

**Scoundrels &
Stratagems**
Or, Virtue Rewarded

A melodrama in one act
Written by Ron Nicol

Spotlight Publications

Scoundrels & Stratagems
or **Virtue Rewarded**

CAST (in order of speaking)

Lady Pinchbeck A fast fading lady of the old school, accustomed to giving orders and standing for no insubordination.

Lamprey Lady Pinchbeck's housekeeper, any age. A sinister creature dressed in black. A deferential manner with a hint of insolence and a touch of menace.

Squire Buzzard Lord of the manor. Tall, dark and ugly, with a dark and ugly moustache which he frequently twirls, and a superior and overbearing manner. He pronounces his name B'zard, but everybody calls him Buzzard.

Prudence Lady Pinchbeck's step-daughter. The heroine.

Quickly Police Sergeant. Honest and shrewd, with a keen sense of justice and a nose for wrongdoing.

Gerald Squire Buzzard's estate manager. The gallant hero.

Gosling Lady Pinchbeck's companion. Enthusiastic and easily confused.

Charity Lady Pinchbeck's niece. The innocent heiress.

Muggins Police Constable. Well meaning and eager to please.

Setting: As elaborate or as simple as desired. Can be given the 'big treatment' or performed on a bare stage with a curtain fit-up, so is well within the scope of companies with limited resources.

Period: Victorian

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The play should be performed in melodramatic style. Exaggerated characterisation and extravagant gestures should be used, with every opportunity being taken for impassioned declamation

Music plays as the curtain rises, and dim lighting with plenty of shadow is brought up. An easel with the sign 'Pinchbeck Hall' on it stands in a DS corner. Lamprey enters and withdraws into the shadows as Charity enters, skips across stage and exits. Lamprey starts to come DS, then retreats as Prudence enters, reading a letter, crosses the stage and exits. Lamprey starts to come DS, withdrawing again as Gerald enters, looks about, and strides off. The light increases as Lady Pinchbeck enters

Pinchbeck Lamprey! Lamprey!

Lamprey speaks from directly behind Pinchbeck

Lamprey Yes, madam?

Pinchbeck Don't skulk, Lamprey! It's most disturbing.

Lamprey You called me, madam.

Pinchbeck I didn't call you madam, I called you Lamprey.

Lamprey Why?

Pinchbeck Because that's your name.

Lamprey I mean, why did you call me?

Pinchbeck I wish you to bring the chair, Lamprey.

Lamprey *The chair, madam?*

Pinchbeck Yes, Lamprey. *The chair.*

Lamprey Very well, madam. I go.

Lamprey exits. Pinchbeck fusses with her hair and clothing

Pinchbeck I have someone of the greatest importance coming to see me. It's imperative that I appear at my best.

Lamprey, carrying a chair, appears soundlessly behind Pinchbeck

Lamprey I have returned.

Pinchbeck Don't sneak up behind me, Lamprey! What is it?

Lamprey It's a chair, madam. I'm surprised you didn't recognise it as such.

Pinchbeck That will do, Lamprey! Place it there.

With exaggerated care, Lamprey places the chair exactly where Pinchbeck is pointing

Now, I don't wish to be disturbed. Do you understand?

Lamprey Does that include sneaking up behind you, madam?

Pinchbeck I warn you, Lamprey, you're treading on thin ice -

Lamprey But it's the middle of summer, madam -

Pinchbeck Look here, Lamprey! I don't want to be interrupted! Just see to it!

Lamprey As you say, madam. By the by, Squire Buzzard is here.

Pinchbeck Why didn't you tell me before? Show him in.

Lamprey Very well, madam. I go.

Lamprey exits. Pinchbeck composes herself, and after a moment Squire Buzzard enters grandly and the lighting increases to full. Lamprey lurks in the background, listening

Pinchbeck Ah! Squire! How good to see you. It's been too long - far too long!

Buzzard It has indeed, dear lady. I trust you're well?

Pinchbeck My constitution has never been better. What can I do for you, dear Squire? Pray be seated.

Buzzard sits in the chair

Buzzard I've a little proposition to put to you, Lady Pinchbeck.

Pinchbeck How delightful! I haven't been propositioned for such a long while. Come into my parlour, where we can talk in complete privacy.

She takes five precise steps across the stage. Lamprey steps forward, changes the sign to read 'The Parlour', and retreats into the shadows. Buzzard, taken aback by Lamprey's appearance, rises, hesitates, and then brings the chair with him. He places the chair and is about to sit when Pinchbeck sits first

Buzzard My dear Lady Pinchbeck...

Pinchbeck Yes, my dear – I mean, yes, Squire?

Buzzard Don't take this amiss, dear lady, but I've been considering marriage.

Pinchbeck (*rising*) Marriage!

Buzzard Yes. Marriage. To somebody not so very far from here.

Pinchbeck Oh my word!

Buzzard I've been casting my eye about the neighbourhood, and it has lighted upon a suitable - an acceptable - candidate. Someone I've known for quite some time.

He's about to sit on the chair when Pinchbeck sits again, draping her dress and herself artistically, simpering and fluttering her eyelashes

Pinchbeck This is so sudden!

Buzzard We've been neighbours for many years now, though we haven't seen as much of each other as I'd have wished.

Pinchbeck (*gushing*) Likewise, my dear Squire!

Buzzard So - I've been wondering...

Pinchbeck (*rising, breathlessly*) Yes?

Buzzard I'm sure you're aware your step-daughter has become a fine young woman. A fine young woman indeed. Indeed yes! Provision should be made for her future. I've been wondering if it might be acceptable if I were to request the pleasure of her hand in marriage?

Pinchbeck That is your proposition?

Buzzard Indeed. I propose a proposal.

Pinchbeck To Prudence.

Buzzard Yes. I propose to propose to Prudence.

Pinchbeck Not - to me?

Buzzard I wouldn't dream of proposing to you!

He slides into the chair

Pinchbeck I see.

She absentmindedly sits on Buzzard's knee, realises, leaps up, pushes Buzzard off the chair in annoyance and sits. Buzzard is about to react angrily, but controls himself and tries to act as if nothing happened

Buzzard I would, of course, ensure that she'd be kept in the manner to which she's become accustomed. Somewhat better, I think.

Pinchbeck You're aware the lady in question has been casting her glances in quite another direction? Without my permission, of course, but these days young ladies consider their elders and betters need not be consulted before indulging in dalliance. However, were you to advance your claims towards the young lady and manage to prevail against her passionate predilections, I'll do my best to discourage your rival.

Buzzard I'm much indebted to you, Lady Pinchbeck. I'll seek out your delightful step-daughter forthwith, and acquaint her with my inclinations.

He bows and exits. Pinchbeck looks wistfully after him, then turns and holds her hand to her forehead in a gesture of despair

Pinchbeck For a moment I almost dared to think... *(She presses her hand to her heart and sighs)* Be still, my foolish heart, and cease your baleful battering of my abundant and bountiful bosom. But I must cast off dull despair and deliberate upon my destiny. Things are looking up! Prudence will be off to the Manor, and if I can devise some cunning plan for Charity, she too will be off my hands. How wonderful! Lamprey!

Lamprey steps forward directly behind Pinchbeck

Lamprey Here, madam.

Pinchbeck Daah! How many times must I tell you!

Lamprey Many times I fear, madam. I'm a persistent prankster.

Pinchbeck You're the bane of my existence, Lamprey, but much as I detest you, I must make use of you. I'm aware you're acquainted with iniquitous individuals who undertake unsavoury assignments. I wish to contact a creature who would be agreeable to embarking upon a confidential enterprise of great consequence.

Lamprey I know of several who've acquired great notoriety in undertaking such adventures.

Pinchbeck Discover me one, but be cautious, Lamprey. Tell no one.

Lamprey At once, madam. *(Whispers)* I go.

Lamprey exits

Pinchbeck How wonderfully wicked I feel. Prudence will soon be off to the Manor, and Charity will be – well, she'll be off too! How delightful!

She skips with delight, collects herself, and exits sedately

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Plot Summary

Penniless Lady Pinchbeck wants to acquire Charity's inheritance for herself and is conspiring to have her removed from the scene, with the doubtful help of Gosling. Squire Buzzard wants to win the hand of Prudence, but she's in love with Gerald, so Buzzard is plotting to discredit his rival. Lamprey has schemes of her own, which involve the disguised Buzzard masquerading as Charity's kidnapper, and Sergeant Quickly and Constable Muggins become involved when Charity disappears. Suspicion falls on Gerald, until after a great deal of confusion and a lot of hilarity, Prudence takes a hand and everything is resolved, though not to everybody's satisfaction.