

TARTUFFE

By
MOLIERE

Freely Adapted
By
Charles Edward Pogue

CAST OF CHARACTERS

MADAME PERNELLE...Orgon's mother

ELMIRE...Orgon's wife

DORINE...servant in Orgon's household

DAMIS...Orgon's son

MARIANNE...Orgon's daughter

CLEANTE...Orgon's brother-in-law

ORGON...master of the household

VALERE...Marianne's intended

TARTUFFE...Orgon's guest and spiritual advisor

M. LOYAL...a bailiff

MINISTER OF THE STATE...royal servant

DORINE

Calm down, Damis! This idiot plot of your father's isn't a done deal yet. A lot can happen before that!

DAMIS

It's happening now! I'll blast that fraud's ears with such abuse, even as I rip them off his smug face! Right before I bash it in!

DORINE

My dear hot-head! The image of a bashed Tartuffe, prone in a puddle of his own blood, spitting teeth makes my heart go pitty-pat. But such carnage, while satisfactory, won't get you what you want. Your step-mother wisely prefers diplomacy to frothing at the mouth. She'll work her patient wiles on him, even as she does your father. Tartuffe seems to soften around her, though she rarely acknowledges his annoying existence. So if she tosses a dollop of charm his way, she may convince him not to encourage your father further in this foolishness. I knocked on the rogue's door just now, but he told me he was praying and to go away. I also heard the slap of his scourge, but it sounded like it was smacking bedclothes, not bare back. When he comes out, I must arrange his meeting with Elmire, so get lost.

DAMIS

I'll have my say at this interview as well.

DORINE

Absolutely not! Your quick-temper will kill Madam's gambit before it begins.

DAMIS

Very well, I'll just stand by and be silent.

DORINE

Don't make me laugh. Subtlety is not your strong suit. The first offensive word out of Tartuffe's mouth and you'd be on him like a Viking berserker.

(Hears a noise)

He's coming! Get out! Elmire can't help you if you ruin her plans.

(He makes to leave, as she turns to meet Tartuffe. Behind her back, Damis slips into a closet. Tartuffe appears carrying his scourge)

TARTUFFE

You, girl. I left my hair shirt on my bed. Hang it for me. Oh, and my flagellator...

(Hands it to her)

Clean it. And think on Heaven as you do. If anyone wants me, tell them I'm off to the prison to offer the inmates what comfort I can.

DORINE

(Under her breath)

Give us all a little comfort and just stay there.

(Examines the whip)

Already seems clean as a whistle. No bits of flesh. No drops of blood. No even a splash of salty sweat. Just a few pieces of lint...the colour of that quilt in your room.

TARTUFFE

Do you want something...?

DORINE

Matter of fact, I've a message...

(He's staring at her cleavage)

Had a vision...?

(Caught staring, Tartuffe quickly flings a handkerchief at her)

TARTUFFE

For Heaven's sake, not another word until you spare my eyes that garish sight!

DORINE

Garish...? Spare your eyes? You want me to blindfold you?

(Tartuffe snatches the handkerchief back.)

TARTUFFE

No! Conceal that...heaving...bosom of yours which I must not see!

(Averts his gaze and arranges the handkerchief over her bosom, copping a generous feel)

Such displays of flesh offend the spirit and arouse devilish thoughts.

DORINE

(Removing his hand)

All safe. You can turn your head now. You've got an awfully low threshold for temptation. Sorry to imperil your immortal soul and all that, but I'm glad to see my own's in better shape than I thought. Why I could see you stripped down stark naked and not be aroused at all.

TARTUFFE

Don't use the "N" word. It's indecent.

DORINE

You mean – "naked"?

TARTUFFE

Moderate your speech, mistress! Or I must leave the room.

DORINE

Weren't you, anyway? All those poor boys in prison, remember? But you stay, I'll go. Madame Elmire is on her way down and would like a word with you.

TARTUFFE

Oh! Really? Then I remain, most willingly!

DORINE

(Aside)

Forgot those fellows in prison fast enough. Seems my hunch hit the mark and the snake fancies my lady.

TARTUFFE

Will your mistress be down soon?

DORINE

(Aside)

Oh, isn't he anxious!

(Daubs his brow with the hanky)

Don't get in a lather, laddybuck. She won't keep you waiting long. Here she comes now.

(Tartuffe snatches his handkerchief back and composes himself as Dorine leaves, curtsying to Elmire as they pass each other. Tartuffe bows to Elmire.)

TARTUFFE

God grant you good health, Madam, in body and spirit and bestow on you the happiness that I, His humblest servant, know you so richly deserve.

ELMIRE

My gratitude for your pious sentiments.

(He attempts to kiss her hand, she withdraws it and indicates some chairs.)

Let's sit and be more comfortable.

TARTUFFE

I was distressed to see you so ill last night. You've recovered?

ELMIRE

Quite. Oddly enough, as soon as I left you at the dinner table and sequestered myself in my room, my fever began to ease.

TARTUFFE

Would that my prayers helped, but I fear they carry little weight. Yet I have beseeched Heaven with sheer quantity, if not quality, and every one has been for your well-being.

ELMIRE

I'm sure God shows greater interest in you than you think and He knows everything you say or do. I've recovered, in any case.

TARTUFFE

Your health is most precious to me. I'd gladly sacrifice my own to spare yours.

ELMIRE

What an endearing thought! But, alas, such sacrifice probably carries Christian charity too far.

TARTUFFE

For you, I would make any sacrifice I could.

ELMIRE

Ah! Then give me your confidence in a certain matter. I'm glad we are alone and unobserved.

TARTUFFE

Oh, Madam, I have long prayed for just such a moment of intimacy with you. This worthless sinner must have done some little good. For God, who in his infinite wisdom so long denied me this small pleasure, now answers my prayer.

ELMIRE

Well, everything in its season... You'll speak frankly and lay bare your heart?

TARTUFFE

Oh, Madam...heart, soul, and...body...are here to serve you as you...please. May I begin my baring by assuring you that any objections I've raised toward your swarming admirers who constantly call arises not from any malice, but rather a passion of purest motives...

ELMIRE

...for the state of my soul. I understand.

TARTUFFE

(Takes her hand)

A passion so fervent...

ELMIRE

Ouch! You've pinched my fingers.

(Tartuffe releases her hand. He places his own on her thigh.)

TARTUFFE

Ah! Forgive my excessive zeal. To hurt you is the least of my intentions. No, I'd much rather...

ELMIRE

Sir, your hand...

TARTUFFE

Yes...?

ELMIRE

What is it doing?

(Indicates her thigh)

...There?

TARTUFFE

My fingers, so used to the hair shirt and coarse cloth of poverty, seemed to have gotten lost in feeling the fabric. It is so soft.

ELMIRE

Part of that softness is my thigh, which your fingers are also feeling. Please, I'm ticklish...and bruise easily.

(She moves her chair away; Tartuffe moves his closer.)

TARTUFFE

Forgive me again.

(He begins to idly play with the lace of her collar, staring intently at her bosom.)

TARTUFFE

But this material is so exquisite. I could gaze on its beauty and fondle it for hours.

ELMIRE

(Rises)

I'm sure. But to the matter at hand. I hear my husband has decided Valere is out and you are in as a son-in-law.

TARTUFFE

He's made some mention of it, but I confess my affections are not so inclined...

ELMIRE

Naturally. A man of your piety would abstain from such secular attachments...like a priest or monk.

TARTUFFE

Oh, hardly that, Madam. My heart is not carved of stone.

ELMIRE

But I'd have thought it so infused with Heavenly love as to leave no love for worldly things.

TARTUFFE

On the contrary. To love Heaven is to love the world. For in the beginning, God created both. And in earthly delights one finds ethereal charms. Heavenly beauty is found in a rare perfect creature like yourself. You radiate Heaven's glory. It dazzles my eyes and stirs my heart. To deny the admiration I feel when I gaze on such divinity of nature would be to deny the Divine One Himself. Not to love His flawless creation would be not to love Him. At first I tried to stifle my secret passion, fearing it some Devil's bait. I fled from your alluring vision, believing your beauty would blight my salvation. But I realized that my hunger to bask in the sacred splendour that radiates from you, God's fair handiwork, was not a sin but a virtue. So I abandoned my heart to my desire...and to you. It is in your power to blast me to perdition.

(Kneels before her)

But I beg your sweetness to overlook my audacity and to forgive my weakness in offering my love, realizing you also have the power to lift me to joy.

(Flattens himself, stomach to the floor, in a crucifixion pose, head touching her toes)

I abase myself at the altar of your feet, knowing Heaven's above.

(His eyes gaze up at her crotch)

ELMIRE

Your declaration is...prettily put, sir, if not a tad surprising. But please do not thrust into my hands your fate. The Lord helps those who help themselves. You must, I think, re-examine your priorities and remember you are a pious man...

TARTUFFE

But a man no less, despite my high calling. Besieged by your celestial beauty, I must surrender and let love plunder my heart. My confession may astonish you, but I am no angel. Though I reach for Heaven, my feet remain entrenched on earth, so I reach for Heaven on Earth! If my avowal makes you gasp, blame your own ravishing enchantments. For they have bewitched me and I am in your thrall. Your goddess-like gaze has swept aside the bulwarks of my resistant heart. Prayers, fasting, tears...all are undone by your beguiling smile. I am left defenseless with nothing but to love my conqueror. But my eyes, my sighs told you all this long before these clumsy words of mine. My defeated heart is at your mercy. If you offer it some sweet terms of treaty and deign to favour my vanquished unworthiness, you stunning miracle, you will find a most ardent ally.

(Tartuffe has slowly risen from the floor and now edges into Elmire)

TARTUFFE

My...worship...of you will be...prodigious. And, in my fervent veneration, your honour runs no risk of betrayal. You may accept my...offerings...with no apprehension of disgrace. Court dandies and pretty lounge lizards degrade the very damsels they dote on by boasting of their amours and flaunting any favour bestowed on them. Thus, they desecrate the altar on which they receive benediction. But my passion burns with a more discreet flame. My care for my reputation protects your own. Your secrets are safe in mine. In me, you may savour love without scandal, pleasure without fear.

ELMIRE

Well...I asked you to be frank. Aren't you afraid I'll tattle to my husband? Your injudicious proposition might affect his feelings for you.

TARTUFFE

I depend on your mercy, Madam, to forgive my brashness and pity frailty inflamed by unfettered but sincere desire...which, sadly, you seem to reject. If I've offended, I offer no excuse but your looking-glass. When you see in it what I see, you'll see a man is only flesh and blood.

ELMIRE

You may not depend on my mercy, sir. But you may depend on my discretion. None of this will reach my husband's ears...provided...your vigorous support for the marriage of Valere and Marianne does. You must openly encourage their wedding and swiftly disentangle yourself from any improper claim or promise by which you have inveigled your way into a situation where you do not belong...

(DAMIS emerges from hiding.)

DAMIS

You may not depend on my discretion, sir! Nor my mercy. I'll shout your deceit to the rooftops. I've heard everything. God is good and gives me a way to avenge myself on your villainy and expose father's righteous saint as a rank voluptuary who wants to debauch his wife.

ELMIRE

No, Damis! I have made my bargain with Tartuffe. Let him repent and earn the pardon I proffer. I'm not about to make a fuss over this lame seduction and I laugh at its sad silliness. But to blab it to your father may cause him humiliation where it has caused me none.

DAMIS

I do not trust the rogue to repent and to prolong this imposter's unmasking will only humiliate father all the more. There's no need for us to squirm any longer in this swine's sanctimonious mud-hole. He's tried to wreck Marianne's happiness and my own. And now he tries to sully your reputation.

ELMIRE

Only I can sully my reputation. Don't endow his pathetic wooing with power it doesn't possess. For the peace of this household, be led by me.

DAMIS

No, Madam, with all due respect. This household has had no peace since this fraud's arrival in it. Well, it's time to air out the place and toss the trash! You said the Lord helps those who help themselves. To not take advantage of this Heaven-sent opportunity would be to spit in the Hand of Providence. I'll treasure the blessing I've received and my vengeance! I don't wish to hurt father, but there'll be less pain in a swift truth.

(Orgon enters)

Ah, truth will be swift indeed. Father, you have just missed an act of loyalty by your valued friend so extraordinary, you would have wept. This fellow you hold in such esteem has just repaid your many kindnesses in the only way a man of his unusual character could – by confessing carnal lust for your wife and crudely suggesting she cuckold you in his oily embrace! The lady is above reproach, having bravely rebuffed him, but being the gentle and gracious soul she is, truly your better half, she would spare your feelings and keep the monster's misdeeds secret. But given his deception, his outrage...his ingratitude to the man who hauled him from the gutter, I cannot keep silent!

(Orgon, stunned, turns to Elmire for confirmation.)

ELMIRE

A wife needn't trouble her husband with trifling tawdriness. A smart woman knows how to defend herself against loutish manners. Honour cannot be compromised by rude remarks and bad behaviour. That's all I have to say about this matter.

(To Damis)

More than I would, if you had respected my wishes and not shot your mouth off!

(She exits)

ORGON

Good Lord, can this horrid accusation be credible?

TARTUFFE

Credible? Of course, Brother, Lord knows it is credible of better men than I. Credible of men not nearly as wicked or guilty as I am. And I am the foulest sinner alive. My low life has been a cesspool of impurity. And now my misdeeds come home to roost. God chooses this moment to mortify me. I will not deny any offence I am branded with. I will not compound my sins by defending myself with defiant pride. Believe all they say and vent your spleen against me. Pitch me out of your house as though I were a common criminal. No shame heaped upon me, however great, is unjust. I have, in my time, deserved far worse.

ORGON

(To Damis)

I am dismayed! You dare defame his virtue with your lies. You bad boy!

DAMIS

You believe his hypocritical humbug! Father, I...

ORGON

Silence, you rotten child!

TARTUFFE

No, Brother, let him have his say. Don't blame him for his vituperative words. It might be better to believe them. Don't favour me just on the face of things. Do you truly know what I might sink to? Don't judge a book by its cover. Many a sordid story hides behind an exquisite binding. So it is with me. Your son and wife have read my lurid pages. The rest of the world may respect me as an upright fellow. But, in truth, I am a low-down cad.

(To Damis)

So, speak, lad. Burden me with your abuse. Call me vile, vicious, venal, viper, villain!

(Grabs Orgon's cane and scourges himself)

Wanton, wastrel, wretch! Rogue, rascal, reprobate, dirty rat! Overwhelm me with a litany of worse epithets. I will not contradict you, but embrace them as my deserved desserts and wear them as my shackles of shame. The weight of their disgrace will drive me to my knees to atone for my malefactions.

ORGON

(Tears the cane from him)

Peace, brother! To detest so much evil in yourself only attests to your goodness!

(Brandishes cane at Damis)

Is your heart made of stone, you nasty piece of work? Does it not melt at this noble soul's self-condemnation!

DAMIS

(To Tartuffe)

Is there no end to your tricks?

(To Orgon)

He boldly tells you the brazen truth in order to blindside you into disbelieving it!

ORGON

Silence, ne'er-do-well!

(To Tartuffe)

Dear friend, please rise.

(To Damis)

You should give the knee to him, knave!

DAMIS

I'll give him one right in his twitching britches and knock what little brains he has back up where they belong!

ORGON
Silence your tongue!

DAMIS
This is insane!

ORGON
(Brandishes cane)
Another word and I'll knock your skull!

TARTUFFE
No violence, Brother, I pray you. I would feel every blow you dealt him on my account.

ORGON
(To Damis)
You hear, hothead, how he spares you? No! Even his pleading cannot blunt my rage.
(Strikes at him with the cane.)

TARTUFFE
Leave him in peace! On my knees, I plead for his pardon.

ORGON
Can such mercy be believed?

DAMIS
No! It can't! I don't need to be pardoned for telling the truth.

ORGON
Ingrate!

DAMIS
Dupe!

ORGON
No more! Your motive is pure maliciousness. You all hate him. Wife, children, servants. And you will use any shoddy treachery to trick me into hounding him from the house. Well, I'm on to you! And the more you connive, the more firmly I'll ensconce him. In fact, I'll marry Marianne to him immediately and crush this family's intolerant pride once and for all!

DAMIS
You'd force her? Father, you can't!

ORGON
I can and do! I'm the decider here!