

On Guard

A play by Lee Gundersheimer

For my mother
who taught me things
about kings and queens
and the stuff of great myths

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Cast of Characters

The play is written to be performed either in two acts or two separate long one act plays. If performed separately the parts are entitled:

THE ORIGIN OF JUSTICE

- Queen- a women of another century with great tenacity in middle age who has been imprisoned wrongfully and blinded by disease from giving birth many years ago
- Walter- a master of the King's guard, middle aged, who has worked the Queen's watch in the Tower for the entire time the she has been imprisoned there and longer
- Albert- a Lieutenant, a young graduate of the Kensington Guards on his first posting, twenties
- Moonbe- the Queens loyal fool, mute from having his tongue removed in punishment by the King.
- Tour Guide- a modern day leader of the tours of The Tower
- Tourists- a group of modern day tourists that can be recruited as walk-ons from the community or understudies if professionals

WHISPERING WALLS

The same characters as in the first act/play now 15 years later appear, all except Moonbe, plus:

- Pertwee- a pro republic traitor, imprisoned for wanting to overthrow the monarchy, played by the same actor as Moonbe
- Lady Anne- his wife who is attempting a daring escape, played by the same actress as the Tour Guide

THE ORIGIN OF JUSTICE

SCENE ONE

A prison in a tower built centuries ago. The set should include a stairway that wraps around all four sides, similar to the Escher drawing of a stairway that seems to have no end and rises to the same place it begins. A large jailer in a uniform resembling a Beefeater is standing under a torch stage right. Stage left there is another torch, and center is a large cell-door, locked. The set should be able to rotate at will, so this up-center area, the prison cell, will become visible. The stairways have others branching off like vines, offering entrances and exits to the main playing area. If budget allows, some of these can be mirrors or projections so that those entering are surreally upside down or in reverse. In the room there is a table and chair and a crude cot. A chamber pot sits in the corner left. The guard hears a noise and seems alarmed, listening. A group of tourists in modern dress pass by on one of the stairways. A tour-guide hurries them along: "This way, this way." The guard seems to be unaware of them but concerned of another noise nearby. After a long pause we hear, through the door center:

QUEEN. The question being: why men will assault with affection long into the evening, attempting with assurances, whispers of waking nestled in fragrant limbs, like some apple-bear stealing into the orchard to pick their fruit -

WALTER. Peace.

QUEEN. Yet comes morning light, where find you their ladies? With stonewalls for sweethearts, boarded on all sides, their sweet branches shackled. The very doors, which only hours before softly forfeited entrance, now slammed and bolted shut. Oh, to visit the University of Botchery that schools you whisker-wits in the ways of romance that I may set it aflame.

WALTER. Be quiet!

QUEEN. Arise, Walter Trumble, and attend my release. Hours pass since the sun dried my iron curtains. None but I awake to see Good Lady Dawn's tears. Spending her sadness, like a pure wife's virtue, to no effect. Even the sparrows have long since flown by-

WALTER. Is there no reasoning with the lady?

QUEEN. Floating on air I'll never breathe. Listen, you bed-presser, as you sleep another morning escapes. Tiptoeing by with no notice... Well today is for noting, dear jailer. Am I hoisting sail 'to an idle wind? "Remember your station"... You sir, are a Captain of the Guard, loyal servant to noble, kind, King Lawrence The First. Abandon your bed or that nimble-pinioned noon will pick half your day's pocket.

WALTER. If you'd forgive your tongue its waggle long enough to listen, you'd note there was a stirring.

QUEEN. Shall I hallelujah it for a sign of something with life still in it?

WALTER. It seems to have retreated....

QUEEN. A shy something- still, a sign nevertheless...

WALTER. I thought just feet, then it grew a voice -

QUEEN. No dense mystery that in matters of cluesolving, a jailer holds no candle to a cuckold. One should never secure a soldier for snooping, search the backside of town for the jealous husbands, as nary a suspect is needed, for them to find clues.

WALTER. And I'd rather pack a war than a wife on the road to peace. For the both be bloody, the marriage offers slim surrender.

A noise again. Footsteps. It seems as though someone is lost. A faint curse is heard. Walter walks the stairs and tries to see what is coming. As he moves, the tour of modern tourists appears and climbs a different stairway. At the same time the stage rotates to reveal the queen's chamber. She moves carefully but knocks over an empty jug of wine, and it becomes noticeable that she is blind.

WALTER. Here, mark you?

QUEEN. Mark? *(She is holding her head, a bit hung-over.)* You leave me with cobwebs for reason, hanging from bells aringing in my cathedral, then implore me to decipher a which from a which? My good keeper, you needn't flood me with drink, mount a moonlit campaign, to convert me to hear invisibles. 'Tis but the walls awhispering. They are the goalers of all that has and ever will. *(The footsteps fade away.)* As you, when you are not sleeping, stand tall by this door keeping an eye on your prize, they too watch over. With no allegiance, they see all sides, never wavering. Imagine all that could be learned, the marvels they've witnessed. All the years, the plotting, the misdeeds. More than you, or I, or any king. Late at night, when no one's listening, like vouchstones they speak, yet only to those with an ear to hear.

My lady mother taught me the only truth told in this world is when the stones themselves begin to speak. No wonder they separated her from her head.

WALTER. Well, no matter. The only voice to be heard now is yours or a boiling cat's, forgive me the not being able to tell which from which. They are so confusable. Whoever else, the walls or whomever, have 'parted.

QUEEN. Whoever, Walter, whoever.

WALTER. Whoever the hell t'was, having heard your din and thinking the better of it, rather than face your fierce babble's, now gone.

QUEEN. Have we a high way for a doorstep? It does appear, the way things come and go. Is this the caliber jailer, I keep?

WALTER. You keep? Has your mind begun its senile sag? I'm the one guarding you, your bleedin' Highness-

QUEEN. I see no need for such formality. If we had only thought to tariff them as they pass through, and use the purse to purchase our repair...

WALTER. Like an idle duck winging north for winter, you've mis-migrated. Flown to the region of reflection, where front is back and left is right, and keykeep lords over Queen.

QUEEN. Region of reflection.... Had you known today marks twenty and five, Walter ?

WALTER. Course, I "known." Here sits nothing but a beef-brain, in your estimation. (*Imitating her.*) "Had you known today marks twenty..."

QUEEN. My father counted but twenty four... My mother but twenty... Marry, Walter, two decades, now halfway to a third, and like an adamant, you show the affection of a stone.

WALTER. One of them jabberin vouch-stones, you just wasn't able to hear-

QUEEN. You have my ears now, and but the turn of a key you'd have my visage.

WALTER. Name the price to pay for your tongue.

QUEEN. Walter! Are you e'en awake?

WALTER. The very riddle I've spent years solving... My hope is not.

QUEEN. For I. For as sure as Ariadne, I am asleep with a dream song for a life... I was a queen. Still am, if any historian be nearby. Granted they've dubbed me daft. Locked me away. The first Mad queen- known mad by my account. You see, if allowed to stray, as my condition warrants, like a crook'd compass from the point, I summize that most married to kings take leave of their wits along life's way. Most married to any man, if truth were free to speak... Yet I, Bedlam's queen, who once held court in gowns of gold, slept shrouded in the silks and satins of royal beds, t'was only after years of keeping horse-hay for my pillow and botchers-blankets on my bed, that my life's riddle's come to be solved.

WALTER. And if solved, I'm the glad for it. For a riddle solved begs no further discussion. And I've been awake for hours- if any historian be nearby, so stop clammering for me to a-rise!

QUEEN. I could find no need for sleep myself- but as we are both dreaming t'would be a fool's logic to waste sleep in a dream, or dream of a sleep, so since nothing is as it should really be, then the longer I'm chained the more I feel free...

WALTER. You have taken leave of your senses.

QUEEN. Would you have me in discord with my doctors? My five fine physicians- Poked, Prodded, Waxburn, Swallow, and Leech- each laboring under personal penalties of death, still each independently diagnosing the need for this long rest with you- my dear sweet jailer. Bless them all, those five artless artists of appliance... Now let us hope the point is clear, I am mad and you, my dear Walter, have a flea's cabinet for collecting facts. Do you not find this conversing through heavy timber tedious? Would not a simple turn of the key, rem-e-dy?

WALTER. Like some mid-summer milk maid, you'd rather rhyme than reason. Have you forgotten the day?

QUEEN. I do try. Each and every one, but stubborn as the carrions we call clergy, they seek audience. The years, ignoring my abridged arithmetic, disobey to add up anyway. Life is but the sum of orphaned days. Forgotten, they lie like cutthroats, waiting in the woods. Mark you, for one of those days, the least recognizable, he'll be the one to steal your last breath.

A door slams down below. As he walks the stairs again, the stage begins to rotate further.

WALTER. Here it lives again.

QUEEN. (*Going right on...*) Yes, our calendars are as counterfeit as a looking glass, and our very features changeable as politicians. Introducing themselves to us one morning, requiring advancement by noon, a touch of silver to knight the eyelids, cheeks seeking the crown of rubied rouge... then by evening the kingdom's a shambles, usurped in what seems but a day. The Age of Gray has ascended, ushering in the War Of The Wrinkles. As my dear husband, the King, would convey- where once your countenance did rule, now chaos resides...

WALTER. You must be still now, please Your Majesty.

QUEEN. No more pomp and ceremony, my Walter. No need hanging the ornament of title for today is different. Today, like the first taste of a lover's lips, must ne'er be ancient history.

WALTER. (*Steps are heard approaching.*) 'Tis you who misplaced her memory. Recite to me the events of the day.

QUEEN. Walter why question me thus? You know I've the abilities of an astrologer: of the future and past there can be no mistake, for my past was all too clear- therefore abandoned, and my future ripe with possibilities, therefore left to chance. It is only the present that appears to me somewhat vague, like murky pond water it offers little reflection. Today...Today... I trust you mean other than our anniversary, which, if I take you at your word, even you recollect. My accounts differ from a jailer. I keep no ledger, only marks on the wall. All the same to me, yet to some they go by Mondays, to others Tuesdays- to me they are weeks of Walterdays...

WALTER. Walterdays?

QUEEN. Perhaps a strain. Let's try Trumbledays? You've a poorpipe for a name, there's no music in it... No matter, my point of reference being the only importance is they are to be spent with you.

WALTER. And our new friend Mister "Whoever they've posted next door-right over there- starting here today", remember?

QUEEN. Oh, yes. Forgive my tardiness in arriving to the destination of your story- however awkwardly authored. I must say I feel a bit devalued to have raced to the finish line of your worry only to realize our new associate, like some stay-the-course tortoise, beats me to the mark.

WALTER. I implore you to keep idle now. Remember our stations.

QUEEN. Last time I looked I was your queen, and you my subject; therefore, remember your station and open this door immediately. Oh, I find

no value in the coin stamped "remember your station". Who's market is this that allows any bacon-chewer to buy entrance to my chamber with the same silver that beggars in value, worthless once in my purse?

Short pause. A young soldier, twenty four, in the uniform of a lieutenant emerges walking the perimeter stairs hoping he has finally found his place. The stage should be making its final rotation, to the position it was at the beginning of the play.

QUEEN. Wasn't it just last night, that you made bed-work of "your station", crying to me how betumbled, how askew the very axle-tree of the heavens must be. And now you wish to place the planets back on their shelf and "remember your stations"? You and your stations... I'll bet you are standing there right now. One hand at your side, the other firmly grasping your weapon. Erect. Stationed as a good soldier ought to be.

The rotation of the stage should be complete. It should stop just as the soldier hits the main floor. The Queen finds a small tree in a corner of her cell.

QUEEN. Walter, forgive me for the fool most think I am, I spied not the seedling till now. 'Tis it from my orchard? Look uncaring world, how he surprises me. More precious than emeralds the green of its leaves, rarer than rubies its fruit will be...

ALBERT. (*Hearing the awkward conversation, and afraid he's interrupting.*) Halt, who goes there?

WALTER. (*More for the queen's benefit.*) The Keys!

ALBERT. Whose keys?

WALTER. His Royal Majesty Good King Lawrence the First.

ALBERT. Have they added a "good"?

WALTER. I like the music of it. Who are you?

ALBERT. You mean "who goes here?"

WALTER. Well, it ain't like there's a bloody regiment of us now is there?

ALBERT. I make reference to your wording - (*Thinking better of questioning a superior.*) First Lt. Albert Hampton.

WALTER. Captain of the Guard, Walter Trumble, all's well and God be with you.

ALBERT. God be with you.

Albert takes the position Walter had at the beginning of the play, and stands at attention.

WALTER. Never been known to keep my buckles bright, or my pilch pressed Lieutenant, but the right's my post . Been that way for twenty of the last twenty five years, I've served here.

ALBERT. Forgiving the question sir, (*Taking out a small pamphlet and finding his spot.*) does not Article four, section three of our Lord's Manual of Corporal Procedure state: the ranking guard positions himself left of subject. His subordinates file either side, according to position?

WALTER. My Lord above-

ALBERT. Since I've the excellent fortune of no others residing in this regiment of greater rank, I may remain just left of subject, over here.

WALTER. They got 'em reading now, in the king's own guard...

ALBERT. Meaning no disrespect sir-

WALTER. None taken, now move your arse to the other post, post facto prompto.

ALBERT. If I may read from my orders-

WALTER. I don't give a good cow's biscuit what your orders say, nor that you can read 'em your bloody self.

ALBERT. Allow me first to say-

WALTER. Must we? Nay say I. Why? 'Cause I'm in command-

ALBERT. To say- there is not one in the guard who is not keenly aware of your station sir. (*Reading:*) Captain Trumble has served us many a good year, longer than any in recent memory, and his record of service, 'til now, warrants not a blemish. He cuts by all accounts a near legendary figure, earning both our praise and respect. However reports of a considerable relaxation of discipline with a series of deviations from the gentlemanly rules of decorum have come to our attention, culminating no doubt with the events of the last fortnight, and, therefore, we request one of Kensington's

finest to report immediately in aid of restoring balance and order to this the most important of posts in all our sacred land. Cordially, The Honorable Lord General Braxton Pompingale, and so on and so forth. As evident sir, at Kensington Guard, where I was schooled-

WALTER. But yesterday, from the looks of you...

ALBERT. At Kensington, we pride ourselves on a single point-

WALTER. Certainly no need to complicate the matter-

ALBERT. (*Albert glares.*) Our credo, if you will-

WALTER. Good they keep it nice and simple for you ruffled neck, carpet soldiers- (*Albert gives up the discussion, but takes the right post all the same.*) Be difficult to muck it up if your only weapon's your words. Well, the field's my school and this is our credo. (*He unsheathes a dagger.*) Now are you to walk to the other post while you still have life in you to move with?

ALBERT. Breeches of procedure will not and must not be tolerated.

They are quiet for a beat. From inside we hear:

QUEEN. Forgive me sirs, not wishing (but always seeming) to intrude, and never wanting to be thrifty with my thoughts- (*Walter lets out a "Ha!"*) However it pains me to ponder the need for "must not" and "will not" to labor in the same command. Wouldn't a simple "never" do? (*Pause.*) I'll take that as a yes. Next we travel to "Breeches of procedure". Certainly one's credo should rest sufficiently above any debate of linguistics, which compels me to inquire just exactly what is the procedure for breeches in your guard? I only ask as I've never met a soldier yet who doesn't prefer his breeches down around his ankles. And his procedure prodding some poor prisoner uninvited. And since we are four hundred forty steps high, no bother screaming, it'll only blend in with those being schooled next door for confession. Therefore if I may: Article one, section one of The Tower's Manual for The Corporally Mis-Punished is damn your "will not and must not be tolerated." We learn quickly to tolerate here in the Tower. We are a very tolerant and forgiving people here in the Tower, are we not Captain Trumble? (*Walter has moved to the post, left, and is silent.*)... I'll take that as a yes. I trust my words were received not as a scholars, but rather in the service of clarity. No further questions? Arms rest, gentlemen. Class dismissed.

The guards do not move. Lights fade to black.

SCENE TWO

The next day. Lights up on both guards at their post staring straight ahead, silent. After a long beat, Walter turns his head wanting to say something. Albert is motionless. Walter shifts his weight, it's been a long time since he's had to be this rigid. He sucks his belly in determined not to be the first to "give in." At the sound of a faint bell's tolling, they snap to attention, and with a cry of "Forward Ho!", they march the perimeter stairs, more as a show of regiment than any practical form of protection. As they march, the stage rotates again to reveal the Queen sitting on her chamber floor holding her small tree in a pot. She is stroking the leaves, and crying. Two of the tourists have wondered from the others, and as one of them yells "Get a picture of this-", they cross off. The guards reach their places after one turn round the stage, and both cry "All's Well." The lights begin to fade as the Queen's sobs become audible. The guards both stare ahead, as:

The lights fade to black.

SCENE THREE

The tower, one day later. The guards are still quiet; Walter is beginning to lean to one side, resting against the wall. After a beat, the queen's voice is heard.

QUEEN. Tis as if the poet who staged my life and I were not in consort, for though I wished an epic, he penned an interlude. With the gravest misfortune being to have postponed 'til the entre act, my fifth act curtain, the plot's turn. How plays your life's fare? The brooding question being offered up to either of you for the baiting. Serves it to entertain, or like the most trodding the stage, merely to dull? I'll take that as a "dull". Boys, must we pass through yet another day regimented to this silly game of Mother may I? Your Queen mother says you may speak. Therefore speak! *(Pause.)* I'll take that as a soon. Well, no matter how blue-faced both your arguments, I certainly find the situation queer- life's living- not your lack of participation in it, and it troubles me. I do believe my husband, your king, imprisoned me for my melancholy. As a worker bee drones about his sticky job never to notice the flowered fields, so Kind Larry never stilled himself long enough to mark a mood. "Happiness?" he'd rebuff if pressed for royal opinion, "Happiness is the harlot, we may purchase, though never own." *(Another pause.)* Save the unfortunate image, there's possible truth in it. My one remaining loyal, the good fellow who brings me my meals, a stray fool I took in and sheltered, Moonbe, my treasure, he used to sing:

For all our sense, we are but children.
They grow us old and kill our dragons.
Turn storybook queens to old wives tales
And those with dewdreams awake in Mad-jails.
Yet, I say youths the keepsake
Throw oldage in the dustbin,
Happily ever after's the lie
No child will put trust in.

Kind Larry thought my servant, my dear Moonbe, to be the source of my illness, and had his tongue pulled out. Happily ever after's the lie no child will put trust in... *(Long pause, the guards are motionless, and the Queen can be heard quietly weeping. Walter looks at Albert. He wants to help, but won't. Albert waits until Walter is not looking and takes out a small tablet and marks on it with a crude pencil.)* I ask you: is this silly catalogue of deeds, with no more worth than some nephew's collection of pigeon feathers, is it truly what you had in the bargain? At eight years old lying in your bed, lost in tall dreams, were the events of this day, or lack of them again in your cases- included anywhere in your plan for the after-time? Lived anywhere, a provision of this day? Odd that no matter how simple the scheme, even with stakes as low as yours dear Walter, *(He is almost goaded*

to speak.) or as foolishly high as a spoiled terrier of a girl, willing to wager her weight, or a more countable sum, to be queen of all she sees- no matter what the gamble, we never seem to toss high enough to beat the dealer. We all are fated a roll of aim-aces and pay the bankers... If no bed of roses lies in life's garden, why must I keep in mine this pair of red-breasted warblers who'd rather have their throats cut than warble?

WALTER. (*To comfort.*) No warble'd be heard with your cawing and crowing.

QUEEN. Oh, how liberating to grant me audience, Walter, for though a ruler's constant worry is remaining well thought of by her people, a cloistered ruler does well just to be thought of... Continue! I faintly heard you testing your song.

WALTER. Not I, my Lady. Possibly Kensington's finest over here. No, not a hum or a peep from this ornament; cut from a quarry that face is. Might gargoyles be carved of your speaking stones?

QUEEN. He's but a codling, needing time to ripen. You were no easy fruit to pick yourself. Stood there for days at first, as if it was your duty-

WALTER. 'T was my duty, both my duty and my vocation-

QUEEN. Sounding rather like Our Lord Chamberlain you are, as he signs the latest holy tax decreeing his need of acquisition for a priceless prize pony to fill his sacred stables.

WALTER. Did you hear that coz, now the Lady blasphememes... And here stand we hard by close enough to catch the arrows that mistarget from above.

QUEEN. No better pincushion than the pious for pricking. How I did love to stand the back-fur of Talbert's neck on end, recall you? Why is it most Puritans are as mirthless as -now I was going to use widows for a joiner, but I believe most to have suffered the loss of a husband to be in secret overjoyed-

WALTER. No less joy awarded the husband allowed to die. Still widow it is, for Talbert was a blackveil, a Puritan for appearances sake. His humor corked 'til he popped a pints mouth open.

QUEEN. Yes, he did have an ale's tongue-

WALTER. (*To Albert.*) We speak of the first Captain I served here under, Thomas Talbert, from near Shrewsbury I believe....

QUEEN. Wherever it 'tis the grapes grow greener...

WALTER. Never met a cup of sack he didn't like, this one. The man drew not a sober breath the last twelve years of his life. But a fine soldier, he was. Fought in the Holy lands himself. Traveled four thousand leagues, fought for days on end, knee deep in sand and faint from heat. Still, blessed was he to look on the walls of Jerusalem. Told me he walked right up and touched the very walls of our Lord's city. Sad they made him. Said he regretted their ordinariness. How old and crumbled, and tired and weary they looked. So home he sailed with a bottle and a transfer and set guard here with myself and the other lack-hearts, where he too grew old and crumbled, and tired and weary, devoting himself to the damp and darkness... But we miss him, Old Talbert, so let's honor him...

*He takes out a small flask of sack and tosses back a swig.
Offers it to Albert who has taken out his small tablet and
crude pencil and is making another note in it.*

WALTER. Mother above, they got them writing now too. Your Ladyship, this one can pen your life's play for you.

QUEEN. As the gift of royal birth guarantees no great wisdom, so penmanship is no kin to poetry. You yourself, dear Walter, have been known to heave a poetic sigh, and can but barely make your mark-

WALTER. My sword writes my stories, and my readers have no trouble finding the bottom of my plots.

QUEEN. Note even a common soldier picks up an unwieldy symbol and lunges into battle-

WALTER. Common? Common? You heard just the other day, the infant himself called me a legend.

QUEEN. So's the story of Agamemnon who after supping on his sons and daughters, is no company I'd be keen to keep.

WALTER. Fought in three separate campaigns on the continent have I. Risen from saddle-boy to Captain of The Royal Guard, with no such thing as a school for soldiering when I come up the river.

QUEEN. The very year Cleopatra barged the water Nile. And did it stop you from marching in just like beardless baby Albert there, all full of your rules and regulations? Talbert was so afraid of being reported, not a drop touched his lips for a month, poor sot. You recall how he, with fevered shakes, outshook the very ghosts that haunt us.

ALBERT. Ghosts?

QUEEN. Who speaks? Another visits?

WALTER. Careless, himself. Not a week on the job, and already loosening his breeches.

QUEEN. What says the pup? His voice has yet learned to penetrate oak.

WALTER. Won't be long with you to school him. The toddler seemed spirit worried.

QUEEN. Won't tell me he's a slave to the sack, like Talbert-

WALTER. O, your majesty. Spirits as in shapes, bug bears, lodgers of the night.

QUEEN. Was certain last night passed with restless company, the pit a pat of teeth a chattering away.

ALBERT. Forgive me your majesty, it was cold. Near freezing in here.

WALTER. Well, it's the Tower, mate, not the bleedin Royal Palace. Forgive me, your majesty.

QUEEN. Quite all right my chamberlains. I may vouchsafe for the difference. Drafty here, yes, but like the trade winds in compare to the chill of the palace bed-chamber, if you receive my meaning...

WALTER. Course it's bleedin cold, this is a jail you churl. *(To the Queen, getting her joke a beat late.)* Ah, I caught your catch. Chilly chambers, sirrah. *(Back to Albert.)* What do you expect some down and quilts, nice little feather bed, like back home. A nip of brandy front of the hearth while we speak of the serfs staging another of their silly uprisings? Mummy and daddy, Lord and Lady Such and Such, wondering what to worry a winter's night about? No cares in the world-'cept their troubled child's future. The quiet one. The little sickly one who might crack the family crest. Let's send him off to soldier school- "Oh, No, Lady Such and Such," exclaims, "not my little Albert!" "Peace, now Margaret, 'tis best for him. Why Lord Bolton sent his Roger all the way to the German Lands and back he came a hero."

QUEEN. *(Taking up the game.)* Back he came in a box-

WALTER. We're only sending our Albert to Kensington. From there the path is straight to His Majesty's guard, not the front ranks. Worse that could

happen to him, he'll have to stand still hours at a time in some palace hallway glued to his procedure. And it's only for a time, teach him some respect.

QUEEN. But he's our son, a-a-a

WALTER. Hampton-

QUEEN. A Hampton. Infant are you by chance a relation of Lady Ann? Wife to Lord Reginald now a Pertwee?

ALBERT. Though of family one may never speak with certainty, the names are new pilgrims to my ears.

QUEEN. The heavens favored your journey, for she would trod about Court in an almost bestial gait. Half hydra, half harpy I'd vow Lady Anne was.

WALTER. Well, that's beside the bleedin point, now isn't it? (*Albert is writing.*) There, he scratches again... Trouble me no more with that! (*Trying to grab Albert's tablet. Albert avoids his grasp.*) Is it policy to be charted word for word, like some mapmaker? Who begs this diagram of events?

ALBERT. Tis for my needs. I collect phrases.

WALTER. (*Reaching for the tablet again.*) Give me, you speculator, you proditor. (*Albert retreats and Walter gives chase.*) Sent by Our Lordship no doubt, who knows what this one's capable of. Leveling charges of treason, no doubt your Ladyship.

ALBERT. I know not of what you speak, I mean no harm. I use this for a hobby-

WALTER. So says our good friend the executioner as he lowers his blade.

QUEEN. Is it customary for a member under our Lord's command to carry parchment and pen? Is this not a breach of procedure?

WALTER. I command you to give over, you dissembling gudgeon. The last but days ago, though an assassin, was decent enough to try his own hand at it. This the very next they send, another insect crawling out the baseboards, but this pest poisons by proxy, I've known a few of his breed. Like spiders you lay the eggs of your plans unseen, then scurry off to let them hatch.

ALBERT. If my tablet is your perturbation, give me your word that in my hand it will come to rest-

WALTER. You've my word that if in my hand it does not rest, my sword soon will.

Albert gives it to Walter. Pause. Walter stares at it unable to read.

WALTER. I've a cabbage for a brain, this could be my warrant and I'd never know...

ALBERT. I beg your forgiveness, since childhood, my characters have suffered illformities, my vowels stunted like dwarfs, my consonants with swaybacks.

QUEEN. If t'were curved as the harems of Persia, he'd have no abilities with them.

WALTER. Though, I'd give it my all...

ALBERT. No matter, allow me to interpret. *(He takes the tablet back, and begins to read.)* Scenario, a prison holding someone captive to protect rather than punish, as from a misunderstanding world... You see, merely idle ideas-

WALTER. No idea lies idle, for a thought once born cries to be fed. First a crust of attention, then the beast craves hearts and heads, ever-growing, consuming scores before becoming belly full. How know I the words you speak, reside there? Here is the how! The Queen will be our bencher. *(He moves to unlock the door.)*

ALBERT. Wait! How know I that you are not some co-rival wishing her Ladyship freedom?

WALTER. Is the suggestion being lofted that I planted in you, who days ago I first laid eyes on, this desire for a hobby, this attachment for eavesdropping, so that one day I might dig it up in my plot to free a Queen I've spent the last twenty years imprisoning?

QUEEN. It does have the lilt of light weight logic.

ALBERT. The very prisoner who, though forbidden, you keep in confidence, making mirth with, and who speaks of you in the familiar.

WALTER. A turn-round torture, I confess. As they say, those that rotate the rack, oft try it on for size...

ALBERT. If to free that door is the next move, mine will be to strike at you for treason.

WALTER. Don't be an asshead, Albert. You strike at me and the next page you'll author will be worm's words.

ALBERT. Stop, I say. *(He draws his dagger.)* Why the accident of my birth has caused me to land in such a place, confusable as -as--

QUEEN. Try The Isle Of Amazonia, t'was always one of my favorite chaotics...

ALBERT. To think I chose this post for it's adventure.

WALTER. Oh, that's the best I've heard since Talbert belched the Lord's Prayer In Latin. The pizzle posted himself in the Tower's Guard for adventure?

ALBERT. Told us that chamber work and court steps were for the pigeon-liveried, the poor-nuts not able to rise to the challenge.

QUEEN. The only challenge for Walter here is to rise. To awaken, I might say for clarification.

WALTER. And who saved your royal hindquarters, a fortnight ago, from slumber everlasting ? A price put on you and villeous Saxwell eager for the purse. While I was catching a bit of repose-

QUEEN. A healthy bit, say most of the morning-

WALTER. The weasel crept to the door and with dagger drawn I, rolling over, spied him. "Thought I heard a stirring", he confessed. But I, sensing a spice of revolt, rolled back feigning slumber.

QUEEN. Luckily his best impersonage, so real you'd swear he was snoring...

WALTER. 'Til he cracked the door like so. *(He has opened the door and tosses the Queen the tablet.)*

ALBERT. Are you mad, she could make off.

WALTER. You mistrust, she's the darkside of fifty and four hundred forty steps from freedom. Not as if she's winged bloody Mercury.

QUEEN. Walter a riddle for you- what do you get when you toss the blind a tablet to read?

WALTER. Remind me to recount the time I went to battle crossbow in hand and forgot me arrows. Here, go through his bag of personals see what you feel, smell, or taste...

ALBERT. Give me that ! (He tosses Albert's bag to the Queen.) I tell you close that door or-

WALTER. Or what you Jackdaw, know you even how to slice an onion without fear. (*Albert lunges quite effectively at Walter who barely eludes.*) I see they neglect to teach patience at your alma mater. If I were a few thousand years younger, you'd be but a memory right now. (*They continue to parry. Just as Walter is about to strike we hear:*)

QUEEN. The infant's a talent!

WALTER. Nonsense, I've seen soups with more stock, this stew will go down with ease. Mark you now, grizzle, for this be what Kensington should have shown you- (*Trying to execute a jump from stair to stair, he trips and falls. Albert shuts the Queens door.*) Damn old age for a villain, ow! Like some oyster eater, it consumes all before it, leaving but a shell.

QUEEN. It appears we misjudged the lad, Walter.

WALTER. Pay her no mind, infant, she's motley-minded you know. I take you for appearances sake, a knave, a nonage, a misprisoned peacock. (Circling each other.) All my life I've fought you noble borns. I can smell your perfume, taste your scorn 'fore your plumage preens the room. (*Walter attacks and Albert counters, sending him hard to the ground.*)

ALBERT. Get up now, I won't fight a "man" who is down-

WALTER. Then luck you'll need fighting anyone but a gentle "man". And you may perish awaiting, for hardly lives a gentleman does his own fighting.

Tripping him up and rolling him over, sitting on him

QUEEN. Walter! Have you won?

WALTER. Almost, my good lady.

They roll again, Albert on top.

QUEEN. For sooth, have you got the best of him?

WALTER. Again, not just yet, my lady. I use to think you'd silver and gold in your veins.

QUEEN. Are you sitting on him, damn you?

They roll over, exchanging positions

WALTER. Yes! 'Cause when I was a boy of ten playing mudgames, my little friend Oswald swore it the truth. All the better born have precious metals pumping away inside 'em. At but fourteen, on the field in some heathen land, I cut me my first nobleman's throat, and half the wit that I am, I'll be damned if I wasn't shocked you bled the same as we do. T'was about to take off my helmet and collect the blood for gold... To think I was afraid my knife wouldn't be sharp enough...

Again they roll, Albert on top.

QUEEN. Have you your knife out?

ALBERT. Yes!

QUEEN. I order you to stop!

WALTER. Are you ordering him or me?

QUEEN. I am your queen, I may order as many as I choose.

ALBERT. You are our prisoner, my charge, I serve my king.

QUEEN. Odd, I was a sovereign. At my coronation, given a loyal army of four thousand. Today, I've revolution in a regiment of two.

ALBERT. Do you think this infant, this knave too young to cut your throat?

WALTER. Never too early for a child to 'cause trouble. Their very concept's oft the first error.

QUEEN. Walter! Before proving your manhood has not faded into the background, listen to your good lady madwoman. The boy lied not to us, he means no treason. He composes entertainments of a sort I've seen before in---my memory wavers. On a stage but the size of a chest -a- drawers, I saw a troupe from the Scottish region, I believe it 'twas-

WALTER. I don't care what bloody region, if they traveled all the way from the bleedin Orient, the man's got a knife to my throat, and the look of the devil in his eye.

QUEEN. But you had him bested but moments before-

WALTER. Preceding your discourse on theater, yes.

QUEEN. What is happening? Walter are you in peril?

WALTER. For one who's spent decades squawking for release, an unlocked door offers little temptation.

QUEEN. I've more pressing engagements to attend-

WALTER. Then crack your open door and attend them!

ALBERT. Attend me, you ruffian, you rusting rustic! And hear me when I say, never again will I allow my name or honor to be made a mockery of. Privileged I am, yet not by birth. And though my station in life, being higher than yours, causes obvious discomfort, since ranking as my officer, the scales are askew, and thinking that I, like so many others at Kensington, must be a spoiled, troubled, affluent, lace-collared brat- hear me clear: sir, I am by birth lower than the lowest born. I am a Hampton by virtue of name, yet not blood. My step-father, possessing a nobleman's kindness, rare, I admit, though hardly extinct, took me in and raised me after finding me blubbering away abandoned in the apple yard, not but a day's ride from these very walls. He, a widower and without heir, took me for an after-gift from his good lady long buried. He raised me with gentle hand and great affection, but the laws of our great land allow no bastard a title, and upon his death both estate and title became anothers. Passed on in a wave of hand, patronage for some royal favor. I offer this as explanation of my keen devotion to his honor, and my boiled-blood when sparked near the subject.

QUEEN. (*Having appeared through her door.*) Sir Hampton, this is a puppet is it not?

ALBERT. Yes, I stage original stories with them, 'tis a hobby of mine.

QUEEN. You see, Walter he's of an artistic temper.

WALTER. 'Tis a murderous temper he currently displays.

QUEEN. Sir Hampton, mean you to prune the life from my Walter's limbs?

ALBERT. If to save him from stealing mine, it seems a certainty, and I hesitate but to have clarified a point-

QUEEN. My intention as well Sir Albert, for logic seems to have immigrated to some foreign land. You accuse this man of treason and he of you the very same, yet so far as I can tell, treason made off with logic and is merrily setting up residence half-way round the world. Might we offer his return to at least the shore of our senses?

ALBERT. I am of a nature never graced with trust.

QUEEN. And I as well. We both have seen our thrones usurped, cousin. Or do you think in this house, I have always resided? We are misfortune's familiars, you and I. Our blood runs hot as hate, and cold as abandoned despair.

ALBERT. *(He is looking right into her eyes. Then, after a pause.)* If repentant reason begs return, we may do well to honor him, what say you sir?

WALTER. I see no logic at present, certainly none in my past, I've erred in all directions...

QUEEN. You see, where is the sport in a death with no ransom? Like a counterfeit coin, this man's breath has no worth in your honor's market, yet for me's as valuable as my own.

Albert slowly allows Walter to stand and hands him back his dagger. Walter taking it, quickly backs him to the wall.

WALTER. Article four section five of the Manual of How We Protect One Another Up In This Here Ward- always and I repeat always, finish the job while you can. If a man's down you strike regardless, follow? None of this fighting by gentlemen's rules. If you have 'em on their belly, finish 'em like a stuck pig.

ALBERT. Yes, sir.

WALTER. I count on you, you count on me. We cover each other's arse up here, and I plan to keep mine intact, rusted as it is. Receive my meaning?

ALBERT. With stinging clarity....

They begin to reposition themselves at their posts.

QUEEN. Well, good, 'tis always nice to dispense with the formalities of introduction... *(The guards realize their error and Walter moves to usher the prisoner back to her cell.)* And I thank you for my brief holiday. *(She goes into her chamber. Walter locks her door, crosses back to his post.)* Friends,

what were we discussing? Ah yes, being content with one's station in life...if you ask me, why search for some silly goblet of gold? Happiness is our holy grail... Allow the blindwoman to illustrate, suppose all you ever wanted was to have a table to sell eggs in the square.

The guards look at each other and smile. Lights begin to fade.

QUEEN. You work your whole life to barter your eggs, and just as you set up shop, what happens? A law is passed taxing hens...

Lights fade to black.

SCENE FOUR

The same setting, but the lights are only up on the stairways, and this time as the tour passes, we notice they are wearing coats and hats, and we hear the tour-guide ask if anyone knows the words to Silent Night. The tourists begin to sing and as they pass, the guide remarks "it may not have been "all calm, all right" on Christmas day some centuries ago, but that would be getting ahead of ourselves. Let us continue and we will return to this the most famous of rooms in the tower, but first the torture chambers." Some children yell "cool" and "Yes!" and the tour hurries off as the lights come up on the anteroom. For the guards, it is two months later, Christmas day. Albert is putting the finishing stages on a makeshift stage and the Queen, her cell door wide open, and Walter are busy stitching small costumes.

WALTER. If any one had prophesied in two tears of the calendar I'd be mending doll dresses for the boy's entertainments, I'd have tossed them in that cage with you and labeled them damaged goods.

QUEEN. Quite the seamstress you are Walter, my needlework must seem moth woven in compare.

WALTER. 'Tis understandable for as other girl-to-be-wives practice their mending the better to be joined, girl-to-be-queens perfect the tug and pull of courtmanners to keep from being ripped apart at the seams. As for me, is not a needle but a small sword, and it's motion merely thrust and parry? Any soldier, pre-Kensington, has fought off the fear and idleness stitching at his uniform. The day after battle, those of us lucky to be sat by the fire, like a bevy of old wives at a blanket quilt, patched our pride, sewing our countries colors back 'to one.

QUEEN. These are the sweetest holidays I've spent since girlhood-

WALTER. Have you vision of such far-off lands?

QUEEN. If I squint!

WALTER. I find it difficult to recall the other side of yesterday.

QUEEN. When one has traveled as long and far as you, the point of focus ought to be locating a tomorrow. (*To Albert.*) Save for old grumble-stitch there, the rooms seems alive with the Yule spirit.

WALTER. Well, it must be the boy that stepped in the smell of the season and tracked it in.

QUEEN. 'Tis his masterful play we make ready to feast on, and listen to you sitting there biting your thread between curses. It feels as if we've almost a home, miraculous when one thinks of our situation. But then that is what this time of years is abrim with- wonder and miracles.

WALTER. Holidays are nothing but tricksters, full of deceits, the only miracle being how we survive them.

ALBERT. I was found on Christmas day. Twenty and five years ago to the day.

WALTER. What does that make you, our Savior?

QUEEN. Walter, please, have respect for the day.

WALTER. I do, I can think of no better day to blaspheme.

QUEEN. Why can you not be in mind with the rest of mankind and, for one day a year, hedge your bets?

WALTER. I have more reverence for my non-beliefs.

ALBERT. Then help me to celebrate my birthday.

WALTER. Your day of location, you mean.

ALBERT. (*After a slight pause.*) The physician in attendance measured me for less than a day, so this by all accounts, my day of birth as well. Said t'was a miracle that my father heard my cries. Even more the wonder I was still alive, with the wicked frost.

WALTER. Obvious, great pains were seen that you were well provided for. (*They both look at him.*) Would imagine you were well bundled. To be able to survive in this bleedin weather.

ALBERT. Yes, in point of fact, my only birthright a fur blanket, military issue, frayed even back then, but wondrous warm. I've kept it all these years...So this for me has always been a two-headed season as well Captain-

WALTER. A single head for me and like Cyclops himself, one blind eye as well.

QUEEN. Well, thank you Walter for awaking me from my nightmare of giddiness and good cheer. I'm back with you in the nether regions. Which is today's amusement? Ferrying cross my never-ending river of whining, or wrestling with your boulder of regret ?

ALBERT. We've but a few more birdbolts to dodge, your Ladyship. For our Captain of Complaint here's due downstairs by mid-morning.

WALTER. You fast-tongue!

ALBERT. Begging your-

WALTER. If only your mind was as agile as your mouth. They might meet up and once introduced, sit down, sup together, and choke o'er a bone or two.

QUEEN. Downstairs?

WALTER. Yes, I'm due in the nether world of whence you speak, the land one visits when forced to retire....

ALBERT. He is of the worry our superiors might suggest his stepping down, surrendering his post. That his years might out man his abilities, and a soldier outnumbered-

WALTER. No need to slop on the color, the picture has been painted. Though from their vantage point, trust you. From my hill, the valley is still quite green with possibilities-

QUEEN. Altitude always plays havoc with perception, ask any landscape artist.

WALTER. Think you I've no fight left in me?

QUEEN. Past question. Even as they lower you down, sword and shield in hand, you'd quarrel the worms their nibble.

WALTER. Don't bury me yet, dammit I'll fight that bastard death like the villain he is! I've walked the field many a day right alongside the coward, I know his game. From all sides he comes, and not dressed as some black-robed nanny spiriting away your sickly grand-ones. On the field he's dragon-like, a skeletal beast, bony plated, and huge. I first saw him standing over my good friend Oswald, who greeting a sword to the belly, had fallen. Ahold of the wound, he looked at me, his eyes the boy I knew sitting in the filth playing with mudballs. A shadow slowly came over his face, and we both looked up and like so, Death hacked him in two, then flashed his awful

toothy grin. But mark you, show him no fear and never turn to run. Stand your ground, his taste is the weak. He may stop and sniff the air, you match him eye to eye. He'll turn and move on, for he likes nothing better than to give chase, having no stomach for a hard fight, with vulture's patience he'd rather wait. Bide his time and wait...There, I've finished sewing the dress.

QUEEN. You are truly one of life's more precious paradoxes, my sweet. And I adore you.

WALTER. T'was your idea to patron the poet, offer our services.

ALBERT. Only after you signed on as manager, reinventing my plots with a "only to have you consider this?", and "wonderful, now ponder that."

WALTER. Listen to the horse thief. Takes off on a suggestion and rides it. With never a coin of thanks, he's down the road and gone.

ALBERT. The writer's not been born that, having heard an agreeable idea, wouldn't swear he thought it first. Or resurrect a masterpiece, with needful adjustments, accounting for tastes of the day and more vitally trivial, his ego, dangling his name somewhere conspicuous. And by showing another's greatness to be profitable, humbly pay it the false-debt of homage. But, I shall break with tradition, and offer my thanks to both, for all your support and with hope by this eve, your gracious applause.

The bells toll sundown from afar.

QUEEN. Odd, t'was just about to query you gourmets how many bites had been taken from this day. Can it be evening already? My mind's clock mistimes. Not unusual for a madwomen, but normally I've a lawyers ability to value the hour.

ALBERT. Captain, you'll be late...

WALTER. I see no reason to make haste to be told I've no time left.

QUEEN. It's a holiday, you pigeonwit. Perhaps they mean to make a presentation of some extra-wages ?

ALBERT. For services well done, we present you with your month's due plus another!

WALTER. You forget I'm in the employ of your husband-

QUEEN. Then, a stuck-pig perhaps.

WALTER. Our Lord Sovereign-

ALBERT. Or a turkey.

WALTER. His majesty, the king?

ALBERT. Begging your pardon, your Ladyship. My stomach's as empty as my brain, I meant no disrespect ...

QUEEN. (*Crossing into her chamber.*) If no offense was intended, then I intend to be offended...

WALTER. Albert, I would hope you are no longer regulation's dupe, for I am sure nowhere in Our Lord's Manual For Corporal Procedure does it commission a puppet play to be enacted, costumed with materials from the prisoner's own property. To enlist her and your superior's aid in the construction of said costumes and scenic elements. To command they endure hours of the torture of rehearsal, take, without gratitude, their unsolicited advice, then brutally insist they applaud after the final punishment of performance has been levied?

ALBERT. (*Using a puppet and impersonating:*) Question you a king, sir? Taste I in the sauce, the spice of revolt? What day and age is this where the insignificant aspire to relevance. Society is but a cog in nature's complexities, do not make a mockery of its machinery. Like the earth once turned over and seeded, I quarrel not the baseborn for the need of manure. Quench their thirst, keep raked and weeded, and in their depend one may secure seasons of bounteous growth. But though tree shan't grow without soil, neither shall piecemeal dirt reach heavenward and touch sky.

WALTER. Following the dis-course most monarch's sail, you speak worthy words, adrown in a seastorm of sentences unfathomable.

ALBERT. (*Still the King.*) Navigate you this language? If a decree is enacted for a play to be played, then actors you shall imperson. And You! If your speech I seek at the Tower gate, come sun-rest my hearing it 'tis certain. Either in the present or past tense- I trust that you have gleaned my meaning.

QUEEN. (*Returning.*) My luck to be late for a lesson in fortune's grammar. Missed we the chance to select the future overflowing with shalls and maybes? Or in my case, with shallnots and neverwills...

ALBERT. (*Again, the King.*) The future is always a possibility, but leave it as such. For as it breathes air, tomorrow withers to today, rusting and crumbling, a handful of memories to be scattered in yesterday's wind.

QUEEN. How pleasant to once more hear sung the doomed poetry of politics. You've mastered his voice in all its misery, Sir Albert. Walter, hurry yourself, pretend there's a nap awaiting your return.

WALTER. It's all but a too brief sleep on the way to a lengthier slumber.

QUEEN. Spoken with feather logic, by a true Goose Downist. Wishing not to lower the shoulder of your responsibility, may I request you take this ring to treasured Moonbe as a gift of the day, and this note of thanks to mark the occasion?

WALTER. *(Taking the ring and note, as he is leaving.)* Now they've got me playing Father bloody Christmas himself....

QUEEN. You're the only for miles with stomach for the task....

WALTER. *(As he walks the stairs...)* Hear Boy? Mark you. Twenty and five years of devoted employ, and this be the respect they pin about your belly.

QUEEN. Once more, you've managed to tangle the thread of reason, my Theseus. To my husband, a sort of Minotaur in miniature, have you pledged your service, as I before you offered mine. Still he locked me away and gave you the key to my truest heart's devotion. Do not stumble over it, as you make your way back to those who call you loyal.

WALTER. Even a pigeon-wit knows who's wings make him fly. *(He realizes he's started in the wrong direction, and turns to descend the stairs behind him.)* Stagestruck, pretend your a goaler still and pack up the prisoner while I'm gone. String would be in aid, to find your way out this labyrinth. *(He is gone.)*

ALBERT. This way, your Majesty.

QUEEN. I feel akin to a pickled herring. If not fancied for supper, place her back in the jar, where, with the rest of her fish sisters, she'll vinegar sleep, and stay put on the shelf for years, preserved. Before you "pack me away" what think you? Mean they to discharge my Walter?

ALBERT. I wouldn't know, my lady. Still, no worry. From what I've divined, they'd have more luck wringing gold from water, than retiring the Captain.

QUEEN. Tis true, easier to put a devil's brats to bed. I'd be more than lost without him.

ALBERT. I must say, it stretches imagination taut to come up with the pairing of King's jailer and Queen.

QUEEN. Find it less likely a man walks by the same church his whole life, to one day have a carved Christ fall and crown him? One moment full of life's worry, the next moment- bam, he has none. That is often how I view Walter, as a prophetic boulder, a savior, dropped in my lap if not on my head from above.

ALBERT. I sense not a speckle of romance in that....

QUEEN. On sweeter days I see us as twin-hearts. Identical not in feature or frame, yet pulled from the same tree. Fate was our father, Coincidence our mother.

ALBERT. More sentiment paints this portrait than falling rock.

QUEEN. Not always did he strike me thus- mean you to shut me away before I answer your request?

ALBERT. Forgive me, though I'd love to hear-

QUEEN. This was a most hateful prison when first Walter arrived. I was truly a madwoman in those days, surrounded by demons-

ALBERT. Demons?

QUEEN. Dissembling as men, but devil-hearted all the same. Many an evil walks this earth without fangs, for if all who wore black were witches, there'd be no need for trial and jury, But this must wait....I speak without measure, my worry of Walter upends me....Back in the cage, the bird belongs....

ALBERT. Peace! Mean you Walter's not to be trusted? Have I sealed my fate in believing you both? Relaxing my watch, only to be winged from behind?

QUEEN. T'was your idea to play your play- As any of the unappreciated arts, eager were you for audience-

ALBERT. I must try and stop him before he speaks. They'll have our heads. More mischief breeds this place-

QUEEN. Built for the damned, we both hope too much of this blackhome. Albert, if you rush off where does that leave me?

ALBERT. Possessed by a motley's magic, I am... Inside, quick you!

QUEEN. One minute in, the next wait what's your hurry? Listen you- Walter is not our worry. And unless you continue to misplace it, your head will not be lost, though I fear I haven't long to wear mine... Walter Trumble is a man of his word, of honor honed sharper than any sword's steel.

ALBERT. A moment ago you swore him to be false.

QUEEN. True to his word, he once did me grave wrong.

ALBERT. Must all contained by these walls be a riddle? Speak me a plain truth.

QUEEN. She is too vain to be plainly viewed, rouged and perfumed must truth entertain, for unadorned she oft disappoints. Here, sit you down, and allow me to join, for this has weighed me much too long to speak standing...Not long after Walter Trumble's service here began, for whenever a new jailer joins the ranks...'tis custom to celebrate...

ALBERT. Pray continue...

QUEEN. To celebrate an initiation of sorts. The newest on the post, forced belly full of sack, to prove his worth as King's Guard...Rank and File, they call it...The usual silent tower suddenly full of laughter and song, the men lining up one by one and a lucky prisoner chosen by chance, eyes tied blind, held down, accosted by all, the newest taking first turn if true spirited, or last- for none refused Rank n' File, an accident might occur, a tragic fall of a few hundred steps. Either first or last, they took their turn, till proud guards all had become. With more wine and good cheer long into the night, some even tasting more sport, till having their fill, the prisoner was returned bruised and unclean, and the songs and the screams would come to an end, just in time for the daylight's bells to begin. And save for the soft sobs of pain and the snores of the men, a too-familiar hush fell over the tower again. (*A horrible laugh is heard from far below...*) Though one of but a few ladies sheltered here, as royalty, many times was I spared being chosen. But that night, Walter's first, heard I that vile Saxwell as he dared all: "Who'd take the word of a madwomen, bloody Queen or not? She's aranting as usual, say we..." And as they came to unlock my chamber door, I picked up a candle stick to struggle, "Touch me and your own blood you'll be tasting..." encircling me they took up jeering, "A fighter this one is, she'll be a good poke...And the last I remember was their bearded faces closing in, leering... When next I awoke Walter was sitting in my chamber on the cold floor beside me, bruised and bloody were we both and he whispered...."Forgive me, your majesty, please forgive me..." and I spit on him. He placed a bucket and rags for me to wash up with, and with dagger drawn the rest of the night he stayed by my door, though the party had moved to another cell, far below the cries betold.

ALBERT. Never should he have allowed it...

QUEEN. You'd have done as he. And felt the shame, a regretful chill, every now and then...

ALBERT. Never would-

QUEEN. No? Then march you this minute, with sword in hand, for below us lie most of your fellow Guards present that night and many times since...

ALBERT. Dare they continue this contemptible custom?

QUEEN. Why stand you gape mouthed? I've know oxen with more sense and bear with less bite than men at their most base.. Is not the goal of a regiment for many to act as one, with single head, of lone pursuit. And 'tis but a short hop-skip from sack to slaughter, from pillage to rape...That night did I learn for certain though little doubt existed, I live in a world suffering of madness and keeping me cloistered from it was Charities' blessing and Walter, if the pun may be pardoned, her gift of guardian angel.

ALBERT. Yet, I thought he-

QUEEN. Joined in the festivities? For certain, I know not, though he says yes, at first his fear too great. But as soon as he saw the deed with sober eyes, like a cornered cur did he claw at them all, 'till the cell was clear, and over the stair there, a few took a fall...And each time since, as you men line up to make hate, by this door sits my Guardian, all night wide awake.

ALBERT. Why since my arrival has each night peaceful passed?

QUEEN. 'Tis too soon after that grease livered Saxwell's last breath, without him the pack has no leader. And since his talent was treason, lingers in the air still the hazard of possible penalty. But lack-winded discipline tires easily, so sit him down the wait won't be long. For time chariots the sky with horseblindness, hindsight is fruitless, he gallops only forward leaving all that came before behind... (*A door slams below.*) Know you that I was placed here not for absence of sanity? My true crime was being barren. Unable my Lord King suspected of providing an heir... How's that for honesty undressed? Call her mad, but cold-wombed she really is...Well, time rode on and two discoveries were made: t'was the king, four fruitless mistresses later, who's seedless, and his lack-child Queen had become bellyful, thanks to the Guards and their games...For months I carried the result of their hated sport, and dear Walter kept me from royal view. For what an embarrassed husband there'd be, and to make a mockery of a monarch more oft than not, becomes one's final deed. Never will I forget the day of birth, turned hazardous for sick and feeble I was. Spirit sickened by months of my mind's

swaying, knowing either I carried the devils work, or an innocent, wishing to be forgiven- but between fevered shakes, struggled the doomed child into this world. And though I swore not to look, for a moment hoping for some answer, I tried. But with vision newly blurred, could not find a face. Then as compacted, off to the hills Walter went, where at my bequest, he christened the child at river's bottom, and with much prayer and lament, we mourned the brief life, doomed as it was to take with it my sight... (*Walter enters and stands nearby, watching.*) And the final irony, if any be needed, was the King's madlie became truth. For the better part of a year, my wits were abandoned. The entire winter spent silently vigilant, then springthaw at my window, to the heavens, I'd yell. And through summer's heat my Moonbe bathed me, for if not wet, I'd demand to be washed... 'Til one day as the leaves outside began to fall away, my spirits sat up, as from a deep sleep awakening- only to find a much darker world...

WALTER. Wherein resides one noble Captain Trumble whom you haven't yet lost ...

QUEEN. Who, Walter, who!

WALTER. Who you bloody well have to deal with, 'cause right here stays his command.

QUEEN. A greater gift you could not have given.

WALTER. Happy am I to hear it, for the extra five ducats awarded will warm my pocket, rather than purchase you a present.

QUEEN. No need to spend for my affection. My worth is greater than any treasury, and my taste much too fine...However since some miser once said, it's the thought one counts, if we totaled your mind's small change might the sum be embrace?

WALTER. In front of the boy?

QUEEN. In front of the world, damn you. What care I if they see?

WALTER. (*As they hug, he holds her tightly.*) Never again will harm come your way, your grace, I newly swear it.

QUEEN. Find you cause to worry-

ALBERT. (*Startled by a noise.*) Stand! Who approaches?

WALTER. Mark you! State your business while you still have tongue to speak.

A crumpled piece of paper is tossed into the air like an arrow and lands in the chamber.

ALBERT. (*Reading.*) I have none.

WALTER. If no business here than get ye gone!

Another piece of paper. Walter picks it up and hands it to Albert.

ALBERT. (*Reading.*) My business is with my ladyship, it's tongue I've none of.

QUEEN. Moonbe?

Another note. It lands near the Queen. Walter picks it up and hands it to Albert.

ALBERT. (*Reading.*) Happy I am there's one with clever wit, my wrist grows weary. Now may I approach?

WALTER. Zany is that you?

Moonbe peers his head over the stairs and smiles, throwing one last missive toward Albert.

ALBERT. (*Reading.*) Zany no more, for the world screams folly for me. Uncapped, the insanity flows freely, and this keg, long since tapped, has but a hollow empty sound...

Moonbe opens his mouth and screams, nothing is heard, then a loud, low, awful horn. He steps from behind the stairs and we see he carries a crude bellows that makes a fart-like horn sound. He also carries a tray of food, and over his shoulder are three bottles of ale. He goes to the Queen and puts down the tray, takes her hand, and spells out some words. She translates.

QUEEN. He says supper he brings early for the cook's on holiday time, and a gift for you both of kidney's ale and pie-

WALTER. Kidney's ale?

QUEEN. (*Moonbe corrects her.*) Forgive me, that's kidney pie and ale. But question him no longer, for the fool without words, his best jests have been jailed.

WALTER. Pity, t'would be nice to have his best, rather than for years to have suffered the rest...

QUEEN. (*Translating for Moonbe.*) Ears he still has Sirrah. Marry, the gift of gab is the fool's kiss. Why waste a low long one, (*Moonbe approaches Walter with hand out.*) on one who won't give and knows not how to receive?

He kisses Walter sloppily on the mouth, and runs off laughing silently.

WALTER. I'll give you a sharp hard one back of your head, you twizzle, ever touch me again...

QUEEN. (*To Walter, jesting.*) Think you sir that since sightless, you may pander your affections to any foolish heart that passes? Keep your kisses for the collection plate, if they be so cheaply spent...(*To Moonbe.*) Get you to my chamber crookcalf, and forget not my supper. Received you my gift? (*Moonbe spells into her hand.*) T'would think even the blind might mark it's shine...And why thank me not for it? (*He spells again.*) You did, but I didn't hear it, ha, ha! Maybe your jest will to my ear improve once my stomach is full... And stay you awhile, for soon Sir Albert's play performs. I'm told it's a tale of Queen's revenge...

ALBERT. And contagious Kings-

QUEEN. (*After Moonbe spells into her hand.*) Say's he, that plot premieres daily, the courts acrawling with lizards, whose colors change quicker than their garters. The first rule of ruling is the learn to be misleading. (*They exit into the chamber; Moonbe shuts the door.*)

WALTER. (*To himself...*)'Tis the first rule of us all- Do unto others before they do unto you.

ALBERT. So, no rest for you. Mean you to be trapped with us here awhile longer?

WALTER. Trapped it is...

ALBERT. Well, I'm glad for it. And joyful you sound.

WALTER. If only for one chase, allow me to ride as the hunter, high on my horse, reveling in the challenge.... Why dub me game once more? I've known nothing but life's corners and ditches. Must it always be to dodge or flee? Like a winded goose, I grow weary of the sport.

ALBERT. What of "bury me not" and "stay you back, Master Death!"

WALTER. Let him come now, I'll quarrel him not. I'd sooner leap in his arms than face the next dawn.

ALBERT. I've more knowledge of Ancient Egypt than of what you speak.

WALTER. Here. Twin Judases there's to be this time. For services rendered, your extra pay.

ALBERT. Then we worried for not, did she not tell us t'was extra wages?

WALTER. That she did. Her judgment's uncanny...though I doubt she prophesied all...

ALBERT. Judases? Prophecy, now it's Testaments we're talking, speak some simple King's English!

WALTER. Simple King's English? That I can do. You'd think it would be simple enough.... Albert, sir, our King has made of us a simple demand- the severing of his Queen's head. The crime treason, though the truer cause, his new royal mistress is with child. We may only hope 'tis his....But no matter, whatever his cause, the sentence must be carried out. Simply and immediately. At dawn.

ALBERT. Surely you jest?

WALTER. One may only assume the haste to alleviate any popular unrest, and more importantly (*He indicates his belly.*) our yet-to-be Queen's soon to unveil her value. And since our Lord Executioner is abroad, studying newer more efficient means, we have been tapped to serve sentence. So you see, sir, either you or I, or both, they care not, must simply... (*He cannot even say the words.*)

ALBERT. It can't be...

Walter hands Albert the official edict

WALTER. Like her mother before her... He said. She must suffer the same end as her mother before her...

ALBERT. Yet why today?

WALTER. A gift. To his new bride...

ALBERT. 'Tis barbaric...

WALTER. Why label peoples past as crude and uncivil? If man were to gaze at his own time from above, sure as night comes to steal away day, he'd find himself stumbling through an age darker than any previous.

ALBERT. *(After a pause.)* What are we to do?

WALTER. Our choices number but two: carry out the sentence or prepare our heads for the same block.

ALBERT. She's...your lady, my Queen- Queen of us all!

WALTER. Already the wind carries false word of her plottings. In tomorrow's market they'll haggle Justice for Queen's blood.

ALBERT. T'will be an innocent death on their hands...

WALTER. And where may we cleanse ours? Climbing back to this chamber anon, my thoughts weighted with the countless I've killed, remembered I how on the field, hate-blinded, with but one smooth stroke, I'd send them under- why? To quench a king's lust, an edict signed over tea? And they, poor bastards, only wishing the same for me, as if all men might be transfigured to blood-drinkers, soulless stalking the land. To point us to battle's but needed some monarch with pen in his hand...And for twenty and five, I've kept her here, jailed-though assured I was she committed no crime. If innocence can be prisoned, why not murdered...

ALBERT. Tis you and I imprisoned, for our fate's door has been slammed shut, bolted. With no escape to be found...And to think my days concern was how kindly she'd receive my play.

WALTER. And receive it she shall-

ALBERT. Captain-

WALTER. And your most difficult performance will be to conceal this unwanted new finish.

ALBERT. How can-

WALTER. Listen, boy! If you and I fail to see this through some other slug will. If I placed my own head on the block, it wouldn't save hers. The only benefit through this fog I see, is my aim will be true and no pain will she feel. While she sleeps this night with one sure blow, her soul, wrongly caged all these years, will I set free.

ALBERT. Which murder presses harder on your heart? Mother or Son?

WALTER. Neither, you churl, were bets I placed, still daily I pay. Each day since and ever more, a still small piece of my soul do I lose... (*The bell tolls nightfall from afar.*) Now ready your stage and remember your role- whisper not a word of warning to my lady. If she becomes fearful for but a moment, your suffering will I multiply times tenfold.

QUEEN. Come Moonbe, I will not be kept waiting... (*Moonbe reluctantly appears.*) I find nothing fashionable in tardiness, mistiming a curtain... Parading down the aisle, feigning misfortune... Such a display of ignorance, to allow the ignorant their display... Walter where are you? You promised to illuminate.

WALTER. In the dark I'm putting us, the better for all to see...

QUEEN. A trick I've known for years... well dim your torches. Sir Albert, your audience awaits!

Albert is behind the stage moving the puppets, Walter is next to the stage and holds a small drum.

ALBERT. Captain, you may begin. (*Walter is watching the Queen.*) Something troubles you, sir?

WALTER. No, begin we shall!

He beats the drum clumsily and touches a cymbal on the side. The curtain opens to reveal a puppet that resembles Walter, who begins his narration:

WALTER. Centuries ago, in a faraway land, lived a simple-minded- (*An add-lib.*) or so t'was thought- gardener, who tended the king's orchards, and provided for his roses, which were the envy of the world. (*Bright flowers sprout on the stage.*)

ALBERT. (*As the puppet.*) No one's blossoms are as colorful, no trees grow sweeter fruit. I have but the God's to thank for bestowing this gift...

WALTER. (*An add-lib.*) Mark how humble he was- yet never lived one more nurturing. At first frost, each bud would he tenderly cover, each trunk would he wrap- it was said he even slept out of doors under his trees and among his blossoms, for he loved them as another would his family.

ALBERT. (*Again as the puppet, about to sleep.*) The king was pleased with his pears, was he not? "My good sir", he said- me a "sir"- "My good sir, your pears have made the Duchess all but annex the south, tomorrow when she has your apples, baked and glazed, all the lands will be ours again...

QUEEN. If 'tis the Duchess of Shrewsbury, she's a soul-seller for poached pears. I myself tallied her swilling a bushel at banquet-

ALBERT. (*As the puppet, but also to stop the interruption.*) So... goodnight my friends! We've much to do tomorrow...

WALTER. Now word of his skill, his unequaled skill- soon spread to the Gods, where it was said he was the favorite of the Harvest Queen, chief rival of the Queen Of Queens. While not uncommon for a gardener to make offerings to the Harvest Queen, she boasted that he was her minion, devoted to her over all other gods and goddesses, and thus had gifted him with powers as a token of her affection. Well, the Queen of Queens was known for her jealousy, honed sharper when aimed at mortal men's affection, and razor edged when pointed at the Harvest Queen who often boasted of her importance to the lower lands.

Albert performs both Queens, one on each hand. First the Harvest Queen (HQ), then the Queen Of Queens (QQ).

HQ. His devotion knows no bounds, so I've kissed the tip of his blossoms with every hue imagined.

QQ. Are you not too generous with your graces? Most mortals once favored, tire of service; tempted they remain loyal- surfeited, they lie about swinelazy.

HQ. No favor I spend goes undeserved. More than affection, this man deserves my unfettered desire...

QQ. Then he's as common as the countless others you've squandered with your trinket-vows, for your desire's a tired tune, too many have sung....

As the Harvest Queen leaves, knowing she's upset her rival:

HQ. Yet with such pretty notes, the sweet melody lingers, I leave them humming long after the songs over...

QQ. Never you mind, I shall steal to this orchard, for before Harvest's next moon, I will become this gardener's worship. Lord I over all men, and over this waxen wench am I not Queen as well? If I am not possessed of more pleasant feature, I've wisdom's cunning in my camp. Wearing the dress of forest nymph, my aid in this mischief, with skirt to tempt with each swirl, away to this mortal garden I twirl.

WALTER. Once in his garden, she watched, wrapped in the branches of a pear tree, as he tenderly cared for each seedling-

ALBERT. (*As Gardener:*) Do you fear the world as I, little bud? Is that why you stay hidden? Take the gamble, my friend, show your colors! The earth will soon enough re-welcome, but the tempered air, like a sweet maid's affection, is ours but for the lend.

WALTER. And rather than trick him with her charms, she found herself becoming bewitched.

ALBERT. (*As Puppet Queen:*) What conjure makes his magic? 'Tis as if a candle is being held to my blood-

She leaves the branches of the tree and begins to dance near the gardener who is working in the dirt The Queen slips from her chair almost fainting. Moonbe and Walter rush to help her up.

QUEEN. I implore your pardon. This fictioned Queen feels light-minded as well. Continue, Sir Albert, I must know if this Gardener ever looks up from his planting...

The stage begins to slowly rotate, the effect should be slight at first then become dizzying, the point of view of the Queen who is obviously ill.

WALTER. Take note of her he did, and the spell between them was spun of the same unseen pull that moves stars about the sky or that allows feathers to fly. Put word to it, and a science it becomes- ordinary, a bald Samson. Leave it unburdened by reason and passion has no peer.

ALBERT. (Whispering:) A bald Samson?

WALTER. Now as their romance blossomed the fruits of their affection became apparent, as belly full, the Goddess became, and the first to notice- her rival the Harvest Queen, who wasted not a minute confided her concern to Court. When the King of Kings, rushed from his mistresses bed-chamber, heard of his wife's infidelities, his anger was more for having been

interrupted, 'til told of the impending child, then hot-headed he became, unleashing a plague or two toward the lower lands.

ALBERT. (*As Harvest Queen first, then King*) HQ. Drought sir, a nice drought will teach them not to be so thirsty. And some fat beetles to teach them never to hunger for what's not theirs...

K. I leave it in your hands to punish them, I've work to do. But make sure they suffer, as we all do in knowing you...(*The puppet starts to go, and stops:*) But two plagues only, this time. No need to pile it on...

WALTER. And the land became choked for rain, all the trees withered away, and a cloud of beetles chewed the fields, feasting on all the Gardener's prize roses. Sleepless he became and full of grief and throughout the land, a price put on the head of whoever had offended the Gods, for sure they were that these were punishments. And the Harvest Queen, who's joyful work was near complete, hid nearby waiting 'till the Queen was weakened with childbirth, then sent a too strong wind blowing away her fairy disguise, and t'was then he knew his truest love was damned. And on what should have been a joyful day of birth-

QUEEN. Enough!

WALTER. As his lover slept, he took the child, a son, and went to the river where he washed and bathed, and raising the boy over his head-

QUEEN. I need hear no more!

WALTER. He cried out:

ALBERT. (*As Gardener:*) Please forgive me for what I've done!

QUEEN. (*She stands.*) I said enough!

The stage stops spinning. Then starts again.

WALTER. And for what I'm about to do...

ALBERT. (*As himself:*) And for what I'm about to do?

WALTER. For instead of drowning the boy, which he intended, he wrapped him up and left him under a dead tree.

ALBERT. No, why speak you this falsehood? He drowns the child to stop the plague, he must -

WALTER. He lets the child live- *(To the Queen.)* You see? He knows what he should do, but doesn't...

ALBERT. No, Captain -

QUEEN. And so the child lived?

WALTER. Yes...

ALBERT. If the boy lives how do we arrive at calling the gardener "Justice"? The name of the play being "The Origin of Justice". Through his sacrifice do we learn to balance the scale of right and wrong...It's one thing to interrupt the poetry with "Bald Samsons," quite another to rewrite the entire-

QUEEN. The gardener is dubbed "Justice?"

ALBERT. Yes, my Lady. By the Queen of the Gods, who bestows on him the gift of judgment- after forgiving him for slaying their child-

QUEEN. Yet I thought the child lived?

WALTER. Yes!

ALBERT. No-

WALTER. Yes!*(He beats the drum, loudly. The stage stops rotating.)* And thus his name being Mercy, for the gardener raised the child over his head, and looking down at the river below- churning, angry, water slapping rock...Crashing down with cruel force, only to peacefully glide on, t'was then he heard a little laugh, a tiny giggle from being lifted so high- and he stopped, as if aware of it's smallness, it's two pecks weight, for the first time. He lowered the infant down, looking at him, with thoughts rushing over like the rapids below. This child's eyes know nothing of the trouble I've caused. These cheeks, his hair, his tiny hands are not the cause of our misfortune, only the result, the sum of a misguided affection...Change any of the pattern of events and this boy would be christened in this water, not sleeping in it's cold bed ...T'was then, as I gazed down, that the child's smile slowly turned to frown, his little face sensing a fear, and I realized my tears, newly falling, were the cause of his concern. So I kissed him on the forehead, to assure his worry, to stop mine, I know not which... I held him tightly until I could stand no more and into the snow I fell sobbing, still cradling him in my arms.... I knew what I had to do....

ALBERT. Wrap him, blanket warm, and leave him hoping to be found?

WALTER. My lady was fever sick, I had to hurry back or I'd loose her as well...Once she slept soundly, I returned for- you, but you were gone...

ALBERT. (*Searching through a bag of possessions.*) Buried under a drift of snow, supper to a pack of wolves for all you knew...

WALTER. I was too numb with worry....I know what I did lacks reason-

QUEEN. And all these years from me this secret you've kept?

WALTER. Once the boy was gone, I feared I had kept my deadly bargain...

ALBERT.

This is the blanket, that was 'til now both father and mother...

WALTER. And if you turn it over my mark "W.T." will you find there embroidered, for little more can I write... (*The Queen faints again.*) My lady...

ALBERT. I fear I might lose my footing as well...

WALTER. Moonbe, here give her this to drink. (*As she regains consciousness, he goes over to Albert who is sitting on the cot stunned.*) Listen now boy, we haven't much time. (*Albert tries to move away.*) Where would you have been raised? Here with her in this our humble home? Think you our Lord King would have let you live? But enough, I have already been too free of tongue- for torture you they will. Know I loved you with all my heart that day-

ALBERT. Drown me you didn't, abandon me you did...

WALTER. And loved you with each day since, and each to come. You won't listen now, but there may come a time you will.

ALBERT. Surrounded by death's chill and you left me?

WALTER. And again I must leave you, and again I shall...

He takes the chamber pot, and is about to crack Albert over the head.

ALBERT. Mean you to murder me again? Am I nothing more than apprentice for your heinous crimes?

WALTER. I mean to murder no one.

ALBERT. How deeply damned may one soul be? Pack me not on your journey to the heart of hell.

QUEEN. Moonbe are they dueling? Never have I understood what this besting of one another in sport provides a man.

ALBERT. There is little sport in deception, your majesty...

QUEEN. On the contrary, deceit 'tis a game we've all played, and those that deny are oft champions. But I've no time today for the tiresome maiden's role of cheer leader-

WALTER. My lady, we've little time...

QUEEN. And now my words repeat-

ALBERT
Listen to me, your majesty-

WALTER.
Hear me, my Lady-

ALBERT
If you believe this man-

WALTER
By our years of devotion I
swear-

ALBERT
As sure as he left me to die-

WALTER.
And to you I swear, by all that is dear to
me, never did I mean you harm-

ALBERT. Yet you display your devotion by coming at me, dagger drawn?

QUEEN. Explain your quarrel with- my newly born son?

WALTER. Trust he knows, but will not speak-

ALBERT. Or suffer I shall, the Captain vows. But no harm will he mean, and devoted he will be, even as he cuts out my heart? Will you be so fond with her?

WALTER. I warn you-

ALBERT. To calculate his devotion to you my Lady, figure in the extra wages he'll earn to, by dawn's light, deliver your head or his own.

Walter is standing over him about to strike a blow

WALTER. Now most certainly will you pay-

ALBERT. Go ahead, I beg release, for if this be the world I share, I'm better to be rid of it.

QUEEN. Did you spare the infant only to slaughter the man? Mean you to murder a part of me twice?

WALTER. Murder? You entreated me take him away!

QUEEN. And I tell you now let him be. I am your target's eye, let me taste your blows.

WALTER. I mean no harm to either-

QUEEN. Stand you not with weapon in hand?

WALTER. Nothing in this hated world, this coven, where corruption's as necessary as air, would entreat me to injure you.

ALBERT. 'Tis he about to work his witchery, your Majesty.

QUEEN. Claim me no longer with "your Majesty" that title diminishes in value with the years...But restore me with that most reverent of stations, the only title I have ever regretted losing, embrace me as your Mother. (*She opens her arms.*) ... Will you receive me thus?

Albert begins to slowly walk toward her and as they are about to embrace, Walter hits Albert over the head with the blunt end of his dagger, knocking him out.

QUEEN. Walter! Have you struck him down?

WALTER. I've little choice and even less time...

QUEEN. You've years left to spend, and each you owe to my son. Is he hurt?

WALTER. Just early to bed, the events of the day a bit too much for him.... (*He is kneeling by her now.*) My dear lady, have you indeed learned to love me after all these years?

QUEEN. Boundlessly...

WALTER. Then for once let my tongue waggle, while you attend... We've only this night to flee, for by daybreak if you are found awake, we both will be sleeping evermore...The boy spoke in earnest- your vile husband has put a price on your head-

QUEEN. Walter 'tis no new discovery- I've known today would be the day...
And once I heard of your visit below, was I sure.

WALTER. You knew?

QUEEN. Moonbe in secret told me of my husband's "good fortune" days ago, the mumble news having already spread, the jests even started- it takes not even a day for the people to joke of misfortune.. .How many queens does it take for a king to make a baby?

WALTER. Moonbe knew of this days ago?

QUEEN. Yes, and I swore him to secrecy, for I wanted every day I could with you.

WALTER. But we could have fled, we'd have had time!

QUEEN. Where my sweet? Where could Queen and Guard go and not fear? How far? How many would they send after us? You know it would only-

WALTER. Be a matter of time. No matter for you know me well, the son of a gambler- while lives there a chance it's worth the taking. If you weren't such a fool our odds would be fewer...

QUEEN. I fear they are fewer than few...Walter, stop your packing-

WALTER. (*He is gathering a few possessions.*) While there's a ducat to lose stay in the game-

QUEEN. My pocket's are empty-

WALTER. Then lay down your best bluff... Moonbe you dolt, gather my Lady's things before I toss you over the wall for conspiring- move I say!

Moonbe exits into the chamber.

QUEEN. (*Resting Albert's head in her lap as she sits in the floor. She is feeling his face tenderly.*) He's of gentle face, and tender skin. And not like most men- changeable as the wind, choosing their direction daily, my son's current runs steady and true, as loyal as any river-

WALTER. Expect you less knowing his seed? My Ladyship, we must depart, and he must remain. For much peril and attention will be drawn by traveling in threes.

QUEEN. Only just this moment were we introduced, and now you beg me leave? I feel my heart needs more time to catch it's breath.

WALTER. T'will be all the more difficult once the night watch has completed their rounds- (*The bells are heard chiming the hour.*) Hear you? Next they'll be listening for the all's well...

QUEEN. And it is... All's well... as it will ever be.

WALTER. You needn't continue your madplay.

QUEEN. Allow me the stage but for a moment longer- and sit here with me. Soft- quarrel not, the act is nearly ended, but a few words to the close. My dear sweet Captain... Is not the shameless fashion of the day to bring the curtain down on a lover's kiss?

WALTER. I feel you're mistaken, 'tis not the night for comedy to be performed, that was another evenings fare.

QUEEN. Pity, I'd prefer it such...I've more taste for mirth. What play's this evening?

WALTER. Tonight we have "The Origin of Justice." Where innocent prisoners are freed- if they hurry- If not "How The Queen and Her Guards Misplaced Their Heads" will soon premiere. Not a popular plot in these parts...

QUEEN. You needn't fear, my sweet, no harm will befall either of you this eve.

WALTER. I wish of that I was as certain.

QUEEN. Let me ease your doubt... Such a simple peace accompanies the absolute, as if all that presses, coiling tightly inside- becomes released, as a rope pulled tightly on both ends, stretching taut, 'till one side let's go, and after so much struggle it falls gently to the floor...

WALTER. I'd love to sit here listening to you mix your metaphors, but my dear we really need to flee.

QUEEN. I will be dead within the hour.

WALTER. If you insist on lying there with the boy, I do not doubt it-

QUEEN. I mean what I say, my love. By the next hours strike, I will be gone.

WALTER. Not true. I mean to save you-

QUEEN. If there was a way, I'm sure you, my devoted guardian, would find it. But not even you can stop these herbs once they've begun their journey. And that was a good while ago now...

WALTER. What have you done? Poison yourself?

QUEEN. Don't be angry-

WALTER. God's Blood, why?

QUEEN. T'was the only way to save you. To save you both....

WALTER. No!

QUEEN. Shhh...My dearest Walter, one cannot fight a king...

WALTER. We can!

QUEEN. I tried, look where I landed-

WALTER. I'll fight him myself-

QUEEN. No, you will do as I ask! If indeed you care.

WALTER. I will have his head, I swear it.

QUEEN. If ever you loved me-

WALTER. I did, and look where it landed me? For the first time in my life, I loved with all my heart...

QUEEN. Then swear me this, that you will remain by my boy's side, with the same devotion you showed me.

WALTER. No world remains for me once you leave it...

QUEEN. I won't be far.

WALTER. (*Referring to the poison.*) You've had your fill and left me nothing to quench my thirst...

QUEEN. Though 'tis my sweetest joy, I really have little time to bicker with you my sweet. Promise me by my boy's side you will always be. (*Walter is*

speechless.) Please, you must promise me-*(Walter shakes his head yes. Moonbe appears and drops her bag.)* Is that my dear friend? Walter you must not be angry with my loyal, he only did as I commanded him do. As you would have done, if not so stubborn...Go now, Master Moonbe, you are free of my service. *(Moonbe too tests if there is any poison left. Seeing there is none, he sits on a step unable to leave, wanting to be nearby.)* You know I use to hear them whisper, the Queen knows not even Latin. And it was true. I hated the language, never had a taste for it. But I was Queen, and I needed a few phrases, to convince the clergy, or for the more pompous moments of state, so those I committed. But all these years, like a needle pricking my conscience, the whispers of: Our Lady lacks Latin. She never spoke God's tongue... and it became my talisman, this weight about my neck, representing all I'd never accomplished, all I might have done. Yet lying here, safely cradled in your arms may I say I'm joyful to have never learned the cursed language. Thrilled to not have it filling up my head now with useless thoughts. What use would I have for it now? Though if it be heaven's tongue, I'll be nothing but tourist...

WALTER. Omnis vita es maior summis scientis....

QUEEN. You see, even you can speak-

WALTER. T'was on a shield of the first man I slew. I never forgot it. 'Tis the only phrase I know, other than some curses and lewd remarks.

QUEEN. What does it mean?

WALTER. Something akin to "Each life is more than the sum of it's knowledge".

QUEEN. 'Tis a nice epitaph...But I'd rather have the lewd remarks...

The "All's Well's" begins to be heard sounding from below, getting closer as each floor responds. Walter is holding the Queen as she slowly loses consciousness, the "All's Well" from just downstairs is heard. She has died. There is silence on the stage. Walter knows he is supposed to respond, but is overcome. Finally, knowing he must, he cries out:

WALTER. All's well... *(He kisses her forehead.)* And God be with you.

He is still sitting cradling her in his arms, Albert is lying on the floor in front of them, and Moonbe is sobbing silently stage right, as the lights slowly dim to black.

END OF ACT/PLAY ONE

ACT/PLAY TWO WHISPERING WALLS

The set is the same as Act One except the prison seems even more ancient. Some of the walls are chipped in places, one of the torch holders is bent, and a few of the stairs are cracked and broken. The most important change is that stage right, all around Walter's post, a vine-like tree is growing in, of all places, a prison anteroom. It should be very tall and branches should be clinging to the walls of the prison, and the roots of the tree are coming from the base of the wall and floor. As the lights come up, the cell door is open, dead center, and Walter is sitting under the tree, stage right. He is drinking heavily from a flask and carving some initials in the tree. It is fifteen years later.

WALTER. Not as if you were the first and only to make off with my heart, you know.

ALBERT. (*Speaking to someone else from inside the cell.*) Am I of no more value than that?

WALTER. A man doesn't see as much of the world as I and not know his way about the backside of a town or two.

ALBERT. (*Again, in the cell.*) And what of the words whispered in one another's arms, were they of no more willful chemistry than vapor? (*The bell tolls the hour far away.*) But a minute!

Albert appears, agitated, as Walter puts away his dagger. Routinely they march the perimeter; Albert even skips a few steps. As they pass their respective hallways, they yell in bored unison: "All's Well! God be with you!" Albert immediately goes back into the cell. Walter continues his carving. The tour appears and gathers around the entire perimeter. The guide stands center and begins to speak:

TOUR GUIDE. Before we show you the execution chamber, and Courtyard of Death, let me remind you that it was in this cell that for over twenty-five years Queen Alice, wife of Lawrence the First, was imprisoned for her madness. Little is known of Queen Alice, except her condition was so grave at times her screams were said to be heard in the villages some twenty leagues from here. Devoted to her, even as her condition deteriorated, Larry had physician after physician visit her in the hopes of finding a cure. It was, no doubt, from one of them that she received the medicine that she would later swallow, poisoning herself. Legend has it Larry was so grief struck that

his tears caused an apple tree, her favorite fruit, to sprout, growing along these very walls for over a century. Which is why, to this day, some refer to this tower as the "Tower Of The Tree." Still this chamber's fame has more to do with the events of the later part of the same century. And the execution that was to take place, which might have changed our history as we know it. For, follow me please, just below us, in the courtyard outside, would be placed the executioners block. And great parties were held to witness the severing of heads in the square.

The tour disappears down the stairs.

WALTER. (*Carving again.*) But here's the worry of it all. A'fore you, affection was all groping and grabbing, sweating and huffing. This is the rub- who's to prepare you for it? I learned to swing a broad sword with the best of 'em, mastered the crossbow as well, but I could have used a bit of schooling in handling you. For years I never wanted much from affection- a good tumble- and a smile when we're through. 'Tis more than me Mother ever gave me Dad. Besides I'm a soldier not some family man- sit me by the fire with my sniveling brats of an evening? I'd sooner drink pizzle. My country was me life and heart, I served my King. Ha! Match that for a jest. Let's toss a-back to country and king, God piss on 'em. Marry, when I fell for my first Queen, 'twas I a might rudimentary in the workings of love? Aye, say I. Love's workings and it's very plausibility, for that matter.

ALBERT. (*From inside.*) Oh, mark that. Think you worthy of such a large reputation. I know it to be not.

WALTER. (*Referring to the carving.*) There, how does she look? I did this with me first dear one back when but a coddle of eight. Who was the first to dance rings with your reason, m'lady? Yet another aspect we never shared.....'Tis all I seem to find these days, the bits I never had a chance to learn of you... I hope your joints creak as mine for that.... No matter, for I had me a pang for this flaxen haired robin who's father'd go gaming with my dad. And we'd scamper off to the woods, when we were supposed to be raking the pig's. And she pull up me shirt and down me jerkin, and set about poking and prodding, and then lie on her back and lift her skirt and all but beg me to do the same, and don't ask me why, but I took a fancy to her. And I use to beg me father to rake out the pig sty. Sometimes two or three times a day...So on a nice big elm near a clearing, we carved our initials. Hers A.R.- Abigail Rogers.....sweet girl...tart that she was. And that afternoon married by a raccoon, who, once spied, was dubbed friar of the forest, and exchanged we our vows hard by. Then after sharing a bit of plum pie I snitched, we sat arm in arm in the tall grass, till the sun fell down.... (*From the cell we hear Albert's voice say: 'Well, 'tis not for my lack of trying, I assure you...'*) I hope all this is making you green with envy-

ALBERT. (*Entering from the cell.*) Oh, it is Captain. You're what, sixty and five, and all you can write would fit on a tree....

WALTER. Did I hear the sound of rat droppings hitting the floor?

ALBERT. You'd not hear an elephant's shitting, as deaf as you've become.

WALTER. Yet the world's not quiet enough, still I hear your snivel and drivel.

ALBERT. 'Tis only cause I shout. Fifteen years of being posted with you, I'm lucky but to have a voice.

WALTER. Rest it please, for the next fifteen. I grant you permission.

ALBERT. My ever-ranking and never-leaving Captain, it's a long while now since I've taken orders from you, and I do not wish to begin again. (*Almost whispering.*) After tomorrow, nor will we e'en be equals, my superiors have assured me-

WALTER. Does this mean, along with the other children, you'll be eating pudding in the square? Celebrating your promotion as the heads roll by?

ALBERT. You know my feelings on the subject-

WALTER. How could that be? Methinks "this silly dodder no longer remembers e'en his own name "...Are those not your words?

ALBERT. What idle patter trouble's you now?

WALTER. Listen, pigeonwit. Never sit you down to cardplay, for your liar's face, transparent as any flirt-gill's bodice, advertises all. Your bluff's as toothless as your courage- and my bite. Think you, after forty years service, I've no reserves to aid me when I'm ambushed? I've caught wind of your confessions below....Spitting your venomous opinion-

ALBERT. When pressed of your performance, when your superiors- and mine- made inquiries, only then did I speak- of a lack of reason, o'ercomes when you've had a taste- which, I freely state but to you, is most of the day, and all of the night...

WALTER. You tried to yank the rug out from under me, not fit for the post said you-

ALBERT. I recommended retirement, only your stepping down, long overdue, with full pension-

WALTER. Bid them take me away from this my post- I'd sooner give over the last of life's breath than hand in uniform and sword.

ALBERT. Barely can you stand, let alone stand watch-

WALTER. Never an escape, nor e'en an attempt, my record clear as an Ethiop's cheek, save the assassin Saxwell years ago....

ALBERT. True nary an attempt to escape, not even to save your own lady, my mother-

WALTER. Ah! Finally we take aim at the heart of the target. Still hold you blame for her deeds o'er my head? Must you, continual as a King's historian, re-paint the past? I'd have risked all for her then and would have succeeded, if not for your fool's show. Distracted by your puppets, 'twas never a chance to help... As for today's falsehoods, save your vain-tempted recommendations for your own retirement-at this post will I remain. And nothing will stop me from seeing this current sentence end full stop,

ALBERT. What is your quarrel with this man? Why struggle you so to see his warrant served?

WALTER. Because you lout, I am a jailer! 'Tis my peg in the game's board! Is it not a jailer's duty to serve sentence? Never confuse my intentions, boy! I care for nothing anymore, 'tis too late in the century for me- my days of want-wishing having passed unrequited long ago. These revolter's barter a new age, I say where's the bargain? Does not our calendar usher it in regardless? But a few more ticks of the centuries clock and once more we become time's newborns. Let them predict and pontificate, I care not. My struggle remains within these walls, to sit under this tree with a nice pint in my hand.... I care more for a dry throat than if your friend is separated from his head. In truth, I'd sooner will them their wish. Have him, his ladyship and all their revolutionary pack o'ertake our sovereign throne, divide up the lands, and give the people, like chirping chicks, some freedom to sup on... Let them try resurrecting the world, they've more hope finding the edge of heaven.

ALBERT. Speak not of our prisoner as my familiar.

PERTWEE. (*Entering from the cell.*) Why, would you deny me? As Peter refused our Lord Savior?

WALTER. That comparison seems most boastful, Sir Pertwee, if not blasphemous- Our Lord's Peter was suspect...'twas being held and questioned.

PERTWEE. (*A jest for his and Albert's enjoyment.*) Let us hope not for turning water into wine...

WALTER. And I trust there is no call for suspicion as our day concludes?

ALBERT. Don't be absurd. I only meant it not prudent to- voice unnecessarily- any connection-

PERTWEE. True, we mustn't lose our heads in all this....

ALBERT. Think you, that is my fear?

PERTWEE. It's most certainly mine.... Call me vain, but I've grown almost attached to my head, and the thought of it tumbling about the courtyard, like some lawn ball, has me a bit aggrieved, I must say...

ALBERT. Don't be so morbid, Reggie....

PERTWEE. It's my execution eve, I'm entitled to a smattering of boneyard humor. I'm frightfully certain 'tis acceptable. Even in the best of circles. Yet we don't have the fashionable to consult for precedent. Not much call for execution etiquette. In France, possibly. The French have such a flair for the dramatic... I hear one viscount even had invitations engraved... I have only my dearest friends disowning me left and right... Who would have thought it so unpopular to be involved with popular rule...

WALTER. As my good lady Queen says-

ALBERT. Said, as she said. Forever do you speak of her in the present as though still with us-

WALTER. She is-

ALBERT. No, Captain Alesbreath, she's gone. Taken from me twice. Once by you in childhood, and then by a King 'tis my shame to be serving still. Why I'm not rid of the both of you is my life's curse...

WALTER. I tell you again, she sits each eve with me in this her tree, taken from the orchard, her favorite spot in all the world. The very tree that sheltered you all those years ago,

ALBERT. Speak no more, your story thrives on your thirst-

PERTWEE. Yet 'tis a tantalizing tale...Like those Persian fables...You, of all people, should appreciate a good story. Have you writ a one in fifteen years?

ALBERT. And you know the cause, vowed I never again to touch pen to paper...

PERTWEE. As should many who labor at it verily...Still, he has managed to get seed to grow from stone...To have the whole county talk of this place as sacred- Never speak of those held in the Tower that sprouted the tree...Those prisoned there never see light of day... We had the whole of this land whispering my name, talking of our plan for self-rule-

ALBERT. 'Til vile Larry had you parceled off here-

PERTWEE. Oh, Pertwee's doomed now, they said, the only way to leave the Tower of the Tree's to be planted in the earth itself. Any wonder, one by one, these last four years, our loyals forgot us.... Yet, I trusted Ann to be right. We mustn't despair. 'Tis a blessing, not a sentence of doom...The first to escape from there would be renown...One the people will never forget.. And so sure was I if any could make the possible from naught, 'twas my Lady Ann...And each time, she's tried your basset hound has stumbled into the way. Who'd have thought this yellowed sack, this cobweb, a match for my wasp of a wife? Look at him, not a clue has he to this day. Four times he has changed history and all we get (*Walter lets out a loud belch,*) is a scratch and a belch for our trouble. Well, ancient, what was it your Tree Queen used to say?

WALTER. I'm not sure I follow.

PERTWEE. You started to quote us. To quip?

WALTER. On what topic?

ALBERT. How should we know. 'twas your thought!

WALTER. Well it's far off now....Like me mother, and me dad...me friend Oswald.....slipping over my memories horizon...(*He drinks and sits under his tree, lost in a sad mood*)

PERTWEE. I wish my father'd been less of a demi-God and more like him. I've a soft heart for the self-loathing... It's a trait worth cultivating....

ALBERT. Where is your good lady "wife"? There's not much day left.

PERTWEE. The sun won't set without her arrival. It wouldn't dare. She's too much stake in my not kissing the block. Her life's work, all her dreams political, rest on these soon-to-be headless shoulders. Poor girl. To be born with all the ambition, the talents of an Alexander, only to be bodiced into one Lady Ann...Still, a marvel of this, or any age, she is-

ALBERT. She smells of garlic.

PERTWEE. Herbs, Albert. Those are herbs, prescribed for congested breath...

ALBERT. And she has all the warmth of a baited bear.

PERTWEE. And twice as dangerous.... You have to admire her for that.

ALBERT. Then spend your affections on her, if you so favor-

PERTWEE. Albert, please, I may die tomorrow, I've little time for one of your jealous fishwife fits...

ALBERT. I hate it when you speak of her so sweetly....

PERTWEE. Comparing one's wife to a baited bear, does not constitute "sweet talk." Even setting our unfortunately needful charade of husbandry aside, she has always been my most devoted and trusted friend. Of this you knew even before we....

ALBERT. Go on, I'd be curious to see which euphemism we haul out today.

PERTWEE. E'en before we first "scattered hay."

ALBERT. There, you see! Copulation, 'tis the only name you call it by.

WALTER. Let the man talk of rolling about with his wife, damn you. I'm glad somebody still does. And she's a fair enough girl, a bit too much garlic perhaps...

ALBERT. Whyn't you ever give voice to a more true affection. Speak of the strength of embrace, the care and calm in one another's arms, of the chance to tickle the others spirit on a somber day. The forgive of a sallow mood without reproach, of a hunger to be with one another as if to live but a single day apart-

PERTWEE. Would be to die? Yes, the want to die for another... 'Tis a devotion too few are willing to pay the price for... Rare to my eyes, how about you?

WALTER. One....I knew a one...Gladly would I have stepped right off the top most stair for her...But for obligations....*(He looks at Albert.)* Duties and obligations...'Tis all life is really...Barred by promises we must keep, shackled we are to obligation's wall...

ALBERT. I did my best to have him retired. Understand you, he's a hero to most of them, they look up to him- (*Walter belches again...*) He's made this place famous... T'would be easier to have this wall removed.

PERTWEE. Then like the rusty fixture he is, let him remain...

ALBERT. And suffer ill for your freedom? Catch the blame for an escape I was in aid of? That, you know, I cannot. Gladly would I help you, have I. And yes, Reg, I'd even place my head on the block for you. But we may not involve him.

PERTWEE. Why? You speak volumes of hatred for the man.

ALBERT. Do you not think it possible to despise and not hate? Or to have ambition and desire so vast as to take down a kingdom, but keep honor intact? Or are you no better than our "noble" King, willing to sign your good name, with the blood of those you've spilt?

PERTWEE. Sometimes my sweet, I do believe you see the world as some schoolboy high on a hill... Running your toes through the grass, looking down on a quaint village with a mill, and some farms, wives heading to the river with the wash, and children playing with their friends in some field... A dog barks nearby, and a cool breeze combs your hair... But as you dream, overhead the sky is turning gray, and behind the mill, someone's daughter's accosted, and even the children like to cheat at hide and seek. The world's a darker, dirtier place than it seems from your view.

ALBERT. And your talk of change, of this new age, of each commoner having a tally... This will clean away the dirt?

PERTWEE. In time, yes.

WALTER. 'Tis a simpleton's summation. What good will choice serve in the matter? Ever you try to get two men to agree on a tavern to drink in? 'Tis a man's nature to disagree, 'tis what separates him from the beasts. Keeps him occupied. Never will you see a pig debate the necessity of justice, or goat the equality of tariffs. They are not infected of this curse for opinion. No, takes a man, or two, to quarrel, and either side will swear in the right. Politics is but a pendulum for pedants, swinging to and fro, back and forth-

PERTWEE. Yet there is no forth, only back. 'Til now the pendulum swings only to those with royal blood.

WALTER. Where like some village fool perched high on their wall, they play at master, sitting tall, though we all know they exist in ignorance of it

all. And those of true wealth and power who surround, pick them up and place them back when, belly full of greed, they fall.

PERTWEE. Sentenced to die tomorrow, an ax run through my neck, while one speaks in nursery rhymes, and the other preaches honor and ambition? I tell you the only honor in death's to avoid it.

WALTER. Or, as at the end of a long quarrel, death's a forgiving lover's embrace. Comes a time to put down the struggle and welcome it! Halt, who approaches?*(Lady Pertwee enters hurriedly.)* Good day, Lady Pertwee.

ALBERT. We were just speaking after you.

LADY PERTWEE. And so I heard- *(To Pertwee.)* Love's embrace, we should welcome it-

ALBERT. I was speaking rather of death, and wishing to avoid it.

LADY PERTWEE. If only the perennials in my garden's bed were as steady as you Corporal, for your lack of charm's as consistent as boiled curd.

ALBERT. Your sentiment's not worth the refute, though others might argue, finding me a much needed comfort, a shelter from your stormy sensibility.

LADY PERTWEE. Confuse not my husband's anchoring his barnacled vessel in your convenient dock for a time, for as your powerfully impersonal sex is known to quip poetical: a port's a port, any will do in a storm...

PERTWEE. Mightn't we have more worthy matters to stage than this continual Comedia Francesais?

LADY PERTWEE. Tis you who complicate every plot by uncoding your piece at the first sign of its waking...

ALBERT. You see Reg, copulation. 'Tis all she labels it as well. Recall her, your more reluctant vision. The many vows.

PERTWEE. Not even a lawyer, overpaid as always, would listen to this haggling-

ALBERT. The song, the song you wrote-

PERTWEE. Send for me when the two of you prefer to focus on my head and its remaining on these shoulders. *(He exits.)*

LADY PERTWEE. *(Singing.)* Of you, and only you, I sing...

My words find their voice,
My song it's tune...

ALBERT. How know you the words?... (*She continues humming.*) The very melody?

LADY PERTWEE. He has writ that song original for at least fifteen that I know of...

ALBERT. A master of miscreation...

LADY PERTWEE. My good husband Pertwee knows abundant loyalty of affection. His friendship never wavers. But of a truer devotion he is incapable. Stunted of heart he was by his grotesque of a father, who blamed him continual for the loss of his mother at birth. Raised I was nearby, I know sir. He has never trusted for true love. Which, like myself, only makes him hunger more for our cause, do not think you may stand in his way. Reginald Pertwee is a name destined for the histories, not tragedy. And you, Corporal, are but a footnote in the tale.

WALTER. I don't know about history, my good lady Ann, but come tomorrow he's destined for the afterworld. Now you are entitled by decree a few more minutes alone-

LADY PERTWEE. By decree, Captain there may be as many to visit as wish to pay their respects-

WALTER. As long as the sun remains unsettled...

LADY PERTWEE. And down these stairs wait his sisters, an aunt, two noblewomen, and his favorite cousins Clara and Constance. Each wishing to have but a moment to pray.

WALTER. Then hurry you, for his door will be shut and bolted at first sign of even song.

LADY PERTWEE. But a moment and I will send for them. I wish to have him make ready. (*She exits into the cell.*)

WALTER. We must keep a steady eye on that one. Like a gravedigger, she never stops plotting. I mistrust her intentions... (*No response from Albert.*) True, she's a woman, of that one should expect. But this one's a fighter... Like my neighbors growing up, the Abigail Rogers, the wife thatches the roof on that cottage.

ALBERT. I feel I've been cast as fortunes fool.

The stage slowly begins to revolve to reveal the inner chamber.

WALTER. Not so long as we keep our wits about us- but a day more and this warrant will be served full, as the others- they'll talk through the next five hundred of the guard of the tree, the goaler from who they never dared e'en attempt to walk.

ALBERT. Dared they four times already, and but for your buffoonery would have succeeded.

WALTER. 'Tis you the gape- as accustomed, you speak with leaden logic.

ALBERT. Four months ago was the latest, plotted and planned to the minute, the final step but to tie and bound you. Only you welted over with that rash contagion, so I -or anyone else for the matter, couldn't go near-

WALTER. Ne'er remind me, my skin felt like wasps were eating away.

ALBERT. Their first plan, two years ago, stopped by your wish to seminar those recruits unannounced.

WALTER. I was honored, many wish to visit The Cell Of The Tree. To be instructed... I'm sometimes viewed a celebrity, though from your vantage more a malady-

ALBERT. And twice more the escape was stopped by your walking the night talking to your vision. One plotter ran when he swore he saw her rolling about with you- suckling your breast.

WALTER. Well it had been five or six years... And you finally took your leave allowing me some privacy-

ALBERT. I took my leave to allow Mister Pertwee's escape. Neither of us. Lady Anne, Reg, or myself accounted for your fantasy life, and the vividness of your will to seem it real.

WALTER. There may come a day when you resolve to trust my word.

ALBERT. I trust it real enough to ward off the feeble hearted. "That place is spirited," he cried. She-Demons who accost and then devour any who set foot nearby...

WALTER. I'm sure your good Lady Mother's portrait paints sweeter than She-Demon, though give her the right wine...

ALBERT. The point being Captain Sot, that by tomorrow most certain will another attempt be made.

WALTER. No, your mother and I did spend last eve entwined, while you were in there- *(He stops awkwardly...)*

ALBERT. I speak of escape, not fornication- yet another attempt to flee-

WALTER. Well t'wasn't that what I just said four pages back? To keep our wits-

ALBERT. A Herculean task with you on the watch. Hold! You knew where I was last night.

WALTER. *(Avoiding.)* I think it best not to sleep at all this night, the better for us both to be waiting-

ALBERT. Answer me. Knew you, I was with Sir Pertwee?

WALTER. Well, 'twas either there or rafting the Yhangtze...

ALBERT. Have you known all along?

WALTER. Which means we should each nap afore the sun drops down-

ALBERT. Answer me!

WALTER. They wouldn't dare try and flee now, too difficult-

ALBERT. You knew?

WALTER. Yes. Now, let it rest.

ALBERT. Why never speak a word of it? Why feign ignorance?

WALTER. To say what? I do believe my son's familiar with another man? 'Tis none of my affair.

ALBERT. You'd rather continue your dumbshow?

WALTER. Is there one better suited to play the part?

ALBERT. True enough. *(The lights begin to crossfade.)* What was it you just said?

PERTWEE. (*From inside the chamber.*) But what say, if for arguments sake, I do really love him?

WALTER. I said, let it rest!

The stage stops rotating. Walter moves off to take a drink. Albert sits. The lights complete their crossfade.

PERTWEE. I know it pains you Ann. But it might be true regardless.

LADY PERTWEE. No more than a drizzle mars the bracken, bending it a little before soaking clean, the news nourishes me. Husband, long ago I learned to shelter from your devotion, I'd sooner sip from a foul river, than cup my hands and drink of your affection. But do not mistake a few pebbles of amorous hue as a treasure valuable. We are nearer to something immortal, you and I.

PERTWEE. Unfortuned turn of phrase, think you not?

LADY PERTWEE. I speak of a chance to carve our names into the trunk of time, but a few more ticks and it will be our hour-

PERTWEE. But a few ticks more and it'll be my last hour!

LADY PERTWEE. Think you I am feeble enough to allow such an opportunity to fall from my hand?

PERTWEE. Well you've had five years and we've left but a day. And glad I am to hear my life so dearly coined "opportunity."

LADY PERTWEE. Who, but a breath ago, slapped another's affections across my face? And now complains my devotion's lacking?

PERTWEE. Let us not quibble the obvious. Without me, your puppet to mouth the words, your speeches would ne'er be heard. For who would care nine-pence for the policy of women. Even if accidentally helped up on the throne. I exist only as your manly costume, and you have always been my ambitioned heart, transfused in me lies your thirst for success, a hunger never warded me at birth. Yet as I control your crowds, even as you control me, I do feel a taste of it. I know they hear in me some touch of a magic-

LADY PERTWEE. A voice gifted for speech, a power to entice a mob of thousands as if but whispering to one. I've always said but bind us together, and there might live a leader for the ages.

PERTWEE. But bound we will never be, can never be-

LADY PERTWEE. Still you mistake destiny for desire, your mind sits supping somewhere near your girdle. Do as I and exile your emotions, banish them for the poor profit that they reap- take a taste when bored, but mistake it not! Even a beggar will walk past a copper to bend for a jewel. Reg, long ago, lived a girl of fourteen who cried a fortnight, for she knew she'd never win more than a cheek's kiss from her man. But she awoke to a dream with a much greater prize, and of that she will be granted. Quarrel me no longer my reason, I ask not for your heart, but for your hand in agreement- *(She extends hers to Pertwee who slowly offers his.)* and an ear to hear my latest plot. Good. A short while ago, you bemoaned yourself as my manly costume, the time is now to skirt yourself, and become the picture of female manner.

PERTWEE. Am I to understand you want me to attire myself as a lady?

LADY PERTWEE. Down to the petticoat, for I'm sure you'll be searched.

PERTWEE. This is no time for a costume ball Ann, my death's the morning's entertainment.

LADY PERTWEE. Have not many marveled at your impersonages of our sex? Once draped and rouged e'en your own family swore you to be the very likeness of your Cousin Constance?

PERTWEE. I was twelve, Ann.

LADY PERTWEE. No matter, for we both know similar charades have been attempted numerous times since.

PERTWEE. Fault me for a weakness for chiffon, but 'tis no time to quarrel me my fantasies-

LADY PERTWEE. 'Tis you taking up the quarrel. I offer solutions.

PERTWEE. I find it hard to wager that a resemblance, once perfumed and wigged, to Cousin Connie is the solution to either of our difficulties. 'Tis absurd.

LADY PERTWEE. All the more chance of it's possible success. My good husband, in certain circles where rests your fame? Of what do most claim you a master of?

PERTWEE. I trust you mean while not reclining?

LADY PERTWEE. The few times you manage to keep yourself standing, in every sense of the word, yes.

PERTWEE. I had no idea you so valued my skills.

LADY PERTWEE. Never more than this day, for in truth it has always aggrieved me that once draped, in most gowns, you were the fairer.

PERTWEE. But a pairs of leggings, and you're the unquestioned victor.

LADY PERTWEE. May we return to more useful skills? Each of the women below are clothed with an extra layer, the last told to impersonate Cozine. Constance wears a raven-black wig. So once gathered here they all mourn your fate, your much improved Cousin will take her place, and in a state of great sorrow, say her last good-byes, leaving me to vow my now vanished husband how, all through the night, I will intercede on his behalf. To this empty cell, will I bid a grief-stricken good night, whereupon closing the door gives us 'til dawn to flee in a waiting boat for the coast. What say you?

PERTWEE. 'Tis certainly one of your more liberal schemes...

LADY PERTWEE. I was up reading Charlemagne's philosophies of statehood, and he spoke of the need to always mark one's wealths or strengths. So I pondered if pressed what be Reginald's sweetest ass-sets. *(She pats him playfully on the bottom.)*

PERTWEE. What about Albert? How do we keep him once you've departed from trying to see me?

LADY PERTWEE. You must take up a grave quarrel with him.

PERTWEE. No difficulty will I have in that...

LADY PERTWEE. I've a plan for it too- left I nothing undiscovered...*(She begins to whisper to Pertwee as the lights start to crossfade to Walter. The Queen appears in the tree above. She drops an apple in Walter's lap.)* Now what say you?

PERTWEE. I say bring on the ladies!

The lights are now fully up on the Queen.

QUEEN. Halt! Who goes there?

WALTER. The Keys.

QUEEN. Who's keys?

WALTER. Stupidity's, Captain Pea-wit's. With head less apt than that of a lettuce.

QUEEN. No need to overstate the obvious-

WALTER. Give me a situation to err in, the more critical the better, then step back and watch as with unwavering grace, I make a muck of it!

QUEEN. Forgive me for peeping at your life's keyhole, dear Walter, for e'en with an eternity of opportunities, ghosting is more tedious than one might imagine.

ALBERT. Captain, I entreat you- Why did you, but a moment ago, call me as if by name your son?

QUEEN. My question precisely, I heard you claim what was mine as yours.

WALTER. Both of you trouble me not. If I say "look, there sits your Queen Mother" would you not say "'tis the ale speaking?" Very well. Why worry for the translation of thoughts drowned long ago, lost in the seas off the isle of Sack.

ALBERT. You, yourself, vowed this drunk an act, a ruse to ward off truth-

WALTER. Wrong again, boy! Sobers the game of truth dodging, but toss a few back and there's no need for veils. Once lightwitted, honesty drops her scarves and like the temptress she is, dances freely.

ALBERT. Enough! (*He takes Walter's bottle.*) Now we'll see how far your tongue will travel to quench its thirst.

WALTER. Give me!

ALBERT. We'll both drink once, with sincerity, she dances. And this time full-fleshed will she spot her twirls.

WALTER. Trouble me no more, I tell you-

ALBERT. (*Starting to pour out the ale onto the floor.*) Then this will be of little use to either of us-

WALTER. Stop, you jape! I take great pains to smuggle that in!

ALBERT. Breeches of procedure should not be tolerated-

WALTER. Damn you, stop- 'Tis not I fornicating with prisoners-

ALBERT. You've had occasion.

WALTER. And was in love with her.

ALBERT. And died she of it.

WALTER. Pox on you, of that I will no longer quibble. 'Twas, in every manner, different.

ALBERT. No different is my love-

WALTER. Listen to the fool- how can you compare my affection with the coupling of man with man. 'Tis not e'en normal-

ALBERT. You asshead- you rape a girl and call it love!

WALTER. *(He slaps Albert.)* Shut your mouth, boy!

ALBERT. *(Throws the bottle to the ground.)* Now you sot, lick the ground 'tis where you belong.

WALTER. I should have dropped you in that icy river long ago-

ALBERT. No matter, for my heart froze long ago, under a tree waiting for my true father to find me!

He crosses to the other side of the prison

QUEEN. *(After a pause.)* Come here, you blowhard, and sit with me awhile...

WALTER. You see, he's broken my bottle...

QUEEN. Seems to me you've had quite a taste today already...

WALTER. No, I feel sad hearted still. Enough is when a hole in my reason replaces the emptiness burrowed about my breast. Each day from this tower I must escape the want of you.

QUEEN. *(She kisses his forehead.)* Is he our boy?

WALTER. Yes, needle me no longer, 'tis true.

QUEEN. How know you it to be so?

WALTER. I was there at the time-

QUEEN. Past chance to hone your wit's blade, dear one, like the rest of you, it's rusted dull.

WALTER. Have I ever told you what a comfort you are to me?

QUEEN. Still, how know you of your lineage he must be-

WALTER. Do you promise not to anger of me?

QUEEN. 'Tis like vowing the clergy to be true.

WALTER. Forgive me, but no others would I allow to take part that night long ago. Forced as I was to participate, I wanted no one but I to touch you. And fought them away as they dared attempt. It seemed if 'twas my fate to wrong you, then my life's act would be to right that wrong.

QUEEN. *(After a pause.)* So you knew the child was yours?

WALTER. Yes. And when I saw his eyes I was all the more certain.

ALBERT. *(Eavesdropping out of view. To himself.)* Yet...

QUEEN. Then why keep the news from me? Why let me kill what we both might have loved?

ALBERT. My very question.

WALTER. I was your jailer, you were not yet my Lady. Of a dearer affection I had not become. We both know a child discovered, even fathered by the Lord above meant your death. Foolish I was, thought I could give him to others and visit on leave... But nothing was there, not even the blanket. My life was from that day, and ever still, but a collection of choices regretted.

QUEEN. And I am to be included among your regrets?

WALTER. In a manner my greatest....

ALBERT. *(Coming forward.)* Lives anywhere truth in this fantasy?

WALTER. You ear-cup! Can you e're be trusted?

ALBERT. Mark this! The father, who abandons his own, begs for trust?

WALTER. And how will son betray his father today? Will it be bound and gagged, pushed to retire? Or now that the hours grow few in number, does the ante raise higher?

LADY PERTWEE. (*Re-entering from the cell.*) Good Captain Trumble, I've Master Pertwee's permission to allow those below to attend him.

WALTER. And out every last one will be at first sign of the sun's retire.

LADY PERTWEE. Please take account they might not with the most civil of manner acquit themselves, given the gravity of emotion.

WALTER. (*Ignoring her sarcasm.*) I figure that gives them about five ticks each, if they hurry.

LADY PERTWEE. Your empathy is duly noted.

She exits to escort them up. Albert has crossed into the cell.

ALBERT. You will never believe the latest knot he's tied in my wits rope.

PERTWEE. You'll forgive the need to interrupt your woe, dearheart, for we are fast approaching the half day mark of my existence. (*Albert tries to interrupt.*) Please, attend me, Albert. For she has the most beauteous of schemes hatched. At sunrise, as you march me past the last gate and into the courtyard, Lady Ann has arraigned for a wagon. Four men will jump those who take me from you and while the old sot is reading my warrant, they will pretend to spirit me away in the wagon northward, while I will in secret make off on horseback due south. It will happen in plain view of all to see, and neither you nor your Captain will suffer harm for it.

ALBERT. He now claims to be my father, Reg.

PERTWEE. What?

ALBERT. I o'erheard him conversing with his Spirit-Queen. Confessing parentage.

PERTWEE. Albert, the man holds discourse with the four walls. He spends more time in his mind's world than in ours, and you wish to take for gospel his opinion?

ALBERT. But if she truly lives for him, why deem it false?

PERTWEE. So if the lunatic speaks Latin, we should label him a scholar? Why search you for logic in a land where there is none?

ALBERT. Do you have any honest affection for me Reg?

PERTWEE. Albert, no more of that. We've graver matters to dig our way out of.

ALBERT. Oh that I might once notice the writing before the wall topples o'er me. For I did truly hope to love you.

PERTWEE. And I you. But it seems without these prison walls and four hundred forty steps it becomes improbable. We are to them but Satan's minions, with our own rung in hell reserved. But show me an age and land where you may greet me with open heart, free of worry, I'll embrace you there. *(Albert starts to protest. Pertwee stops him.)* Remember the plan. It begins at the last gate. Mark you, I tell you this now to aid in your prepare. So no harm will come to you in the struggle.

ALBERT. No, you tell me this now to stop me from taking part in the struggle. For we both know, if they quarrel with me, your plan would fail... I'm relieved your rabid wife has sniffed a way out for you. I only hope it successful. There will be many others to block your way.

PERTWEE. True. But my last hope is Ann. And hers that I live. Which nourishes me, strengthening my faith to rival a saints.

ALBERT. Need I do more than fail to put up a fight?

PERTWEE. No, she has arraigned the rest.

ALBERT. Then I will leave you to your mournful visits.

PERTWEE. Albert-- when all is well, I will send for you.

ALBERT. No, please. Restrain yourself. Save your embrace. T'will be another age, another place.

The lights crossfade to Walter and the Queen.

WALTER. I had a cur, a sour smelling mongrel, affectionately pegged Wort, with a curved tail that would straighten to a wag when content. His capacity for joy was astounding, as if the puzzle's solving was but a next meal and a place to rest his head.

QUEEN. He was a dog, my dear- I doubt the pressing matters of state much concerned him.

WALTER. The very focus of my envy. A scratch of the back, to him unexpected ecstasy- two scraps of mutton, unfettered joy. As simple a gift as a morning's stretch and yawn, a shake of the head, 'twas a new day's dawn. Even old and gray and long ago toothless, he'd still send his tail out and back, to and fro. And the day he died, sickly and feeble of step, lying there eyes clouded to all but a pat on the head, I remember as I touched him, how continual, yet now somewhat slower- more as the tide than as rapid, did his tail ebb and flow. 'Till it finally came to rest and I knew Wort was gone.... With one heavenly jest, his tail curled itself up, like so, never to wag again... I labor of this when the world's weight begins to press on me. I think of that cur-tail, absurdly bent, then ridiculously erect, relentlessly beating to and fro- as acute a métier for calm as the finest captain's compass, and I wish for such a simpleness of purpose, such capacity for contentment.

QUEEN. You brought me such a joy. And there was a time, I'm most certain, when I had influence to bring your tail to a wag.

WALTER. I wish it to be like that. Was it for you?

QUEEN. Did I not just say it so?

WALTER. No, your final moments. Were they peaceful?

QUEEN. I was cradled in my love's arms, the only finer would be immortality.

WALTER. What have you now, hounding me all these years?

QUEEN. This is but a heartbeat, a few deep breaths in the race-

WALTER. And I weary of the competing. My sprinting days long past, and my wind not what it used to be... I think it my place to forfeit the game.

QUEEN. You'll have knowledge of when to quit, and little worry. Finish or not, we all end up crossing the line.

WALTER. Enough, like some cross country trainer will you vex me 'till the end?

QUEEN. 'Tis you that will me present, wish me gone and vexed or not, I vanish.

WALTER. Will you? Then I will you to bring me a pint for my troubles. Or a warning when inspection sneaks in.

QUEEN. I may not influence the sport, my dear, only watch on and cheer. That is my gift- but allowed to be near.

WALTER. Yet I'm in need of aid. I know that "sweet-as-a-salted-wound" Ann will not rest 'til her Pertwee is freed. The black-fog of plotting thickens from all sides.

ALBERT. Captain, I must a word with you.

WALTER. But a moment. Mark you, I'm busy. *(To the Queen.)* You see, more scheming. The boy's servanted himself to our Pertwee, and his Lady Ann grows horn-mad. And now add to escape three pinches of cuckold's currant, and we've the recipe for this pot's over-boiling.

QUEEN. So, he's confessed his love?

WALTER. Of course. But I've known of it- why label it love, this rump-fed revelry? This rudish rolling about 'tis more convenience than caring. 'Tis common in campaigns overseas, sequester a man from wenching and wayward he will stray. Our boy's been locked away most his rut-time, even the most kindly pup, once caged, will bite.

QUEEN. And yet if he truly loves, then what? Would you take umbrage with those who question the coupling of Queen and common guardsman?

WALTER. Save to join in their cries of doomed and ill-fated. And less plausible still's this merger of would-be King and guardsman.

ALBERT. Allow me to buy into your single sided debate, for if my perversion's the mered question, methinks a few dull parts are in need of shine. Do not confuse my coupling with this prisoner as coincidence, for my being locked away, has no more effect as the others of the same sex I've embraced before standing my guard here. And why speak of my affection for this man as some miscarriage, some affliction of a feverish humor, for is not all love a kind of falling-sickness? When one loves, all reason is prisoner, all wit chambered. There exists a world outside the walls of infatuation, faraway we may see it rain. We note the seasons of cold and the night becoming day, but no matter. When one is fortun'd to be spotted with kisses, blessed of the skimble-skamble speech, contagined with impassioned seizures, sighs of unrestrained joy- do not seek to cure of him an ill. Drink celebrations with him that no remedy will be found, hopeful the blessed affliction might never fade.

WALTER. 'Tis no matter to me the why or with whom your poking stick stiffens the pleat. And 'tis you who diagnose it diseased, not I. I have no opinion on the symptoms, save when it sickens you to infect me as a

consequence. If to rescue your master-mistress means you to quarrel me my dutiful life, then I will take issue with you and end the need to quibble.

ALBERT. I feel there is no need to end what has already ceased of its own will.

WALTER. You mean to say that this perfect and "unblemished devotion" has died?

ALBERT. No my devotion like some headless chicken refusing to give over, still runs about the field-

WALTER. And your devoted? Mean you to have him unbeaked as well?

ALBERT. (*After a pause.*) He and his ladyship plan otherwise.

WALTER. (*Sarcastically.*) No, you cannot speak truly? This comes to me with more surprise than if I will live to see the other side of this night's events.

ALBERT. As is your custom, I've lost you. Slipped you have, from my reasons fingers.

WALTER. No matter. I have, as I do with any Mathematics, full knowledge and little care of the plan.

ALBERT. You know?

WALTER. Of course any duckbill could make wind of it. My Ladyship and I were just patching together the clues, when you so gratuitously interceded. She is my right hand in such matters, (*to needle her*) mangled as it may be, more a hindrance than aid, one that ought to be lopped off, but for vanities sake, I keep her nearby.

ALBERT. What do you know of their plan?

WALTER. First, how do I know you're to be trusted?

ALBERT. I am, to be honest, not sure.

WALTER. You wish to see this man live.

ALBERT. I do not wish him to die.

WALTER. Then one must have the other, the coin has but two sides. For certain as you allow him breath, means he to steal away your own.

ALBERT. They claim it need not be true, but true I know it to be so.

WALTER. How claim they? Have they unveiled their plan to you?

ALBERT. In part.

WALTER. I'm sure it matches what we've already sketched. But for curiosities sake, allow me to compare.

ALBERT. How know I that you may be trusted?

WALTER. For sooth, we both do not. For a moment ago, I was decided to go down fighting, but I begin to see a more valued choice. One that glimmers, a faint mirage, a far off chalice in the sand. (*He looks first at the Queen, then back to Albert.*) Do you in fact love this man?

ALBERT. I did yes. As never before believed possible. Even still.

WALTER. And your want is to save him, even at risk of your own peril.

ALBERT. Even as I break my honor's code, and every rule of reason, I would again- yes. As you must have felt those many years ago, so feel I now. T'would be too cruel a tale to author my own affection's end.

WALTER. Where's the worry, then, I say. We've both been awaiting to crack the royal egg-king in two for more than a baker's dozen. After old King Larry's great fall, for this would certainly tumble him down from the wall, I know two, if not all, of the King's men, wouldn't wish him back together again. I give me left teet for a drink. And for that I will never forgive. But this? If 'tis your wish to step aside, my weapon too will I lay down. For feverish I feel of a sudden, and the time to retire fast approaching. Yet on my terms, at the hour chosen by my hand. And this very minute seems right by me- (*He takes off his dagger.*) for my greatest cause, dear son, is the strong desire to never again do you wrong. I've spent the good part of a life damming your river on its false course, I now open the gates. Let it flow freely and true.

ALBERT. Mean you to let them steal away?

WALTER. If 'tis your wish. I see no confusion, for barely can I stand, yet alone stand watch.

ALBERT. Captain, t'would mean us both harm.

WALTER. Every chapter begs completing, no need to labor the finish. My story suffered once for lack of an edit, even now it cries out for a close. (*He looks at the Queen*) 'Tis all but a fatal accompli...

She smiles and blows him a kiss and is gone.

ALBERT. How can one man's pester be greater than a whole swarm of bees? If only you'd have left before the night's events.

WALTER. This day's deeds, as a fire from a kiln, have hardened me of purpose.

ALBERT. Still I cannot doom you as I damn myself.

WALTER. My boy, 'tis too late, for this pot, cracked and glazen o'er, this old lump of clay's been cast. (*They begin to hear the others coming.*) Quarrel me no longer for the she-witch and her coven fast approaches.

ALBERT. How are we to act?

WALTER. With the same grace and devotion as before the merger. (*The Ladies are just off-stage and the lights on the cell are dimming.*) You cudgel, stand by your post and trouble me not. I'd sooner kiss hell's harem than be companied of you another day. As soon as this know-it-all's head divines the great question, by it's first bounce, I will pell-mell to relinquish this post. The cock's crow will herald the age of my retirement.

The lights on the guards have faded to black as the clock's bell tolls sundown. The tour-guide enters with mostly a group of women, possibly nuns, possibly college girls. She asks them to hurry, and they move from the stairs into the anteroom. The lights start to go back up as the guide moves center, and we see Walter and Albert stationed at their posts.

TOUR GUIDE. So it was again here in this chamber that the only recorded escape from the tower was ever completed. The very night before he was to be executed, Reginald Pertwee, and his beloved Lady Anne pulled off one of the most unlikely charades in history. Dressed as one of the lady mourners gathered to pay their last respects, the prisoner Pertwee was secreted from this very cell- (*Pertwee appears in full costume and makeup as Constance. He should be extremely convincing and not comical in the least.*) In full view, he made his way through this room and down these stairs, fooling every last one of the King's guards.

ALBERT. You there! A word with you.

WALTER. Let her pass, Corporal. The last drenched you so with her mock tears, methought I'd have to save you from drowning in her river.

ALBERT. I say hold, good lady!

TOUR GUIDE. It was the custom to allow any who wished to pay their respects, a visit with the condemned. So Lady Anne had the room filled with, for the most part, ladies, since the more that filled the room, the easier it would be to sneak her petticoated husband by. noblewomen, friends, cousins-

ALBERT. Are you not what remains of the famed cousins- Clara, having departed, this but leaves Constance to call you by.

Pertwee nods, afraid to speak.

WALTER. This one's the fairer, to be sure. But what's your wish with her?

ALBERT. Your good sister, but two steps from that chamber, solicited her services, inquiring of my next leave.

WALTER. That's a juicy one-

ALBERT. Seems she's a part of a nice shop two towns over, one that stays open a good part of the night. *(To Walter.)* Told me she'd given you your ducats worth, once or twice.

WALTER. *(An apple drops on his head.)* Ow! 'Twas only so's to have a yardstick for compare. Greater is the appreciation of sweet pudding after a bit of sour tart. *(Another apple falls.)* Harvest your crop elsewhere! Methought I made memory of her previous. Certainly her dewy scent.

ALBERT. So, how now, Cousin? Have you been prodded by this crooked cudgel as well?

WALTER. You needn't bother displaying your wares for my boy here. He shops at another market. The back basement side of town. *(He crosses to the cell door, leaving Albert.)* Is that the last of them Sweet-good-hearted Anne? The hour is past due!

ALBERT. You must pardon my Captain's base manner. Comes from spending half a life over seas, and the other half under the influence. My need to query you Miss, stems but from a desire to prevent an injustice and no other, for we have good cause to believe your "friend" Pertwee- can it be? Heavens and angels above, hold me steady. For if what I am seeing holds true, I feel I may loose all reason.

TOUR GUIDE. (*She is pointing to the wrong side of the stage, the tree being rooted to the other.*) If you look rather closely here, you may just be able to make out what is believed to be a hole, where it is said the trunk of the fabled tree might have sprouted from the wall. Now, don't snicker there, you. Have we all not come across moments where what was true was stranger than any fiction.

ALBERT. (*To Pertwee.*) Even your deception turns out to be deceitful. Could you not have trusted in me the much to let you go?

WALTER. Still at this one, are you? If I had no more sense than you endow me, I'd think you fancy her.

ALBERT. Odd you should say that, Father. I may speak of you such, now may I not?

WALTER. If the urge overcomes you, but make no habit of it.

ALBERT. You see Father, this good lady here, if I could but meet one of this very metal- I feel 'tis possible, even I, might see my way to love her.

WALTER. Hear you? 'Tis just what I told your never listening nor leaving mother, 'twas but a matter of confinement.

ALBERT. She is all I'd ever wish for...all I want.

WALTER. Now, don't make foppish promise of yourself, we've no knowledge of her heritage.

ALBERT. No matter...

WALTER. If she's no better than her twin cousin, the wastrel I've wenched, let us not be hasty!

ALBERT. Yes, t'would be (dare I say) wise, father. 'Tis sound enough advice. Good Lady, forgive me. I've stolen too much of your time, but may I entreat you but to part with this, to remember me on? (*He kisses him on the lips.*)

WALTER. You see, he's a Trumble, through and through.

ALBERT. Farewell. (*Pertwee runs off. Albert follows and calls after him.*) When all is well, Good Lady, I will send for you.

WALTER. Come boy, bring your thoughts back up from your waist. (*To himself.*) I may have preferred him perverse.

TOUR GUIDE. Now ladies you'll be interested in this. For without his brave wife Anne, Pertwee, would have never escaped, for it was her that kept the game alive until her husband was safely below, waiting at the next town on horseback. She had one last trump card in her plan to play, and cool as a cucumber she sat in this very cell, with the door shut just about so, disguising her voice, and began to have a conversation with herself, playing both roles, pretending to quell her husband's fears, promising to work all through the night for his release.

WALTER. Oh listen to her now, piling it on as if she believes it to be his last hour. The false finch!

ALBERT. Captain?

WALTER. My rank's no longer bound by blood?

ALBERT. No matter, Captain, Father, Goatherd, I care not! My wit has lost all degree of sound sense.

WALTER. 'Twas just a wench, you feverfool. They are as common as the lace-weed growing by the road.

ALBERT. Has the riddle been written that ever you could solve?

WALTER. No need to take umbrage-

ALBERT. 'Twas Reginald skirted in that gown just then. Reginald Pertwee. He's made off with the pack of hens, to some waiting wagon, I'm sure.

WALTER. The wench you coupled but a moment ago? Was our manly charge?

ALBERT. If my eyes were deceived, my lips are certain of the taste-

WALTER. Enough! Then who is she inside conversing with?

ALBERT. Herself, I would wager. As I and any performer knows, fooling the audience is easier than it might seem.

WALTER. And what of your "morning's plot"?

ALBERT. A thicker web, spun the better to catch us both.

WALTER. We must yell the word. I'm sure they've not touched courtyard.

ALBERT. Captain!

WALTER. You ass, if t'were certain, then why did you not say the word? I'd have cut the very lace from his- (*It begins to sink in.*) You knew...

ALBERT. Yes.

WALTER. And let him go.

ALBERT. Yes.

WALTER. And, I fear, would still wish him go.

ALBERT. Yes...

WALTER. I suppose it does little to change your thinking to remind you he lied twice over, false on top of false.

ALBERT. True enough.

WALTER. And but to yell the word might avenge-

ALBERT. Have we not agreed on escape? We have but turned the clock over somewhat sooner, no more. Ignorant of the crime, we were never, only the occasion t'would be committed.

TOUR GUIDE. While inside she gave speech after speech of impassioned love, how she was sure she might be able to save him. Imagine, it might have sounded a little like this:

"Do not fear this night, good husband. Try to rest now."

"I cannot rest, knowing this may be my last. What good is sleep? What care I if I'm tired tomorrow. If I'm to lose my head, I'd rather sleep through the deed than be wide awake!"

WALTER. Still, she performs, the weasel. This one would gnaw her own foot to save her pups. Well, if we are duped and no longer life's victors, I see no need in prolonging the celebration. Out I say, before I lock you away with the man, and have a bargain chopping, two heads in one morn.

TOUR GUIDE. "I must go now, dear sir. But by morning's light, I will arrive with news of your pardon, of this I newly swear." And with that she might have even feigned a goodnight kiss-

WALTER. Out I say. 'Tis long past the sunset of my day's content.

TOUR GUIDE. And emerged grief-stricken, continuing her mournful march from the room, knowing full well what she left was an empty chamber.

WALTER. As authentic as a jeweler's gilded tooth, you'd swear her tears to be truly salted.

ALBERT. She'd have made a fortune on the Italian stage with this alacrity for the tragedies.

TOUR GUIDE. And thus completed one of the most significant events in our history. For if Reginald Pertwee had not been saved by the cleverness of his lady, our society today, might be quite different.

The bell tolls the hour below, signaling the need for the All's Well.

WALTER. Shall we?

ALBERT. 'Tis our duty, is it not? I see no difference than if we were to battle, certain we might not live the day through.

They begin to march the perimeter

TOUR GUIDE. Think about it for a moment now. If the escape from this cell, had failed, we might still be living in a monarchy, answering to absolute rule, the servants of an authority over which we had no control.

An All's Well" is heard from below.

WALTER. Funny, I recall how the morning of battle we used to cross ourselves and say "I hope the worms are hungry, I'd hate to die in vain."

And"God be with you".

TOUR GUIDE. How the events of that night, at the close of a century so long ago, have no doubt touched each and every one of us-

Another"All's Well".

WALTER. And by my last battle, though I suppose you might argue this to be the final- no matter, by the end of my fighting youth, I'd be hard pressed to divine one campaign from the next. If I lived to see the sun go down or not-

"God be with you."

WALTER. No matter, t'would set all the same.

TOUR GUIDE. And so we continue our tour outside near the gate, if you will all follow me.

The tourists begin to leave. Two linger back, perhaps the only men in the group, perhaps lovers, just long enough to exchange a final glance. The guards have reached center and as they cross past one another cry out with no trace of irony: "All's Well!" and as they take their post, they both respond without even a glance "God be with us." instead of "God be with you."

TOURIST. They must have felt the fool, don't you think?

2ND TOURIST. Who?

TOURIST. The ones responsible for guarding him.

2ND TOURIST. Ah, hadn't thought of them.

TOURIST. Makes you wonder.

2ND TOURIST. Nah, probably half a brain between the lot of 'em. Not exactly a challenging career. What do you do for a living? I guard things. Watch over them. Make sure nothing much happens.

TOURIST. Oh, and rootin' out tooth decay, and fitting false teeth's a bloody excitement?

2nd TOURIST. Listen don't knock it. As my dear mother used to say- in fact her dying words- were pay the rent, be good to your own, and the rest, as they say, is history...

The tourists are gone. Leaving the guards standing tall in front of the empty cell. It is quiet for a beat. They look at each other, then ahead. And the lights fade to black.

END OF PLAY