

“A House in Society”
(a comedy of manners)

(The Green Room. A Duke and Duchess enter. With them are the Countess Puerile, a society lady, and Daniel Waterman, a fop of high regard.)

Duke. A cherubic street-urchin if I ever saw one.

Duchess. I say, dear, that story is funnier with each retelling.

Waterman. Ha, ha! You mean to say, Duke, that you submit yourself to the cause of Charity? Imagine it, my dear Countess: his grace, waist-coated and powder-puffed, in the gutters!

Puerile. Charity is a virtue, Master Waterman. Why, I myself plan, on next Friday, to treat many to a fine meal of Brazilian beef and lamb – the Roman Bishop be damned!

Duchess. Capital idea, Countess. We two will also be feeding the masses – on Saturday, those gutter-snipes shall be made welcome in our own home and treated to such breakfast delicacies as they could not imagine.

(James, a monarch, enters.)

James. My coronation was a lively affair, indeed. And now I sit on my throne, just old enough to die and depart. No matter: tradition is tradition.

Waterman. A wise point, my lord, and well-spoken.

James. Now, those pesky Lords, on the other hand: each imagines themselves ruler of all they survey – I would as soon turn my back and they would cut off my head and spout their lie for all eternity. Legislation, they call it.

Puerile. The two ladies, though – are they not fine society folk?

James. Indeed they are, but of middling quality.

Puerile. I always say, my lord, a middling-quality woman far outstrips those men in any contest.

(Enter three lords: Mark, David, and Robert; and two ladies: Alice and Margaret the Dangerous.)

Lords and Ladies. You do us wrong, lord. We serve the citizens! You cannot fault that.

James. Indeed I can. I will not say that word, that c-word –

Waterman. Codpiece?

James. Away, with you fop, and your one-tracked mind. “Subject,” I think, serves the tongue better than “citizen” can.

Lords and Ladies. Your situation is far from that of our neighboring republic. Far from demanding the people’s power, monarchs instead are enthroned in their sleep, none the wiser until morning!

(Enter Bruce, a minor functionary of the court.)

Bruce. A fork, a knife, two spoons – no. Two knives, a soup-spoon, a lobster-fork – no. Curses!

James. What trouble now?

Bruce. Oh, my lord! A veritable nightmare!

Waterman. You would do well, courtier, to heed the words of the Chinese. They observe that the knife, a tool of war, has no place at the civilized table.

Lords and Ladies. What chaos! Surely life’s hardest burdens are ours: how do we arrange the silver?

Puerile. Everything depends on proper placement.

Duke. Not everything can be resolved over a dinner. Some disputes must take to the field of war!

All. Ha!

Duke. The field of manly competition, then.

Duchess. What do you suggest?

Waterman. A test of wits! Of brains! How can I help but prevail?

Bruce. I think, Master Waterman, you would meet your match at a more physical contest. Opportunities abound, if you trust your luck.

Waterman. I might be liable to lose my bodily fluids. I would hold you to task, sir, upsetting my humors.

Bruce. Nonsense. If your humors need adjustment, there’s many a surgeon available who, for no fee at all, will remove your precious life’s-blood.

Lords and Ladies. Uncivil talk!

Bruce. Then let it be so. I maintain it happens every day.

(A Banker enters, counting.)

James. What now? Good my lord, Chancellor of the Exchequer, how goes?

Banker. Money, sir! Can it be? Note my wide smile, sir!

Waterman. Astounding! A Jew, but a Moorish Jew!

Banker. Not at all. You mistake me, I'm sure.

Puerile. Uncivil talk!

Waterman. Good countess, when Nature presents me with such oddities, I must remark!

Bruce. A natural philosopher, then? Newton? Hooke?

Waterman. And why not, after all?

All. Ha!

Waterman. Test me, then.

Duke. Not here, surely.

Puerile. Society demands some restraint.

Waterman. Name the place and the time, then, lords; I'll match anyone.

Duchess. This very place, my dear fop.

Waterman. All the more convenient. When?

Duchess. A fortnight hence, if it will suit.

Waterman. It will.

Lords and Ladies. We shall be in attendance, good sir; pray you conduct yourself well.

Puerile. What's the nature of this contest?

Bruce. A contest of natural philosophy?

Duke. You mistake me. It shall consist of many endeavors. Art, philosophy – all these things a society lord or lady must have at their command at all times.

Waterman. My talent, God-given, is lacking, but so help me, I shall do my best. A fortnight, then.

(He exits.)

All. Scandal!

Puerile. Come, let us not talk of these things. It's enough to give one dropsy.

Duchess. A diversion, then?

Puerile. Take your pick, my lady. Sunday next, we might take in a spectacle from the East – "Paper Man," they call it. It has been talked about in all the lowest circles.

Lords and Ladies. Oh! Be civil, we pray, dear Countess!

Puerile. "Wicked," then, might suit your tastes. Wednesday evening we'll go together to the theatre.

Duchess. Delightful!

Bruce. Mind, my lady – do not spend all your energy at these spectacles.

Duchess. Master Courtier, your meaning?

Bruce. Surely you don't neglect child-birthing, the noblest of all Woman's pursuits?

All. Oh! Uncivil talk! We shall surely die of embarrassment! Ha ha!

(Curtain.)