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THE BLABBERMOUTH

A One-Act Play

By

C. ROBERT JONES



THE DRAMATIC PUBLISHING COMPANY

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(THE BLABBERMOUTH)

ISBN 0-87129-751-5

THE BLABBERMOUTH

or

“Tell It Like It Is!”

(A Lanky Tale)

A One-Act Play

for Three Men and Five Women

CHARACTERS

Angus McTavish owner of McTavish’s General Store

Lanky Loosebottom the tall chief clerk, in his teens

Preacher McPheters the local pastor

Pruella Rankin .the teenage daughter of one of Angus’ old friends

Amelia McTavish. Angus’ sister

Miss Eunice Quackenbush. . . the choir leader at Zebulon Church

Flossie Ragsdale president of the local bank

Mrs. Duncan. a customer at the General Store

TIME: A morning in June, just a few years ago.

PLACE: Angus McTavish’s General Store
in a rural mountain cove.

SCENE: The interior of Angus McTavish's General Store.

AT RISE OF CURTAIN: PRUELLA RANKIN is sweeping the floor, none too enthusiastically. She wears a checkered shirt and jeans with her hair drawn up in a ponytail. LANKY LOOSEBOTTOM, wearing a clerk's apron, is standing on a chair near the counter putting up a new piece of flypaper.

PRUE (stopping). How come I'm the one who gets to sweep out this place every morning?

LANKY. 'Cause Mr. McTavish said to, I guess.

PRUE (resuming her sweeping with a vengeance). Well, I hate it! My mother never made me do this at home. We have a maid to clean up!

LANKY. Aw, come on, Pruella. A little sweepin' never hurt nobody.

PRUE. I didn't come to this awful place to be a slave all summer . . . and don't call me Pruella!

LANKY. Why not? That's what Mr. McTavish calls you.

PRUE. And I've told him over and over I want to be called just Prue. Only he can't seem to get that through his head. I

think Pruella is tacky. Almost as tacky as that dreadful fly-paper you're putting up. Yuk!

LANKY. It does the job.

PRUE. So do cannons but nobody uses 'em anymore.

LANKY. If you hate the mountains so much, why'd you come?

PRUE. There was a little arm-twisting by my parents. They grew up here and were classmates of Mr. McTavish. My dad told me I should get to know my heritage. I overheard him tell my mother, however, that a job would teach me how to manage money and build my character.

LANKY. What's wrong with that?

PRUE. Nothing, except I'd rather be at the beach with all my friends. How long have you been working here, Lanky?

LANKY. About three years.

PRUE. Has it built your character?

LANKY. I never thought about it. I have to work to help out at home. My maw's a widow.

PRUE. That's different. All I know is that this town — if you can call it that — is boring, boring, *boring!* (She puts the broom in the corner.)

LANKY. If you've lived in a city all your life, I guess it is.

PRUE. What am I supposed to do next, Simon Legree?

LANKY (nicely). You can dust off that shelf over there and be sure everything's sittin' where folks can read the labels.

PRUE. A job for an idiot.

LANKY. If you say so. (PRUE looks at LANKY sideways, not quite sure how he means it. PRUE gets a feather duster and moves to the shelf. PRUE looks back at LANKY as he works with the flypaper.)

PRUE (pretending). I can't reach the top, Lanky.

LANKY (looking over at PRUE). I'll do it for you. (He steps down off the chair and crosses to PRUE. He takes the duster and hands PRUE the used flypaper strip which she drops

distastefully on the seat of the chair as LANKY turns to dust.

PRUE sits on the bench and watches.)

PRUE. How do you stand being here all the time? My aunt's house is like a morgue.

LANKY. It's not so bad. There's square dances every Friday night and movies at the Bijou on Saturdays.

PRUE (disenchanted). How thrilling.

LANKY. Then there's turkey shoots.

PRUE. You get your kicks shooting a turkey?

LANKY. You don't exactly shoot a turkey. You win one if you're the best shot at a target.

PRUE. I'll never make it to August. Heck! I'll never make it to July! It's like time passed this place by. Just look at this store. It's like something out of the last century. Why doesn't Mr. McTavish do something to modernize it, for goodness' sake?

LANKY. He's smart. He knows people like it the way it is. If he installed all them up-to-date things, then the store would be like every place else.

PRUE (in a superior tone). Well, I can honestly say there's nothing in here I'd want — unless it's that music box from Austria with the dancing ballerina on top. It's really nice. (She goes behind the counter to where the music box is on the shelf.)

LANKY. Why don't you buy it?

PRUE. I don't have any money. My parents may be loaded, but all I have this summer is what I earn. I think I'll sorta push it out of sight so nobody'll buy it till I can save up enough.

LANKY. I doubt if anybody'll buy it. It's been sittin' there over a year — just like these cowboy boots with the silver buckles on the side. (He picks up one of the boots.) Ever since the mill shut down, nobody's had money for fancy things much.

PRUE (crossing to LANKY). I take it you've got your eye on the boots.

LANKY. I can't afford 'em. I sure would like 'em though.

PRUE (taking the boot). If you can wear this, you have got *big feet!*

LANKY. My maw says if I didn't have so much of me turned down for feet, I'd be right tall. Now you're through dustin', you can stack them cans of cherries on the shelf like Mr. McTavish said.

PRUE (snidely). Thanks. (She takes the duster from LANKY, then moves to the box.) This job is just like these cherries.

LANKY. How's that?

PRUE. The pits. (LANKY laughs.)

(Just then, MISS EUNICE QUACKENBUSH enters. LANKY quickly moves to the counter.)

MISS EUNICE. Good morning, Lanky. (She sees PRUE.) Pruella! Is that you? (PRUE stands.) Gracious! It is you! How you've grown!

PRUE. Hello, Miss Eunice.

MISS EUNICE. I heard you were going to be here for your vacation. You look more like your father every year. You know, he and I grew up together right here in the cove.

PRUE. Yes, ma'am. He told me you used to make goo-goo eyes at him, whatever that is.

MISS EUNICE (blushing). Well, I suppose all us girls did. He was a handsome thing. I do hope you'll come join us in the choir this summer.

PRUE. I'm not a very good singer, Miss Eunice.

MISS EUNICE. Now, Pruella, dear. The Lord has ears that appreciate whatever we offer in praise. I'll expect you at choir practice next Wednesday. (She crosses to the counter.)

LANKY. What for you today, Miss Eunice?

MISS EUNICE. I'd like ten three-cent stamps and seven penny-postcards, Lanky.

LANKY (getting the stamps and cards). Yes, ma'am. That'll be —

MISS EUNICE (interrupting). Thirty-seven cents. I have the exact change. (She hands LANKY the money and takes a pencil from her purse as she takes the stamps and cards. She sits on the chair where PRUE laid the flypaper.) I want to send one of these cards while I'm here, Lanky. (She writes on the card.) My niece in St. Louis is graduating from high school soon and I want to remember her with a card. (She looks around.) Is Mr. McTavish here yet?

LANKY. No'm. I expect him any minute.

MISS EUNICE. I always enjoy coming in his store. You don't find many places like this left anymore, Lanky, and you don't find many men with his manners either, let me tell you. Such a gentleman. It's a wonder some woman hasn't plucked him right off the vine already. 'Course his sister Amelia keeps such a tight rein over him, I . . . well . . . I mean, nobody stands much of a chance. He's a good model to pattern yourself by, Lanky. Mark my word.

LANKY. Yes, ma'am.

(ANGUS McTAVISH comes through the front door dressed in a dark suit. MISS EUNICE beams. ANGUS doffs his hat to her.)

ANGUS. Well, top o' the day, Miss Eunice. How are you? What a pretty frock. That color is perfect with your eyes.

MISS EUNICE (coyly). Is it? Why, thank you, Mr. McTavish. How gallant you are.

ANGUS. Is Lanky takin' good care of you?

MISS EUNICE. Indeed, he is. (A beat.) What is the occasion, Mr. McTavish? If my eyes don't deceive me, you've got on a new suit.

ANGUS. Well, yes, it is new. Do you like it?

MISS EUNICE. If you don't watch out, you are going to have all the single ladies swooning left and right. Why, you'll have to fight them off with a stick.

ANGUS (embarrassed, clearing his throat). Amelia tells me that the special music for church this Sunday is . . . beyond words. She was quite . . . spirited about it when she got home from choir practice last night.

MISS EUNICE. I don't sing solos very often. I don't feel it particularly proper for the choir leader to monopolize the spotlight, if you understand what I mean, Mr. McTavish.

ANGUS. Oh, I do. I do, indeed. You definitely should not sing . . . I mean you should save your voice and let the others do it . . . uh . . . they need your firm hand to lead 'em.

MISS EUNICE. Why, thank you. I try my best. (MISS EUNICE starts to rise so she can drop her card in the letter slot. The flypaper causes the chair to stick to her dress and the chair follows her. She falls into Angus' arms.) Oh, dear! (LANKY rushes around the counter and grabs the chair. He yanks it away and there is a loud ripping sound.) Oh! (MISS EUNICE grabs her backside and her purse falls on the floor. She and ANGUS butt heads as they both stoop to retrieve it. LANKY is embarrassed at seeing Miss Eunice's exposed slip and turns away, raising his hand in the fashion of a horse blinder to his eyes.) Now look what you've done, you clumsy oaf.

ANGUS. I'm sorry, Miss Eunice.

MISS EUNICE. Not you, Mr. McTavish. I was speaking of Lanky who has just torn my dress.

LANKY. I'm terribly sorry, Miss Eunice.

ANGUS. Well, don't just stand there, Lanky. Hand Miss Eunice

a piece of that cloth over there to wrap around her waist. (LANKY quickly grabs a piece of fabric from a bolt on a roller. MISS EUNICE wraps the end around her waist and takes her purse.)

MISS EUNICE. I have never been so mortified in all my life! Good day! (She proceeds regally out the door. The only problem is that the cloth is not a remnant. It is a whole bolt of cloth and it unrolls forming a train across the store as she goes. The screen door slams and catches the cloth and we can only imagine how she looks as she scurries away. See *Production Notes*. ALL break up with laughter.)

PRUE. I'll bet she feels like she's got a grizzly running after her.

ANGUS. A grizzly?

PRUE. Yeah. A bear behind. (ALL start to giggle. ANGUS laughs so hard that he plops down on the bench.)

ANGUS (finally able to speak). All right . . . all right. Now, Prue, mind your manners. Lanky, you and I should remember that gentlemen never laugh at a lady's misfortune. When I come back from the bank, I want you to take Miss Eunice some dress material as a gift from me and apologize.

LANKY. Yes, sir.

ANGUS. She may sing like an alley cat, but she is a faithful customer and I don't want to lose her good will.

LANKY. Yes, sir.

ANGUS. While I think about it, you'd better fix this bench. It's just about ready to collapse.

LANKY. I'll do it today.

ANGUS (after a beat). I think you both may as well know that we have a problem here at the store.

LANKY. What kind of problem, Mr. McTavish?

ANGUS. When the mill laid off all those people, I did something I swore I'd never do. I let people have things on credit. I have always believed in pay as you go, but I couldn't let all

those folks starve. The trouble is, I'm 'bout out of cash. I can't buy any new stock till we got some money — and it don't look like the mill's going to be rehiring soon.

PRUE. What will happen, Mr. McTavish?

ANGUS. I hope Flossie Ragsdale over at the bank will make me a loan.

LANKY. Surely she will, Mr. McTavish. She's always seemed very nice to me.

ANGUS. Well, she is nice . . . till you mention borrowing money. Then, she's something of a tightwad. Her husband was easier to deal with. I wish he were here now.

LANKY. But you have a good reputation, Mr. McTavish. Everybody likes you.

ANGUS. Sometimes that's not enough, Lanky. Unfortunately, what makes it worse is that I overextended myself by buying some stock that just hasn't sold. Nobody can afford those expensive boots, for example.

LANKY. Will you tell that to Mrs. Ragsdale?

ANGUS. Of course. You should always tell the truth, Lanky. Once you tell one lie, you have to keep telling others to cover that one. Besides, she'd find out anyway. So . . . beginning today, we won't be doing any more business on credit.

LANKY. That's gonna be hard.

ANGUS. I know, but if I don't stop now, I could lose my store. Then where would we be? I think you'd better fix up a sign saying "No Credit," Lanky, and hang it in a prominent place.

LANKY. Yes, sir.

ANGUS. Well, I'm going. Remember, no credit . . . and *no* exceptions! (At the door.) Oh, by the way, if Preacher McPheters comes by to collect my pledge for the church building fund, tell him it'll have to wait awhile, and don't you let him bamboozle you into giving him the money out of the cash drawer. He's a fine preacher, but he's as slick as a greased pig.

I'll bet he could sell ice to Eskimos.

LANKY. Yes, sir.

ANGUS. And one more thing. Amelia will probably come by to ask if I've ordered the bunting for the bandstand for Fair Day.

Tell her I have. I forgot it last night. She has nagged me about that for a week. (After a beat, rhetorically.) How do you handle an old maid sister who's a nag some times?

LANKY (innocently). A muzzle?

ANGUS. Ah, Lanky. How little you know about women. (To PRUE.) Right, Pruella? (He starts to exit.)

LANKY. How much material should I cut off for Miss Eunice?

ANGUS. Oh, about six yards . . . of the blue gingham.

LANKY. It shrinks. Maw bought some.

ANGUS. Well, give her seven yards. I don't think another thirty-nine cents will bankrupt me. (He chuckles to himself.)

Can't you just imagine what people thought when they saw her from the back! A grizzly, indeed. (He laughs, then exits.)

PRUE. I'll never be able to sing in the choir now. I'd get the giggles just remembering.

LANKY. I sure hope you won't be puttin' any more flypaper on chair seats.

PRUE. I'm sorry. I didn't think. Did you know she had a crush on Mr. McTavish?

LANKY. Everybody knows it.

PRUE. I wonder why he never got married.

LANKY. I told you he was smart.

PRUE. I doubt if Miss Eunice thinks so. (LANKY goes to the counter, makes the "No Credit" sign on the back of a piece of cardboard, then gets a hammer and tacks as PRUE stacks the cans of cherries.) Do you think these cans could explode?

LANKY. I would hope not.

PRUE. Mother had some tomatoes that exploded once. To this day, we've got some dried-up red splotches on the ceiling in

the pantry. Why'd he buy all these cherries anyway?

LANKY. For pies. Your aunt Mattie and Coroner Smith's wife asked him to stock 'em.

PRUE. Ugh! Well, I don't care for them, myself. They turn your mouth inside out. (She stands up and goes to sit on the bench. Her stacking job is still not complete.) Do you think it's really true about George Washington?

LANKY. That he chopped down the cherry tree?

PRUE. No. That he never told a lie.

LANKY. That's what the history books say.

PRUE. They may say it, but I don't believe it. There's nobody that good.

LANKY. I try never to tell lies.

PRUE. Do you mean to stand there and tell me you always tell the truth!

LANKY. I don't lie, Prue. Mr. McTavish is right. Once you start, you can't quit. I think you'd better finish unpacking them cans. You wouldn't want Mr. McTavish to come in and find you loafin'.

PRUE (getting up, pouting). Slave driver! I hate doing this. (She kicks the box and instantly recoils in pain.) Ooooow!

LANKY. Moderation in temper is a virtue.

PRUE (angrily). You've got an answer for everything, haven't you? You think you are *so* smart.

LANKY. That's what my maw says. She's right, too. Every time I lose my temper, I get my comeuppance.

PRUE. I'm surprised you'd admit to even having a temper. I thought you were perfect – you who never tell a lie.

LANKY. I didn't say that.

PRUE. Okay, Mr. Perfect, I'll bet you that you can't get through this entire morning telling the *whole* truth.

LANKY. I don't bet.

PRUE. Too chicken?

LANKY. No. Bettin's the same as gamblin', and gamblers and their money are soon parted.

PRUE. I wasn't talking about money. If you can get all the way to noon telling the *complete* truth, those cowboy boots are yours.

LANKY (getting on the chair to put up the sign). You just said you didn't have any money.

PRUE. I don't. I'll pay for them out of my wages.

LANKY. It wouldn't be right.

PRUE. Why not? What have you got to lose, Lanky, especially if you always tell the truth? Seems like an easy way to get a pair of boots to me.

LANKY (hesitantly). I don't know.

PRUE (needling slightly). Don't you trust yourself?

LANKY. Of course I trust myself!

PRUE. Well, then, is it a deal?

LANKY. What do you get out of this?

PRUE. Nothing . . . unless you slip up. And then I might like the Viennese music box.

LANKY. I haven't got that kind of money.

PRUE. Why should you worry, for goodness' sake? You've got the edge. You *never* lie, remember? Or are you afraid you can't be totally honest for a whole morning?

LANKY (finishing with the sign). Of course I can be honest for a whole morning.

PRUE. Then it's a deal?

LANKY. Yes! It's a deal. (PRUE walks over to LANKY and offers her hand. He shakes it.)

(The door opens and FLOSSIE RAGSDALE, an imposing woman of middle years and formal demeanor, enters and walks to the counter. LANKY jumps off the chair. He leaves the tacks on the chair and takes the hammer to the counter with him.)