

DEFROCKED

A Play in One Act

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CHARACTERS

Chester B. Partlow, a former clergyman

Helen, his wife, a maid of many summers

Annabelle, their lovely daughter

Declan, Annabelle's date for the evening

The play takes place around dusk in the sitting room of the Partlows' aging country manor. The time is the present.

DEFROCKED

(A once-grand sitting room, which years of neglect have turned shabby and dingy. Upon a mantelpiece rest six shiny metal urns, each of them covered with a lid. Sitting alone in the room, drinking steadily, is CHESTER B. PARTLOW. He pours from a bottle of expensive Scotch whisky, which is almost full but will be empty before long. He wears a faded, wrinkled black suit and black collarless shirt, open at the neck. He barely stirs as his wife, HELEN, and daughter, ANNABELLE, breeze into the room, each carrying a parasol.)

HELEN

Such a day! It cannot make up its mind whether to rain!

(They place their parasols by the door.)

ANNABELLE

Oh, I hope the storm holds off until after my special night!

HELEN

You will be the belle of the ball--

ANNABELLE

The princess of the prom!

HELEN

Won't she, Chester?

(No response.)

HELEN

Chester!

CHESTER

What?

HELEN

Doesn't Annabelle look beautiful?

CHESTER

“Beauty, like truth and justice, lives within us; like virtue, and like moral law, it is a companion of the soul.”

ANNABELLE

(Peeved that her father did not compliment her. She pronounces Papa and Mama with the accent always on the second syllable.)

Papa!

HELEN

Oh, hush, Chester!

CHESTER

Is the mail not here yet? Where is that laggard postman? Bring him to me, so I can chastise him for his sloth!

ANNABELLE

I will check, Papa!

(She exits.)

HELEN

Annabelle's date, Declan, will be here soon. Oh, how I wish the cleaning staff had not run off en masse -- again.

CHESTER

Don't fret, Helen. Soon there'll be another war somewhere, and hordes of displaced doctors and scientists will wash ashore, clamoring for the privilege of scrubbing our toilets for seven dollars an hour. Freeing you to do whatever it is you do all day--

HELEN

Whom do you think maintains our estate? Raises our lovely daughter -- tends (looking at the urns) to our family --

(ANNABELLE returns.)

ANNABELLE

A letter for you, Papa!

(CHESTER seizes the letter, rips it open, and scans it. His eager face quickly melts into disbelief, then disgust.)

HELEN

What is it, dearheart?

(CHESTER wordlessly hands the letter to HELEN and sinks back into his chair and bottle.)

HELEN

Quel horror!

ANNABELLE

What is it, Mama?

HELEN

Another lawyer refusing to take your father's case--

ANNABELLE

Which one?

HELEN

The one against the church.

ANNABELLE

Oh, my.

HELEN

This attorney was your father's last hope -- he had just gotten his law license back--

CHESTER

Even the very courts are closed to me! Lady Justice casts an inviting, come-hither look, then cruelly spurns me! But I will not let this erode my mighty spirit! Chester B. Partlow will not be denied! My words will ring out once m--

(HELEN grabs a feather duster and begins lovingly, carefully dusting the urns on the mantelpiece.)

HELEN

Oh, I so wish all of you were alive to see this day, our little flower passing into womanhood!

(ANNABELLE joins her mother at the urns and speaks to them one by one.)

ANNABELLE

I feel as if they are here, Mama! Grandmama ... Grandpapa ... great-uncle Gustave ... great-aunt Katrina ...

HELEN

And my dear brother and sister, Hubert and Hannah -- such memories.

CHESTER

Keep at it, Helen, we wouldn't want young Declan to see dust on our collection of dust.

HELEN

You are in such a mood today!

CHESTER

(To the urns) "Sometimes death is a punishment, often a gift; it has been a favor to many."

ANNABELLE

I suppose it WAS a favor, Papa, since that's how we inherited this estate--

CHESTER

A mausoleum with plumbing!

(There is a knock at the door.)

ANNABELLE

It's Declan!

HELEN

Quick -- hide, for your entrance!

(ANNABELLE scurries behind her father's chair.)

HELEN

Outside of the room, dear!

ANNABELLE

Oh, right!

(ANNABELLE exits. HELEN checks her appearance by her reflection in one of the urns, then goes to the door and opens it.)

HELEN

Good evening!

(Young DECLAN enters, carrying two bouquets of flowers.)

DECLAN

How do you do?

HELEN

Please -- come in!

DECLAN

Thank you. What a lovely room!

HELEN

Thank you. You must be Declan!

DECLAN

And you must be Mrs. Partlow!

(Hands her a bunch of flowers.)

DECLAN

For the lady of the house.

HELEN

Oh, my! It has been so long since a man gave me flowers--

CHESTER

The delivery must have gone astray.

HELEN

My name is Helen -- named after the one whose face launched a thousand ships--

(Hearing this line for the thousandth time, CHESTER groans.)

HELEN

And this is my husband, Chester!

(DECLAN goes to CHESTER and extends his hand.)

DECLAN

Pleased to meet you, sir.

(CHESTER glares at DECLAN, then rises.)

CHESTER

"I know the very difference that lies 'twixt hallowed love and base unholy lust. I know the one is as a golden spur, urging the spirit to all noble aims. The other but a foul and miry pit."

DECLAN

(Nervously) Yes, I've heard that said.

CHESTER

Young man, as God above is my witness, and I am his direct link to this foul Earth, I warn you -- if you in any way violate, or disrespect, or so much as cast an errant glance upon my daughter, I will hunt you down and visit upon you such horrors as would make the centurions of Hell cower in abject terror, do I make myself clear?

DECLAN

Perfectly.

HELEN

A soft drink? Coke? Pepsi--

DECLAN

No, thank you.

HELEN

A -- (now referring to herself as well as the drink) Sprite? (Laughs uproariously at her play on words)

DECLAN

Thank you, I'm not thirsty.

(ANNABELLE enters the room, grandly.)

HELEN

And here she is, the maiden of the hour!

ANNABELLE

Declan!

(DECLAN hands her the other bouquet of flowers.)

DECLAN

For you -- you look -- (about to pay her a lavish compliment, but then casts a wary glance at CHESTER) so nice.

ANNABELLE

You shouldn't have! Mama, please have these watered!

HELEN

Of course! Your father and I were just getting acquainted with this fine young man! He was assuring your father of his good intentions!

ANNABELLE

He will be a perfect gentleman. He will gaze upon the fairness of my face, the luster of my hair, the various and sundry delights of my figure, longingly, lustfully, but always discreetly. His imagination will spin furiously with images of us joined together from lip to hip, but his evening will end as it begins, in a frenzied haze of adolescent frustration. Am I right?

DECLAN

Yes.

HELEN

Declan, dear, where does your family live?

DECLAN

By the forest.

HELEN

And what do they do?

DECLAN

Forestry.

HELEN

How ergonomic! Do you wish to become a forester, too?

DECLAN

No--

ANNABELLE

Declan wants to become a poet!

(A loud snort from CHESTER.)

HELEN

You will fit in like a beautiful silken thread into the glorious fabric of our family! (Looking out the window) Oh, look, there is Fluffy!

DECLAN

Who?

ANNABELLE

Our schnauzer.

HELEN

Frolicking upon the moor! Playing so -- oh -- oh, dear -- what's that in his mouth?

ANNABELLE

A rabbit?

DECLAN

Too small -- is it a cat?

HELEN

Perhaps a ferret.

ANNABELLE

It appears to be alive.

DECLAN

(Brief pause) Well, it was--

HELEN

I hope it lived a good long life--

DECLAN

Reverend Partlow, Annabelle tells me you're a minister. Where is your church?

(HELEN and ANNABELLE are suddenly silent. This was the wrong question for DECLAN to ask. CHESTER begins drinking faster.)

CHESTER

“There is no knife that cuts so sharply and with such poisoned blade as treachery.”

DECLAN

Excuse me?

CHESTER

“The strong are the prey of the weak.”

DECLAN

Huh?

CHESTER

Mocked by my flock ... tossed out like so much flotsam ... my temple defiled by a mob of wanton degenerates ... yea, they can take my collar, rob me of my vestments ... but they cannot deprive me of my pulpit, shall not extinguish my fire ... His will be done! By the grace of God, Chester B. Partlow's voice will echo through every hill and valley--

HELEN

Now, dear, they did give you that lovely gold watch--

CHESTER

To torment me! So I can watch the hours of my life melt away in the shadow of your accursed ancestors!

HELEN

Is that any way to talk--

CHESTER

My "congregation"! Cast me aside so they can commune with darkness, wallow in the mud of sexual temptation. Slaves to their own loins ... galloping barefoot, bare-breasted across my fields, lust-crazed wenches--flaunting their tender flesh and jutting--

HELEN

Like the ones at the church?

CHESTER

Silence! I shall not be tormented in my own home by the false witness of harlots! They came to me for guidance -- we prayed -- our souls joined as one --

(As CHESTER quenches his insatiable thirst and recalls one particularly sublime joining of "souls," DECLAN is peering out the window in keen interest. CHESTER snaps out of his reverie and continues his tirade.)

CHESTER

Having their wicked lesbian trysts out among my clover -- they think I do not see them, but I do-- and what these eyes see, so do those of the Lord above, and he will smite them, their firm young haunches, their bouncing young bosoms, their--

(DECLAN, about to burst, springs to his feet.)

DECLAN

Where?

CHESTER

Avert your foul eyes!

HELEN

Chester, be nice to our guest!

CHESTER

Helen, do you know the time?

HELEN

Why, yes, it's 6 o'clock.

CHESTER

And what day is it?

HELEN

Friday, Chester, my sweet.

CHESTER

And what do I do at 6 p.m. on Fridays?

HELEN

Oh, forgive me, I neglect my wifely duties!

(She scurries off, then returns with a tin of sardines and hands it to CHESTER.)

HELEN

Dinner is served!

(CHESTER peels the lid off the can and removes a sardine.)

CHESTER

Observe, young Declan. Consider the sardine. It has no head -- no cerebral cortex, no reasoning capacity. Its spine is soft, malleable. No brain -- no backbone. Like my parishoners, who stood by while the plotters turned me out into the cold. But every Friday evening -- we have communion.

(CHESTER devours a sardine, washing it down with whisky.)

HELEN

Chester!

CHESTER

What?

(HELEN nods in DECLAN's direction.)

CHESTER

Where are my manners--

(CHESTER offers the tin to DECLAN, who is nauseated.)

DECLAN

No, thank you, sir.

(CHESTER is surprised.)

CHESTER

They're brisling.

(ANNABELLE rushes to DECLAN's aid.)

ANNABELLE

Dinner awaits at the prom, Father!

CHESTER

Along with every Bacchanalian depravity that springs from the depths of unfettered minds. As the Lord said in Isaiah -- or was it Deuteronomy? --

HELEN

One or the other, I'm sure.

ANNABELLE

Papa, it has been ever so long since I saw you kiss Mama!

(CHESTER recoils in horror at the thought. HELEN is not much more enthusiastic, but tries to put on a brave front.)

HELEN

Dear, this is not the ti--

ANNABELLE

Kiss Papa! Please!

(HELEN moves forward to CHESTER. They kiss, clumsily, then withdraw quickly. Both look stricken. CHESTER takes a long, hard drink.)

ANNABELLE

(Singing)

"Isn't it romantic ... la la la la la."

HELEN

(Composing herself from the ordeal of kissing CHESTER)

Declan, before you go -- I must introduce you to my family.

(DECLAN looks around in apprehension - perhaps there are more CHESTERS lurking about - but then realizes HELEN is referring to the urns.)

HELEN

Where to begin - my mother - the most graceful ballet dancer of her day -

CHESTER

Exhibitionist.

HELEN

My father -- an artiste and owner of his own gallery --

CHESTER

Stick-figures and pornography!

HELEN

(To CHESTER) How you chatter! (To DECLAN) My aunt Katrina and Uncle Gustave -- my dear brother Hubert, my beloved sister Hannah -- how I miss them -- all people of elegance, and grace, and sophistication -- patrons of the arts -- their work, their very essence lives in everything you see around us--

(CHESTER has had enough.)

CHESTER

And, now, permit me my own family tour.

(Stops at the first urn)

The matriarch -- a drunken, scheming dullard. Her only joy lay in the misery of every tortured soul around her. I would watch her sit, hour after hour, spinning her webs of deceit and petty intrigues--

(Shuddering at the memory, he moves to the next urn.)

My late father-in-law. A true East Side swell. Used to have polo ponies. Couldn't play to save his life, but his horses were the finest you'd ever see. They sold this tonic, make the horses' coats all shiny. You were supposed to give the horse a tablespoon a day. Well, the old man figures, if one tablespoon makes them look this good, I shall give them THREE tablespoons! Six horses, gives them all three tablespoons apiece, four days in a row. Fifth day, the old fool goes into his stable and is greeted by 24 legs, all stiff, up in the air. Turns out one tablespoon is all the horsies should have. Had to get a crane to haul them out. ASPCA was called. Made all the local papers.

(Moving along to another urn)

Helen's uncle and her brother had a falling out over the gallery after Helen's father died. Her brother wound up starting a rival gallery, and they outdid each other in seeing how much garish swill they could frame up on their walls and peddle to ninnies. Wound up driving each other out of business.

(Moving along to more urns)

Then the aunt formed a ballet company. She fired one handyman because the snow outside the dance hall would be dirty after he'd shoveled it. "Why is the snow always dirty, Juan? I can't have my patrons looking at the dirty snow, you're fired!" (To the urn) Why's the snow dirty, you cretinous cow? Because it falls on dirt!

Year after year, I had to sit and listen to their amoral chatter, and their sarcasm, and their scheming, and their criticism. Every one of them thought Helen had married beneath herself -- didn't they! So high and mighty! No wretched soul in Hell ever suffered as I did at their miserable hands!

HELEN

You are such a gloomy Gus today! Well, I shan't let you rain on our parade.

(To DECLAN)

Before you leave, dear, we have one other memorial to show you!

ANNABELLE

The garden--

HELEN

Where the dogs are buried!

DECLAN

Dogs?

ANNABELLE

All thirteen of them.

DECLAN

You have thirteen dogs buried in your garden?

HELEN

All schnauzers--

ANNABELLE

Just like Fluffy.

HELEN

All named -- oh, dear, I forget.

(DECLAN clearly wants to leave with ANNABELLE and get away from CHESTER and HELEN.)

DECLAN

But it's raining -- you'll catch your death--

CHESTER

It's not raining, just a drizzle.

DECLAN

(Gesturing toward the window)

I beg to differ, Reverend Partlow, but -- veritable sheets of rain--

CHESTER

Drizzle.

DECLAN

Sir, look in the field at the enormous puddles -- why, poor Fluffy is drenched -- my God, the size of that bone in his mouth--

(CHESTER picks up a large book by his chair.)

CHESTER

Rain, is it? Yes, the puddles, let me gaze upon them. You are familiar with the Bible, young Declan?

DECLAN

Of course, sir.

CHESTER

Perhaps the Good Book has something to tell us about this.

(CHESTER whacks DECLAN over the head with the Bible. DECLAN collapses to the ground, grabbing his head in pain.)

CHESTER

When I call it drizzle, by God in Heaven, it be drizzle!

(HELEN and ANNABELLE rush to DECLAN's aid.)

HELEN

(To CHESTER)

Aren't you in a snit today?

(To DECLAN)

Come, dear, let us inspect the garden. It's not so wet.

ANNABELLE

Thirteen schnauzers, thirteen headstones -- Mama, what was their name again?

(The women hustle DECLAN out of the house, leaving CHESTER alone in the sitting room. Sullenly, drunkenly, he confronts the urns.)

CHESTER

Not sneering now, are we? Where are those famous smirks? "Haughty people seem to me to have the stature of a child and the face of a man."

(He measures an urn with his hands.)

Very small children indeed! And I can see none of your faces for all the dust!

(One final swig of courage.)

CHESTER

Curse ye! Ye will haunt my dreams no more!

(He swipes at the urns, knocking some over. Those that don't fall at first, he picks up and slams to the floor. Ash comes tumbling out. CHESTER's triumph quickly dissolves as he realizes that for once, perhaps, he has gone too far.)

CHESTER

Oops!

(With drunken calm at first but increasing anxiety and urgency as realizes the magnitude of his problem, CHESTER begins trying to clean up the mess, and get the ashes back into their proper containers.)

CHESTER

Here we are, all back where we belong! Back in our little containers -- eternal rest, be unto you!

(CHESTER's drunken state, though, renders him extremely clumsy. Picking up two urns, he accidentally lifts them from the bottom, causing all the ash to spill out.)

CHESTER

Uh-oh!

(He resumes his labors, but frequently has trouble matching the right ash with the right urn.)

CHESTER

Here we go, here we go -- all back into our little jars -- Gustave -- Hubert, oops, that's Katrina -- nothing that cannot be undone -- all together, one big happy family at last --

(CHESTER trips and falls over into the ash, landing flat on the seat of his pants. At that moment, HELEN returns, ANNABELLE and DECLAN close behind. HELEN reaches for the parasols.)

HELEN

Chester, you had us in such a tizzy, we forgot our para--

(She stops speaking as she looks up and sees CHESTER sitting amidst the ashes of her family.)

HELEN

Quel catastrophe!

(She sinks to her knees in horror.)

CHESTER

Now, Helen, no cause for alarm -- a little mishap is all -- we'll have them all back good as new.

(Sweeping ash into his cupped hand and replacing it into various urns.)

CHESTER

Here's Mother -- and Father -- no, that's Hubert, I'm sure of it -- here's Katrina, I recognize her perfume -- dust of the ages, what?

(Suddenly, CHESTER emits an enormous sneeze.)

CHESTER

Excuse me -- no harm done -- there, there -- haste makes waste --

(Seeing the chaos before them, DECLAN tries to help. He picks up an urn, peers inside, then futilely tries to match the ash on the floor with the contents. CHESTER, meanwhile, struggles to his feet and, bending over to continue the cleanup, reveals the bottom of his trousers. HELEN gasps in horror.)

ANNABELLE

Grandmama!

CHESTER

(Looks around in sheer terror) Where?

(He then realizes she is talking not about a ghost, but the ash on the seat of his pants.)

CHESTER

Ah, yes, sorry --

(Seizes an urn.)

CHESTER

Nothing to be concerned about. We'll get mother back where she belongs --

(He positions the urn properly and begins swatting at the seat of his pants, attempting to get his mother-in-law's ashes back into the container.)

HELEN

You -- oaf! You have defiled and degraded the sacred altar of my family! I rue the day I met you, you bottom-dwelling vermin, you drunkard, you seducer, you hypocrite, you false prophet -- you, you destroyer of worlds, y--

(In her torrent of insults is the germ of CHESTER's salvation. He stops wiping off his trousers. A messianic gleam comes into his eyes as he is consumed by the joy of revelation. He stands erect, letting the urn drop to the floor, unnoticed. He seizes his Bible and brandishes it above his head.)

CHESTER

Father in Heaven, thank you! You have shown me the Way! My voice will again be heard, ringing out your Truth across the land! I will have my pulpit! I - Chester B. Partlow - will stand for election to the Congress of the United States of America!

(In his fervor, he drops his Bible. Evidently, this stirs up some of the dust, because HELEN, ANNABELLE, and DECLAN all sneeze violently.)

THE END