

THE LAST LAUGH

By

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THE LAST LAUGH

CAST

*The play is performed by 8 actors
(6 men and 2 women)*

Georges Feydeau, a playwright (30's to 50's)
Emile Blenheim, an art dealer (late 20's to 30's)
Henri Blenheim, an art dealer (Emile's brother, late 20's)
Adele Finache (late 20's to early 30's) *
Bernadette Finache (Adele's identical twin sister) *
Victor, a valet (ancient)
Marie, a maid (Victor's wife, 20's)
Duke Pedro Somontano de Barbastro (Spanish, ageless)
Celestina de Somontano de Barbastro (the Duke's wife, late 20's to
early 30's) *
A Driver **
A Porter **
A Telegraph Delivery Man **
A Waiter **

*Adele, Bernadette and Celestina are played by the same actress

** The Driver, Porter, Telegraph Delivery Man and Waiter are
played by the same actor (20's)

ACT ONE

(A DOORBELL RINGS AGAIN AND AGAIN. VICTOR, the ancient, know-it-all valet, doesn't care. He sits, reading a newspaper in the salon of a ritzy home in Paris 1914.)

(The ritziness can be implied -- what's important is the five doors. The center door leads to the entrance foyer, which we can see part of. The other doors lead off to a sitting room, powder room, large closet, and small gun closet, the interiors of all of which are unseen.)

(At the moment, all the doors are closed, except for the door to the foyer, through which we see MARIE -- the young flirtatious maid who is Victor's wife -- as she whizzes past:)

MARIE

Victor! The front door!

(Victor ignores her, turns a page in the newspaper.)

(The DOORBELL RINGS again. Marie rushes in, carrying a vase of flowers:)

MARIE (CONT'D)

Will you answer the door!

VICTOR

(reading from the newspaper,
disapprovingly)

Another strike -- the world today...

(A DIFFERENT DOORBELL RINGS.)

MARIE

The service entrance! I'll get that, you get the front.

(She hurries out to the foyer.)

VICTOR

Unbelievable -- this time it's waiters, striking for the right to have moustaches!

(The FRONT DOORBELL RINGS again, several times. Marie hurries in, arranges flowers:)

MARIE

The extra chairs just arrived.

VICTOR

We mustn't seat M. Renoir and M. Matisse next to each other. "I invented impressionism", "No I invented impressionism"...

(Now there is KNOCKING from the front door in addition to the DOORBELL.)

VICTOR (CONT'D)

More political scandals -- bring back Napoleon, that's what I say.

MARIE

(to the audience)

Why did I marry an old husband?

VICTOR

(to the audience)

I was a step up for her.

MARIE

You're not going soft in the head today of all days, are you?

VICTOR

I'm still hard everywhere and any time.

MARIE

(daring him)

Race you to our bedroom.

VICTOR

With the boys' weddings in two hours?!

MARIE

(to the audience)

He couldn't get to our bedroom in two hours.

(to Victor)

You always have an excuse -- "I'm tired", "I'm busy", "There are sixty people coming for dinner --

(The DOORBELL RINGS CONSTANTLY, as if someone is leaning on it. Marie, exasperated, rushes out.)

VICTOR

Weddings at home, never heard of such a thing. Raspberries grown under glass, flowers imported from Provence, lobster from the coast -- as if I don't have enough work...

(Marie shows in GEORGES FEYDEAU, richly but hastily dressed, carrying a suitcase, and distressed. He likes to have everything under control, and right now his life is in total disarray.)

MARIE

Sorry you had to wait, M. Feydeau, Victor is --

VICTOR

(wobbling to his feet)

-- is happy as ever to welcome you, Monsieur.

(Victor offers his hand to Georges. Georges holds out the suitcase for Victor to take, but instead Victor shakes George's other hand.)

VICTOR (CONT'D)

How's the new play coming along?

GEORGES

Play? What play? The play I haven't started writing? The play that goes into rehearsal in six days?

VICTOR
 (oblivious to George's
 anxiety)
 Going well, is it? Your last play -- what a success!

GEORGES
 What good does that do me now? Please tell M. Emile I need
 to see him --

MARIE
 (equally oblivious;
 competing for George's
 attention)
 How do you get such hilarious ideas?

GEORGES
 I wish I knew! Oh to be able to feed the carnivorous beast!

VICTOR
 If you'll forgive one small criticism --

GEORGES
 Et tu, Victor?

VICTOR
 The character of the valet, so unbelievable! Valets have the
 greatest discretion --

MARIE
 And that flirt of a maid, running after every man --

VICTOR
 Why a respectable man would marry such a tart --

MARIE
 But the way the married couple bickered, now that was
 realistic.

GEORGES
 I too am married. Oh god, why she should choose this week to
 destroy me! I need to see M. Emile...

MARIE & VICTOR
 (to each other, at same
 time)
 Go announce M. Feydeau.

(They each try to monopolize
 Georges:)

MARIE

The house is at sixes and sevens and my husband here can't be bothered to raise a finger -- and that's not all he can't raise.

GEORGES

I really must see Emile right away --

VICTOR

An interesting expression, "sixes and sevens", derived from the dice game "hazard" -- do you recall it, monsieur?

(A RUMBLE OF THUNDER.)

MARIE

This rain! So much extra work -- the day's hardly started and already I'm so hot...

(She lowers her blouse for
Georges.)

VICTOR

I used to play it with the boys for hours in the old days, before everything got so hurried -- in fact, one weekend --

MARIE

Nobody wants to hear your stories, go announce Monsieur.

(to Georges, flirting)

Can I provide anything while you wait, monsieur?

GEORGES

A plot.

MARIE

A plot?

GEORGES

I need a new play. And a new wife. Also a new mistress.

(with the weight of the
world:)

What do women want, Marie?

MARIE

You don't need my advice, you write about it so masterfully.

GEORGES

It seems I know nothing of reality.

VICTOR

You think Marie does? She was juggling for tips when I found her.

MARIE

I was an artist's model, a noble calling -- where would the masters be if it weren't for naked women on canvas?

VICTOR

The boys run a respectable art gallery --

GEORGES

Oh and a new home, I also need a new home.

MARIE

Did the masters tell you they commissioned M. Renoir to paint portraits of their fiancées as their wedding gifts? Isn't that romantic?

GEORGES

I'll go get Emile myself --

VICTOR

Nonsense, I insist -- Marie, fetch M. Emile.

(to Georges)

Don't know their place, young people today.

(The SERVICE ENTRANCE DOORBELL RINGS.)

MARIE

The service entrance again! More trunks! The sisters have the most beautiful clothes you can imagine!

(She exits to the foyer.)

VICTOR

Two brothers marrying identical twin sisters -- on the same day! In the same house! In which they're going to live! Together! Does that sound healthy?

GEORGES

Nothing scandalous in that...

VICTOR

I meant healthy for me? All the extra work! Since the boys' parents passed away, this has been a masculine home, now there will be women coming and going, lady friends wanting tea...

(he shudders)

Now I'll have two mistresses -- well, three if you count my own mistress -- actually four if you count Marie. And I can't even tell the brides apart!

(He collapses to the chair,
exhausted just thinking of it.)

GEORGES

Adele is brunette, Bernadette is blonde.

VICTOR

Yes but which one's marrying which boy?

(A handsome young DRIVER is shown
in by Marie, who's all over him:)

DRIVER

(to Georges)

'Scuse me monsieur, you said you'd be back with the car fare?

MARIE

How'd you like to take me out for a spin?

VICTOR

Marie! Lay the table.

MARIE

That's about the only thing that gets laid around here...

(She exits, sneaking a caress of
the Driver's shoulders on her way
out.)

VICTOR

I heard that!

GEORGES

Victor, could you lend me a few francs?

VICTOR

Sorry monsieur, my hearing...

DRIVER

Hey aren't you Georges Feydeau, the playwright?

GEORGES

I was.

DRIVER

Don't worry 'bout the fare -- if you'd do me the honor of --

(EMILE BLENHEIM -- charming, vain, a man's man, always in search of adventure -- enters from the foyer, carrying a couple of rifles, which he stows in the gun closet.)

EMILE

Georges old man, you're early.

GEORGES

Guns? You're not even married yet.

EMILE

(laughing good-naturedly)

Putting them away in anticipation of the blessed event. No more escaping to the country for a little bird-shooting -- and some red-tail on the side. At least not for the next few weeks.

VICTOR

(from the chair, to Emile)

Have you cleaned your room? Can't expect me to clean up after you with all the extra work you've created today.

DRIVER

(to Georges)

Monsieur...?

GEORGES

This is a bit embarrassing, Emile...

EMILE

Nothing embarrassing between old friends, spit it out.

GEORGES

I need to borrow some money.

EMILE

Say no more, I know how quickly money evaporates at Maxim's. I hear you closed the place last night -- as usual.

(Emile holds out money to the Driver.)

GEORGES

Actually, I was hoping you might --

DRIVER

No I couldn't, not for driving a genius like M. Feydeau...

EMILE

He hasn't got a play running now, can't get you tickets.

(Emile puts the money in the Driver's hand.)

(THUNDER RUMBLES. The Driver BARKS.)

(Georges and Emile react, look at the Driver: what the hell? The Driver pretends it wasn't him, looks around:)

DRIVER

Do you have a dog?

EMILE

Victor, show Fifi out.

(Victor sighs. He tries to rise, sinks back into the chair. He waves his hand for help. The Driver helps him up, then Victor snatches his hand away:)

VICTOR

How dare you assume such familiarity? Out with you! Out!

(The Driver leaves.)

VICTOR (CONT'D)

(to Emile)

Remember the driver we had when you boys were children? He was furious every time you peed in the car.

(Emile holds up Georges' suitcase for Victor to take.)

(Victor ignores the suitcase, exits.)

EMILE

(re the suitcase)

Taking a trip? Hope you'll wait till after the weddings -- you're our witness, old man.

GEORGES

My wife threw me out, I was hoping you could --

EMILE

Threw you out of your own house?

GEORGES

Her house actually, as she was kind enough to remind me -- her father gave it to her when we married.

EMILE

He gave it to both of you! Marriage is a sacred institution, a bonding of wealth! She brought a wealth of money, you brought a wealth of talent.

GEORGES

Do you think you might be able to --

EMILE

In our case, we bring a respected art gallery and a good financial position, our fiancées bring fantastic social connections and a new influx of clients. Not all roses, mind you, I'll have to put up with my brother's wife -- beautiful but what a dimwit. Henri depends so much on me, I couldn't insist they live elsewhere --

GEORGES

Speaking of living elsewhere...

EMILE

Hmm? Oh sorry old man, normally I'd roll out the welcome but with the wives moving in --

GEORGES

No no, I wouldn't dream of imposing myself, I was hoping --

EMILE

What about your mistress? She's always pestering you to spend more time with her.

GEORGES

She was my first stop -- she saw the suitcase, put two and two together and locked me out. Apparently I'm less attractive when I'm broke. Fast with a door, I'll give her that.

EMILE

What shocking behavior! If you can't count on your mistress to be loyal -- broke, did you say?

GEORGES

That's what I wanted to talk to you about...

EMILE

You're the most successful writer in France, you've made fortunes off your plays, how can you be broke?

GEORGES

You sound like my wife -- and my mistress.

EMILE

Say, you don't happen to need a loan, do you?

GEORGES

(aside, to us)

Finally!

("innocently", to Emile:)

Well I could use some cash, I have to move into a hotel...

EMILE

A hotel? Nothing better! Fantastic place for adventures!

GEORGES

Oh no, I need things under control so I can write.

EMILE

Hope you don't mind my asking -- have you been gambling?

GEORGES

Of course not! I invest in the stock market.

EMILE

But that's the biggest gamble of all!

GEORGES

I have a method, a scientific method --

EMILE

A method that results in you being broke?

GEORGES

Temporarily. But the market's like theatre, there are rules, formulas, you just have to stick to them and eventually they pay off. Like life.

EMILE

Not so sure the old rules apply any more -- all the political upheavals, military skirmishes. But you're smarter than I...

GEORGES

Stop it, you're the cleverest art dealer in Paris!

EMILE

Clever enough to know what I'm good at: bringing in clients. My brother's the smart one, he can figure out which starving artist is on his way up. I'm just a people person -- and I have to tell you Georges, I never liked that wife of yours --

GEORGES

You could've warned me!

EMILE

She complains because you go out with friends at night? You're a busy man, you need a little adventure now and then.

GEORGES

It's not "adventure", it's work!

(Emile laughs.)

GEORGES (CONT'D)

No really. And then when I come home, she's waiting up and argues the rest of the night. I'm an artist, I have a delicate constitution!

EMILE

How are you supposed to write if you're upset?

GEORGES

Exactly! I need everything to be orderly -- wake at mid-day, a quiet afternoon of writing, a nap -- some of my best work is accomplished while I'm napping --

EMILE

Of course!

GEORGES

Then dinner at Maxim's, with colleagues. Always home by two a.m., three at the latest. Simple, predictable, always the same. When she upsets the rhythm, the well runs dry. Monday I was so off-schedule I couldn't even make love to my mistress!

EMILE

My dear fellow!

GEORGES

What do women want, Emile?

EMILE

You tell me, you're the grand chronicler of relationships of our time.

GEORGES

Oh no, all I do is write comedies about adultery. They're mostly mathematics really -- 1 is married to 2, but lusts after 3, who's married to 4. 4 fancies 2, but 2 is proper and will only have an affair with 4 if 1 has an affair of 1's own, so 4 arranges for 1 to be seduced by 5 -- who turns out to be the lover of a German who shows up with a gun.

EMILE

Exactly, they're about the impossibility of marriage!

GEORGES

And you're getting married today.

EMILE

But I've chosen wisely.

GEORGES

That's what we all think when we're blinded by love.

EMILE

(laughing)

"Blinded by love"? That sounds awful!

GEORGES

It is!

EMILE

Love is wonderful!

GEORGES

It's impossible.

EMILE

We should get as much as possible, from as many different sources as we can!

GEORGES

That will only land you in trouble -- read my plays.

EMILE

You think you can understand love by writing about it? It's mysterious, dangerous, uncontrollable -- that's what makes it marvelous! And I don't plan to let marriage waylay me, I've got a system of my own all worked out, listen --

(The FRONT DOORBELL RINGS.)

VICTOR (O.S.)

Mademoiselle Finache and mademoiselle Finache, welcome.

EMILE

The brides are here! Where's my brother?

ADELE (O.S.)

(bombastic, commanding
voice)

Victor. Bernadette is feeling faint, of course.

BERNADETTE (O.S.)

(delicate, demure voice)

I think I feel fine, Adele --

ADELE (O.S.)

Nonsense, you're pale, you need rest -- it's not every day we get married. Victor, show Bernadette to her room.

GEORGES

If I could just have that check, I'll move into the hotel.

EMILE

No no, wait, observe the brilliance of my system.

GEORGES

I'll be back in time for the ceremony --

EMILE

Stay -- maybe there's a play in it -- not that you need my ideas!

GEORGES

(to the audience)

It's come to this.

(He sneaks out a small notebook,
prepares to take notes.)

BERNADETTE (O.S.)

I can find my room, Adele --

ADELE (O.S.)

Victor will take you -- you'd probably lose your way.

(ADELE FINACHE enters, like a
great gust of wind. A bossy
brunette, she accepts no nonsense
and knows what's best for
everyone.)

ADELE (CONT'D)

There you are Emile, you might have greeted us at the door.

(He kisses her on both cheeks.)

EMILE

You know best, my turtle-dove, can you ever forgive me?

ADELE

(an order:)

Don't be silly.

EMILE

Isn't she fantastic, Georges? May I present M. Feydeau?

GEORGES

I'm honored to be part of your wedding, mademoiselle.

ADELE

I hope you won't confuse matters, I understand you have a
fondness for that sort of thing in your plays. I wouldn't
want to end up marrying Emile's sibling.

GEORGES

What's wrong with Henri?

ADELE

Too much useless information up here.

(the brain)

Men shouldn't fill their brains with facts, it leaves no room
for their wives to have an effect. Henri would do better to
emulate Emile.

EMILE

(doesn't get the insult)

My sweet sparrow.

ADELE

So M. Feydeau: no funny business.

GEORGES

I'll do my best.

ADELE

You must do more than your best. Where would humanity be if it only did its best? Would we have invented the automobile, the telephone, the electric light?

GEORGES

(aside)

Wasn't aware you had.

ADELE

(taking off her hat)

The feathers in this hat come from some beast in Africa -- if we hadn't conquered that dark continent because we merely did our best, what would our milliners do? And if you didn't waste your nights drinking and carousing at Maxim's, might not your plays be better than merely your best?

GEORGES

(aside)

Everybody's a critic.

(to Adele)

I don't drink alcohol, mademoiselle.

ADELE

Absurd, a little champagne is fortifying -- as a matter of fact, I could use some right now. Emile.

EMILE

Of course, my magpie.

(He RINGS for Victor.)

ADELE

What a day it's been! My poor sister is such a fragile, simple creature, unable to do anything for herself. We even had to trick her and Henri into marrying each other.

EMILE

All we did was introduce them, my bluejay, and then nature took its course.

ADELE

Nature? Nature is an amateur! Your brother would never have proposed had you not prompted him. And Bernadette, ever since we were children I've had to take her in hand -- quite literally, right outside I had to help her cross the street. She was distracted by the great enumeration of soldiers milling about.

GEORGES

(aside, making notes)

A bossy woman and her dim-witted sister...?

(Victor enters, peers at Adele:)

VICTOR

Which one are you?

EMILE

Victor, some champagne?

VICTOR

Don't mind if I do.

EMILE

I meant...

(He signals for Victor to pour champagne for them.)

VICTOR

Just because you're getting married today, don't think you can get uppity. I remember you when you shat your pants.

(During the following, Victor pours champagne into glasses on a tray. For each glass he pours, he drinks one himself.)

(HENRI BLENHEIM -- Emile's studious, disciplined, obliviously naive younger brother -- enters, balancing a notebook, pen, and a glass bell inside of which grows an orchid. His glasses are half-down his nose. He pushes them up, nearly stabbing himself in the eye with the pen:)

HENRI

Emile, the most extraordinary thing -- a woman just walked into my bedroom.

EMILE

You mean Bernadette?

HENRI

Bernadette...? Oh Bernadette!

ADELE

(sternly)

Good afternoon, Henri.

HENRI

Adele? Oh are the weddings today? I lost all track of --

ADELE

Time? days? life itself?

HENRI

Extraordinary, this orchid, the *Cirrhopetalum Africanum*, it bloomed! Today! The second time in six months under glass! In nature it only blooms once a year -- I must write immediately to the *Journal of Extraordinary Orchidoideae*.

ADELE

This proves my point: Nature requires our assistance.

EMILE

The orchid?

ADELE

(to Emile)

Your brother.

GEORGES

(aside, writing in notebook)

I've never put a murder in a play...

(Victor serves champagne from the tray. He's very wobbly, and they dive in to get the glasses before they spill.)

HENRI
Georges! What're you doing here?

GEORGES
I'm your witness.

HENRI
Oh good, you can write to the journal too --

GEORGES
For the wedding -- please accept my best wishes.

(Georges holds out his hand to shake hands. Henri hesitates, eyeing George's hand nervously.)

HENRI
I'd rather not shake hands if you don't mind.

GEORGES
Have I done something wrong?

HENRI
No no -- it's germs. The latest findings are extraordinary -- did you know that germs can be transferred from one person to another by the merest touch? They can even fly across the room! I don't think I ever want to touch anyone ever again.

GEORGES
You're going to have a very formal wedding night.

HENRI
(not getting the joke)
Yes, Victor's laid out my tuxedo.

EMILE
I've had sparkling water put into a champagne bottle just for you, Georges, like they do for you at Maxim's. I've even had your initials written on the label, see? G.F.

(Emile pours a glass of water for Georges.)

ADELE
You're the writer, M. Feydeau, propose a toast.

GEORGES

... To -- love!

ADELE

I hope your new play is better than that.

GEORGES

(aside, writing in notebook)

She dies from poison in the champagne...

HENRI

Emile, you don't think Bernadette is going to make a habit of coming into my bedroom, do you?

EMILE

I imagine so, you will be married.

HENRI

She's so distracting!

EMILE

And part of marriage is making children.

HENRI

Children?! We're going to have children?!

ADELE

Of course! Children make our lives worthwhile.

HENRI

Perhaps when they're older -- when they're young all they make is a mess. We're occasionally obliged to entertain our cousin and her progeny -- absolute chaos! The last time they were here it took me two weeks to get my Amazonian beetles back in order.

ADELE

Amazonian beetles should be kept as far out of the reach of young children as their own genitals.

HENRI

Can't we just acquire children when they get older? I'm already behind schedule with my encyclopedia, I'm only up to the B's!

EMILE

There's more to life than research, brother.

HENRI

But research is the only way to really understand anything.

GEORGES

Like love? Good luck with that.

HENRI

Love defies understanding, there's no way to classify it.

(Victor raises his glass tipsily
to that, as he staggers out.)

HENRI (CONT'D)

I skipped ahead to the L's for a bit -- I was curious about lacquering techniques during the Quing dynasty, fascinating, the resin trees have to be fifteen years old before --

ADELE

The point?

HENRI

I read what some of the greatest poets say about love and I want no part of it.

GEORGES

Good man.

ADELE

Marriage isn't about love any more than it's about sex.

(Georges chokes on his drink.)

ADELE (CONT'D)

Do I surprise you? I understand that people say much less sensible things in your little plays.

GEORGES

(aside, writing in notebook)

And we have another suspect.

(snapping it shut, to

Adele:)

I'm surprised that you have such a modern view on marriage.

ADELE

I should say not! The modern notion of marriage is that it's everlasting love and non-stop connubial bliss.

Emile and I understand that marriage is a partnership based on values that are much more important than sexual intimacy.

EMILE

Isn't she marvelous?

HENRI

(lost)

"Sexual intimacy"?

ADELE

(to Emile)

Didn't your father have a talk with him?

EMILE

Henri is in some ways less French than English.

ADELE

Henri, I see I shall have to administer to you the same tutelage that I this morning bestowed upon Bernadette...

(She steers Henri out to the foyer.)

GEORGES

So that's why Bernadette was feeling ill.

EMILE

Now you understand I've made a wise choice. You heard Adele -
- she won't stand in my way with other women!

GEORGES

That's not exactly what I heard...

EMILE

This is one matter in which I'm wiser than you. You find Adele overbearing, correct?

GEORGES

Not at all...

EMILE

The truth, old friend?

GEORGES

I'd rather marry my own wife.

(BERNADETTE FINACHE appears in the foyer doorway.)

Although she is identical to her twin sister -- except for her blonde hair -- she is the polar opposite in personality: demure, over-protected to the point of vapidness, believes anything anybody tells her, and not the sharpest knife in the drawer.)

(Georges and Emile do not see her. She tries to get their attention but, being shy, she's not good at it, and they don't notice her.)

EMILE

Adele is overbearing. But it doesn't matter because we're not in love with each other.

(Bernadette, shocked, starts to leave, but she becomes interested in what they're saying, and hides in the doorway, eavesdropping:)

EMILE (CONT'D)

You, on the other hand, you were in love with your wife when you married her, correct?

GEORGES

Naturally.

EMILE

That was your mistake! Men like you expect to obtain everything in the same woman. Then when you tire of her, when the mere thought of spending another night in bed with her makes the faucet lose its water pressure -- when that happens, you seek out a mistress. With most wives that's a disaster! They may even have an affair of their own! Adele, however, understands. That's worth the sacrifice. And that, old man, is my system.

GEORGES

(thinking it through)

It's true, I did expect everything in the same woman -- but our mistake -- my wife and I -- our mistake was that we didn't know each other intimately before we married.

(Bernadette's attention is now fully engaged. She sneaks closer to hear better:)

GEORGES (CONT'D)

How absurd to be chain two people together forever who don't even know if they're well matched -- it's Russian roulette! Marriage would be so much better, so much more successful if we could marry a woman who we know we are sexually compatible with. There'd be no need for us to take mistresses.

(Bernadette, dismayed, almost reveals herself, scurries back into hiding.)

GEORGES (CONT'D)

Society's great mistake is that we expect our fiancées to know nothing about sex, but then when they become our wives we expect them to fascinate us endlessly -- with sex!

EMILE

But how would women gain that experience before marriage? What if they fell in love with someone else as a result? Women don't have our emotional self-control.

GEORGES

We could audition them! Excellent idea, if I do say so.

EMILE

And how do you propose to propose that to one's fiancée?

GEORGES

... Mmmm. The theory runs into trouble.

EMILE

You don't say.

GEORGES

It's so annoying -- we're enlightened about everything else nowadays: Medicine is correcting its barbaric practices of the past, technology is bringing the world closer together -- but we're still in the dark ages when it comes to marriage. No Emile, I'm convinced the only way to survive marriage is to insist we know each other sexually before we wed. Otherwise, divorce is inevitable.

(Bernadette gets an idea -- you can almost see the light bulb go off. She starts to sneak off -- but her dress gets caught on something. She tries to free herself without being noticed...)

EMILE

That's a bit dark. Cheer up, you'll make another fortune off your new play and then you'll have women at your feet again.

GEORGES

What new play's that? The one that starts rehearsals next week? The one I don't even have a title for?

EMILE

You can come up with a title later...

GEORGES

No, I can't start without a title, the title is everything!

EMILE

Then let's make up a title right now, get you started.

GEORGES

(looking through his
notebook)

How about "Suicide of a Playwright Grasping At Straws"?

(Bernadette finally frees
herself, knocking over something,
which alerts them to her
presence:)

EMILE

Bernadette!

BERNADETTE

I was looking for Adele -- you know, my sister?

EMILE

(patiently)

Yes that's right, Adele is your sister. May I introduce M. Feydeau?

GEORGES

Charmed.

BERNADETTE

Oh dear I'm sorry, I didn't mean to!

GEORGES

"Didn't mean to..."?

BERNADETTE

Charm you. So many men say that to me, I must have inherited powers from my mother.

(They look at her: What??)

BERNADETTE (CONT'D)

She was a witch -- at least that's what my father called her.

(Georges laughs, thinking she's joking. She isn't. He pulls out his notebook.)

BERNADETTE (CONT'D)

Have you seen Adele -- you know, my sister?

EMILE

Yes, we've established that Adele is your sister and yours alone.

BERNADETTE

Oh but that's not entirely true, M. Blenheim...

EMILE

You must call me Emile, I'm to become your brother-in-law.

BERNADETTE

So strange, one can become a brother. Our dear sister never ceased to be our sister even after she disappeared.

EMILE

(trying to follow)

Adele? She hasn't disappeared, she's around here somewhere --

BERNADETTE

I didn't mean Adele.

GEORGES

You have another sister?

BERNADETTE

No, just the three of us.

GEORGES

Right, so three is one more...

BERNADETTE

It's one more than two, not one more than three.
(aside, to Emile)

Not very bright, is he?

(to Georges, explaining
slowly)

We're triplets.

EMILE

This is the first I've heard of it...

BERNADETTE

Adele says we shouldn't live in the past. Celeste was stolen from our nursery when we were babies. So long ago... but sometimes I still feel as if half of me is missing.

GEORGES

You mean one-third.

BERNADETTE

(with infinite patience)

I had two sisters, now I have only one, that's half.

GEORGES

My mistake.

BERNADETTE

(to make him feel better)

I make mistakes sometimes, too. What was I doing? Oh, I was looking for Adele -- you know, my sister? But I got lost...

EMILE

Did you look on all the floors?

BERNADETTE

(surprised)

What would Adele be doing --

BERNADETTE & GEORGES & EMILE

(at the same time)

-- on the floor...

BERNADETTE

And then I heard two men talking and it frightened me because they were saying --

(realizing it was them;

changes what she was going
to say:)

Actually, I couldn't understand what you -- they were saying.
(remembering what they
said:)

But it was terrible -- I must find Henri right away!

(Henri races in, terrified,
slamming the door to the foyer
behind him.)

(In a frantic state, he doesn't
notice Bernadette, instead
accusing Emile:)

HENRI

Did you know about this?! I mean, I knew it existed,
reproduction is documented in every species I've studied, but
I thought that human beings had become enlightened in how
they went about it!

(Emile nods towards Bernadette.
Henri turns, sees her, jumps
back, scared.)

EMILE

Come along, Georges, I'll write you that check --

(aside to Georges:)

Can you imagine being married to that bird-brain? And when I
say that, I'm insulting many of the birds I've shot.

(Henri grabs Emile:)

HENRI

Don't leave me!

(Emile disengages himself from
Henri. He and Georges exit to
the foyer, closing the door.)

(Henri, terrified, and
Bernadette, worried, are left
alone.)

BERNADETTE

Do you like my new perfume? It's called Night in the Garden.

HENRI

Please don't hurt me.

BERNADETTE

May I have some champagne?

(Henri pours her a glass from
George's bottle -- the one filled
with water.)

BERNADETTE (CONT'D)

(sips; surprised)

It doesn't take like much...

(looking at the label)

"G.F."? Is that a good year?

(Henri, meanwhile, has been
trying to sneak out of the room.
She sees him:)

BERNADETTE (CONT'D)

Henri, there's something very important we must do.

HENRI

Four o'clock, time to feed my snake...

BERNADETTE

The success of our marriage depends on it. My sister told me
all about it --

HENRI

(shuddering)

She showed me! With illustrations! It was horrible --
although I have to say she's not bad with a pencil, if we
handled erotica we could get a good price for it...

BERNADETTE

If we don't do it right away, we're doomed!

HENRI

Right away? You mean we have to do it tonight?

BERNADETTE

No, not tonight --

HENRI

Thank god, I need time to erase those images from my mind --

BERNADETTE

Right now!

HENRI

Now!!? Why??

BERNADETTE

Otherwise divorce is inevitable.

HENRI

Divorce? We're not even married yet! It's not proper to...
(can't say it)
...until we're married!

BERNADETTE

That's what I thought! Adele told me that one has to wait until one is married -- and she's right about everything.

HENRI

God I hope not.

BERNADETTE

She's older...

HENRI

By ninety seconds.

BERNADETTE

But your brother and M. Feydeau, they have more experience, they say couples must find out if they're compatible before they get married -- otherwise, divorce is inevitable. Do you want to get divorced?

HENRI

I'm not even sure I want to get married.

(Bernadette sniffles back tears.)

HENRI (CONT'D)

You're becoming damp.

BERNADETTE

You don't want to marry me.

HENRI

I don't see the point if we're just going to get divorced.

BERNADETTE

But we won't get divorced if we do this right now.

HENRI

There's never been any divorce in our family, the scandal...

BERNADETTE

Are you ready? Think of it as research.

(They look straight out, too nervous to look at each other, anxiety growing.)

BERNADETTE (CONT'D)

Adele said drinking champagne would help.

(She sips some more "champagne" -- really the GF bottle of water.)

BERNADETTE (CONT'D)

I must be immune to it.

HENRI

... Where's your flower?

BERNADETTE

Was I supposed to bring a flower?

HENRI

(relieved)

Well that's over then -- Adele said to be gentle when taking your flower.

(He starts out, but Bernadette runs in front of him, throwing herself across the door to the foyer, barring it.)

HENRI (CONT'D)

You know there are four other doors.

(He starts to go to the door to the sitting room, but Bernadette quickly lifts her skirt, revealing an ankle.)

(Henri, shocked, stops. Stares, with some growing desire, at her ankle.)

BERNADETTE

You have my permission.

HENRI

... To...?

BERNADETTE

Rip it off!

HENRI

You want me to rip off your...?

BERNADETTE

(closing her eyes)

Do it!

(Henri reaches to her ankle, stops:)

HENRI

Why would I want to rip off your ankle?

BERNADETTE

Not my ankle silly --

HENRI

Oh! you mean your...

BERNADETTE

(lips moist)

Yes.

(Henry starts again. Slowly reaches toward the dress at her ankle, is just about to take the dress in hand --)

HENRI

I can't! I've been reading about germs and --

BERNADETTE

It's all right, silly, it's healed.

HENRI

(alarmed, backing away)

Healed? What's healed?

BERNADETTE

My ankle.

HENRI

We're back to the ankle?

BERNADETTE

Just do it quickly!

(She again closes her eyes,
prepares herself. Then opens her
eyes:)

BERNADETTE (CONT'D)

Forgive me for closing my eyes, I'm just doing what Adele
told me to do.

(She closes her eyes, hums "La
Marseillaise".)

(Henri leans in slooowly, stops:)

HENRI

Excuse me -- what is it I'm supposed to do quickly?

BERNADETTE

Rip the bandage off my ankle.

HENRI

(eewww)

The bandage??

BERNADETTE

That's what Adele said -- "Do it quickly and efficiently,
like ripping off a bandage."

HENRI

... That's not what she told me to do --

BERNADETTE
(begging him)

Henri please!

HENRI

All right, all right!

(He leans in, takes hold of the bandage on Bernadette's ankle distastefully, closes his eyes... Then:)

HENRI (CONT'D)

This isn't the way it was in her drawings --

BERNADETTE

Do it!

(He quickly rips off the bandage.)

(They both CRY OUT.)

(Henri quickly gets rid of the icky bandage into a wastebasket.)

(They both wait for something to happen. To feel something. Then:)

HENRI

How does your sister know all this?

(POUNDING FROM THE FOYER DOOR.
They spring to their feet.)

BERNADETTE

Who's that?

HENRI

I don't know but I'll be grateful to him the rest of my life.

DUKE (O.S.)

(thick Spanish accent, with
a lisp as big as all Iberia)

I demand to be entered!

(DUKE PEDRO SOMONTANO DE BARBASTRO storms in, wearing an elaborate military uniform, his hand quivering on his sword in its jeweled scabbard. He's an excitable man for whom honor trumps all, except pursuit of the ladies. He accuses Henri:)

DUKE (CONT'D)

She no is legitimate!

HENRI

Her family doesn't have much money, but they're entirely --

DUKE

I speak of the painting! The Re-no-ear you me sell, she is suspicious!

HENRI

(offended, which trumps
fear)

Are you accusing me of misrepresenting the provenance of --

DUKE

Your province, she no is important! You are villain no matter where you from!

(He draws his sword. Bernadette SCREAMS. He speaks to her with elaborate courtesy:)

DUKE (CONT'D)

I the lady scare. Pardoneme, dear lady, I no him kill here.
(to Henri, scabbarding
sword)

I you challenge a duel.

HENRI

In that case, you want Emile...
(calling, a little
desperately)

Emile!

DUKE

A meal?! I no want a meal!
(then)

What you are serving?

(changing mind)

No! My honor, this is the sustenance I require only!

HENRI

(aside)

You might work on your grammar as well.

DUKE

(hears that)

My grandma! You insult my grandma!?

HENRI

I was talking about your syntax...

DUKE

I no sin! And a strange country it is that tax for sin!

(almost spitting with
disgust:)

You French.

HENRI

No! Syntax -- grammar -- !

DUKE

Again with my grandma! Vengeance!!

(He draws his sword and chases
Henri. Bernadette SCREAMS and
runs toward the foyer, bumping
into Emile and Georges on their
way in:)

GEORGES

Well well, still waters run deep, Henri.

EMILE

Didn't know you had it in you, old man.

GEORGES

I'll get my suitcase and be on my way...

(They notice the Duke, with his
sword still drawn.)

EMILE

Your excellency! Pleasure to see you...

DUKE

Your brother, he test my patient --

HENRI

(correcting him)

Patience!

DUKE

You no order me!

EMILE

I'm sure this is just a misunderstanding.

(to Georges)

May I present Duke Pedro Somontano de Barbastro. M. Georges Feydeau, France's most illustrious writer.

DUKE

You writer? I am of the arts a great peon!

GEORGES

A peon...? Oh you mean, a patron?

DUKE

This what I say, peon, I pee on the arts. What you write?

GEORGES

Plays -- if you'll excuse me --

DUKE

Ah the theatre! She is my favorite -- the tragedy, the comedy, the actresses! All the arts I love -- is true, I no have expert-teeth with painters of the France, sometimes French scoundrels they sell me painting she no is genuflect.

GEORGES

You mean genuine.

DUKE

This what I say. Why you repeat all things I say, you have trouble with your rear?

GEORGES

Not since I started taking enemas.

EMILE

My dear Duke, we would never sell an undocumented painting -- if you come to my study I'll be happy to show you the papers.

DUKE

Papers?! They can be spurious simulated shams.

HENRI

You accuse us of -- !

EMILE

What would satisfy you, Duke?

DUKE

My honor must be wrecked.

GEORGES

(can't resist correcting
him:)

Rectified.

DUKE

This what I say. Sheesh. The painting, she very expensive,
the only thing satisfy the honor of my family is --

HENRI

Under no circumstances will we refund your money -- it would
admitting we sold you a fake!

(The Duke, infuriated, reaches
for his sword. Henri and Emile
struggle to hide behind each
other.)

GEORGES

(stalling, while trying to
come up with a solution)

Henri! You shock me!

DUKE

(gratefully, to Georges)

You are a gentleman senor.

GEORGES

The Duke is a reasonable man --

DUKE

I salute you.

HENRI

Reasonable? He's an idio--

(Emile clamps his hand over
Henri's mouth -- he sees that
Georges is going somewhere with
this:)

GEORGES

The Duke doesn't want money for money's sake --

DUKE
 I blow you kisses --
 (then)
 I no want money?

GEORGES
 A gentleman of the Duke's noble lineage and extravagant taste
 in uniforms --

DUKE
 (delighted)
 You like? Is new.

GEORGES
 He doesn't need
 (distastefully)
 money.

DUKE
 Is no need, but still --

GEORGES
 What the Duke needs is to defend the honor --

DUKE
 Precisely --

GEORGES
 -- of his Bastard name.

DUKE
 Barbastro, Barbastro!

GEORGES
 And the only way he can do that --

DUKE
 (sword tingling in his hand)
 Is unfortunate but --

GEORGES
 -- is to have the artist himself confirm his work.

DUKE
 Is only way --
 (then, quickly as it hits
 him:)
 What you say?

GEORGES
 And he's in luck because M. Renoir is coming this afternoon!

DUKE
 What??

HENRI & EMILE
 Brilliant. / Nicely done.

GEORGES (CONT'D)
 (to Duke)
 M. Re-no-ear, she come this afternoon here.

(Victor enters with a muscular young PORTER who carries two wrapped canvases.)

VICTOR
 The paintings from M. Renoir are here, along with a note...
 (reading from the note)
 "Here are the portraits of your beautiful fiancées. Please send payment to me at the Hospital of -- "

(Emile grabs the note from Victor.)

DUKE
 M. Re-no-ear is in hospital?

(Emile freezes, passes the note to Henri. Henri passes the note to Georges. Georges ad-libs:)

GEORGES
 The Hotel Hospital -- see?

(He waves the note quickly in front of the Duke.)

DUKE
 Is strange name for hotel.

GEORGES
 It's called that because... it's next door to the hospital.

PORTER
 Where do you want these?

EMILE
 Victor will show you to the study.

DUKE
 Why he tell you send money if he come here today?

GEORGES

He's not comfortable mixing business with pleasure, he's a wedding guest --

EMILE

Victor! Take the paintings to the study. Wouldn't want the brides to see their surprise, now would we?

(Victor tries to push the Porter out to the foyer, but the Porter holds his ground, gaping at Georges.)

DUKE

(scandalized)

You marry two brides?

EMILE

Yes -- Victor!

(Victor runs up to the Porter to get him to budge, but bounces off him.)

DUKE

(disgusted)

You French.

EMILE

No no, my brother and I --

DUKE

(even worse)

You and your brother marry same woman? Have you no honor?!

HENRI

He's marrying one girl, I'm marrying her sister, you cretin!

DUKE

Cretin? You think I Greek? You think I huh-huh with boys?!

EMILE

(sweetly, to counteract

Henri)

We hope that you'll stay as our guest...

VICTOR

Another guest?!

Victor!!

EMILE

(He motions for Victor to get the Porter and paintings out.)

(Victor grabs the back of the Porter's suspenders. Holding them, Victor backs out to the foyer, but the Porter stays put and his suspenders stretch....)

DUKE

You brothers marry sisters on same day in same house -- where you going to live together?!

GEORGES

(enjoying shocking the Duke)

Possibly naked.

DUKE

(even more disgusted)

You French.

PORTER

Begging your pardon, but aren't you Georges Feydeau, the playwright? You're a blessing on France, monsieur --

EMILE

Don't bother him, go with my valet.

GEORGES

Now now Emile, it can be helpful to listen to our audience...

(The Porter's suspenders bungee Victor back into the room, and he bounces off the Porter's back, who doesn't notice.)

PORTER

Oh I could never afford buy a ticket, I watch from backstage -
- my mother, monsieur, she's a dresser.

DUKE

I should hope so!