



Stella Chester

Adapted from the comedy by Frank G. Tompkins

BIG DOG PUBLISHING

Sham!

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BIG DOG PUBLISHING

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COMEDY. A modern adaptation of the comedy by Frank G. Tompkins. Looking to steal fine art and other valuables, a cultured thief with impeccable taste breaks into the suburban home of a wealthy couple. When the couple arrives home, the thief berates the couple for their poor taste in art and décor. Afraid of being exposed as shams, the couple pulls out their finest treasures to try to impress the thief, hoping that she will steal something from them. The quirky characters and their amusing repartee make for nonstop laughs!

Performance Time: Approximately 30 minutes.

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Characters

(1 M, 2 F, 1 flexible)

CHARLES: Clara's husband; wears fashionable clothing and an overcoat; male.

CLARA: Charles's wife; wears fashionable clothing; female.

THIEF: Thief, evidently a woman of culture; wears expensive clothing and is impeccably dressed; female.

REPORTER: Newspaper reporter; flexible.

NOTE: For flexible role, change the script accordingly.

Setting

Charles and Clara's home in a wealthy suburb, present day.

Set

Charles and Clara's living room. The room has the look of a wealthy suburban living room. There is a fireplace with an expensive-looking vase on the mantle, a curio cabinet with figurines, a luxurious sofa, chairs, etc.

Props

Ham sandwich
Eyeglasses in a case
Silver tray
Teacup
Vase
Gum
Crystal decanter
Chinese pottery
Burnt log
Figurine of a little girl
Portrait wrapped in paper and tied with string
Portrait of George Washington
Coat, for Thief

“There’s nothing in your house
that I want...
nothing that I could,
even for a moment,
contemplate keeping
without a good deal
of personal pain.”

—Thief

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(AT RISE: *Charles and Clara's living home. The room is dark.* Pause. *The door opens, allowing a streak of light into the room. A Thief peers in cautiously. The Thief steps inside and feels along the wall until she finds the light switch, which floods the room with light.* From time to time, *the Thief takes a bite of her ham sandwich as she looks about. Nothing pleases her until a vase on the mantel catches her eye. She picks it up, looks at the bottom, puts it down hard, and mutters with disgust, "Imitation."* The Thief approaches other items in the room and they receive the same disdainful verdict. As she starts to sit before the fire and enjoy her sandwich, suddenly she pauses to listen. Hurriedly, she looks about for some place to hide, thinks better of it, and then stands opposite the door, smiling pleasantly and expectantly. The door opens. Clara enters with Charles at her heels. As Clara spies the Thief, she stifles a scream and retreats, backing Charles out behind her. The Thief smiles and waits. The door opens again. Charles enters with Clara clinging to him. Charles and Clara stand opposite the Thief and just stare at her, unsure what to do.)

THIEF: (Pleasantly.) Good evening! (Pause.) Good evening, good evening! You surprised me. Can't say I expected you home so soon. Was the play an awful bore? (Pause. Clara and Charles just stare at her.) Well, can't one of you speak? I can carry on a conversation alone, but the question-and-answer method is usually preferred. If one of you will say, "How do you do?" we might get a step further to conversing.

CLARA: (Breathlessly.) You...you... (With growing conviction.) ...you're a thief!

THIEF: Exactly. And you, madam, are the mistress of the house, I presume...or are you another thief?

CLARA: This...this is *our* house. Charles, why don't you do something? Don't stand there like a—! (Stops herself.) Make her go away! Tell her she mustn't take anything. (Advancing

toward the Thief. To Thief.) What have you taken? (Sees the ham sandwich in the Thief's hand.) Give it to me this instant! How dare you?! (Turns.) Charles, take that ham sandwich away from her!

(Unafraid and a little amused, Charles is uncertain what to do. Pause.)

CHARLES: *(To Thief, in a bullying tone.) I say, you'd better clear out. We've come home. You know you can't— (Slight pause. Calmly.) Come, now. Be sensible. I don't want to use force.*

THIEF: I don't want you to, either.

CHARLES: If you've got anything of ours— *(Pause.)* We aren't helpless, you know.

(Charles starts to draw something black and shiny [eyeglasses in a case] from his overcoat pocket, trying to make the eyeglass case look like a pistol. The Thief is not fooled.)

THIEF: *(Indicating eyeglass case.) Let's see those glasses. Give them here. (Takes the glasses from Charles and looks them over.) Perhaps they're better than mine. (Looking at the case.) Fine case. (Takes out the glasses and tries them on.) Humph! Window glass! Take them back. (Hands the glasses and case back to Charles.) I know you're not armed, you know. I threw your gun down the air shaft. Never carry one myself...during business hours. Yours was in the bottom of your dresser. Bad shape those drawers were in! Nice and neat on top...rat's nest below. Reveals your character. You can always tell a man by his dresser drawers. Didn't it ever occur to you that a thief might drop in on you some night? What would that thief think of you?*

CHARLES: I don't think—

THIEF: You should. I said to myself when I opened that drawer, "These people look good on the surface, but they're

shams, fakes. It's probably a streak that runs through everything they do." You ought to try *real* neatness. This other sort of thing is just a form of dishonesty.

CLARA: (*Angry.*) You! Talking to *us* about honesty...in *our* house?!

THIEF: Just the place for honesty. Begin at home. Let's—

CLARA: Charles, I won't stand for this! Grab hold of her! Search her! (*Charles just stands there.*) You hold her, and I'll call the cops.

THIEF: You can't.

CLARA: What do you mean we can't?!

THIEF: Your cell phone service has been cut off. I suspect you neglected the bill. You ought not to. Better get it paid right away.

CLARA: Charles, do I have to stand here and be insulted?

THIEF: Sit down, won't you, please? (*Indicating her ham sandwich.*) This is my last ham sandwich, so I can't offer you any, but I noticed there's plenty of beer in the frig. (*With disgust.*) I don't recommend that brand, but perhaps you're used to it.

CLARA: Charles, are you going to let her talk to us like that?! I won't have it...being lectured by a *thief*!

CHARLES: You can't stop her from talking, my dear...especially her sort. Can't you see she's a born preacher? (*To Thief.*) While advice is going round, let me tell you that you've missed your calling.

CLARA: Oh, Charles! Don't talk to her! You're a good deal better than she is.

THIEF: (*To Charles.*) Maybe I'll jiu-jitsu you. (*Takes a jiu-jitsu stance.*)

CLARA: She's insulting you now, Charles. Please try. I'll hold her feet.

THIEF: No doubt you would. But that wouldn't stop my talking. You'd be taking an unfair advantage, too. There are two of you.

CLARA: (*Enraged.*) Unfair?! I'd like to know—!

THIEF: (*Shouts.*) Pleeeeease, don't screech! My head aches, and your voice is so piercing. Let's sit down quietly and discuss the situation like well-bred people, and when we've come to some understanding, I'll go.

CLARA: Yes, after you've taken everything in the house and criticized everything else!

CHARLES: But she isn't taking anything now, is she? Let her criticize, can't you? I don't suppose she often meets her, er... (*Thinks.*) ...customers socially. She's just dying for a good old visit. (*To Thief.*) Lonesome profession, isn't it?

CLARA: (*Irritated.*) If you don't do anything, I'll call the neighbors.

THIEF: No neighbors to call. Nearest one is a block away, and he isn't home. (*Sighs.*) The price of living in a fashionable suburb. Don't believe you can afford it, either. (*To Clara.*) Won't you sit down? I can't till you do. (*Clara remains standing. Annoyed.*) Well, then I shall have to stand, and I've been on my feet all day. It's hardly considerate. I don't talk so well on my feet, either. It will take me much *longer* this way. (*Reluctantly, Clara sits in a chair, sighs.*) Thank you, that's better. (*Sinking into an easy chair, sighs.*) I knew I could appeal to your better nature. (*Takes out some gum. To Charles, offering.*) Gum? (*Charles takes a piece of gum. To Clara, offering.*) And you? Gum?

CLARA: (*Puts out her hand for a piece of gum, but withdraws it quickly.*) Thank you, I don't care to chew gum...with a thief.

THIEF: Right. Better not. I hate to see people chew gum like cows. No one in my family does it.

CLARA: I don't know that I care to be like those in your family. (*Sarcastically.*) No doubt you get your gum from a grocer of taste.

THIEF: Your next door neighbor. This is... (*Realizes.*) ...was...his gum. Exquisite taste. (*Eyes Clara and Charles closely.*) Great friends? Or perhaps you don't move in the same circles. (*Clara glares at her.*) Pardon me. Tactless of me, but how could I guess? Well, here's your chance to

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get acquainted with his choice in chewing gum. (*Holding out gum.*) Have a piece.

CLARA: (*Haughtily.*) I don't receive stolen goods.

THIEF: Charles seems to be enjoying his.

CHARLES: (*Chewing happily like a cow.*) Hempsted's a chewing gum connoisseur! Truth is...we don't know the Hempsteds.

THIEF: That's right, Charles. Tell the truth.

CLARA: Charles, there isn't any reason—

THIEF: Quiet, please. Remember my head. I'm sorry, but I must decline to discuss your social prospects with you, and also your neighbors' shortcomings, much as we would all enjoy it. There isn't time for that. Let's get down to business. The question we've got to decide and decide very quickly is...what would you like to have me take?

CLARA: (*Aghast.*) What would we—?! What would we like to have you take?! Why...why...you can't take anything now. We're here. Of all the nerve! "What would we like—?!"

THIEF: (*Irritated.*) Emphasis by repetition. No need.

CHARLES: I may be slow, but I don't for the moment see the necessity of you taking anything.

THIEF: (*To herself.*) I was afraid of this. (*To Charles and Clara.*) Now look here, just suppose I go away and don't take anything? (*Triumphantly.*) How would you like that?

CHARLES: Suits me to a "T." (*To Clara.*) How about you, my dear? Think you can be firm and bear up under it?

THIEF: (*Annoyed.*) Don't be sarcastic. Besides, it isn't fair to me...when I'm trying to help you. Here am I, trying to get you out of an awkward, unfortunate situation, and you go and get sarcastic on me. It isn't right.

CHARLES: Beg your pardon, try using one-syllable words. You see, this is a new situation for us, but we're anxious to learn.

THIEF: Listen, then. See if you can follow this: There's nothing in your house that I want...nothing that I could,

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even for a moment, contemplate keeping without a good deal of personal pain.

[END OF FREEVIEW]