

GENTLEMEN AND PLAYERS

by
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SCENE 1

READTHROUGH AT THE OPENING OF A NEW SEASON AT SMOCK ALLEY. CAST AND PROMPTER ARE GATHERED ON THE STAGE

SHERIDAN

Ladies and gentlemen players of Smock Alley... Pray silence for a moment. We are proud and privileged to welcome Miss Peg Woffington and Mr West Digges to our theatre for this season. It is our fervent belief that their presence in our company will not only enhance the prestige of Smock Alley, but also swell its coffers.

POLITE CHEERS OF APPROVAL FROM THE ACTORS

WOFFINGTON

Thank you, Mr Sheridan, for your cordial welcome. A blessing it is indeed to find oneself among a company of such eminence. And dare we hope that so prodigious a turn-out from the members of the gentry for this first rehearsal augurs well for our new season?
(RAUCOUS CHEERS FROM AROUND THE STAGE)

DIGGES

Pray that we can also depend upon your attendance at night when the viewing is chargeable!

SHERIDAN

Before we commence, may I respectfully request that the gentlemen of leisure attending rehearsals allow space upon the stage for those persons who are actively involved in the production.

SHOUTS AND CATCALLS FROM THE GENTRY

WOFFINGTON May I also respectfully request, on behalf of the ladies of the company, that they keep their hands to themselves.

COMPANY Hear! Hear!

FURNIVAL Lest any of you have forgotten the so-called gentleman who, last season, took the liberty of pressing his lips to the neck of our leading lady as she passed him on the stage, let me remind you of the slap he received in the face – which, rumour has it, still smarts to this day. As does the applause from the audience that followed her action, and forced him into a public apology.

WOFFINGTON We ladies wish it to be known that we intend to enshrine this practice and employ it in response to all such disrespectful approaches.

SHOUTS FROM THE GENTRY OF 'YOU'LL BE LUCKY!' 'GIVE US A KISS, PEGGY!' ETC ETC

KELLY Huzzah! There's nothing so good as a mare with a bit of spirit, what? Makes for a much more exciting ride, wouldn't you say?!

KELLY

Quite right! Spoke like a thoroughbred!

SHERIDAN

And now, I place you in the capable hands of our prompter, Mr Harrington, who will conduct the rehearsal.

DIGGES AND SHERIDAN MOVE AWAY TO THE WINGS

SCENE 2

THE WINGS

DIGGES

So, Tom, I see your efforts to tame the mob are bearing fruit already.

SHERIDAN

Oh, there is much to be done yet, West. I have long held this fetish that a theatre might one day become a place where the events upon the stage will be the primary diversion.

DIGGES

The very idea!

SHERIDAN

Laughable, I know.

DIGGES

I had sooner take on a lion in the amphitheatre than tackle the wild beasts of the upper gallery.

SHERIDAN

Imagine this... An auditorium hums with respectful anticipation; the patrons quietly make their way to

their seats. The lights in the house are magically extinguished, the voices hush to a whisper...

DIGGES A whisper?

SHERIDAN A whisper which, as the room descends into blackness, fades into silence.

DIGGES To silence?

SHERIDAN Sweet silence... All eyes are trained towards the stage. The curtain rises and the set is revealed, empty save for the players.

DIGGES Egad.

SHERIDAN Not a rake nor blade in sight.

DIGGES Ambitious, to be sure.

SHERIDAN Why, indeed, should a theatre not be a place to see and hear a play?

DIGGES Your plan would have a better chance in a trappist monastery than in a theatre.

SHERIDAN Something must be done, West. The galleries in London seem like chapels of rest beside the mayhem here in Dublin. Between the acts the unruly mob assail the orchestra with rotten apples, half-eaten gingerbread

and even glass bottles, which often fall upon the heads of the persons in the pit.

DIGGES Many a wig bespoiled, I'll wager.

SHERIDAN Many an eye lost too...

DIGGES And those eyes in the pit are all too often the only ones looking towards the stage...

SHERIDAN Ah, those in the pit who come just to watch the plays. What a place the theatre would be if all the audiences were like them. None of the incessant babbling and blushing of dandies and peahens in the boxes, who come only to view one another. None of the university men bursting into the pit to avenge some insult to one of their number, beating anyone and breaking anything that comes within their reach. None of the licentious barking of drunken apprentices and journeymen. None of the blasphemy and loud immodesty of the cider women and fruit wenches; the frenzied crush in the lobbies; the herd of coachmen, livery-servants, bill hawkers, footpads, cutpurses, quickfingers, filches and beggars who surround the doors...

DIGGES It sounds simple enough. Where do you propose to begin?

SHERIDAN By debarring the public from the stage and the Green Room except by invitation, and by raising the prices in the gallery again and again until order is restored.

DIGGES The best of Irish luck to you, Thomas.

SHERIDAN To us all.

BAWDY DRINKING SONG.

SCENE 3

DRESSING ROOM. OUTSIDE IN THE CORRIDOR, AT SOME DISTANCE AWAY, THERE IS A CONTINUOUS COMMOTION

FURNIVAL What do you call these articles?

YOUNG Shoes, Mrs Furnival.

FURNIVAL Shoes. And whose shoes are they, pray tell me?

YOUNG Your shoes, ma'am. Your new shoes.

FURNIVAL Made for a child. I am no longer a child, and I require shoes made to fit my adult feet.

YOUNG Yes, Mrs Furnival.

FURNIVAL

Well? What do you propose to do about it? If we were performing The Orphan of China one would expect to traverse the stage with bound feet, but we are not. We are enacting the tribulations of Moses, and one means to cross the Red Sea with a degree of dignity. Even if one does have to compete for space with Mr Sheridan's ridiculous tin nose.

YOUNG

Ma'am, there is a shoe stretcher in Temple Bar that I have had dealings with. He is an artist. He is the best in Europe. But he will touch only the shoes of very great performers...

FURNIVAL

Good. He will deal with mine, then, will he not? (A pregnant pause) I repeat, he will deal with mine, then, will he not?

YOUNG

I can but ask, Mrs Furnival.

FURNIVAL

Are you trying to insult me, woman? Of course you will ask, and of course he will accept my doll's shoes. Take them forthwith, and bring them back to me, stretched - artistically.

YOUNG

Very well, ma'am.

FURNIVAL EXITS AS WOFFINGTON ENTERS WITH SHERIDAN. AS THE DOOR OPENS, THE SHOUTING IN THE CORRIDOR CAN BE HEARD CLEARLY

WOFFINGTON Ah, Polly, would you have time to go over some lines with me?

YOUNG Of course, Peg. I'll be with you in a moment.

WOFFINGTON I see you're carrying Furnival's shoes. What does she want this time?

YOUNG New ones, I suspect. More new shoes. I don't wish to put Thomas to yet more expense, so I have told her of a shoe stretcher who deals only with great performers. I mean to put them to one side, and return them untouched. We shall see whether flattery will make them fit or not.

SHOUTING AND HYSTERICAL SCREAMING OUTSIDE.

FX: SOUND OF DOOR OPENING

SHERIDAN Pray, forgive me, ladies. We have need of your room for a brief while. Lay him down in here. Doctor, you may attend to him in here.

SOUNDS OF A BODY BEING HEAVED, ACCOMPANIED BY AGONISED GROANING

WOFFINGTON (SOTTO) Oh, sweet saints. What has happened?

SHERIDAN The rakes have stormed the stage door, and one of them has stabbed poor Eammon here with his sword. The blade has snapped and is lodged in his thigh.

WOFFINGTON

Do we know who did this?

SHERIDAN

One of the usual drunken pack of so-called gentlemen. They took off swiftly enough, but I fear we shall see them again in the pit. They have taken very ill their banishment from behind the scenes, and they don't like to be given orders by the likes of us. We must send for the militia. I fear this bodes very ill for tonight's performance...

BUSTLE AND NOISE OF THE AUDIENCE. FANFARE,
FOLLOWED BY SLIGHT HUSH

SHERIDAN Could poets once foretell the life
of plays,
And but divine what you'd condemn or praise,
They'd writ their epilogues accordingly;
But no one knows the fate of poetry.

WOFFINGTON Ladies will smile if scenes
are modest writ,
Whilst your double entendres please the pit.

DIGGES There's not a vizzard sweating in
the gallery,
But likes a smart intreague, a rake and
raillery.

FURNIVAL And were we to consult our friends
above,

A pert and witty footman 'tis they
love.

SCENE 4

BOX

LADY HEREFORD Ah, Antoinette, there you are. I couldn't be more vexed. I sent my footman down at three o'clock to keep this box for us, and it seems that a gang of Henrietta's men forced their way in and attempted to take it by force.

LADY RYE My gracious! Things have come to a pretty pass when our place in the box is dependent on the brawling of our servants.

LADY HEREFORD If it weren't for a helping hand he got from the Dorsets' men in the next box, we would have been up in the gallery tonight.

LADY RYE The very notion...

LADY HEREFORD I really don't know what the world is coming to. And what about Sheridan's latest trick, keeping us all away from rehearsals?

LADY RYE It's an outrage. How is one know if a play is any good without actually going to see it? Not that one minds much, of course, but a little diversion is nice now

and again when one tires of the antics in the other boxes.

LADY HEREFORD One could send along a governess or one's doctor to view the play on the first night, I suppose. Then, if it turns out to be worth a look, we could go ourselves on the second night.

LADY RYE (AGHAST) Second night? Caroline, have you lost your reason?

LADY HEREFORD Oh, now, something is happening down there on the stage. Poor Sheridan is having to compete for attention with a young man trying to climb over the spikes from the pit.

LADY RYE Oh yes... I like this very much. See how Sheridan feigns indifference. Behold his noble brow furrowed in courtly detachment.

LADY HEREFORD Excellent. A small bet is called for, don't you think? Twenty shillings to me if our young soldier reaches the stage - ungorged.

LADY RYE And twenty to me if he falls down into the orchestra!

SHRIEKS OF LAUGHTER FROM BOTH

LADY HEREFORD Nothing could amuse me so much as that grand fellow from goodness knows where, who tried to make his mark upon Dublin last season. Do you remember him?

LADY RYE Oh, by heavens, how could one forget?

LADY HEREFORD He did cut quite a dash, I must admit. Perched on the edge of his box, with his back to the stage.

LADY RYE Legs outstretched and crossed at the ankle, sword beside him, lounging against the side of the box—

LADY HEREFORD Amply displaying his six-feet-long person to the whole house.

LADY RYE Oh, such richly embroidered silken clothes, hair so tastefully dressed, such perfect ringlets playing about his ears...

LADY HEREFORD Such a proud display, such a smile of complacent nonchalance... before he suddenly overbalanced and tumbled into the pit!

MORE SHRIEKS AND GUFFAWS

LADY RYE Oh, look, the soldier's over! Twenty shillings to you.

ROAR FROM THE AUDIENCE

SCENE 5

STAGE

SHERIDAN And with one intent, the multitude raised their voices to the heavens to beg Almighty God to deliver-

KELLY I have something to deliver to you, sir!

SHERIDAN Oh God of heaven, Oh God of the Israelites, Oh God of all the firmament-

KELLY Oh God, will he ever stop?

AUDIENCE LAUGHTER

SHERIDAN And at that moment there came a mighty hush over all the earth-

KELLY Dinner's ready, sir.

SHERIDAN And darkness descended-

KELLY It's only a little fruit. Not the ripest either, I regret. But here it is anyway.

SHERIDAN Will you kindly return yourself to whence you came, sir, that the play may continue.

KELLY Shall I place it in your pocket, lest you take on hungry after all your exertions? Or shall I rest it on that fine tin nose you are sporting? Can we see a show of hands please? The nose or the pocket? All hands for the nose?

AUDIENCE CHEERING

KELLY All hands for the pocket?

AUDIENCE SHOUTS OF 'NOSE! NOSE! NOSE! NOSE!'

KELLY A very disappointing show for the pocket. So, the nose it must be.

SHERIDAN Must the enjoyment of the many be marred by the antics of the few?

KELLY Hold still, while I pop this apple on yer snout, there's a good fellow!

SHERIDAN Remove your hands from me sir, and remove yourself from the stage.

KELLY Have it your own way, then. What good is a player that won't stand still? I'll be off then. With a tear

and a sigh I must leave you to give my 'Good Evenings' to the ladies behind.

SHERIDAN No you shan't. Stop him, you men. He shall not go backstage.

CHEERING FROM THE GALLERY

SHERIDAN (ASIDE) He already has, goddamnit! (OUT) Ladies and Gentlemen, such as there be among you, I thank you for your indulgence, and pray that the performance will continue without further interruption.

AUDIENCE SHOUTING

SCENE 6

BOX

LADY HEREFORD Well, what a diverting evening we are having.

LADY RYE Indeed, and so much more amusing than the play itself, don't you think?

FX: DISTANT BREAKING GLASS AND SNAPPING OF STRINGS.

LADY RYE What was that?

LADY HEREFORD Oh, probably the footmen in the gallery. They use the orchestra as target practice, you know.

LADY RYE Poor dears, it's a long evening for them.

LADY HEREFORD Oh, look, there's your husband, little Lord Rye.

LADY RYE Heavens, so it is. I haven't seen him for weeks. Doesn't he look well?

LADY HEREFORD He's bought a new wig, that's all.

LADY RYE No, Caroline, something else is making him look so sprightly.

LADY HEREFORD Or someone else.

LADY RYE Quite. Do you know, when I see him like that I could almost take a fancy to him myself.

LADY HEREFORD Oh, really, Antoinette, that's too distasteful. Not your own husband.

SCENE 7

DRESSING ROOM

WOFFINGTON ...and there to rest their weary – to feast their weary... Oh, Polly, I don't know a line of this. You'll have to go on for me.

YOUNG Oh, no, heaven forbid. I've been much too taken up with the costumes even to begin to learn any of the parts. Spare me and stay well for a few more nights at least.

NOISY SINGING FROM OUTSIDE THE DOOR. KELLY BURSTS INTO THE ROOM

KELLY Oh, what joy! The players do play. What a pretty scene... What ravishing comeliness. What games do you play alone together, ye damsels?

WOFFINGTON Mr Kelly, please take yourself away. As you know, gentlemen are no longer welcomed behind the scenes. We are engaged in our work.

KELLY And what work is it that a pair of sweet creatures might engage in without the helping hand of a gentleman?

YOUNG Mr Kelly, get you hence, I beg you.

KELLY Beg? Beg? Ha! Ha! You'll be begging me not to stop before I'm gone from you. Make space between those silken stockings, and I'll gladly give you cause to beg, my pretty one.

YOUNG Mr Kelly...

KELLY Hey! Hey! Keep still, ya whore!

YOUNG You're tearing my dress...

WOFFINGTON You savage! Take your hands from her! Get away, you evil-

KELLY Your turn next. Oh how I love a vixen vexed! Vexed is next, make no mistake.

☞ FX: FABRIC TEARING AS HE GRABS HER.

WOFFINGTON Let me go, you brute, you drunken animal!

KELLY A fine way to speak to a gentleman. It seems I shall have to show you some manners.

☞ FX: DOOR OPENING

WOFFINGTON RUNS OUT IN GREAT AGITATION. KELLY SHOUTS AFTER HER DOWN THE CORRIDOR

KELLY Strumpet! Whore!

BEFORE HE CAN TAKE OFF AFTER HER, SHERIDAN ENTERS
WITH A STAGEHAND

SHERIDAN Hold him, Samuel.

KELLY Take your hands off me, you ruffians. Let me go!

SHERIDAN Get him out of here. Cast him into the street – and
be sure his feet don't touch the ground till he's
face down in the mud.

THE SHOUTING CONTINUES AS THEY DRAG HIM OFF DOWN THE
CORRIDOR

SCENE 8

BOX

LADY HEREFORD Oh, bless my soul. What riotous assembly.

LADY RYE What is that thing on the front of his head?

LADY HEREFORD I believe it's his Moses nose.

LADY RYE Heavens. Was Moses' nose really made of
pink tin?

LADY HEREFORD Must have been. The man's a

stickler for detail.

LADY RYE Mr Sheridan appears to have left the stage in pursuit of that scruffy officer.

LADY HEREFORD This evening is not going well for our esteemed manager. Shall we move on? We could torture poor Dorothea by arriving early. (SHE CACKLES WITH LAUGHTER)

LADY RYE Tempting, to be sure. But the sport here looks set to liven up. Here, pass the dice. We'll have a throw or two in the meantime. Four guineas down.

THERE IS SHOUTING AND COMMOTION FROM BELOW

LADY HEREFORD It would appear that our noble warrior is back in the pit.

SCENE 9

THE PIT

KELLY (SHOUTING UP FROM THE PIT) Sheridan, you're a blackguard and a rascal. You're not fit to run a cockfight.

SHERIDAN

If there be any friends of this gentleman present, I ask you to take control of him, for the sake of the more respectful members of the audience

KELLY

Ya filthy stinking dog! I'll teach you to question the respectability of a gentleman.

SHERIDAN

I spoke of respect, sir, not of respectability. They are not the same. Now, I'll have no more of your bellowing. There are places more suited to such behaviour than a theatre.

KELLY

You'll not speak to a gentleman in such terms. Get on yer knees, yer lowly cur, and plead for forgiveness.

THE HOUSE HAS HUSHED TO SILENCE

SHERIDAN

Sir, such conduct is not becoming of a gentleman. You would do best to get you to your lodgings and put this shameful day behind you.

KELLY

And what would a lowly player know of gentlemanly conduct? You should learn your place, you upstart cur! Picking pockets and dancing for pennies – that's all you're fit for!

SHERIDAN

Sir, I am every bit as much a gentleman as any in the house. And some might say, on hearing you tonight – more so than some!

SHOUTS OF 'INSULT!' AND 'SHAME!' FROM THE PIT AND THE
BOXES

KELLY You'll pay for this, Sheridan. You'll pay with your
blood for insulting the gentry in this way.

SHERIDAN This is no insult. I was born and raised a gentleman,
the same as yourself.

KELLY But you're an actor now. You chose to disport
yourself upon the stage. And if that makes you a
gentleman, what does that make us?

THE HOUSE WAITS IN SILENCE FOR SHERIDAN'S REPLY

KELLY (ENRAGED) I'll ask you again, Sheridan. If you are a
gentleman, what does your equal ranking make us?

SHERIDAN You'll find better manners among we rogues and
vagabonds than among some present here tonight.

THERE IS A HOWL OF OUTRAGE FROM THE PIT AND THE BOXES

SCENE 10

BOX

LADY HEREFORD Oh what fun, Antoinette. I do so love the theatre. I must say, it's a credit to Mr Sheridan. I haven't enjoyed an evening so much in years.

LADY RYE This is no laughing matter, Caroline. A player cannot stand up in a public place and claim equal terms with a gentleman. For in saying so, he implies that gentlemen are no better than players – and if that is so, what does that make us?

LADY HEREFORD Oh dear, Antoinette. I see what you mean. Isn't it fortunate, then, that dear Henrietta isn't present to hear herself compared to a strumpet? (SHE AND LADY RYE COLLAPSE INTO FITS OF GIGGLES)

THERE IS A DULL CLUNK AND A GASP FROM SHERIDAN,
FOLLOWED BY A ROAR OF LAUGHTER FROM THE AUDIENCE

LADY RYE Do look. That fellow has just dented Sheridan's nose with an orange.

CLOWN MUSIC FROM BALLAD OPERA OR ITALIAN CIRCUS

SCENE 11

THE GREEN ROOM. THE INTERVAL

SHERIDAN (ENTERING) Thank God for the interval. Oh, Mother Nature, spare us from another night like this.

WOFFINGTON Thomas, your head is bleeding.

SHERIDAN I have been wounded by an orange.

FURNIVAL Let me take that nose off you. It's crumpled like a paper bag.

SHERIDAN Well, you'll all be pleased to see that I'll not be wearing the nose again. You can thank Kelly for that.

FURNIVAL I've never seen a man in regimental uniform behaving like that in a public place.

WOFFINGTON His behaviour is certainly churlish – even by the standards of the military.

KELLY'S VOICE CAN BE HEARD SHOUTING OUTSIDE IN THE
CORRIDOR

SHERIDAN Oh dear sweet saints. Here he comes again.

KELLY Sheridan! You'll pay for this, so you will.

SHERIDAN There's no paying to be done, Mr Kelly. After fair warning – several fair warnings, I merely ordered you to be removed from the house. Someone come and take away this lunatic child before there's an accident.

KELLY I'll have satisfaction, Sheridan, so I will.

SHERIDAN Is your honour worth defending, Kelly? Nothing in your boorish conduct would command respect, even from the gallery.

KELLY You've provoked me enough, actor. I tell you, I'll have satisfaction for this.

SHERIDAN Is this a challenge? Because if it is, I'm ready to take it up here and now. You may have your choice of weapons: a stout oak stick, as carried by Moses himself, or the fop's slender cane from Hamlet. I'd take the oak if I were you, Kelly. I've a stout right arm.

KELLY I'll take neither; I'll not engage in combat with a clown.

SHERIDAN Then I'll take the oak.

HE STRIKES HIM. KELLY SCREAMS

SHERIDAN See to it that you never come here again, Kelly.

KELLY You'll pay for this!

SHERIDAN Quiet, you snivelling whelp!

HE HITS HIM AGAIN WITH HIS STICK

KELLY Stop! Stop!

SHERIDAN Say you repent.

KELLY Stop! For pity's sake.

SHERIDAN Repent. Like the miserable coward that you are. Kneel and beg forgiveness or I'll strike you again.

KELLY Stop! Oh, stop! You've broken my ankle.

SHERIDAN I'll break your nose too!

WOFFINGTON Thomas, stop! Leave him now!

KELLY IS YELPING AND CRYING

KELLY Enough, no more. I'll go in peace. Help me to walk, someone. Help me.

SHERIDAN Take him away. And be sure he never enters this house again.

KELLY SNIVELS AND BLUBBERS AWAY

SCENE 12

DEVILLY'S COFFEE HOUSE. GENERAL HUBBUB

DEVILLY

Come on, Mr Goldsmith, this is a coffee house, not the Houses of Parliament. If you're not going to order, I'll give your tables to those people waiting in the doorway with jingling pockets.

GOLDSMITH

Quite right, Mrs Devilly! We'll take three more pots. Oh, and I think Mr Burke would like you to charge them to his account, wouldn't you, Edmund?

BURKE

Thank you, Oliver, I'll not forget. Have you got a copy of the Morning Post, Mrs Devilly?

DEVILLY Have you not seen it? Well, bless us and save us – not that I ever get time to put my feet up and read the papers, naturally – but it seems that after last night's disturbances at Smock Alley, this Edward Kelly's friends have been rampaging around the city looking for revenge, and Mr Sheridan has been forced into hiding, in fear for his life.

RAISED VOICES AS A HERD OF KELLY'S SUPPORTERS BURST INTO THE COFFEE HOUSE

BURKE

Heavens, what rabble approaches?

KELLY

There's one! Student, where is Sheridan hiding out?

BURKE

(Languidly) Who is this man, Goldfish? Do we know him?

GOLDSMITH I may have seen him. But they all look so much alike, these ageing blades. Especially as one only ever sees them face down in the gutter as one trips through the morning mist towards one's studies.

BURKE What is your name, ageing blade?

KELLY Edward Kelly. And you'll do well to remember it, pup.

BURKE Edmund Burke. Delighted to make your acquaintance.

GOLDSMITH Oliver Goldsmith. Enchanted to meet you. Now, get along and hunt some snipe, there's a good fellow. We have our Plato to discuss.

KELLY Look at the pair of you. You're a disgrace. You're no better dressed than a couple of players yourselves.

BURKE Do we like this man, Goldfish?

GOLDSMITH Not greatly, sir.

BURKE And the pack of hounds he travels with? Are they Trinity men, Goldfish?

GOLDSMITH Oh no, indeed not, sir.

KELLY Some of your number are said to be protecting Sheridan. Just wait till we find out who they are. The honour of the gentry is at stake.

BURKE Was Sheridan a Trinity man, Goldfish?

GOLDSMITH Certainly was, sir. Among the finest in his day.

BURKE Then we're with the players. And gentlemen they are to a man.

GOLDSMITH Mustn't forget the women.

BURKE Yes, indeed, the women. They are gentlemen too.

KELLY I'll break your head, you insolent gypsy.

GOLDSMITH I find his musicless tones grate upon the ear, Burke. His clashing notes disturb the sweetness of the morn.

BURKE Punitive measures are called for. What say you, Men of Trinity?

CRIES OF 'HEAR! HEAR!'

GOLDSMITH Into the fray!

WHOOPS AND BATTLE CRIES AS THE OTHERS SET UPON
KELLY'S GANG

REBEL DRINKING SONG

SCENE 13

DIGGES'S LODGINGS

SHERIDAN This is ridiculous, Frances. I cannot spend the rest of my life hiding in Digges's lodgings. I'm going out to face them.

FRANCES Don't be rash, Thomas. It is said that the blades have a horse standing by day and night to whisk away your assassin.

FRANCES It's true indeed. Never have I seen such a mob – rampaging and looting through the place. Were it not for the swift action of the scholars in righting an overturned brazier, the theatre would have been burned to the ground. It is no cowardice to wise to make an apology and be done with the whole affair.

SHERIDAN Never. For do you not see that to apologise when there has been no wrongdoing is not the behaviour of a gentleman. To do so would be to concede to their low view of players.

DIGGES ENTERS

DIGGES There's a pair of young men to see you, Thomas. They claim to be Trinity men, come to protect you. Shall I show them up?

FRANCES

How do they know you are here, I wonder? Go upstairs, out of sight. I'll receive them here.

SHERIDAN AND DIGGES EXIT

FRANCES

(TO HERSELF) Aha! The Dublin Journal is quick enough to comment on the affair. "...From the earliest account of theatrical history, down to the present, I could not meet with a parallel to the case of Sheridan, which is no less than a violent dispute about the HONOUR of an actor."

DIGGES ENTERS WITH BURKE AND GOLDSMITH

DIGGES

Mrs Sheridan will see you.

BURKE

How do you do? Edmund Burke. It's a privilege to meet you, Mrs Sheridan. May I introduce my friend and fellow Trinity man, Oliver Goldsmith?

FRANCES

How do you do?

GOLDSMITH

A pleasure to meet you, Mrs Sheridan.

FRANCES

What leads you to imagine that my husband is here?

BURKE

The events of the past two nights have given us concern for his safety. We have been keeping a discreet watch over him. He was seen coming here late last night.

FRANCES

Do you think any of the others saw him?

BURKE

We think not. If they knew he was here, they would have stormed the place.

FRANCES

Well, I'm afraid that your lookouts have not been quite keen enough. Sheridan is gone, I cannot say where.

BURKE

Good. Our lookouts are street boys. Pickpockets. If he can slip away from them, he could elude his own shadow. Just let him know that the men of Trinity have taken his part, and they offer their protection against the Philistines.

GOLDSMITH

If you need help of any kind, you can leave word at our rooms at Trinity.

FRANCES

Thomas has notions of returning to the stage at once. Of course, such an idea is out of the question.

BURKE

On the contrary, he must return this very night, if you can trace him. We cannot have a recurrence of last night's brawling. We intend to form a corps of our men to maintain order.

DIGGES

How can we be certain that you are not of the other side? That you are not attempting to draw my husband out.

GOLDSMITH You cannot. But events will soon convince you. This is war, Mrs Sheridan. We are fighting on your side.

SHERIDAN ENTERS

SHERIDAN This talk of warfare is a little over-dramatic, do you not think?

BURKE Mr Sheridan... Edmund Burke. Oliver Goldsmith.

SHERIDAN This is a hot coal, to be sure. But a war?

BURKE It is no small matter. The integrity of the theatre and the honour of a respected actor are at stake, Mr Sheridan. We feel that they are worth defending. We have already begun by making an example of one of the leaders of last night's disruption - one John Martin.

SHERIDAN How so?

BURKE This morning, having discovered where he lay, a thousand of our men roused him at dawn to rouse him and brought him to a courtyard at the college. Having been made sensible of his crime, he was suffered to kneel in a circle of our men. Then water was applied from the college pump to cool his head, and once he had admitted his fault and meekly begged pardon he was set free. Spurred by the success of this trial,

we ministered to a Captain Fitzgerald in a similar manner.

BURKE

Then Edward Kelly who, knowing that the scholars would soon seek him out, came quietly for his own safety and knelt before us too.

GOLDSMITH

It is certain that the friends of these gentlemen will not accept this humiliation lightly, and will take to the streets, bent on revenge. The whole city is in such a fright that the shopkeepers have shut up their premises, and many citizens fear to go out of their houses.

BURKE

Mr Sheridan, we pledge to protect you. The public awaits your Richard III. Show them that the crooked back is broad, sir.

FRANCES

It would be reckless and foolish for Thomas to be abroad, with the threat of death upon him. There is no shame in staying out of sight until the storm has calmed.

BURKE

Good day to you, Mr Sheridan. We eagerly await your Richard III.

THEY LEAVE

FRANCES

Hot-headed pups!

SHERIDAN Quite so.

FRANCES I take it that you don't intend to follow their advice and appear?

SHERIDAN One should not be seen to give way to the intimidators. Last night's withdrawal from the stage was humiliation enough.

SCENE 14

GREEN ROOM

☞ FX: DISTANT HUBBUB AS THE HOUSE FILLS UP. CLOSE UP RUSTLING OF COSTUMES

WOFFINGTON Gracious! I've never seen the Green Room so quiet. Is there anyone alive in here?

☞ FX: MORE RUSTLING

YOUNG I've repaired your breeches, Mr Sheridan.

SHERIDAN (AFTER A PAUSE, HE SIGHS DEEPLY) Thank you, Polly.
(ANOTHER PAUSE) Ah well, let us away. Now, remember, company, tonight could be a rough voyage. There's to be no heroics. One smell of trouble, and I give you permission to leave the stage by the nearest exit. Do not engage with the audience under any circumstances.

If there's talking to be done with with them, I'll do it.

YOUNG Mrs Furnival, your shoes have been returned by my man in Temple Bar.

FURNIVAL Stretched, I hope?

YOUNG Expertly stretched, Mrs Furnival.

FURNIVAL No hesitation, I presume?

YOUNG Almost none.

FURNIVAL Almost?... Well, hand them over, let's try them... Ah, yes. Oh, bliss. Improved beyond all measure. My compliments to Mr Stretcher. An artist.

WOFFINGTON Polly, I think it would be a kind gesture to invite Mr Stretcher to a performance, and introduce him to Mrs Furnival afterwards.

YOUNG Oh... yes... er, perhaps... Mrs Woffington, if you're ready, I'll tighten your stays.

WOFFINGTON Ow! Polly! Stop! Not so tight!

YOUNG (GIGGLING) Sorry, Mrs Woffington.

DIGGES ENTERS

DIGGES Thomas, a word, if you please.

HE ADDRESSES HIM CONFIDENTIALLY

DIGGES The company would like to suggest a strategy that, if you will permit, might allow us to test the mood of the crowd—

SHERIDAN One must request permission to enter, is that what this has come to? (AFTER A PAUSE) Very well, West, tell me all...

SCENE 15

BOX

LADY HEREFORD Don't you find it cold tonight, Antoinette?

LADY RYE Frightful. The draft in the corridor could freeze the diamonds to one's throat.

LADY HEREFORD Still, it promises to be quite a night, one way and another.

LADY RYE Have I missed much?

LADY HEREFORD Well, that fellow standing alone in the crown,
bemoaning his lot, is King Henry. A messenger has
just entered, with the news that Mr Sheridan will
appear, if it is their pleasure. Otherwise, Mr Dyer
will take his place, to spare our manager's life and
the fabric of the house.

LADY RYE Will Sheridan step out, do you think?

LADY HEREFORD Who can tell? Rumour has it that he has been seen
boarding a boat bound for the jungles of Africa.

LADY HEREFORD He would certainly be safer there.

SNORTS AND SHRIEKS OF LAUGHTER FROM BOTH

LADY RYE Well, bless my soul. Here he comes. It would seem
that Africa's loss is our gain!

SCENE 16

STAGE

HUGE CHEER FROM SOME QUARTERS. LOUD BOOS FROM OTHERS.

SHERIDAN Good people of Smock Alley!

LOUD SHOUTS OF "SUBMISSION! SUBMISSION! SUBMISSION!"

AND OFF! OFF! OFF!"

SHERIDAN

Good ladies and kind gentlemen. If any gentlemen have taken offence at my public behaviour of late, I am extremely sorry for it, and beg leave to declare that I am not conscious of ever having designed to offend them in any shape. As I am perfectly satisfied that the voice of the public can never be wrong, if it be their opinion that I should make a submission, I am ready to do it.

MORE SHOUTS OF "SUBMISSION!"

FX: GUNSHOT

THE HOUSE INSTANTLY GOES QUIET.

BURKE Is that what it takes to bring civil order to this house? We, the students of Trinity College deplore the bringing of private quarrels into this place, and hereby assert the rights of the audience to hear and see the play.

GOLDSMITH We therefore ask for a vote. Those who are for preserving the decency and freedom of the stage, please raise your hands.

LOUD CHEERS AND SHOUTS OF APPROVAL

BURKE

Those who are for rioting, disruption and barbarism,
please raise your hands.

BOOS AND CATCALLS

BURKE

Ladies and Gentlemen. The rule of order wins the day.
Henceforth, may the plays be allowed to continue in
peace. A hand for Mr Sheridan!

THUNDEROUS APPLAUSE

REBEL DRINKING SONG

SCENE 17

DEVILLY'S COFFEE HOUSE.

GOLDSMITH

Mrs Devilly? A large pot of coffee, please. And a
copy of the Dublin Courant, if you have one to hand.

DEVILLY

Paper's here, Mr Goldsmith. Coffee will take longer.

GOLDSMITH

Not too long, one hopes.

DEVILLY

Cheeky young whippet. By gracious, sir, your friend
Mr Sheridan's life has taken a few queer turns since
his return to the stage – not that some of us ever
get the chance to sit around reading papers and

gossiping, of course – but no one has talked of anything else in here for weeks.

GOLDSMITH And the papers write of little else, either. (OPENING THE PAPER) Here we are... "This quarrel... concerned nothing more than the Honour of an Actor... But his cause was a noble one... defence of decency... decorum of the stage... supported by all persons of worth and honour... etectera, etcetera..."

DEVILLY Any news from the court yet, sir?

GOLDSMITH Not so far. It could be a lengthy affair – there is no precedent for a case between gentleman and a player, so it could go in Kelly's favour for that reason alone. Burke and I are taking it in turns to attend.

DEVILLY That looks like your friend coming in now. (CALLING ACROSS THE ROOM) Another cup over here, please, Catherine.

GOLDSMITH You're right. Things must be unusually dull today. Edmund, over here!

BURKE (APPROACHING) How are you, Goldfish? Good day to you, Mrs Devilly.

GOLDSMITH Pleasure to see you, Mr Burke.

BURKE REACHES THE TABLE

GOLDSMITH You're out early. Has there been an adjournment?

BURKE Better than that, old chap. There has been an outcome.

GOLDSMITH And?

BURKE A resounding victory. Against all expectations, the jury found Mr Kelly guilty of assault, and sentenced him to three months in jail and a fine of £500.

GOLDSMITH By heavens!

BURKE Sheridan was magnificent. His dignity and charm before the court greatly assisted his case. On one occasion, Kelly's defence counsel, addressing the jury, sneered: "I have often seen a gentleman soldier and a gentleman tailor; but I have never seen a gentleman player." Bowing modestly, Sheridan rose, and replied: "Sir, I hope you see one now." The onlookers in the court broke into spontaneous applause, and the day was all but won from that moment.

DEVILLY Well, bless my soul! I think this calls for something celebratory. I'll go and fetch some glasses.

SCENE 18

SHERIDAN'S HOUSE

FRANCES Come to bed now, Thomas. You must be exhausted after the day.

SHERIDAN Not at all, I could dance till morning. I feel sprightly, light, charged with that special vigour that victory brings.

FRANCES (AFTER A MOMENT) There are other things being said about you, you know. The tattle pages in the magazines are beginning to comment on your trips to the country with Mrs Woffington.

SHERIDAN One cannot stop gossip, Frances. But you know this is not the way it seems to them.

FRANCES That may be so, but that means nothing when the sly jokes begin. "Congratulations are due to Mr Thomas Sheridan for his selfless attention to the moral well-being of his leading lady, and for the many hours expended in the noble cause, alone with her at his country retreat in Quilca, County Cavan. Such disinterest is so rare in these cynical times." You realise, Thomas, that soon all of Dublin and most of London will be laughing behind its hand at you.

SHERIDAN

Let them think what they will. My conscience is clear.

FRANCES

Clear it may be, but if you had any feelings for me, or any respect for yourself, you would not provoke such gossip – it's an affront to your dignity and mine. And making Mrs Woffington into a Protestant will not make her any more acceptable in Society. In the eyes of the world she will always be an actress.

SHERIDAN

Frances, times are changing. The incident with Kelly has served to prove, I think, that an actor can begin to be regarded as a gentleman. One would hope that the same respect could be accorded to an actress – especially one with such grace, dignity, intelligence, poise—

FRANCES

Beauty, charm, wit, elegance... what else? And admitting her to your Beefsteak Club – as the only woman in a club for gentlemen will hardly make her appear more of a lady.

SHERIDAN

Nothing would give me greater pleasure, my love, than to have you play hostess. But you know that such a thing is out of the question.

FRANCES

I see, as a married woman, it is less respectable for me to be alone among men, including my husband?

SHERIDAN

It's out of respect for you, I assure you, my heart.

FRANCES

Oh, bring her to the Beefsteak if you must. Only, answer me one question. While she is in the house, where should I and the children go? Should we take to the streets? Or should we go to the theatre and wait in the Green Room while you entertain her along with the great and the mighty in my house at your own expense?

SHERIDAN

I had no idea that you felt so strongly against the Beefsteak.

FRANCES

My complaint is not with the Beefsteak Club. Can you not see that, however much you may believe in actresses as ladies, I cannot be seen to keep company with such a woman in my house.

SHERIDAN

Peg Woffington is a woman of exquisite generosity and the soundest moral character.

FRANCES

Putting aside all questions of private character, it is enough in the eyes of the world that an actress stands unmasked before the public - even her own servants - and displays passions, utters words of love, plays the coquette, sometimes the wanton, to be squeezed and kissed by men not her husband, and makes herself available for the entertainment of any who pay their pennies. Times have not changed the people's view of that.

SHERIDAN It is to be hoped that they will, Frances.

SCENE 19

GREEN ROOM. THE COMPANY ARE GATHERED, WAITING FOR SHERIDAN TO ARRIVE AND ADDRESS THEM

WOFFINGTON Oh, West, what shall I wear tonight? Thomas has asked me to be Guest of Honour at the Beefsteak Club. What might be the correct dress for a woman at a club for gentlemen only?

DIGGES Will you go?

WOFFINGTON Why, of course. Why would I not?

DIGGES No reason...

WOFFINGTON West? Why would I not go?

DIGGES In this climate of Nationalist fervour, many people take a poor view of Sheridan's easy friendships among the Court. You might be as well not to make a habit of it.

WOFFINGTON I have been asked there to simply to add a little feminine gaiety to the occasion.

DIGGES All the same, the Duke of Dorset represents the crown, and many would equate Thomas's breaking bread with him as supping with the king.

WOFFINGTON Players are not statesmen, and never were.

DIGGES Indeed. But many in Ireland feel deep resentment towards King George for using their taxes to pay English debts. And you would do well to keep a tactful distance at this time.

WOFFINGTON Surely no-one would blame a girl who rose from the streets of Dublin for enjoying the fruits of her success?

DIGGES Of course not. But...

WOFFINGTON It doesn't seem so long ago that I was a barefoot child standing on the steps of Dublin Castle, holding my sprigs of watercress to sell, and watching the ladies come and go to the glittering balls within. People who served there regaled us with tales of their splendour – mountainous ice sculptures, dazzling chandeliers, snow-white peacocks and perfumed fountains... and after the gentry had gone, of whole oxen left uneaten, rare Chinese fruits barely pecked at... and all about the floor a debris of amber combs, porcelain teeth, trampled feathers and tiny scattered jewels, fallen from dresses and wigs... And

stumbling home through the freezing mud never did I dream that I would enter those doors as a guest.

DIGGES

Nor, indeed that the people would cheer Dublin's own Peg Woffington as she was set down from her gilded sedan by powdered footmen. They begrudge you nothing, Peg, while they feel you are one of their own. But if they should ever think you had crossed the floor, their love could quickly turn...

WOFFINGTON

What do you suppose this meeting is about?

DIGGES

Thomas is said to be planning not to stage Mahomet tonight. To the Irish ear, Voltaire's words resonate all too clearly with nationalistic sentiment, and unite all parts of the house in their anger towards the king. Naturally, it's causing deep consternation at court. You heard the urgent calls for me to encore the "crush these vipers!"

WOFFINGTON

It was a tribute to your sparkling rendition, West.

DIGGES

You are kind, Peg. But there was no flattery in it. The people were cheering for Alcanor, defender of the city against the oppressor.

SHERIDAN ENTERS

SHERIDAN

Ladies and gentlemen of the company, your attention for a moment. I am aware of the rumours and

speculation surrounding tonight's performance and, after giving the matter much thought, I have decided that we shall proceed with Mahomet. That is all. Thank you.

MURMUR FROM THE COMPANY

DIGGES

Thomas, are you certain this is wise?

SHERIDAN

I have made my decision. Much has been expended on it, and until it is recouped, the means do not exist to mount a fresh production.

AWKWARD LAUGHTER

SHERIDAN

As to the question of encores, I do not believe that the stage is a proper place to exhibit political sentiments. The business of an actor is to divest himself of private sentiments and to enter, with all his spirit, into the character he represents. But if an actor, in order to please the public, should, by emphasis, gesture or look, mark out a passage in his part as a party stroke, he steps out of his feigned character into his natural one. I had hoped that the example I have set would have made admonitions unnecessary.

DIGGES

Mr Sheridan, would I be correct in my impression that your remarks are directed at myself?

SHERIDAN

(AFTER A MOMENT'S PAUSE) Yes, Mr Digges, I cannot deny that. To you, I must particularly apply, as the first tragedian I have ever heard of who repeated a speech upon the "encore!" of an audience.

DIGGES

Sir, given the volatile mood of the audience, and the incendiary effect that refusing an encore might have, what do you recommend in such an event? If I should comply with their demand and repeat the speech, am I to incur your censure?

THERE IS NO REPLY

DIGGES

Sir, I await your answer.

SHERIDAN

I believe that I have expressed my views on the matter clearly enough on more than this occasion.

DIGGES

Even so, sir, I would be grateful if you would direct me as to exactly what I must do should the question arise again.

SHERIDAN

Once it were established that a section of an audience has a right to encore a speech, any other part of the audience may claim the same right. And if once repeated, why not several times? Why not any other speech as well? And why not as many speeches as they wish?

DIGGES

Sir, am I to understand that you forbid the repetition of any speech?

SHERIDAN

You have heard my arguments on that head. If you think they are of weight, I suppose you will act accordingly; if not, remember I do not give you any orders on this occasion. You are left entirely free to act as you please. I leave you to act in that matter as you think proper. (GOING) Mrs Young, if I could speak to you for a moment about costumes.

DIGGES

Goddamnit! What manner of answer is that, Peg? There is no doubt of his views, yet it could be unsafe to inflame the mob. Oh, what am I to do?

SCENE 20

THE WINGS. WOFFINGTON AND YOUNG ARE TALKING SOTTO VOCE AT THE SIDE OF THE STAGE. SHERIDAN IS ONSTAGE.

WOFFINGTON

Poor West. Waiting white-faced in the wings.

YOUNG

I cannot say I envy him.

WOFFINGTON

No, the atmosphere out there is truly menacing. Even the gallery is silent. Except when West is on – then they catch fire. There is some faction or other organising this, without a doubt.

YOUNG

It was the same outside the entrance. None of the loud bustling before a performance. Instead, as the Duke of Dorset and his glittering party drew up in his carriage, the same faces that usually press excitedly against the windows stood in silence, unsmiling. With each sedan chair that arrived, the throng parted noiselessly to allow it through, then closed ranks, staring grim-faced after it. It was as though the crowd had been directed for a scene in an opera.

WOFFINGTON

There he goes. Good luck, West...

HUGE ERUPTION OF CHEERING, WHISTLING, THUMPING FROM THE AUDIENCE

DIGGES

If, ye powers divine!
Ye mark the movements of this nether world,
And bring them to Account; crush, crush these vipers,
Who, singled out by a community to guard their
rights, shall for a grasp of ore,
Or paltry office, sell them to the foe!

AUDIENCE SHOUTING QUICKLY BECOMES RHYTHMIC REPETITION OF "ENCORE!"

WOFFINGTON

What will he do? They will not stop until he gives them the speech again.

YOUNG

He is moving down to the very front of the stage. He has raised his hand, as though he is about to address them. Mr Sheridan will not be pleased.

WOFFINGTON

Listen!

THE HOUSE INSTANTLY FALLS SILENT

DIGGES

Good people. With your indulgence, pray that we may continue the play without interruption.

CHANTS OF "ENCORE!" RESUME, MORE LOUDLY THAN EVER.

AFTER A MOMENT THERE IS SILENCE AGAIN

DIGGES

Flattered as I am by this reception, and desirous as I am to please – indeed it would give me the highest pleasure to comply with your request to repeat the speech – private reasons compel me to beg that you will be so good as to excuse me, as my compliance would be greatly injurious to me.

BOOING AND HISSING. CALLS IN UNISON FOR "SHERIDAN!"

WOFFINGTON

They are calling for Thomas. He would do best to address them and allow the encore. They will go on the rampage if he does not appease them at once.

THE CLAMOURING BECOMES MORE URGENT

WOFFINGTON Oh, West, repeat the speech... just to quieten them down. Well, if Thomas won't appear, I shall speak to them!

YOUNG No, Peg! Don't be foolish.

MORE ANGRY SHOUTING AND WHISTLING

They are starting to tear up the benches. We should leave.

☞ FX: LOUD CRASH AND BREAKING OF GLASS, FOLLOWED BY SCREAMING

WOFFINGTON There goes the chandelier. Someone will be killed! Where are the stagehands? Oh... Quick, Polly, help me bring down the curtain.

☞ FX: CREAKING OF ROPES AND PULLEYS AGAINST A BACKGROUND OF RIOTING

YOUNG Someone has thrown a torch at the curtain. It's on fire!

DIGGES (COMING TOWARDS THEM) This is madness! Peg! Polly! Come away before they invade the stage!

WOFFINGTON No! I can't run away while the theatre burns! Polly, help me fetch the fire buckets...

AS THEY GO, SHOUTS OF "SHERIDAN!" GROW EVER LOUDER

SCENE 21

SHERIDAN'S HOUSE

FRANCES Come in, Mr Goldsmith, Mr Burke. I'm afraid that you will not find my husband at home.

GOLDSMITH Mrs Sheridan, we have come to say how sorry we are for the events of last night. Nothing that has gone before could have prepared your husband for the catastrophe that has befallen him.

FRANCES The damage is colossal. Smock Alley is in ruins. We knew that it was risky for him to stage Mahomet once more, but no one could have predicted such a disaster.

BURKE We tried at first to stem the fury, but it was impossible. The rioting continued from eight o'clock until three this morning. There were benches torn up, scenery destroyed, the curtain set on fire.

GOLDSMITH Mrs Woffington and Mrs Young stayed to the last, saving props and costumes and manning the water buckets with Mr Digges, when many of the men had fled. But the damage is very severe.

BURKE This was not the drunken revelry that has plagued the theatre for so long. This was violent anger, expressed from the boxes to the gallery. For once the gentry united with the poor in voicing their hostility to the pickpocket English king.

GOLDSMITH A pity it is that Thomas was not able to see it in time.

FRANCES What's done is done... We are preparing to leave for London. Thomas is at Quilca until we are ready to depart.

GOLDSMITH What will he do?

FRANCES He says he is done with the theatre.

BURKE He will surely return once the dust has settled. It would be a tragic loss for the city and for the theatre should he not return. No man has ever succeeded so well in improving the conditions for the play.

FRANCES Only time will tell... Won't you sit down?

GOLDSMITH Thank you, but I feel sure that you have much to do. Please, Mrs Sheridan, should there be any way in which we can be of help – however small...

FRANCES

We will not forget your kindness. But perhaps there is one thing that you might do. Speak to Mrs Woffington. Thank her for her loyalty last night. And tell her that I send her my compliments – as one lady to another.

[END]

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PAGE 1

SCENE 1

READTHROUGH AT THE OPENING OF A NEW SEASON AT SMOCK ALLEY. CAST AND PROMPTER ARE GATHERED ON THE STAGE

SHERIDAN

Ladies and gentlemen players of Smock Alley... Pray silence for a moment. We are proud and privileged to welcome Miss Peg Woffington and Mr West Digges to our theatre for this season. It is our fervent belief that their presence in our company will not only enhance the prestige of Smock Alley, but also swell its coffers.

POLITE CHEERS OF APPROVAL FROM THE ACTORS

WOFFINGTON

Thank you, Mr Sheridan, for your cordial welcome. A blessing it is indeed to find oneself among a company of such eminence. And dare we hope that so prodigious a turn-out from the members of the gentry for this first rehearsal augurs well for our new season?
(RAUCOUS CHEERS FROM AROUND THE STAGE)

DIGGES

Pray that we can also depend upon your attendance at night when the viewing is chargeable!

SHERIDAN

Before we commence, may I respectfully request that the gentlemen of leisure attending rehearsals allow space upon the stage for those persons who are actively involved in the production.

SHOUTS AND CATCALLS FROM THE GENTRY

WOFFINGTON May I also respectfully request, on behalf of the ladies of the company, that they keep their hands to themselves.

COMPANY Hear! Hear!

FURNIVAL Lest any of you have forgotten the so-called gentleman who, last season, took the liberty of pressing his lips to the neck of our leading lady as she passed him on the stage, let me remind you of the slap he received in the face – which, rumour has it, still smarts to this day. As does the applause from the audience that followed her action, and forced him into a public apology.

WOFFINGTON We ladies wish it to be known that we intend to enshrine this practice and employ it in response to all such disrespectful approaches.

SHOUTS FROM THE GENTRY OF 'YOU'LL BE LUCKY!' 'GIVE US A KISS, PEGGY!' ETC ETC

KELLY Huzzah! There's nothing so good as a mare with a bit of spirit, what? Makes for a much more exciting ride, wouldn't you say?!

KELLY

Quite right! Spoke like a thoroughbred!

SHERIDAN

And now, I place you in the capable hands of our prompter, Mr Harrington, who will conduct the rehearsal.

DIGGES AND SHERIDAN MOVE AWAY TO THE WINGS

SCENE 2

THE WINGS

DIGGES

So, Tom, I see your efforts to tame the mob are bearing fruit already.

SHERIDAN

Oh, there is much to be done yet, West. I have long held this fetish that a theatre might one day become a place where the events upon the stage will be the primary diversion.

DIGGES

The very idea!

SHERIDAN

Laughable, I know.

DIGGES

I had sooner take on a lion in the amphitheatre than tackle the wild beasts of the upper gallery.

SHERIDAN

Imagine this... An auditorium hums with respectful anticipation; the patrons quietly make their way to

their seats. The lights in the house are magically extinguished, the voices hush to a whisper...

DIGGES A whisper?

SHERIDAN A whisper which, as the room descends into blackness, fades into silence.

DIGGES To silence?

SHERIDAN Sweet silence... All eyes are trained towards the stage. The curtain rises and the set is revealed, empty save for the players.

DIGGES Egad.

SHERIDAN Not a rake nor blade in sight.

DIGGES Ambitious, to be sure.

SHERIDAN Why, indeed, should a theatre not be a place to see and hear a play?

DIGGES Your plan would have a better chance in a trappist monastery than in a theatre.

SHERIDAN Something must be done, West. The galleries in London seem like chapels of rest beside the mayhem here in Dublin. Between the acts the unruly mob assail the orchestra with rotten apples, half-eaten gingerbread

and even glass bottles, which often fall upon the heads of the persons in the pit.

DIGGES Many a wig bespoiled, I'll wager.

SHERIDAN Many an eye lost too...

DIGGES And those eyes in the pit are all too often the only ones looking towards the stage...

SHERIDAN Ah, those in the pit who come just to watch the plays. What a place the theatre would be if all the audiences were like them. None of the incessant babbling and blushing of dandies and peahens in the boxes, who come only to view one another. None of the university men bursting into the pit to avenge some insult to one of their number, beating anyone and breaking anything that comes within their reach. None of the licentious barking of drunken apprentices and journeymen. None of the blasphemy and loud immodesty of the cider women and fruit wenches; the frenzied crush in the lobbies; the herd of coachmen, livery-servants, bill hawkers, footpads, cutpurses, quickfingers, filches and beggars who surround the doors...

DIGGES It sounds simple enough. Where do you propose to begin?

SHERIDAN

By debarring the public from the stage and the Green Room except by invitation, and by raising the prices in the gallery again and again until order is restored.

DIGGES

The best of Irish luck to you, Thomas.

SHERIDAN

To us all.

BAWDY DRINKING SONG.

SCENE 3

DRESSING ROOM. OUTSIDE IN THE CORRIDOR, AT SOME DISTANCE AWAY, THERE IS A CONTINUOUS COMMOTION

FURNIVAL

What do you call these articles?

YOUNG

Shoes, Mrs Furnival.

FURNIVAL

Shoes. And whose shoes are they, pray tell me?

YOUNG

Your shoes, ma'am. Your new shoes.

FURNIVAL

Made for a child. I am no longer a child, and I require shoes made to fit my adult feet.

YOUNG

Yes, Mrs Furnival.

FURNIVAL

Well? What do you propose to do about it? If we were performing The Orphan of China one would expect to traverse the stage with bound feet, but we are not. We are enacting the tribulations of Moses, and one means to cross the Red Sea with a degree of dignity. Even if one does have to compete for space with Mr Sheridan's ridiculous tin nose.

YOUNG

Ma'am, there is a shoe stretcher in Temple Bar that I have had dealings with. He is an artist. He is the best in Europe. But he will touch only the shoes of very great performers...

FURNIVAL

Good. He will deal with mine, then, will he not? (A pregnant pause) I repeat, he will deal with mine, then, will he not?

YOUNG

I can but ask, Mrs Furnival.

FURNIVAL

Are you trying to insult me, woman? Of course you will ask, and of course he will accept my doll's shoes. Take them forthwith, and bring them back to me, stretched - artistically.

YOUNG

Very well, ma'am.

FURNIVAL EXITS AS WOFFINGTON ENTERS WITH SHERIDAN. AS THE DOOR OPENS, THE SHOUTING IN THE CORRIDOR CAN BE HEARD CLEARLY

WOFFINGTON Ah, Polly, would you have time to go over some lines with me?

YOUNG Of course, Peg. I'll be with you in a moment.

WOFFINGTON I see you're carrying Furnival's shoes. What does she want this time?

YOUNG New ones, I suspect. More new shoes. I don't wish to put Thomas to yet more expense, so I have told her of a shoe stretcher who deals only with great performers. I mean to put them to one side, and return them untouched. We shall see whether flattery will make them fit or not.

SHOUTING AND HYSTERICAL SCREAMING OUTSIDE.

FX: SOUND OF DOOR OPENING

SHERIDAN Pray, forgive me, ladies. We have need of your room for a brief while. Lay him down in here. Doctor, you may attend to him in here.

SOUNDS OF A BODY BEING HEAVED, ACCOMPANIED BY AGONISED GROANING

WOFFINGTON (SOTTO) Oh, sweet saints. What has happened?

SHERIDAN The rakes have stormed the stage door, and one of them has stabbed poor Eammon here with his sword. The blade has snapped and is lodged in his thigh.

WOFFINGTON

Do we know who did this?

SHERIDAN

One of the usual drunken pack of so-called gentlemen. They took off swiftly enough, but I fear we shall see them again in the pit. They have taken very ill their banishment from behind the scenes, and they don't like to be given orders by the likes of us. We must send for the militia. I fear this bodes very ill for tonight's performance...

BUSTLE AND NOISE OF THE AUDIENCE. FANFARE,
FOLLOWED BY SLIGHT HUSH

SHERIDAN Could poets once foretell the life
of plays,
And but divine what you'd condemn or praise,
They'd writ their epilogues accordingly;
But no one knows the fate of poetry.

WOFFINGTON Ladies will smile if scenes
are modest writ,
Whilst your double entendres please the pit.

DIGGES There's not a vizzard sweating in
the gallery,
But likes a smart intreague, a rake and
raillery.

FURNIVAL And were we to consult our friends
above,

A pert and witty footman 'tis they
love.

SCENE 4

BOX

LADY HEREFORD Ah, Antoinette, there you are. I couldn't be more vexed. I sent my footman down at three o'clock to keep this box for us, and it seems that a gang of Henrietta's men forced their way in and attempted to take it by force.

LADY RYE My gracious! Things have come to a pretty pass when our place in the box is dependent on the brawling of our servants.

LADY HEREFORD If it weren't for a helping hand he got from the Dorsets' men in the next box, we would have been up in the gallery tonight.

LADY RYE The very notion...

LADY HEREFORD I really don't know what the world is coming to. And what about Sheridan's latest trick, keeping us all away from rehearsals?

LADY RYE It's an outrage. How is one know if a play is any good without actually going to see it? Not that one minds much, of course, but a little diversion is nice now

and again when one tires of the antics in the other boxes.

LADY HEREFORD One could send along a governess or one's doctor to view the play on the first night, I suppose. Then, if it turns out to be worth a look, we could go ourselves on the second night.

LADY RYE (AGHAST) Second night? Caroline, have you lost your reason?

LADY HEREFORD Oh, now, something is happening down there on the stage. Poor Sheridan is having to compete for attention with a young man trying to climb over the spikes from the pit.

LADY RYE Oh yes... I like this very much. See how Sheridan feigns indifference. Behold his noble brow furrowed in courtly detachment.

LADY HEREFORD Excellent. A small bet is called for, don't you think? Twenty shillings to me if our young soldier reaches the stage - ungorged.

LADY RYE And twenty to me if he falls down into the orchestra!

SHRIEKS OF LAUGHTER FROM BOTH

LADY HEREFORD Nothing could amuse me so much as that grand fellow from goodness knows where, who tried to make his mark upon Dublin last season. Do you remember him?

LADY RYE Oh, by heavens, how could one forget?

LADY HEREFORD He did cut quite a dash, I must admit. Perched on the edge of his box, with his back to the stage.

LADY RYE Legs outstretched and crossed at the ankle, sword beside him, lounging against the side of the box—

LADY HEREFORD Amply displaying his six-feet-long person to the whole house.

LADY RYE Oh, such richly embroidered silken clothes, hair so tastefully dressed, such perfect ringlets playing about his ears...

LADY HEREFORD Such a proud display, such a smile of complacent nonchalance... before he suddenly overbalanced and tumbled into the pit!

MORE SHRIEKS AND GUFFAWS

LADY RYE Oh, look, the soldier's over! Twenty shillings to you.

ROAR FROM THE AUDIENCE

SCENE 5

STAGE

SHERIDAN And with one intent, the multitude raised their voices to the heavens to beg Almighty God to deliver-

KELLY I have something to deliver to you, sir!

SHERIDAN Oh God of heaven, Oh God of the Israelites, Oh God of all the firmament-

KELLY Oh God, will he ever stop?

AUDIENCE LAUGHTER

SHERIDAN And at that moment there came a mighty hush over all the earth-

KELLY Dinner's ready, sir.

SHERIDAN And darkness descended-

KELLY It's only a little fruit. Not the ripest either, I regret. But here it is anyway.

SHERIDAN

Will you kindly return yourself to whence you came, sir, that the play may continue.

KELLY

Shall I place it in your pocket, lest you take on hungry after all your exertions? Or shall I rest it on that fine tin nose you are sporting? Can we see a show of hands please? The nose or the pocket? All hands for the nose?

AUDIENCE CHEERING

KELLY

All hands for the pocket?

AUDIENCE SHOUTS OF 'NOSE! NOSE! NOSE! NOSE!'

KELLY

A very disappointing show for the pocket. So, the nose it must be.

SHERIDAN

Must the enjoyment of the many be marred by the antics of the few?

KELLY

Hold still, while I pop this apple on yer snout, there's a good fellow!

SHERIDAN

Remove your hands from me sir, and remove yourself from the stage.

KELLY

Have it your own way, then. What good is a player that won't stand still? I'll be off then. With a tear

and a sigh I must leave you to give my 'Good Evenings' to the ladies behind.

SHERIDAN No you shan't. Stop him, you men. He shall not go backstage.

CHEERING FROM THE GALLERY

SHERIDAN (ASIDE) He already has, goddamnit! (OUT) Ladies and Gentlemen, such as there be among you, I thank you for your indulgence, and pray that the performance will continue without further interruption.

AUDIENCE SHOUTING

SCENE 6

BOX

LADY HEREFORD Well, what a diverting evening we are having.

LADY RYE Indeed, and so much more amusing than the play itself, don't you think?

FX: DISTANT BREAKING GLASS AND SNAPPING OF STRINGS.

LADY RYE What was that?

LADY HEREFORD Oh, probably the footmen in the gallery. They use the orchestra as target practice, you know.

LADY RYE Poor dears, it's a long evening for them.

LADY HEREFORD Oh, look, there's your husband, little Lord Rye.

LADY RYE Heavens, so it is. I haven't seen him for weeks. Doesn't he look well?

LADY HEREFORD He's bought a new wig, that's all.

LADY RYE No, Caroline, something else is making him look so sprightly.

LADY HEREFORD Or someone else.

LADY RYE Quite. Do you know, when I see him like that I could almost take a fancy to him myself.

LADY HEREFORD Oh, really, Antoinette, that's too distasteful. Not your own husband.

SCENE 7

DRESSING ROOM

WOFFINGTON ...and there to rest their weary – to feast their weary... Oh, Polly, I don't know a line of this. You'll have to go on for me.

YOUNG Oh, no, heaven forbid. I've been much too taken up with the costumes even to begin to learn any of the parts. Spare me and stay well for a few more nights at least.

NOISY SINGING FROM OUTSIDE THE DOOR. KELLY BURSTS INTO THE ROOM

KELLY Oh, what joy! The players do play. What a pretty scene... What ravishing comeliness. What games do you play alone together, ye damsels?

WOFFINGTON Mr Kelly, please take yourself away. As you know, gentlemen are no longer welcomed behind the scenes. We are engaged in our work.

KELLY And what work is it that a pair of sweet creatures might engage in without the helping hand of a gentleman?

YOUNG Mr Kelly, get you hence, I beg you.

KELLY Beg? Beg? Ha! Ha! You'll be begging me not to stop before I'm gone from you. Make space between those silken stockings, and I'll gladly give you cause to beg, my pretty one.

YOUNG Mr Kelly...

KELLY Hey! Hey! Keep still, ya whore!

YOUNG You're tearing my dress...

WOFFINGTON You savage! Take your hands from her! Get away, you evil-

KELLY Your turn next. Oh how I love a vixen vexed! Vexed is next, make no mistake.

☞ FX: FABRIC TEARING AS HE GRABS HER.

WOFFINGTON Let me go, you brute, you drunken animal!

KELLY A fine way to speak to a gentleman. It seems I shall have to show you some manners.

☞ FX: DOOR OPENING

WOFFINGTON RUNS OUT IN GREAT AGITATION. KELLY SHOUTS AFTER HER DOWN THE CORRIDOR

KELLY Strumpet! Whore!

BEFORE HE CAN TAKE OFF AFTER HER, SHERIDAN ENTERS
WITH A STAGEHAND

SHERIDAN Hold him, Samuel.

KELLY Take your hands off me, you ruffians. Let me go!

SHERIDAN Get him out of here. Cast him into the street – and
be sure his feet don't touch the ground till he's
face down in the mud.

THE SHOUTING CONTINUES AS THEY DRAG HIM OFF DOWN THE
CORRIDOR

SCENE 8

BOX

LADY HEREFORD Oh, bless my soul. What riotous assembly.

LADY RYE What is that thing on the front of his head?

LADY HEREFORD I believe it's his Moses nose.

LADY RYE Heavens. Was Moses' nose really made of
pink tin?

LADY HEREFORD Must have been. The man's a

stickler for detail.

LADY RYE Mr Sheridan appears to have left the stage in pursuit of that scruffy officer.

LADY HEREFORD This evening is not going well for our esteemed manager. Shall we move on? We could torture poor Dorothea by arriving early. (SHE CACKLES WITH LAUGHTER)

LADY RYE Tempting, to be sure. But the sport here looks set to liven up. Here, pass the dice. We'll have a throw or two in the meantime. Four guineas down.

THERE IS SHOUTING AND COMMOTION FROM BELOW

LADY HEREFORD It would appear that our noble warrior is back in the pit.

SCENE 9

THE PIT

KELLY (SHOUTING UP FROM THE PIT) Sheridan, you're a blackguard and a rascal. You're not fit to run a cockfight.

SHERIDAN

If there be any friends of this gentleman present, I ask you to take control of him, for the sake of the more respectful members of the audience

KELLY

Ya filthy stinking dog! I'll teach you to question the respectability of a gentleman.

SHERIDAN

I spoke of respect, sir, not of respectability. They are not the same. Now, I'll have no more of your bellowing. There are places more suited to such behaviour than a theatre.

KELLY

You'll not speak to a gentleman in such terms. Get on yer knees, yer lowly cur, and plead for forgiveness.

THE HOUSE HAS HUSHED TO SILENCE

SHERIDAN

Sir, such conduct is not becoming of a gentleman. You would do best to get you to your lodgings and put this shameful day behind you.

KELLY

And what would a lowly player know of gentlemanly conduct? You should learn your place, you upstart cur! Picking pockets and dancing for pennies – that's all you're fit for!

SHERIDAN

Sir, I am every bit as much a gentleman as any in the house. And some might say, on hearing you tonight – more so than some!

SHOUTS OF 'INSULT!' AND 'SHAME!' FROM THE PIT AND THE
BOXES

KELLY You'll pay for this, Sheridan. You'll pay with your
blood for insulting the gentry in this way.

SHERIDAN This is no insult. I was born and raised a gentleman,
the same as yourself.

KELLY But you're an actor now. You chose to disport
yourself upon the stage. And if that makes you a
gentleman, what does that make us?

THE HOUSE WAITS IN SILENCE FOR SHERIDAN'S REPLY

KELLY (ENRAGED) I'll ask you again, Sheridan. If you are a
gentleman, what does your equal ranking make us?

SHERIDAN You'll find better manners among we rogues and
vagabonds than among some present here tonight.

THERE IS A HOWL OF OUTRAGE FROM THE PIT AND THE BOXES

SCENE 10

BOX

LADY HEREFORD Oh what fun, Antoinette. I do so love the theatre. I must say, it's a credit to Mr Sheridan. I haven't enjoyed an evening so much in years.

LADY RYE This is no laughing matter, Caroline. A player cannot stand up in a public place and claim equal terms with a gentleman. For in saying so, he implies that gentlemen are no better than players – and if that is so, what does that make us?

LADY HEREFORD Oh dear, Antoinette. I see what you mean. Isn't it fortunate, then, that dear Henrietta isn't present to hear herself compared to a strumpet? (SHE AND LADY RYE COLLAPSE INTO FITS OF GIGGLES)

THERE IS A DULL CLUNK AND A GASP FROM SHERIDAN,
FOLLOWED BY A ROAR OF LAUGHTER FROM THE AUDIENCE

LADY RYE Do look. That fellow has just dented Sheridan's nose with an orange.

CLOWN MUSIC FROM BALLAD OPERA OR ITALIAN CIRCUS

SCENE 11

THE GREEN ROOM. THE INTERVAL

SHERIDAN (ENTERING) Thank God for the interval. Oh, Mother Nature, spare us from another night like this.

WOFFINGTON Thomas, your head is bleeding.

SHERIDAN I have been wounded by an orange.

FURNIVAL Let me take that nose off you. It's crumpled like a paper bag.

SHERIDAN Well, you'll all be pleased to see that I'll not be wearing the nose again. You can thank Kelly for that.

FURNIVAL I've never seen a man in regimental uniform behaving like that in a public place.

WOFFINGTON His behaviour is certainly churlish – even by the standards of the military.

KELLY'S VOICE CAN BE HEARD SHOUTING OUTSIDE IN THE
CORRIDOR

SHERIDAN Oh dear sweet saints. Here he comes again.

KELLY Sheridan! You'll pay for this, so you will.

SHERIDAN There's no paying to be done, Mr Kelly. After fair warning – several fair warnings, I merely ordered you to be removed from the house. Someone come and take away this lunatic child before there's an accident.

KELLY I'll have satisfaction, Sheridan, so I will.

SHERIDAN

Is your honour worth defending, Kelly? Nothing in your boorish conduct would command respect, even from the gallery.

KELLY

You've provoked me enough, actor. I tell you, I'll have satisfaction for this.

SHERIDAN

Is this a challenge? Because if it is, I'm ready to take it up here and now. You may have your choice of weapons: a stout oak stick, as carried by Moses himself, or the fop's slender cane from Hamlet. I'd take the oak if I were you, Kelly. I've a stout right arm.

KELLY

I'll take neither; I'll not engage in combat with a clown.

SHERIDAN

Then I'll take the oak.

HE STRIKES HIM. KELLY SCREAMS

SHERIDAN

See to it that you never come here again, Kelly.

KELLY

You'll pay for this!

SHERIDAN

Quiet, you snivelling whelp!

HE HITS HIM AGAIN WITH HIS STICK

KELLY

Stop! Stop!

SHERIDAN Say you repent.

KELLY Stop! For pity's sake.

SHERIDAN Repent. Like the miserable coward that you are. Kneel and beg forgiveness or I'll strike you again.

KELLY Stop! Oh, stop! You've broken my ankle.

SHERIDAN I'll break your nose too!

WOFFINGTON Thomas, stop! Leave him now!

KELLY IS YELPING AND CRYING

KELLY Enough, no more. I'll go in peace. Help me to walk, someone. Help me.

SHERIDAN Take him away. And be sure he never enters this house again.

KELLY SNIVELS AND BLUBBERS AWAY

SCENE 12

DEVILLY'S COFFEE HOUSE. GENERAL HUBBUB

DEVILLY

Come on, Mr Goldsmith, this is a coffee house, not the Houses of Parliament. If you're not going to order, I'll give your tables to those people waiting in the doorway with jingling pockets.

GOLDSMITH

Quite right, Mrs Devilly! We'll take three more pots. Oh, and I think Mr Burke would like you to charge them to his account, wouldn't you, Edmund?

BURKE

Thank you, Oliver, I'll not forget. Have you got a copy of the Morning Post, Mrs Devilly?

DEVILLY Have you not seen it? Well, bless us and save us – not that I ever get time to put my feet up and read the papers, naturally – but it seems that after last night's disturbances at Smock Alley, this Edward Kelly's friends have been rampaging around the city looking for revenge, and Mr Sheridan has been forced into hiding, in fear for his life.

RAISED VOICES AS A HERD OF KELLY'S SUPPORTERS BURST INTO THE COFFEE HOUSE

BURKE

Heavens, what rabble approaches?

KELLY

There's one! Student, where is Sheridan hiding out?

BURKE

(Languidly) Who is this man, Goldfish? Do we know him?

GOLDSMITH I may have seen him. But they all look so much alike, these ageing blades. Especially as one only ever sees them face down in the gutter as one trips through the morning mist towards one's studies.

BURKE What is your name, ageing blade?

KELLY Edward Kelly. And you'll do well to remember it, pup.

BURKE Edmund Burke. Delighted to make your acquaintance.

GOLDSMITH Oliver Goldsmith. Enchanted to meet you. Now, get along and hunt some snipe, there's a good fellow. We have our Plato to discuss.

KELLY Look at the pair of you. You're a disgrace. You're no better dressed than a couple of players yourselves.

BURKE Do we like this man, Goldfish?

GOLDSMITH Not greatly, sir.

BURKE And the pack of hounds he travels with? Are they Trinity men, Goldfish?

GOLDSMITH Oh no, indeed not, sir.

KELLY Some of your number are said to be protecting Sheridan. Just wait till we find out who they are. The honour of the gentry is at stake.

BURKE Was Sheridan a Trinity man, Goldfish?

GOLDSMITH Certainly was, sir. Among the finest in his day.

BURKE Then we're with the players. And gentlemen they are to a man.

GOLDSMITH Mustn't forget the women.

BURKE Yes, indeed, the women. They are gentlemen too.

KELLY I'll break your head, you insolent gypsy.

GOLDSMITH I find his musicless tones grate upon the ear, Burke. His clashing notes disturb the sweetness of the morn.

BURKE Punitive measures are called for. What say you, Men of Trinity?

CRIES OF 'HEAR! HEAR!'

GOLDSMITH Into the fray!

WHOOPS AND BATTLE CRIES AS THE OTHERS SET UPON
KELLY'S GANG

REBEL DRINKING SONG

SCENE 13

DIGGES'S LODGINGS

SHERIDAN This is ridiculous, Frances. I cannot spend the rest of my life hiding in Digges's lodgings. I'm going out to face them.

FRANCES Don't be rash, Thomas. It is said that the blades have a horse standing by day and night to whisk away your assassin.

FRANCES It's true indeed. Never have I seen such a mob – rampaging and looting through the place. Were it not for the swift action of the scholars in righting an overturned brazier, the theatre would have been burned to the ground. It is no cowardice to wise to make an apology and be done with the whole affair.

SHERIDAN Never. For do you not see that to apologise when there has been no wrongdoing is not the behaviour of a gentleman. To do so would be to concede to their low view of players.

DIGGES ENTERS

DIGGES There's a pair of young men to see you, Thomas. They claim to be Trinity men, come to protect you. Shall I show them up?

FRANCES

How do they know you are here, I wonder? Go upstairs, out of sight. I'll receive them here.

SHERIDAN AND DIGGES EXIT

FRANCES

(TO HERSELF) Aha! The Dublin Journal is quick enough to comment on the affair. "...From the earliest account of theatrical history, down to the present, I could not meet with a parallel to the case of Sheridan, which is no less than a violent dispute about the HONOUR of an actor."

DIGGES ENTERS WITH BURKE AND GOLDSMITH

DIGGES

Mrs Sheridan will see you.

BURKE

How do you do? Edmund Burke. It's a privilege to meet you, Mrs Sheridan. May I introduce my friend and fellow Trinity man, Oliver Goldsmith?

FRANCES

How do you do?

GOLDSMITH

A pleasure to meet you, Mrs Sheridan.

FRANCES

What leads you to imagine that my husband is here?

BURKE

The events of the past two nights have given us concern for his safety. We have been keeping a discreet watch over him. He was seen coming here late last night.

FRANCES

Do you think any of the others saw him?

BURKE

We think not. If they knew he was here, they would have stormed the place.

FRANCES

Well, I'm afraid that your lookouts have not been quite keen enough. Sheridan is gone, I cannot say where.

BURKE

Good. Our lookouts are street boys. Pickpockets. If he can slip away from them, he could elude his own shadow. Just let him know that the men of Trinity have taken his part, and they offer their protection against the Philistines.

GOLDSMITH

If you need help of any kind, you can leave word at our rooms at Trinity.

FRANCES

Thomas has notions of returning to the stage at once. Of course, such an idea is out of the question.

BURKE

On the contrary, he must return this very night, if you can trace him. We cannot have a recurrence of last night's brawling. We intend to form a corps of our men to maintain order.

DIGGES

How can we be certain that you are not of the other side? That you are not attempting to draw my husband out.

GOLDSMITH You cannot. But events will soon convince you. This is war, Mrs Sheridan. We are fighting on your side.

SHERIDAN ENTERS

SHERIDAN This talk of warfare is a little over-dramatic, do you not think?

BURKE Mr Sheridan... Edmund Burke. Oliver Goldsmith.

SHERIDAN This is a hot coal, to be sure. But a war?

BURKE It is no small matter. The integrity of the theatre and the honour of a respected actor are at stake, Mr Sheridan. We feel that they are worth defending. We have already begun by making an example of one of the leaders of last night's disruption - one John Martin.

SHERIDAN How so?

BURKE This morning, having discovered where he lay, a thousand of our men roused him at dawn to rouse him and brought him to a courtyard at the college. Having been made sensible of his crime, he was suffered to kneel in a circle of our men. Then water was applied from the college pump to cool his head, and once he had admitted his fault and meekly begged pardon he was set free. Spurred by the success of this trial,

we ministered to a Captain Fitzgerald in a similar manner.

BURKE

Then Edward Kelly who, knowing that the scholars would soon seek him out, came quietly for his own safety and knelt before us too.

GOLDSMITH

It is certain that the friends of these gentlemen will not accept this humiliation lightly, and will take to the streets, bent on revenge. The whole city is in such a fright that the shopkeepers have shut up their premises, and many citizens fear to go out of their houses.

BURKE

Mr Sheridan, we pledge to protect you. The public awaits your Richard III. Show them that the crooked back is broad, sir.

FRANCES

It would be reckless and foolish for Thomas to be abroad, with the threat of death upon him. There is no shame in staying out of sight until the storm has calmed.

BURKE

Good day to you, Mr Sheridan. We eagerly await your Richard III.

THEY LEAVE

FRANCES

Hot-headed pups!

SHERIDAN Quite so.

FRANCES I take it that you don't intend to follow their advice and appear?

SHERIDAN One should not be seen to give way to the intimidators. Last night's withdrawal from the stage was humiliation enough.

SCENE 14

GREEN ROOM

☞ FX: DISTANT HUBBUB AS THE HOUSE FILLS UP. CLOSE UP RUSTLING OF COSTUMES

WOFFINGTON Gracious! I've never seen the Green Room so quiet. Is there anyone alive in here?

☞ FX: MORE RUSTLING

YOUNG I've repaired your breeches, Mr Sheridan.

SHERIDAN (AFTER A PAUSE, HE SIGHS DEEPLY) Thank you, Polly.
(ANOTHER PAUSE) Ah well, let us away. Now, remember, company, tonight could be a rough voyage. There's to be no heroics. One smell of trouble, and I give you permission to leave the stage by the nearest exit. Do not engage with the audience under any circumstances.

If there's talking to be done with with them, I'll do it.

YOUNG Mrs Furnival, your shoes have been returned by my man in Temple Bar.

FURNIVAL Stretched, I hope?

YOUNG Expertly stretched, Mrs Furnival.

FURNIVAL No hesitation, I presume?

YOUNG Almost none.

FURNIVAL Almost?... Well, hand them over, let's try them.. Ah, yes. Oh, bliss. Improved beyond all measure. My compliments to Mr Stretcher. An artist.

WOFFINGTON Polly, I think it would be a kind gesture to invite Mr Stretcher to a performance, and introduce him to Mrs Furnival afterwards.

YOUNG Oh... yes... er, perhaps... Mrs Woffington, if you're ready, I'll tighten your stays.

WOFFINGTON Ow! Polly! Stop! Not so tight!

YOUNG (GIGGLING) Sorry, Mrs Woffington.

DIGGES ENTERS

DIGGES Thomas, a word, if you please.

HE ADDRESSES HIM CONFIDENTIALLY

DIGGES The company would like to suggest a strategy that, if you will permit, might allow us to test the mood of the crowd—

SHERIDAN One must request permission to enter, is that what this has come to? (AFTER A PAUSE) Very well, West, tell me all...

SCENE 15

BOX

LADY HEREFORD Don't you find it cold tonight, Antoinette?

LADY RYE Frightful. The draft in the corridor could freeze the diamonds to one's throat.

LADY HEREFORD Still, it promises to be quite a night, one way and another.

LADY RYE Have I missed much?

LADY HEREFORD Well, that fellow standing alone in the crown,
bemoaning his lot, is King Henry. A messenger has
just entered, with the news that Mr Sheridan will
appear, if it is their pleasure. Otherwise, Mr Dyer
will take his place, to spare our manager's life and
the fabric of the house.

LADY RYE Will Sheridan step out, do you think?

LADY HEREFORD Who can tell? Rumour has it that he has been seen
boarding a boat bound for the jungles of Africa.

LADY HEREFORD He would certainly be safer there.

SNORTS AND SHRIEKS OF LAUGHTER FROM BOTH

LADY RYE Well, bless my soul. Here he comes. It would seem
that Africa's loss is our gain!

SCENE 16

STAGE

HUGE CHEER FROM SOME QUARTERS. LOUD BOOS FROM OTHERS.

SHERIDAN Good people of Smock Alley!

LOUD SHOUTS OF "SUBMISSION! SUBMISSION! SUBMISSION!"

AND OFF! OFF! OFF!"

SHERIDAN

Good ladies and kind gentlemen. If any gentlemen have taken offence at my public behaviour of late, I am extremely sorry for it, and beg leave to declare that I am not conscious of ever having designed to offend them in any shape. As I am perfectly satisfied that the voice of the public can never be wrong, if it be their opinion that I should make a submission, I am ready to do it.

MORE SHOUTS OF "SUBMISSION!"

FX: GUNSHOT

THE HOUSE INSTANTLY GOES QUIET.

BURKE Is that what it takes to bring civil order to this house? We, the students of Trinity College deplore the bringing of private quarrels into this place, and hereby assert the rights of the audience to hear and see the play.

GOLDSMITH We therefore ask for a vote. Those who are for preserving the decency and freedom of the stage, please raise your hands.

LOUD CHEERS AND SHOUTS OF APPROVAL

BURKE

Those who are for rioting, disruption and barbarism,
please raise your hands.

BOOS AND CATCALLS

BURKE

Ladies and Gentlemen. The rule of order wins the day.
Henceforth, may the plays be allowed to continue in
peace. A hand for Mr Sheridan!

THUNDEROUS APPLAUSE

REBEL DRINKING SONG

SCENE 17

DEVILLY'S COFFEE HOUSE.

GOLDSMITH

Mrs Devilly? A large pot of coffee, please. And a
copy of the Dublin Courant, if you have one to hand.

DEVILLY

Paper's here, Mr Goldsmith. Coffee will take longer.

GOLDSMITH

Not too long, one hopes.

DEVILLY

Cheeky young whippet. By gracious, sir, your friend
Mr Sheridan's life has taken a few queer turns since
his return to the stage – not that some of us ever
get the chance to sit around reading papers and

gossiping, of course – but no one has talked of anything else in here for weeks.

GOLDSMITH And the papers write of little else, either. (OPENING THE PAPER) Here we are... "This quarrel... concerned nothing more than the Honour of an Actor... But his cause was a noble one... defence of decency... decorum of the stage... supported by all persons of worth and honour... etectera, etcetera..."

DEVILLY Any news from the court yet, sir?

GOLDSMITH Not so far. It could be a lengthy affair – there is no precedent for a case between gentleman and a player, so it could go in Kelly's favour for that reason alone. Burke and I are taking it in turns to attend.

DEVILLY That looks like your friend coming in now. (CALLING ACROSS THE ROOM) Another cup over here, please, Catherine.

GOLDSMITH You're right. Things must be unusually dull today. Edmund, over here!

BURKE (APPROACHING) How are you, Goldfish? Good day to you, Mrs Devilly.

GOLDSMITH Pleasure to see you, Mr Burke.

BURKE REACHES THE TABLE

GOLDSMITH You're out early. Has there been an adjournment?

BURKE Better than that, old chap. There has been an outcome.

GOLDSMITH And?

BURKE A resounding victory. Against all expectations, the jury found Mr Kelly guilty of assault, and sentenced him to three months in jail and a fine of £500.

GOLDSMITH By heavens!

BURKE Sheridan was magnificent. His dignity and charm before the court greatly assisted his case. On one occasion, Kelly's defence counsel, addressing the jury, sneered: "I have often seen a gentleman soldier and a gentleman tailor; but I have never seen a gentleman player." Bowing modestly, Sheridan rose, and replied: "Sir, I hope you see one now." The onlookers in the court broke into spontaneous applause, and the day was all but won from that moment.

DEVILLY Well, bless my soul! I think this calls for something celebratory. I'll go and fetch some glasses.

SCENE 18

SHERIDAN'S HOUSE

FRANCES Come to bed now, Thomas. You must be exhausted after the day.

SHERIDAN Not at all, I could dance till morning. I feel sprightly, light, charged with that special vigour that victory brings.

FRANCES (AFTER A MOMENT) There are other things being said about you, you know. The tattle pages in the magazines are beginning to comment on your trips to the country with Mrs Woffington.

SHERIDAN One cannot stop gossip, Frances. But you know this is not the way it seems to them.

FRANCES That may be so, but that means nothing when the sly jokes begin. "Congratulations are due to Mr Thomas Sheridan for his selfless attention to the moral well-being of his leading lady, and for the many hours expended in the noble cause, alone with her at his country retreat in Quilca, County Cavan. Such disinterest is so rare in these cynical times." You realise, Thomas, that soon all of Dublin and most of London will be laughing behind its hand at you.

SHERIDAN

Let them think what they will. My conscience is clear.

FRANCES

Clear it may be, but if you had any feelings for me, or any respect for yourself, you would not provoke such gossip – it's an affront to your dignity and mine. And making Mrs Woffington into a Protestant will not make her any more acceptable in Society. In the eyes of the world she will always be an actress.

SHERIDAN

Frances, times are changing. The incident with Kelly has served to prove, I think, that an actor can begin to be regarded as a gentleman. One would hope that the same respect could be accorded to an actress – especially one with such grace, dignity, intelligence, poise—

FRANCES

Beauty, charm, wit, elegance... what else? And admitting her to your Beefsteak Club – as the only woman in a club for gentlemen will hardly make her appear more of a lady.

SHERIDAN

Nothing would give me greater pleasure, my love, than to have you play hostess. But you know that such a thing is out of the question.

FRANCES

I see, as a married woman, it is less respectable for me to be alone among men, including my husband?

SHERIDAN

It's out of respect for you, I assure you, my heart.

FRANCES

Oh, bring her to the Beefsteak if you must. Only, answer me one question. While she is in the house, where should I and the children go? Should we take to the streets? Or should we go to the theatre and wait in the Green Room while you entertain her along with the great and the mighty in my house at your own expense?

SHERIDAN

I had no idea that you felt so strongly against the Beefsteak.

FRANCES

My complaint is not with the Beefsteak Club. Can you not see that, however much you may believe in actresses as ladies, I cannot be seen to keep company with such a woman in my house.

SHERIDAN

Peg Woffington is a woman of exquisite generosity and the soundest moral character.

FRANCES

Putting aside all questions of private character, it is enough in the eyes of the world that an actress stands unmasked before the public - even her own servants - and displays passions, utters words of love, plays the coquette, sometimes the wanton, to be squeezed and kissed by men not her husband, and makes herself available for the entertainment of any who pay their pennies. Times have not changed the people's view of that.

SHERIDAN It is to be hoped that they will, Frances.

SCENE 19

GREEN ROOM. THE COMPANY ARE GATHERED, WAITING FOR SHERIDAN TO ARRIVE AND ADDRESS THEM

WOFFINGTON Oh, West, what shall I wear tonight? Thomas has asked me to be Guest of Honour at the Beefsteak Club. What might be the correct dress for a woman at a club for gentlemen only?

DIGGES Will you go?

WOFFINGTON Why, of course. Why would I not?

DIGGES No reason...

WOFFINGTON West? Why would I not go?

DIGGES In this climate of Nationalist fervour, many people take a poor view of Sheridan's easy friendships among the Court. You might be as well not to make a habit of it.

WOFFINGTON I have been asked there to simply to add a little feminine gaiety to the occasion.

DIGGES All the same, the Duke of Dorset represents the crown, and many would equate Thomas's breaking bread with him as supping with the king.

WOFFINGTON Players are not statesmen, and never were.

DIGGES Indeed. But many in Ireland feel deep resentment towards King George for using their taxes to pay English debts. And you would do well to keep a tactful distance at this time.

WOFFINGTON Surely no-one would blame a girl who rose from the streets of Dublin for enjoying the fruits of her success?

DIGGES Of course not. But...

WOFFINGTON It doesn't seem so long ago that I was a barefoot child standing on the steps of Dublin Castle, holding my sprigs of watercress to sell, and watching the ladies come and go to the glittering balls within. People who served there regaled us with tales of their splendour – mountainous ice sculptures, dazzling chandeliers, snow-white peacocks and perfumed fountains... and after the gentry had gone, of whole oxen left uneaten, rare Chinese fruits barely pecked at... and all about the floor a debris of amber combs, porcelain teeth, trampled feathers and tiny scattered jewels, fallen from dresses and wigs... And

stumbling home through the freezing mud never did I dream that I would enter those doors as a guest.

DIGGES

Nor, indeed that the people would cheer Dublin's own Peg Woffington as she was set down from her gilded sedan by powdered footmen. They begrudge you nothing, Peg, while they feel you are one of their own. But if they should ever think you had crossed the floor, their love could quickly turn...

WOFFINGTON

What do you suppose this meeting is about?

DIGGES

Thomas is said to be planning not to stage Mahomet tonight. To the Irish ear, Voltaire's words resonate all too clearly with nationalistic sentiment, and unite all parts of the house in their anger towards the king. Naturally, it's causing deep consternation at court. You heard the urgent calls for me to encore the "crush these vipers!"

WOFFINGTON

It was a tribute to your sparkling rendition, West.

DIGGES

You are kind, Peg. But there was no flattery in it. The people were cheering for Alcanor, defender of the city against the oppressor.

SHERIDAN ENTERS

SHERIDAN

Ladies and gentlemen of the company, your attention for a moment. I am aware of the rumours and

speculation surrounding tonight's performance and, after giving the matter much thought, I have decided that we shall proceed with Mahomet. That is all. Thank you.

MURMUR FROM THE COMPANY

DIGGES Thomas, are you certain this is wise?

SHERIDAN I have made my decision. Much has been expended on it, and until it is recouped, the means do not exist to mount a fresh production.

AWKWARD LAUGHTER

SHERIDAN As to the question of encores, I do not believe that the stage is a proper place to exhibit political sentiments. The business of an actor is to divest himself of private sentiments and to enter, with all his spirit, into the character he represents. But if an actor, in order to please the public, should, by emphasis, gesture or look, mark out a passage in his part as a party stroke, he steps out of his feigned character into his natural one. I had hoped that the example I have set would have made admonitions unnecessary.

DIGGES Mr Sheridan, would I be correct in my impression that your remarks are directed at myself?

SHERIDAN

(AFTER A MOMENT'S PAUSE) Yes, Mr Digges, I cannot deny that. To you, I must particularly apply, as the first tragedian I have ever heard of who repeated a speech upon the "encore!" of an audience.

DIGGES

Sir, given the volatile mood of the audience, and the incendiary effect that refusing an encore might have, what do you recommend in such an event? If I should comply with their demand and repeat the speech, am I to incur your censure?

THERE IS NO REPLY

DIGGES

Sir, I await your answer.

SHERIDAN

I believe that I have expressed my views on the matter clearly enough on more than this occasion.

DIGGES

Even so, sir, I would be grateful if you would direct me as to exactly what I must do should the question arise again.

SHERIDAN

Once it were established that a section of an audience has a right to encore a speech, any other part of the audience may claim the same right. And if once repeated, why not several times? Why not any other speech as well? And why not as many speeches as they wish?

DIGGES

Sir, am I to understand that you forbid the repetition of any speech?

SHERIDAN

You have heard my arguments on that head. If you think they are of weight, I suppose you will act accordingly; if not, remember I do not give you any orders on this occasion. You are left entirely free to act as you please. I leave you to act in that matter as you think proper. (GOING) Mrs Young, if I could speak to you for a moment about costumes.

DIGGES

Goddamnit! What manner of answer is that, Peg? There is no doubt of his views, yet it could be unsafe to inflame the mob. Oh, what am I to do?

SCENE 20

THE WINGS. WOFFINGTON AND YOUNG ARE TALKING SOTTO VOCE AT THE SIDE OF THE STAGE. SHERIDAN IS ONSTAGE.

WOFFINGTON

Poor West. Waiting white-faced in the wings.

YOUNG

I cannot say I envy him.

WOFFINGTON

No, the atmosphere out there is truly menacing. Even the gallery is silent. Except when West is on – then they catch fire. There is some faction or other organising this, without a doubt.

YOUNG

It was the same outside the entrance. None of the loud bustling before a performance. Instead, as the Duke of Dorset and his glittering party drew up in his carriage, the same faces that usually press excitedly against the windows stood in silence, unsmiling. With each sedan chair that arrived, the throng parted noiselessly to allow it through, then closed ranks, staring grim-faced after it. It was as though the crowd had been directed for a scene in an opera.

WOFFINGTON

There he goes. Good luck, West...

HUGE ERUPTION OF CHEERING, WHISTLING, THUMPING FROM THE AUDIENCE

DIGGES

If, ye powers divine!
Ye mark the movements of this nether world,
And bring them to Account; crush, crush these vipers,
Who, singled out by a community to guard their
rights, shall for a grasp of ore,
Or paltry office, sell them to the foe!

AUDIENCE SHOUTING QUICKLY BECOMES RHYTHMIC REPETITION OF "ENCORE!"

WOFFINGTON

What will he do? They will not stop until he gives them the speech again.

YOUNG

He is moving down to the very front of the stage. He has raised his hand, as though he is about to address them. Mr Sheridan will not be pleased.

WOFFINGTON

Listen!

THE HOUSE INSTANTLY FALLS SILENT

DIGGES

Good people. With your indulgence, pray that we may continue the play without interruption.

CHANTS OF "ENCORE!" RESUME, MORE LOUDLY THAN EVER.

AFTER A MOMENT THERE IS SILENCE AGAIN

DIGGES

Flattered as I am by this reception, and desirous as I am to please – indeed it would give me the highest pleasure to comply with your request to repeat the speech – private reasons compel me to beg that you will be so good as to excuse me, as my compliance would be greatly injurious to me.

BOOING AND HISSING. CALLS IN UNISON FOR "SHERIDAN!"

WOFFINGTON

They are calling for Thomas. He would do best to address them and allow the encore. They will go on the rampage if he does not appease them at once.

THE CLAMOURING BECOMES MORE URGENT

WOFFINGTON Oh, West, repeat the speech... just to quieten them down. Well, if Thomas won't appear, I shall speak to them!

YOUNG No, Peg! Don't be foolish.

MORE ANGRY SHOUTING AND WHISTLING

They are starting to tear up the benches. We should leave.

☞ FX: LOUD CRASH AND BREAKING OF GLASS, FOLLOWED BY SCREAMING

WOFFINGTON There goes the chandelier. Someone will be killed! Where are the stagehands? Oh... Quick, Polly, help me bring down the curtain.

☞ FX: CREAKING OF ROPES AND PULLEYS AGAINST A BACKGROUND OF RIOTING

YOUNG Someone has thrown a torch at the curtain. It's on fire!

DIGGES (COMING TOWARDS THEM) This is madness! Peg! Polly! Come away before they invade the stage!

WOFFINGTON No! I can't run away while the theatre burns! Polly, help me fetch the fire buckets...

AS THEY GO, SHOUTS OF "SHERIDAN!" GROW EVER LOUDER

SCENE 21

SHERIDAN'S HOUSE

FRANCES Come in, Mr Goldsmith, Mr Burke. I'm afraid that you will not find my husband at home.

GOLDSMITH Mrs Sheridan, we have come to say how sorry we are for the events of last night. Nothing that has gone before could have prepared your husband for the catastrophe that has befallen him.

FRANCES The damage is colossal. Smock Alley is in ruins. We knew that it was risky for him to stage Mahomet once more, but no one could have predicted such a disaster.

BURKE We tried at first to stem the fury, but it was impossible. The rioting continued from eight o'clock until three this morning. There were benches torn up, scenery destroyed, the curtain set on fire.

GOLDSMITH Mrs Woffington and Mrs Young stayed to the last, saving props and costumes and manning the water buckets with Mr Digges, when many of the men had fled. But the damage is very severe.

BURKE This was not the drunken revelry that has plagued the theatre for so long. This was violent anger, expressed from the boxes to the gallery. For once the gentry united with the poor in voicing their hostility to the pickpocket English king.

GOLDSMITH A pity it is that Thomas was not able to see it in time.

FRANCES What's done is done... We are preparing to leave for London. Thomas is at Quilca until we are ready to depart.

GOLDSMITH What will he do?

FRANCES He says he is done with the theatre.

BURKE He will surely return once the dust has settled. It would be a tragic loss for the city and for the theatre should he not return. No man has ever succeeded so well in improving the conditions for the play.

FRANCES Only time will tell... Won't you sit down?

GOLDSMITH Thank you, but I feel sure that you have much to do. Please, Mrs Sheridan, should there be any way in which we can be of help – however small...

FRANCES

We will not forget your kindness. But perhaps there is one thing that you might do. Speak to Mrs Woffington. Thank her for her loyalty last night. And tell her that I send her my compliments – as one lady to another.

[END]

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