

SCENE THREE

ELMIRE, TARTUFFE

TARTUFFE.

May Heaven, whose infinite goodness we adore,
Preserve your body and soul forevermore,
And bless your days, and answer thus the plea
Of one who is its humblest votary.

ELMIRE.

I thank you for that pious wish. But please,
Do take a chair and let's be more at ease.

(They sit down.)

TARTUFFE.

I trust that you are once more well and strong?

ELMIRE.

Oh, yes: the fever didn't last for long.

TARTUFFE.

My prayers are too unworthy, I am sure,
To have gained from Heaven this most gracious cure;
But lately, Madam, my every supplication
Has had for object your recuperation.

ELMIRE.

You shouldn't have troubled so. I don't deserve it.

TARTUFFE.

Your health is priceless, Madam, and to preserve it
I'd gladly give my own, in all sincerity.

ELMIRE.

Sir, you outdo us all in Christian charity.

You've been most kind. I count myself your debtor.

TARTUFFE.

'Twas nothing, Madam. I long to serve you better.

ELMIRE.

There's a private matter I'm anxious to discuss.
I'm glad there's no one here to hinder us.

TARTUFFE.

I too am glad; it floods my heart with bliss
To find myself alone with you like this.

For just this chance I've prayed with all my power—
But prayed in vain, until this happy hour.

ELMIRE.

This won't take long, Sir, and I hope you'll be
Entirely frank and unconstrained with me.

TARTUFFE.

Indeed, there's nothing I had rather do
Than bare my inmost heart and soul to you.
First, let me say that what remarks I've made
About the constant visits you are paid
Were prompted not by any mean emotion,
But rather by a pure and deep devotion,
A fervent zeal...

ELMIRE.

No need for explanation.

Your sole concern, I'm sure, was my salvation.

TARTUFFE. *(Taking Elmire's hand and pressing her fingertips.)*
Quite so; and such great fervor do I feel...

ELMIRE.

Ooh! Please! You're pinching!

TARTUFFE.

'Twas from excess of zeal.

I never meant to cause you pain, I swear.

I'd rather...

(He places his hand on Elmire's knee.)

ELMIRE.

What can your hand be doing there?

TARTUFFE. Feeling your gown; what soft, fine-woven stuff!

ELMIRE.

Please, I'm extremely ticklish. That's enough.
(*She draws her chair away; Tartuffe pulls his after her.*)

TARTUFFE. (*Fondling the lace collar of her gown.*)

My, my, what lovely lacework on your dress!
The workmanship's miraculous, no less.
I've not seen anything to equal it.

ELMIRE.

Yes, quite. But let's talk business for a bit.
They say my husband means to break his word
And give his daughter to you, Sir. Had you heard?

TARTUFFE.

He did once mention it. But I confess
I dream of quite a different happiness.
It's elsewhere, Madam, that my eyes discern
The promise of that bliss for which I yearn.

ELMIRE.

I see: you care for nothing here below.

TARTUFFE.

Ah, well—my heart's not made of stone, you know.

ELMIRE.

All your desires mount heavenward, I'm sure,
In scorn of all that's earthly and impure.

TARTUFFE.

A love of heavenly beauty does not preclude
A proper love for earthly pulchritude;
Our senses are quite rightly captivated
By perfect works our Maker has created.
Some glory clings to all that Heaven has made;
In you, all Heaven's marvels are displayed.
On that fair face, such beauties have been lavished;
The eyes are dazzled and the heart is ravished;
How could I look on you, O flawless creature,
And not adore the Author of all Nature,
Feeling a love both passionate and pure
For you, his triumph of self-portraiture?

At first, I trembled lest that love should be
A subtle snare that Hell had laid for me;
I vowed to flee the sight of you, eschewing
A rapture that might prove my soul's undoing;
But soon, fair being, I became aware
That my deep passion could be made to square
With rectitude, and with my bounden duty.
I thereupon surrendered to your beauty.
It is, I know, presumptuous on my part
To bring you this poor offering of my heart,
And it is not my merit, Heaven knows,
But your compassion on which my hopes repose.
You are my peace, my solace, my salvation;
On you depends my bliss—or desolation;
I bide your judgement and, as you think best,
I shall be either miserable or blest.

ELMIRE.

Your declaration is most gallant, Sir,
But don't you think it's out of character?
You'd have done better to restrain your passion
And think before you spoke in such a fashion.
It ill becomes a pious man like you...

TARTUFFE.

I may be pious, but I'm human too:
With your celestial charms before his eyes,
A man has not the power to be wise.
I know such words sound strangely, coming from me,
But I'm no angel, nor was meant to be,
And if you blame my passion, you must needs
Reproach as well the charms on which it feeds.
Your loveliness I had no sooner seen
Than you became my soul's unrivalled queen;
Before your seraph glance, divinely sweet,
My heart's defenses crumbled in defeat,
And nothing fasting, prayer, or tears might do
Could stay my spirit from adoring you.

My eyes, my sighs have told you in the past
 What now my lips make bold to say at last,
 And if, in your great goodness, you will deign
 To look upon your slave, and ease his pain,—
 If, in compassion for my soul's distress,
 You'll stoop to comfort my unworthiness,
 I'll raise to you, in thanks for that sweet manna,
 And endless hymn, an infinite hosanna.
 With me, of course, there need be no anxiety,
 No fear of scandal or of notoriety.
 These young court gallants, whom all the ladies fancy,
 Are vain in speech, in action rash and chancy;
 When they succeed in love, the world soon knows it;
 No favor's granted them but they disclose it
 And by the looseness of their tongues profane
 The very altar where their hearts have lain.
 Men of my sort, however, love discreetly,
 And one may trust our reticence completely.
 My keen concern for my good name insures
 The absolute security of yours;
 In short, I offer you, my dear Elmire,
 Love without scandal, pleasure without fear.
 ELMIRE.

I've heard your well-turned speeches to the end,
 And what you urge I clearly apprehend.
 Aren't you afraid that I may take a notion
 To tell my husband of your warm devotion,
 And that, supposing he were duly told,
 His feeling toward you might grow rather cold?
 TARTUFFE.

I know, dear lady, that your exceeding charity
 Will lead your heart to pardon my temerity;
 That you'll excuse my violent affection
 As human weakness, human imperfection;
 And that—O fairest!—you will bear in mind
 That I'm but flesh and blood, and am not blind.

ELMIRE.

Some women might do otherwise, perhaps,
 But I shall be discreet about your lapse;
 I'll tell my husband nothing of what's occurred
 If, in return, you'll give your solemn word
 To advocate as forcefully as you can
 The marriage of Valère and Mariane,
 Renouncing all desire to dispossess
 Another of his rightful happiness,
 And...

SCENE FOUR

DAMIS, ELMIRE, TARTUFFE

DAMIS. (*Emerging from the closet where he has been hiding.*)

Nol We'll not hush up this vile affair;
 I heard it all inside that closet there,
 Where Heaven, in order to confound the pride
 Of this great rascal, prompted me to hide.
 Ah, now I have my long-awaited chance
 To punish his deceit and arrogance,
 And give my father clear and shocking proof
 Of the black character of his dear Tartuffe.

ELMIRE.

Ah no, Damis; I'll be content if he
 Will study to deserve my leniency.
 I've promised silence—don't make me break my word;
 To make a scandal would be too absurd.
 Good wives laugh off such trifles, and forget them;
 Why should they tell their husbands, and upset them?

DAMIS.

You have your reasons for taking such a course,