

LES DRAGONS DE VILLARS

Music by Aimé Louis Maillart

Libretto by Lockroy & Cormon

First Performance: Théâtre-Lyrique, Paris, September 19, 1856

In the first act peasant women in the service of Thibaut, a rich country squire, are collecting fruit. Georgette, Thibaut's young wife, controls their work. In compliance with a general request she treats them to a favorite provençal song, in which a young girl, gives her hand to another suitor. She is interrupted by the sound of trumpets. Thibaut, hurrying up in great distress, asks the women to hide themselves at once, because soldiers are marching into the village. He conceals his own wife in the pigeon-house. A detachment of dragoons arrives, and Belamy, their corporal, asks for food and wine at Thibaut's house. He learns that there is nothing to be had, and in particular that all the women have fled, fearing the unprincipled soldiers of King Louis XIV., sent to persecute the poor Huguenots or Camisards, who are hiding in the mountains - further that the "Dragons de Villars" are said to be an especially wild and dissolute set.

Belamy is greatly disgusted, and, after having had his dinner and a sleep in Thibaut's own bed, decides to march on. The Squire gladly offers to accompany the soldiers to St. Gratien's grotto, near the hermitage, where they have orders to search for Huguenot refugees. While Belamy is sleeping, Thibaut calls his servant Silvain and scolds him because, though his best servant, he has now repeatedly been absent over-long on his errands; finally orders him to saddle the mules.

Stammering, Silvain owns that they have gone astray in the mountains, but that he is sure of their being found in due time. While Thibaut expresses his fear that they may be stolen by the fugitives, Rose Friquet, an orphan girl, brings the mules, riding on the back of one of them. Thibaut loads her with reproaches, but Silvain thanks her warmly, and though she mockingly repudiates his thanks, he discovers that she has taken the mules in order not to let the provost into Silvain's secret. The fact is that Silvain carries food every day to the refugees, and Rose Firquet, the poor goat-keeper, who is despised and supposed to be wicked and malicious, protects him in her poor way, because he once intercepted a stone which was meant for her head.

While the soldiers are dining, Belamy, who has found Georgette's bonnet, demands an explanation. Thibaut, confused, finds a pretext for going out, but Rose betrays to Belamy first the wine-cellar and then Georgette's hiding-place. The young wife cries for help, and Rose runs in to fetch Thibaut. Belamy is delighted with pretty Georgette, but she tells him, rather anxiously, that all the wives of the village must needs, remain entirely true to their husbands, for the hermit of St. Gratien, though dead for two hundred years, is keeping rigid watch, and betrays every case of infidelity by ringing a little bell, which is heard far and wide. Belamy is somewhat desirous to try the experiment with Georgette, and asks her to accompany him to the hermitage instead of her husband.

After having found the other women in the village, the soldiers, to Thibaut's great

vexation, decide to stay and amuse themselves. Silvain rejoices, and after a secret sign from Rose, resolves to warn the refugees in the evening.

In the second act Rose and Silvain meet near St. Gratien. Rose, after telling him that all the paths are occupied by sentries, promises to show him a way for the refugees, which she and her goad alone know. Silvain, thinking her warmly, endeavors to induce her to care more for her outward appearance, praising her pretty features. Rose is delighted to hear for the first time that she is pretty, and the duet ensuing is one of the most charming things in the opera. Silvain promises to be her friend henceforth, and then leaves, in order to seek the Camisards. After this Thibaut appears, seeking his wife, whom he has seen going away with Belamy. Finding Rose, he imagines he has mistaken her for his wife, but she laughingly corrects him, and he proceeds to search for Georgette. Belamy now comes and courts Thibaut's wife, but Rose, seeing them, resolves to free the path for the others. No sooner has Belamy tried to snatch a kiss from his companion, than Rose draws the rope of the hermit's bell, and she repeats the proceeding, until Georgette takes flight, while Thibaut rushes up at the sound of the bell. Belamy reassures him, intimating that the bell may have rung for Rose (though it never rings for girls), and accompanies him to the village. But he soon returns to look for the supposed hermit, who has played him this trick, and finds Rose instead, who does not perceive him. To his great surprise, Silvain comes up with the whole troop of refugees, leading the aged clergyman who had been a father to them in his childhood. Silvain presents Rose to them as their deliverer, and vows to make her his wife. Rose leads them to the secret path, while Silvain returns to the village, leaving Belamy triumphant at his discovery.

In the third act, we find the people, on the following morning, speaking of nothing but Silvain's wedding with Rose and of the hermit's bell. Nobody knows who has been the culprit, but Thibaut slyly calculates that the hermit has rung beforehand, when Rose, the bride, kissed the dragon. Having learned that the soldier's had been commanded to saddle their horses in the midst of her prey, has come back, he believes that Rose has betrayed the poor Camisards in order to win the price set on their heads, and this opinion he now communicates to Silvain.

To keep Belamy away from Georgette, the sly Squire has conducted him to the wine-cellar, and the officer, now half drunk, admist having had a rendezvous with Rose. When Thibaut has retired, Belamy again kisses Georgette, and lo, the bell does not ring this time!

Meanwhile Rose comes down the hill, nearly clad, and glowing with joy and pride, and Georgette, disregarding Thibaut's reproofs, offers her the wedding garland. The whole village is assembled to see the wedding, but Silvain appears with dark brow, and when Rose radiantly greets him, he pushes her back fiercely, believing that she betrayed the refugees who are, as he has heard, caught. Rose is too proud to defend herself, but when Georgette tries to console her she silently defends herself, but when Georgette tries to console her she silently draws from her bosom a paper containing the information that the refugees have safely crossed the frontier. Great is Silvain's shame,

and heartfelt his repentance. Suddenly Belamy enters, beside himself with rage, for his prey has escaped, and he has lost his patent as lieutenant, together with the remuneration of 200 pistoles, and he at once orders Silvain to be shot. But Rose bravely defends her lover, threatening to reveal the dragoon's neglect of duty. When, therefore, Belamy's superior appears to hear the important news of which the messenger told him, his corporal is only able to stammer out that nothing in particular has happened, and so, after all Georgette is saved from discovery, and Rose becomes Silvain's wife.