

The Miser

(1668)

Act I

Valère, though well born, has become Harpagon's house steward in order to be near the miser's daughter, Élise, to whom he is secretly engaged. Harpagon is a domestic tyrant, however, and this bodes ill for the wedding plans of the young couple as well as for those of Élise's brother, Cléante, who is courting a certain Mariane. Hope turns to despair when Harpagon announces that he himself will wed Mariane. He further proposes to marry Cléante to an unnamed widow and Élise to the rich "widower", Anselme. Élise of course objects, and Valère reluctantly acts as mediator in the dispute.

Act II

Forced to borrow money, Cléante is appalled to learn the exorbitant terms fixed by the mysterious usurer who has agreed to lend him 15,000 francs. When he discovers that the usurer in question is his own father, a bitter quarrel breaks out between Harpagon and his son. Frosine, an unscrupulous lady who is acting as marriage broker for Harpagon, informs the miser that his marriage plans are going well and that Mariane will visit him that evening.

Act III

Harpagon instructs his household staff in preparation for the dinner he is giving in honour of Anselme and of Mariane. The cook, Maître Jacques, proposes rich and expensive dishes, but Valère supports Harpagon's plea for frugality and is put in charge of the dinner arrangements. Upon Harpagon's request, Maître Jacques reveals to his master the general opinion about Harpagon's stinginess, and he is rewarded with a good beating. When he picks a quarrel with Valère, he receives a second thrashing. He then vows revenge on the steward.

Intermission

As they wait for Harpagon, Mariane speaks to Frosine of her love for a young suitor whose name she does not know. After Harpagon has delivered a ridiculous love speech, Cléante comes to greet his new mother-in-law who recognizes in him her young suitor. The two declare their love in a conversation full of double meanings. Cléante earns Harpagon's wrath by snatching a diamond ring from his father's finger and presenting it to Mariane. Cléante then takes the ladies to the garden while Harpagon goes off to see about some business.

Act IV

When Harpagon sees his son Cléante kissing Mariane's hand he decides to test him by saying that Cléante may marry the girl if he really cares for her. The young man falls into the trap. Maître Jacques is asked to act as judge in the ensuing quarrel between father and son. He pacifies them both by lying to them, but the quarrel soon resumes and Harpagon finally disinherits his son. Cléante's valet, however, has found a way to put pressure on Harpagon: he has dug up the miser's money-chest. In a final monologue, Harpagon bewails his loss.

Act V

Harpagon gives instructions to the police officer he has summoned. Maître Jacques, accused of the crime by his master, tries to pin the blame on Valère. When the steward is accused in turn by Harpagon, he thinks the miser is speaking of his secret engagement with Élise and this misunderstanding creates enormous complications. Finally, Anselme appears, and recognizes Valère and Mariane as his long-lost children. Anselme appeals to the miser on behalf of the young people. Valère marries Élise, Cléante marries Mariane, Maître Jacques is forgiven, Anselme is reunited with his wife, and Harpagon with his one true love: his money.