

JOCASTA & THE FAMISHED CAT

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Jocasta & The famished cat by Agnes Farley

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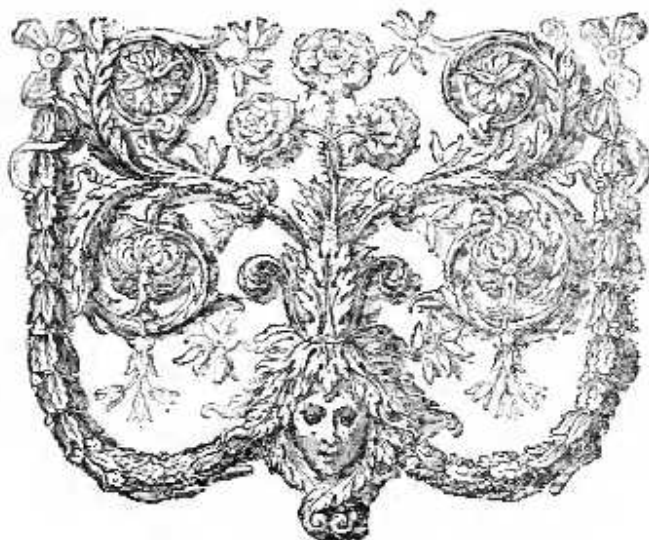
**JOCASTA & THE
FAMISHED CAT**

THE WORKS OF ANATOLE FRANCE
IN AN ENGLISH TRANSLATION
EDITED BY FREDERIC CHAPMAN



JOCASTA & THE FAMISHED CAT

A TRANSLATION BY
AGNES FARLEY



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NOTE



WHEN, in 1879, Monsieur France published *Jocaste et Le Chat Maigre*, his first work of fiction, it contained a preface comprising a dedicatory letter addressed to Monsieur Charles Edmond and a story entitled *André*. The latter, when, in 1885, he put together his book, *Le Livre de mon Ami*, was transferred to the new volume. The former disappeared from the later editions of *Jocaste*. As nothing that comes from the great writer's pen can fail to interest, the dedicatory letter is here reproduced, with a word or two on the modifications introduced into the story on its introduction into its new environment. A translation of *André* will be found in its proper place in the translation by Mr. J. Lewis May of *Le Livre de mon Ami* which will follow closely upon the appearance of the present volume. The letter is as follows:—

DEAR SIR,—I should have liked to offer you some inspiring tale such as you yourself know so well how to present. *Jocaste*, which is what I bring

for your acceptance, is steeped in violence and unrest. It is a sinister story, and even the best among the persons concerned in it are not altogether immaculate.

I have appended to it a little chronicle which we will, if you are agreeable, entitle *Le Chat Maigre*, and in which you will encounter none but the scatter-brained. One of the most gifted writers of the century once remarked to a sober-minded acquaintance, "No one who is sane affords me much amusement." May my lunatics bring with them to your fireside an hour's philosophical entertainment!

How much better inspired were you on that All Souls' Day when, in some hamlet in Alsace, you overtook an old forester and an elderly schoolmaster! They each of them bore a wreath which they set on a grave; and then, being alone in the world on that day of hallowed memories, beneath a gloomy storm-rent sky, they went off to sup together at the forester's hut.

You stole unawares into the secret recesses of their sturdy simplicity, and all that you record of their conversation is helpful and gives a feeling of that beatific refreshment—*dulce refrigerium*—which the early Christians invoke on their sepulchral marbles at Rome.

Your schoolmaster and forester, although disciplined by age and the labours of life, have yet unwittingly preserved tender hearts stored with joyous recollections. The poets tell us of hoary oaks whose hollows shelter swarms of bees so that their rugged rind drops honey. The memory of your worthy dominie is packed with touching and artless anecdotes. Above all about a little girl the mention

of whom carries him outside himself and some of whose admirable sayings he quotes. I should like to chronicle one of them for the benefit of those who may read this letter after you.

"I set the little one on her feet again" (it is the schoolmaster who is speaking), "and hand in hand we resumed our way together. Something impelled me at the moment to confide to her the misfortune I had just sustained. 'No more holiday-making to-day, my pet,' I said to her finally; 'we are in mourning. My brother—you knew him well, he loved you dearly, he used to bring you toys—now he lies dead. He will be laid under the sod. Do not cry, my darling; it is only I who need cry. Yes, he is dead. But there! Each one in his turn! As to the *fête*, we will put it off till next year. You will lose nothing by waiting.' The child stopped short, and fixing her big terrified blue eyes on me said:

"'Next year, then, your brother will not be dead any longer?'"¹

How this question, in its simple directness and sublime ignorance, pierces to our very marrow! At Bellevue there is a little creature, appropriately nicknamed the Elephant, since no longer ago than last year she could have been hidden with ease in her godmother's muff, whose childish prattle is interspersed with utterances of as profound significance as this that you have so skilfully put on record.

A simple tale about a child has come to my ears which it would have gratified me to dedicate to you. But, alas, well as I am instructed as to its minutest details it will never be written by me. It would

¹ The day after All Saints' Day—(*Le lendemain de la Toussaint*) in the *Revue Alsacienne*, May 1878.

recall in more than one feature the delightful scenes at the Rookery at Blunderstone, and my characters, truthful as they might be, would grow pale and dwindle to vain shadows beside the ever charming inmates of Dickens' cottage. After all, since I am only talking to you just now, I can very well tell you this story that will never be written. Here it is.

The tale is about the charming widow of a clever young surgeon, sprung from the peasantry, and her little boy, André. The child, as he grows, loses flesh and colour, so his mother resolves for his sake to pay a visit to his grandparents in their humble little farmhouse, and mother and child are received with open arms, the child in particular making a complete conquest of the old folks. The best bedroom was allotted to the Parisian visitors, a room which the grandparents had never occupied since their bridal night.

At this point in the reprinted story the author has, for some reason, struck out the following paragraph:—

The two old people slept as they were accustomed to do in the downstairs room behind the curtain that hung from the beam of the staircase. Madame Trévière's nurse made her way timorously up a steep ladder into the attic, where she slept surrounded by onions.

The advent of the lovely young mother flutters the heart of a wealthy manufacturer, a patron of