

THE PENNY DREADFULS

A DARK COMEDY IN ONE ACT

By Ray Sheers

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THE PENNY DREADFULS – ONE ACT

By Ray Sheers

SYNOPSIS: The Penny Dreadfuls are orphans and runaways who steal for the conniving Professor. Their loot ends up at a pawn shop run by two despicable ladies. Business has been very profitable until the mysterious Mad Aggie appears on the scene, seeking revenge. And revenge was never sweeter! First, the Professor gets a bottle of potion he believes will cure his baldness. It does. There's hair everywhere! Then Scuttlebutt, the leader of the Penny Dreadfuls, gets arrested. Add to this mix the corrupt Officer Culver and the Professor's demanding girlfriend, and the Professor's about to pull out his hair, all of it! But everything works out in the end, and the villains get their due. *(For maximum flexibility, two brief optional scenes from the full-length version are included.)*

CAST OF CHARACTERS

(5-7 MEN, 4-5 WOMEN, 6-10 EITHER, 0-10 EXTRAS)

MAD AGGIE (M)

Mad Aggie was once a Penny Dreadful, now disguised as a mad villager; a nuisance, but one nobody takes too seriously. Mad Aggie seeks revenge on the Professor and has plotted ten years to get that revenge. (Throughout the play, Mad Aggie has the power to freeze the action on stage and speak directly to the audience.) *(41 lines)*

DORTHEA SPROCKETT (F) AND BETHESDA NIGHTSOIL (F)

Both are late middle-aged, bordering on old. They run Dortha Sprockett: Nightsoil and Sprockett's Pawn Shop, selling stolen goods brought in by the Penny Dreadfuls. Both are under the Professor's thumb. Neither appears to have a kind bone in her body. *(NOTE: A third female pawnbroker (Henrietta) could easily be added. The director merely needs to reassign some of BETHESDA and DORTHEA's lines to her.)* (DORTHEA, 123 lines; BETHESDA, 120 lines)

CUSTOMER 1 (Optional role: M OR F)

Non-speaking role.

OFFICER CULVER (M OR F)

A corrupt policeman. (9 lines)

THE PROFESSOR (M)

A ruthless, villainous type whose life of crime has brought him no happiness and little wealth. Though not humorless, he is heartless and must be portrayed as such. “To save his own skin any song he’d gladly sing, and he’ll lose no sleep if from the gallows you swing.” He might wear an eye patch and carry a walking stick. He always wears a hat, for he’s self-conscious about his hairpiece, which is not a good fit. (104 lines)

CALVIN (M)

A young boy found by the Professor who is to be trained as a Penny Dreadful. He is described as “the runt of the litter” and should appear meek and extremely vulnerable. (7 lines)

SCUTTLEBUTT (M)

Unofficial leader of the Penny Dreadfuls. (38 lines)

THE PENNY DREADFULS (M OR F)

“Orphans and runaways who spend their nights and days working for the Professor as pickpockets and thieves. These boys have more than mischief up their sleeves.” They are unkempt, unwashed, and unwanted. Though each of the Penny Dreadfuls has a distinct personality, they must be able to work well as a unit since much of their dialogue is in rhyme. (13 lines in unison)

BOTTLENECK (M OR F) —16 lines

WORM (M) — 28 lines

SHRUGG (M OR F) —22 lines

BUMGOREY (M OR F) —18 lines

BANGLES (M OR F) —24 lines

MAGPIE (M OR F) —16 lines

NOTE ON CASTING: Though the PENNY DREADFULS are identified as males in the script, it is certainly feasible to include a few girls in the group, if desired. WORM needs to be male.

MR. AND MRS. TEASBERRY (M AND F)

A couple who owe money to the Professor and are afraid for their lives, and rightly so! (*MR. TEASBERRY, 22 lines; MRS. TEASBERRY, 17 lines*)

LOLITA FOXGLOVE (F)

The Professor's girlfriend; a vamp used to pushing people around and getting her way. She is a completely unsympathetic character. She is expensively dressed in bright clothes. She might wear a large hat and a feather boa. (*19 lines*)

STREET VENDORS (OPTIONAL MARKET SCENE)

These characters are all hawking their wares. When addressing the audience, they appear friendly, cloying. When interacting with each other, there is nothing but hostility and jealousy among them. Like most of the Penny Dreadfuls' lines, they also speak in rhyme.

FLOWER VENDOR (F) —11 lines

BALLOON VENDOR (M OR F) —7 lines

JEWELRY VENDOR (M) —6 lines

FORTUNE TELLER (M) —7 lines

PIE VENDOR (M OR F) —5 lines

CUSTOMER 2 (M OR F)

A non-speaking role. Other customers may be added to the Optional Market Scene, if desired.

AUTHOR'S NOTE

If a school or church performance is planned, the vendors in the Market Scene could be performed by adults in the school or church. It is a scene that requires minimal rehearsal time. Also, the scene could be expanded to include a short musical piece, a magic act, jugglers, acrobats, etc. Often students may not want a speaking part but would like to participate in other ways that display their particular talents. If using musicians, it's a great way to start the scene.

SYNOPSIS OF SCENES

Scene 1 Nightsoil and Sprockett's Pawn Shop
Scene 2 Nightsoil and Sprockett's Pawn Shop
Scene 3 Open Market or Street Scene (*optional scene*)
Scene 4 Nightsoil and Sprockett's Pawn Shop
Scene 5 The Jail (*optional scene*)
Scene 6 Nightsoil and Sprockett's Pawn Shop
Epilogue

PRODUCTION NOTES

(*RUNNING TIME: 40-60 MINUTES*)

NOTE: A great deal of latitude is given the director in producing this work. Two scenes may be omitted without altering the plot. The sets, costumes, lighting, etc., may be simple or elaborate.

MAD AGGIE'S COSTUME: Mad Aggie should appear truly mad. He might wear a Mardi Gras-style mask over his eyes. He might wear a shiny floor-length cloak, contrasting with the Professor's. He might wear a great deal of jewelry, anything to make him look bizarre, but not comical.

MAD AGGIE'S THEME MUSIC: A recorder, harmonica, or flute could be used. Mad Aggie doesn't need to play it, just run through the notes. Alternately, a drum roll could be used. A drummer might be backstage or even onstage in an unobtrusive place - invisible to all but the audience. (If onstage, the drummer should be costumed in dark clothing and might wear a mask, similar but not identical to Mad Aggie's. The drummer will be motionless throughout the play except when drumming is needed. The addition of the drummer as a character heightens the play's surreal nature.)

THE PROFESSOR: He should seem severe in appearance and in demeanor. He must be convincingly cruel to the Teasberrys and Calvin in Scene 1 and 2 for his subsequent actions toward Scuttlbutt and Calvin in the last scenes to be believable.

THE PROFESSOR'S COSTUME: A hat with a section of wig attached to the back will eliminate the need to create a bald head. The wig should look obviously fake. An eye patch and a walking stick complete his costume, though neither is required. For Scene 4, a hooded floor-length cloak will conceal his "condition." This eliminates the need to show his hairiness, merely suggest it. Long gloves with hair attached (from old wigs) will conceal his hands. Hairy hands from a Halloween costume could also be used. The Professor's glass eye is simply a large clear marble. If he has the marble in his pocket until he frightens Calvin with it, he can easily make it appear as if he's removing it from under the eye patch or removing it from its socket.

THE PENNY DREADFULS: Their costumes should be rather dark and drab, worn and old, too large or too small, with holes or patches. Several might wear hats. Avoid anything modern or fashionable. If one or two of the Penny Dreadfuls have a special talent: juggling, dancing, playing an instrument, doing magic tricks, it fits in nicely in the Market Scene, but this is optional.

NIGHTSOIL AND SPROCKETT'S PAWN SHOP: Several tables of different heights covered with fabric and loaded with miscellaneous objects are enough to create the sense of an old-fashioned pawn shop. Shiny gold and silver objects are particularly effective, though any assortment will do. A few large brass pots are useful for Bethesda and Dortha to be polishing as the play opens. Using carts with wheels makes it easy to move the objects off and on stage. Other furniture is optional.

THE JAIL SCENE: (OPTIONAL) The jail cell can be elaborate or simple. No furniture is needed. A very easy and cheap way to produce the effect of a cell is to use an overhead projector. Create bars by cutting strips out of a piece of cardboard to be placed on the overhead projector. Affixing a piece of blue, iridescent cellophane to the cardboard creates an eerie effect. If cellophane isn't available, paint a piece of waxed paper blue. Position the projector(s) ahead of time (angled is best). Large pieces of cardboard painted black can be used to conceal the projectors. If your stage is very large, you'll need to use two projectors. Don't worry if the bars appear on Scuttlbutt or the Penny Dreadfuls. The scene is deliberately surreal. Use minimal lighting.

(The overhead may even be enough.) Position the Penny Dreadfuls downstage on one side and Mad Aggie downstage on the other. A spotlight can be used on the Penny Dreadfuls when they speak, then on Mad Aggie when he speaks. A more elaborate set can have the Penny Dreadfuls upstage behind actual bars speaking to Scuttlebutt and Mad Aggie still downstage, either left or right. However the scene is staged, the tension should increase as the scene progresses, and Scuttlebutt should seem torn between what Mad Aggie says and what the Penny Dreadfuls say.

NOOSE: (OPTIONAL) When Mad Aggie refers to the gallows in the Jail Scene, a noose can be rigged to rise, or he can simply lift it from the floor and dangle it. Construct the noose so that the loop cannot close. Coat the noose with glue to keep its shape.

LIGHTING: This is a dark comedy, so lighting should reflect that. Avoid bright lighting, except for the Market Scene. Dimming the lights whenever Mad Aggie “freezes” the action is effective, but not necessary.

WEAPON: The weapon Lolita uses on the Professor should be in every pawn shop scene and placed so that it’s visible to the audience. The weapon should be large enough to be seen easily and look threatening. Many schools have banned the use of guns and knives (though either would be effective). An alternative could be a fireplace tool, a piece of sculpture, or any other large, lethal-looking object that might appear in a pawn shop.

POPPING THE BALLOON (MARKET SCENE): If desired, one of the Penny Dreadfuls could grab the balloons and run offstage to create the distraction.

DRUM BEAT: (OPTIONAL) Single drumbeats might be used to punctuate some of the lines. While this sound effect is written into the stage directions and is particularly effective, it isn’t necessary.

PROPS

- ☐ One stuffed envelope
- ☐ Large clear marble (the “glass eye”)
- ☐ Walking stick (optional)
- ☐ Eye patch (optional)
- ☐ Several pillowcases (*Filled with PENNY DREADFULS’ loot*)
- ☐ Several handkerchiefs
- ☐ Pearl necklace
- ☐ Miscellaneous jewelry (*These may be safety pinned to the inside of the Jewelry Vendor’s coat. He will also need many rings to wear.*)
- ☐ Pawn shop items (*Large, shiny items work best, though anything will do. You will need enough to fill several tables; a few brass pots for BETHESDA and DORTHEA to polish are useful.*)
- ☐ Three (3) glass bottles medium sized, colored, empty bottles for the potion
- ☐ Drum or small musical instrument (recorder, flute, harmonica, etc.) to “freeze” and “unfreeze” action.
- ☐ Picnic basket or plate
- ☐ Muffins
- ☐ Small bag of coins
- ☐ Pie (*Easily made with a pie tin and papier mache**)
- ☐ Purse(s)*
- ☐ Loud whistle
- ☐ Artificial flowers in baskets*
- ☐ Helium balloons* (*Six or eight balloons are enough for the BALLOON VENDOR. Note: Most helium balloons only last a day.*)
- ☐ Pin* (*to pop balloon*)
- ☐ Wig attached to hat (*See PRODUCTION NOTES*)
- ☐ Noose (*optional; See PRODUCTION NOTES*)
- ☐ Goblet(s)
- ☒ Weapon (*The weapon should be large and lethal looking - something one might find in a pawn shop. If desired, a gun or knife may be used.*)

**Props for optional Market Scene*

SCENE 1

Drum roll. MAD AGGIE appears suddenly out of darkness. He might wear a Mardi Gras-style half-mask over his eyes. He has long, wild hair. If the stage has a curtain, the curtain is closed when the play begins, with MAD AGGIE alone in front of the curtain. If there is no curtain, the pawn shop will be visible in semi-darkness. DORTHEA, BETHESDA, and CUSTOMER 1 are frozen in place.

MAD AGGIE: *(To audience.)*

You think you know me,

oh, yes, you do.

You think you know Mad Aggie through and through.

But I've got tales that will hoodoo you,
stories to make you squirm and scream.

Tonight Mad Aggie will write your dreams.

Curtain opens revealing the pawn shop. Lights go up. DORTHEA, BETHESDA, and pawn shop CUSTOMER are frozen in place. CUSTOMER is holding a large item, as if s/he is considering whether or not to buy it.

Listen well, I tell you. For them *(Indicating DORTHEA and BETHESDA.)*, I play the fool.

But not for you. Oh no! Everything I say to you is true.

Come with me, and you will see what Mad Aggie sees.

Come. This be our first stop. Nightsoil and Sprockett's Pawn Shop!

As MAD AGGIE enters the pawn shop, we hear a drum roll or his signature tune. [SEE PRODUCTION NOTES] Throughout the play, this serves to freeze or unfreeze the action on stage.

DORTHEA: Oh no! Not again!

BETHESDA: Get out of here, Aggie!

MAD AGGIE: *(To DORTHEA and BETHESDA.)*

I sleep in your shoes,

I make knots in your tongues,

I unclose your eyelids,
I clot your lungs.
I can't stop my chatter.
I am quite mad, you see.
I steal your air and get fatter and fatter.
Something, you know, is definitely the matter.

CUSTOMER 1, obviously unnerved by MAD AGGIE, throws the object she's been holding to the floor and rushes out the door. DORTHEA is on her heels.

MAD AGGIE: Where's the Professor?

BETHESDA: *(She picks up the item CUSTOMER dropped and examines it for damage.)* Go home, Aggie. He's not here.

MAD AGGIE:

Oh, is the Professor out?
I think he's in.
Tell me, do you know where he's hid my violin?

DORTHEA enters, obviously upset at losing a CUSTOMER.

BETHESDA: Your violin's gone, Aggie. It was probably sold years ago.

MAD AGGIE:

It was years ago I stubbed my toe.
The doctor had to cut it off, you know.
He took an ax and chopped it off.
The doctor brought it here in a velvet box.
A pox on both your houses, I say, a pox!
You can't lose, and I can't win.
I want my toe . . . and my violin!

DORTHEA: We don't have your bloody toe or your violin! Now, get out of here, Aggie, before . . .

MAD AGGIE:

Before tomorrow came today.
Mad Aggie is here to stay.
Gone tomorrow, here today, gone tomorrow, here today.

BETHESDA: Well, the Professor's not here today. And he's not likely to be here tomorrow either. So go home and stay there.

MAD AGGIE:

He's gone away?

He made me what I am today, you know.

That's what I hear the voices say.

He made me what I am today, that's what they say.

OFFICER CULVER enters.

OFFICER CULVER: (*Approaching MAD AGGIE.*) Get out of here, Aggie, before I run you in!

MAD AGGIE:

I have to go now. I'm late. I'm terribly, terribly late.

I mustn't be seen. I must be invisible and take my flight.

For tonight, I play for the queen! (*Exits.*)

BETHESDA: Crazy old bat! Gives me the raving fantods, she does.

DORTHEA: You ought to lock that woman up.

OFFICER CULVER: You're lucky we don't lock you up.

DORTHEA: We pay our bills regular.

BETHESDA: Once a week.

OFFICER CULVER: You do make a regular contribution to the Policemen's Benevolent Fund. Speaking of which, it's that time again, ladies.

BETHESDA: (*Producing an envelope of money.*) As if we didn't know. You never come here except to collect money.

OFFICER CULVER: That's right, I don't. You wouldn't want me coming unannounced, seeing an illegal transaction taking place - or (*Picking up an object from the table.*) finding stolen goods for sale, would you now? By the way, there's been a slight increase in the amount of your **donation**.

BETHESDA: What?

DORTHEA: How much of an increase?

OFFICER CULVER: Fifty more a week.

BETHESDA: That's robbery!

OFFICER CULVER: Something you'd know a thing or two about, eh? Times are hard, ladies.

BETHESDA: We can't afford fifty more a week.

OFFICER CULVER: You can't afford not to.

BETHESDA: The Professor won't put up with it!

OFFICER CULVER: Oh, really? What will he do if I start arresting the Penny Dreadfuls one by one? You tell the Professor the price of doing business in this town has just gone up. Or he'll be **out** of business! (*Exits.*)

BETHESDA: Wait until the Professor hears about this!

DORTHEA: Business is bad enough without being sucked dry by the likes of him!

The PROFESSOR and CALVIN enter unnoticed by DORTHEA and BETHESDA. PROFESSOR holds one of CALVIN's arms as if to prevent him from escaping. He motions to CALVIN to keep quiet; CALVIN nods. He releases CALVIN's arm and CALVIN immediately scurries behind a piece of furniture.

BETHESDA: A person can't even earn an honest buck without the law picking our pockets!

DORTHEA: One of these days . . .

The PROFESSOR clamps a hand on each of their shoulders. Both react with fear.

PROFESSOR: You two harpies will be hideously old and decrepit.

BETHESDA: Professor, what are you trying to do give us a heart attack?

PROFESSOR: In order to have a heart attack, one needs a heart, an organ I believe both of you are lacking.

DORTHEA: Look who's talking.

BETHESDA: You just missed Mad Aggie.

PROFESSOR: (*With mock regret.*) What a pity.

DORTHEA: And Officer Culver—who has raised his rates again.

PROFESSOR: How much this time?

BETHESDA: Fifty more a week.

PROFESSOR: What! That's preposterous! It's highway robbery! We won't pay it.

DORTHEA: But he threatened to put us out of business!

PROFESSOR: Oh, he did, did he? Don't worry. I'll take care of Officer Culver. Every slimy creature has its weak spot. That reminds me. . . *(Looking around for CALVIN, then pulling him roughly out into the open.)* . . . look what I've brought you.

BETHESDA: *(Disgusted.)* What's *that* supposed to be?

PROFESSOR: A little present.

DORTHEA: *(Examining CALVIN.)* Little is right.

BETHESDA: Scrawny bit of a rat, isn't he?

PROFESSOR: The runt of the litter, I'm afraid.

DORTHEA: What are we supposed to do with it?

PROFESSOR: He'll make a fine Penny Dreadful —with a little work.

BETHESDA: Another mouth to feed.

DORTHEA: Just what we don't need.

PROFESSOR: He'll earn his keep.

BETHESDA: We'll see to that!

PROFESSOR: This is Bethesda Nightsoil, that delightful little morsel is Dorthea Sprockett.

DORTHEA: Watch it, Professor.

PROFESSOR: Speaking of morsels, you got anything to eat? I'm famished.

BETHESDA: I never knew a time you weren't famished. You ever come here without an empty stomach?

PROFESSOR: I never travel without my stomach.

DORTHEA: There's some leftover meat pies in the kitchen.

PROFESSOR: Meat pies, eh? That would explain the absence of cats and dogs in the neighborhood.

DORTHEA: *(She gives CALVIN a sinister wink.)* An old family recipe.

PROFESSOR: Stay here, Calvin. Bethesda and Dorthea will get you settled in. I'll bring you something nice to nibble.

BETHESDA: See if you can find Mad Aggie's toe for him to nibble on.

DORTHEA: She says you've got it in a velvet box.

PROFESSOR: (*Lifting up his eye patch and removing his “glass eye.”*) I'll keep an eye out for it, (*To CALVIN.*) my glass eye. (*Holding it in the palm of his hand, he forces CALVIN to look at it. CALVIN, frightened, pushes the PROFESSOR's hand away, and the “eye” falls onto the floor.*) Quick! Get it before it rolls away! (*BETHESDA retrieves it, spits on it and polishes it a little, then gives it back to the PROFESSOR.*) That was a near miss. (*He replaces the eye and adjusts his eye patch.*)

DORTHEA: (*Pinching CALVIN's arm.*) A bit squeamish, aren't you?

BETHESDA: One would think you'd never seen a glass eye before! (*Pinching CALVIN's other arm.*)

CALVIN: I - I haven't.

DORTHEA: Well, now you have.

BETHESDA: And you'll be seeing a whole lot worse!

PROFESSOR: Don't worry, the ladies aren't as bad as they seem. Try to stay on their good side though. (*Exits.*)

DORTHEA: (*Calling after him.*) We don't have a good side! Don't you be filling the boy's head with a lot of nonsense!

BETHESDA: (*Holding up one of CALVIN's arm.*) What a puny little thing you are!

DORTHEA: Have to fatten you up so the wind won't blow you away.

BETHESDA: Fatten him up for the kill, you mean.

DORTHEA: Meat's scarce these days.

BETHESDA: Going to get scarcer, what with all the cats and dogs already been cooked.

DORTHEA: What'd the Professor say his name was?

CALVIN: (*Meekly.*) Calvin.

DORTHEA: Was I talking to you! You speak when you're spoken to around here!

BETHESDA: Despicable little creature!

MAD AGGIE's theme. MAD AGGIE enters. BETHESDA, DORTHEA, and CALVIN freeze. Enter the PENNY DREADFULS; several carry sacks of stolen goods. MAD AGGIE's theme. They freeze in place.

MAD AGGIE: (*To audience.*)

These are the Penny Dreadfuls,

orphan boys [*for orphans*] and runaways,
who spend their nights and days
working for the Professor as pickpockets and thieves.
These boys have [*or they've*] more than mischief up their sleeves!

MAD AGGIE theme; they unfreeze. AGGIE exits unnoticed.

BETHESDA: (*To PENNY DREADFULS.*) How many times have I told you to use the back door? You want to bring the law on us traipsing in the front door like that, making a spectacle of yourselves?

SCUTTLEBUTT: Sorry. We forgot.

BETHESDA: (*Mockingly.*) **Sorry, we forgot!**

DORTHEA: Well, we'll give you something you won't forget! (*As she pushes him to the floor, BETHESDA pulls out a pearl necklace that's hanging from his pocket.*)

BETHESDA: (*Holding up the necklace.*) OOooh, what a pretty little trinket!

SCUTTLEBUTT: (*Rising.*) Thought you'd take a fancy to that.

DORTHEA: Let me see that. (*Taking it and examining it.*) It might bring a few dollars.

WORM: More than a few. Them is real pearls.

BETHESDA: What do you know about real pearls, **Worm**?

BANGLES: He knows that you'll sell them as real pearls whether they're real or not.

DORTHEA: (*Holding the necklace up to the light to examine it.*) In the right light, they *might* pass for the real thing.

BETHESDA: (*Pulling CALVIN over by her hair.*) These **rag pickers** are the Penny Dreadfuls.

BOTTLENECK: Oh, we pick more than rags, don't we now, Bethesda?

BETHESDA: When you do your job right, you do! And it's Miss Nightsoil to you!

CALVIN: (*Apprehensively.*) Wh-what are the Penny Dreadfuls?

DORTHEA: What'd you say! Speak up!

CALVIN: (*A little louder.*) What are the Penny Dreadfuls?

BUMGOREY: Wouldn't you like to know?

BETHESDA: Oh, don't be so brash, Bumgorey.

DORTHEA: Tell him who you are.

BANGLES: Why should we?

BETHESDA: Apparently, he's one of you, now. (*Shoving CALVIN over to them.*)

WORM: One of us?

SHRUGG: Him?

BOTTLENECK: Says who?

The PROFESSOR enters unseen by the PENNY DREADFULS.

PROFESSOR: Says me!

PENNY DREADFULS: (*Turning toward the PROFESSOR, obviously frightened.*) **Professor!**

BOTTLENECK: Oh, well, that's different, of course.

BUMGOREY: Right. If he's going to be one of us —

WORM: He'll have to know who's who —(*WORM wanders offstage.*)

SCUTTLEBUTT: —and what's what.

PROFESSOR: And who's in charge around here!

PENNY DREADFULS: (*Pointing.*) He is!

PROFESSOR: And don't you ever forget it!

BETHESDA: So, tell him, Scuttlebutt! Tell him who you are!

DORTHEA: Go ahead, introduce yourselves to puny little Calvin here. (*Cuffing him on the head.*)

SCUTTLEBUTT: I'm Scuttlebutt. And this here's Bottleneck. Over there is Shrugg and Magpie. That's Bumgorey, and Bangles. (*Looking around for WORM.*) Get over here, Worm! (*WORM rushes on stage.*) This here is Worm. That's all of us.

CALVIN: Worm?

WORM: (*Approaching him.*) Them what knows me calls me Worm.

MAGPIE: (*Laughing.*) Them what don't calls him worse.

WORM: Shut your face, Magpie. (*For a brief moment, it looks as though the two may fight. Several PENNY DREADFULS separate them.*)

SCUTTLEBUTT: (*Indicating PROFESSOR, BETHESDA, and DORTHEA.*) Them you've met, I guess.

PROFESSOR: (*Pushing CALVIN over to them.*) These, my little rodent, are the Penny Dreadfuls

BETHESDA: And they work dirt cheap!

Throughout the following, the PENNY DREADFULS will be on one side of CALVIN, while the PROFESSOR and the ladies will remain on the other side. As CALVIN tries to back away from one group, a member of the other group will roughly push him back toward the other group.

SCUTTLEBUTT: We've got filth-encrusted elbows—

SHRUGG: —and dirt between our toes.

SCUTTLEBUTT: We've got scum upon our teeth—

BUMGOREY: —and we never wipe our nose.

BANGLES: There's something nasty in our ears.

WORM: We're what every mother fears!

MAGPIE: True, we've got horrible stinking feet—

PENNY DREADFULS: But we work dirt cheap!

PROFESSOR/BETHESDA/DORTHEA: But they work dirt cheap!

BOTTLENECK: There are creatures stirring in our hair—

WORM: —and they're spreading nightly everywhere.

SCUTTLEBUTT: These creatures never seem to sleep.

SHRUGG: All they do is —

BUMGOREY/SHRUGG/BANGLES: Creep, creep, creep!

MAGPIE: We can't imagine what they eat!

BETHESDA/DORTHEA/PROFESSOR: You can't imagine what they eat!

PENNY DREADFULS: Yes, we're the Penny Dreadfuls. And we work dirt cheap!

BETHESDA/DORTHEA/PROFESSOR: They're the Penny Dreadfuls and they work dirt cheap!

BOTTLENECK: We never wash away the dirt.

SHRUGG: What's the harm?

SCUTTLEBUTT: Does it hurt?

WORM: A little filth—

SCUTTLEBUTT: —a little grime.

BUMGOREY: This way of life—

BANGLES: —it suits us fine!

MAGPIE: You don't like our smells, you say?

WORM: You be careful what you say, I say!

SCUTTLEBUTT: Or we'll send our nasty smells your way,

SHRUGG/BUMGOREY/BANGLES: You creep, creep, creep!

PENNY DREADFULS: For we're the Penny Dreadfuls and we work dirt cheap!

PROFESSOR/BETHESDA/DORTHEA: Yes, they're the Penny Dreadfuls and they work dirt cheap!

CALVIN now huddles downstage, center, his head down, trying to cover his ears. The rest of the PENNY DREADFULS' speech is delivered directly to the audience.

BOTTLENECK: We roam your streets and pick your pockets.

SHRUGG: We steal your purse—

SCUTTLEBUTT: —and take your lockets.

BUMGOREY: Missing a certain favorite curtain, sir?

WORM: We know where to hock it!

MAGPIE: At Nightsoil and Sprockett's!

BETHESDA: Finest pawnshop you'll ever find!

DORTHEA: Best pawnbrokers in this town or any other!

SCUTTLEBUTT: *(To CALVIN.)* Of course, they'll rob you blind!
(DORTHEA sneaks up behind him.)

BANGLES: You'd better watch your behind, Scuttlebutt! *(DORTHEA kicks him from behind.)*

SCUTTLEBUTT: Ow!

SHRUGG: For the right price they'd sell their own grandmother!

DORTHEA: Something wrong with that?

BETHESDA: Think! Without us, where would you be at?

DORTHEA: For they're the Penny Dreadfuls—

ALL: And they work dirt cheap!

BANGLES: We'll steal your necklace off your throat—

BOTTLENECK: We'll take your ponies and your boat.

BANGLES: We'll swipe your watches from your wrists—

WORM: —then sneak your wallets to our fists.

BUMGOREY: We'll strip your paintings off the walls—

SHRUGG: —we'll take your gilded mirrors from your halls.

MAGPIE: We'll steal your fine feathered hats and gowns—

SHRUGG: —your furs so fine.

WORM: We'll take your silk underwear right off the line!

SCUTTLEBUTT: We'll steal that lovely string of pearls.

WORM: I'll take your pretty girls!

BUMGOREY: We'll swipe your diamonds and your rings,

BANGLES: And all your other fancy things.

BOTTLENECK: And if there's still time to linger,

WORM: We might even take your finger!

SCUTTLEBUTT: We know where to hock it.

BUMGOREY: At Nightsoil and Sprockett's!

SCUTTLEBUTT: Listen close to what we say.

MAGPIE: And you be mighty careful when you sleep.

BOTTLENECK: We'll even steal your dreams away.

PENNY DREADFULS: (*To CALVIN.*) For we're the Penny Dreadfuls
And we work dirt cheap!

ALL: (*Surrounding CALVIN.*) For they're the Penny Dreadfuls and
they work dirt cheap!

DORTHEA: (*Grabbing the sacks of stolen good.*) Now, get out of
here, so we can sort through this rubbish! (*DORTHEA and
BETHESDA start to empty the sacks.*)

BETHESDA: You heard her! And use the back door this time, you
good-for nothings!

*They exit. She gives one of the PENNY DREADFULS a kick in the
pants.*

PROFESSOR: Scuttlebutt! (*SCUTTLEBUTT approaches the
PROFESSOR.*) I want you to **instruct** our little Calvin here. (*To
CALVIN.*) Listen well to what tells you, and mind you, be careful of
the law! You don't want to end up in jail —or worse!
(*PROFESSOR exits.*).

CALVIN: (*Frightened.*) Worse?

SCUTTLEBUTT: He means hanging! What the dickens kind of name
is Calvin? You'll need a better name than that if you're going to be
a Penny Dreadful. I hereby rename you . . . Caliban.

CALVIN: Caliban?

SCUTTLEBUTT: Right. Caliban was a hideously deformed creature. That suits you better. Did the Professor show you his glass eye? (CALVIN nods.) It's a beauty, ain't it? I wish I had one. Now, come on. The Professor wants me to **instruct** you, Caliban. (They exit.)

CURTAIN.

SCENE 2

Outside the pawn shop. As before, the curtain is closed and the following scene between the TEASBERRYS and MAD AGGIE is played before the curtain. Or, if there is no curtain, the pawn shop is dimly lit with DORTHEA and BETHESDA frozen in place until the TEASBERRYS enter the pawn shop.

MAD AGGIE appears out of the darkness.

MAD AGGIE: (To audience.)

Ah, the Professor spoke so true.

Every slimy creature has its weak spot.

About vermin the Professor knows a thing or two.

But what bait shall we use to catch our despicable, slimy creature?

For that, I am your clever guide and able teacher.

The TEASBERRYS enter. MRS. TEASBERRY carries a picnic basket. They are obviously nervous, even distraught. MAD AGGIE follows behind them, and taps MR. TEASBERRY on the shoulder. Startled, the TEASBERRYS turn and face MAD AGGIE. No actual dialog takes place between the TEASBERRYS and MAD AGGIE. Their conversation is pantomimed. MAD AGGIE looks around to make sure they are unobserved, then he motions to MR. TEASBERRY to come closer. MR. TEASBERRY looks at his wife, who nods, then he approaches MAD AGGIE who whispers something into MR. TEASBERRY's ear. Obviously interested in what MAD AGGIE has told him, he conveys the information to his wife, who, though suspicious of MAD AGGIE, nods. MAD AGGIE offers them two identical bottles, and, again whispers into MR. TEASBERRY's ear. MR. TEASBERRY nods and puts the bottles into his coat pocket. MAD AGGIE motions for them to proceed into the pawn shop. He exits as the two enter the pawn shop.

DORTHEA: Why, if it isn't Mr. Teasberry.

BETHESDA: Come to pay up, have you?

MR. TEASBERRY: *(Nervously.)* My wife did some baking . . . apricot muffins. I told her how much you like your sweets.

MRS. TEASBERRY: *(Meekly.)* I just made them this morning. *(Throughout the scene she will daub her face nervously with a handkerchief.)*

DORTHEA: *(Taking basket.)* We like our sweets same as the next person, but we can't pay our bills with apricot muffins.

BETHESDA: Money, Mr. Teasberry. Money is what our relationship is based on, not apricot muffins! Do you have the money you owe?

MR. TEASBERRY: Not exactly.

DORTHEA: *(Shouting.)* What do you mean, **not exactly**?

BETHESDA: We have been very patient, Mr. Teasberry,

DORTHEA: Exceedingly patient!

BETHESDA: But enough is enough!

MR. TEASBERRY: Just a little more time. Business has been very bad, and—

BETHESDA: Don't whine to us about your business being poor.

That's none of our concern.

DORTHEA: That's right, our concern is money.

BETHESDA: Money we lent you in good faith—

DORTHEA: —with the understanding that it be paid back—

BETHESDA: —in full—

DORTHEA: —with interest.

BETHESDA: Something you haven't done!

DORTHEA: And your time is up.

BETHESDA: You leave us no choice but to turn this matter over to—

BETHESDA/DORTHEA: *The PROFESSOR.*

BETHESDA: Dorthea, get the Professor.

MR. TEASBERRY: No!

DORTHEA: The Professor is not a patient man!

BETHESDA: Nor is he a merciful one - even when he's in a good mood.

DORTHEA: Which, today, he's not.

BETHESDA: Are your affairs in order, Mr. Teasberry?

DORTHEA: Your last will and testament made out?

BETHESDA: Wife and kiddies provided for should there be an—
unforeseen accident?

MR. TEASBERRY: No, please, can't we work something out?

BETHESDA: Work something out? **Work something out!**

DORTHEA: Oh, I'm sure the Professor will work something out for you.

BETHESDA: Starting with breaking your fingers and your toes! (*The PROFESSOR enters.*)

PROFESSOR: Did someone mention my name? (*MR. TEASBERRY practically collapses at the sound of the PROFESSOR's voice.*)

BETHESDA: Ah, Professor, Mr. Teasberry here is unable—

DORTHEA: —or unwilling—

BETHESDA: —to repay his loan.

DORTHEA: We were just explaining to him how little patience you have for men who don't repay their loans.

PROFESSOR: I do believe you've frightened Mr. Teasberry. Look, ladies, he's shaking like a leaf. You'd think he'd been threatened with loss of life or limb —or several limbs. And who is this?

DORTHEA: Mrs. Teasberry.

BETHESDA: Queen of the apricot muffins!

MRS. TEASBERRY: Oh please, Professor, just a little more time is all we ask. We're doing everything we possibly can.

PROFESSOR: Everything?

MR. TEASBERRY: I promise you next week will be better, and—

BETHESDA: Next week might be better, but it's not likely you'll live to see it.

PROFESSOR: Perhaps we can work something out. I'm a reasonable man. Anyone will tell you that. If you haven't the money to repay the loan, perhaps you can offer us something else—as a sign of good faith.

MR. TEASBERRY: I've already brought you everything of value I own.

BETHESDA: Junk, mainly.

PROFESSOR: Oh, what a pity.

MR. TEASBERRY: My wife's necklace!

BETHESDA: Garbage!

MRS. TEASBERRY: There was gold in that necklace!

DORTHEA: Fool's gold! And we were fools to take it!

MRS. TEASBERRY: Our silver platter - a wedding gift - that was worth a lot of money.

BETHESDA: I've got more silver in my teeth than there was in that platter.

PROFESSOR: Well, that does paint rather a dim picture of things, I'm afraid.

MR. TEASBERRY: (*Dropping to his knees.*) Oh, please, just a little more time.

DORTHEA: We've already given you more time!

BETHESDA: And what good did it do?

PROFESSOR: *(He roughly yanks him up from the floor and still clutching him firmly, starts to walk him across the stage.)* Look at the situation from my point of view. If word were to get out that I'd given you special treatment, why, everybody who owed me money would expect the same, and then where would I be? *(Throwing him to the floor.)* In the poorhouse, Mr. Teasberry! *(Pulling him up again.)* No, in order to settle this account, I'm afraid I'll have to take matters into my own hands. *(Putting his hands around his throat and shaking him.)*

MRS. TEASBERRY: *(Trying to pull the PROFESSOR off her husband.)* Stop it! Stop it! You're hurting him! You can't do this! Stop it, you—you monster!

PROFESSOR drops him.

PROFESSOR: *(His hands still clenched, he begins to approach MRS. TEASBERRY who backs away from him.)* Oh, but I can, Mrs. Teasberry. I can and I will! Did you call me a monster?

MRS. TEASBERRY: Well, I - you were hurting him.

PROFESSOR: To be perfectly honest, I am a bit of a monster. All men are. *(To MR. TEASBERRY.)* So what are we going to do about this situation, Mr. Teasberry. As you see, this can't go on indefinitely. I, too, have bills to pay.

MRS. TEASBERRY: Wait, there is something - something we could give you.

PROFESSOR: Something of value?

BETHESDA and DORTHEA approach them.

MRS. TEASBERRY: Oh, yes, something quite valuable.

PROFESSOR: Well, what is it?

MR. TEASBERRY: *(Holding up one of the bottles.)* This.

PROFESSOR: *(Taking the bottle.)* What is this?

MRS. TEASBERRY: *(Confidentially.)* It's a potion.

BETHESDA: A potion!

MR. TEASBERRY: It's got - powers.

DORTHEA: *(Derisively.)* OOOo! It's got powers!

PROFESSOR: What kind of powers?

MRS. TEASBERRY: Certain - restorative powers.

BETHESDA: Restorative powers, she says!

MR. TEASBERRY: (*Motioning him to come closer.*) It's a cure for something I'm afraid we men are particularly prone to. (*DORTHEA and BETHESDA move in to eavesdrop.*)

PROFESSOR: Oh?

MR. TEASBERRY: Yes, the devastating and embarrassing - loss of - hair.

DORTHEA and BETHESDA cackle.

PROFESSOR: (*Obviously embarrassed, he adjusts his hat and hairpiece.*) Well, I myself have no use for such a — potion. (*The ladies snicker.*)

MR. TEASBERRY: (*Nervously.*) Oh, I'm sure, but the day might come when you might find it useful — if not for yourself, then I'm sure it would bring a handsome price from someone else who might benefit from this rare elixir.

PROFESSOR: Yes, well, I'm sure there is some poor soul out there willing to pay for—

BETHESDA: A full head of hair!

DORTHEA: That doesn't slip off his head every time he bends down to tie his shoes. (*They laugh.*)

PROFESSOR: (*Sternly.*) Don't you have some work to do? Perhaps you could inventory the last shipment of goods that just came in!

DORTHEA: Touchy, isn't he! (*Snickering, they exit.*)

PROFESSOR: (*He checks to make sure DORTHEA and BETHESDA have left.*) You're certain about this potion of yours?

MRS. TEASBERRY: Absolutely certain.

PROFESSOR: Then I'll consider this - remedy - as collateral against your loan - for the time being anyway. It had better do what you claim it does. I wouldn't want any unsatisfied customers.

MRS. TEASBERRY: Oh, satisfaction's guaranteed. You'll see. Follow the directions and apply it generously.

PROFESSOR: You're certain this is safe to use?

MR. TEASBERRY: It's perfectly safe!

MRS. TEASBERRY: And effective!

PROFESSOR: I presume there's more where this came from - should there be a demand for it, I mean, from my customers.

MR. TEASBERRY: Oh, I think that could be arranged. (*MR. TEASBERRY gives him the second bottle.*)

MRS. TEASBERRY: We'll be leaving now.

PROFESSOR: (*Preoccupied with the bottles of potion.*) Hm? Oh, yes. Good day.

MAD AGGIE theme.

MAD AGGIE: (*Entering.*) So, as expected, the slimy creature took the bait. Now all we have to do is sit back and wait.

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