

The aphorism “less is more” is generally credited to architect Mies van der Rohe. While not true in every circumstance, the very short story, or “short short,” is a unique medium that allows the reader to focus on one aspect of a character and find something surprising and enlightening about it, as if he was looking at the shadow of a larger thing. Unlike prose poems, it is not purely about the language, and it should contain more of a plot than a mere character sketch. An acknowledged master of the “short short” was the late Fredric Brown (1906-1972), to whom this Suite is respectfully dedicated.

Jean-Marc Lofficier & Fernando Calvi: A Suite of Shadowmen

Arsène Lupin: Arsène Lupin’s Christmas

Arsène Lupin was always early. He had often found it useful in his career. But this time, the girl, perhaps wiser, had not shown up for the hastily arranged rendezvous on the Grands Boulevards.

“Bah,” said Lupin. Since he had a couple of hours to spare, he entered the children’s theater. It was the week before Christmas and they were presenting a traditional puppet show. In the dark, among his own people, Lupin felt safe. Suddenly, just as Père Noël–Santa Claus–was shown coming down the chimney, he noticed that the child next to him, a little girl of ten, had begun to cry.

“Excuse me, Monsieur,” said a woman who turned out to be the child’s aunt. “I thought the show would help take her mind off of things, but you, see, the Police arrested her father last night...”

It turned out that the child’s father, Monsieur Dubois, had been the *homme à tout faire*, handyman, employed, or rather exploited, by Baron d’H***. The heartless nobleman had fired Dubois, a widowed father, the week before Christmas, refusing to pay him his final month’s wages. When Dubois had returned during the night through the chimney to steal something in exchange for what he was owed, the wily Baron, who had anticipated the move, was waiting with the Police.

The next day, a man impersonating Chief Inspector Ganimard signed for Dubois’ release at the Prison de la Santé. That same night, Baron d’H*** was the victim of a daring burglary which robbed him of nearly half-a-million francs.

And in Canada, there would soon be a newly-emigrated French family whose little girl never cried again when she saw Santa Claus slide down a chimney.

Erik: *Figaro's Children*

Figaro was the only one in the Opéra not afraid of Erik.

Figaro was a cat.

Pardon, Figaro was a *chatte*, a lady cat (in every sense of the word), but it had always been a tradition to name the Opéra's cat Figaro, and gender had not been deemed important enough to upset that tradition.

Every rat the Rat-Catcher did not get was Figaro's to enjoy. She was welcome everywhere, above and below the Opéra.

And, as we said, she was the only resident of that prodigious building who was not afraid of Erik. She purred when he caressed her, came occasionally to visit him, begging for treats (she loved dates) and generally behaved like a proper little lady around him.

There was one man, however, who did not like Figaro: Antoine Manoukian, a *machiniste* who, unbeknownst to Management, raised rabbits in a hutch on the third level. Manoukian thought that Figaro ate his baby rabbits, and truth be told, not all baby rabbit disappearances could be blamed on rats.

When her time came, Figaro had kittens. In those days, the Rue Scribe was a notorious haven for cat dalliances.

Manoukian was prepared to put up with one Figaro, if only because he knew that to do otherwise would mean being ostracized by the rest of the staff, but he could not tolerate a chowder of Figaros.

So, stealthily, he managed to grab all the helpless little kittens and stuff them into a bag, weighing it down with a stone, intending to drown them into the Lake.

Mewling bag in hand, he approached the dark water's edge.

Antoine Manoukian's body was found floating in the Seine the next day. Cause of death: drowning, presumably accidental.

Figaro's children still roam free today below the Opéra.

Ask anyone.

Fantômas: *The Tarot of Fantômas*

“Death. I see Death,” said the gypsy fortune-teller laying out the seven major arcana of the Tarot on the table.

“Indeed,” said Fantômas, quickly plunging his dagger into the woman’s right eye socket.

The body was quickly undressed and stuffed inside the empty box that served as the support for a scratched crystal ball that had seen better days.

Then, dressed in the gypsy’s robes, properly made up, a veil partially obscuring his face, Fantômas waited.

Juve and his men had pursued him to the Foire du Trône. By now, they undoubtedly had drawn a cast iron Police cordon around the Fair. Escape was chancy at best.

Fantômas looked at the cards the gypsy had laid on the table before her untimely demise: Death. *Well, we’ve seen to that*, he thought.

The Fool. Fandor, who had been sent on a wild goose chase down into the Catacombs. Fantômas smiled at the thought of the deadly trap he had set down there. Perhaps, this time, the pesky journalist would not be lucky.

Justice. Juve. Dull, plodding, but relentless. No surprise there.

The Devil in the middle. That would be him. *So far, so good*, he thought. *But how does the Devil get out of jail? Is there a card for that?*

The Wheel of Fortune, the Hanged Man and the House of God, struck by lightning. Fantômas smiled. He swept away the cards. He had the answer he sought!

The fire, which nearly destroyed the Foire du Trône, was attributed to arson. Eight people died, crushed in the panic; a dozen more had to be hospitalized. The fire had started near the Grande Roue. Luckily, it was put out before it could collapse, which would have killed even more people.

Police Commissioner Juve was found hanging by his feet in the snakes’ pit inside the Pavilion des Reptiles. Only his knowledge of the ancient Hindu songs of the snake-charmers of Manganiyar had saved his life.

Fantômas remained an unbeliever in the power of the Tarot, but never criticized Lady Beltham anymore for spending her Wednesday afternoons with her astrologer.

Doc Ardan: *The Star Prince*

“If you please, draw me a dinosaur!”

Francis Ardan looked at the golden-haired boy. He was dressed in an operetta-style costume, wearing a long blue coat, white shirt, pants and shiny boots. The aviator had been forced to make an emergency landing in this deserted part of the Western Sahara and was busy repairing the engine when, suddenly, the boy had appeared out of nowhere.

“What are you doing here?” asked Ardan.

“If you please, draw me a dinosaur,” asked the boy.

It seemed churlish to refuse. Ardan took out his logbook and pencil and began drawing.

“Who are you?” he asked.

“I come from above,” said the boy, pointing at the starry sky. “I am so bored up there.”

“How did you come here?”

“It is difficult. And very painful. When I leave, I die a little. So I only come when someone is around. I can only come here because that’s where they are. The machines.”

“The machines?”

“They’re buried deep in the sand. There used to be a sea here, and dinosaurs and other children with whom I could play. But everything is gone now. And I am all alone.”

Ardan had finished the drawing. He gave it to the boy.

“It is very beautiful,” he said. “Just as I remember them. Thank you. I will treasure it forever. It was worth it.”

“Can’t you come more often? Reach other people?” asked Ardan. “There is so much we could learn from you.”

“I don’t have enough power. I’m sorry. I’m only a very little star,” said the boy, as his made-up body slowly began to crumble into dust, mingling with the sand that covered the ancient machines.

The Nyctalope: *Marguerite*

Vichy had ordered a sweep of the region of Combefontaine, North of Lyon, for members of the Resistance. The Nyctalope was asked to go along; he was not happy because he despised the Milice, but when Jacques de Bernonville had told him that Mezarek might have returned, he felt he had no choice. He feared that the carnage Belzebuth might wreak far exceeded that of Klaus Barbie.

They had been searching the village for an hour when the Nyctalope entered the Loubets' house. The old farmer and his wife looked at him with the hostility he had come to recognize; in a corner, he noticed a small girl playing with a doll.

"What's your name?" he asked the child.

"Laurence," she replied.

"And what's her name?" he said, pointing at the doll.

"Marguerite."

"Can I hold her?"

The child reluctantly gave him the doll. He looked under its skirt. It was made in England.

"Where did you get it?" he said, giving the doll back.

"Yesterday was my twelfth birthday. The Tooth Fairy came in the middle of the night and brought me the doll. He said her name was Marguerite. He kissed me and told me to go back to sleep and not tell anyone."

The Nyctalope stood up. The Milice was about to enter the Loubet house. He looked at the child. He looked at Marguerite.

"Please, Monsieur, take Marguerite for your daughter," said Laurence, shyly handing him the doll. "Maybe she doesn't have a Marguerite."

The Nyctalope took the doll.

"I already searched this house," he told the Milice. "There's no one here except a couple of farmers and their granddaughter. False alarm." Then, he whispered to Laurence: "I'll take Marguerite but only because someone else might wonder what a British doll is doing here. Tell the Tooth Fairy that tonight, the border will be unguarded near Chaumont."

After the War, the Loubets—father and daughter reunited—received a package in the mail that contained Marguerite. They searched in vain for the Nyctalope to thank him, but he had vanished.