

The School for Scandal

Written by Richard Brinsley Sheridan

Written at the age of twenty-six by Sheridan, the play was presented in London in 1777. It is still regularly performed in repertory as an example of Restoration Comedy. The so-called Screen Scene (act four, scene three) is a classic example of dramatic irony.

Principal Characters

Sir Peter Teazle	After the death of a friend, Sir Peter has become the guardian of two brothers, sons of the deceased.
Joseph Surface	The older character. A devious fellow intent on seducing...
Maria	Another ward of Sir Peter's household. Not at all attracted to Joseph, she is secretly enamored with...
Charles Surface	The young brother. He is a much more likable young man but his generosity and extravagance have led him into debt and he has a bad reputation.
Lady Teazle	Much younger than Sir Peter, she has only recently married him. She is too extravagant and constantly quarreling with her husband. She candidly admits that she married him for his money, but in reality has considerable affection for Sir Peter which she conceals because it is considered fashionable to be an unfaithful wife. In order to advance himself in his plans to seduce Maria, Joseph has begun at attempt to seduce Lady Teazle also and, mostly because of her exasperation at Sir Peter, she has not discouraged the approaches, though it is not at all certain that she would ever succumb.
Sir Oliver Surface	Uncle of Joseph and Charles. An old friend of Sir Peter, he has been living abroad and is quite wealthy, and is now returning to meet his two nephews of whose merits he has heard conflicting reports.
Lady Sneerwell	A widow and member of the fashionable set who spend more of their time inventing scandal and spreading malicious gossip about their friends.
Mr. Snake	A journalist who relies on Lady Sneerwell as a source of scandalous stories which he disseminates in the form of anonymous contributions which he writes for the scandal sheets of London.

Act One, Scene One

Lady Sneerwell's house

Lady Sneerwell is drinking chocolate with her friend Snake, the journalist. They discuss some of the recent items of scandal which Snake has been able to get into the gossip sheets. Lady Sneerwell candidly admits her satisfaction in engineering the ruin of other peoples' private lives as a form of revenge for indignities that she herself has suffered in the past.

They turn to a discussion of Sir Peter Teazle's family problems. Snake is intrigued at Lady Sneerwell's desire to discourage the romantic interest which Maria, the young ward of Sir Peter, seems to have developed in young Charles Surface. Why does Lady Sneerwell seem more willing to assist the efforts of Charles' older brother, Joseph, in his courtship of the same girl? Lady Sneerwell assures Snake that she has no particular liking for Joseph Surface, whom she recognises as "artful, selfish, and malicious" and who has completely deceived Sir Peter. She is elaborating on Joseph's low moral character when a servant appears to announce another visitor: Joseph Surface in person.

Lady Sneerwell instantly switches to an effusive welcome of Joseph. She introduces him to Snake, who pleads that he must leave them to write his gossip items, including some which report on the desperate financial straits of Joseph's brother, Charles.

Unconvincingly, Joseph expresses sympathy for his unfortunate younger brother. As soon as Snake is gone, Lady Sneerwell and Joseph both declare their distrust and dislike of the journalist.

They are joined by Maria, who explains that she is trying to avoid two more of Lady Sneerwell's friends, Mr. Crabtree and Sir Benjamin Backbite. Joseph, plainly continuing his attempt to impress Maria, now complains that Maria shows more favor to Charles, his brother. Maria insists, somewhat too emphatically, that she has no interest in the young man, of whom she has heard nothing good.

The three are interrupted by the servant, asking Lady Sneerwell if she will receive a new visitor, a Mrs. Candour. While they wait for the lady to be ushered upstairs, Joseph and Sneerwell cheerfully comment on the character of Mrs. Candour. Well-known as good-natured and benevolent, the lady is "talkative" and manages to make more mischief than even the directly malicious old Crabtree.

Mrs. Candour enters and quickly demonstrates this talent. Affecting to feel distress at the sad things she has heard about friends and acquaintances, she supplies a wealth of libellous information about them.

Presently, the group is augmented by the appearance of the previously mentioned Mr. Crabtree and Sir Benjamin Backbite, who join the general competition in malicious gossip. Maria does not participate. When conversation begins to focus on the misfortunes and imminent bankruptcy of Charles Surface, Maria is clearly upset and takes her leave. Lady Sneerwell urges Mrs. Candour to go after the poor girl and try to comfort her. Sir Benjamin and Crabtree also depart.

Left alone with Joseph, Lady Sneerwell remarks that they plainly must do more if they are to succeed in discouraging Maria's attraction to Joseph's rival, his brother Charles.

Act One, Scene Two

Sir Peter Teazle's house

Sir Peter is discovered alone. In a soliloquy he comments on the folly of marrying a wife so much younger than himself, describes their quarrels over her extravagance, yet ruefully admits that, though he takes care to conceal it, he is still very much in love with the young woman.

He is joined by the old servant, Rowley. They discuss Lady Teazle and Sir Peter declares that he believes that Lady Sneerwell and her friends are a bad influence on both Lady Teazle and on Sir Peter's young ward, Maria. Maria shows signs of wanting to bestow herself – and the fortune which she will inherit – on Charles Surface. Sir Peter considers Charles a profligate and feels that Maria ought to marry the older brother, Joseph.

Rowley doesn't agree, and reminds Sir Peter that since their father's death he has acted as their guardian and has come to know both of the young men. Rowley promises Sir Peter that young Charles, though he has mismanaged his affairs, may still reform.

Sir Peter doubts this. When Sir Oliver, their uncle, returns to England, Sir Peter is certain that he will be shocked at Charles' spendthrift behaviour.

Rowley has news: Sir Oliver has already returned. He has heard of Sir Peter's recent marriage and is eager to come and congratulate his old friend. Sir Peter is delighted but nervously begs Rowley to say nothing of the quarrelling between Lady Teazle and himself. He could not bear the humiliation of Sir Oliver's making fun of him.

Act Two, Scene One

Sir Peter Teazle's house

Lady Teazle and Sir Peter are discovered in the middle of another quarrel. He complains of her extravagance. He reminds her that when they first met, she was a simple young woman, living in the country, content with simple things.

Lady Teazle is a young woman of spirit. She is quite unrepentant. Since her husband brought her to London, and since he can well afford it, she insists on her right to live like a woman of fashion. To his dismay, Lady Teazle makes no attempt to deny that she married Sir Peter for his money. Nor is she in the least impressed at his warning against Lady Sneerwell and her companions. She is on her way to join them now and Sir Peter is expected too.

Sir Peter promises to follow. Alone, he again confesses that he admires his pretty wife, delights in her high spirits, even when she is doing everything that she can to enrage him.

Act Two, Scene Two

Lady Sneerwell's house

The School of Scandal is a session again with Lady Sneerwell, Mrs. Candour, Crabtree, Sir Benjamin, and Joseph all in attendance. Sir Benjamin is, in his own opinion, a poet and a wit. Patently skeptical, the others join in an appeal that he recite one of his recent verse epigrams. It is embarrassingly silly, but they are all enthusiastic in their admiration.

Lady Teazle enters with Maria. There is more gossip. Lady Teazle proves that she can be as entertainingly cynical as any of them.

Presently, Sir Peter himself appears. As the scandal continues, Sir Peter privately confesses his dismay at the obvious relish with which the company destroys the reputation of their supposed friends. A servant arrives with a note for Sir Peter and he seizes the excuse to leave.

The group breaks up. Joseph tries to detain Maria. Attempting to make love to her, he is rebuffed but becomes even more impassioned.

Unfortunately for him, they are interrupted by the unexpected return of Lady Teazle. This is particularly embarrassing since we gather that Joseph has been trying to seduce her also.

Lady Teazle dismisses Maria. Joseph hastens to repair the damage and is somewhat surprised to find that Lady Teazle shows no signs of being upset. She explains telling Joseph that she has not discouraged his advances because it seems to be expected that a woman of sophistication should have lovers. On the other hand, she admits that she has still not fully overcome her country upbringing to the extent that she is actually going to betray Sir Peter – it is enough that there is gossip. Amicably, Lady Teazle and Joseph agree to continue the relationship as it is. Lady Teazle exits.

Alone, Joseph disconsolately admits that, when he started on the campaign to seduce his guardian's wife, it was only because he felt this would be a useful maneuver in his play to win Maria and her inheritance. Now, to his dismay, Joseph has begun to fall in love with Lady Teazle herself.

Act Two, Scene Three

Sir Peter Teazle's house

Sir Oliver Surface is waiting for the return of Sir Peter. He is questioning Rowley who begs Sir Oliver not to tease his old friend. Sir Peter is highly sensitive on the subject.

Rowley also reports on Sir Oliver's nephews, Joseph and Charles. Sir Peter, he explains, is very angry at Charles. This could be, suggests Rowley, because Lady Teazle has taken Charles' side in the matter of the young man's extravagance and Sir Peter may actually suspect her of being attracted to a young man more of her own age. If so, insists Rowley, Sir Peter is doing Charles an injustice. He would be wiser to mistrust Joseph's relationship with Lady Teazle.

Sir Peter enters. Sir Oliver greets him warmly and congratulates him on the marriage.

They begin at once to discuss the two young men. Sir Oliver has already heard the bad reports of Charles, but Sir Peter promises him that the older brother will make up for the disappointments in the younger. Joseph, insists Sir Peter, is a model character, everybody speaks well of him. Sir Oliver is more skeptical and will make up his own mind. In fact, Sir Oliver declares that he and Rowley are planning a test of a kind. Promising to explain more fully, Sir Oliver leads Sir Peter to dinner.

Act Three, Scene One

Sir Peter Teazle's house

Later. Sir Peter, Sir Oliver and Rowley continue the discussion. Rowley is reporting on an incident that involved both Joseph and Charles. A merchant who was a close friend of their father and mother had failed in business ventures, through no fault of his own, and in desperation come to each of the brothers for help. Joseph offered nothing but vague assurances of sympathy, Charles, on the other hand, though he is himself in similarly disastrous financial condition has been trying his most to raise money for the unfortunate friend of his family, even at a time when his own position is so desperate.

When Sir Peter is still dubious, Rowley announces that he has found someone else who can speak on Charles' behalf. Waiting downstairs is a moneylender from whom Charles has borrowed funds, an elderly Jew who, though he deplores the behaviour of the young man, has been trying to get him to mend his ways.

The moneylender, Moses, is summoned, Sir Peter and Sir Oliver interrogate him. Moses reports that, unfortunately, he did not meet Charles until the month's affairs were already in a bad state. Because he has come to feel kindly towards the boy he has been trying to assist by trying to introduce Charles to another financier, a man called Mr. Premium. Charles has not yet met him.

An idea occurs to Sir Peter. If Charles hasn't met Mr. Premium, and as he has not seen his uncle for many years and will be unlikely to recognise him, why doesn't Sir Oliver impersonate Premium? Along with Moses, Sir Oliver can arrange to meet Charles in circumstances where the true character of the young man is certain to reveal itself.

Sir Oliver leaves with Moses to prepare for this masquerade. Rowley also departs.

Maria enters and Sir Peter begins to question her about Joseph. Has she changed her feelings about him? Maria reiterates her distaste for Joseph. Is it, asks Sir Peter, because she has ignored her guardian's advice, has continued to see Charles? Maria protests that this is not the case. Though she dislikes Joseph, she has had to agree with Sir Peter that Charles is irresponsible, unsuitable, and unworthy. It's true that she feels some pity for him, but that's all. Sensing that this is far from all, Sir Peter loses his temper, warning her once more that he is her legal guardian.

As Maria exits, Lady Teazle enters. She wants money from Sir Peter, three hundred pounds. Sir Peter agrees to give it to her but not with great enthusiasm, wanting some promise that it will be repaid.

An argument develops rapidly over their marriage agreement. Lady Teazle has no private income and has for a time felt that her husband should have made an independent settlement on her behalf. Callously she remembers that before she was married, her family friends ridiculed her for being infatuated with a man so many years her senior. Perhaps, she declares, she really should have had the sense to marry another of her suitors who set not only just as rich as Sir Peter but, since he has quite recently broken his neck in an accident, might have left her a wealthy widow!

Understandably outraged (and unaware that she is being mischievous), Sir Peter loses control, announcing to her that he has heard rumors of her interest in Charles and is now inclined to believe there may be some truth in them. Lady Teazle warns him in return – she does not like to be suspected without cause.

All right, says Sir Peter. A separate settlement as soon as you please! Or a divorce! Agreed, declared Lady Teazle. In such circumstances, they will be the happiest of couples and never disagree again.

As Sir Peter seems about to explode, she takes leave of him in the best of spirits. He is left in a tantrum of misery, anger, and frustration.

Act Three, Scene Two

Sir Peter Teazle's house

Charles' servant, Mr. Trip, receives Moses and Sir Oliver, who is introducing himself as Mr. Premium. While Trip goes off to fetch his master, Sir Oliver comments that this house once belonged to his brother, father of Joseph and Charles. Moses explains that it was left to Joseph as the eldest, but Charles bought it from him – an extravagant gesture in the opinion of Sir Peter Teazle.

Trip returns, promising that his master will be with them in a moment. Trip takes the opportunity to ask Moses if he has been able to arrange a loan for Trip himself, since his wages from Charles are in arrears and he seems to have expenses of his own, indicating – as Sir Oliver comments in an aside to the audience – that the servant has taken on the airs of a man of property. To the dismay of Sir Oliver, Trip assures Moses that he is sure that he can offer expensive items of his master's wardrobe as security against a loan.

As Trip exits, in answer to a bell summoning him to his master, Sir Oliver comments to Moses that if the servant is copying Charlie's behaviour the household must be a "Temple of Dissipation."

Act Three, Scene Three

Sir Peter Teazle's house

Charles Surface is now discovered in the company of a number of his friends, including a character named Careless. By all appearances they are a fairly dissolute group, some of them obviously a little drunk. While the wine decanter circulates, they discuss the attractions of drinking, gambling, and women. Proposing a toast, Careless extracts from Charles the first name of the girls he is in love with (Maria), but Charles refuses to identify her by her last name. One of the group is invited to sing a ballad in celebration of women in general whatever their age or temperament.

Trip appears to remind Charles that the moneylender and his associate, a broker, are waiting to see him. Charles' friends insist that the Jew and Mr. Premium be invited to join the party.

When Moses and Sir Oliver appear, the revellers demand that the two older men join the party, urging Moses and Mr. Premium to catch up in the drinking. Careless and his friends show little respect for the two elderly visitors and Sir Oliver again expresses his

indignation in private aside to the audience of the sport of teasing the old men, Careless suggests that they retire to gamble in an adjoining room, leaving Charles to his financial discussion.

Alone with Charles and Moses, Mr. Premium begins to question Charles on his assets. What security can he offer? Charles is candid. He has very little property left. With engaging frankness, he admits his flaws of character and invites the broker to take advantage of his financial predicament. The only security Charles can offer is that he expects to come in to a substantial bequest from an uncle who is presently returning from India. Charles calls on Moses to confirm that he is the favorite nephew and that Uncle Oliver has frequently talked of leaving most of his fortune to his younger nephew. Uncomfortably, Moses admits that he has heard something to this effect. Pointedly, Mr. Premium reminds the young man that he cannot count on such a bequest and that he has heard that the climate in India has been so ruinous to Uncle Oliver's health that it's said that his nearest relations hardly recognise him. Mr. Premium finds this interesting and adds that he has heard that Sir Oliver is already arrived back in London. Charles corrects him at once – his uncle is still in Calcutta, Moses can confirm it. Moses is increasingly unsure what he should say.

Mr. Premium returns to the subject of Charles present possessions. Wasn't there a sizeable amount of costly silver and plate left to the two young men? Charles explains that all that was sold long ago. Books? Also, long gone. On the other hand, suggests Charles, if Mr. Premium has any interest in paintings, Charles has a whole gallery of family portraits which he will gladly offer to the highest bidder.

Sir Oliver once more expresses his outrage in an aside, just as Careless reappears from the gaming room where Charles' friends are impatient for his company. Charles declares that he will join them just as soon as he has finished conducting an auction. A sale of his ancestors! Would Careless assist in the role of auctioneer? With some difficulty, Mr. Premium affects to be amused at this idea of selling off one's family in order to pay one's debts.

Act Four, Scene One

Charles Surface's house

The four of them, Charles, Sir Oliver, Moses and Careless appear in a gallery hung with the portraits of the Surface family, a collection which dates back to the Norman Conquest. Charles assures the prospective purchaser that they are valuable works, not at all like the more recent pictures in the manner of Raphael where the sitter is merely inspiration for the painter's invention. No, all these are true likenesses, all of them as "stiff and awkward" as the original subjects. He also presents Mr. Premium with a parchment, the family genealogy.

As Careless joins the charade, acting the part of an auctioneer, Charles introduces his predecessors, describing each in hardly flattering language and proposing bargain prices. Sir Oliver, suffering agonies of private rage, plays along. One by one the walls are cleared.

Careless remarks on one remaining picture, “that ill-looking fellow by the sitter.” Charles identifies the picture – a portrait of his Uncle Oliver done before he went off to India. Though Careless elaborates on the character of the sitter, Charles exhibits a surprising reaction. The portrait is not for sale.

Mr. Premium is intrigued. Why not? Charles seems to have lost his enthusiasm for the auction, saying that the old fellow has been good to him. “I’ll keep his picture while I have a room to put it in.”

Mr. Premium meets the challenge, explaining that for some reason, he has taken a particular fancy to this painting. He offers to pay anything that Charles asks. Suddenly, Charles seems adamant. “Poor Noll” is not for sale.

The present original of the painting comments to the audience that he suddenly sees in his nephew a remarkable resemblance to Charles’ father. Mr. Premium offers the young man a draft of eight hundred pounds (a substantial increase). But he insists it must include picture. Charles again refuses. Concealing secret emotion, Sir Oliver agrees to buy all the rest, promises to settle the sale immediately and shakes Charles by the hand.

Charles, left alone, calculates how much he has made on the sale of the pictures, over five hundred pounds. When Rowley joins him, Charles instructs him that he wants a hundred pounds of it to be sent at once to only Stanley, the bankrupt merchant whom he was unable to help till now. Rowley, astonished, reminds Charles of his own circumstances, urging him not to be too hasty in his generous gestures. If he reflects for an hour or so... Charles agrees, all the more reason for not reflecting on it. “While I have, by Heaven, I’ll give! So damn your economy.”

Act Four, Scene Two

Charles Surface’s house

Sir Oliver enters with Moses. Though Moses continues to deplore Charles’ extravagance, his drinking, his womanising, and his needless gambling, Sir Oliver is plainly impressed only by one thing, “he would not sell my picture.”

Rowley enters, remarking that he has passed Charles’ debtors, two tailors, and a hosier, in the hall. They are unlikely to be paid in spite of Charles’ sale of the pictures. Sir Oliver, however, announces that he has decided that he will settle Charles’ debts and provide income. But now he will discard the role of broker and pay a visit on his other nephew, Joseph. Rowley suggests that he delay this for a moment since Sir Peter Teazle is on his way to see Joseph at this moment.

Act Four, Scene Three

Joseph Surface’s house

Joseph is expecting a note from Lady Teazle. Hearing a knock at the downstairs door, he instructs his servant to place a screen in front of the window so that his neighbor, an inquisitive lady, will not identify his guest. The servant tells Joseph that the caller is Lady Teazle. He explains that Lady Teazle discreetly leaves her chair (the conveyance carried by two servants and used by ladies of fashion) in the next street outside her milliners. Waiting

for his visitor, Joseph soliloquizes on his concerns – Lady Teazle, he thinks, already suspects his intentions regarding Maria, but must not learn the truth until he has Lady Teazle in his power.

Lady Teazle enters. She complains of Sir Peter's bad temper, his jealousy, his suspicions of her relationship to Charles. If Sir Peter would agree to Charles marrying Maria that would solve the problem. Joseph agrees, adding that it would also allay Lady Teazle's utterly unwarranted suspicions that he, Joseph, had designs on the silly girl.

Lady Teazle, inclined to agree, complains again of the injustice of her husband's behaviour. Joseph supports her. Indeed, he suggests, when a husband so unfairly accuses his wife, surely the trust between them is so shattered that the wife owes it to herself to seek some revenge. Lady Teazle's clear conscience and complete innocence may have led her to be careless and imprudent in her conduct, whereas if she were to make one small indiscretion she would behave more cautiously and might find herself more tolerant of her husband's ill humour. Lady Teazle finds the idea amusing – Joseph is recommending that she should sin in her own defence, part with her virtue to protect her reputation, is that it?

Joseph seems to be making some progress when the servant interrupts, explaining that Sir Peter Teazle has arrived and is already on his way upstairs. Lady Teazle panics. She scrambles behind the screen. Joseph scurries for a book and collapses into an armchair, pretending to have fallen asleep over it as Sir Peter enters. The servant, hovering in anxious attendance, is dismissed as Sir Peter explains that he has private matters to discuss.

Sir Peter is very unhappy. Clearly he has a complete trust in Joseph and has come to confide in him. He has begun to suspect that Lady Teazle may be deceiving him with another man. Joseph, managing to conceal any nervousness he may feel, asks Sir Peter whom he suspects. Sir Benjamin Backbite, perhaps? No, a younger man, says Sir Peter. Joseph's brother.

Relieved, Joseph affects to sympathise, while at the same time doing nothing to disabuse Sir Peter. On Sir Peter's behalf, Joseph declares his indignation at Charles' behaviour. "I disclaim kindred with him, for a man who can break the laws of hospitality and tempt the wife of a friend deserves to be branded as the pest of society."

Sir Peter remarks on the contrast between Joseph and Charles. He continues, elaborating on his private problems with his wife. He produces two documents, drafts of two deeds. The first is one immediate settlement of eight hundred a year which will provide for Lady Teazle's income while Sir Peter is alive, the second is Sir Peter's will, which leaves her the bulk of his estate when he dies.

Joseph is shaken at this generosity, extraordinary under the circumstances. Privately, all too aware that Lady Teazle is listening behind the screen, Joseph comments aside to the audience that he fears the old man's gesture may "corrupt my pupil."

To make matters worse for Joseph, Sir Peter now begins to question Joseph about his success with Maria. Sir Peter has been disappointed that Joseph is not making much progress. Again all too conscious of the listener behind the screen, Joseph tries desperately to get Sir Peter off the subject, with little success.

They are interrupted by Joseph's servant who says that Charles is downstairs and is insisting on coming up. Joseph is ordering the servant to get rid of his brother when Sir Peter intervenes. Sir Peter has had an idea: he will conceal himself in the room so that Joseph can question Charles about his relationship with Lady Teazle.

For a ghastly moment, it looks as if Sir Peter will try to conceal himself behind the screen. Joseph manages to intercept, but not before Sir Peter has become aware that there is someone concealed there. A woman.

Improvising in panic, Joseph explains that it is true that Sir Peter caught him in a compromising situation. The young lady is a milliner who begs not to be exposed in this indiscretion. Sir Peter, though dismayed that his confessions about his wife have been overheard, agrees not to say anything, as long as nobody else does. Instead, he finds concealment in another hiding place, a clothes closet.

Charles arrives. Why wouldn't the servant admit him? Is Joseph with a wench or a moneylender? Where did Sir Peter go?

Joseph says Sir Peter left in order to avoid meeting Charles. Sir Peter, says Joseph, seems to suspect that Charles is having an affair with his wife. Charles finds this amusing. Callously, he remarks that it would be quite understandable if Lady Teazle was looking for a younger lover, but it isn't Charles. For the benefit of listeners, Joseph remarks that Sir Peter will be glad to hear this.

To Joseph's embarrassment, however, Charles begins to tease his brother about his intentions towards Sir Peter's wife. Joseph's indignant protests do nothing to discourage Charles. Charles reminds Joseph of more than one previous occasion on which he interrupted Joseph in what surely was hardly an innocent situation. Aghast, Joseph is forced to silence Charles by whispering to him that Sir Peter is listening to their conversation. Charles, delighted, drags Sir Peter out of the closet.

Joseph is at his wits end. He would dearly like to escape from both of them but he dare not leave them together and is still trying to prevent the discovery of the identity of the woman behind the screen. Trying to persuade the two men to move to another room, he only makes matters worse because he provokes Sir Peter into telling Charles about the "milliner." Charles, vastly entertained by the whole affair, throws down the screen.

Lady Teazle and Sir Peter confront each other.

Of the four of them, only Charles is amused. The consternation of the other three delights him. After making fun of them all, Charles leaves.

After a horrifying silence, Joseph attempts an explanation – and makes an even greater mess of it. He appeals for corroboration to Lady Teazle, she offers no help, telling Sir Peter, "There's not one syllable of truth in what that gentleman has told you."

To Joseph's chagrin, Lady Teazle denounces him to Sir Peter – sparing herself nothing in the process. She admits that she might very well have succumbed to Joseph's seductions and will "never again respect myself for having listened to him." Lady Teazle exits, followed by Sir Peter and Joseph, who is still trying to make excuses.

Act Five, Scene One

Joseph Surface's house

His servant announces visitors to Joseph: a Mr. Stanley wants to see him. Knowing that Stanley is asking for help and that his master is not likely to assist, the servant would have sent the man away but for the fact that Mr. Rowley has come with him.

Joseph is in bad temper. While he waits to receive the unwelcome poor relations, he soliloquizes on the disaster with Sir Peter and Lady Teazle, the near collapse of his plans for impressing Maria. He leaves the stage for a few moments as Sir Oliver, now impersonating Mr. Stanley, appears, accompanied by Rowley.

Well aware that Joseph must have instructed the Servant to send them away, Sir Oliver is already suspecting that Sir Peter's high opinion of Joseph is mistaken. Rowley agrees. He warns Sir Oliver that Joseph may put on a great show of sympathy and generosity but that it is not likely to be supported by deeds. Joseph is a man who believes that "Charity begins at home."

Rowley leaves. Joseph re-enters. His manner is now effusive, warm, and understanding. Assuming the part of the unlucky "Mr. Stanley," Sir Oliver describes his desperate need. Joseph shows great distress – all the greater because he is himself in such straits that he can offer no assistance. Mr. Stanley, disheartened, explains that he was recommended to Joseph because it is rumoured that Joseph has lately received large bequests from an uncle, Sir Oliver Surface. Joseph hastily corrects him – it is not true. Certainly, he has had small gifts from Sir Oliver but they are quite worthless. His uncle, explains Joseph, has grown very mean in his old age. Indeed, Joseph has actually had to lend the old man a great deal of money.

Sir Oliver listens to these lies with mounting private anger. As he leaves, he remarks in an aside that this settles the matter. He will make Charles his heir.

Rowley returns. He brings a letter from Sir Oliver Surface – with the news that Sir Oliver is now in London and wishes to meet with both of his nephews as soon as possible. For a moment, Joseph considers whether or not to recall "Mr. Stanley," but Rowley reports that the man has left the house. Sending Rowley off again, Joseph expresses his delight at his uncle's return and, as soon as Rowley is gone, reveals his private dismay and apprehension.

Act Five, Scene Two

Sir Peter Teazle's house

Lady Teazle's maid explains to Mrs. Candour that her mistress cannot receive visitors at the moment. Mrs. Candour, full of excitement, demands that the maid insist farther. While the maid retires, Mrs. Candour expresses her exasperation – news of the deliciously scandalous episode is liable to be public property before Mrs. Candour has established herself as the most reliable source.

Sir Benjamin Backbite, also alerted to the rumour, arrives in a hurry. Quickly, it emerges that, though both of them have heard dramatic reports, their stories are quite contradictory.

Next to arrive is Lady Sneerwell. She brings her own version. It is quite unclear whether it was Charles Surface or Joseph Surface who has been caught “in flagrante” by Sir Peter. Sir Benjamin has the most exciting version, a duel in which Sir Peter has been wounded. At this point, Crabtree joins the group and, while he confirms that Sir Peter was dangerously wounded, corrects Sir Benjamin: it was not a sword wound in the side but a bullet wound in the throat. While the argument continues and the details elaborate, Sir Oliver enters.

The three scandal mongerers mistake him for the doctor who has come to attend to Sir Peter’s injuries. While they pester him for information, Sir Oliver listens in amazement. He is rescued by the appearance of the victim, Sir Peter Teazle in person.

To the chagrin of the gossiping trio, Sir Peter orders them out of his house.

When Sir Oliver is left with Rowley and Sir Peter, he reports that he has now completed his investigations of Joseph and Charles. Pretending that they are ready to agree with Sir Peter’s view (opinions which have since been drastically reversed) Rowley and Sir Oliver begin to tease Sir Peter, who soon realises that they are making fun of him. Rowley and Sir Oliver presently admit that they now know the full hilarious and humiliating episode of Sir Peter, Joseph, Charles, Lady Teazle, and “the little French milliner” hidden behind the screen. Sir Peter tries very hard to share in their laughter.

No doubt the who town is going to be equally entertained.

Rowley and Sir Oliver relent. Feeling some pity for the old man, they invite him to ignore the scandal mongerers. Rowley urges Sir Peter to join his young wife whom he has seen in the next room. Sir Peter is still unhappy. He doesn’t know what to think. There is still a question in his mind about a letter that he found, a letter from Lady Teazle addressed to Charles. Rowley quickly reassures him – the letter was a forgery, planted by Lady Sneerwell and Joseph so that Sir Peter would find it. Rowley has heard about it from Mr. Snake.

Sir Peter is watching his wife through the door into the next room. He still obviously adores her. Miserably, he comments that if they reconcile, the gossips will find him even more ridiculous. Let them laugh, says Rowley. Sir Peter’s best revenge will be to show that he is happy in spite of their ridicule.

Act Five, Scene Three

Joseph Surface’s house

Lady Sneerwell is in a fury, blaming Joseph for the complete collapse of her schemes. Joseph is shaken, but not yet totally despairing. He’s sure that Sir Peter will keep silent about the affair in order to save his own face. Joseph will soon be seeing Sir Oliver and feels confident that he may still succeed in charming the old fool. He begs Lady Sneerwell to retire to another room in order that he may receive his uncle in private.

As Lady Sneerwell hides, Sir Oliver enters. Joseph still recognises him as “Mr. Stanley” and dismisses him rudely. Mr. Stanley announces that he insists on meeting Joseph’s uncle in person. Losing his temper entirely, Joseph summons his servant and orders him to have Mr. Stanley removed by force.

A scuffle has started when Charles appears. To Charles, the visitor is not Mr. Stanley but Mr. Premium. Charles at once comes to the defence of Mr. Premium. As Joseph and Charles battle each other, confusions reigns until the arrival of four other members of the household: Rowley, Maria, and Sir Peter who is now accompanied by Lady Teazle.

Sir Oliver recovers and identifies himself at last to his two nephew.

Both are suitably shaken. Sir Oliver tastes sweet revenge as he reminds both Joseph and Charles of his previous encounters with them. When Sir Oliver finally offers a forgiving hand to Charles, it is Lady Teazle who suggests that the reconciliation Charles is really hoping for is with Maria. But Maria is still resentful, accusing Charles of being much more interested in Lady Sneerwell than herself. Joseph suggests that perhaps Lady Sneerwell should be allowed the chance to speak. He opens the door to the adjoining room so that Lady Sneerwell can join them.

Sir Peter retaliates. Turning to Rowley, he instructs him to produce another individual who can provide explanations. Rowley opens another door to introduce Mr. Snake.

Lady Sneerwell, in dismay, turns on Snake, denouncing his treachery. Snake blandly admits that he has been paid by Lady Sneerwell to forge incriminating letters and publish scandalous stories, but is now being paid ever more handsomely to tell the truth. Lady Teazle, who has now learned of the conspiracy contrived by Lady Sneerwell and Snake, the forgeries of a compromising correspondence between Charles and Lady Teazle intended for Sir Peter, now joins in denouncing Lady Sneerwell and her entire group. Livid, Lady Sneerwell retaliates, maliciously hoping that Lady Teazle's husband lives for fifty years.

As Lady Sneerwell storms out, Joseph, not very convincingly, seizes the chance to express his moral indignation at both Lady Sneerwell and Snake. Promising that he will try to see that she makes no more mischief, he follows Lady Sneerwell.

Sir Peter turns on Snake. Has he any defence to make? Snake reminds them that it is important to his livelihood that he should be thought malicious, it would be damaging to his reputation if it were known that he had been betrayed into honest action.

With the scandal mongerers utterly routed, with Sir Oliver reconciled to Charles, Charles to Maria, and Sir Peter to Lady Teazle, the curtain falls.