

Roland

MR. KRILOW ALSO owned the Vi-de-lan Studio a few doors away from the kitchen gadget booth, near Pennsylvania Avenue.

The Vi-de-lan Studio sold a hair preparation made from combing out the natural oil in sheep's wool. It was called lanolin. The lanolin was processed into a smooth pale amber cream. According to the Vi-de-lan folks, it thickened, strengthened, lengthened, and generally beautified your hair. It made your hair healthier, too, and it stopped hair loss dead-in-its-tracks, and sometimes it even grew new hair on bald heads.

The Vi-de-lan Studio did not have a storefront. It was a small theater without seats that opened onto the boardwalk. Popular music of the day poured out of it from an amplified phonograph machine; favorites like *String of Pearls*, *Bei Meir Bist Du Schoen*, *Song of India*, *Pennsylvania Six-Five Thousand*, and *Sing, Sing, Sing*, and the big band sounds of the Dorseys, Glen Miller, Benny Goodman, Woody Herman, Harry James, and Glen Gray. The interior was shaped like a quarter sphere, like a miniature Hollywood Bowl. The floor was red quarry tile. The dome-like curve of the bowl was smooth ivory-colored stucco. There was a stage across the rear of the theater, concealed by a red-and-gold velvet curtain.

At the entrance was a large easel. A sign rested on it, four feet wide and more than six feet tall. The sign was pale ivory with bright red letters. It proclaimed:

VI-DE-LAN Studio

presents

ROLAND

THE INCREDIBLE MECHANICAL MAN!

\$100 reward!

If you can make him speak or smile!

NEXT PERFORMANCE IS AT



Below the last line of text a clock face with movable hands pointed to the time of the next performance. The bright red text was superimposed on a pale, sepia-toned, life-sized, full-figured picture of Roland.

A few people attracted by the music and the sign drifted into the theater in anticipation of the performance. At the appointed time, the red-and-gold velvet curtain parted to reveal Roland. The audience grew. He was alone on the stage, standing perfectly still, at attention. The backdrop was a Parisian mural. It was painted from an impossible point of view from which, miraculously, you could see the Notre Dame Cathedral, the Arc de Triomphe, the Opera

House, the Eiffel Tower, Les Invalides, and Montmartre. Even Sacre Coeur was there in the background.

Roland was dressed as a Parisian boulevardier, like Maurice Chevalier. He wore a navy linen double-breasted jacket with a gold-embroidered crest on the breast pocket and white trousers. His shirt had blue-and-white stripes with a high white starched collar with rounded collar points, like an old-fashioned 1890s high celluloid collar. He wore a bright, wide red-and-gold necktie. A silk red-and-gold handkerchief peeked out of the breast pocket and above that was a tricolor campaign ribbon. His shoes were yellow, half covered by white laced canvas spats. He wore white gloves. The outfit was topped off with a round, flat-topped, yellow straw hat, a skimmer, with a red, white, and blue band.

Roland's left hand rested on the ivory cap of an ebony walking stick. He stood motionless, for fifteen seconds. Was it a person? Or a doll? You could not tell. Then, his head began to turn to the left, slowly, ever so slowly, with a series of minute motions, almost a smooth motion, but ever so slightly a tiny bit stiff and jerky, like a very well-crafted robot. The audience grew larger as passers-by stopped to watch. He lifted and moved his right arm and slowly, slowly, rotated his right wrist and hand. The fingers moved into a cupped position. Every motion was perfect. Just the faint hint of a mechanism, no movement perfectly smooth. He tilted his head up, down, turned it to one side, then to the other. He turned his torso, moved his arms, hands, even raised and lowered the walking stick. You thought, "It must be a doll. A man could not move like that."

What really captured your attention—and held it—was Roland's face. The straw hat was tilted rakishly to the right, revealing glossy, raven hair, luxurious, brushed straight back, covering

the upper half-inch of his ears. The sideburns were perfect, an inch-and-a-half long and a half-inch thick. Was it a man's face? Or polished maplewood—absolutely smooth, with a circle of rouge on each cheek? Perfect black eyebrows, slightly arched, gave him a slightly quizzical expression. The eyes were deep-set and dark. They never moved. They stared straight ahead, motionless. *He never blinked!*

His lips were chiseled, outlined and touched with a pale red gloss, corners upturned ever so slightly, fixed in the faintest of smiles, a wooden doll-like smile. He had a thin, black pencil-line of a moustache, split in the center.

To add to the artificial look, Roland wore a gold-rimmed monocle in his left eye. Nobody wore monocles any longer. You saw them in movies about England in Victorian times, and one American actor, Charles Coburn, wore a monocle, sort of as a parody of an English country squire. All together, Roland was a handsome fellow. His expression suggested a thoroughly agreeable personality beneath the stiffness of the carved wooden features.

Slowly, Roland moved his arms and hands. Slowly, he turned this way and that, one motion at a time. At the end of each movement, there was an almost imperceptible quiver, as if the mechanism was stopping abruptly. He was able to take a few steps in exquisite slow motion. How could he do it? He had superhuman control.

Some in the audience made noises, called out, waved their arms, contorted their faces, spread their mouths open and wide with the forefingers of each hand, poked out their tongues. *\$100 reward if you can make him speak or smile!* Roland's expression never changed. The dark eyes never wavered. As his head rotated, his eyes stared straight into the eyes of one audience member after

another, piercing. When his eyes fixed on you for those few seconds, you had to look away.

All the while, a whisper of a whirring sound came from somewhere inside Roland's chest, the sound of well-oiled machinery, elegant, so smooth and quiet that the sound was barely audible.

Roland's performance lasted four minutes. Then, suddenly, he snapped to attention, thumped the walking stick, and breaking into a broad smile, swept off the straw hat and half bowed to the applause of his audience. At that moment, a door opened in the mural behind him and an attractive girl emerged onto the stage. She hooked her arm in Roland's and called out, "*Roland*, ladies and gentlemen, the great *Roland*! A big hand for *Roland*." She pronounced the name with the emphasis on the second syllable, a broad "A," like *roLAHND*. She clapped her hands. The audience applauded again. "Before *Roland* leaves us," she called out, "I want you to look at his hair." His hair *was* remarkable. It was thick, black as his ebony walking stick, gleaming, combed and brushed straight back, the richness of it sweeping around and over his head and across the tips of his ears, and full-bodied behind his head, ending in a thick sharp curving line across the bottom of his neck. "Now, look at *my* hair," she said. "Come closer. Look at my hair. You, sir, would you like to feel ... my hair?" A chuckle and a broad smile. Her hair was long, full-bodied, shining, the color of old gold, full of highlights. "This is Vi-de-lan hair. Roland's hair is Vi-de-lan hair." Roland backed away, smiling and saluting to right and left, through the open door in the mural while the girl began her demonstration.

An assistant came on stage. He carried a tall table and a jar of Vi-de-lan. The girl demonstrated how to use Vi-de-lan. She lifted some from the jar, delicately, with the third and fourth fingers of

her right hand. She stroked it into her hair. She brushed it in. She stroked in more and more, and brushed and brushed, long, languid strokes. She turned her head from side to side. The hair cascaded across her shoulders, a waterfall of golden richness, then across and to the other side and another golden waterfall. The long brush strokes showed off its marvelous shine and body.

As she brushed, she extolled Vi-de-lan: "Vi-de-lan is made from lanolin. Do you know what lanolin is? It is the oil that is impregnated in natural sheep's wool. You never saw a sheep go bald. You never saw a sheep with thinning wool. That thickness, that strength, that beauty comes from that special oil of the sheep. The lanolin saturates the wool and keeps it strong and healthy and thick. It waterproofs. A sheep can stand in rain for hours, days even, and the rainwater never penetrates the wool. It is the sheep's natural hair treatment. It preserves, it protects. It will do the same for you. Do you want hair like mine? Like Roland's? Sure, you do!"

Her demonstration went on for about five minutes. Then, the sales pitch, "Ladies and Gentlemen, you cannot buy Vi-de-lan in any store. This is the only place where you can purchase it. Only Vi-de-lan uses the natural sheep's lanolin. The price, it's only one dollar and fifty cents. This is a four-ounce jar. If you use it every day the way I showed you, it will last three months. So, if you are not going to be returning to Atlantic City any time soon, I suggest you buy several jars."

The assistant emerged again. Now he has a wheelbarrow. It is filled with jars of Vi-de-lan. A shill pushes forward, "I'll take two." That starts the buying.

I liked to watch the show during my lunch break. Roland fascinated me. Sometimes I practiced his movements, always in front of a mirror. I could almost get a few of the movements, but only

fleetingly. The slow-motion walk was impossible. What control he had. And strength. Try it yourself. The slow-motion walk was excruciatingly slow. The rear leg has to lift up onto its toes slowly, ever so slowly, and he has to maintain balance, as the other leg slowly swings forward. It is impossible.

One day, Mr. Krilow called me up from the kitchen gadget booth to his office on the second floor. He asked me if I knew the assistant's job at the Vi-de-lan Studio. I told him I'd seen the show. I knew the assistant's job. It wasn't much. "Go over there now, Jack, they need an assistant. The boy didn't show up today. Work a few shows over there. I'll get someone to cover the booth here. Go around the back. There is a door back there."

I ran around the block to the alleyway behind the stores. I was excited. I was going to meet Roland.