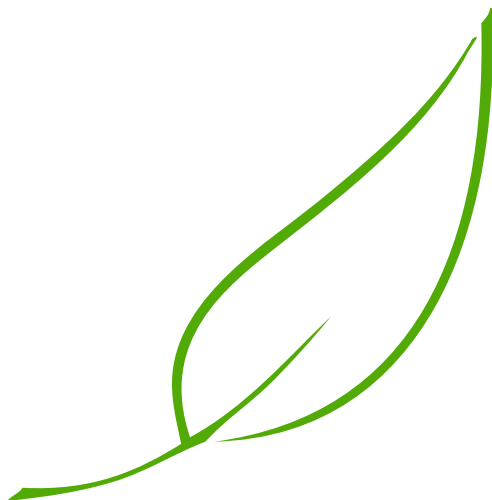


THE SON OF ARLECCHINO

By Leon Katz



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THE SON OF ARLECCHINO

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SYNOPSIS: The greatest, most theatrical style of Western comedy, *Commedia dell'arte*, comes to hilarious life in the farce of *Arlecchino* being tricked into supposing that he's personally given birth to a son. Almost all the classic characters of *commedia farce* are here, playing their traditional roles in a wild, bawdy farce-comedy of all-around trickery; but it's a comedy that ends with a touching scene of *Arlecchino*'s delight in sharing both motherhood and fatherhood with his offspring. Here they are—the famous *commedia* characters—each one bent on fooling everybody else, and all—almost all—getting rewarded for their low cunning. They're low, but they're brilliant schemers, and funny, and thoroughly entertaining.

(3 females, 4-5 males)

PANTALONE (m).....(75 lines)
ISABELLA (f)his wife. (49 lines)
DOTTORE (m)(100 lines)
ARLECCHINO (m) his servant. (41 lines)
FRANCESCHINA (f) a bawd. (69 lines)
COLUMBINA (f) her servant. (17 lines)
LEANDRO (m) a novice. (36 lines)
LK (m) Optional Character, part of
Optional Postlude. (28 lines)

SETTING

A street before three houses: Dottore's, Pantalone's, Franceschina's. A small fountain in the street, with a statue of the Virgin and child set in it.

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PRODUCTION NOTES

The “three houses” need be only a curtain with three openings drawn across the upstage area, or a more elaborate arrangement of painted flats – commedia performances were done at every level of production finish. The center (Franceschina’s house) will need another curtained or practical opening above the other, to indicate a second-story window.

The Virgin’s statue will need a three-step ladder concealed behind it, for Arlecchino’s “climb” to the safety of its back.

The Postlude was originally written for publication, rather than performance. However, it may be performed as a prologue or intermission piece. It will require the casting of an extra male to play the character, LK.

COSTUMES

The traditional Commedia dell’arte costumes:

ARLECCHINO: patchwork tights and jacket, black cap and slippers

PANTALONE: Black cape over red tights, black cap and slippers; red hair and beard

DOTTORE: Short black cape over black jacket and pantaloons, wide-brimmed, soft black hat

LEANDRO: Coarse brown monk’s robe, bare feet

ISABELLA: Elegant dress with tight bodice and wide skirt; lace handkerchief.

FRANCESCHINA: Simple but stylish dress with ample bodice; apron.

PROPS

- ☐ A cloth bundle containing:
- ☐ Flask of wine
- ☐ Book with covers of Holy Writ
- ☐ Pots, flasks and bowls (for Dottore's potions)
- ☐ A great pot resembling iron (paper mache for extreme lightness; lined with plastic to hold liquids)
- ☐ Large ladle
- ☐ Potion ingredients (To represent):
- ☐ Beetles
- ☐ Scorpions
- ☐ Marmot's gorge
- ☐ Costic
- ☐ Powdered cullions
- ☐ Placenta
- ☐ Stage powders for explosions, colored mists, sprays (out of Dottore's pot)
- ☐ "Ghoulis-looking instruments" including plumber's plunger, huge syringe, etc (for Dottore's operation on Arlecchino)
- ☐ Doll: (Arlecchino's tiny baby, a duplicate of full-grown Arlecchino)
- ☐ Swaddling clothes
- ☐ Liquid phial

ACT ONE, SCENE 1

AT RISE: *PANTALONE and FRANCESCHINA come out of FRANCESCHINA's house, in conference.*

FRANCESCHINA: Debauchery, he says! When was debauchery? How many years has it been, old whoremonger, since you prowled the streets of the town debauching every flower of virtue who so much as looked up at you from the pages of her catechism? And how many years ago did you, liar, swear off the hunt and settle into holy marriage with Isabella, whose reputation is so far beyond reproach that St. Katherine herself is a doxy in a stewhouse compared to her? And now you're grieving? Now you regret.

PANTALONE: Regrets, Franceschina. Misery and regrets.

FRANCESCHINA: Calm your misery, decrepitude, and tell me: what right have you to be in torment? Who put into your house the lovely Columbina, who's warmed your nights now for more than a year?

PANTALONE: You, good woman, you. Ah Columbina!

FRANCESCHINA: Ungrateful old lecher, you should be basking in perpetual bliss, with a spotless wife to take care of your reputation and a delicious bawd to take care of your pleasure. And you come to Franceschina now with stories of grief and despair?

PANTALONE: A great, great measure of grief and despair! Columbina, my wonder, my joy, has bolted her door against me, and for three months I haven't touched so much as a toe of her whole delectable body. She's my idol, Franceschina, my salvation, my everything, and for want of her, I've taken to the shameful ruse of spending my nights at the monastery of San Marco, so that my misery won't make me cry out her name when I'm in bed with that stone of virtue, my Isabella.

FRANCESCHINA: Three whole months! You haven't enjoyed her for three months?

PANTALONE: Three months, Franceschina. I'm dead with longing, dead.

FRANCESCHINA: Does the corrupted harlot have the face to lock her door against you, her benefactor, into whose protection I myself delivered her?

PANTALONE: She has the face. The door is locked.

FRANCESCHINA: Where is the shameless thing now?

PANTALONE: In her room below my cellar, Franceschina, behind her iron door. You'll speak to her, good woman, yes? You'll tell her of my torment. And above all, you'll find out if she has another lover.

FRANCESCHINA: What? You suspect she has a lover while she's locked inside your own house?

PANTALONE: It's madness, I know, but I'm jealous of the very air she breathes. If she's betraying me, Franceschina, I'll kill her with a thousand daggers and scratch the marks of my revenge on every pore of her flesh, so much do I love her. Go to her, good woman. Sneak past my wife's door and take the secret way to Columbina's, and plead my cause.

FRANCESCHINA: That one of my lambs should be settled in so rich a house as Pantalone's and betray her trust! I'll speak to her, be sure I'll speak to her, and whatever caused the reluctance of the ungrateful whore, she'll unbolt her door for you tonight.

PANTALONE: May God keep you in trade to the end of your useful days!

FRANCESCHINA: Go off for an hour, Pantalone. In an hour, come back to your house, and she will be yours.

FRANCESCHINA goes into PANTALONE's house.

SCENE 2

PANTALONE: Riches, Pantalone! Riches tonight! But for such a night with Columbina, when after three months of famine she opens her door for you, how will you find the strength to bolt it shut? Ah, the strength, old man, the strength! Well, cover your ears, Holy Virgin, and shut your eyes, while Pantalone hides his shame and begs at Dottore's door. *(Knocks at DOTTORE's door.)* Dottore! Good neighbor! It's neighbor Pantalone! Come to the door!

SCENE 3

DOTTORE comes out of his house.

DOTTORE: Friend! Neighbor! How can Dottore serve you? Say!
Only say!

PANTALONE: Let me whisper in your ear, Dottore. For three months
Columbina hasn't answered to my scratchings at her door.

DOTTORE: The enticing Columbina?

PANTALONE: She. And wondering at the reason for her coldness,
I'm supposing. . . If Dottore breathes a word of this to any mouse,
to any dog. . .

DOTTORE: By the sores of St. Stephen, Pantalone, by the agonies
of St. Simeon. . .

PANTALONE: I'm supposing that Columbina is not altogether
content, perhaps, not altogether delighted. . .

DOTTORE: (*Incredulous.*) With Pantalone?

PANTALONE: And so I ask a potion, an elixir, a something from your
skill and magic so that Columbina and I may know delights that
even we in our ecstatic tumblings have never known before.

DOTTORE: A potion, is it? For Pantalone? So that *he, he, he*, alone
will swoon and tumble with Columbina?

PANTALONE: And you'll provide it for me, Dottore? You'll mix such
a potion?

DOTTORE: Oh, Dottore will provide! Let me alone for potions!
Dottore will mix, he'll pound, he'll pummel! Will Pantalone have
potions? Beyond his dreams!

PANTALONE: Blessings on you, dear Dottore!

DOTTORE: Yours be the blessing, Pantalone. Dottore will make
potions, and oh, how Pantalone will tumble!

DOTTORE goes into his house.

SCENE 4

PANTALONE: (*Hailing the Statue of the Virgin.*) Ave, ave, good Lady! Pantalone will be young again! A young young young young man! Not too long to wait, Pantalone! Off to the monastery for an hour, and then a perfect night with Columbina! (*Turns to his house.*) Ah, but first. . . ! (*Calling.*) Isabella! Wife! Where are you?

ISABELLA: (*Within.*) At the prie-dieu, dear husband, on my knees in prayer!

PANTALONE: Will you leave off supplicating all the saints, and come to the window?

ISABELLA: Another Ave Maria, husband, and a Paternoster or two. .

PANTALONE: Leave off, damnation, and come to the window when I call!

ISABELLA: (*Appearing at the window.*) Impetuous man, do you want me to come out of the house before my bosom is veiled, and give lechery in the street its chance to rivet on the body of your wife, to the destruction of your reputation and my own? No eyes but yours have ever seen the whiteness of these breasts, which have been given into your care for matrimonial consummation only and for the greater glory of God!

PANTALONE: Good! A wonderful precaution, fine. Now steal a moment's sabbatical from your devotions and bring my book, my alms-money and my gifts for the holy Friars. I'm visiting them this morning, and will take these things with me.

ISABELLA: To the Friars this morning?

PANTALONE: For Lauds, good soul, for Lauds, I never miss Lauds. And in the evening, I'll return to them for Vespers. . .

ISABELLA: (*Handing out a bundle.*) And after Vespers, return to your wife, so that tonight we may cleave. . .

PANTALONE: No cleaving, no. I'll spend the night at the Friars in fasting and prayer. Today is a day sacred to one of the dear Saints, Isabella, when it behooves men and women to abstain from carnal intercourse.

ISABELLA: Which Saint today, Pantalone?

PANTALONE: An abused Saint, one of the most abused in life. It is one of those.

ISABELLA: And yesterday's? Which one was he?

PANTALONE: No more questions, Isabella, it argues ignorance of doctrine. Go now, and stay at your prayers, stay there. I must hurry to the Friars now to pray for a boon I need for my salvation.

ISABELLA: May the blessed Virgin grant everything you desire, worthy man!

PANTALONE: It is to be seen, spouse, it is to be seen.

ISABELLA: And when you return, we will clasp bosoms and say by heart the lamentation of the Magdalen and meditate on the Passion.

PANTALONE: Enough, good woman, enough joys for one day. Be quiet now and go back to your prayers. Go, fall on your knees, child, go. And be still. *(ISABELLA goes into the house. PANTALONE rummages through the bundle she brought to him.)* You have the wine flask? And the bawdy tales bound in the covers of Holy Writ? Good. The Friars would never forgive neglect of their instruction. Holy gentleman, what would Pantalone's life have been these last three months without his nights at San Marco's sharing his memories with you of all his vigorous years? Well, Pantalone, today will be your day of days! Savor every morsel of it, happy man! Every blessed morsel!

SCENE 5

FRA LEANDRO comes in from the street.

LEANDRO: A joyful morning to you, Pantalone! What luck to meet you here!

PANTALONE: Fra Leandro! Why are you wandering about the town so early in the day?

LEANDRO: Seeking you out, dear master. For three month you've been spreading enlightenment among us novices at San Marco's in the ways of debauchery and lechery, to our absolute joy and stupefaction. Brother Renaldo has already turned his confessional into the most famous place of secret assignation in all of Italy. Wives and widows from the countryside greet each other with a secret sign that means: 'I've been confessed by Brother Renaldo.'

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It's to you that Renaldo owes his perfect bliss – and so I've hurried to find you so that you'll teach me more than you've taught Renaldo.

PANTALONE: Let Renaldo's learning be enough for you. Take your place behind your grate, do as Renaldo did, and cripple yourself into the same state of bliss.

LEANDRO: But it is not the wives and widows of the countryside whom I want, Pantalone. There is only one lady, one. She is modest, young, beautiful and unattainable. I've watched her, studied her, dreamed of her, and I swear to you she is the end and all of my desire.

PANTALONE: Who is this wonder? What is the lady's name?

LEANDRO: If I knew, dear teacher, would I be so careless of my own good fortune as to share her name with Pantalone?

PANTALONE: Why not, you cunning little devil?

LEANDRO: By reason of your own teaching. You yourself told of the foolish novice who confided his secret in a great whoremaster whose advice he sought, and lost the lady to him.

PANTALONE: And do you suppose an overripe Pantalone could steal this perfection of womanhood from a hot-blooded novice such as you?

LEANDRO: Forgive me, learned man, but Leandro is many years from having knowledge, cunning and a sure hand such as Pantalone's.

PANTALONE: Oh, you simple-clever creature! Do you really think me such a vain old fool that I can be won to give you lessons in love by such gross flattery? Oh, foolish novice! What is your question?

LEANDRO: Master! It is not a single question but a whole catechism rattling in my head, and I hardly know where to begin. As for example. . .

PANTALONE: No, ignoramus, no! No helter-skelter, higgledy-piggledy questions running this way and that! Love, you must learn, is a species of science, and seduction is a genus of that species. If you proceed in an orderly way from question to question, you will march at last to the glorious conclusion. As for example: question one. How does the lover make known his

interest to the lady without provoking the suspicion of her husband, father, or any of the natural obstacles to consummation?

LEANDRO: How?

PANTALONE: It is right that you should ask. You must pace before the lady's house two or three times a day, being careful that only she notices your glances. And after many such paces, when the lady smiles, perhaps as though at nothing, or bows a hardly perceptible bow, you must pretend not to notice this, and disappear for a day or two, leaving in her a measure of bewilderment and regret.

LEANDRO: Maestro! I'm born to follow this study! I've already paced and paced before the lady's house, and after five days, she, when no one was in the street but I, looked directly at me with a serious face that showed neither pleasure nor annoyance, neither love nor hate, but only as if to say: I grant that I have noticed you.

PANTALONE: And you?

LEANDRO: When she granted this, a natural urging led me to stay away for three days, as if to say: I grant that you have granted that you've noticed me, but I would have you grant me more. And this, you say, Maestro, was properly done?

PANTALONE: Most properly, Leandro, blindly, you have gone far. But now I must teach you something that is, God knows, beyond your cloistered ken.

LEANDRO: I long to learn it.

PANTALONE: Know that there are bad women, Leandro, called bawds, who are evil, who are for hire, and who are your salvation: the eyes, the tongue, the very hand that slips the lover into the arms of his beloved. Send such a low crone to your lady with a message, and then you will know how the lady receives you.

LEANDRO: Ah, no. Maestro, no! I've already in my lame and bumbling way sent the best and shrewdest of these bawds.

PANTALONE: You have?

LEANDRO: To my sorrow, because she was told that if she ever came back with such a message, the lady would, with the help of God, kill her on the spot. And now I'm in despair that if I ever approach her again, she in her anger will kill me, too.

PANTALONE: Perfect, Leandro! Matters are perfect!

LEANDRO: How are they perfect when everything is lost, and I am in despair?

PANTALONE: The lady is ripe, Leandro! See how true understanding must be the weapon of the lover! Consider: the lady gives herself out to be holiness itself, and the very bawd you sent will now swear to her purity. Do you see now, Leandro? Do you understand?

LEANDRO: I understand nothing, Pantalone, except that she is holiness itself, and that I am dead.

PANTALONE: And that's all? Nothing more?

LEANDRO: And that she is above suspicion, and. . . (*Sudden illumination.*) Ah-h-h-h-h-h!

PANTALONE: Yes? Yes?

LEANDRO: And that her cursing the old bawd was as if to say to me: "Leandro, if you have the wit to understand me, you may now come in perfect peace of mind, for if we should be discovered during the deed itself, the very bawds will swear we are falsely suspected, and vouch for the innocence of our play. Fall into my arms, Leandro, with perfect assurance."

PANTALONE: Perfect pupil! You've caught the logic of the science!

LEANDRO: A great teacher and natural urging brought me to it. But, Maestro. . .

PANTALONE: But? But?

LEANDRO: Afterwards, Maestro, after I have won her and we are lying in bed, what do I do then?

PANTALONE: Ah, as to that!

LEANDRO: As to that – that, Maestro, is the deepest question of all. And I hoped to have from you, dear teacher, the fullest, most savory, most marvelous lesson in that respect. I am at your feet, Maestro, waiting to learn everything.

PANTALONE: Well, little novice, as to that, we must here be silent.

LEANDRO: Silent! When we have come at last to the crux of the whole matter! Why, Master, why?

PANTALONE: (*Observing the spectators.*) Because, little innocent, while we've been whispering, a world of eavesdroppers has gathered at our feet, leering and eager to share your lesson in corruption. But Pantalone out of natural malice has so far contrived to teach them nothing, and to keep the best of the lesson for your ears alone. Come, little pupil, we will walk now to San Marco's for morning devotions, and on the way Pantalone will whisper, to you alone, the whole of his remembrance and understanding of true and perfect fornication.

LEANDRO: Maestro, Maestro! This is the most precious hour of my life!

They go out.

SCENE 6

FRANCESCHINA puts her head out of PANTALONE's door and looks about.

FRANCESCHINA: Come out, you lechery, come out, and pray for protection from the wrath of Pantalone!

She drags COLUMBINA out of the house to the foot of the Statue. COLUMBINA has a great swelled belly, and is in excruciating pain.

COLUMBINA: (*In agony.*) Mother of God, I'm bursting!

FRANCESCHINA: Bursting? Burst! Where is shame, belly? Where has it gone? To show me this – this thing, this sight!

COLUMBINA: Angel Franceschina. . .

FRANCESCHINA: Shut your mouth, you swelled balloon, and fall into my lap and let me hold you! (*Cradles COLUMBINA in her arms.*) Oh, my darling, my best pupil, after so much teaching, do you bring me this?

COLUMBINA: Let me breathe. Oh, let me turn!

FRANCESCHINA: Don't breathe. Listen. Who brought you to Pantalone's and promised that your follies would be reserved forever for him alone? Who?

COLUMBINA: Sweet Franceschina, this great glob will drop out of me before you're done raging at my folly.

FRANCESCHINA: Oh, Holy Virgin, grace this mindless whore with sense, and let her know that the child must not be born unless the spawn is Pantalone's and gotten from his own loins. Is it so, belly? Can it be that the child is his?

COLUMBINA: Never.

FRANCESCHINA: Why, never? He's lain with you, folly?

COLUMBINA: Until the spring, we wallowed every night.

FRANCESCHINA: Salvation! If he wallowed every night, then the great cargo of his lust found harbor in your own belly, and the child is his, and nothing but sweet fortune can come of it. God be praised!

COLUMBINA: God be praised, yes, Franceschina, but not for this. Every night when, trembling, Pantalone stretched his shaking fingers toward the object of his desire, a great rattle would seize his anxious bones, and in a little instant he would plop his wasted cargo into the world before it ever knew the patience to find its way into Columbina's waiting harbor.

FRANCESCHINA: Miserable woman! Didn't you have the charity to blind him to his loss by writhing with feigned pleasure, and biting his chest and arms in a show of ecstasy to persuade him that no man since the beginning of time had more excruciating vigor than his? If you had done as I had taught you, Pantalone would have sworn on the cross itself that the child was his.

COLUMBINA: Oh, I did, Franceschina, I did. Every night, I swooned with joy and gave him sweet thanks for the hugeness of his blessing, but he would stop my mouth in a rage and shriek: "I'm spent, spent! Old Pantalone is spent! Nothing more will spring from this thing, nothing!" And then he would beat the failing instrument of his pleasure so that poor Columbina was in a fright he would lose the good of it forever. Never could he suppose the child is his, never would he believe. . . . *(Suddenly screams.)* A-ah! Franceschina! It's on me! Oh God, I'm in a tunnel, a black tunnel! Help me, Mother of God, help!

FRANCESCHINA: Where are you crawling? Come, drag the ridiculous thing into my house, and we'll dream up a ruse before it undoes all. Come, crawl, child, this way, crawl, into my house. That's it, child, to, through the door, sweet child, so. (*COLUMBINA has crawled into the house.*) Oh, the folly of the simple slut! Whore's folly!

FRANCESCHINA goes in and slams the door.

SCENE 7

DOTTORE comes out of his house holding flasks. The dangling pockets in his robe are filled with compounds.

DOTTORE: Here, Arlecchino, emptyhead, here!

ARLECCHINO follows DOTTORE out of the house staggering under the weight and bulk of a great pot.

DOTTORE: Set down the pot, set it down away from my door and the precious projections bubbling inside to near-consummation! And run back, numbskull, and fire the furnace!

ARLECCHINO steadies the pot and sits on the ground in exhaustion, trying to catch his breath.

DOTTORE: There are things to cook, things to stew and simmer, for sweet Pantalone's potion! (*Notices ARLECCHINO on the ground, and is horrified that he is still there.*) Fire, simpleton, fire!

ARLECCHINO leaps up, barely able to stand, and runs into the house.

DOTTORE: Come, Dottore, mix! Mix for Pantalone! (*As he pours powders, swift watery streams and thick solutions that glub-glub their way into the pot, he cries, as though in incantation.*) May a black agony powder his bones and wither his flesh, the dear friend, the sweet neighbor, with the spittle drooling from his scrofulous beard while he's dreaming of ecstasy forever with *my my my my* Columbina! Mix, Dottore, pound and mix, to make little simples and sweet nostrums to give Mars Pantalone the wherewithal to pleasure Venus Columbina, who, the indelible stars have written, will one day by *mine mine mine mine* and mine alone, if Dottore has to fry and poison every man and man-child in town down to puling infants to clear the field for conquest! Oh yes, Pantalone, potions, potions! (*Calling to ARLECCHINO.*) Push the alembic under the vessel away from the furnace, let it calcinate there! Free the furnace! And comb all the dead roaches out of the ashes, sweep them into the yellow aspic and bring the aspic here! (*Mixing and pummeling.*) The aspic, Pantalone, for you, dear man, for you, made from an impotent horse's rheumy eyeballs which we powdered last month for his Eminence, to feed to his lusty rival. It dried the juice out of the vigorous man, and left him a walking desert forever! Ha! (*Calling to ARLECCHINO.*) Come out and tell me!

ARLECCHINO rushes to the door panting and holding a set of bellows.

DOTTORE: Is the furnace fired? Then drop the bellows, and under the urinal, you'll find the infested discharge of a rabid Uruguayan zebra! Bring it for Pantalone, child, bring it!

ARLECCHINO rushes back into the house.

DOTTORE: For the dear one, for Hercules Pantalone, to give him a bull's strength, a horse's length and a rabbit's perpetuum mobile, eh Pantalone? Will Dottore do this little kindness for you? Why not? Dottore would not refuse merely because Dottore himself is fainting and dying for Columbina! No no no, foolish Dottore! He'll do it, of course! (*Calling to ARLECCHINO.*) Where are you? Where is the aspic?

ARLECCHINO comes out with it.

DOTTORE: And the postulated discharge? Where?

ARLECCHINO rushes back into the house.

DOTTORE: Yes, mix, Dottore! In gratitude to friend Pantalone, in gratitude and thanksgiving to the man who keeps delicious Columbina locked in his lair like the jailer, the dragon, the wild beast he is! And Dottore for months and months doesn't catch a glimmer of her sweet upended body, not a peek!

ARLECCHINO runs out with the discharge.

DOTTORE: Splash it in, Arlecchino, more, more! (*As ARLECCHINO pours..*) The old ape's cullions, rotted in a jar at the bottom of the chest under the dust and cobwebs of fourteen years, get them!

ARLECCHINO rushes into the house. DOTTORE calls after him.

DOTTORE: Hold your nose, and powder them! Then drop in a morsel of the dried placenta that fell to us from the Cardinal's mistress's misfortune of the year past! Only a morsel, just a morsel, not the whole of it! It would dilute the malice of the rotted cullions. (*Mixing and pounding.*) For the years, Pantalone, for the years of favors and boons and gifts Dottore had from your heel, from your boot, from the back of your hand! Years of boons and gifts, years, years!

ARLECCHINO rushes to DOTTORE with the powdered cullions and placenta.

DOTTORE: Dump the powder in, dump it! Mind it doesn't touch your hand, the rot eats flesh to the bone! (*Mixing.*) For Pantalone's syrup! For the soothing of the old man's parched tongue, and worn teeth, and deep throat! What else, Dottore, what else for the good man's nectar? (*To ARLECCHINO.*) Beetles, Arlecchino! All the beetles and scorpions on the shelf mashed under the weight of Aquinas! Bring them, bring them!

ARLECCHINO rushes into the house. DOTTORE is mixing again.

DOTTORE: Oh, Pantalone, the brew is taking! (*Ladles the potion, like a cook testing the broth.*) There's your body, there's your color, there's your aroma! (*A hissing sound from DOTTORE's house..*) Magus! The alembic is flooding the cucurbit!

ARLECCHINO rushes out of the house with the beetles and scorpions.

DOTTORE: Run, child, run, what are you doing here? Run and close the cap before the alkahest infestates the receiver!

ARLECCHINO rushes back into the house before delivering the beetles and scorpions.

DOTTORE: Where are the beetles and scorpions, blockhead, where?

ARLECCHINO rushes out of the house with the beetles and scorpions.

DOTTORE: Go, stop the flooding, and – (*A sudden illumination; stops in wonder.*) Ah! Inspiration, Dottore! Child, go to the bottom of the cage of sick mice. Crawl in, and then separate their urine from their excrement!

ARLECCHINO stares at DOTTORE dumbfounded by the instruction.

DOTTORE: Without letting the mice out of the cage, God help us! (He sees *ARLECCHINO* standing mute, with mouth open.) Go!! (*ARLECCHINO*, galvanized, rushed toward the house, is stopped by:) And sprinkle the excrement with a dozen lice from the backs of the two monkeys in my chamber. (*ARLECCHINO* again starts to rush out, and is stopped by:) No! Use the parrots!

ARLECCHINO rushes into the house. DOTTORE calls after him.

DOTTORE: The monkeys would take an age, the abandoned things take every tickle as a promise of lechery to come! The urine's come to a boil, yes? And at the top of the boil, you dip into it a small dog's paw!

ARLECCHINO sticks his head out the door, gaping at DOTTORE in disbelief.

DOTTORE: Ah, that's it, Dottore, that's it! The garnish of the potion! Is the urine boiled? (*ARLECCHINO disappears into the house.*) Then put the excrement in a pot, and the urine in a flask, and bring them! (*To the potion as he stirs.*) For our youth, Pantalone, for our sometime youth, when Dottore raced you to every maiden's door and arrived, always, second! Tonight you'll drink to our youth, Pantalone! Skol! (*To ARLECCHINO.*) You have them? Good. Cautiously, child, pour the urine first, and then the excrement. . . Now, go! . . . Go, imbecile, go! Run, run behind the alembics and hide – no listening, no peeping! (*Covers his face and bows his head.*) Magus, now! The art shared only by adepts!

During this, ARLECCHINO sneaks into FRANCESCHINA's house. DOTTORE faces the pot again.

DOTTORE: Stir, Dottore! Seven times. Gently. It wants a mother's touch. Yes, it will blossom, with the venom of the aspic, into endless diseases of the groin – Ready! (*With the solemnity of a high priest.*) Now, Pantalone!! Coda and finis! (*Extracts two items from his pockets, holding one in each hand.*) A tinct of marmot's gorge for petrification of the scrotum! Gently, gently, Dottore! We don't want petrification of the entire scrotum in an instant! No. We want painful lingering. (*Squeezes a little tinct of marmot's gorge into the pot, it sizzles.*) And last, the costic! For a great swelling of the stomach, and the withering of all the limbs! (*Hurls the costic into the pot with a vengeance, and a whoosh of yellow smoke shoots out of it.*) Dottore Dottoris! It is done! (*After a moment of savoring his triumph.*) Run, Dottore, put the pot back on the oven, to bubble and simmer until tonight. (*Raises the pot with no effort as though in a toast.*) Ah, joy to you, Pantalone! Tonight, when you come to call, oh, how Dottore is ready with potions!

DOTTORE runs into the house.

SCENE 8

LEANDRO: Leandro, Leandro, Leandro, you're transmuted! There's no waiting now, Brother, not another minute! Not now, when you've learned about the genus, consummation! Oh, little Friar of San Marco's, did you ever imagine, did you ever dream. . . ! So many permutations and combinations, so many roads and by-ways to the same inn! Pantalone, Leandro's in your debt forever, and believe him, he's determined to repay you as a faithful scholar should, by putting to the test right now and all at once the whole of your instruction! Well, here is the prize you've groomed me for! Here is the lady's window! (*Turns towards ISABELLA's window.*) Dear Master, the urge to win this lady was Leandro's, but to your eternal praise, the cunning that guided him to this door was wholly yours! (*ISABELLA appears at her window.*) There she is, Maestro! Here is my lady, O here is my love! No, don't moon, Leandro! Hurry up and finish with seduction, and quick! – get to the repertory of consummation! How do you begin? A suggestive

salutation, says the Maestro. Ah, God help your cloistered ignorance, Leandro, you don't know any! Well, there's no help for it now, use whatever salutation you *do* know, and trust to the lady's deeper understanding! (*Approaches the window.*) In nomine patris et filii et spiritus sancti! (*Whispers.*) Now lean this way, lovely lady! I have something to whisper in your ear.

ISABELLA: Holy Friar, are you mad?

LEANDRO: Mad as a hatter, enticing one, for Brother Leandro wants right now, this instant, to leap through the portals of your ladyship's chamber, and plead on his knees, hitting his forehead on the stones . . .

ISABELLA: Demented man! Is this a posture for a minister of the Church to take before a woman of virtue? Are you in a frenzy, to behave like this? How does it become a man of the cloth to ask to be leaping through a lady's portals and to brain himself at her feet?

LEANDRO: Damnation, beautiful lady! I counted on your understanding without my explanation! My Master gave me to know that the persuasion of a lover's argument never comes from his mouth, but from other attributes the lady detects while he's busily lisping words he tips with silver and sighing sighs to the blessed moon! If it isn't so, then I'm lost, and I tell you plainly that will you or won't you, I'll be at you through the window or the door or any way I can, for Leandro is new to seduction, and very uneasy with it, and is in a hurry to get to . . .

ISABELLA: Monster! Have you lost possession of your wits? Vanish! At once!! Vanish, or I will call my neighbors to drag you back to your monkish cell and strap you to its wall until the light of reason returns to your addled head! What right have you – filthy monk! – what right have you to foul my door with your devil's stench? Go, run to the doors of abandoned sluts, and jug and prance before *them* on your cloven hooves!

LEANDRO: (*With a gesture of surrender.*) Ah, well, Leandro, it's lost! No, pious lady, it's not because they're cloven that I've put them in the mire. It's because they are completely innocent of guile. You see, simple Brother Leandro only today won his voluptuary's handbook, and he has no practice at all in matching his powers of seduction against an experienced virtue like yours. (*Shrugs.*) Well,

it's lost now, incompetent Leandro! And you're left empty-handed and a fool! Gracious lady, forgive my foolishness. Do would-be lover Leandro the kindness to forget his folly, and he'll trouble you no more! God be with you!

ISABELLA: God be with you, foolish Friar! And I will pray to Him that you recover your wits. And you do likewise!

She turns to leave and he turns to leave. But LEANDRO turns back.

LEANDRO: Only one question, Lady Virtue. After the lessons in debauchery I've had today, I cannot take it in why virtue such as yours bothers to resist at all, because according to my learning, nothing comes of the game but the purest pleasure.

ISABELLA: (*Laughing.*) Ah, novice voluptuary! After only one day of learning, are you so lost to grace that you can speak of vile debauchery as a mere game? Why, this isn't sinful wickedness, it's plain stupidity! Come, we'll put aside this blockhead seduction, and out of pity, let me reason with you. Look into your heart and tell me: has virtue no restraint on you whatever?

LEANDRO: I don't think so, beautiful lady. Because today I learned, to my utter delight, that when the game of debauchery is perfectly played, the rules have no bounds at all. There are no limits of decency, none of taste, nothing. The only rule is the lovers' absolute abandonment of their pleasure.

ISABELLA: I cannot believe it. None, libertine?

LEANDRO: None whatever, voluptuous lady. I learned to my infinite happiness that the finest moments of true lechery are to be tasted only in nights of perfectly mindless debauch.

ISABELLA: Well then, Brother Leandro, God be praised that I am older in the ways of virtue than you are in the pleasures of debauchery! And God be praised that you are still fresh and raw in the practice of these iniquities! Heaven knows that virtue such as mine cannot sit still when vice abounding such as yours is parading at its door! Listen carefully, young corruption: if you still have anywhere within you longings for salvation, if you possess still the merest spark of heaven's fire, then come to my house tonight—

LEANDRO: Tonight!

ISABELLA: And here in my house, you will learn how virtue has since time immemorial made easy conquest of the terrors of debauchery.

LEANDRO: Oh I will come, devious lady, be sure, be sure I will be there.

ISABELLA: Then go now, eager one, and pray to the Almighty that debauchery avoid all temptation until it meets to debate with virtue, tonight!

ISABELLA closes her window.

SCENE 9

LEANDRO: Sing praises, Leandro, glorious praises! Hymns and praises! The lady is yours! Run, and report to the good Maestro! Victory! Oh, what an easy victory! (*Stops and considers.*) Yes, but whose? Whose victory will you tell him it was? Another question for the Maestro, Brother **LEANDRO:** in the game of seduction, how can you tell the seducer from the seduced? Ah, but tonight! Tonight there will be no questions! In the study of consummation, you're stuffed with learning to the fingertips, to the everlasting honor of Pantalone! Tonight, Leandro, oh, tonight!

He runs out.

SCENE 10

ISABELLA reappears at her window.

ISABELLA: Gentle ladies, virtuous wives, Isabella has come back to beg you not to be outraged by her playing saintly Penelope to her husband and devilish Circe to a lover, and both ways debasing womankind, as the poet says, to the role of a mere object. Fiddle-faddle, ladies! I've sneaked back for a wee moment to reassure you on that score, and to make perfectly plain to those of you who have a nose for the main chance, that this mere object knows so

well what it is about that, like the gambler who accidentally drips a lowly three of clubs on the gambling table while he's clutching to his bosom the certain makings of a royal flush, Isabella has, waiting in the wings, a final outcome that will delight the iron breast of the most war-like lady among us, and leave her happy and content with the last page of the tale of Isabella. As for the other tale of Columbina's unwanted baby, Isabella takes little notice of it, since, as a woman of neat purpose, she cannot abide a comedy in which the soft tread of one plot is continually trampled by the vulgar jig of another. But she takes comfort in the assurance, at least – from Him above who put the words in all our mouths – that the two tales will in the end fold into each other's arms, and to Isabella's natural satisfaction, remain thereafter intertwined. Go and refresh yourselves, good women – and those others who are with you – and return, dear ladies, to our comedy, and to further useful instruction, in ten minutes.

END OF ACT ONE

ACT TWO, SCENE 1

ARLECCHINO running out of FRANCESCHINA's house, she after him, bellowing.

FRANCESCHINA: Beast! Was this a prayer to bring to Franceschina's house?

ARLECCHINO: Good lady, what have I done? I merely asked you. . .

FRANCESCHINA: (*Knocking at DOTTORE's door.*) Mad Doctor, open your door so that Franceschina can tell you all about this unnatural beast! This monster here is projecting – God save us! – for the hand of Columbina in holy marriage!

DOTTORE bursts out of his house.

DOTTORE: This? This sludge wants holy marriage? With Columbina? *This*, with Columbina? *This?* (*DOTTORE runs towards his house..*) A potion, Dottore! A potion will separate this vile insect from life itself!

ARLECCHINO: I fart on your potion, driveling old quack! I, Arlecchino, fart on it!

DOTTORE: Ha! He speaks, does he? Out of spite, and malice, he speaks!

DOTTORE lunges at ARLECCHINO, who takes refuge on top of the Statue. From the safety of the Virgin's back, clutching her shoulders and looking out over her head, he defies DOTTORE.

ARLECCHINO: I, Arlecchino, !! !! Lover Arlecchino, liberated Arlecchino will never give up my hope of marrying Columbina, never, not for a million potions, not for a million screaming bawds, not for a million mad Dottores.

DOTTORE: O-o-o-o-o-o-h! The brave little insect has found his tongue!

FRANCESCHINA: Chop it off, Dottore, before I run mad from the sound of it! Drag him into your house and chain him to the vats and furnaces, so that never again will he find time or strength to crawl into Columbina's chamber!

DOTTORE: *Again!!! Find time – again!!*

ARLECCHINO: Again, old devil! Again, again! Insect Arlecchino crawled into Columbina's chamber before, under the very nose of old Dottore, who, as all the world knows, is pining for Columbina himself, though Columbina laughs at his old goat's wooing and old sow's folly!

FRANCESCHINA stares at DOTTORE open-mouthed.

FRANCESCHINA: Dottore!!

DOTTORE: Believe nothing, Franceschina, nothing!

FRANCESCHINA: Virgin Mother, is there a male thing in creation who isn't slobbering in his dreams for Columbina?

DOTTORE: *(Weeping, to ARLECCHINO.)* The black plague on you, the evil eye, and the curse of all the witches, demons and miserable succubi for destroying the secret of Dottore's heart and soul, and giving it out that he loves Columbina to madness and despair!

ARLECCHINO: *(Weeping.)* Arlecchino too, Arlecchino too loves Columbina to madness and despair!

FRANCESCHINA: *(Weeping.)* And Pantalone too, Pantalone too loves Columbina to madness and despair! And Franceschina is driven by all of it to true madness and despair! Death, Franceschina! To have hung the assurance of old age on the strength of Pantalone's bolt and the lock on Columbina's door! Bawd's delusions, Franceschina, bawd's delusions!

DOTTORE: *(To ARLECCHINO.)* Come down, destroyer of bawd's hopes, and Dottore will see to it that you never again trouble Columbina with your love and crawling!

FRANCESCHINA: Ah, let him alone, old man! Believe Franceschina, there'll be lovers and lovers to come – crawling out of the ground and leaping out of the air to generous Columbina, to the destruction of *all* our hopes and dreams! Send this infant to your ovens, good Doctor, for Franceschina must confide in you the nearest danger of all.

DOTTORE: Nearer than this monster?

FRANCESCHINA: Nearer than you can imagine!

DOTTORE: (*To ARLECCHINO.*) You, monster, run, run to the fires in Dottore's house! Lost, helpless Franceschina is confiding all her cares into the hands of brave Dottore, who dismisses you without rancor, without malice, and without forgiveness!

ARLECCHINO: Then lost, helpless Franceschina is as mad as Dottore to put her cares into the hands of an old folly and decaying fraud, who has sense enough only to grind the body and soul of his miserable slave Arlecchino in the mortar of his quackeries and dreams! Freedom, Arlecchino! Freedom! Cry freedom from mad Dottore's leaden head and iron foot!

DOTTORE, while yelling at ARLECCHINO, chases him out of his refuge and into the house.

DOTTORE: Into the house, monster tongue, and the curse of Sisyphus on whoever it was who taught you to speak.

SCENE 2

With ARLECCHINO in the house, DOTTORE turns to FRANCESCHINA.

DOTTORE: Franceschina, if you had not stayed my hand.

FRANCESCHINA: Sit, good Dottore, sit. And pray God there's enough reason left in you to save Franceschina from her fate.

DOTTORE: (*Sitting beside FRANCESCHINA.*) Calmly, good woman! Tell Dottore what the danger is. Does it touch the innocent Columbina?

FRANCESCHINA: Very nearly, Dottore. To her shame and my grief, a child thing has found its way into Columbina, and it must find its way out again with no sign that it was ever there.

DOTTORE: A babe has found its way into Columbina? An incubus of the devil, surely!

FRANCESCHINA: An incubus of the devil, yes, wise man, but since Pantalone cannot be persuaded that he is the lucky devil, he would destroy Columbina should he learn of it. And what is nearer my heart, destroy me, too. It is a weight, therefore, on my breast. Do you follow, Dottore? Do you take it in?

DOTTORE: (*Frowning over the question.*) Dottore takes it in! And Dottore considers and advises, woman. . .

FRANCESCHINA: Yes, good man?

DOTTORE: It is best to get rid of the babe!

FRANCESCHINA: (*Restraining herself.*) Ah, well thought out, Dottore, wisely said, very wise, good man. But Franceschina is soliciting your wisdom to explain to her: how?

DOTTORE: Leave that to Dottore, woman! Oh, Dottore knows how to get rid of babes!

FRANCESCHINA: Particulars, Dottore!

DOTTORE: Oh, innumerable ways! Leather. The Medes and Persians strapped their babes into leather swaddling clothes, soaked them in a stream, and then dried them in the sun.

FRANCESCHINA: To what effect, Dottore?

DOTTORE: The dried babe shrank to the size of an acorn, and disposal was no trouble at all.

FRANCESCHINA: Savagery! They were not civilized, Dottore!

DOTTORE: Ah, civilized! The civilized Greeks in ancient times exposed unwanted blessings on a mountain, rock or hill, and left them to the mercies of wolves and men.

FRANCESCHINA: Horrible, Dottore, horrible! Do they do it still?

DOTTORE: No, they've lost civility. Item: mutilation of the face and body – Pliny says – which gives the babe all the advantages of living, but with all the traces of resemblance to the guilty parents removed. As, *exempli gratia*, the slitting and folding of the nostrils, the removal of an eye or ear. . .

FRANCESCHINA: Another way, Dottore. These are not. . .

DOTTORE: These are *not*? Courage, Franceschina! If we're to rescue Columbina from her ills, we must have stomach for the cure, says Dottore!



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