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SF PERUSALS

Samuel French Acting Edition

The Old One-Two

A Play in One Act

by A.R. Gurney Jr.

SAMUEL FRENCH

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PLOT SUMMARY

A Professor of Classics at an American university becomes obsessed with a girl student, who challenges the relevance of his course and finally leads him into an overnight affair. Meanwhile, the Dean of the department, joining her in the attempt to bring the curriculum up to date, has become involved in a sly relationship with the Professor's mysterious wife. The play is saved from a tragic ending by a sudden, surprising discovery.

CAST

AUGUSTUS HOLDER, *Professor of Classics at an American university.*

SUSAN GREEN, *a student.*

THE DEAN

SET

Four playing areas:

1. An old oaken lectern, facing out, from which PROFESSOR HOLDER addresses his class.
2. PROFESSOR HOLDER'S office. A cluttered desk with books, notes, papers. A Greek bust on it. A telephone. A picture of the Parthenon behind. Two chairs, one behind the desk, one in front.
3. The DEAN'S office. A metal desk with push-button telephones, a dictaphone, an electric typewriter. Modern furniture, an abstract painting on the wall.
4. SUSAN GREEN'S room in a dormitory. A wooden chair and institutional desk. Paperback books and records scattered around. Posters about peace and ecology on the wall. A wall dorm-line telephone.

The play takes place during the Fall of the current academic year.

The Old One-Two

As the houselights dim, PROFESSOR HOLDER *comes out and goes to the lectern. He carries an old battered leather briefcase and a black umbrella. He wears an old-fashioned, rumpled dark suit, white shirt, dark tie. He is in his 50's, graying, and has an Old World charm about him. He leans his umbrella carefully against the lectern, places his briefcase on the lectern, and carefully removes a couple of books and lecture notes, arranging them on the lectern. He puts his briefcase neatly next to his umbrella. He puts on a pair of steel-rimmed glasses, surveys his notes, takes off the glasses, surveys the audience, and finally begins. He speaks with a slight foreign accent.*

HOLDER. (*To audience.*) Good morning . . . This course is entitled Introduction to Humanities. Colon. The Classical Experience. (*A wry smile.*) It is known to students—affectionately, I hope—as the Old One-Two. (*Pause.*) Old, because I have taught it in this university for a great many years. (*Pause.*) One-Two because I teach it both semesters. In that way, those of you who fail it in the fall can repeat it in the spring. (*Pause.*) I should only add that this is a required course for all students in the liberal arts. Over the years, it has been attacked, occupied, ravaged, and abused. But it has stood. It stands. It will stand. Mutilated, but beautiful. Like the Parthenon. (*A pretty* GIRL, *in casual clothes, carrying books and papers, gets up from her seat in one of the rear rows and edges her way out to the Center aisle. She may ad-lib "Excuse me . . . Sorry. . . ."* HOLDER *sees*

her, over the top of his glasses; he watches her patiently and finally speaks.) Just a minute, please. (*The* GIRL *continues toward the door.*) I said just a minute, please. (*The* GIRL *stops.*) What's the difficulty, please?

GIRL. I'm in the wrong course.

HOLDER. You are in the right course.

GIRL. No, I mean wrong for me.

HOLDER. How do you know?

GIRL. How do I *know?*

HOLDER. (*Patiently.*) How do you know this course is wrong for you.

GIRL. Oh. Well, you see I'm interested in Urban Studies.

HOLDER. Good. Here you will study Athens and Rome. Sit down, please.

GIRL. Oh no. I mean contemporary urban problems. (*Pause. He waits.*) Like traffic patterns . . . (*He still waits.*) And slums . . .

HOLDER. You want to study traffic? You want to study slums?

GIRL. Exactly.

HOLDER. Oh dear. Well. Study what you want. But first you must have the Classical Experience.

GIRL. But I don't want the Classical Experience.

HOLDER. That's not the point. The gods of this university, in their infinite wisdom, long ago decreed that you cannot know yourself until you know your tradition. You cannot study traffic and slums until you study Homer and Sophocles. You cannot be taken seriously as an educated person—until you have taken me. (*Pause.*)

GIRL. (*Suddenly defiant.*) I'll see the Dean.

HOLDER. He'll send you back.

GIRL. The *new* Dean?

HOLDER. Any Dean.

GIRL. I'll take a substitute.

HOLDER. There are no substitutes.

GIRL. I'll petition, I'll appeal.

HOLDER. (*Shaking his head.*) No petition, no appeal.

GIRL. Why that's absolutely, totally unfair!

HOLDER. Ah hah! There! You see what you've learned? Already you've arrived at a primitive conception of Greek tragedy! Think about that. And sit down.

GIRL. No, I won't. I won't think about that. And I won't sit down, either. And I won't study the Greeks. I'm going to find a way out of the Old One-Two! (*She walks out. We hear a door slam in the rear.* HOLDER *sighs, and speaks to the audience.*)

HOLDER. During the term, you will read a number of Greek plays. And in them, you will discover several splendid young heroines. Antigone, Polyxena, Iphigenia . . . (*He loves these words.*) . . . all these maidens will you meet. And you will see them stand up bravely to authority. And go to their death for it, singing fine, pure, triumphant songs. And you will realize that there is a great tradition of personal protest in our culture. And you will recall this recent exhibition, and you will see it as a poor, sad parody of that tradition. And you will shudder with shame. (*He returns to his notes, is now all business.*) Your first paper, on Homer, of at least two thousand words, will be due a week from Monday. I personally will read and grade your work. Try hard! Like the Greeks we study, I believe in fate, struggle, honor, and sudden death. Plan your weekends accordingly. (*He holds up a battered, leathery volume, stuffed with notes.*) Now Homer. *The Odyssey.* I translate from the Greek. (*He reads, carefully translating.*) "Sing inside of me, Muse, and through *me only* let the story be told . . ."

(*The lights fade out on* HOLDER *and the lectern; they fade up on the* DEAN, *in his office. He is in his early thirties, modishly dressed, and at this point is answering an intercom in his office.*)

DEAN. O.K. Send her in. (*The* GIRL *comes in.*) Hi.

SUSAN. I'm—

DEAN. Susan Green. I know. I heard all about you. I'm

the new Dean. (*He shakes her hand enthusiastically.*) Now here's what I've done. I've reserved a room for you at the student center. Big enough for a reasonably large crowd. I've scheduled it for seven-thirty. I thought that was a good time: after the meal and before the movies. My secretary will help you run off announcements on the Xerox, and then I'll dig up people to help you post them on bulletin boards around the campus. O.K.?

SUSAN. But I don't want that.

DEAN. You don't want to have a protest meeting?

SUSAN. No, I just want to get out of the course.

DEAN. Oh. Gee. I thought you were going to protest.

SUSAN. Uh uh. Not me. I'm not the type. (*Pause.*)

DEAN. (*Sitting down, sadly.*) Darn.

SUSAN. I want to change to the social sciences.

DEAN. You, too, huh? I mean we're losing half our students because of that course, and no one even wants to protest.

SUSAN. Why don't you fire him?

DEAN. Can't. He's got tenure.

SUSAN. Why don't you get rid of the course?

DEAN. Can't. There are too many old men around this place who think it's essential.

SUSAN. But the students hate it.

DEAN. They don't show it. They either get out of it, like you, or else retire to their room and write a two thousand word paper, without a whimper. God. Where is the spirit of the sixties? I'm going back to teaching Romantic poetry. There's more excitement in Wordsworth's "Daffodils" than there is in the corridors of power these days. Well many thanks, anyway, for lighting a small temporary candle in a dark Nixon world.

SUSAN. If we protested, what would you do?

DEAN. Oh I'd have an excuse to break up the course.

SUSAN. Break it up?

DEAN. Sure. Kids could choose. You could take Professor Birnhaum on Culture and Counterculture. You could take Miss Russell on Sex and Sexuality. You could

take Mr. Johnson on Black Power. (*He shows her a catalogue.*)

SUSAN. Oh what fabulous courses!

DEAN. They could be. But I'll have to cancel all three of them if we continue to lose our enrollment. (*Pause.*)

SUSAN. All right. Then I *will* protest. I will call that meeting. (*The* DEAN *looks at her, goes to her, gives her a big hug.*)

DEAN. There! That's what we did in the sixties. And if you mention any of this to anyone else, I'll deny it ever happened. Now get going, baby. The Xerox is waiting. You do your part, I'll do mine, and we'll have this place swinging in six months. (*She goes out. He dials the telephone quickly, all the while humming "Hey Jude."*)

DEAN. Let me speak to the treasurer, please. (*More "Hey Jude."*) Bill? . . . It's me . . . You know that crazy fascist alumnus who wants to give money to the Old One-Two . . . Listen, I think I've got a way we can use it now. . . . Supposing Holder gets tired and wants a rest . . .

(*The lights fade on him, and fade up on* HOLDER, *who is also on the telephone.*)

HOLDER. Hello, Darling . . . I'm coming home early today. Will you meet the four o'clock bus? . . . Yes. A bad day . . . The Old One-Two . . . The usual flurry of complaints at the beginning of the term. This time, a silly young girl. I wonder if I'm getting too old to play the villain . . . Goodbye, darling. See you at four.

(HOLDER *hangs up, puts on his overcoat, grabs his briefcase, and exits as the lights dim on his office. The lights come up on the lectern.* SUSAN GREEN *comes nervously down the aisle.*)

SUSAN. (*Nervously; to audience.*) Before the bell rings, before he gets here . . . (*Glances off.*) . . . I'm supposed to say . . . for the people who couldn't make the

meeting last night . . . well, we met, and took a vote, and decided not to write that first paper. Hear that, everyone? . . . It's a strike. O.K.? We're striking . . . And anyone who finks out, anyone who writes that paper, will hear about it. From me. O.K.? (*Pause; glances off again.*) And I was elected to tell him. (*Pause. She stands nervously in the aisle. Then the bell rings.* HOLDER *comes out, briefcase and all. He seems not to see her, and sets up his books and notes as usual. Finally, when he is all set, he calls out to her.*)

HOLDER. Now. Who are you?

SUSAN. You know who I am.

HOLDER. Ah so I do. Forgive me. You all look alike. The hair, the clothes . . . I'm particularly fascinated by the clothes. This yearning of upper middleclass American children for the bucolic. It's charmingly decadent. We went through it in Europe in the 18th century. The French call it "nostalgie de la boue"—longing for the gutter. You, as I recall, long for the slums.

SUSAN. (*Suddenly.*) We refuse to write the first paper. (*Pause.*)

HOLDER. Come up here, please. (*Pause.*)

SUSAN. All right. (*She starts for the stage.*)

HOLDER. I want everyone to see and hear you.

SUSAN. All right. (*She mounts the stage, stands near the edge.*)

HOLDER. (*To* SUSAN.) Now. Repeat what you said.

SUSAN. We refuse to write the first paper.

HOLDER. Who refuses?

SUSAN. We. (*Indicating audience.*) Us.

HOLDER. "We" is correct. The nominative case. The subject of the verb "refuse."

SUSAN. Well, we do.

HOLDER. The first paper.

SUSAN. Yes.

HOLDER. On Homer?

SUSAN. Yes. On Homer. We refuse to write it.

HOLDER. Why?

SUSAN. Because . . . two thousand words is too much.

HOLDER. Too much? On Homer?

SUSAN. We have other things to do.

HOLDER. Such as what?

SUSAN. Other courses. Other activities.

HOLDER. I know the courses. I've heard of the activities. I hear the major activity is avoiding work for the courses.

SUSAN. That's just plain wrong.

HOLDER. Well, well. You feel that these activities, these courses are important?

SUSAN. Yes.

HOLDER. More important than Homer?

SUSAN. Yes.

HOLDER. (*With a sigh.*) Oh dear. And you speak for the whole class?

SUSAN. Yes.

HOLDER. And so I've got to speak for Homer, don't I? (HOLDER *paces back and forth, scratching his head, thinking.*) Or rather: Homer should speak for himself. As he has for three thousand years.

SUSAN. We feel—

HOLDER. Wait, wait. I'm thinking . . . There is an incident, in Book Two, of the *Iliad,* where an insolent soldier tries to persuade the Greeks to leave Troy. The Lord Odysseus listens to the man, and then hits him over the head with a sceptre. The soldier collapses, the rebellion subsides, and everyone falls into line on behalf of the Greeks. (*He turns to her proudly.*) There it is. Right in Homer. So . . . A week from Monday, I will ask for the papers. And anyone who does not hand one in, appropriately typed, with a minimum of mis-spellings, gets hit over the head with an F. For Fail. Then you will understand Homer.

SUSAN. I think . . .

HOLDER. Write *down* what you think. About Homer. And stop playing these silly games! (*Now all business, he goes to the lectern, speaks to the audience.*) Now in the time remaining, let us consider that passage in the *Odyssey*— (*Nodding offhandedly to* SUSAN.) you may

sit down— (*To audience.*) where Odysseus lies exhausted on the beach from his struggles in the sea. . . . (*She stands there helplessly as the lights dim on them and the lectern.*)

(*Lights up on* HOLDER'S *office. The* DEAN *enters, paces, pokes through a book or two. Finally* HOLDER *comes in, sees him.*)

HOLDER. Ah. Mein Dean.

DEAN. Where the hell have you been? I've called all over campus.

HOLDER. I got the message. (*He reaches into his pocket, brings out a fistful of little pink slips which he lets flutter one by one into the wastebasket.*) See the Dean . . . Call the Dean . . . please see or call the Dean . . . (*He throws the rest away.*) You rule a paper empire, Agamemnon.

DEAN. (*Patiently.*) Where were you?

HOLDER. Jogging. I jog. In the gym. Sound mind, sound body. Every day, after class, I jog two miles around the track. It's quite invigorating now that women use the athletic facilities. But then I always take a cold shower, and read the Stoics. (*Sits down behind his desk.*) Or else see my Dean.

DEAN. Gus . . .

HOLDER. Now be calm. Their strike is broken. Strike! I abuse the dignity of American labor by terming that twitch a strike. Anyway, it's over. And Saint Joan will recant, and retire to the library to write a miserable, messy little paper.

DEAN. She's a bright girl. She did brilliantly in high school.

HOLDER. Which says all that needs to be said about American high schools.

DEAN. I'm not going to argue that, Gus.

HOLDER. I wouldn't.

DEAN. No, actually, I am the bearer of glad tidings.

HOLDER. Ah. A raise in salary.

DEAN. No, Gus. Better. I think I can swing your sabbatical now.

HOLDER. My sabbatical!

DEAN. We found the money, Gus. I told the treasurer how long you had taught without a break.

HOLDER. I am tired . . .

DEAN. So we found the dough, Gus. You can have the second semester off. Full pay.

HOLDER. Second semester! Why I could be in Greece this spring!

DEAN. Exactly, Gus. And I think we could even cough up a little extra for transportation.

HOLDER. I could see Delphi again! We could walk among the ruins!

DEAN. Right, Gus. So shall I put you down for it, then?

HOLDER. You may put me down immediately! (*Pause.*) But what will happen here?

DEAN. Oh, well . . .

HOLDER. Who will teach the Old One-Two?

DEAN. We'll work it out.

HOLDER. Will you bring someone in? I'd want to interview him. Do you have a man in mind from my field?

DEAN. Oh we'll dig up someone.

HOLDER. Who? Name names. What have they written? It's my course.

DEAN. Well I'm thinking of opening it up a little, Gus.

HOLDER. Opening it up?

DEAN. Letting various people take a crack at various versions . . .

HOLDER. Various people, various versions! Who and what?

DEAN. We're talking about the future, Gus . . .

HOLDER. We're talking about Birnbaum, and that Russell woman, and that black man, and all those other barbarians whom you have brought into this department!

DEAN. They are fine, bright people . . .

HOLDER. You are trying to bribe me out of this place, so that those alien hordes can teach my Greeks!

DEAN. Oh Christ, Gus!

HOLDER. You *gave* them Christ! You gave them the Bible, and Dante, and Shakespeare, and they threw it all away! Very well! Now let them divide the whole modern world between them! They'll never get their hands on my Greeks!

DEAN. They are not your Greeks, Gus . . .

HOLDER. They are mine, and I'll stand and protect them like a Spartan at Thermopylae! I will not allow these people, with their beards, and their cheap careerism, and their peasant sensibilities, to get their foul, unwashed hands on my Greeks!

DEAN. Oh can it, Gus.

HOLDER. The Greeks are mine. And they stay mine. And I stay here. And I will not be lured onto the rocks by the siren song of a sabbatical spring in Greece!

DEAN. At least think of your wife!

HOLDER. My wife?

DEAN. At least discuss it with her.

HOLDER. My wife stays out of this.

DEAN. That's just it. You keep her out there in the woods. You never bring her in. I never see her at the functions.

HOLDER. Don't you dare mention my wife!

DEAN. Oh Gus . . .

HOLDER. And don't call me Gus. I'm Professor Holder to you. And I am in charge of the Greeks!

DEAN. The course is doomed.

HOLDER. Not while I'm alive. And no Dean can prevent me from teaching it.

DEAN. I'm going to try.

HOLDER. Fine. Try. Take away my classroom. I'll teach it in the halls. Take away my schedule. I'll teach it at night. Take away my students, and I'll teach it to the janitor who comes in to erase from the blackboard the presumptuous scrawls of Birnbaum, Russell, and John-

son. Now please go. I have work to do. Unlike them, I read. I study. I prepare. (*He picks up a book. The* DEAN *looks at him, then storms out angrily. After the* DEAN *has gone,* HOLDER *puts down his book and dials the telephone.*) Darling, I'll be late tonight . . . No, I've got to work . . . I want to be exceptional this term . . . I have the feeling it's crucial . . . No, I'll get a sandwich from the machines, and be home very late. I'll walk from the bus . . . Goodbye, darling. I'll miss you, as always.

(*The lights fade up on the* DEAN'S *office. The* DEAN *storms in, goes to his telephone, pushes a button.*)

DEAN. Get me Professor Holder's home, will you? . . . They live somewhere out in Arcadia . . . (*He waits, shuffling angrily through papers. The telephone buzzes. He answers.*) Hello? . . . Is this Mrs. Holder? . . . We've never met, Mrs. Holder, but I'm your husband's Dean, and I think he's making a serious mistake, and I'd like to come out and talk to you about it some time . . . Now? . . . Right now? (*Consults watch, memo calendar.*) But I've got— (*Decides.*) All right. Now. (*Grabs a pencil and pad.*) Yes . . . Beyond the church . . . Beyond the graveyard . . . Turn right at a grove of trees. Yes. Fine. Got it. I'll be there . . . Goodbye, Mrs. Holder. (*Hangs up; pushes a button; speaks into other telephone.*) Cancel all appointments for the rest of the day. (*Hangs up; gets up and grabs his coat and leaves as the light fade on his office.*)

(*The lights come up on* SUSAN GREEN'S *dormitory room. Her telephone is ringing. She comes in carrying a stack of books which she throws angrily down on her bed. She answers the telephone.*)

SUSAN. Hello? . . . No, I'm sorry, Tommy. I can't go out after all. I'm going to write the paper. I said I'm going to write it. Everyone else has chickened out, and is

writing one, and I'm going to do it too . . . Oh yes I am . . . I took every book on Homer out of the library, and I'm cutting all my other classes, and I'm going to write me the best goddamn paper he ever say . . . Oh yes, footnotes, references, maps, the works! . . . And I'm going to have it typed professionally at a buck a page. . . . And I'm going to show up in class every day. And sit there with my eager little eyes on him. And nod at his sappy points. And smile at his crumby jokes. And take huge stacks of notes . . . Oh yes. And after I've handed in the paper, and he's corrected it, I'm going to put on my best little dress from Pick and Puke. And comb my hair neat as a pin. And wear lipstick. And I'm going to show up in his office, and sit there with my knees together, and listen politely while he gasses on about my good work . . . No, no, wait. And then . . . and then . . . when he hands me the paper, when he hands it back, I'm going to stand up and say, very quietly and very clearly: "This is all you want, you chickenshit bastard. A lot of old words from a lot of old books. Anyone dumb enough to take the time can write this crap. So you can take this paper, and you can shove it up your classical ass!" . . . I am, Tommy. I'm going to do it. And I'm going to tear it up and throw it in his face. He'll flunk me, but it'll be worth it. He'll learn something. So goodbye. I want to get going on this thing. (*She hangs up; gets ready to read and take notes; looks around; runs off angrily.*) Oh God! Does anybody have a pencil?

(*The lights come up on the lectern.* HOLDER *is finishing a lecture.*)

HOLDER. (*To audience.*) . . . and let me conclude the class by asking you to realize how much it means when Odysseus decides to leave his home and fight for the Greeks. Consider this line: (*He reads, translating.*) "He yearned to see the smoke from his own hearth, rising." (*He looks out, reflectively.*) Consider that. The natural

yearning of the man, the natural rising of the smoke. Both are the same. Men yearn for their hearth just as naturally, just as inevitably, as smoke rises from it. And so when Odysseus leaves Penelope at her loom in order to do battle for the Greeks, he is willfully turning his back on the very ground of his being. And that is very difficult to do. (*The bell rings.*) Ah. The bell. (*Holds up his hands.*) One moment please. I have corrected your papers. You may retrieve them, graded and with appropriate comments, outside my office at any time this afternoon. Those papers which are unusually good, or unusually bad, I will retain and return personally during office hours. Therefore, if your paper is not in the batch outside my door, see me personally at your convenience, and at mine. (*The lights dim on the lectern as he gathers up his things and exits.*)

(*The lights come up on the* DEAN *dictating, in his office, as he paces.*)

DEAN. Dear Mrs. Holder. (*Pause.*) Just a short quick note to thank you for a most pleasant afternoon. While we barely touched on the purpose of my visit, I enjoyed immensely our stroll through the misty orchard, our chat by the fire, the cheese, the wine, the music in the background . . . (*He forgets he is dictating, continues dreamily.*) the highlights in your hair . . . your deep dark eyes . . . your throaty voice with its mysterious accent . . . (*Pause. He dreams. Then he snaps out of it. He adjusts his dictaphone and starts again.*) Dear Mrs. Holder. I have always been especially fond of Simone Signoret . . . (*Stops; starts again.*) Dear Mrs. Holder. You might think that we administrators lead shallow, rootless, abstract lives. (*Pause.*) We do. (*Pause.*) Which is why we need occasionally to drink at the well . . . lean on the breast . . . touch the source. . . . (*Pause; starts again.*) Dear Mrs. Holder. Just a quick note. Just a quick , , , Just a quickie . . . (*Pause; puts down his*

dictaphone; looks up a number in his rotary memorandum file, and dials impulsively.) Hi. This is— (*Pause.*) How did you know I'd call. (*Pause; laughs.*) Yes, well, listen, I feel we barely touched—on the purpose of my visit, and I'd like to come out again. (*Pause.*) Tonight? Dinner? But I'd prefer it if he wasn't—? (*Pause.*) Dinner it is, then. I'll be there. Goodbye, Simone Signoret—I mean, Mrs. Holder. (*Hangs up dreamily, then pushes a button on his intercom.*) Call my wife. Tell her to take the kids to MacDonald's. I've got to go out of town for the evening. (*The lights dim on the* DEAN.)

(*The lights come up on* HOLDER'S *office, where* SUSAN *now sits demurely gotten up, jaw set, hair neat and tied back, hands clasped in her lap. After a moment* HOLDER *come in. He sees her.*)

HOLDER. Ah. Miss Susan Green.

SUSAN. The door was open. So I came in.

HOLDER. How well you look.

SUSAN. (*Coldly.*) Thank you.

HOLDER. You've changed a great deal.

SUSAN. I've changed my clothes.

HOLDER. They're very becoming. I am reminded of a line from the *Electra:* "I now wear different robes." (*He sits behind his desk; stares intently at her.*)

SUSAN. What about my paper?

HOLDER. Ah. Your paper.

SUSAN. It wasn't in the pile. Do you have it?

HOLDER. Of course I have it. By all means I have it. (*He continues to stare at her.*)

SUSAN. May I see it?

HOLDER. (*Snapping out of it.*) Oh of course. (*He rummages through his briefcase.*) I have it right here. (*He gets it out, holds it.*) I've read it three times. Once last night, once this morning, and once about an hour ago. (*Pause. He looks at it.*)

SUSAN. May I have it back?

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