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SF PERUSALS

Samuel French Acting Edition

Splitting Heirs

by Freyda Thomas

Inspired by
Regnard's *Le Légataire universel*

SAMUEL FRENCH
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ISBN 978-0-573-70561-8

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CHARACTERS

ERASTE – Nephew to Geronte, bumbling, awkward, shy, loveable, scared of his uncle, madly in love with:

ISABELLE – The girl next door. Everything you've ever wanted in an ingénue and less. Never says more than three words in a row until the epilogue. Conveys her character in poses. Lisps.

CRISPIN – (Pronounced Kree-SPAN.) Servant to Eraste, jack-of-all-trades, bon vivant, master of disguise. Fences, plays a German doctor, a woman, and impersonates Geronte.

LISETTE – Prototype comic maid, servant to Geronte, in love with Crispin. Sharp, sassy, plays a man in one scene.

GERONTE – An old, sick miser. Dies several times.

MME ARGANTE – Isabelle's mother. Lady Bracknell in Paris.

POQUELIN – Geronte's lawyer. A very short man. (Also plays the Gendarme's assistant.)

PIERRE – Poquelin's assistant, also the Gendarme.

PROLOGUE

(The stage is black except for a special on **ISABELLE** *and* **ERASTE**. *He is on one knee. She faces away from him, frozen in a lovely, demure tableau. He hesitates, then speaks. She moves only to change poses.)*

ERASTE.

My dearest Isabelle – I – that is –

ISABELLE.

Yes?

ERASTE.

I have a secret longing to confess.
One which I carry with me in my heart.
May I impart its thought to you?

ISABELLE.

Impart.

ERASTE.

(During his next lines he prompts himself from crib sheets fastened to various parts of his body – inside his hat, coat, on the sole of his shoe, etc.)

Well, then, dear Isabelle, I mean – uh –

ISABELLE.

Yes?

ERASTE.

If but my heart could speak, it would confess
A hundred sweet enchantments which your face
Creates within it. Let me words embrace
Your –

ISABELLE.

Oh!

ERASTE.

Heart, as yours has embraced my own,
Which beats, here, evermore, for you alone.
The moment we first met – when?

ISABELLE.

Yesterday.

ERASTE.

I felt a peace surround my sorry way.
Since first I heard the music in your voice –

ISABELLE.

(Demonstrating.)

Ah! Ah!

ERASTE.

That makes the wingéd bird rejoice.
Would I could better fashion into speech
The love I bear you. How must I beseech,
Explain, cajole and flatter such a sense
That you might not show cool indifference
To this sweet longing that my soul endures
In its desire to be as one with yours.
It wanders, silent, lonely, late at night,
In search of an oasis of requite
For its most tender passion –

ISABELLE.

Oh!

ERASTE.

Forgive
The candor of my ardor, but to live
In doubt and darkness, aching so to pass
Into the light of your sweet eyes –

ISABELLE.

Alas!

ERASTE.

Tell me your loving heart desires to cure
This tender malady, so clear, so pure –

ISABELLE.

Yes!

ERASTE.

Then, do you consent to let me dwell
In paradise with dearest Isabelle?
Your honeyed lips need only to confess
That you might condescend to love me –

ISABELLE.

Yes!

(Stunned that she has agreed, he collects himself, kisses her hand, and faints dead away. She turns and smiles down at him as the lights go to black.)

ACT I

Scene One

(A unit set. There is a balcony at the top of a flight of stairs having at least two doors leading onto it. There are three downstairs doors – the front door, one leading to the servants' quarters and kitchen, and one leading to the study, a room off the main room, which cannot be seen by the audience. At curtain rise **CRISPIN** *and* **LISETTE** *enter from opposite doors – she from upstairs, carrying a basin and a towel, he from the servants' quarters with a tray of paté. They pass each other formally and quickly, with a nod, get to their exit doors, stop, look around, back up slowly to each other, put down their props, and embrace passionately. Afterwards,* **CRISPIN** *points to the upstairs.)*

CRISPIN.

How is he?

LISETTE.

Terrible.

CRISPIN.

What – not again?

LISETTE.

And every day this week.

CRISPIN.

Mon Dieu.

LISETTE.

Amen.

It always starts the same way – "Aargh! I'm dying!"

The legs and arms go –

(She demonstrates, sitting on the sofa.)

It's terrifying.
His face turns blue, he clutches at his heart,
Falls lifeless on the pillow. "I depart,"
He rattles, eyes roll back into his head,
I cover him and pray, "Thank God he's dead,"
Walk to the door, convinced, I must admit,
He's gone. Then from the bed I hear, "You twit!
Come here!" I swear that man just loves to die.

CRISPIN.

Day after day we watch him calcify.

LISETTE.

I watch him. All you ever have to do
Is cater to that witless nephew.

CRISPIN.

True.

LISETTE.

I bathe him, feed him, humor him, comply
With every wheezing order –

CRISPIN.

I could cry.

LISETTE.

Each vile command allowed a dying man.

CRISPIN.

I sympathize.

LISETTE.

Imagine, if you can…

(She imitates his voice.)

"It's time to let my blood! I want my shawl!"
At any hour of the day, that call –
"Lisette!" I change his linens, give him pills,
Cool down his fevers, elevate his chills,

Transport him to the wheelchair on my back,
Revive him after every new attack –
The poultices, cathartic and emetic –
The vile medications –

CRISPIN.

It's pathetic.

LISETTE.

(As he begins wooing her.)

Crispin…

CRISPIN.

(Murmuring in her ear.)

Lisette…

LISETTE.

My bear…

CRISPIN.

My pet…

LISETTE.

Stop that!

CRISPIN.

I love her when she's angry –

LISETTE.

We must chat.

CRISPIN.

All right, my little puma.

LISETTE.

(Extricating herself from his embrace.)

You sit here.

(She sits in a different chair.)

That's right. Now, angel, think back to last year.

CRISPIN.

Last year.

LISETTE.

That's right. Last May. A starry night.

No moon, a breeze, the stars were very bright.

CRISPIN.

Bright.

LISETTE.

Right. You spoke of us. That is to say,
Of you and me.

CRISPIN.

Oh, that us.

LISETTE.

Ah, touché.
Well, then?

CRISPIN.

Well, then?

LISETTE.

Well, when?

CRISPIN.

Well when? When what?

LISETTE.

When are we getting married?

CRISPIN.

Married?! But –

LISETTE.

But what? You love me?

CRISPIN.

Yes!

LISETTE.

Then marry me!

CRISPIN.

(Groping for an answer.)

As soon as I have an…annuity.

LISETTE.

Another foul disease!

CRISPIN.

No, no, a trust!

LISETTE.

You need a truss?

CRISPIN.

That's right. It's only just
So I may take good care of you, my dear.

LISETTE.

The old man's got a truss! I'll bring it here!

(She starts to go, he stops her.)

CRISPIN.

No, no, my swan!

(Aside.)

She's so adorable.
A TRUST of money.

LISETTE.

Oh.

CRISPIN.

A plentiful
Supply of cash in hand that will allow
Our comfort.

LISETTE.

Oh. How will you get it?

CRISPIN.

How.

(Making it up as he goes.)

A plan. So pure, so brilliant, so exquisite
In its simplicity, you'll say –

LISETTE.

What is it?

CRISPIN.

I don't know yet

LISETTE.

You don't know yet.

CRISPIN.

Just so.

LISETTE.

You will tell me the moment that you know.

(They sit and begin snacking on the paté.)

CRISPIN.

Of course.

LISETTE.

(Getting an idea.)

Of course…

CRISPIN.

Of course?

LISETTE.

If the old bird…

CRISPIN.

Geronte?

LISETTE.

Who else? Relented, and conferred
His fortune on Eraste –

CRISPIN.

His nephew?!

LISETTE.

Yes.
By your manipulation, I would guess
Eraste could be persuaded to endow…

CRISPIN.

A brilliant scheme!

LISETTE.

I know.

CRISPIN.

But how?

LISETTE.

Yes, how?
To get Geronte to leave that simpleton
A single sou –

CRISPIN.

The challenge could be fun.
First, let us both review the situation.

LISETTE.

My master hates your master.

CRISPIN.

Complication.

LISETTE.

Why does he hate him?

CRISPIN.

Simple. He was born.
His brother's only child. Geronte has sworn
To never pardon or forgive the deed.

LISETTE.

The deed.

CRISPIN.

A shame, the way they disagreed.
Such hopes for brother dear the old man had.
A lawyer in the family –

LISETTE.

Too bad.

CRISPIN.

His life arranged for him. Except one factor.
The upstart runs away…to be an actor!

LISETTE.

No!

CRISPIN.

Yes. They tell me all of France could see
The old man's face. As red as it could be
When he had read the note. "I've gone away

To find my true vocation" –

LISETTE.

Lackaday.

CRISPIN.

He choked, he gasped, he hopped around a bit,
And then he had an apoplectic fit!
Geronte was in a sorry state. At last
He managed to survive. The crisis passed,
But for the next four years his brother's name
Was never even whispered!

LISETTE.

Till *he* came.

CRISPIN.

Just popped down from the sky it seemed – voilà.
A baby boy. His brother's last faux pas
Before he passed away.

LISETTE.

Poor little thing.

CRISPIN.

Just sitting on that trunk and blubbering…

LISETTE.

The trunk! The one the old man likes to kick!
The very mention of it makes him sick.
So that's where all the costumes came from.

CRISPIN.

Yes.
The last remains of brother.

LISETTE.

Quelle tristesse.
Did brother…marry?

CRISPIN.

Yes! A costumière.
They met on his first tour with Molière.

LISETTE.

(They both cross themselves.)

Molière! That's quite a story.

CRISPIN.

My soul weeps

To think of it.

LISETTE.

And so the old man keeps

The boy, to punish him for Papa's crime.

CRISPIN.

Someday he'll pardon poor Eraste.

LISETTE.

Meantime,

The task at hand.

CRISPIN.

Eraste.

And the old man.

To cause a rapprochement we need a plan.

A delicate maneuvering, this task.

My master is too –

LISETTE.

Ignorant –

CRISPIN.

To ask

His uncle for a farthing. He's so good,

He only wants the old man's love. He would

Be genuinely crushed to see him die,

Yet stands to gain a fortune by it.

LISETTE.

Why?

CRISPIN.

Upon the sad demise Eraste might be

The sole residuary legatee.

LISETTE.

The what?

CRISPIN.

The legal heir.

LISETTE.

There are no others?

CRISPIN.

There may be one or two.

LISETTE.

No sisters? Brothers?
Nieces?

CRISPIN.

Just Eraste and one or two
Relations – distant – from the country, who
Have never seen the old man.

LISETTE.

What a plot!
So then, is he the legal heir or not?

CRISPIN.

It all depends upon the will.

LISETTE.

The will.

CRISPIN.

My master cannot know his fate until
Your master draws a legal document
Deciding how and where the money's spent.

LISETTE.

Don't mention money!

CRISPIN.

No?

LISETTE.

It makes him cringe. He

Hates to spend a sou.

CRISPIN.

But why?

LISETTE.

He's stingy.
You want to know how cheap?

CRISPIN.

Not really, no.

LISETTE.

He pays me nothing.

CRISPIN.

(Falling to his knees and taking her hand.)

Why, the so and so!
I'd no idea! But why do you stay?

LISETTE.

(Aside.)

I stay because of him, but dare not say.
I must remain aloof. Can't let him know
How much I love my braggadocio!

(To him.)

Two reasons: First, at least it's a position.
Good food, a pleasant room, and in addition,
He lets me say whatever I'm inclined to.
I call him crocodile if I've a mind to.
Talk back and yell as often as I care.

CRISPIN.

He doesn't fire you?

LISETTE.

He wouldn't dare.
No other servant would agree to do
The terrible ordeals he puts me through.

CRISPIN.

(Getting amorous again.)

Your craft. Such expertise. I am impressed.

LISETTE.

My duck…

CRISPIN.

My goose…

LISETTE.

(Extricating herself again.)

I have to get him dressed.

Besides, we were discussing strategy.

CRISPIN.

Eraste. And how to make him legatee.

LISETTE.

Where is the witless wonder?

CRISPIN.

He's gone out.

He wouldn't tell me what it was about,

But he was in a state I've never seen!

His hands were trembling, and his face was green.

His usual incompetence was worse

Than ever. Several times I heard him curse!

He had his shoes on backwards, ripped a glove –

LISETTE.

Green face, ripped glove, shoes backwards? He's in love.

CRISPIN.

How do you know?

LISETTE.

It's obvious! But who?

CRISPIN.

Whom does he love? I haven't got a clue.

LISETTE.

Well, someone is the object of his dreams.

CRISPIN.

The boy has got some talent, so it seems.
You know, he's not as witless as one might
Be led to think. He's often almost bright.
It's old Geronte who makes him ill at ease.
Eraste will venture anything to please
The devil. Never works, of course. But mark
My words, that lad has got a certain spark.
A dormant courage, waiting to attack.
He may surprise us all one day –

ERASTE.

(Bursting in and surprising them.)

I'm back!

*(***LISETTE** *screams and startles* **ERASTE***, who steps in the enema pan, trips, and falls. He grabs the hot iron to steady himself, burns his hand, and then sticks it in the enema pan to cool it. General chaos.)*

CRISPIN.

(To **LISETTE***.)*

You see? I told you.

(To **ERASTE***.)*

Well? Where have you been?

ERASTE.

I've been to heaven!

CRISPIN.

And they let you in?
Sit down and tell me all about it.

ERASTE.

(Sitting, then standing.)

Well,
I went up to the door and rang the bell –

CRISPIN.

What bell?

ERASTE.

The doorbell.

CRISPIN.

(Aside.)

Patience.

(To him.)

Tell me more.

ERASTE.

I waited…

CRISPIN.

And?

ERASTE.

She opened up the door!

CRISPIN.

(To **LISETTE**.*)*

She did?

LISETTE.

Imagine that!

CRISPIN.

Then what occurred?

ERASTE.

She said, "Come in." At first my mind was blurred,

(Gathering confidence, acting it out as he goes.)

But soon my voice returned. I said, "Merci."
She led the way. So very close were we,
That leaning forward, I could touch her hair!
I tripped, just once, upon a little chair.
We sat in the salon, the door was closed…
She smiled at me.

(He drifts into a reverie.)

CRISPIN & LISETTE.

And?

ERASTE.

Oh. Then I proposed.

LISETTE.

He did?

CRISPIN.

You did?

ERASTE.

I did.

CRISPIN.

I cannot wait
To hear the rest. Did she reciprocate
Your love?

ERASTE.

Reciprocate means to agree?

CRISPIN.

(Aside.)

Bright boy.

(He nods to **ERASTE**.*)*

ERASTE.

Then she reciprocated me!

(A moment of joyous celebration for all, then **LISETTE** *stops the action.)*

LISETTE.

Who?

ERASTE.

Who?

CRISPIN.

Who?

LISETTE.

Who reciprocated you?

ERASTE.

Oh! Isabelle.

LISETTE.

Ah, Isabelle.

CRISPIN.

That's who.

Isabelle who?

ERASTE.

Next door.

CRISPIN.

A happy chance
To find so close at hand la belle romance.

ERASTE.

The brightest dearest angel –

LISETTE.

Say no more.
I'd rather hear the part about the door.

(Aside to **CRISPIN***.)*

And she returns his love!

CRISPIN.

Apparently.

LISETTE.

Quel plot.

ERASTE.

She has agreed to marry me!

CRISPIN.

What news! Felicitations! Uncle knows,
Of course.

ERASTE.

(Reality descends.)

Oh. Do you think he might oppose
Our union?

(He starts to pace.)

CRISPIN.

Ah, reality descends.
He starts to pace, he sits, he comprehends.

ERASTE.

Crispin! What shall I do? He must agree!

CRISPIN.

Of course he will. Leave everything to me.

ERASTE.

Oh good.

(He exits, returns immediately.)

What will we do?

CRISPIN.

No apprehension.
A simple, quick maneuver. Pay attention!
You bring her here to meet him.

ERASTE.

Ah!

(He exits, returns immediately.)

You're sure?

CRISPIN.

Do you have any doubt I shall procure
A happy ending for us all?

ERASTE.

Oh, no!
I trust your every word.

CRISPIN.

You should. Now, go!

(He finally leaves. **CRISPIN** *and* **LISETTE** *embrace.)*

If I get her for him, his joyous mood
Will be but shadows to his gratitude.
His nature, generous, unbridled, free,

Would guarantee a small annuity…
Let us conjecture – three?

LISETTE.

Eight.

CRISPIN.

Hundred francs
A year would fill my heart with…heartfelt thanks.
He went to get the bride – you get the man,
While I explain how all of this began!

(During the next monologue by **CRISPIN**, **LISETTE** *brings a wheelchair into the main room from the study. She then goes upstairs to the old man's room and emerges with him on her back, carries him downstairs, and deposits him in the wheelchair, settles him in, puts his shawl around him.* **CRISPIN** *never turns around or offers a hand. At the end of his monologue the old man speaks.)*

A servant's life is not an easy one.
But then again, whose life is naught but fun?
Who does not sometime, somewhere in one's life
Experience a small degree of strife?
And though I may have more than others felt
The gnaw of hunger tight'ning at my belt,
Or once and frequently been forced to greet
The frosty nip of winter at my feet,
The chilblains in my joints from chopping wood,
In general, my life's been rather good!
A servant's life may have its ups and downs,
But truly, do the heads that wear the crowns
Lie easier than ours? I say nay, nay.
A servant's life may not be distingué,
And emptying of chamber pots may not
Be your idea of a grand gavotte,
Or climbing stairs or weeding gardens or

The washing and a hundred errands more,
But I'm not wont to dwell in dark despair,
For in here is much better than out there,
And wishing one were elsewhere than where one
Has found oneself to be is best not done.
So, though the concept seems a bit demented
And seeped in optimism, I'm contented!
Lament? Complain? Bemoan? Why, what's the good?
I'd not trade places with them if I could.
You think they're any happier than we?
Just watch how things progress and you will see.

GERONTE.

(By now **GERONTE** *is settled in. He barks.)*

What day is it?!

LISETTE.

(Also barking.)

It's Thursday.

GERONTE.

What's the date?

LISETTE.

The twelfth of May.

GERONTE.

What drops do I await?

LISETTE.

The green ones. Three o'clock.

GERONTE.

I need a nap.

(He falls asleep, wakes up.)

Lisette!

LISETTE.

What?!

GERONTE.

Where's my shawl?!

LISETTE.

It's in your lap!

(She throws it over his head. He speaks from beneath it.)

GERONTE.

Someday you'll go too far!

LISETTE.

Indeed I may!

GERONTE.

You twit!

LISETTE.

You yell at everything I say!

GERONTE.

Is this a way to treat a man who's ill?

LISETTE.

It's almost two o'clock. Here, take a pill.

(She opens his mouth, drops the pill in, closes his mouth, and slaps him on the back, as though she's done it a hundred times.)

Works every time.

CRISPIN.

A dandy system.

GERONTE.

Aahh.

(When he recovers.)

You wench!

LISETTE.

Decrepit coot!

GERONTE.

You're fired!

LISETTE.

Ha!

GERONTE.

Go pack! I'm throwing you into the street.

LISETTE.

Good. After this the street will be a treat.

GERONTE.

Now take me to the study.

LISETTE.

Certainly.

(She begins to wheel him in as they do the next exchange.)

GERONTE.

This heartless wench will be the death of me.
Lisette!

LISETTE.

What now!

GERONTE.

It's time for my emetic!

LISETTE.

You just had one.

GERONTE.

Well then, my diuretic.

LISETTE.

You had that too.

GERONTE.

I need a cataplasm.

LISETTE.

Oh, no you don't.

GERONTE.

I do! I'll have a spasm!

LISETTE.

Go right ahead.

GERONTE.

You lizard!

LISETTE.

Don't be glum.
In just a while it's time for laudanum.

GERONTE.

What time was my last…

(Whispering to her.)

LISETTE.

What?!

GERONTE.

My…you-know…

LISETTE.

Oh.
Now let me see…it's not yet time to go.

GERONTE.

Then leave me, crocodile!

LISETTE.

Avec plaisir.

GERONTE.

Don't show your face to me again!

LISETTE.

I cheer
To hear the welcome news, you clod!

GERONTE.

You scullion!

LISETTE.

Cur!

GERONTE.

Rag-picker!

LISETTE.

Scrub!

GERONTE.

Slubberdegullion!

LISETTE.

(She slams the study door, turns, and addresses **CRISPIN**.*)*

Now where were we? Oh, yes. The subject of
Our marriage. The annuity.

CRISPIN.

(Getting amorous again.)

And love.

LISETTE.

The task at hand.

CRISPIN.

The old man…

LISETTE.

How to broach
The subject of Eraste –

CRISPIN.

(Still making out.)

A soft approach.

LISETTE.

Do not rely on his senility.
The very mention of Eraste and he
Becomes a lucid man of thirty-five.
His venom is what keeps that man alive.
I've seen him go from stupor to irate
In seconds, if he's forced to contemplate
The subject of Eraste.

CRISPIN.

Leave him to me.
I'll use my talents in diplomacy.

LISETTE.

Diplomacy! Where did you learn?

CRISPIN.

I once

Apprenticed to a diplomat. A dunce
Who wanted me to write his oratory.
That night he spoke…but that's another story.
Now go and get him. No point in delaying
The scene.

(She goes to leave, he kisses her again.)

LISETTE.

(Aside, as she leaves.)

That man can kiss.

CRISPIN.

What was I saying?
Oh yes. Geronte. A case in point, poor soul.
Among the wealthy, life can take its toll,
And all his fortune cannot buy him youth
Or health, or love, or friends, and that's the truth.

LISETTE.

(Wheeling **GERONTE** *back in.)*

Well, here we are!

CRISPIN.

He looks so well today.
His skin's a rather piquant shade of gray.
Is he all right?

LISETTE.

Of course. He's in a trance.
Just mention – you-know-who.

CRISPIN.

All right.

LISETTE.

Bonne chance.

CRISPIN.

Your nephew, sir –

GERONTE.

(Waking instantly.)

That pea-brain? Say no more.

CRISPIN.

Sends greetings, and he hopes you won't deplore
His most sincere regard for your well-being.

GERONTE.

I'll bet he does.

CRISPIN.

If you'd agree to seeing
Him for just a moment –

GERONTE.

No!

LISETTE.

Be nice!

CRISPIN.

He's anxious to solicit your advice
About a somewhat delicate affair.

GERONTE.

That birdbrain's always getting in my hair!
All right. Where is he?

CRISPIN.

(Aside to **LISETTE**.*)*

On his way, I hope.

(To **ERASTE**.*)*

He's not quite here yet.

GERONTE.

Not here yet? The dope!

He wants to see me and he isn't here.
You are expecting him sometime this year?

CRISPIN.

(Looking out the window.)

Oh, yes indeed, I venture to presume
That shortly he'll be standing in this room.

(The door bursts open; it is **ERASTE**. *The exuberance with which he opens the door causes an alabaster vase on a table by the door to fall and break. A silence.* **ERASTE** *is frozen in fear.)*

GERONTE.

Which priceless piece of pottery was that?

LISETTE.

The alabaster vase by Montserrat.

GERONTE.

The Montserrat?!

LISETTE.

Yes.

GERONTE.

Idiotic pup!
He'll never learn. Lisette!

LISETTE.

What!

GERONTE.

Clean it up!

ERASTE.

Oh uncle, I'm so sorry, please forgive
My clumsiness!

GERONTE.

And I am forced to live
In constant peril for my life – watch out!

(**ERASTE** *trips again over a piece of furniture.)*

ERASTE.

Oh, yes! Excuse me.

GERONTE.

Worthless knockabout.
I wonder that I'm still alive with him
Around me.

LISETTE.

(Aside to **CRISPIN**.*)*

Things are looking somewhat grim.

ERASTE.

(Aside to **CRISPIN**.*)*

Crispin!

CRISPIN.

(Edging to him.)

What is it?

ERASTE.

I have brought her.

CRISPIN.

Good.
Where is she?

ERASTE.

(Pointing out the door.)

There.

CRISPIN.

(Looking.)

Please tell me, if you would,
Who is that woman with her?

ERASTE.

Her mamá.
She wants to meet my uncle.

CRISPIN.

Oh, la la.

(Aside to **LISETTE**.*)*

CRISPIN.

He's sprung a mother on me.

LISETTE.

Oh what fun.

Another challenge!

CRISPIN.

Be prepared to run.

(They nod to each other. He goes to **GERONTE**.*)*

Oh sir! A grand occasion it would seem!
Your neighbors hold you in such high esteem
That they have ventured to our door to pay
Their great respects in person, here today.

GERONTE.

They never came before.

CRISPIN.

They've just moved in.

(Aside.)

Now let me see…the best place to begin…

(Aside to **ERASTE**, *after a quick reflection.)*

I'm ready. You may bring them in.

ERASTE.

Oh joy!

I knew you'd do it!

CRISPIN.

Try not to destroy

Another vase.

*(***ERASTE** *gets the ladies,* **CRISPIN** *speaks to* **GERONTE**.*)*

May I present to you…

(A quick whispered conference with **ERASTE**.*)*

Madame Argante.

MME ARGANTE.

Delighted.

GERONTE.

How'd'ye do?

CRISPIN.

Her daughter Isabelle.

GERONTE.

Who? Isabelle?

LISETTE.

Yes!

ISABELLE.

How'd'ye do, sir.

GERONTE.

Who's this mademoiselle?

What is she doing here?

ERASTE.

(Aside to **CRISPIN**.*)*

What do I say?

CRISPIN.

First offer them a chair.

ERASTE.

Oh, straightaway!

(A great deal of confusion producing chairs for both ladies. **ERASTE** *trips and bumps into everyone.)*

GERONTE.

Excuse me for a moment. Psst, Lisette!

LISETTE.

Pardonnez-moi.

(She goes to **GERONTE**.*)*

What is it?

GERONTE.

I forget…

What time…the diuretic…

LISETTE.

Ten past two.

It's not time yet.

GERONTE.

But soon! I'll signal you.

(They do an elaborate mime routine of exchanging signals, then return to the guests. **LISETTE** *serves them the pâté. A moment of silence, which* **CRISPIN** *breaks.)*

CRISPIN.

Madame? You've moved here?

MME ARGANTE.

Yes, from Compiegne. [com-pee-YEN]

LISETTE.

(After there is no reaction from **GERONTE**, *shouting in his ear.)*

They've moved from Compiegne!

GERONTE.

How's that again?

LISETTE.

I said Compiegne, you toad!

GERONTE.

I heard!

CRISPIN.

That's nice.

It's…nice in Compiegne.

MME ARGANTE.

One pays a price

For rustic life.

GERONTE.

A price? What price?

MME ARGANTE.

Good sir,

My daughter's future. I would not deter
The opportunity for wealthy suitors.
She's educated. Why, the finest tutors
Have shaped her character, refined her sense
And formed her spirit. I've spared no expense
Preparing her to take her place among
Her worthy peers. And though she is still young,
She's of a very marriageable age.

ERASTE.

She's very healthy –

(They both bring her forward to **GERONTE**.*)*

CRISPIN.

Wiser than a sage –

(She produces a book from a basket she is carrying.)

ERASTE.

Her teeth are good…

(She smiles. Her teeth are pearls.)

CRISPIN.

She's strong –

(He hands her a piece of firewood which she breaks in two.)

ERASTE.

Artistic –

(She takes out a piece of embroidery from the basket.)

CRISPIN.

Kind –

(She tucks **GERONTE***'s shawl around his lap.)*

ERASTE.

She cooks –

(She produces a small cake from the basket.)

CRISPIN.

Recites –

ISABELLE.

How doth the –

CRISPIN.

She's refined!

(She curtsies.)

GERONTE.

Yes, yes, I see her virtues all intact.
But what has this to do with me, in fact?

CRISPIN.

Please tell us, sir, your thoughts on marriage.

GERONTE.

Why?

CRISPIN.

This demoiselle would like to satisfy
Her mother's fondest wish and marry –

GERONTE.

You?
You wish to marry?

ISABELLE.

Yes, I –

GERONTE.

That will do!

CRISPIN.

(Aside to **ERASTE**.*)*

Now! Ask him now!

ERASTE.

I can't. I'm petrified!
You do it.

CRISPIN.

No, it must be you.

ERASTE.

But I'd

Just make him angry. Please!

*(***ERASTE** *gives* **CRISPIN** *a look he uses only when he is so desperate he can think of nothing else. It resembles Kermit when he wrinkles up his mouth. It always works on* **CRISPIN**.*)*

CRISPIN.

All right!

(To **GERONTE**.*)*

You're satisfied that she should marry?

GERONTE.

Quite.

CRISPIN.

You think a worthy wife she well might be?

GERONTE.

Well, I suppose…

ERASTE.

(Aside to **CRISPIN**.*)*

He likes her!

LISETTE.

Ssh! We'll see.

ERASTE.

I knew he'd do it!

LISETTE.

So did I.

ISABELLE.

And me!

CRISPIN.

Then you approve of her as wife to be?

GERONTE.

I plan to marry her immediately.

ERASTE.

Oh joy!

ISABELLE.

Oh rapture!

LISETTE.

Love!

CRISPIN.

We did it!

ALL FOUR.

(Suddenly realizing at the same time.)

What?

LISETTE.

You?

ERASTE.

Marry her?

CRISPIN.

Yourself?

GERONTE.

Of course. Why not?
That's what you've been suggesting, isn't it?

ERASTE.

But he meant –

CRISPIN.

Well, you see –

LISETTE.

That is –

CRISPIN.

(Aside and very quietly.)

Oh, sh–

GERONTE.

Now that I think on it, a good idea!
In my declining years a wife would be a
Nurse, companion in connubial bliss,

To bathe me, dress me, read to me –

LISETTE.

What's this?

Those are my duties!

GERONTE.

Were. Until today.

You're fired.

LISETTE.

Ha!

GERONTE.

I mean just what I say.

LISETTE.

You constipated, liver-spotted gout–
Infested ancient and decrepit lout!
You can't just toss me out into the street.

GERONTE.

Oh yes I can, you slut. Revenge is sweet.

LISETTE.

And what about the services that I
Perform for you, without which you would die?

GERONTE.

You've just extolled the great intelligence
Of what's-her-name. Her kindness, common sense,
You'll teach her everything before you go.
The poultices and soporifics –

LISETTE.

No!

GERONTE.

You'll do just as I say!

LISETTE.

I won't!

GERONTE.

You will!

You vixen!

LISETTE.

Croaker!

GERONTE.

Brabbler!

LISETTE.

Imbecile!

MME ARGANTE.

Monsieur?!

GERONTE.

Madame?

MME ARGANTE.

I have a word to say.
Before you call my daughter fiancée
I must know that her future is secure.
When marrying a man who is…mature,
As you are, she must have…stability.
You're surely not inclined to disagree.
And, too, my daughter must be given voice.
She has some say in this important choice.

ISABELLE.

I –

MME ARGANTE.

That's enough!

GERONTE.

I bow to your concern.
No doubt you will not be distressed to learn
That though mature, I am still in my prime
Of life, and what is more important, I'm
A very rich old man. My whole estate
I will bequeath to her.

ERASTE.

(Aside.)

Oh, fickle fate!

ISABELLE.

Oh dear!

(She faints. **MME ARGANTE** *and* **ERASTE** *attend her.)*

MME ARGANTE.

She's fainted from the very thrill
Of being wed to you –

CRISPIN.

(Aside.)

And to his will.

MME ARGANTE.

In that case, cher monsieur, it is with pleasure
That I present my daughter's greatest treasure –
Her hand in marriage –

(She and **ERASTE** *carry the still-fainted* **ISABELLE** *over to the old man, offering her limp hand.)*

GERONTE.

(As **ISABELLE** *is reviving.)*

And with rest and care,
We may produce a new and legal heir!

*(***ISABELLE** *faints again.)*

MME ARGANTE.

She's weak from joy.

CRISPIN.

Apparently.

ERASTE.

(Aside to **CRISPIN**.*)*

Crispin!

CRISPIN.

I know. We need to make another plan.

(To **GERONTE**.*)*

You cannot marry her.

GERONTE.

Why not?

LISETTE.

(Aside to **CRISPIN**.*)*

Why not?

CRISPIN.

The illness you'll endure –

(Aside to **LISETTE**.*)*

Make up a plot!

LISETTE.

It's quite well known that men in their mature years
Who marry, will undoubtedly endure years
Of symptoms, ills, diseases and conditions
Inflicted by such addle-brained ambitions.

GERONTE.

All well and good, such clever little quips,
But I've not heard it from a doctor's lips.

LISETTE.

(Aside.) A doctor's lips?

(To **GERONTE**.*)*

It just so happens I
Have sent for one, to come and testify.

(She is edging **CRISPIN** *toward the study.)*

An expert and a world-renowned physician
Who will himself present his admonition
Regarding marriage after sixty-five.
Just listen if you want to stay alive.

(Aside to **CRISPIN**.*)*

The trunk!

CRISPIN.

The costumes?

LISETTE.

In the study. Go!

You'll be my world-renowned physician!

CRISPIN.

Oh!

I get it! What a perspicacious scheme!

LISETTE.

(He goes. **LISETTE** *takes the focus.)*

This doctor, sir, is held in high esteem
Among his colleagues for his expertise
In matters of infection and disease.

GERONTE.

I want to tend to matters here at hand!
Lisette, explain so that she'll understand
The tasks she will perform as wife and nurse.

LISETTE.

(Aside.)

I'd better humor him.

(To **ISABELLE**.*)*

First, you must curse
Him regularly, just like this –

GERONTE.

Lisette!

LISETTE.

All right! Now every night you have to get
The mustard plaster for his chest. You put
The ointment on right here, next, wrap his foot…

(She lifts the wrapped foot to demonstrate and lets it drop.)

LISETTE.

This one. Like this –

GERONTE.

Ow!

LISETTE.

Please don't interrupt.
He gets six drops of this before he's supped.
And ten of these right afterwards.

ISABELLE.

(She sits, feeling faint.)

Oh, dear!

LISETTE.

(Jerking him forward.)

The cataplasms go on over here.

ISABELLE.

Oh dear!

ERASTE.

(Aside to **ISABELLE**.*)*

Don't fear. Crispin will save the day.

LISETTE.

You give him these just after dejeuner.

ISABELLE.

Oh my!

LISETTE.

(Taking out some enema apparatus.)

And most importantly, you stand
Upon a chair, like this, you raise your hand,
The trick is in the wrist. Like this – parfait!
And then you push –

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