

SHIPS

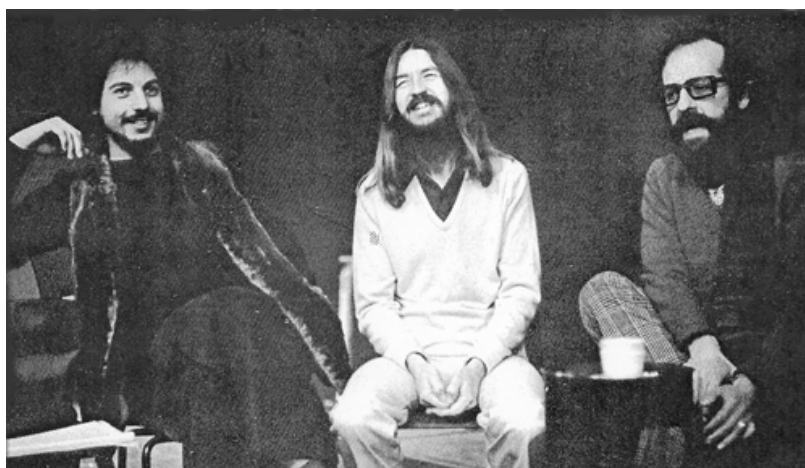
A PLAY FOR THEATRE
by ALAN WAKEMAN

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All rights whatsoever in this play are strictly reserved and professional applications for permission to perform it must be made in advance, before rehearsals begin, to:

awakeman@btinternet.com

However, amateur drama groups will be pleased to hear that I'm usually prepared to grant permission for amateur productions without payment, but do ask for my name to be included in the credits. I appreciate being informed in advance of performance dates and especially enjoy receiving copies of photographs, programmes, flyers, posters etc.



Three members of Gay Sweatshop at a press conference to launch the group's first season of gay plays in February 1975: (left to right) Gerald Chapman, director of 'Ships', Alan Wakeman, author of 'Ships', Roger Baker, founder member of the group.

The first performance of 'Ships' was at *The Ambiance Lunch-Hour Theatre Club* off Shaftesbury Avenue in London's West End at Inter-Action's *Almost Free Theatre* in Rupert Street on Monday 31st March 1975 with the following cast:

'Coffee'

Bill: Andrew Tourell

Terry: Anthony Smees

'Tea'

Bill: Andrew Tourell

Margaret: Elaine Ives-Cameron

'Wine'

Michael: Jim Duggan

Dim: Iain Armstrong

Streaky: Timothy Welsh

Terry: Anthony Smees

Margaret: Elaine Ives-Cameron

Roger: Barry Parman

An Inter-Action/Gay Sweatshop Production designed by Norman Coates and directed by Gerald Chapman.

Other productions have been mounted in the Netherlands, Australia, Brazil, New Zealand and Poland.

Author's Note (August 2008):

I've slightly revised the text to enable new productions to continue to be set in the present moment.

The following programme notes were used for the original Inter-Action/Gay Sweatshop production:



A great city multiplies chance encounters with strangers until they become a daily commonplace; yet every such encounter could still be the beginning of a marvellous adventure. This is the excitement of the city; this is why we put up with the pandemonium and the pace, the pollution and the pressure. How paradoxical then that we should spend so much of our time pretending that those people queuing with us for the bus, or sitting next to us in a restaurant, are not real; and how paradoxical the consequences of our actions because it results in our fellow citizens becoming as isolated from us as the myriad dummies arranged in graceful poses in glittering shop windows all over the city. For the truth is that, like us, every one of them has lived a life of 60-minute hours, 24-hour days, 365-day years, year in and year out, leading inexorably to this particular moment when we sit together in this particular theatre waiting for this particular play to start...

CAST

in order of appearance

TERRY

Cockney, gorgeous, flirtatious, cheerful, cheeky, skin-tight jeans, early 20s.

BILL

*Well-spoken, serious, attractive, bored, successful, mid 30s. **Not camp!***

MARGARET

Suburban, smart, respectable, mid 30s.

MICHAEL

Southern Irish accent, charismatic, intelligent, although a tramp and scruffy, he is not filthy; age indeterminate.

DIM

Cockney accent, scruffy, filthy, sullen, surly, age indeterminate.

STREAKY

Scruffy skinhead; aged about 20.

ROGER

Ageing flower-child with long hair and Jesus look.

(The doorbell rings. Bill answers it.)

Terry: Morning! Gas fitter. Come to see about a leak.

Bill: Oh. Yes. Come in. The kitchen's through here. I think I know where the leak is, actually. I think it's that joint where the pipe goes into the stove.

Terry: Right you are. Just leave it to me.

Bill: I'll be in the other room, if you need anything.

Terry: Right you are, matey. Just leave it to me.

(Terry gets down to work. Bill goes to another room, sits down at a computer, types a few words and then looks towards Terry.)

(Bill gets up again and returns to speak to Terry.)

Bill: Er... Hallo! Er... it occurred to me you might like a cup of coffee...

Terry: Wouldn't say no. Can't use your cooker though. I've 'ad to turn off your stop-cock.

Bill: Oh really. That's all right. I can use the electric kettle.

(He fills the kettle and plugs it in.)

How long have you been doing this job?

Terry: Couple of years.

Bill: Do you like it?

Terry: What's there to like? Wasting me life, aren't I? Every day, another day gone - and I'm standing 'ere scratching meself.

Bill: Oh dear! Do you always wear jeans to work in?

Terry: Course. They're practical. They're cheap. What else should I wear?

Bill: *(Laughing.)* I don't think that's the only reason people wear them.

Terry: Oh no. What other reason would there be then?

Bill: Well, some people wear them because they think it makes them look... sexy.

Terry: *(Laughing.)* If you're feeling sexy, it's more a matter of taking things off, not putting them on, i'n'it?

Bill: *(Laughing.)* Yes.

(The kettle boils.)

Terry: Your water's boiling, matey.

Bill: What?

Terry: Your kettle - it's boiling.

Bill: Oh, the water! Yes. Thanks.

(Bill prepares cups, makes coffee etc. Terry watches him.)

Terry: So... er... you reckon they make me look sexy, do yer?

Bill: I didn't say that. I said other people.

Terry: Fellers are always making passes at me. I dunno why.

Bill: I wonder why that could be.

Terry: Wha'd'yer mean? I don't encourage no one!

Bill: Some people might find your manner of dress... provocative.

Terry: I'm only wearing a pair of old jeans, for Chrissake!

Bill: How do you like your coffee?

Terry: In a mug.

Bill: I meant, what do you want in it?

Terry: Oh the usual things. Ecstasy. LSD. What yer got?

Bill: I've got sugar and milk.

Terry: Yeah, well I'll 'ave both them.

(Bill pours milk, picks up sugar bowl and taps it.)

Two... There, that's done. Shouldn't 'ave no more trouble with that. Just needed a spot of grease up your flexible 'ose.

Bill: Oh really! Thanks. Here's your coffee.

Terry: Ta.

(Bill takes his own coffee and returns to his work. Terry wanders about and reacts to what he sees through a door.)

Is that a waterbed?

Bill: Er, yes, it is.

Terry: Straight up! Is it true what they say about them?

Bill: What's that?

Terry: You know. They're supposed to be a knock-out for... you know.

Bill: Oh that. Yes, it's true.

Terry: Straight up! (*Pause.*) I've never erm... tried a waterbed.

Bill: Haven't you now?

Terry: I'd be interested to 'ave a go.

Bill: Would you now?

Terry: Don't you get seasick?

Bill: It only moves for a minute or two after you get in. You get used to it. I don't even notice it anymore.

Terry: Well it'd make an interesting change for me.

(There is a pause. They look at each other.)

Might even bring a bit of excitement into me life, don't yer think?

Bill: Have you... finished the job?

Terry: Yeah. I've just got your stop-cock to turn on again; then I'm through.

(Terry returns to kitchen, turns on stop-cock, picks up his toolbag and turns to find Bill has followed and is standing looking at him.)

Well, I must be pushing off. Another young 'ousewife is awaiting my special service, somewhere. Just sign 'ere.

Bill: Thank you for doing the job so... expertly. (*Signing.*) Listen... do please feel free to... come and try the waterbed... erm... sometime...

Terry: I didn't really mean it, matey. It was just a passing fancy, you know.

(Bill opens door. Terry goes through it.)

Keep smiling, sunshine. You're not so bad-looking yerself. You never know what the tooth fairy might bring yer... one of these nights! See yer!

(Terry exits and immediately re-enters and rings the doorbell again. Bill answers it.)

Morning! Gas fitter. (Aye aye! Bit smart in 'ere, i'n'it? Rich bastard!) Come to see about a leak.

Bill: Oh. (Christ! What a gorgeous boy!) Yes. Come in. The kitchen's through here. (Damn! Why must these temptations be thrust at me?) I think I know where the leak is, actually. I think it's that joint where the pipe goes into the stove.

Terry: Right you are. Just leave it to me. (One of them! Got your number, matey. Fancy yer chances, do yer?)

Bill: I'll be in the other room, if you need anything.

Terry: Right you are, matey. Just leave it to me.

(Terry gets down to work. Bill goes to another room, sits down at a computer, types a few words and then looks towards Terry.)

Bill: (Okay, so you're a sexy-looking number, but cocky little oiks like you are always lousy in bed...)

Terry: (Just look at this pad! Some people 'ave all the bleedin' luck. I bet I could really screw this geezer if I played me cards right. 'E's bound to 'ave a go at me.)

Bill: (...so I definitely won't make a pass at him. My life's far too complicated already. Still... I suppose it's only civilised to offer him some coffee.)

(Bill gets up again and returns to speak to Terry.)

Er... Hallo! Er... it occurred to me you might like a cup of coffee...

Terry: (We're off already, are we?) Wouldn't say no. Can't use your cooker though. I've 'ad to turn off your stop-cock.

Bill: Oh really.

Terry: (Yeah, really. You lecherous bastard!)

Bill: That's all right. I can use the electric kettle.

(He fills the kettle and plugs it in.)

(Why does this keep happening to me? It's not fair. Other people get funny little men in baggy overalls. I have to get beautiful boys in skin-tight jeans. It's just not fair.) How long have you been doing this job?

Terry: Couple of years.

Bill: Do you like it?

Terry: What's there to like? Wasting me life, aren't I? Every day, another day gone - and I'm standing 'ere scratching meself.

Bill: Oh dear! Do you always wear jeans to work in? (Damnation! Why did I ask him that? I must be more careful.)

Terry: (And we're over the first!) Course. They're practical. They're cheap. What else should I wear?

Bill: *(Laughing.)* I don't think that's the only reason people wear them. (As if you didn't know how well they shown off that sexy arse of yours!)

Terry: ('Ere we go!) Oh no. What other reason would there be then?

Bill: (My god! I do believe he's fishing for compliments!) Well, some people wear them because they think it makes them look... sexy.

Terry: (*Laughing.*) (Oh yeah! Was I right, or was I wrong?!) If you're feeling sexy, it's more a matter of taking things off, not putting them on, i'n'it?

Bill: (*Laughing.*) Yes. (And very delectable you'd look too, with nothing on, you little prick-teaser.)

(*The kettle boils.*)

(But I'd bet you'd bloody soon thump me one if I tried anything. Anyway, you're not nearly as fanciable as you think you are... so now I'm going to make you a cup of instant and leave you all alone while I get on with my work.)

Terry: Your water's boiling, matey.

Bill: What?

Terry: Your kettle - it's boiling.

Bill: Oh, the water! Yes. Thanks.

(*Bill prepares cups, makes coffee etc.*)

Terry: (Funny. 'E's gone all quiet. Lost the knack, 'ave you? Despite yer trendy gear and yer fancy pad? Probably chatting up is as far as you ever get, i'n'it, matey? Don't s'pose you ever make it to the pit no more, at your age? And you really fancy me too, don't yer?) So... er... you reckon they make me look sexy, do yer?

Bill: I didn't say that. I said other people.

Terry: Fellers are always making passes at me. I dunno why.

Bill: I wonder why that could be.

Terry: Wha'd'yer mean? I don't encourage no one! (But I would like to do it once, just for the 'ell of it. Just to find out what it's like. It's all part of life's rich mosaic pattern, after all.)

Bill: Some people might find your manner of dress... provocative.

Terry: I'm only wearing a pair of old jeans, for Chrissake!

Bill: (Yeah. And the fact that they're so tight that you must've been melted down and poured into them is purely coincidental, I suppose.) How do you like your coffee?

Terry: In a mug.

Bill: (A joker as well as a prick-teaser!) I meant, what do you want in it?

Terry: Oh the usual things. Ecstasy. LSD. What yer got?

Bill: I've got sugar and milk.

Terry: Yeah, well I'll 'ave both them.

(Bill pours milk then picks up sugar bowl and taps it.)

Two... There, that's done. Shouldn't 'ave no more trouble with that. Just needed a spot of grease up your flexible 'ose. (Tinker Bell!)

Bill: Oh really! Thanks. Here's your coffee.

Terry: Ta.

Bill: (And goodbye, lover boy!)

(Bill takes his own coffee and returns to his work. Terry wanders about with his coffee and reacts to what he sees through a door.)

Terry: Is that a waterbed?

Bill: Er, yes, it is.

Terry: Straight up! ('Ow about that then?! Right, that's it! After all, 'e's not that bad-looking and 'e fancies me a ton.) Is it true what they say about them?

Bill: What's that?

Terry: You know. They're suppose to be a knock-out for... you know. (*Sex* you dumb cluck!)

Bill: Oh that. Yes, it's true.

Terry: Straight up! ('Ere we go then!) I've never erm... tried a waterbed.

Bill: Haven't you now?

Terry: I'd be interested to 'ave a go.

Bill: Would you now?

Terry: ('E 'asn't twigged.) Don't you get seasick?

Bill: It only moves for a minute or two after you get in. You get used to it. I don't even notice it anymore.

Terry: Well it'd make an interesting change for me.

(There is a pause. They look at each other.)

('E really 'asn't twigged.)

Might even bring a bit of excitement into me life, don't yer think?

Bill: (My god! I do believe he's making advances!) Have you... finished the job?

Terry: Yeah. I've just got your stop-cock to turn on again, then I'm through. (You know your trouble, matey? You don't fancy yer chances 'alf enough. Pity. Could've been fun.)

(Terry returns to kitchen, turns on stop-cock, picks up his toolbag and turns to find Bill has followed and is standing looking at him.)

Terry: Well, I must be pushing off. Another young 'ousewife is awaiting my special service, somewhere. Just sign 'ere.

Bill: Thank you for doing the job so... expertly. (*Signing.*) Listen... do please feel free to... come and try the waterbed... erm... sometime...

Terry: (Too late, sunshine! Missed yer chance, didn't yer?!) I didn't really mean it, matey. It was just a passing fancy, you know.

(Bill opens door. Terry goes through it.)

Keep smiling, sunshine. You're not so bad-looking yerself. You never know what the tooth fairy might bring yer... one of these nights! See yer!

(Terry exits and both men remain motionless on either side of the door.)

(BLACKOUT.)

(A train is heard entering the station and stopping. The doors open. Enter Margaret. She stops to look at a poster advertising rum or vodka showing a sexy female model wearing a tight, provocatively-cut, scarlet tee-shirt. Margaret is outraged by the poster and begins hurling abuse at it. Note: the exact colour of the tee-shirt in the poster is not critical, but the grubby garment Margaret removes from her handbag on Page 19 should be recognisably the same colour and the word "scarlet" in Margaret's dialogue will need revising throughout if a different colour is used.)

Margaret: *(To poster.)* You think you're so clever, don't you? Eat it up! Drink it down! Put it on! Take it off! Buy this, buy that! Oh yes, you think you've really got it made, don't you? Oh my word, yes, you think you know it all! Look at your soft manageable hair... and your creamy smooth complexion! ... Well, let me tell you, you'll be found out one day, my girl!

(She fumbles in her bag and produces a felt-tip pen.)

I'll show you what's going to happen to you - you little hussy!

(She begins drawing 'age lines' on the model's face, spitting out short phrases as she makes each mark.)

First you'll have lines here! And then you'll have lines here! And then you'll have lines here! And then you'll find out what it's like to be lonely, little Miss Provocative!

(Enter Bill. He walks past her, then stops and looks back.)

Don't you understand, you silly cow?! Don't you understand?! They're all bastards?! The bloody lot of them! Bastards! **Bastards!**

(She sinks to the ground, lets her bags drop round her and begins to cry and sob alternately. Bill approaches her nervously, then crouches down and speaks to her.)

Bill: Are you all right?

Margaret: No! No. Oh, no. I'm not. I don't know what... to do...

Bill: Do you need help?

Margaret: Please! Please, could you?

Bill: I live just round the corner from here - would you like to come and... have a cup of tea with me?

Margaret: Oh yes, please! But I don't think I can walk...

Bill: Here, let me help you...

(He helps her to her feet and together they go out into the street.)

Margaret: It's being underground that does it. I should've known better. It's claustrophobia you see. People don't understand. I feel better already - out here in the open air.

Bill: I see. And have you had these... attacks before?

Margaret: What?

Bill: These attacks of... claustrophobia?

Margaret: Oh yes. Lots and lots of times.

Bill: Here we are. This is my door...

*(They enter **Bill's** flat. **Margaret** looks about her avidly.)*

Margaret: Isn't this nice? You are lucky. I never would have imagined this.

Bill: Right. I'll go and put the kettle on. The living-room's through there... Please make yourself comfortable.

Margaret: Do you have a loo I could use?

Bill: Of course. It's through there...

*(**Margaret** goes to the bathroom. **Bill** goes to the kitchen and makes tea. **Margaret** looks at herself in the bathroom mirror in silence and then sobs.)*

Margaret: Oh god! Oh god! Oh god!

*(**Margaret** takes out a compact, lipstick and so on and 'puts on a face'. She contemplates her handiwork in the mirror. **Bill** brings tea for two on a tray. **Margaret** goes back into the living-room.)*

Bill: Ah, there you are. Do you take sugar and milk in your tea?

Margaret: Whatever must you have thought of me? I must've looked simply dreadful! Lying on the ground, crying like a baby!

Bill: I just thought you needed help. Do you take sugar and milk in your tea?

Margaret: Huh! More than those other swine! Did you see them? Walking right past me as if I was a piece of old baggage!

Bill: Well, you're looking much better now. Really, very much better. Do you take... sugar?

Margaret: Yes, but no milk, please. I can't stand milk. Well, I just can't explain it. I can't think what came over me.

Bill: Here you are. Drink this. You'll feel much better.

Margaret: Oh I feel perfectly all right now, thank you. *(She takes the tea.)* Perfectly.

Bill: Good.

(Margaret finds and sits down on a sofa. There is a pause. They drink their tea.)

Bill: Have you ever thought of... going by bus? I mean, if the underground worries you so much?

Margaret: *(Very matter of fact.)* Oh it does, it does. I can't stand being down there. I get this feeling of being... trapped, you know, with no escape, and then I panic. *(She sips her tea demurely.)*

Bill: So why... don't you go by bus?

Margaret: You're right. You're absolutely right. I really shouldn't go down there. I know it. But you see it is the most convenient way for me to get to work, really it is. If I go by bus, I have this long walk across the park to the stop and... sometimes...

Bill: Yes?

Margaret: Well, only very occasionally, you understand... I get this strange feeling that the path...

Bill: Yes?

Margaret: Well, I know it sounds silly, but I get this feeling that the path is going to start moving... and that I'm going to lose my balance. So I panic and have to find somewhere to sit down. And then people start staring at me... like they were in the underground - as if they wanted to, well, as if they wanted to murder me! One day...

Bill: Yes?

Margaret: Oh, nothing.

Bill: No, please tell me.

Margaret: *(Cheerfully.)* Oh, it's just a silly fantasy I have - to get a machine-gun and shoot them all. Do you ever feel you could just shoot everyone - everyone in the whole world?

Bill: Er, no, actually. I can't say that I do.

Margaret: My mother said that I... But I mustn't talk so much. *(Laughs gaily.)* I must not talk so much.

Bill: Please feel free to talk as much as you want to.

Margaret: You're very kind. You have... kind eyes.

Bill: Thank you.

Margaret: Do you want to see a pullover I bought this morning, in a sale?! It was a real bargain if I do say so myself. Not that I think you're the kind to contradict me.

Bill: Of course not.

Margaret: Do you want to see it?

Bill: Yes, please.

(Margaret takes a plain, dark-green, pullover out of a Harrods bag and displays it for Bill to admire.)

Margaret: It's pure cashmere! Olive green, you see... I always wear olive green. It goes with my eyes, you see. I know what suits me!

(Bill looks at her clothes. She's wearing no olive green at all.)

Do you like it?

Bill: Yes. It's very smart.

Margaret: Isn't it?! Now you obviously have good taste. Now my mother...

Bill: Yes?

Margaret: My mother wanted me to buy a scarlet one! Can you imagine that? But I hate scarlet! She's always telling me what to do. She's always telling me what she likes. She never lets me buy what I want. Oh no! I say to her: 'Listen, mother,' I say 'I'm over 40 now, and women over 40 don't wear scarlet unless they're whores!' But she still goes on and on about it.

'Scarlet'll make you look sexy!'

I could easily machine-gun her! I expect I will one day.

(Bill's concern is beginning to turn to alarm. He looks at the telephone, and then at the door.)

She makes me go to parties, you know.

Bill: Don't you like parties?

Margaret: Goodness me, no! All those people! I stand there. I feel trapped. No escape. And then I panic and want to machine-gun them. Everyone feels that, don't they? You must have felt that, haven't you?

Bill: Erm, no, actually.

Margaret: Yes, everyone feels that, don't they? From time to time, I mean. Everyone feels as if she could just shoot them all - I mean, if she had a gun. *Bam bam bam bam bam bam bam bam bam bam bam!* Hah! All dead! Hah! Then they'd be sorry! Then they'd leave me alone! Are you a photographer?

Bill: Sorry?

Margaret: I said: 'Are you a photographer?' 'ARE YOU A PHO-TOG-GRA-PHER?' I mean, you're very good-looking and you have this beautiful flat. I just thought you might be a photographer. Not that I can see any photographs anywhere. But I just thought, you know, like that...

Bill: Well, I can't see that it follows from any of the things you've said but, yes, as a matter of fact, I am.

Margaret: I thought so. I'm very perceptive, you see. She always did admit that...
'You're a perceptive little bitch, aren't you?'

She was always calling me a bitch, the cow! And I bet you're always photographing beautiful women in tight, scarlet tee-shirts who simply throw themselves at you... So obviously you wouldn't be interested in a dowdy old wreck like me, would you? I mean, why should you be? Why should you want to know someone my age?! So there's no need for me even to begin thinking in that direction, is there? *(She looks at the bedroom door.)* No need at all. *(She stuffs the pullover back into its bag with a gesture of finality.)* Thinking can be such a bother, can't it?

(She directs a social smile at Bill who is simply bemused and doesn't know what to do or say.)

Have you ever seen a film called 'Blow Up'?

Bill: Er, no, actually. I don't think so.

Margaret: It's about this handsome young photographer; and these two girls go to his studio to try to get some modelling work. But they get something else. My goodness me, yes! They get some thing quite different! Have you ever raped anyone?

Bill: Look, I think we'd better get something straight. In the first place, you're not a dowdy old wreck. In fact, you're very attractive, and you know it. In the second place, I don't do that kind of photography - I do portraits. And, in the third place... I'm gay, actually.

Margaret: Gay? What can you mean?

Bill: I'm homosexual. I prefer men to women, sexually. So you see, you have absolutely nothing to fear...

Margaret: How marvellous! How marvellous! Now my mother would have said I was wrong to come here. Yes, she definitely would have said so...

(Margaret's impersonations of her mother gradually get the upper hand.)

You're never to go into strange men's lodgings! Do you hear?! They all want the same thing, and it's our job to make sure they don't get it!

But mother, how am I ever to meet the man I'm going to marry?

Margaret: You'll marry when I say so, my girl, and not before! There's only one fate for girls who go into strange men's lodgings. And no daughter of mine is going to end up like that...

Oh mother! I'm quite old enough to look after myself...

Old enough! Hah! You're a child! That's what you are! A child!

(*To Bill.*) Do you have orgies here?

Bill: What?

Margaret: Orge-eez?

Bill: No. (*Pause.*) I have a lover, actually.

Margaret: Lucky! What's his name?

Bill: (*Thinking about his encounter with the Terry.*) I don't need anything more...

Margaret: Lucky! What's his name?

Bill: Jimmy.

Margaret: Lucky, lucky you! Now me, I'm all alone in this whole rotten world. I haven't even got anywhere to sleep tonight! Can you imagine that? I don't even know where I'm going to be sleeping tonight! Imagine!

Bill: Are you telling me you have no home to go to?

Margaret: Not that I want you to think that I'd like to stay here! Oh no! My goodness me, no! It would never even occur to me to ask you. In fact... (*She jumps to her feet as if jerked up by someone else.*) I'll be leaving now. You've already been very kind. And I expect you have lots of... photographs to take, so... (*She catches sight of the tea things and turns to Bill as if he had spoken to her.*) Yes, I would! Just a teeny drop more. How kind of you to ask me...

(*She hands her cup to Bill who refills it. She sits down again.*)

I wonder if you're completely gay. My mother is no fool and she's always telling me to be very very very careful. And I always take her advice in everything...

They'll think up all sorts of tricks to catch us out. They'll lie. They'll cheat. They'll pretend to be gay.

Yes, mother.

We woman must stand firm. I know he's very good-looking but it's time you left...

Yes, mother. Can I finish my tea first?

Bill: I assure you you are in no danger. If you have no home, why haven't you got any luggage with you?

Margaret: Everything I own in the whole world is here! (*She clutches the Harrods bag to her.*)

Bill: But you said you just bought that pullover in a sale...

Margaret: So I did. So I did. It's true. I never lie. But that was... ages ago.

Bill: This morning?

Margaret: Yes.

Bill: What about your mother? Can't you go to your mother's?

Margaret: She's dead.

Bill: Oh!

Margaret: She died years ago.

Bill: I'm sorry.

Margaret: (*Casually.*) Oh, I can hardly remember her. She was a good mother to me. She tried to protect me from my wickedness. But now I'm alone in the whole rotten world and must fend for myself.

Bill: I'm sorry. I must've misunderstood you.

Margaret: Oh, she still *talks* to me. But it's not the same, is it?

(Bill looks at her with concern - almost tenderness. She looks back at him.)

Kind eyes.

(Margaret lets her bags fall round her again and slumps back into her chair.)

Bill: Look, I don't know how to say this, but...

Margaret: (*Cutting in.*) Sometimes I think I'll buy a net and go out and catch somebody and take them home with me, and keep them forever... and then I won't be lonely anymore. Have you ever seen a film called '*The Collector*'?

Bill: Er, no, I haven't.

Margaret: No, of course you haven't! You're much too young to have seen an old film like that, aren't you? (*Laughs.*) Sometimes, I forget how old I am!

Bill: Listen, I'm sorry you're lonely, and I'm sorry I can't help... but...

Margaret: (*Picking up her handbag and cutting in.*) As a matter of fact, I've got to go now.

Bill: Have you? Only you see, I have to go out now too.

Margaret: I'm going. I'm going. Right now. But... I wonder if I could just... use your loo again? (*Laughs.*) The tea, you know, goes through so quickly, doesn't it?

Bill: Of course. Help yourself.

(Margaret exits to bathroom. Bill goes to telephone and dials a number. During the following telephone conversation, Margaret looks at herself in the mirror then opens her handbag and takes out an old rag. She sucks her thumb and nurses the old rag looking like a child of 5. The rag is an old scarlet tee-shirt.)

Hallo Jimmy...

No, you were right - it was the joint where the pipe goes into the stove. But I'm ringing about someth...

Yes they came this morning; but Jimmy, listen - I'm ringing about something else. As I was coming out of the tube I saw this woman lying on the ground, sobbing. She was in a terrible state and everyone was just walking past her. I mean, some people were actually stepping over her as if she was...

I know I shouldn't; but Jimmy, love, that's not the point...

The point is that she's still here. She's about to leave and I don't know what to do...

But Jimmy, love, she seems to be completely mad. I don't know if I ought to let her just... walk off into the night.

She says she hasn't.

In the loo.

Yes, quite ordinary things really. You're right.

A leather handbag, a carrier bag with an expensive, brand-new pullover in it. Yes, I suppose you're right.

All right, love. Thanks for the...

(Margaret re-enters from bathroom.)

See you in the foyer, then, at seven-thirty...

Right. Bye. And Jimmy?

I love you.

(Bill hangs up the receiver and turns to look at Margaret.)

Margaret: Was that your... boy-friend?

Bill: Er, yes.

Margaret: Lucky. Well, I'm just off.

Bill: You look a lot better now. I hope you'll be more careful in future.

Margaret: More careful?

Bill: About... going down the underground. Have you ever thought of going to see a doctor about your... claustrophobia?

Margaret: Oh, yes, of course. I've seen hundreds and hundreds of doctors. Well, thank you again for the tea. It's been a pleasure meeting you. I do so hope we'll meet again someday. Perhaps I could... come and visit you sometimes? But no. You're a good-looking young photographer and you're *gay*. What could you possibly want with an old hag like me?

(Bill starts to object.)

I know. I know. I'm very attractive, and I know it. Besides, you're got your... lover, Jimmy. Lucky. Now, have I got everything? *(Laughs.)* All my worldly goods!

(Bill picks up the Harrods bag and hands it to her.)

Bill: Look, I'm sorry I've got to go out. But Jimmy and I are going to the theatre this evening, and I said I'd pick up the tickets. But do, please, feel free to come and visit me again, if you want to...

Margaret: Kind. Kind eyes.

(She reaches out as if to touch him, but doesn't.)

Bill: And do you think you'll be all right - out there?

Margaret: All right? Of course. You've been very... Thank you so much. I hope you and, Jimmy, enjoy your visit to the theatre... Goodbye...

Bill: Good luck!

(Margaret walks off into the audience.)

(FADE TO BLACK)

(Michael, Dim and Streaky are occupying a bench as if it were a mansion. Streaky is in the middle and is asleep. As the lights come up, Michael is draining the last possible drop from a wine bottle. He holds it upside down and wrings it out like a rag. Dim is holding a cider bottle and watching him.)

Michael: In my beginning is my end.

(He places the empty bottle on the ground beside the bench with exaggerated care.)

Dim: That one's gone anyway.

(Dim laughs exaggeratedly and, using his cider bottle, repeats Michael's actions exactly.)

Mine too. Done. Finished. Over.

Michael: It's back in the hands of providence we are. Here comes someone...

(Enter Terry. He walks across determinedly not seeing the three men on the bench.)

Dim: Spare some change, please.

Michael: Good evening to you, sir! I wonder if...

(But Terry has ignored him. Michael gives him a two-finger salute. As Terry exits he encounters Margaret entering. They look at each other.)

(Seeing Margaret.) Aha! This looks more likely. *(He gets up to accost her.)*

Dim: Spent. Concluded. Consumed. Spare some change, please.

Michael: Good evening to you, madam! I wonder if you could spare a few pence for a bite to eat and a cup of tea?

Margaret: Oh, so that's it, is it? I might have guessed!

Michael: Just some small change, madam, for a bite to eat and a cup of tea.

Margaret: No. You'd only spend it on drink. I know your sort.

Dim: Emptied. Drained. Done.

Michael: Sure, and there's no alcoholic drink can be purchased for the price of a cup of tea, madam. Not according to my knowledge of this holy city, anyway.

Margaret: No. But for the price of *several* cups of tea, cadged from honest, respectable people! What about that, then?

Michael: Sure, I swear it, lady, on the holy book...

Margaret: Respectable people don't need to swear.

Michael: Then, on my word of honour, as a gentleman.

Margaret: Hah! That cuts no ice with me! You're no gentleman.

Michael: What exactly is it you want me to say, lady? Shall I swear it on my mother's name?

Margaret: (*Reacting strongly.*) Yes! Yes, swear it on your mother's name!

Michael: I swear, on my mother's name, God bless her! that I'll spend the few pence this *respectable* woman might feel able to spare, on food.

Margaret: And only on food.

Michael: On food, on wholefood, and nothing but food, so help me God!

(**Margaret** begins fumbling in her handbag.)

Bless you, madam. You'll never want for a friend when you have a heart of gold, they say.

Margaret: (*Producing a pound.*) Only on food, mind. You've sworn it.

Michael: That I have.

Margaret: Take it then. (*She gives him the money.*)

Michael: Bless you, mother!

(***Margaret** reacts to being called 'mother'. She takes a handful of five-pound notes from her bag and stuffs them in **Michael's** hand and runs off. **Michael** looks after her and then down at the money in his hand.*)

Now that, Dim lad, was as convincing a demonstration as you're ever likely to behold that our fate hangs on finding the right word!

(*He counts the money as he goes back to the bench and sits down. **Dim** looks at him with interest.*)

To think I ever doubted my vocation!

Dim: What'd she give you, then?

Michael: Thirty pieces of silver!

Dim: Eh?

Michael: I've sold another sliver of my soul, Dim lad.

Dim: You going to buy some more booze, then?

Michael: I am not. I've given my word.

Dim: She won't know.

Michael: *I'll* know!

Dim: She's gone. Exited. Departed.

Michael: Wanted to buy it for a pound, she did. And the likes of us not even allowed near the off-licence anyway. Makes you wonder.

Dim: Marched off. Taken her leave. Left the scene. (*To Michael.*) I've got stomach-ache.

Michael: And no wonder! You won't eat, will you. You daft boy!

Dim: I know as many words as you.

Michael: And wouldn't that be ape-like, if it were true? And me a Leo! Expect nothing, and sure, you can suffer no disappointment.

Dim: Ah, but is it better to lose it - meaning I s'pose you must've 'ad it once? Or is it better never to've 'ad it in the first place? Like me?

Michael: 'There is nothing either good or bad, but thinking makes it so.'

Dim: Good. Better. Best.

Michael: (*He stands up and bows extravagantly.*) I'm forever honouring your illustrious memory, you glorious, man. (*He sits down again.*) God, but I had a powerful dream last night! Powerful!

Dim: Bad. Worse. Worst. I've 'ad a terrible thought these last few days, plaguing me. Jesus! Terrible!

Michael: Out with it then! Thoughts have no place in that dark void you call a mind. Tell me your terrible thought and I'll tell you my demon dream.

Dim: Fearful. 'Orrible. Ghaaaastly!

Michael: Will you listen to the boy? Tell me this 'ghaaastly' thought, and I'll tell you my demon dream. I can't say fairer than that now, can I?

Dim: It's serious, Michael.

Michael: It's serious he wants me to be, and it's serious I always am - especially when I'm joking.

(*He catches sight of Roger approaching.*)

Holy Mary, Mother of God! Will you look what's coming?! It's *Himself*, coming to provide for us!

(*Enter Roger. He is carrying a bottle of wine and two loaves of homemade wholewheat bread. He smiles at Michael and Dim as he walks by and then exits again. Michael recovers his senses.*)

Good evening to you, friend! Please! Just...

(*Michael gets up to go after Roger, but the latter has heard him and turned back anyway. They meet at the side.*)

Michael: Sure, and I couldn't let a pair of honest eyes like those walk by without greeting them!

Roger: Thank you. You have honest eyes yourself.

Michael: (*Pointing at **Roger**'s bottle of wine.*) Would you be after letting us share in your good fortune, friend?

Roger: Well... I'm on my way to a party, and my friends asked me to bring a bottle and something to eat.

Michael: And what have you done with the fishes, then?

Roger: (*Smiling.*) What?

Michael: Sure it's only my little joke. Pay no heed to it.

Roger: I can easily get some more on the way. All right. Why not? Here you are - have it.

(***Roger** offers the bottle of wine to a disbelieving **Michael**.)*)

Michael: Sure I only meant a drop! Your friends needn't even notice.

Roger: No. It's all right. Go on. Take it. Please.

(***Michael** takes the bottle of wine.*)

May it warm your soul.

Michael: Spoken like an Irishman! Bless you, my friend! But, listen, will you not sit down with us and share it?

Roger: All right. I'd like to. Thank you.

(*This involves moving **Streaky** to one side so that **Roger** can sit between **Michael** and **Dim**. **Streaky** doesn't show any sign of life during this business. **Roger** breaks pieces off one of the loaves and offers them to **Michael** and **Dim**. **Dim** takes his piece, stares at it and elaborately places it on **Streaky**'s lap. **Michael** puts his piece beside him, opens the wine bottle - it's the kind with a cap, not a cork - and toasts the world.*)

Michael: Bless everyone who can smile! And sustain everyone who cannot!

(***Michael** drinks and passes the bottle to **Roger** who drinks in silence and passes it onto **Dim**. **Dim** doesn't drink but in a continuous movement the bottle passes from him to **Streaky** who awakes as if by magic, drinks, splutters and drinks again until **Dim** snatches the bottle away from him again and passes it back to **Roger**, again without drinking himself.*)

Roger: Don't you want any?

Dim: Not my drink.

(***Roger** passes the bottle back to **Michael**.)*)

Michael: Sure the daft boy will drink nothing but cider. But for you and me, wine is the only fitting drink, I'm thinking. *(He drinks again.)*

Dim: Useless drinking wine. Takes you up. Brings you down. Pointless.

Roger: Is there an off-licence anywhere nearby?

Michael: Indeed there is. And 'tis a miserable specimen of humanity inhabits it! He calls the police if we so much as go near...

(Roger stands up.)

Are you leaving us so soon, friend?

Roger: I'll be back in a minute. But can you tell me where the off-licence is, please?

Michael: Sure I'll walk with you and show you, if I may.

(Michael places the bottle on the ground with extreme care, points a finger at it and speaks to it as if it were a child.)

Stay there, mind!

(Michael gets up and exits with Roger. Dim watches them leave.)

Dim: 'I'll be back in a minute.'

'Sure I'll walk with you and show you, if I may.'

I, I, I.

Makes no bleeding sense. 'E thinks it does. 'E thinks everything does. 'E pays so much attention to *words* that 'e don't realise 'ow crucial it is. Streaky, listen! Why don't 'e realise 'ow crucial it is that nothing makes sense? Nothing! *(Pause.)* Terrible, that is! No, portentous! No, dire! Yeah, that's it. Why won't 'e realise 'ow dire it is?

(He looks at Streaky.)

Did you 'ear my question?

(He shakes Streaky who coughs but doesn't open his eyes.)

Did you? *Did you? Did you?!*

Streaky: Did a person speak?

(Re-enter Michael, singing.)

Michael: Oh what a beautiful evening!
Oh what a beautiful day!
I've got a wonderful feeling...

(He punches Dim on the shoulder.)

...something is coming your way!

(He sits down again.)

Michael: Are you not sometimes overcome with admiration for it all?

Dim: What?

Michael: Life, Dim, lad, life! *(He punches Dim again.)* Life! *(He indicates the trees and sky and sings it.)* **LIFE...!**

Dim: I've got stomach-ache.

Michael: Well, don't you go worrying about that. That lovely man has gone to get some soothing nectar for your poor, abused gut. And for him and me, there's still all this... *(He picks up the bottle of wine and holds it up to the light.)* Ripened in the sunlight, matured in the darkness. Like my poor, mortal soul.

Dim: What you on about?

Michael: Wine, Dim, lad, wine! You can keep your 'Morning Coffee' and your 'Afternoon Tea'! This *(he pats the bottle)* is the gift of holy truth... from compassionate gods, to lonely, suffering, lying, mortals, like ourselves.

Dim: I only drink cider.

Michael: And don't I know it!? Holy Mother! He's getting you some. Have I not been telling you this past five minutes? He's getting you some!

Dim: Is 'e really?

Michael: Sweet Jesus!

Dim: I love you.

Michael: And I love you too, you silly heap of a boy.

(He puts his arm round Dim and pulls him into a bear hug.)

Listen, tell me your serious thought and I'll tell you my demon dream.

Dim: It's not 'serious'. It's **dire**.

Michael: So tell it to me!

Dim: *(Pulling away.)* It's bleedin' dire!

Michael: *(Pushing him away.)* Dire, then. And aren't you becoming the perfect little pedant?!

Dim: Well... I...

Michael: *(Interrupting.)* Ah! Here's our fine new friend, back again!

(Re-enter Roger. He has another bottle of wine and a bottle of cider. He offers the cider to Dim.)

Roger: Here, this is for you.

(Dim takes the bottle, astonished.)

Roger: You did say it was cider you drink, didn't you?

(Dim nods.)

Michael: Bless you. You're a lovely man.

Roger: May I sit with you a little longer?

Michael: Indeed you may. We were hoping you would.

(Roger sits down again. He places the bottle of wine on the ground between his feet. Dim opens the bottle of cider and drinks from it as if it were a baby's bottle. He keeps the cider cap in his other hand.)

Roger: My name's Roger. Could you tell me your names, please?

Michael: Well, Roger, the sleeper on the end is *Streaky* - that being one of my little ironic jokes.

(Roger looks at Dim.)

Dim: *(Pointing at Michael.)* 'E calls me 'Dim'.

(Streaky splutters again.)

Roger: Is Streaky all right?

Michael: Oh, he's sound, Roger. He's sound. Never better. Beautiful clear speech you have - a joy to hear it. Are you a literary man? You have the eyes of a literary man.

Roger: I do write stuff, yes. But... I don't think I'd call it literary.

Michael: Stick to it! Sure if we'll only let them, the gods will speak through us. *(Pointing to a badge Roger is wearing.)* What is that, Roger?

Roger: It's a *Gay Vegetarian* badge.

Michael: Gay vegetarian, Roger? What is that?

Roger: 'Gay' for *homosexual* and 'vegetarian' for... *vegetarian*. *(Laughs.)* I'm a member of a group of *(laughs again)* gay vegetarians.

Dim: 'Omosexual vegetarians.

(Michael stands up.)

Michael: Give me your hand! A child of the future age, at last!

(Roger stands up and he and Michael shake hands. Michael keeps hold of him.)

Ah! 'Tis a rare treat to meet an honest man!

Roger: I try.

Michael: I had a friend who was a famous poet who was... like you. Ah, but not honest with it, like you. 'Tis fine honest eyes you have!

(Roger gently withdraws his hands and sits down again.)

Roger: Thank you. What did you mean by 'Child of the future age'?

Michael: Ah, that's a quote, Roger, from *William Blake*. A glorious genius of our magnificent language. Listen:

Children of the Future Age
Reading this indignant page,
Know that in a former time,
Love, sweet Love!
Was thought a crime.

(Michael sits down again. Dim stands up like a child doing a recitation.)

Dim: Dear Mother...
the Church is cold,
But the Ale-'ouse is 'ealthy
and pleasant and warm;
Besides I can tell where I am used well,
Such usage in 'eaven will never do well.
But if at the Church
they would give us some Ale,
And a pleasant fire our souls to regale,
We'd sing and we'd pray
all the live-long day,
Nor ever once wish
from the Church to stray.

Michael: Bravo, Dim, lad! Well done!

Dim: *(Sitting down again.)* 'Cept that I only like cider.

Michael: Tell me, Roger, what is it like for a man to love a man?

Roger: Are you so sure you've never loved one?

Michael: Ah! I see what you mean. And have you loved many?

Roger: *(Smiling.)* Only one.

Michael: I loved a woman once. Oh, just so much *(he indicates an inch)*. Ah, but she loved another, and it was so painful for me that I had to leave. I couldn't abide to be even in the same country as herself. 'Twas then I went on the road.

Dim: On the road!

Roger: What's it like, being on the road?

Dim: Trudging! Tramping! Pushing on!

Michael: Sure, most of the time it's magic. And it's the only way I know to keep from being swallowed up by... them.

Roger: So you've never regretted it?

Michael: I have not! I've loved every minute of my life. Sure regret is wasted energy.

Dim: Getting ahead! Overtaking! Everything's wasted energy, i'n'it?

Roger: May I see your palms?

Michael: Do you read palms, Roger?

Roger: A bit.

Michael: That's a different kind of magic, to be sure. But do you think it's true?

Roger: When I first started doing it, I didn't believe a word of it. It was just a way of getting closer to people. I like the physical contact and everyone likes talking about themselves. But I must admit, the more hands I look at, the more I begin to wonder if there might not be something in it.

Michael: So... *(he presents his palms to Roger)* what do you see?

(Roger bends over Michael's palms to look closely. Michael looks down at his bent head appreciatively.)

Roger: Well... it's a good, strong hand. You're a very simple man, but you have a strong sense of purpose. You find it easy to make decisions - even snap decisions - and then act on them.

(He looks up into Michael's eyes.)

That must be a great asset 'on the road'. You have very powerful emotions, but as you don't bottle them up, they're not a problem to you. And your intuition is powerful too - I wish I could develop mine as much. You ought really to be reading my palms! It's a remarkable hand. I can see you've lived well. I think it's... the best hand I've ever seen...

(Roger looks up. Michael leans forward and kisses him on the lips. Roger neither pulls away nor participates in this kiss, but he puts his hands on Michael's shoulder. When Michael pulls away, Roger smiles at him. Roger turns to Dim.)

What about you, Dim? Can I see your palms?

(Dim is still holding the cider bottle. He offers his other hand without expression. It still has the cider bottle cap in it. Roger takes the cap and puts it on the seat beside him. Michael sits back and stares ahead, looking dazed.)

Michael: Brendan always wanted that from me. And me wondering all these years what it would have been like. And I suppose wanting it too, in a way. Ah, but he would never admit it, and so it never happened.

Roger: *(Looking up.)* Did you admit it to him?

Michael: Admit what, Roger?

Roger: That you knew what he wanted, and that you wanted it too.

Michael: I did not. I thought it would embarrass him.

Roger: Because physical love between men is unmentionable?

Michael: I thought it was up to him to tell me if he wanted to.

Roger: Why should he? If you weren't prepared to tell him you already knew? (*He looks back down at **Dim**'s palm.*)

Michael: Holy Mary, you're right there, Roger! Ah, you've given me something to think about there!

Dim: (*Impatiently.*) What can you see?

Roger: (*Sighing.*) You've had a brutal life; but it's still in your power to change it. If you don't, I don't think you'll live much longer. The chief problem seems to be that you don't eat properly.

Dim: (*Snatching his hand away.*) 'E drinks wine, not me. I drink cider.

Roger: There's nothing wrong with cider. But why don't you eat?

Michael: Ah, you're right there, Roger, indeed you are. I long ago gave up trying. Stubborn as a teetotal bishop he is!

Dim: It's my way! My way! *Mine!*

Roger: Of course it is. But that doesn't mean you can't change it.

(*Michael and Dim glare at each other across Roger who stands up.*)

Michael: Are you leaving us, Roger?

Roger: Yes. I want to go to my party now. My friends are giving it in my honour.

Michael: Then a final toast.

(*Michael stands up and toasts the others.*)

I drink... to the few honest souls, in this dishonest city.

(*Michael drinks and offers the bottle to Roger who drinks and hands it back to Michael. Roger breaks a hunk of bread off a loaf and offers it to Dim who refuses, then accepts with a sheepish grin. Roger touches Streaky on the shoulder. Streaky begins eating the piece of bread that's been on his lap throughout. Dim looks at Streaky in amazement and slowly begins to eat too. Roger turns to say goodbye to Michael.*)

Will you come and sit with us again, Roger?

Roger: (*Shaking his head.*) I'm going abroad tomorrow, for several months. That's what the party's for - saying goodbye to my friends.

Michael: Ah, that's too bad. Then, farewell, Roger.

(Michael and Roger shake hands and Roger gives Michael a light kiss on the lips. As Roger exits, Michael calls after him.)

God be with you, my friend!

(Michael sits down again. He drinks a couple of times. Dim continues to eat his hunk of bread.)

Ah, damnation! It's the likes of me that'll be the ruination of the world! I meant to tell him my wonderful, demon dream! And I forgot! Would you be after believing that? I forgot! *(He nurses the wine bottle like a baby.)* Sure, it'll take all your skill to console me now, and you feeling weak and poorly yourself.

Dim: Tell me.

Michael: What?

Dim: Tell me your demon dream.

Michael: All right. But only if you'll tell me your 'dire' thought.

Dim: Streaky must be in the middle.

Michael: Ah, you daft heap of a boy! Come on, then...

(They rearrange themselves as they were at the start. Michael waits for calm. As his final speech proceeds, the light slowly reddens and fades.)

I'm on an impossible journey. There's a deep well and, somehow, I've contrived a sort of rope attached at the top and wrapped in a curious fashion around my middle - so that I can feed it out as I need it. I'm going to lower myself down this well! *(Laughs.)* And me always terrified of heights! At first, as I begin to go down, hand over hand, I can feel the solid walls of the well in the darkness. They're firm, warm, comforting. When I reach up to test the rope, I can see it stretching up like a silken thread into the night sky. At last, I'm at the bottom. I reach my arms out into the blackness, till they're stretched to their limit. But everywhere I reach, there's nothing. Nothing. Nothing at all!

(Dim stops eating and looks scared.)

Michael: As I reach into it, it seems to push back at me, this nothingness! It's like a kind of physical presence. I can feel it beginning to stifle me. I'm suffocating! I can't breathe! I'm going to die! And then it hits me that this is the answer! That there is nothing at the bottom of this famous well! Nothing! Perfect and pure *Nothing!* It's a vision of the holy grail! And me, always searching, searching. When there's nothing to find! There is no well! There is no rope! There is no 'up' and no 'down'! Why, there isn't even a 'me' to climb! And, suddenly, I'm filled with a powerful joy, and with a final vast effort I cry aloud: *'I've found it! I've found it! I can perform miracles! I can create a universe - out of Nothing!'* And there I am, startled awake, and the sky with a billion stars! And the moon shining down on me, like it knew all the time!

Dim: That was it! That was me dire thought! There's nothing, nothing, *Nothing!* Oh, the horror of it!

Michael: (*Leaping to his feet.*) No, no, no! Joy, not horror! Don't you see? We exist! We're alive! The world exists because we're making it - all the time. *We are!* Out of nothing! And if we're making it, we can make it any way we like! Daily magic - wake; look at the sky, the sun, the trees, the clouds! Wonder at it! Love it! God looks through all our eyes! Through yours too, Dim, lad, don't you see? Ah, here's to you, Roger! Bless you, Beloved Friend! and all the honest souls like you!

(*He turns and toasts the audience.*)

And here's to you all - *Children Of The Future Age!*

(BLACKOUT)