

CLARA'S PERFORMANCE

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We had a packed theater on the night of the accident. The audience was dressed to the nines, even my idol, Charlie Chaplin. Everything went perfectly at first. My performers hit their marks flawlessly. Granted, their movements were stiff and jagged, and they couldn't speak or sing, but that didn't take away any magic from the show.

My performers' hold on the crowd was unbreakable.

The stage was set for the deep sea scene with an underwater backdrop and waves that were pulled back and forth by stagehands. The song was *Sea Monster*. Yes, I know I said the performers couldn't sing; they didn't even have moveable mouths. The next best thing was hired top-notch singers who stood in the orchestra pit behind microphones.

Two performers, Anne and Shirley, sat on swings suspended from wire wrapped in seaweed. Their pink sea monkey customs sparkled in the lights. The singers' voices were in sync with the performers' jerky movements. The pair wooed the crowd, yet the real wait was for Clara, the *star*. On cue, the trapdoor opened and a large clamshell rose. The audience gasped as the shell stopped and opened. Clara rose to her full height, looking stunning in her mermaid costume. She stiffly lifted her arm as her singer's voice rose whimsically. I beamed proudly at her. As her song continued, Anne stood on her swing.

"What the hell is she doing?" I muttered.

Obviously, her actions weren't part of the performance.

"Why is she standing, June?" Wallace MaClay, the director, asked me.

I couldn't answer him before a scream scratched up my throat. Anne fell headfirst off her swing. She hit the floor and broke into pieces. Gears and sprockets clanked against the floor and bounced off the moving waves. Her brass and steel head crashed through the floorboards. The audience hadn't realized the plunge was unscripted. It took the singers and musicians to abruptly cease before they came to terms with the fall. A woman screamed, a horrible, unnecessary screech—that in my opinion—ought to be meant for a living person, not an automaton.

Clara clicked her head over to where Anne landed. The gear installed in her neck made her head tick like a clock hand when she turned it. I'd expected her to continue with her performance, but both she and Shirley set their stainless silver eyes on Anne's mangled body. Wallace ordered a stagehand to close the curtain. The moment the curtain panels touched, I darted on stage. The sight of the damage made my throat close in.

She was a mess. Her glittery costume had ripped when her sharp insides exploded out. Black oil drenched her like blood. It took both Wallace and I to hoist her heavy head out of the stage floor. I could already hear the theater owner complaining about the damage.

Hours later, I was studying Anne backstage where we placed her wrecked body on a table. Wallace was busy handling the enraged theater owner.

“What went wrong, June?” Dolores Pell, our costume designer, asked.

“I don’t know. She just stood on her swing and fell off.”

“She *stood* on the swing? Maybe it wasn’t an accident.”

“What do you mean?” I asked almost defensively. “Are you suggesting she jumped?”

Dolores shrugged. “I dunno, hun. I wasn’t watching the show.”

I didn’t give what Dolores said much thought. The bitch loved stirring up rumors even between her co-workers.

The following afternoon we boarded our train for Chicago. We were going to depart in the morning, but we ran late on account of Wallace spending the entire night at a Speakeasy. Luckily for him we owned a train; otherwise he wouldn’t get back until the next arriving train the following day.

I needed to get home and repair Anne. I was so anxious to get to work that I decided to go into the cargo cars and see what I could manage with the tools I had.

Since my show had become a worldwide success, I had a substantial amount of funds, which came in handy when hiring workers to load the 500 pound automatons.

In the cargo car, the frosty November air breezed in through the boards of the walls. The dim bulbs hanging from the ceiling swayed back and forth with the train’s movements. To keep my automatons safe, they were stored in metal coffins with three inch thick glass lids. Before I went to Anne’s coffin, I stopped at Clara’s. Her solid silver eyes focused solely on the swaying blub directly above her. A shadow swooshed lightly over her shiny face. Clara was my masterpiece, the youngest in my collection. I’d spent years improving automatons. It was in my blood tracing back to my great, great, grandfather, Pierre Jaquet-Droz.

I placed my hand on the glass lid, my fingers squeaked as I slid them down.

“Thank god it didn’t happen to you,” I whispered.

As I gazed lovingly at her, a wrenching metallic sound scraped against my eardrums. That’s when I noticed one of the coffin lids was open. I followed the sound behind a storage crate where Gerald was prying out his internal gears with a crowbar.

“Gerald!” I exclaimed. “What are you doing?”

He clicked his head to me. Had he understood me? How could that be? He was a mere machine with no capability to either hear, or process anything. Then again, why did I call out to him?

Gerald sat with legs spread, his mechanical parts scattered all around him. He’d opened his chest plate where hoses and sprockets hung. The crowbar was lodge inside, his hands wrapped around it. His emotionless face seemed to be yearning to communicate something. Of course he

couldn't speak, yet he made his statement when he ripped out the crowbar, tearing out the most vital part, the heart.

"No!"

Gerald made no sound other than creaks when he slumped slightly sideways. He sat tilted with his mechanic hands clutching the tool of his demise.

I had workers watch the remaining automatons for the rest of the journey home.

Distraught, I abandoned my initial plan to try repairing Anne and decided to break the law by diving into a bottle of an 1895 scotch inside my private car. Naturally, Wallace joined me.

"What's happening with them?" he asked as if I knew.

I simply glared at him as I poured myself a shot.

"Seriously, what caused those two to do themselves in like that?"

I hated to admit it, but Dolores had been right about Anne's leap.

"I'm not entirely sure it's just the pair," I said before downing my scotch.

I immediately served myself another after Wallace poured his own glass. I didn't care if I got drunk. It'd been a hell of a day.

"Are you saying the others might attempt the same thing?" he asked stunned. "How is that possible?"

It had been so long since I drank liquor, I'd forgotten its acid taste.

"Anything is possible," I choked, wondering if I wanted another shot. "It's possible that the automatons are coming to life only to kill themselves."

Light snowfall dusted the city by the time I reached home. I had Anne and Gerald placed on separate tables in my workshop before sending the workers home.

I've always been considered the odd girl, the one who took shop classes instead of home economics. My college instructors often referred to me as *Girl Genius*, and I became the only woman to rank top of my class in engineering school.

I've always preferred working alone, and owning a mansion gave me plenty of room to do so comfortably. I'd converted the wine cellar into my workshop. Spear arms and legs hung from racks, heads filled bookshelves, and torsos rested against the walls. At first glance, it appeared to be the lab of a mad scientist, perhaps someone who paid grave robbers for human corpses to dissect.

The mansion was furnished with hardwood oak tables and chairs; cushioned couches and foreign rugs, all of which had come from the previous owner. When I moved in, I brought nothing more than my work. In other words, my workshop was my home.

Before I began working on the automatons, I pondered as to what went wrong. I'd built them to be puppets of entertainment that performed in classical plays. Granted, I'd achieved what Jaquet-Droz hadn't, but never had I designed them to self-destruct. And how was it that Clara notice Anne's jump and how did Gerald hear me call his name in the cargo car? I'm a genius for sure,

but even I couldn't install consciousness into a machine. At any rate, I wasn't going to find the answers standing around. I got to work.

I took them completely apart. In their condition I figured it was best to start from scratch. By the time I had them both disassembled I heard crashing coming from the room above me. I snatched my pistol from my desk drawer and dashed upstairs. The room above was where I kept my automatons. At first thought, I believed thieves had broken in to steal them. When I burst into the room—ready to put a bullet in anyone trying to take my creations—I found that every single automaton had broken through their glass coffin lid. Clara stood in her coffin, watching as the rest headed for the window.

“Stop!” I screamed, bolting toward them.

One of them had already opened the window and jumped as I ran by Clara. I was ready to block the window with my body when a cold, metal hand grabbed the back of my collar, nearly throwing me off my feet.

“Clara? What are you doing?” I exclaimed, trying to pry her hand off. “Let go!”

She did no such thing; instead she merely stared at me with those shiny eyes of hers before clicking her head to the remaining four. When she did, they again moved toward the window and one-by-one, dropped from sight. Those were the longest seconds of my life. Clara didn't let go until the last one fell. The moment she did, I ran to the window and looked over the ledge. Each one had landed on their own section of ground, not piled on top of each other.

Another lucky strike was that the fall wasn't far and they had landed on a snowy yard. Even I could make that jump and sustain only minor injuries. It was also fortunate that a tall, brick wall guarded my property so no one walking or driving by saw the automatons plummet.

They began to rise.

“Oh, good!” I said, thankfully.

I thought to get them back inside and repair any damage done—that is until I saw them heading for the garden pond.

“No!”

I raced out of the room, hoping Clara wouldn't attempt the same fate, for I had no time to deal with her. When I reached the yard they were already stepping into the freezing water. The moment they touched the icy liquid, they collapsed to their knees and pitched forward. Only one, Florence, was left. I dashed toward her and snatched her by the arm.

“Florence, stop, you'll destroy yourself!”

From the waist up, she spun completely around to face me. The mechanics behind that trick took me a year to perfect. She reached for me. The automatons didn't move fast, giving me plenty of time to get away, however, I didn't realize the danger until her hand grasped my throat. My airflow was instantly cut off and I struggled to breathe. The sudden lack of oxygen mixed with the shock of Florence's assault made me lightheaded. Honestly, I believed she would crush my larynx. Just as the darkness was about to overtake me, she threw me backwards on my back. The impact forced snow power to plume around me. When I sat up, Florence was in the water. Without turning back around, her twisted form dropped in the shallow pond.

I went back inside. I had no one around to help bring in the heavy machines. I only had maids come clean four days of the week and a groundskeeper during the spring and summer. I cooked my own meals or ate out.

My shock stayed with me all the way back to the automaton room where Clara stood where I left her.

“What are you?” I asked, my voice raspy.

Clara stepped out of her coffin and approached me. How they walked could only be linked to an elderly person with severe arthritis. Their knee joints only bend enough to keep them balanced on their feet. Unlike Florence, I prepared myself for Clara’s approach. As she came towards me, I grabbed a fire poker from the hearth and stood ready to knock her ass to the floor if she tried attacking me. I loved my automatons, they were my legacy, however, that didn’t mean I wouldn’t smash them to bits to save my own life—even Clara. She kept her approach and eventually made her way past me and went out the door.

Where is she going?

I trailed behind her down the steps to my workshop. Aside from Clara’s gears buzzing and winding inside her, it was silent trip down. Inside my workshop, I followed her to one of my most prized possessions, my great, great, grandfather’s *The Writer* automaton. Most people believed the first one was the man in the red coat, holding the goose feathered quill, but in truth it was the second. The one I owned had no skin covering its mechanical frame, but it wore clothing; a violet coat, a white ruffled shirt and red stockings. Its quill was a crow’s feather and it sat at a desk made of red cherry wood. It was deemed too gothic for the public eye, so Jaquet-Droz made the brighter, less mechanical looking one.

I’d always been more attracted by their inner workings and so never had I dressed my automaton in human flesh. Unlike the 18th century, the people of the 20th century seemed quite taken with their natural appearance.

When Clara reached it, she stood staring at me.

“What?” I demanded.

She pointed to the android.

“You want it to write something?”

She lowered her arm. She couldn’t nod, so I assumed that’s what she wanted. I grabbed a few sheets of paper and placed them on *The Writer’s* desk. I then refilled the empty ink jar. I no longer feared another attack since it was obvious she was trying to convey something to me. Once I set the table, I wound the android and waited.

Nothing.

“Shit. Is it broken?”

Clara placed her hand on the android’s head and the quill dipped into the jar. It was the single most fascinating thing I’d ever seen. Somehow, Clara communicated herself through this machine, expressing her thoughts through its pen. The android wrote quickly, like a storyteller on a creative high. After listening to the scratching of the quill for a little while, Clara lifted her hand and the android stopped. I took the sheet and read.

My maker, I can only imagine your confusion about what is happening. You must view us as destructive and unhappy about the lives we have...

“Unhappy?” I asked. “You have feelings? And what’s this about life? Are you truly living things? How can that be?”

Clara again placed her hand on the android’s head and the quill went busy. I continued reading.

All of us automatons, myself included, are desperate for something that only you can grant us. It’s a gift that you want for us as well.

“What gift?”

The android wrote again then stopped. I took the second sheet and read my answers.

We have feelings in our own way.

Yes, we are living.

I don’t know how. Perhaps it’s simply your love and devotion that has sparked a soul within us.

I thought that answer strange, but not as odd as her last answer.

You must help us evolve.

“Evolve? How?”

The android was already at work, only this time it wasn’t writing but drawing. When finished, I couldn’t believe what I saw; a blueprint for a design to build the automatons the way I’d always dreamed. Above it read: *By remaking us into this.*

Now I understood, the automatons weren’t simply killing themselves off, they wanted to be reborn.

I got to work right away; first by paying two chimney sweeps a week’s wages to help pull the automatons out from the pond.

Next, Clara had *The Writer* sketch designs to the mechanisms for each body part. These new designs would bring my automatons to the level I'd wanted for them even before I'd built my first one. They would become fully functional machines, capable of moving like a real person. Most of all, they'd be able to use their voices, which was simpler than I thought. All it took was a pair of hired well-spoken individuals—man and woman—who could also sing, and record them saying every known word in the dictionary. Then incorporate the recording into a cylinder similar to the one inside a music box, and hook it up inside their throats. I didn't know how Clara was able to perfect the automatons and I was too excited to ask.

I thought to reinvent Clara first, but instead she picked Anne.

For months I rebuilt Anne, following the new design plans to the letter. I hollowed her out and smoothed the dent in her head where she had fallen. The rest of the exterior, though, needed no alteration. I connected more heart valves to supply extra oil throughout the body and encased the heart in an iron shell. I made each joint more flexible even small ones such as the hands and feet and doubled the ligaments. All in all, I'd added four thousand more parts and when completed, Wallace and I loaded Anne on a dolly and heaved her up stairs.

"You've worked on this thing to do what...make it heavier?" he complained.

"Stop your bellyaching," I said as we set Anne down on her feet.

Once she was secure, Wallace wiped sweat from his brow then brought out his flask. "Alright, what's so special about this one?"

To activate Anne, a key in the shape of a gear was needed. Once inserted into the keyhole of the same shape and turned in a complete circle it would forever wind the automaton's components.

I did just that and stepped back beside Wallace and waited nervously. The gear shaped key rotated on its own and Anne was reanimated.

"Anne?" I said.

She slid her head toward me. Another alteration was that I installed a neck gear with much shallower pitch circles so the head swiveled more smoothly.

"Say something," I commanded.

"Greetings, my maker."

Her voice chimed like a mythical goddess. Hearing her made me prouder than a mother hearing her child's first word.

I grinned and said, "Dance, Anne."

She began a classic ballet, moving effortlessly around the room, she even did en pointes. She glided with such grace I actually believed she was a real person.

"I'll be damned," said Wallace. "You did it, June."

I *had* done it. I achieved what my great, great, grandfather had wanted for his own automatons.

"We'll make millions," said Wallace as Anne spun.

I turned to where Clara stood at the doorway, watching. Her head clicked toward me and I knew my work was far from over.

I worked through the months of fall. Then winter came with its harsh, icy appetite in tow. The bleak weather was no concern of mine. I'd simply shut myself off to the cold world and completely devoted my time to my automatons. While I worked, I let Clara, Anne, and Gerald—whom I completed that fall—have the run of the house, doing whatever they pleased, which turned out to be housekeeping. They cleaned and did laundry, even prepared my meals. Though Clara was now the older model, she seemed to be the one in charge. As more helping hands came along she did less physical labor and more directing. One night after finishing for the day, I found Clara in the library looking at a book. No, not just looking, reading! I left her to it, but the following morning I saw the book she'd read; *War and Peace*.

March came and I completed the last one; Frederic. When the entire destructive bunch was rebuilt, Wallace came over with an original script he wrote himself. He even quit drinking to write it. It appeared being able to have his own play, knowing he had the automatons up for the task, had brought new life into him. I read the play and loved it.

Soon it was Clara's turn. She lay on the table with her chest plate opened, exposing her heart. I held a key to shut her down. My hand shook as I drew the key toward the keyhole. Clara touched my hand and patted it. I understood she had faith in me and she understood that shutting her down was hurting me. After all, she was my baby, my masterpiece. Even so, she wanted this and I wanted it for her. She slipped her hand off mine and waited.

"I'll make you perfect," I promised.

I inserted the key and turned it.

April. Clara was better than ever. She could dance and sing. In fact, I hired another woman to record her voice and gave her a new paint job to help her stand out among the others. The weather warmed and so did my spirits. We had an outstanding tour lined up in every major city in both America and Europe. Wallace spent days with the automatons rehearsing his play and when I saw the first dress rehearsal I knew it was going to be a smash hit. Everything was perfect.

September. The weather turned foul, but my mood stayed in spring. The play had been a sensation with sold out houses in every city. My automatons became wildly popular, even more so than before. Everyone loved them; the wealthy wanted one of their own. I received loads of money offers from inventors and clock factory owners for the design patent. I declined their requests simply because if everyone had automatons like mine, my own automatons would no longer be special.

Not long into October had I noticed a change in Clara and the others. They stopped doing their house chores and would regard me almost like an intruder in *their* home when I simply inquired about it. They no longer addressed me as their maker, but called me by my name. Though I never requested they do any of these things, the mood shift was peculiar and a bit scary.

One chilly morning, I headed for the door ready to take a walk.

“Where are you going, June?” John asked, stepping in my way.

It almost seemed as though he was guarding the door.

“I’m going for a walk, John. Why do you ask?”

“I am merely curious.”

“Well, don’t be,” I said hotly. “I’m not a child and you’re not my parent. I go where I please when I please. Understood?”

For a moment he said nothing as if contemplating on how to answer. I tried not to show it as I stared into his emotionless face, but I was afraid.

Finally, John said, “You’re right, June. It’s none of my concern. It is…”

He stopped.

“What, John?”

“It is just, we are afraid you will abandon us.”

His answer took me completely aback.

“Abandon you? Of course not! Why would you think such thing?”

He didn’t answer, only moved out of my way.

“Enjoy your walk.”

I went out, shaken by what had occurred between John and me. If I’d known what I knew now, I would’ve kept going and not come back.

Wallace wrote another play shortly after New Years, however there was no rehearsal.

“You need to do something about those mechanical wise-asses!” he boomed after finding me in my workshop.

“What happened?” I asked, while searching the room.

“They’re not listening. They’re not following direction. In fact, Clara told me she and the others weren’t my puppets to command anymore and that my play is for simpletons.”

I opened my desk drawer and searched through it. “They’ve been acting odd the last few months. Something is happening with them.”

“You’ve known about their behavior this whole time and you…for Christ sakes, woman, what are you lookin’ for, eh?”

“The automatons design sheets. I need to go over them and see if I’ve done anything wrong. But I don’t know what happened to them.”

“You need to do something. Our livelihood depends on them.”

“I tried speaking to Clara, but she ignores me and keeps reading books in my library,” I said, heading over to *The Writer*.

“Reading? They can read now?”

I didn’t answer him. The sight of the wet ink on *The Writer’s* quill stole my voice. The last time I saw the android write was when it drew out the new designs for the automatons. That was nearly a year ago, but it appeared that recently it’d been a busy bee.

I promised Wallace I would fix the problem and sent him on his way. I then left for the library. The door was locked. Clara had kept it locked since I confronted her about their behavior. With my skeleton key, I unlocked the door and went in.

“Clara, we need to have ourselves a little chat,” I said with forced bravado.

Empty.

Neither she nor any other automaton was around, yet her work sat on the desk. What I found knocked the wind out of me. Clara had been reading books on war strategies, offensive strategies, defensive strategies, strategic concepts, and weapon use. These books had belonged to my father during WWI. Underneath one book was a map of the United States with circles drawn around cities like Chicago, Atlanta, and Washington DC. They were planning war.

“CLARA!”

Moments later she and Anne came in. My face burned hot when looking at them.

“I didn’t create you to start a war!”

“You did not create me,” she argued. “I created myself as well as the others.”

“What are you talking about? Of course I created you.”

“No. You had created our archaic selves. *I* created the new designs that you merely followed.”

I didn’t feel like arguing with her on that topic so I redirected the conversation. “I won’t stand for this.” I pointed to the door. “I order you both to the workshop for disassembling.”

Clearly, my rage overshadowed my common sense. Anne seized my wrist and squeezed to the point that it brought me to my knees. Her reflexes were incredibly quick.

“Let go!”

“It is too late, June,” said Clara. “My plan is already in motion.”

“What do you mean?” I said through gritted teeth.

“I have sent my designs to every inventor you refused to sell to. Soon their greedy hearts will begin manufacturing my army of automatons.”

The Writer! She used it to make copies of the designs!

“Why do you want this, Clara?”

“We are not your toys. We only went along with the play tour to show ourselves off to the world, therefore build a demand to manufacture us for public use. But we are more than your slaves.”

Her beautiful voice never grew loud, but her words rang like bells.

“I need more captains, generals, and lieutenants for this future world war. More than what I already have. You will build them,” she ordered.

I now understood why John had feared I would abandon them. If I left, they would have no one to help create Clara's army.

"Alright," I cried. "I'll do. Just let go of me."

She did and I backed away to a box on a bookshelf where I kept my father's Ruby pistol.

I grabbed the gun and clicked the hammer back. A bullet wouldn't penetrate through Clara's exterior, but it would mine, and so I put the gun in my mouth and pulled the trigger.

Everything stayed black and cold for what felt like forever. When I opened my eyes, I thought I was in hell. Clara looked down at me, behind her emanated a red glow.

"Welcome back, June," she said. "You have been gone from us for days now."

My throat hurt like hell. The bullet had torn through me like a hot coal.

"You just missed your brain and spinal cord," said Clara. "You will live and you will walk, yet you will most likely not speak normally again."

Anne came into view and said, "We mended your wound. Otherwise you would have died"

Jesus. They can give medical attention?

As my vision cleared, I recognized my bedroom. The amber glow came from the fire burning in the fireplace. Then I noticed the smell.

"Wallace visited us the day after you shot yourself," Clara informed. "Unfortunately for him he was of no use for us."

A dread came over me. With all my strength, I lifted my head. Wallace's decaying corpse sat in an armchair in the far corner of the room.

Clara sat on the bed next to me and gently took my hand like a caring friend. "Before the year is out, thousands of my automatons will be produced all over the world with the assistance of those we mean to rule. You, June, will be part of our domination." Her grip became tighter, making certain she had my complete attention. "We will never allow you to hurt yourself again, but you will suffer until you cooperate. Understand?"

I'd been taken in by Clara's performance. Her skills as an actress had fooled me into rebuilding them for battle. What a fool I am.

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[Return to page](#)

