most imperfect as a play, is a drama of great spiritual and intellectual interest. In a number of his plays Curel reminds one of Ibsen; in this one the resemblance is undoubted and striking.

In his remaining four plays, from 1906 to 1922, excluding *La Danse devant le miroir*, Curel has hardly attained the height of the three just mentioned. He has, however, extended somewhat his range and interest, and has decidedly



improved in his dramatic art, a fact which is clearly reflected in greater popular success on the stage. *Le Coup d'aile* (1906) is one of the least exceptional of his plays in its characters and psychology. *L'Ame en folie* (1919) is more interesting, and again deals with great problems. *L'Ivresse du sage* (1921) strikes a new note for Cúrel, since it is largely comedy; it is almost gay throughout, although a serious vein is also to be found. The action of *la Terre inhumaine* (1922) is placed in Lorraine during the Great War. This has been hailed by critics as the finest of war plays. It is a piece with clearly defined motives, with genuine action, and with tense dramatic situations, certainly one of the best constructed of Cúrel's plays; but it will probably not add as much as several others to his reputation in the drama of ideas.

The one fact that stands out most clearly in the study of Cúrel and his career in the theater, is the difficulty with which he adapts himself to the dramatic form. Obviously this difficulty is due to two causes. In the first place, his constant preoccupation with ideas, often abstract and difficult, and his frequent choice of the great eternal problems of humanity for his themes, would tax to the limit the most skilful of playwrights to produce a successful stage play. The way of the thinker on the popular stage is strait and narrow. Moreover, it is also certain that Cúrel does not have some of the qualities that are most important for success with the public. His plays are frequently too argumentative, too oratorical, and written in a style too remote from ordinary speech. They not only contain unusual personages and situations, but often the characters arrive at decisions by mental short-cuts that baffle an audience and tax even the most thoughtful reader. Finally, his construction in the larger sphere of scenes and acts is often awkward and faulty. The best proof of this is the fact that most of

his plays have been extensively revised, some entirely rewritten, as the result of criticism by managers and dramatic critics; and these revisions have in general been decided improvements. Undoubtedly Curel, in his eager pursuit of ideas and in his development of characters, has paid little attention to what is effective theatrically. To an extent, this is a merit, but he often carries it too far. He is not a skilful playwright from a technical point of view.

Nevertheless, he does have certain important dramatic qualities. His style is often most illuminating, as suddenly revealing as a lightning flash; and his characters, even when most exceptional or most symbolic, seem real persons and not mere abstractions. Above all, they are not pawns or puppets. They are endowed with self-determination, free to work out their own fates, perhaps too free sometimes in following some secret inner urge; but after all, they seem to have something of the imperfect and incomplete that makes us recognize real life.

Critics have, perhaps, attributed to no other author more various characteristics than to Curel, both by comparing him with other writers and by ascribing to him unusual and even contradictory qualities. The alembicated psychology and subtle dialogue of *La Danse devant le miroir* suggest strikingly Marivaux and Musset; the monstrous egoists of *les Fossiles* recall Corneille; Jean de Sancey in *le Repas du lion* justly reminds one of Shakespeare's Hamlet; and the undoubted kinship to Ibsen has been generally recognized in a number of his plays.

Some of Curel's qualities would seem to indicate other fields than that of the theater. Despite his lack of success in the novel, his subjects and his highly developed psychology have often been pointed out by the critics as belonging more properly to that field. Also, his striking qualities of imagination are everywhere apparent in a *genre*

where imagination is most closely fettered. Moreover, although writing in a realistic period, and with Antoine, one of the founders of stage naturalism, as his most frequent producer and his constant mentor, Curel gives us many scenes that are highly poetic; in a number of instances, he has even been characterized as epic. In truth, he deserves all these characterizations and others beside. This fact probably explains his comparative lack of success with popular audiences, which demand simplicity and easily comprehended emotion, just as it constitutes his greatest appeal to the elite, the critic, and the student of the drama.

Curel is by character and temperament a thinker, and his quality of speculation and meditation has undoubtedly been encouraged by his somewhat solitary life, passed in great part in his Lorraine forests. Moreover, he is writing in a *genre* that tends toward definite conclusions and deals with the great problems of humanity, such as origin of the species, evolution, and other questions of science or religion. It would seem natural, then, to ask what are the author's own judgments or views on life.

The most certain conclusion from such investigation is that he has, above all else, avoided dogmatic judgments. In such conflicts as those of religion and evolution, or of faith and science, he has given to each a place, and a fine place, in the history and development of humanity, without deciding finally in the favor of either one. That he is neither an apostle of faith nor of fact is certain. Indeed, one might be tempted, seeing his uncertainty in his conclusions, to ascribe to him the philosophy of Montaigne, the *Que sais-je* of the doubter and skeptic. But he is not simply a skeptic, and even less a cynic: his doubts are not a system, they are not final. His philosophy would seem more appropriately characterized by the phrase *Que sais-je encore?* He is too honest and open-minded to believe that

he has captured the whole truth at the end of any of his great plays; but he shows no intention of giving up the pursuit, and above all, he invites us to take it up at the point where he stops.

He is as indefatigable in his pursuit of ideas through the maze of life as he was of the wild boar in his Lorraine forests. In the first case as in the second, darkness may end the chase; but it does not end his zest or spell discouragement for the morrow. The follower of Curel will gain an added interest in life and in healthful intellectual exercise; there is no blighting pessimism even in his failures. In short, he is particularly the thinker, the man whom the great problems of life continually interest. For him, man is the thinking being, and perhaps we may say that this is his final philosophy,—to be a man in this, the fullest, sense. In the French drama he represents a rare and precious type. The thinker in the theater is rare enough in any country; but in France, despite the constant intellectual preoccupation of French literature, the speculative thinker is especially rare. The French undoubtedly possess to a pre-eminent degree most of the dramatic virtues: taste, concision, logic, a superior sense of form and style, and, most valuable of all, a keen sense of social psychology. These qualities, a result doubtless of their unusual mass solidarity, have brought their dramatic art to a higher level of excellence than can be found anywhere else. Nevertheless, this very perfection of dramatic art has often tended to stress unduly the rules, conventions, and restrictions of the theater, to take the audience's approval and comprehension as the common denominator of all drama. In no other country have there been so many Scribes and Sardous.

Undoubtedly, rules and conventions are peculiarly necessary to the actable play; and in order to live, the drama must be acted. A measure of popular approval is indis-

pensable. But in stressing this factor too much, there is also danger of narrowing the stage. The temptation of a writer like Scribe is to create a dramatic mold, perfect in form, but in which the contents, the idea, may shrivel to nothing. The tendency of a Curel, occupied solely with the idea and with life, and negligent of technic and even of popular approval, is to break all molds and to give the heart of drama a chance to expand and create a new life and art in accord with the pulse of each new generation. A Curel, then, is as necessary as a Scribe to the health of the drama, and, in fact, must appear from time to time if the drama is to have health and growth. The theater, after all, is an intellectual amusement. Curel's attempt is so ambitious, and on the whole so successful, that it should stand as a challenge to every modern dramatist who believes in the high mission of his profession. Its example seems especially salutary at this time when the easy appeal of realism, lowered to the level of a universal democracy, threatens seriously the theater in its highest and most enduring values, its intellectual and artistic qualities, which bring it into the realm of literature.

## II

### LA NOUVELLE IDOLE

*La Nouvelle Idole* has been on the stage the most genuinely successful of all Curel's plays. It was written in March, 1895, and published in the *Revue de Paris* in May of the same year. In 1899 it was revised and successfully produced at the Théâtre Antoine. In 1914 it was taken into the repertory of the Comédie Française, where it has been accepted as a classic. It was published in 1899 by Stock in the form then used on the stage. Since being ac-

cepted by the Comédie Française, it has been again revised by the author—chiefly by the elimination here and there of a few words, as well as of some longer passages—and published with an interesting preface, *Historique de "la Nouvelle Idole,"* in volume III of Cúrel's *Théâtre complet*, Paris, 1920, editions Georges Crès et Cie. This definitive text is followed in the present edition.

The chief conflicting motives of this drama are faith and science, the eternal struggle in the human mind between the intuitions and yearnings of the soul and the demonstrable facts of realistic experience. For it should be noted that, although faith and science are incorporated in separate personages, there is no clash between these two characters; the real drama, all that is truly poignant, is the agonizing struggle in the mind of Dr. Donnat. In this respect it is a drama in the truest French sense, measured by the standard set by Corneille and Racine, and upheld by French genius ever since,—a mental and moral crisis evolving intelligibly according to the principles of interior action.

The play is not only noteworthy in being one of the best of those written in the field of science, but it presents a problem of peculiar interest, the dramatic value and possibilities of a true scientist and of his philosophy on the stage, where effects are generally so largely emotional. To attempt this task is to accept a wager against all the odds; and if by sheer power of genius Cúrel has succeeded, the example does not encourage easy imitation. Dr. Donnat is too intellectual, too cold, to win easily an audience. The fate of a Marguerite Gautier, unworthy though she be, will probably call for a hundred times more tears than that of the man who sacrifices himself for an idea. Cúrel seems to have felt this difficulty of making his intellectual martyr appealing, of inducing in his personage the vital spark that will kindle the sympathy of his audience; and it is most

interesting to see that when he fails to do this by intellectual argument he turns to emotional persuasion; when he despairs of science, he resorts to faith, although it is a faith harassed and even strangled by doubt. In the whole final act, while Dr. Donnat's science constantly destroys and denies God, his faith persists in re-creating Him and in appealing to Him; and this is the most moving act of the play. As usual, Currel does not attempt to decide finally as to the supremacy of the motives which he has placed in conflict. His aim and attitude are perhaps best expressed in his own words in his preface: "Je pense, en effet, que la nature humaine, si pesamment chargée des basses hérédités, ne doit négliger aucun des moyens de s'élever qui s'offrent à elle. Tendre vers Dieu par la foi, vers la vérité par la science, vers la beauté par l'amour . . . Telle est la conclusion de *la Nouvelle Idole*."

The play has a much greater value than that of a pure drama of science, interesting as that may be in this scientific age. It is one of the best examples of the theater of ideas. As such, it demonstrates how far one can go successfully in putting elevated and serious thought on the stage before a general public. Currel maintains here at its highest level his reputation as a serious thinker on the greatest problems of humanity, and at the same time, if he has not wholly succeeded, has come nearest to incorporating these in good dramatic form of general interest. As Robert de Flers says, Currel, while first of all a dramatist, has had "la noble audace de porter à la rampe les conflits des plus graves problèmes contemporains." Currel protests in his preface against the interpretation of *la Nouvelle Idole* as a *pièce à thèse* intended to prove that a scientist has no right to perform experiments on his patients, even for the most important scientific purposes; in fact, he says, his personal views are not far from being the exact contrary of that

thesis, as is made plain by his choice for hero of a scientist like Donnat. It is true that Louise, troubled about the possible scandal and already somewhat detached from her husband, attacks his thesis violently in the first act, both of them being overwhelmed by the tragic consequences in the case of Antoinette; but very soon it becomes evident that this is not the main interest. "Dès la scène de l'auscultation d'Antoinette, on sent bien qu'un pouvoir, digne de se mesurer avec la science, se dresse devant elle. . . . Sur le terrain des prodiges, la foi défie le savant. Ce que Donnat trouve de mieux à dire pour sa défense, c'est de comparer sa science à l'idole sous le char de laquelle se précipitent les croyants. Il met en présence deux religions, deux fois." The famous critic Sarcey objected to a play which, he said, was "plutôt un dialogue philosophique qu'une pièce de théâtre." Let the reader judge whether Catulle Mendès was not a keener critic when he said of *la Nouvelle Idole*: "Pour la première fois sur la scène française, après trop de tentatives médiocres,—pédantes et puériles en même temps,—des idées abstraites en opposition sont devenues des êtres réels en conflit, réels et vivants, d'une humanité si douloureuse qu'elles créent, dans la sublimité spirituelle, un poignant drame sensuel." The interest of *la Nouvelle Idole* is derived from the fact that its characters arouse our sympathy because they are real human beings, who are themselves intensely interested in the ideas with which they are bound up. From this point of view, the play may well be called a masterpiece.



## LA NOUVELLE IDOLE

*Pièce en trois actes, représentée pour la première fois à Paris, au Théâtre  
Antoine, le 11 mars 1899*

*Représentée à la Comédie-Française, le 26 juin 1914*