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A farce in one act, by T. Edgar Pemberton

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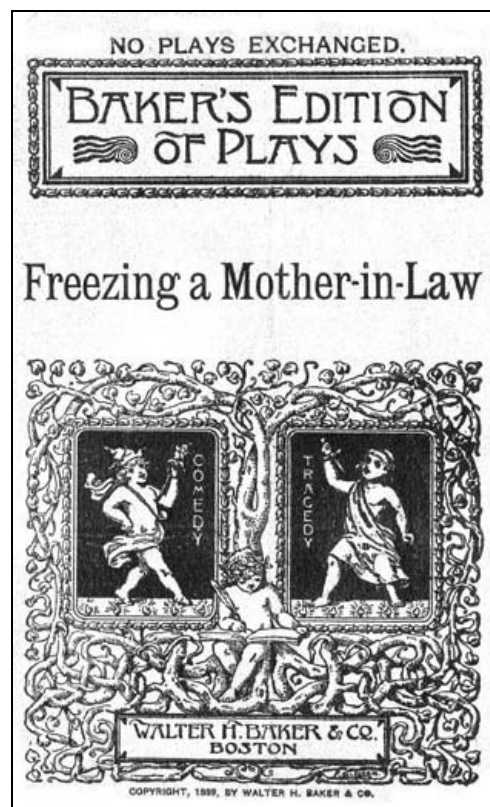
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SUSPENDED ANIMATION: A FARCE IN ONE ACT \*\*\*



NO PLAYS EXCHANGED.

BAKER'S EDITION OF PLAYS

Freezing a Mother-in-Law

WALTER H. BAKER & CO.  
BOSTON

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FREEZING A MOTHER-IN-LAW

OR

SUSPENDED ANIMATION

A Farce in One Act

BY

T. E. PEMBERTON

BOSTON

*Walter H. Baker & Co.*

PUBLISHERS

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CHARACTERS.

MR. WATMUFF            *Attached to the past*  
FERDINAND SWIFT      *His nephew, attached to fortune hunting*  
WALTER LITHERLAND   *Attached to Emily Watmuff*  
MRS. WATMUFF         *Attached to the memory of her parents*  
EMILY                   *Her daughter, attached to Walter Litherland*

COSTUMES.—Modern and appropriate.

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FREEZING A MOTHER-IN-LAW.

SCENE.—MR. WATMUFF'S *library*. Entrances, R. and L. At L.C. a door opening to a cupboard. At R. table, with books and a bottle of water on it. A screen stands close to door, R. WALTER LITHERLAND and EMILY WATMUFF discovered.

EMILY. And so we must part forever!

WALTER. For the thirteenth time, my darling, I must, in reply to that remark of yours, say—I don't see why.

EMILY. Ah! Walter, you do not know who rules this house.

WALTER. I may be wrong, but I was always under the impression that your mother did.

EMILY. Ah! then you do know. I was afraid you would think that my poor father was the master of it.

WALTER. I know that the house is let to your father; but I confess, my dearest, that I have observed that he has sub-let himself to your respected mother.

EMILY. And she has declared that she will *never* give her consent to our engagement.

WALTER. But your father has given his, and that is a great point gained.

EMILY. It may be a great point, but it is a very useless one. Mamma always has her own way. She pronounced her decision this morning, and when you quit the house to-day orders will be given that you are never allowed to enter it again.

WALTER. Then clearly I must not quit it. I am a great believer in diplomacy, Emily. To go at the present time directly against your revered mother's will would be utterly to lose you; to lose you, my darling, would be far more than to lose my life; therefore, I have determined to humor your respected parent, until the fortunes of war give me an opportunity of ingratiating myself with her. Hush! She approaches. Now rely upon me, and in every way back me up.

(*Enter MRS. WATMUFF, door L.*)

MRS. W. (*glaring indignantly at WALTER*). Still here, sir! I thought that you had been instructed by my husband to quit these premises.

WALTER. Madam, I am much to blame. That the wishes expressed, I am sure, after mature deliberation, of Mr. Watmuff and yourself, have been communicated to me, I cannot deny—and yet—I linger here.

MRS. W. Linger no longer, sir; but obey our behest.

WALTER. I am, madam, about to do so; but since this interview with my dear Emily must be my last —

MRS. W. *Your* dear Emily! By what right, sir, do you speak of my daughter as *your* dear Emily?

EMILY. Because, mamma, I have consented—

MRS. W. How, girl! This to my face? To your chamber, miss.

WALTER. Again, madam, I have to own myself in the wrong. It is *your* dear Emily to whom I have come to bid a long farewell.

MRS. W. A short farewell, sir, is all that is necessary—and more than I shall allow. My domestics will have instructions to remove you, within five minutes, from this domain. What ho! there—cook and serving-maid!

(Exit MRS. WATMUFF, door L.)

EMILY. Walter, surely you do not mean to give me up!

WALTER. My darling, do you—can you—doubt me? I shall never give you up; but I am convinced that our only course is to temporize. Your mother is, to say the least of it, arbitrary; but does she not give me a glorious chance of proving the strength of my affection for you?

EMILY. How, dearest?

WALTER. I am prepared to marry you, my darling, even during her lifetime.

(Enter MR. WATMUFF, door R.)

EMILY. Oh, papa, I am in sad trouble. Mamma still withholds her consent.

MR. W. My dear child, your mother, with the exception of her tongue, has a habit of withholding everything.

EMILY. And she has ordered Walter to quit the house.

MR. W. Well, my dear, beyond a not unnatural feeling of envy for Walter, I don't feel that I can express any sentiment on the subject. I have given my consent.

EMILY. But of what use is it?

MR. W. Not much, my dear, I must own. But I thought you might derive some comfort from it.

EMILY. Do you know that mamma is now giving orders to the cook and housemaid to remove poor Walter by force?

MR. W. My dear child, it is, I must admit, an extreme measure. But what can I do?

EMILY. You ought not to brook such treatment.

MR. W. Dearest love, I don't know that I do brook it; because I never mastered the full meaning of that word. But even if I did, how can I unbrook it?

WALTER. My dear sir, I think I comprehend your position better than poor Emily does; and, indeed, I have been trying to persuade her that our better plan is to yield to the storm until it has passed. We must remember the old fable of the oak and the willow.

MR. W. It has been Mrs. Watmuff's good fortune to dwell in a perfect grove of willows since the day of her birth. I confess that I have yielded so long that I am limp with yielding.

WALTER. And I mean to yield only so far as to retain strength for a final spring, and a final growth in a right and firm direction. Come, Emily, be guided by me, and I promise you all shall be well. If I remain here a moment longer I fear the storm may burst, and at present we are both too oak-like to stand it.

(Exeunt EMILY and WALTER, door R.)

MR. W. That's a remarkably sanguine young man; but, then, he's at the sanguine time of life. I was sanguine myself once—remarkably sanguine; and then I married Mrs. Watmuff—or, rather, I should say, she married me. I believe that there is a ceremony which, in polite language, is termed asking the dearly-beloved object of your affections "the momentous question," and in vulgar parlance is called "popping the question." I may honestly say that I neither popped nor momented. Looking back on a long vista of years, I cannot for the life of me remember any period when I was engaged; I only remember being free, and being—well—married. Marriages, they say, are made in Heaven. I don't want to be irreverent, but sometimes I can't help wishing that Heaven had left me, as the charity cards say, "totally unprovided for." But my provision approaches.

(Enter MRS. WATMUFF, door L.)

MRS. W. (*sits L.*). So, Mr. Watmuff, I find you alone. I am fortunate. Sit down, sit down, sir. I repeat, I am fortunate.

MR. W. (*sits, R.*). My dear, I am very glad to hear it. Fortune, they say, favors the—

MRS. W. A truce, sir, to ribaldry. The time has come when a definite understanding should exist between us.

MR. W. My dear, so far as I am concerned, a *very* definite understanding has existed for a very long time.

MRS. W. Peace, vain scoffer! and hear me. Our daughter, Mr. Watmuff, is of an age to wed.

MR. W. My love, I am given to understand that she also is of that opinion.

MRS. W. And of this crisis in the life of our only child you make an opportunity to fly in my face.

MR. W. Do I, my dear? I was not aware of it.

MRS. W. Do you not directly encourage the advances of a suitor who is to me in every way distasteful?

MR. W. But, my love, on what grounds? On what grounds?

MRS. W. Grounds, Mr. Watmuff—grounds! You speak of your daughter as though she were so much coffee. Is it not enough that I object to the addresses of this young upstart?

MR. W. My dear, it is quite enough. I may say that it is more than enough. But what was I to do? I always liked Walter. You know that I dote on Emily. They come to me, tell me that they love each other, and ask for my blessing. I happen to have a blessing by me, and I give it them.

MRS. W. And without a thought of me—*me*, the partner of your joys and sorrows—*me*, the ruling spirit of your existence. You have no right to dispose of a blessing of your own, Mr. Watmuff—you have not got one. Such a blessing is a curse.

MR. W. Well, my love, whatever it is, they've got it, and they seem to like it, so far, well enough. But—

MRS. W. A truce—a truce, I say.

MR. W. A truce, by all means; but as for Walter Litherland—

MRS. W. Walter Litherland never marries daughter of mine, Mr. Watmuff. It is enough. I have said it. I married to gratify my parents. Emily will marry to gratify me.

MR. W. My love, may I, with all deference, venture to remind you that your respected and beloved parents were, when I first had the pleasure of making your acquaintance, what may be called "no more."

MRS. W. Silence, mocker of the dead. They had gone to their reward. But I lived to obey their wishes.

MR. W. Oh, and was *I* one of them?

MRS. W. In the abstract, yes. What did I find you?

MR. W. My dear, don't allude to that. You did not find me much; but I am not an avaricious man, and as I said at the time, what I looked for in a wife was not so much money as—

MRS. W. Sordid one! Ever thinking of your worldly goods. When I ask, what did I find you? I allude to your moral condition. You were a smoker of tobacco. Do you deny it?

MR. W. (*regretfully*). I used to enjoy a cigar.

MRS. W. You were a bibber of wine. Was it not so?

MR. W. (*regretfully*). A glass of port now and then was very pleasant to me.

MRS. W. It was such as *you* that my parents hated. It was such as *you* they loved to reform. It is the custom of some to erect to the memory of their parents costly monuments of marble, and gaudy windows of perishable glass. *I* erected *you*. Say, have I altered you? Do you smoke now?

MR. W. (*very mournfully*). I do not.

MRS. W. Where is your cellar of port?

MR. W. In my cellar. It has remained there, my love, since, twenty years ago, you appropriated the key; and (*with a groan*) it must be in very fine condition.

MRS. W. Ay! you can still think of the condition of your port; lucky for you that I have thought of *your* condition. You are a mausoleum, Mr. Watmuff, of which my parents may feel justly proud. Their tomb will not be neglected during the lifetime of their daughter. My decision with regard to Walter Litherland is one more *immortelle* woven, by loving hands to their memory. You are a mausoleum, Mr. Watmuff. (*Exit* MRS. WATMUFF, *door* L.)

MR. W. A mausoleum, am I? I wish they'd put a railing round me then, and keep me isolated. I'm always being railed at. Why, if I'm regarded from that point of view, can't I be railed in? I haven't the privileges of a family vault. I'm only a common grave, walked over and trampled on by everybody. It's too bad. It would be rough enough on a grave, but on flesh and blood it's outrageous. And when I think of that cellar of port, d—d if I don't wish I was buried—with it. How crusty it must be now! As crusty, I expect, as I ought to be if I only dared to show my teeth.

(*Enter* FERDINAND SWIFT, *door* R.)

MR. W. Ferdinand, can I believe my eyes? My dear nephew, I thought you were in America.

FER. America twelve days ago—England to-day—this my first call; glad to see you, uncle.

MR. W. And I'm glad to see you, my boy. (*They shake hands heartily.*) But why have you returned so soon, Ferdinand? I thought you would remain in America until you had made your mark.

FER. My dear uncle, I *have* made it. If marks were now, as they were once, the current coin of the realm, you'd find I'd made a considerable number.

MR. W. My dear boy, I'm very glad to hear it. I always said you would do well. Tell me all about it.

(*Enter WALTER LITHERLAND, door R.*)

WALTER. Mr. Watmuff, might I crave one moment?—(*seeing SWIFT*)—Oh! I beg your pardon, sir; I see you are engaged.

MR. W. Not at all, not at all. Ferdinand, you must let me introduce to you my friend, Walter Litherland. Walter, this is my nephew, Ferdinand Swift, just returned from America, having made his fortune.

WALTER. I am very glad to hear it. I must congratulate you, sir.

FER. Not at all. Very glad, indeed, to know you. Friend of the family, must, of course, be a friend of mine.

MR. W. Quite right, quite right. I must tell you, Ferdinand, that Walter is attached to Emily.

FER. Very sensible man. Very pleasant and appropriate thing, I should say.

WALTER. You are very good. I wish that all the members of your family were of the same opinion.

FER. What! you don't mean to say that my venerable uncle (*all seated*)—

WALTER. Mr. Watmuff is kindness itself; but I regret to say that your aunt—

FER. Not a word, Walter, not a word. I very much regret that she *is* my aunt; I've regretted it for years; but I've lived her down, and you must live her down. She's one of those women that want living down.

MR. W. But you were going to tell me about your fortune, Ferdinand.

WALTER. Perhaps Mr. Swift would like me to withdraw—

FER. Not at all; not in the least. You're one of the family, and as I shall leave all my money *to* the family, you may as well hear about it. Have a cigar? (*Offers cigar-case to LITHERLAND.*)

WALTER (*taking one*). Thank you.

FER. Uncle?

MR. W. (*taking one*). Thanks, Ferdinand; yes, I—(*MRS. WATMUFF'S voice heard without: "What ho! there, Emily! Come hither, girl."* MR. WATMUFF *drops his cigar.*) My dear Ferdinand, I forgot your aunt, She does not like the smell of smoke. In fact, if you don't mind, I think we had better not smoke at present.

FER. Certainly not. My aunt, is, after all, one of the family, and by another member of it family prejudices ought to be observed.

MR. W. (*relieved*). What a good fellow you are, Ferdinand! You deserve a fortune. Now tell us how you have made it.

WALTER. You have made me very curious, sir; for a fortune is just the thing which I want to make.

FER. My dear sir, it is merely a question of time and tact, and the greater the tact the less need for time. Mine is a pure case of tact.

WALTER. I trust the fortune is intact.

FER. Well, no, it isn't; because it is what you may call *in futuro*. It's got to be made yet; but in more ways than one it's a dead certainty.

MR. W. (*who during this conversation keeps on pinching his cigar, smelling it, and otherwise indicating how he would like to smoke it*). It isn't anything to do with mausoleums, is it?

FER. Mausoleums? No. What put that into your head?

MR. W. I thought, perhaps, your aunt, finding me too much for herself, might have determined to float me into a company, and had put you on to promote me. All right. Go on, Ferdinand.

(*Business with cigar. MR. WATMUFF is about to light it, when MRS. WATMUFF speaks outside. He burns his mouth, etc., ad lib.*)

FER. Well, I've made an important discovery.

MR. W. Bravo, Ferdinand!



WALTER. An inventor? Sir, I congratulate you.

FER. Well, perhaps I ought to say that I've made an important discovery that another fellow has made an important discovery. All the States are wild about it; and, as he was an intimate friend of mine, and always said he would like to do me a good turn, I, without bothering him about it, noted down the particulars and came over to England to introduce it as *my* discovery.

WALTER. How will he like that?

FER. Probably not at all. But inventors and discoverers are proverbially discontented and disappointed men, and he mustn't fight with destiny.

MR. W. But what is it?

FER. Frost.

MR. W. and WALTER. Frost?

FER. Exactly. Frost. Frost applied to freezing. Of course you know that a lot of American meat is now shipped to England. Much cheaper meat than English meat, and, consequently, big fortunes to be made out of the process. But it isn't altogether satisfactory, because it's difficult to preserve the meat during the voyage. Goes bad, you know; gets high, and that sort of thing.

WALTER. High in price, do you mean?

FER. Well, a little bit in that way, perhaps; but decidedly high in another. Very good. To the speculative American mind it becomes, therefore, a matter for conjecture, how is such evil to be overcome? An American with more than usually speculative and powerful mind gets over the difficulty. Frost.

MR. W. Frost?

FER. Frost. Liquid discovered which, injected into the ear of animal, freezes him *pro tem.*, and suspends the beggars animation for as long as you please. Freeze and suspend your animal in America,—unfreeze him in England by simple process of another liquid, and a warm bath,—he lives again,—you kill him,—and get fresh meat. Important to every man who keeps horse, cow, sheep, or pig,—*vide* advertisement of company, whose motto is, "Not lost, but gone before."

WALTER. That hardly strikes me as appropriate, because under the old system the meat usually was "gone" before—<sup>(All rise.)</sup>

FER. Before reaching destination. Good. Motto must be altered.

MR. W. But, Ferdinand, surely you are not going into the meat trade?

FER. Certainly not. Mark the small mind. Can't see further than the bare facts stated in preliminary prospectus. My view is to adapt the discovery to the human being.

MR. W. Impossible! And what would be the good of it?

FER. (*taking their arms and walking up and down*). Quite possible, and the good of it simply incalculable. Father of family finds things bad,—freezes, or suspends animation of family, and puts them on shelves until times mend. Man thinks he ought to give up horses, but doesn't like to sell old favorites,—freezes, or suspends their animation till price of hay and corn comes down, and things generally go up. Man has wife who makes things unpleasant at home,—freezes or suspends his animation till she comes round.

WALTER. There is hardly novelty in that notion. Men before now have, under such circumstances, suspended themselves.

FER. With a rope. Yes. But how much better is my plan! A few drops of this colorless liquid (*producing bottle*) injected into lobe of ear of patient will freeze, or suspend animation of patient, during will of practitioner. Remedy, few drops of another liquid injected into lobe of other ear, and warm bath.

MR. W. Upon my soul, it's a grand idea.

WALTER. The great difficulty which you will have to deal with will be to get some one to submit himself to the experiment.

FER. Walter, you're a sharp fellow. You've hit the right nail on the head. That *is* the difficulty. It is really astounding how blind and how selfish people are in advancing the interests of science. In the States they can't get a soul to try it, and they've got to wait for the first felon.

MR. W. The first felon?

FER. Yes. First man condemned to death, you know. Then they'll give him his choice—suspend his animation either by rope or patent freezing mixture. If he recovers from the latter, give him his life and liberty.

WALTER. Then you admit that there is a certain amount of risk attached to the experiment?

FER. I admit nothing of the sort. There isn't the least risk.

WALTER. Then why do not *you* submit yourself to the ordeal?

FER. Damme, sir, don't you understand that as the proprietor of the patent I couldn't safely show any one how to bring me to life again? There's only one man could do it, and that's the American inventor; and he's such a devilish grasping fellow that when he hears I've brought the thing over here without consulting him, he'd be capable of keeping me suspended indefinitely.

MR. W. Then how do you mean to proceed?

FER. Oh! look out for a felon. England is the best field for that sort of thing, and that's why I came over here. I'm not going to ask any more private individuals. I'm sick of it, and won't give myself the pain of receiving any more refusals. I confess I've buoyed myself up with the hope that I should find a felon in my own family, which would make things easy and pleasant for me. Is there one, uncle? I said good-by to a lot of cousins who promised well in that direction.

MR. W. No, Ferdinand, there isn't one.

FER. Hard lines, because there must be one soon.

WALTER. But, failing a felon, what shall you do?

FER. I see only one course open—I must marry, and freeze my wife.

WALTER. You would have sufficient confidence in the project, sir, to try the experiment on your wife?

FER. Damme, sir, that's my difficulty. I should have to bring her round again to prove the success of the discovery; and I've a perfect horror of matrimony.

MR. W. Upon my soul, you know, this strikes me as being exceedingly interesting, and I really think that some one ought, in the cause of humanity, to come forward and submit himself to the experiment.

FER. My dear uncle, you charm me. You evidently mean to place yourself in the light of the felon of the family whom I hoped to find; and, considering that you are not a felon, I really take it very kindly. When shall I inject—

MR. W. No, no, Ferdinand; don't misunderstand me. As a man, and as a father, I don't feel justified in suspending my animation even for a minute. No one knows what might happen during that minute; it might be necessary to realize an investment, or to indorse a check, or,—in fact, I couldn't forgive myself if anything went wrong while I was indulging in the mere gratification of a whim. But it has struck me that your aunt—

FER. My aunt! We couldn't hit on a better subject. I should inject my fluid into the lobe of the right ear; I should light a cigar, and, by the time the cigar was finished, I should think of injecting the other fluid into the lobe of the left ear, and of resuscitating the patient.

MR. W. (*excitedly*). Oh, you would light a cigar, would you?

FER. Well, yes, I think so.

MR. W. And naturally you would ask me to smoke with you?

FER. Well, yes, naturally.

MR. W. (*earnestly*). Ferdinand, do you like a glass of good wine with a cigar?

FER. Well, naturally, yes.

MR. W. Ferdinand, I feel that it is my duty to help you in this worthy enterprise. I have explained why I cannot myself become a subject for your experiments; but I do think that your aunt—

FER. My dear uncle, do you think you could induce her—

MR. W. For Heaven's sake, do not talk of inducement, or you will spoil all. I say advisedly *all*. It must be done by compulsion, or say rather, tact.

FER. Certainly, uncle, say rather, tact. Only tell me how to show tact.

MR. W. (*hurriedly*). Listen. Your aunt has lately, to do her justice, suffered from neuralgia. In common with the majority of her sex, she is willing to try any absurd remedy which is suggested to her. Tell her that a drop of your fluid injected into the lobe of the right ear will cure neuralgia, and she will take it like a lamb.

FER. Best of uncles, this is glorious. How shall I thank you?

MR. W. I only make *one* condition.

FER. And that is?

MR. W. Don't unsuspend her until the smell of our—I mean *your* cigar, has passed off.

FER. I give you my word.

MR. W. And remember, I am only induced to make this temporary sacrifice of my own happiness in the interests of science.

FER. And of your nephew?

MR. W. Ferdinand, I promised your mother that I would always do what I could to further your interests. Let us go and find my wife.

(*Exeunt FERDINAND and MR. WATMUFF, door R.*)

WALTER. That seems to be a very enterprising and pushing young gentleman, and one likely to make his way in the world. But what a shocking old villain my future father-in-law turns out to be! He really seems to relish the idea of performing this awful experiment on his unfortunate wife. She may be a trying woman, but she doesn't deserve to run such a risk as this. Now what am I to do? Clearly I can't be an accomplice in a thing of this sort. Freezing my mother-in-law! And equally clearly I must put a stop to it; but the difficulty is, how am I to do it without offending old Mr. Watmuff, who is my only friend in the house? (*Notices that SWIFT has left his bottle on table.*) Ah! an idea strikes me; if I could only have a moment with Mrs. Watmuff I might tell her, and so ingratiate myself with her.

(*Enter MRS. WATMUFF, door L.*)

MRS. W. Still here, sir? Was not my mandate sufficiently clear to you?

WALTER. My dear Mrs. Watmuff, I am indeed lucky thus to meet you at this moment, and we may both be thankful that I did not leave the house when you told me.

MRS. W. How, sir? I do not comprehend you. You speak in parables.

WALTER. I speak in great haste, madam, and I beg of you to listen to me. Every moment is of vital importance, and I do not hesitate to say that your life may depend on hearing me.

MRS. W. My life, sir? I do not dread death, young man. My parents dreaded it not. It came, and they accepted it; and so in due season shall I accept it.

WALTER. But, Mrs. Watmuff, it may come to you in very undue season. To be brief with you, I have discovered that at this very moment, in this very house, a horrible plot is being concocted which may cost you your life.

MRS. W. A plot! How say you? And who, then, are the conspirators?

WALTER. You have a nephew named Ferdinand Swift—

MRS. W. A hare-brained adventurer. He is in the other hemisphere.

WALTER. He has returned, and is in this house. He has brought with him some wild American invention with which he proposes to make his fortune. Do you see this bottle?

MRS. W. I observe a phial, sir.

WALTER. This bottle contains a fluid which will, so says your nephew, if injected into the ear, freeze or suspend the animation of the subject so operated on, until another fluid, injected into the other ear, restores life. The difficulty is to persuade any one to submit himself to so hazardous an experiment; but he has so excited the curiosity of Mr. Watmuff, that he has consented that *you* should be subjected—

MRS. W. *He* has consented? I gather, sir, that my consent would also be necessary.

WALTER. Here comes the base part of it. You are not to be told. Swift is to suggest that you should use his precious fluid as a remedy for neuralgia. For Heaven's sake, refuse to use it, for any one who does would do so at the peril of his life. Good-by, madam. I believe that my warning is a timely one, and I am thankful to be the means of rendering you this small service.

(*Exit door, R., WALTER LITHERLAND, who immediately returns and hides behind screen, unnoticed by MRS. WATMUFF.*)

MRS. W. A timely warning, truly! I feel as one in a trance. I have long doubted the fidelity of Mr. Watmuff,—I have long understood the duplicity of his character,—but I had not thought him capable of such vile machinations as these. Cold-blooded miscreants!—they would suspend my animation, would they? Oh, Mr. Watmuff, you must be read a bitter lesson for this. It will be hard for me to take a part in a masquerade, but the memory of my parents demands this *immortelle* from me. (*Takes up the bottle, empties it of its contents, and fills it up from a bottle of water which is on table.*) Yes, I will affect to be deceived by your blandishments, and you shall think

that you have succeeded in your most vile purpose. Shades of my parents, hover near me, and protect your daughter in the Juliet-like ordeal through which she is about to pass!

(*Enter MR. WATMUFF and FERDINAND SWIFT, door R.*)

MR. W. Oh, there you are, my dear. I've been looking for you everywhere. I wanted to tell you Ferdinand Swift had unexpectedly arrived in England.

FER. And I need hardly say, my dear aunt, that my first desire was to come and pay my respects to you.

MRS. W. You are welcome, nephew.

MR. W. I think you'll say that again, my dear, when you hear of what Ferdinand has brought with him. You must know that he is the bearer to England of, and is about to introduce to this country, a most extraordinary remedy—for what do you think?

MRS. W. How should I hazard a conjecture, Mr. Watmuff?

MR. W. For neuralgia! There! isn't that good news?

MRS. W. It would, indeed, be a boon, could some efficacious specific be found to war with that most terrible disorder.

FER. My dear aunt, it has been found. It may seem a curious thing to say, but, when I inquired after your health—which, of course, I did the moment I came into the house—and my uncle told me that you suffered from neuralgia, I was positively *glad* to know that I could be the happy means of at once and permanently relieving you from all pain.

MRS. W. If what you say is true, nephew, you will be a benefactor to suffering humanity. You should deem yourself very fortunate to be such an instrument.

FER. My dear aunt, I do think myself fortunate. To be running about from morning to night, as I am, continually relieving my fellow creatures from the excruciating pangs of neuralgia, makes life one long summer's day of happiness. It makes me so light-hearted that I'm always singing, or humming, or whistling, and so I'm known among my friends as the musical instrument.

MRS. W. And what, may I ask, is your remedy?

FER. The simplest thing in the world. You take—(*feeling in his pocket for bottle*)—Hullo! By Jove! —(*seeing bottle on table*)—Ah! yes, to be sure, I left it here. You take two or three drops of this colorless fluid, make the smallest of punctures in the lobe of the right ear, inject it, and the pain goes as if by magic. If you are suffering now, aunt—

MRS. W. I am always suffering.

FER. Then let me try.

MR. W. Yes, my dear. Let Ferdinand try.

MRS. W. It is your *wish* that I should do so, Mr. Watmuff?

MR. W. My dear, of course it is. I would give anything to see you free from pain.

MRS. W. It is enough; my husband's wish is law to me. (To FERDINAND.) Apply your remedy, sir.

FER. With pleasure. (*Brings down large easy-chair.*)

WALTER (*aside, appearing from behind screen at back*). I am glad I made up my mind to see through this. Upon my soul, I'm beginning to admire Mrs. Watmuff. What ruffians these men are!

FER. Now, my dear aunt, sit in this chair, and lean back. You will soon be free from pain.

MR. W. Yes, my love, do just as Ferdinand tells you, and you will soon be free from pain.

FER. (*operating*). All that you will feel is one sharp prick in the lobe of the ear,—there,—I haven't even drawn blood. Now for the bottle.

(*As the water is applied, MRS. WATMUFF becomes gradually stiff and rigid; finally her eyes close, her hands drop, and she appears to be lifeless.*)

FER. Pretty process, isn't it?

MR. W. Beautiful! How calm she is! I never saw her calmer.

FER. No; and I don't suppose you ever will again.

MR. W. Ferdinand, I wouldn't have her hear me for the world, but I have an awful time of it with this woman.

FER. I don't doubt you. I've always considered my aunt as the most unpleasant person of my acquaintance. (*Lights a cigar.*) Smoke, uncle?

MR. W. Thanks, Ferdinand. (*Lights cigar.*) Ah! That's real enjoyment. That's the first cigar I've smoked since I married your aunt. She never would let me. Would it bring her to if I blew some smoke in her face, Ferdinand?

FER. Not at all. Only the infallible mixture will restore her.

MR. W. (*blows smoke of cigar into MRS. WATMUFF'S face*). There! There! There! There! That's done me a lot of good, Ferdinand, and now we'll have a glass of wine. (*Puts his hand into MRS. WATMUFF'S pocket and produces key.*) She pocketed the cellar key on our wedding-day, Ferdinand, and has kept it ever since; but, by Gad, I'll have a duplicate made now.

FER. Quite right; but before you get the wine, let's put the old woman away somewhere. In the first place, she isn't a pleasant sight; and, in the second place, if any one came in they might be startled. Where shall she go?

MR. W. (*pointing to cupboard*). I should like to put her in the coal-hole. Would that cupboard do?

FER. The very thing. Lend me a hand with her. You must do this part of the business carefully,—that's the one objection to the process. A frozen body like this would break to pieces if you dropped it, and you don't want that.

MR. W. I don't see why I shouldn't—she's often boasted of having broken me.

(*They carry MRS. WATMUFF into cupboard, and close the door on her.*)

MR. W. And now come, Ferdinand, and give me a light in the cellar.

(*Exit FERDINAND SWIFT and MR. WATMUFF, door R.*)

MRS. W. (*appearing at door of cupboard*). Varlets! Varlets! I say. Oh, that the spirits of my parents should witness this day! For some wives it is ordained that their husbands shall, so to speak, fly in their faces,—my most miserable husband has *smoked* in mine! Bitterly shall he rue it. My thanks are indeed due to that worthy young man, whom I fear I have misjudged, who apprised me of my danger; otherwise I might now be a stark and frozen body. By keeping open the door of this cupboard I can hear all that goes on, and I shall be an interested witness of the junketings which will now take place. (*Retires into cupboard.*)

WALTER (*appearing cautiously from behind screen*). Fortune favors me. This is glorious! She already thinks she has misjudged me. Emily, my darling, I foresee that you will be mine. (*Crosses and goes off, door L.*)

(*Enter, door R., MR. WATMUFF, and FERDINAND SWIFT, each carrying a decanter of wine; both are smoking.*)

MR. W. Aha! The coast is clear.

FER. (*filling a glass of wine and "eying" it*). And so is the wine. (*Drinks.*)

MR. W. Put the bottles on this table, Ferdinand, and bring two chairs. Now we will try and make the best of things until we have your dear aunt with us again. (*Drinks.*) It *is* a good glass of wine,—isn't it, Ferdinand?

FER. Excellent. Does every credit to your judgment.

MR. W. Ah! you were almost a baby when I laid it down, Ferdinand, and it's never been disturbed. I can assure you, my dear boy, I've passed whole days in picturing to myself its condition, and wondering who would be lucky enough to drink it. This is really a wonderful discovery of yours. You see, your aunt—

FER. Oh, I know. Have another cigar?

MR. W. Thank you, Ferdinand, I don't mind if I do. It's a sin to smoke with such good wine as this; but, you see, I must make hay while the sun shines. The fact is, your aunt—

FER. Don't speak of it, uncle—don't speak of it. I quite understand it; but, after all, you're not the only man with a skeleton in the cupboard.

MR. W. A skeleton! Aha! If she only was, Ferdinand—if she only was. (*Drinks another glass of wine.*)

FER. My dear uncle, if you talk in that wild and heartless way I shall begin to think that you take quite another view of the objects of my experiment. (*Drinks.*)

MR. W. Not at all, not at all; but I must confess that it's pleasant to have things quiet like this. (*Drinks.*)

FER. It's quite evident you appreciate it. Well, I must say your tone rather relieves me. I am delighted with the success of the first part of my experiment. She went off beautifully. Now if the second part should go wrong, and I don't succeed in pulling her together again, I can see you

won't so much mind.

MR. W. My dear Ferdinand, don't speak in that horrible way. Surely, you have no doubts?

FER. Well, of course, I'm like all experimentalists; I may fail. You'll please to bear in mind that I was very particular in getting your consent before I made the venture.

MR. W. Venture! Fail! What do you mean? I certainly gave my consent, but you said it was a "dead" certainty.

FER. And so it will be, in one way or the other, a dead certainty.

MR. W. Great Heaven! Then do you mean to tell me that you think it possible that you may be unable to thaw my wife?

FER. Well, yes, it's on the cards.

MR. W. You're very cool over it.

FER. So's she; that's the beauty of the system.

MR. W. But what shall I do?

FER. Keep her frozen, and finish your wine. Bless your soul, uncle, I'll see you through it.

MR. W. Yes, yes, Ferdinand, you will, I am sure of it. If there should be any trouble, you'll see me through it.

FER. Oh, I didn't mean that—I meant I'd see you through your wine. Your health, uncle. (*Drinks.*)

MR. W. Ferdinand, in Heaven's name, do not trifle with such a subject as this. Have you reflected what, if anything happened to your aunt, *I* should be?

FER. The very man I want—the first felon. I should immediately apply to the State for permission to continue my researches.

MR. W. Ferdinand, for pity's sake, keep me in suspense no longer. Produce your remedy. Where, oh, where is your antidote?

FER. (*mockingly*). Where, oh, where is my doting aunty? Ha! ha! pretty play upon words, isn't it? Have another glass of wine. (*Drinks.*)

MR. W. No more wine for me. I have drunk my last glass of wine, and I have smoked my last cigar. Never did I anticipate such horrors as now consume me. Ferdinand, if you have any pity for an old man—

FER. My dear uncle, I can see I'm going too far. You shouldn't give me such good wine, and so develop my propensities for practical joking. We'll thaw the old woman at once.

MR. W. My dear boy, how you relieve me! Yes, at once—at once. Never mind the smell of smoke and the decanters. Compared to my present feelings, her abuse will be a perfect treat.

FER. (*feeling his pockets*). Hullo!

MR. W. What's the matter?

FER. Well, don't be alarmed; but I seem to have mislaid the other bottle.

MR. W. Not the antidote?

FER. Well, yes. Don't agitate yourself; but I can't find it.

MR. W. For God's sake, Ferdinand, keep yourself cool, and think. My unfortunate wife's life, and for the matter of that mine, depends upon you. Think; where have you put it?

FER. I don't know. Of course I thought I put it in my pocket; but it isn't there.

MR. W. Miserable young man! what have you done? Where is it?

FER. Well, if I haven't left it at the hotel where I stayed last night—

MR. W. Yes; if you haven't left it there?

FER. Why, I must have left it in America.

MR. W. In America? Then all is lost.

FER. No, it isn't. Now calm yourself, uncle. I must confess that I've got you into a bit of a mess, but it's all in the interests of science, you know. I'll go to the hotel at once, and try and find my bottle. If it isn't there, I'll give up all my prospects in England, and travel to America as quickly as I can, and come back as quickly as I can, with another bottle.

MR. W. And in the mean time, what am I to do?

FER. Oh, your duty is quite clear. You must take care of the body. And I'd advise you to be devilish cautious that no one catches sight of it. Who can tell how you might be misunderstood?

MR. W. Ferdinand, you are driving me mad. Do you mean to say that while you are taking a journey to America and returning, I am to remain here keeping guard over your poor aunt's body?

FER. My dear uncle, be a philosopher. As you very properly said just now, there is a skeleton in every man's cupboard.

MR. W. Damme, sir, yes. I've had a skeleton long enough, and I've done my best to bear it—but I never expected my cupboard to contain a frozen wife, and under the circumstances I don't know how to conduct myself.

FER. Be a man,—and finish the port.

MR. W. But how am I to explain her absence to other people?

FER. Confound it, uncle, you've no imagination. Say she's gone out for a walk.

MR. W. And supposing your ship is wrecked, and you and your d—d bottle go to the bottom?

FER. In that case, uncle, I can only wish you well; and, believe me, I will do so. I won't worry you any more now, for your hands are full, and you will like to be left alone to form your own plans. Farewell. If I'm not back with the bottle in ten minutes, think of me on my way to America.

(*Exit FERDINAND SWIFT, door R.*)

MR. W. What a heartless ruffian! How easily he takes it all, and how little he feels for me! How different are our lots! He goes to America: I have to remain here—here, in this awful house, with this dread mystery locked up in a cupboard. If anything happens, it is he who is guilty, and not I; and yet I dare not interfere with his departure, for my only chance depends upon his safe return with the antidote. And how am I to pass the time until he does return? What schemes must I not invent to Emily and the servants to account for the prolonged absence of Mrs. Watmuff! How am I to explain away the continually locked cupboard? There can be no earthly chance for me. Mrs. Watmuff will be missed—will be searched for—will be found—and long before that wretched nephew of mine returns with her restorative, she will be in her grave, and I shall have been hung as her murderer. As these and a thousand other horrible results of my mad act rush through my disordered mind, my brain is on fire, and I feel that I am going mad. One chance, and one only, remains to me. Ferdinand *may* find the remedy at his hotel: if so, he and my poor wronged wife will want a warm bath. Thank goodness, there is one thing that I can do. I will go and see that the water is hot. (*Exit MR. WATMUFF, door R.*)

(*MRS. WATMUFF appears at door of cupboard.*)

MRS. W. Poor conscience-stricken imbecile! Oh! my parents, what must you not have thought during the last half-hour! Teach me in the future how to deal with this most miserable and misguided of men.

(*WALTER LITHERLAND and EMILY enter door L., talking.*)

WALTER. Yes, Emily, I must say farewell.

MRS. W. (*aside*). How! He here again? Now can I learn the real sentiments of these young people. I do not forget the timely warning of the young man, and shall be glad to find that he has been misjudged. My parents, I thank you for the opportunity thus vouchsafed me.

(*MRS. WATMUFF retires into the cupboard.*)

WALTER (*aside to EMILY*). It's all right; she's still there; I heard her. (*Aloud.*) Let us sit, dearest (*places two chairs close to cupboard*), and I will explain to you all that I mean—all that I feel.

EMILY. Walter, I will do so, because I know that our parting is at hand; otherwise, after my dear mother's expressed wish that we should see each other no more, I could not have consented to converse alone with you.

WALTER. Your tender allusion to your mother, Emily, makes my task a comparatively easy one. I confess that my object in seeking this interview was that I might, tenderly and devotedly, bid you farewell.

EMILY. I knew it. Something in your manner, Walter, told me that it was to be so; and though my heart will break at our parting, I shall know that it is only some wise purpose which induces you to leave me.

WALTER. Emily, it is right that I should tell you all. You have alluded to your mother. You know that in the first delirium of my love for you I was inclined—God forgive me!—to resent the manifest objections which that honored lady showed towards my pretensions. Hot-headed fool that I was, Emily, I cruelly misjudged her. I thought that her objections were mere prejudices.

Circumstances have since come to my knowledge which have convinced me that—though we cannot yet quite see why—she is right, and that, distress us as it may, we are in duty bound to bow before her greater experience, and to yield to her wisely dispensed commands.

EMILY. Walter, an inward voice tells me that you are right. Without asking why, we ought to acquiesce in her views. Sometimes I fear that my poor mother's life is not so happy as it should be.

WALTER. Indeed it is not. Your father—but no, I can at least spare you the pain of that sad story. We are both familiar with your dear mother's loving and tender allusions to the memory of her parents. May you, in years to come, enjoy the same proud privilege! May I, when old and gray-headed, at least be able to think that I left my Emily in that luxury, a lifelong legacy! And now, my dearest, I shall kiss you once, and bid you a last good-by.

EMILY. No, Walter; you will not kiss me. At such a season as this, when we have agreed to part, such an act would be on your part unmanly, on mine unmaidenly. I will open the street door for you; more I cannot do.

*(Exeunt WALTER and EMILY, door L. MRS. WATMUFF again appears at door of cupboard.)*

MRS. W. Oh, most excellent young man! Oh, most dutiful of daughters! You have indeed earned the blessing of your mother, and straightway you shall have it. I will to them, and delay his departure. *(Exit MRS. WATMUFF, door L.)*

*(Enter MR. WATMUFF, door R., carrying two cans of hot water.)*

MR. W. I thought it would never boil, and yet *I* was boiling over all the time. Oh, what a hideous time this is! But I have made up my mind. I can bear this no longer; and, antidote or no antidote, I shall try and thaw the poor thing with hot water. My poor darling! *(Opens cupboard door and finds it empty. He sinks with a shriek into the nearest chair.)* Oh, horror! horror! horror! The body has been discovered and removed. All is over now—I am indeed undone!

*(Enter FERDINAND SWIFT, door R.)*

FER. Undone? Not a bit of it. Overdone, I should say, from the look of you. Don't be an old lunatic. Pull yourself together. Look here—*(shaking him)*—it's all right; I've found my other bottle; here it is. She'll be herself again in a few minutes.

MR. W. She won't, Ferdinand; it's all over. The body has been discovered and removed.

FER. *(having rushed to cupboard and inspected it)*. Good gracious! This is most serious. What infernal carelessness! Who did it? and who allowed it to be done? Do you know, you demented old ass, that in that state, my poor aunt was as brittle as glass; and if she's been dropped, or even knocked up against anything, or, for the matter of that, even jolted, she would break into ten thousand pieces! Who's to blame for this, I should, like to know?

MR. W. *(with a groan)*. I know, Ferdinand, *I* am. I am what you came to England to look out for, the first felon. Freeze me as quickly as you can, and if you have any sympathy for me, keep me frozen.

*(Enter, door L., MRS. WATMUFF, WALTER, and EMILY. MRS. WATMUFF is walking between them, and has an arm round the waist of each.)*

FER. Hullo! Here *is* the body! Now, who on earth has done this?

MR. W. My wife, alive and well! Aha! Aha! Oh, joy! joy! joy!

FER. Well, upon my soul, it takes very little to make you happy. What I want to know is—

MRS. W. Peace, assassin; and you *(to MR. WATMUFF)*, malefactor, peace, I say.

FER. No, but hang it, this is a serious matter to me. It's a direct infringement on my patent. That's what it is. Who brought you round? Sentiment is sentiment,—but damme, justice is justice; and I mean to know who brought you round, and then prosecute him.

MRS. W. Silence, miscreant. I have not, as you put it, been brought round, because, your vile scheme having been frustrated, I was never rendered insensible. The liquid in your life-destroying phial, Ferdinand Swift, was cast away by these hands, and pure and innocent water took its place.

FER. Then you never were frozen?

MRS. W. Only so far as genuine horror can freeze.

FER. But you went off?

MRS. W. It was a masquerade—

MR. W. What! Do you mean to say that you were sensible all the time that—



MRS. W. I was conscious during the entire period. I was conscious, Mr. Watmuff, when you were gloating and exulting over what you believed to be my lifeless body.

MR. W. (*sinks in chair, and buries his face in his hands*). Oh, don't! Spare me! spare me!

MRS. W. I was conscious, Mr. Watmuff, when you abstracted from my pocket the key of the cellar.

MR. W. (*groaning*). Oh, don't! don't!

MRS. W. I heard you, Mr. Watmuff, express your determination to possess yourself of a duplicate to that key. (MR. WATMUFF *groans*.) I heard you descend to the wine vaults, and was conscious of your return with beakers and flagons containing wine. (MR. WATMUFF *groans*.) I was conscious of the vile odor of tobacco pervading these rooms, which hitherto I had kept free from such pollution; and, mark this well, Mr. Watmuff, I was more than conscious *when the smoke from your cigar, ejected from your lips, designedly suffused my countenance*.

MR. W. Oh, this is too much! Ferdinand, do me a kindness. You are on the look-out for some one who does not object to be frozen. In the interests of science, I'm quite prepared to immolate myself. Freeze me, and I'll bless you as long as you keep me frozen.

MRS. W. (*approaching EMILY and WALTER*). Lastly, I was conscious when these dear ones (*embraces them*) revealed themselves to me in their true colors, and I learned that it was consistent with my duty to my parents to give them my blessing.

EMILY. I need not tell you, papa, how happy this makes me.

MR. W. I'm very glad, my dear, to know that one member of the family is likely to be happy. Now, Ferdinand, I'm quite ready. Freeze me.

FER. With pleasure. You will feel one sharp prick in the lobe—

MRS. W. Hold, hateful trifler with the sacred laws of nature! Is such a man as that *fit* to be frozen? I will freeze you when we are alone, sir! Ah, sad it is, when the old must be taught by the young, and that the daughter's lot should be happier than the mother's! (*To EMILY*.) And yet, my child, I do not grudge you your happiness, and am glad at heart to think that you will have a husband who declined to take part in the diabolical scheme for Freezing his Mother-in-Law.

CURTAIN.

\*\*\* END OF THE PROJECT GUTENBERG EBOOK FREEZING A MOTHER-IN-LAW; OR,  
SUSPENDED ANIMATION: A FARCE IN ONE ACT \*\*\*

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