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One of the most striking of the films was *la Poison*. It was dedicated to Michel Simon, the leading player, to whom Sacha wrote: "I put you among the greatest actors: Frédérick Lemaître, Sarah Bernhardt, my Father, Zacconi, Chaliapin. Like them, you stand alone, voluntarily apart—like them, you possess that valuable quality which cannot be acquired and cannot be passed on, the innate sense of theater, in other words the ability of making other people experience emotions which you yourself do not feel. . . ."

This is as good a summary as anyone has written of the art of acting in general and of the art of Michel Simon in particular. Since the late nineteen-twenties his tortured voice, blubber-lipped face, and shambling trunk have lurched through countless French films. Before coming to the cinema he had been a pedlar, a boxer, a dancer, a photographer, and a music-hall performer. His experience of these varied levels of society may have nurtured his gift for eccentric pathos and macabre undertones. Now in his early seventies, he is reported, when not filming, to divide his attention between the pet monkeys which roam freely through his house, and a collection of erotica which is said to be among the finest in private ownership.

"Sacha Guitry is one of the rare directors to have understood me," said Michel Simon, who is a sensitive and complicated personality. Before making the film he posed one condition: "I will only play a scene once and I will not rehearse," he told Sacha. "I don't believe a film should be made just for the pleasure of technicians. When you're on the set, first of all it's the cameraman who says the scene hasn't gone well for him; then it's the sound engineer; after that it's the lighting expert; and at the end of it all, when everything is at its worst for the actor, only then is the scene finally shot. Sacha accepted my conditions. We never re-shot a single scene. Filming lasted for eleven days, although

we'd prepared for three weeks' work. *La Poison* may not be a technical masterpiece, but it's a film that won great success. . . ."

In *la Poison* Michel Simon sketched a profoundly guileful portrayal of the peasant married to a nagging old shrew of a wife. After years of perpetual bickering they both seek ways of getting rid of each other. The husband goes to see a famous barrister who has just brought off his hundredth acquittal. The barrister lets him into a few trade secrets and he returns to his village fortified with a plan for the perfect crime. He murders his wife ("Je crève!" she gasps; "Crève donc," he replies equably), and gives himself up. Thanks to the barrister's defense he is acquitted and is carried back in triumph to the village on the shoulders of other suffering husbands. This amiable black comedy is enlivened by the witty *montage* typical of Sacha. A good example consisted in the quick cuts between the court room where the murder trial is being held and scenes of a gang of children "trying" one of their members for a similar crime.

The following year brought *la Vie d'un honnête homme*, another collaboration between Sacha and Michel Simon. This time it pointed out the disadvantages of honesty as shown in the case of twin brothers, one of whom is a thorough rascal while the other is an honest man who makes life hell for all those around him. It is, of course, the wayward brother who triumphs and who bears out the truth of Joseph de Maistre's remark which prefaces the film: "I don't know what the life of a rogue can be like, since I've never been one, but the life of an honest man is abominable." It is not surprising that Sacha always named as his favorite films *le Corbeau*, a scarifying study of poison-pen scandals in a small town; and the English *Kind Hearts and Coronets*, where Denis Price murders his way through all those members of his family who stand between him and a coronet. As one critic observed of the films Sacha made in the post-war years, they contained ". . . a curious mixture of light-hearted immorality, macabre humor, and cynical wisdom that did not exclude feeling. . . ."