As The Clock Struck Ten

By

Tony Frier

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Characters

John Donald Merrett - aka Donnie/Ronald Chesney, ages from 17 to 46

Bertha Merrett - John’s mother, aged early 40s

Vera Merrett nee Bonnar - John’s wife, ages from 16 to 45

Mary Bonnar - aka Lady Menzies, John’s mother-in-law, ages from 40 to 70

Ellen - the Merrett’s daily help, early 20s

Judge

McLeod - the Crown Prosecution

Aitchison - John’s Defence counsel

Captain Partington

Guard

Clerk of the court - non-speaking

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Prologue

(Opening music. It is 1955. As the curtain rises the stage is in darkness, John is standing Upstage. After a moment, lights rise slightly and John, at 46, walks Downstage Centre; once there a spot gradually lights him. He is dishevelled and sweaty with deep red scratches showing on his forearms. He holds his jacket with a gun in the pocket over one shoulder with one hand, and smokes a cigarette with the other. The Victims - Vera, Partington, Bertha, McLeod, Ellen and Mary enter one by one, to a random space around the stage. Mary is the last to enter and begins to speak as soon as she reaches her space. As each Victim speaks they are lit by a spot where they stand.)

**Mary: (Aged 70, she has red strangulation marks round her neck, her head hangs limply to the side and her hair is disarranged on one side of her head.)** He was a monster, an absolute monster. What he did to my little Vera. She never should have married him. I said. I said “Find yourself a local boy, not some foreigner.” New Zealand it was - that's where we’d sent all our criminals. We didn't want them back, not the likes of him. Not the likes of Ronald Chesney or whatever he called himself. **(She turns to John.)** You were a monster. You were an absolute monster, Ronald Chesney.

**Vera: (Aged 45, she speaks as if drunk and her dishevelled hair and blouse are dripping wet.)** I don't think he ever loved me, not really loved me. I don't know why he asked me to marry him. He was never here, always off somewhere. With work he'd say, but I knew where he'd really been. He said he was sorry, that he’d change, stop, and I'd always forgive him. I wouldn’t believe him, but I’d forgive him, and then he'd go off again. **(She turns to John.)** You were selfish and heartless. You were absolutely heartless, Donnie Merrett.

**Partington: (Dressed in civilian clothing.)** I don't think I'd ever had anyone under my command like him. He was devious, scheming. Always just enough doubt about his guilt that I couldn't get him court martialled. Got others to do the running for him, while he sat back raking in the profits, making the other men go without while he grew fat. What I didn’t know, however, was what he’d do. How he’d get his revenge. Thirty years’ service I’d given. Thirty years. **(He turns to John.)** You were greedy, disreputable and dishonourable. You were a dishonour to your regiment, Corporal Chesney.

**Bertha: (Her head is bandaged with a bloodstain showing through the bandage behind her ear, though the audience don’t immediately see the bloodstain.)**  Where did I go wrong with him? It wasn't easy on my own, after his father left. Was he missing the discipline that a father would have given him? All that time I’d been deceived. The things he’d been getting up to. Those girls. And then this happened. **(She touches the side of her head and turns to John revealing the blood**-**stained side of the bandage.)** You were a naughty boy, Donnie. You lied to me, deceived me, time after time. You were a naughty, lying, deceitful son, Donnie Merrett.

**McLeod: (His clothing stained and dirty and he speaks as if slightly drunk.)** You ruined me, John Merrett. I was the most successful prosecutor in Scotland, then your case came along. An open and shut case, absolutely no question of guilt. I’d never lost a case before. I wish to God I hadn’t taken it. Took solace in the whisky bottle, and consequently lost my next case, and the next. My chambers, what’s the phrase… decided to let me go. My last court appearance was in the dock, drunk and disorderly. **(He turns to face John.)** You ruined my life. You ruined the rest of my life, John Merrett.

**Ellen:** You promised me you’d see me right, you did. You said I was to come round to yours and you’d see me right. I waited for you, waited a whole year, but when I came round you’d gone. I tried to make an honest living, but no-one would take me on when they found out where I’d worked, what people’d said about me. After what I could’ve said, but didn’t. I’ve a good mind to tell everyone what I saw. Not that anyone’d listen to the likes of me now. **(She turns to John.)** But you lied to me, you bastard. You’re nothing but a lying, cheating bastard, Donnie Merrett.

(Simultaneously the music stops, a clock begins to strike, a hand bell starts ringing intermittently and All repeat the last line of their monologue in cannon, overlapping each other and growing in intensity at each repetition. As the ninth strike approaches, John stubs out his cigarette, draws a gun from his jacket pocket and puts it in his mouth. On the ninth strike the hand bell stops ringing, the cannoned speeches stop and there is a snap blackout.)

(Inter-scene music.)

Scene 1

(Buckingham Terrace, Edinburgh, February 1926. Composite set comprising the lounge and John’s bedroom at Buckingham Terrace, a small terraced house. Upstage Centre is John’s room, a chaise facing Upstage with two chairs facing it; on one is a sketch book, on the other John’s jacket. Elsewhere is the lounge; Upstage Left parallel with the back wall is a door frame, the front door, and on an angle Centrestage Left is a window frame. Downstage Left is a writing bureau with a telephone and a clock on it and a chair in front. On a coffee table Stage Right is a tray containing a decanter of sherry and glasses; a couple of armchairs are Centrestage. John, aged 17 and Ellen are on the chaise, but hidden from view by its back.)

(As the lights rise Bertha, helping Mary, aged 40, in with her, passes by the outside of the window and enters through the front door. Bertha carries a hatbox and handbag; Mary has a handbag. Music fades.)

**Bertha:** Here we are then, let’s get you sat down.

**Mary:** Thank you, Mrs Merrett.

**Bertha:** Oh, Bertha, please.

**Mary:** Thank you, Bertha. **(She sits.)** This is very cosy.

**Bertha:** It suits me, us. Donnie and me.

**Mary:** Oh yes, Donnie, is he…?

**Bertha: (Putting her handbag on the bureau and not hearing Mary.)** Well, let me take your coat and we’ll have some tea. **(Bertha calls into the kitchen Downstage Left.)** Ellen!

**Mary:** So kind of you to help. **(Mary takes off her coat.)**

**Bertha:** Not at all, not at all, just lucky I was passing at the right time. Ellen! I can never find that girl when I need her.

**Mary:** Oh dear! Is Donnie…?

**Bertha: (Again not hearing Mary.)** I’ve just been buying myself a new hat.

**Mary:** Dear me, another new hat? I don’t think I’ve seen you in the same hat twice at the Guild.

**Bertha:** Scott’s had just received their spring delivery.

**Mary:** I must look in. I’ve passed here many times, always admired the front garden, but never realised you lived here.

**Bertha:** Funny isn’t it? We meet up at the Guild every month, then all go our separate ways not really knowing anything about each other. **(She takes Mary’s coat.)**

**Mary:** That’s right.

**Bertha:** I wonder if she’s gone out on an errand. **(Bertha calling louder to upstairs Downstage Right.)** Donnie! Donnie!

(John, aged 17 and shirtless, sits up startled on the chaise in his room.)

**Mary:** And Donnie is how old?

**Bertha:** Donnie? He’s seventeen. Donnie!

**John:** Up in my room!

**Bertha:** Have you seen Ellen?

(Ellen, without her blouse, sits up startled on the chaise.)

**John:** Yes, she’s… she’s just doing some work up here.

**Bertha:** Well tell her I need her down here. Whatever she’s doing for you up there she ought to be doing for me down here.

(John and Ellen stifle a giggle.)

**John:** Will do.

(John and Ellen dress hurriedly, timing this so that they’re dressed in time to exit Upstage Right and immediately re-enter Downstage Right on their next line.)

**Bertha:** Yes, my little boy, well, not so little now.

**Mary:** No. I believe I have seen him in town. He cuts such a dashing figure on his motorcycle.

**Bertha:** *Motorcycle?* That can’t have been Donnie, he doesn’t have a motorcycle and anyway he’d be in a lecture.

**Mary:** I must be mistaken. **(A pause.)** And is there a Mr Merrett?

**Bertha:** There is, but he left us some years ago now. We were living in New Zealand and he just decided to up sticks and go.

**Mary:** *New Zealand.* Goodness me.

**Bertha:** We’d emigrated there just before Donnie was born, to start a new life, but *he* then decided to start another new life, without us. Donnie, well, he started to get drawn into trouble, and I thought we’d be best off back home in Edinburgh, so we came home last year.

(Ellen enters Downstage Right.)

**Bertha:** Ah, Ellen, we’d like some tea please and if you could take Lady Menzies’ coat.

**Ellen:** Lady Menzies? *Ha*, alright. **(Ellen exits Downstage Left not taking the coat.)**

(John enters Downstage Right, grumpy for having had his activities interrupted.)

**Bertha:** That girl! Ah, here he is, Donnie, this is Lady Menzies. We go to the same Townswomen’s Guild meetings in Edinburgh.

**John:** Lady Menzies, delighted to meet you. **(He turns on the charm, takes Mary’s hand and kisses it.)**

**Mary:** Oh, likewise. **(She doesn’t release John’s hand.)**

**Bertha:** I was just about to tell Lady Menzies about some of the naughty things you got up to in New Zealand.

**John:** Oh really mother, I’m sure Lady Menzies doesn’t want to hear about that.

**Mary:** Oh I don’t know, I just might like hearing tales of naughty boys.

**Bertha:** Lady Menzies was just passing on her way into town and came over all faint.

**Mary:** Fortunately just at the same time your dear mother was coming back home, so she very kindly took on the role of the good Samaritan and invited me in to sit down.

**Bertha:** And for tea.

**John:** I think you probably need something a little stronger than tea, Lady Menzies. **(He manages to free himself from her grip.)** Let me pour you a sherry.

**Bertha:** Oh Donnie, do you think you should?

**Mary:** A sherry would be lovely.

**John:** My pleasure.

**Ellen: (Entering)**  Tea not wanted then?

**Bertha:** Were you listening?

**Ellen:** Just as well I was otherwise there’d be a pot of tea going to waste.

**Bertha:** Less of your back chat my girl and, yes, we would still like the tea.

**Ellen:** Will that be tea for two or will *Lady* Menzies just be having sherry?

(Mary reacts to this.)

**Mary:** Just the sherry for me thank you.

**Ellen:** Right.

(Bertha tries to give Mary’s coat to Ellen, but she exits Downstage Left without it.)

**Bertha:** She really will have to go. What work was she doing upstairs, Donnie?

**John:** She was sitting for a portrait, part of an assignment I’ve been set.

**Bertha:** Donnie is doing a degree in art at Edinburgh University, Lady Menzies.

**Mary:** How very interesting, an artist.

**John:** Ooh, a little way off that yet. **(An idea strikes him.)** I hope you won’t mind my asking, but I wonder whether you would consider sitting for me. This assignment I’ve been set requires two contrasting works, so I’d have the one of you, elegant and refined, that I can contrast with the one of Ellen with her common, lower class…

(John is interrupted by the sound of the deliberate smashing of a cup from the kitchen.)

**Bertha:** Do excuse me, Lady Menzies. **(She crosses Stage Left.)**

**Mary:** Of course.

**Bertha:** By the way, Donnie, I haven’t had your account this month. I need it this afternoon please. **(She exits Downstage Left with Mary’s coat.)**

**Mary:** I’ve never been asked to sit for a portrait before, I wouldn’t know what to do.

**John:** You don’t do anything. **(He approaches Mary.)** It’s just… if you’ll forgive me saying, it’s the tone of your skin, so… clear, so radiant. **(He caresses Mary’s face.)** And the structure of your cheek, your jaw, absolutely fascinating. **(He closes in further on Mary.)** Such a rare combination of strength and refinement. An artist’s dream. I simply must have you…

**Mary: (Her heart skips a beat.)** Oh!

**John:** …sit for me.

**Mary: (Breathlessly)** Of course, I’d be delighted.

**John:** Excellent! Is there any way I could make a start with you this afternoon?

**Mary:** Aren’t you supposed to be doing your accounts?

**John:** That won’t take long. Mother always insists I account for every penny of my allowance. **(Sotto voce)**  Don’t tell her, but I always just make the whole thing up and *create* some receipts to support it.

**Mary: (Laughing)** What a naughty boy you are for sure. I’m sure Vera will be extremely jealous.

**John:** Vera?

**Mary:** My daughter.

**John:** Then perhaps I could paint her too, playing with her doll in the nursery.

**Mary:** Oh my dear, she’s no child, she’s sixteen.

**John:** *Never!*  I find it impossible to believe that you can have a daughter of sixteen, Lady Menzies.

**Mary:** Oh how very kind of you to say so.

(Bertha enters with the tea tray which she puts on the coffee table.)

**Bertha:** I’ve told Ellen to collect her things and leave immediately, so I hope you managed to get all you wanted from her upstairs, Donnie. I’m paying her till the end of the week.

**Ellen: (Storming Onstage.)** And don’t forget it’s two weeks you owe me. You didn’t pay me last week.

**Bertha:** Well we’ll see about that. **(She goes to the bureau, gets the chequebook from her handbag and looks through it.)** I’m very particular about filling in my counterfoils so it’ll be in my chequebook when I last paid you, but either way I’ll be taking something off for that cup you broke.

**Ellen:** You’ll do no such thing.

**Bertha:** In fact, I’ll be knocking off the cost of the whole tea set as I won’t be able to use it at all now.

**Ellen:** Well in that case I’d best go and knock off the whole damn tea set. **(She exits Downstage Left.)**

(The sound of smashing crockery continues from the kitchen with the dialogue pausing momentarily after each smash.)

**Bertha:** Now then, when would I have paid her last week? The twenty-fourth, let’s see, now, this was today’s cheque, I mustn’t forget to complete that. **(Bertha flips back and forth through the counterfoils, then appears puzzled.)** Well, this is where it should have been, but I haven’t written it in, there’s just the blank counterfoil.

(John looks uneasy.)

**Mary:** That’ll be it then, dear. The girl’s obviously lying.

(An extra loud smash is heard Offstage.)

**Bertha:** Yes, that’ll be her wages from last week, I’m sure of it. Ellen!

**Ellen: (Entering, cup in hand.)** What?

**Bertha:** It would appear that I did in fact pay you last week.

**Ellen:** The devil you did. If you remember you went to get your chequebook, but couldn’t find it. Said it must be upstairs and **(imitating Bertha)** “would I mind terribly waiting until you next went up”.

**Bertha: (She starts to speak a couple of times, but checks herself, and realises Ellen is right.)** Well…

**Ellen: (To John.)** And you’d better make sure I get paid for the work I did upstairs or there’ll be something said.

**Bertha:** That’s quite enough from you.

**Ellen: (To John.)** *And* you’d better think twice before showing your face again at Picardy Place.

**Bertha: (Not really having registered Ellen’s comment.)** I shall check my bank statement and you can come back on Friday for your money. Now clear up in the kitchen then you can go.

**Ellen:** Clear it up yourself. **(She hurls the cup Offstage into the kitchen.)**

**Bertha:** I’m so sorry about this, Lady Menzies.

**Ellen:** Lady Menzies, Lady Menzies, ha! She’s no more a lady than I am. I know all about you.

**Bertha:** Get out! Get out right now my girl.

**Ellen:** Don’t you worry, I’m going. **(She rips her apron off, throws it down and storms Offstage through the front door and past the window.)**

**Bertha: (She sits.)** I think I need a sherry as well now.

**John:** Coming right up. **(He pours Bertha a sherry.)**

**Bertha:** What was that about Picardy Place, Donnie?

**John:** Nothing. Leave this to me, Mother. **(He hands Bertha her sherry then hurries out after Ellen.)**

**Bertha:** I’m so sorry you had to see that.

**Mary:** I understand the problems with domestic staff. I shall ask around and see if I can find someone else for you.

**Bertha:** To be honest I’m not sure I will replace her. My father gives me a small allowance, but it doesn’t seem to cover the bills any longer. I have to keep dipping into my savings just to keep my account in credit, so perhaps it’s time to cut my cloth accordingly.

**Mary:** Well let me know if you change your mind. You were asking about Picardy Place?

**Bertha:** Yes, where is it?

**Mary:** It’s not so much about *where* it is, but what’s there.

**Bertha:** Which is…?

**Mary:** A… dance hall.

**Bertha:** A dance hall?

**Mary:** Yes, the Dunedin Palais de Danse. I sit on the licensing committee and we have just refused their request for extended opening hours.

**Bertha:** But Donnie can’t dance. He’s no interest in dancing.

**Mary:** I don’t think it’s a very nice place, dear. I hear they employ girls there, girls who… charge for dancing… and for undressing… and other things.

**Bertha:** Well how would Ellen…? How would Donnie…?

**Mary:** You’re well rid of a girl like that.

**Bertha:** What, you think she…? Well, yes, yes I am well rid of her. I never knew. I’d never heard of it before. Just wait till he gets back. And do you think she…?

**Mary:** I really couldn’t say, my dear.

**Bertha:** She was right about me having mislaid my chequebook last week, though, and it’s strange about that counterfoil. **(Bertha looks through her chequebook again.)** I’ve always been so careful about keeping records. Oh dear, look, I did it again the month before too. How odd. How very odd.

(Lights fade and inter-scene music fades in.)

Scene 2

(Buckingham Terrace, 17th March 1926, just before 10.00 am. Lights rise to reveal Mary sitting on the chaise in John’s room. John’s jacket, with a gun in the pocket, is over a chair. John is seated on the chair sketching Mary, whilst Vera perches on the arm of the chaise. Inter-scene music fades out.)

**John:** Just a couple more minutes then we’re finished.

**Vera:** You’re so talented, Donnie.

(Bertha enters through the front door, finds a letter on the floor that’s been posted through the letterbox, opens and reads it.)

**John:** And then I hope you’ll have time for me to start on your portrait, Vera.

**Vera:** Oh absolutely.

**Mary:** We can’t, Vera. Your father has asked us to be back in time for lunch.

**Vera:** Oh really, Mother. Surely you can manage without me.

**John:** It would be wonderful if I *could* make a start.

**Bertha: (Sotto voce)**  This can’t be right.

**Mary:** Well, I suppose so.

(John, delighted to hear this, rapidly finishes the sketch of Mary.)

**Mary:** But make sure you’re back in time for lunch. You’ll have to make your own way home.

**John:** It will be my pleasure to escort Vera home when we’re done.

**Vera:** On your motorcycle?

**Mary:** Hush, Vera. Donnie said we’re not to mention anything about the motorcycle.

**Bertha:** This *can’t* be right. **(She puts her handbag on the bureau.)**

**Mary:** That’s settled then.

**John:** And you’re done too, Mary. What do you think? **(He displays a very poor, hurriedly finished, sketch.)**

**Mary:** Oh my! That’s… very good. What do you think, Vera?

**Vera:** How very exciting.

**Mary:** You really are a very talented young man, Donnie.

**John:** Thank you. It’s been an absolute delight to sketch you and I’m sure Vera will be just as delightful.

**Bertha:** Donnie!

**John:** Upstairs Mother!

**Bertha:** Can you come down?

**John:** I’m busy with Mary and Vera.

**Mary:** Well I’ll be on my way. **(She stands and picks up her handbag.)** I’ll tell your mother you’ll be down later.

**John:** Thank you.

**Mary:** I’ve actually had another idea of a sketch you can do of me.

**John: (He is eager to get rid of Mary and ushers her out.)** I can’t wait to hear it!

**Mary: (As she exits Upstage Right.)** Now Vera, don’t be late.

**Vera:** I promise, Mother.

**John:** Right then Vera, let’s get you in position. **(He sits Vera down positioning her arms, her face, her clothing, lingering perhaps a little too long and being overly tactile.)**  If we just move this arm here, and tilt your head up this way, beautiful.

(Mary enters the lounge Downstage Right. During the following Vera is very gradually seduced by John; his hands start to wander, but Vera isn’t happy with things going this far, so moves his hands; he tries again with the same result. They do, however, end up kissing and disappearing behind the back of the chaise.)

**Mary:** Ah, Bertha, Donnie’s got his hands full with Vera at the moment.

**Bertha:** Oh, I need to speak with him.

**Mary:** He’ll be down in an hour. Are you alright?

**Bertha:** It’s just… a letter from my bank, saying I’m overdrawn.

**Mary:** Overdrawn? Oh dear.

**Bertha:** But I always keep such good records of what I spend.

**Mary:** They must have made a mistake.

**Bertha:** Yes, I think you must be right, but it does trouble me so.

**Mary:** Well telephone them. Put the matter right and stop worrying.

**Bertha:** I’ll call straightaway.

**Mary:** If you could just make sure Vera leaves by eleven.

**Bertha:** Of course I will. Goodbye.

(Bertha sees Mary through the door.)

**Bertha: (To herself)** Now, telephone the bank. **(Bertha looks at the letter as she crosses to the bureau, but then stops.)** But then, these *are* my cheques. **(Bertha continues to the bureau, gets her chequebook and cross checks from the letter to the chequebook.)** Yes, fifteen shillings to the post office, that was for a postal order, five shillings to the grocer. Twenty-eight pounds? I’ve no record of spending twenty-eight pounds. Now, what was that for? **(A pause.)** Unless… now I wonder… Oh no, no, not again. Donnie, Donnie!

(John sits up dishevelled.)

**John:** I’m busy.

**Bertha:** I need to speak with you now, down here.

**John: (Annoyed)** On my way. **(To Vera.)** Don’t move.

(Frustrated, John exits Upstage Right straightening himself up as he goes. Vera stands, it has all been too much too soon for her, and she straightens herself preparing to leave.)

**Bertha:** I don’t know what’s going on here.

**Vera: (To herself.)** This isn’t what I wanted, this isn’t how it was supposed to be, not yet.

(Distraught, Vera continues to straighten herself up, picks up her handbag and exits Upstage Right in time to re-appear in the lounge on her next line.)

**John: (He enters the lounge Downstage Right, annoyed.)** What?

**Bertha:** I’ve had a letter from the bank. A letter telling me I’ve overdrawn my account. And there are cheques that have gone out of my account that I know I haven’t written.

**John:** Perhaps you’re just getting forgetful.

**Bertha:** I wouldn’t forget writing a cheque for twenty-eight pounds.

**Vera: (She enters Downstage Right and hurriedly crosses to the front door.)** I’m sorry, I’ve got to get back home.

**John:** Oh, bloody hell, Vera!

**Bertha:** *John Donald Merrett*, you know I won’t have that language in this house.

**Vera:** Good bye, Mrs Merrett. **(She exits and passes the window.)**

**Bertha:** Good bye, dear.

**John:** So what are you saying?

**Bertha:** Did you write those cheques?

(Silence)

**Bertha:** Have you been taking my chequebook and writing cheques?

(Silence)

**Bertha:** I see. What have you been spending my money on?

(Silence)

**Bertha:** Girls? Girls who dance in Picardy Place? Girls who dance and take their clothes off for money?

(Silence)

**Bertha:** And what’s this about you and a motorcycle?

(Silence)

**Bertha:** Right. I’m going to phone the bank.

(Bertha crosses to the bureau, sits and dials whilst John turns and runs out to go to his room where he gets the gun from his jacket. Ellen appears outside of the window and looks in unseen. The clock begins to strike ten; this should be timed to start so that the gunshot coincides with the tenth strike.)

**Bertha:** Don’t think you can hide up there Donnie Merrett. Don’t think you’re going to get away with this. What would your father have thought? What would your father have said? It’s that girl isn’t it? It’s that Ellen that’s put you up to this. Does she take you there? Does she dance for you? Dance… and other things? The bank will tell me who those cheques were made out to.

(Unseen to Bertha, John enters the lounge, walks straight up to her and points the gun at her head.)

**Bertha:** They’ll be able to tell me who you’ve been giving my money to. Have you been paying that girl to dance for you? Paying her to take off her clothes? Take off her clothes and…

(John fires the gun and Bertha slumps down on the bureau. Blackout.)

(Inter-scene music.)

Scene 3

(Edinburgh Court, 1st Feb 1927. In a semi-circle around the stage starting Downstage Right is the public gallery bench - on which Vera and Mary sit, the witness box, two chairs for the counsel behind a table, the dock, the Judge’s bench/chair and the door, Downstage Left. The lights rise and the music fades out.)

**McLeod:** I recall John Donald Merrett.

(The Guard escorts John from the dock to the witness box.)

**Judge:** Mr Merrett, you are reminded that you remain under oath from yesterday. Mr McLeod?

**McLeod:** Thank you your honour. We heard yesterday from Miss Bonnar that just before ten o’clock on the seventeenth of March nineteen-twenty-six, some thirteen months ago, you were in your room upstairs at Buckingham Terrace, Edinburgh preparing to start a sketch of her. This was interrupted by a call from your mother whereupon you went downstairs and Miss Bonnar left to attend a lunch engagement. We’ve also heard evidence from Mrs Bonnar that, moments prior to that, your mother had become very anxious about a number of cheques that had, unbeknownst to her, been drawn on her account, causing her to go overdrawn. The bank clerk, Mr Jefferson, told the court he received a call at ten o’clock that morning and, whilst nobody actually spoke to him, he could clearly hear a voice talking loudly to someone in the room, and that he recognised that voice as Mrs Merrett’s. Then, as the clock struck ten, there was a loud gunshot and a few moments later, you were heard shouting “My mother has shot herself”. Mr Merrett, do you own a gun?

(Silence)

**Judge:** You must answer the prosecution’s questions, Mr Merrett.

**John:** Yes.

**McLeod:** When did you buy this gun?

**John:** Sometime last year.

**McLeod:** For what purpose?

**John:** Mother had said she wanted one.

**McLeod: (Disbelieving)** How unfortunate that she’s not here to confirm that.

**Aitchison: (He stands)** My Lord!

**Judge:** Questions please, Mr McLeod.

(Aitchison sits.)

**McLeod:** My Lord. Mr Merrett, where did you keep this gun?

**John:** My *mother* kept it in the bureau drawer.

**McLeod:** Was the drawer locked?

**John:** I suppose so.

**McLeod:** And where is the key?

**John:** I think it’s kept in another drawer.

**McLeod:** The police report makes no mention of any key being found.

**John:** Mother must have put it somewhere else.

**McLeod:** So, your mother, wracked with shame for going overdrawn at the bank, goes to the bureau, unlocks the drawer, hides the key somewhere and takes out the gun and, gun in hand, rings the bank, converses with you then shoots herself?

(During the following, and to the annoyance of McLeod, the Clerk is distracted by something Offstage. Clerk goes Offstage momentarily and re-enters with a note which he passes to the Judge.)

**John:** I couldn’t say. I’d gone back up to my room. I only came down again when I heard the gunshot.

**McLeod:** And then you…?

**John:** I called for help.

**McLeod:** And then…?

**John:** I don’t remember.

**McLeod:** You went out riding on a motorcycle, did you not? On a motorcycle with a female employee from the Dunedin Palais De Danse; a second-hand motorcycle that you had purchased two weeks earlier, for twenty-eight pounds.

(The Judge has read the note and summons the counsel to him.)

**Judge:** Mr McLeod, Mr Aitchison, approach the bench please.

(The Judge has a short whispered conversation with the Clerk, Aitchison and McLeod who then return to their chairs as the Clerk exits.)

**Judge:** Thank you, Mr Merrett, please step down.

**John:** But I haven’t…

**Judge:** Please step down.

(The Guard escorts John back to the dock.)

**McLeod: (He stands.)** The prosecution calls Mrs Bertha Merrett.

(All gasp and turn to see the Clerk wheel on Bertha, with head bandaged, in a wheelchair.)

**John:** *Mother*, what are you…?

**Judge:** Order. Mrs Merrett, I understand you have discharged yourself from hospital against medical advice to be here today.

**Bertha:** That’s right, your honour.

**John:** Mother, why are…?

**Judge:** We are very grateful to you Mrs Merrett, but you must not over-exert yourself. Clerk?

(The Clerk produces a bible on which we see, but don’t hear, Bertha swear an oath, whilst the Judge continues.)

**Judge:** Gentlemen, keep it brief.

**John:** Why have you…?

**Judge:** Mr Merrett, you must remain silent or I will have you removed.

(Bertha has finished taking her oath.)

**Judge:** Mr McLeod.

**McLeod: (He stands.)** My Lord. Mrs Merrett, perhaps you can relate to the court the events of the seventeenth of March last year.

**Bertha:** Was that the day Donnie shot me?

(Aitchison starts to rise to object, but the Judge stops him.)

**Judge:** That was the day you received the gunshot wound, Mrs Merrett.

**Bertha:** Oh, right. Well, I’d just come in from the shops and there was a letter that said I’d overdrawn my account. I’d always been so careful to keep a record of any cheques I’d written, but recently I’d noticed one of them was blank, which was really odd, and when I looked back there were quite a few more that were blank. The letter listed all the cheques I’d written that year. I recognised some of them, but there were others, I had no record of them, so I called Donnie down.

**McLeod:** Why?

**Bertha:** Well, when he was younger, I’d caught him a couple of times taking money from my purse. He promised me he wouldn’t steal ever again and we agreed not to tell his father, but I don’t think he stopped.

**McLeod:** So you called him down from his room?

**Bertha:** That’s right, he’d just finished off Lady Menzies and he was making a start on Vera.

(The Clerk and Guard snigger.)

**Judge:** Order! Please continue, Mrs Merrett.

**Bertha:** Well I asked him if he’d written the cheques and told him I was going to phone the bank. He didn’t say anything, he just ran back upstairs. I’d just got through to the bank, then everything went white.

**McLeod:** So as far as you are concerned Mrs Merrett, what happened?

**Bertha:** Donnie shot me. **(She looks at John.)** My son, John Donald Merrett, he tried to kill me.

**McLeod:** Thank you, Mrs Merrett. Your witness. **(He sits.)**

**Aitchison: (He stands.)** Now Mrs Merrett, do you like wearing hats?

**Bertha:** Hats?

**McLeod: (He stands.)** My lord.

**Judge:** Mr Aitchison?

**Aitchison:** Please bear with me my lord, the relevance will become apparent.

(The Judge nods. McLeod sits.)

**Aitchison:** Yes Mrs Merrett, hats.

**Bertha:** I do, yes.

**Aitchison:** And where do you buy your hats, Mrs Merrett?

**Bertha:** Scott’s.

**Aitchison:** Do Scott’s take cheques, Mrs Merrett?

**Bertha:** No, they only take cash. I have to cash a cheque.

**Aitchison:** And in your eagerness to buy another hat, is it possible you could have cashed a cheque, but forgotten to complete the counterfoil.

**Bertha: (Getting anxious.)** Well, no, not really, I do it the moment I get home, always.

**Aitchison:** So not at the time of writing the cheque?

**Bertha:** No, like I said, the moment I get home.

**Aitchison:** And on the occasion when you first noticed a blank counterfoil?

**Bertha: (More anxious.)** Yes, well, actually, no, not that day, obviously, I had Lady Menzies to see to, but I would have done it later.

**Aitchison:** So not always then.

**Judge:** I think you’ve made your point, Mr Aitchison.

**Aitchison:** My lord. Mrs Merrett, during the fifteen years you lived with your husband, he instilled in you the vital importance of keeping accurate financial records, did he not?

**Bertha:** Well, yes, he did.

**Aitchison:** And his professional integrity as an accountant meant he ought never to be in a position where there was any financial irregularity or problem?

**Bertha:** Yes.

**Aitchison:** So when you found yourself overdrawn with the bank to the tune of eighty pounds, how did you feel?

**Bertha:** Terrible, I felt… terribly ashamed.

**Aitchison:** Ashamed to show your face in public with everyone knowing you were in debt to the bank.

**McLeod: (He stands.)** My lord, undue pressure.

**Judge:** I’ll allow it, but proceed carefully Mr Aitchison.

(McLeod sits.)

**Aitchison:** My lord, I am attempting to establish a state of mind that would be susceptible to suicide.

**Bertha:** *Suicide!* *Suicide!* I’d never do that, never. Who said that?

(All eyes turn to John.)

**Bertha:** How could you? How could you say such a thing? **(She starts to break down.)** After all I’ve… after everything. You shot me, Donnie Merrett, you came up behind me and shot me in the head because I’d discovered what you’d done. **(She dissolves in tears.)**

**Judge:** I think we will leave it there gentlemen. Please help Mrs Merrett out.

(The Clerk wheels out Bertha who sobs. Aitchison sits.)

**Bertha:** How could you, Donnie, how could you? What would your father have thought?

**Judge:** Mr McLeod?

**McLeod: (He stands.)** That concludes the case for the prosecution, my lord. **(He sits.)**

**Judge:** Thank you. Mr Aitchison.

**Aitchison: (He stands.)** My lord. I do not intend to call any witnesses, merely to present a number of facts. Yesterday, my learned friend made much of the absence of any gunpowder residue around the wound in Mrs Merrett’s head, suggesting this could only have occurred had the gun been fired from a distance. In fact, his whole case rests or falls on this. This, and a missing bureau drawer key. My lord, it is a well-documented fact that the gun used at Buckingham Terrace, a Spanish nought-point-two-five millimetre automatic, uses significantly less charge than almost any other gun.

(McLeod consults his notes in a panic.)

**Aitchison:** Consequently, less residue is produced when it is fired. Your lordship will recall a Spanish nought-point-two-five millimetre automatic was the weapon used in the suicide of one Michael Salter some six months ago.

(McLeod consults further.)

**Aitchison:** A case your lordship heard in this very court where it was found unequivocally that Mr Salter had committed suicide. The pathologist’s report drew attention to the unusual absence of residue, and attributed this to the lighter charge used in the gun. Your lordship requested a report from a ballistics expert which confirmed that this weapon can leave **(reading)** “barely any trace of powder residue even when fired from a distance as close as sixteen inches”.

**Judge:** I do remember the case well, Mr Aitchison. Mr McLeod, do you wish us to review this case?

**McLeod: (Resignedly, rising slightly and sitting again.)** No, my lord.

**Aitchison:** Further, the pathologist’s report in the Merrett case, exhibit seven, finds it impossible to conclude from the angle of entry of the bullet whether the gun was fired by Mrs Merrett or somebody else.

(McLeod holds his head in his hands.)

**Aitchison:** And the absence of the bureau key? Irrelevant. The locks in the bureau are broken, so whether there was a key or not, neither drawer could be locked.

(McLeod slumps further.)

**Aitchison:** We have heard from Mrs Bonnar that Mrs Merrett had that morning learned her son was a patron of the infamous Dunedin Palais de Danse in Picardy Palace, a dance hall employing striptease artistes and frequented by prostitutes. For poor Mrs Merrett, the embarrassment of learning this, coupled with the shame of her bank account being overdrawn, proved just too much to bear. She decided to take her own life. The wound, however, proved not to be fatal, and finding out that her attempt to end it all had failed, Bertha Merrett decides to punish her son by launching this emotional attack on the person who had caused all her distress. Young Donnie Merrett may be guilty of many things; deceit, forgery, a disreputable lifestyle perhaps, but he is not capable of murder.

(Inter-scene music fades in.)

**Aitchison:** There is absolutely no conclusive evidence whatsoever on which he can be convicted of murder. There is but one verdict you can return, not proven.

(The lights dim.)

Scene 4

(Edinburgh Prison, April, June and October 1927. Angled Downstage Right is a table with a chair either side. John sits at the Offstage side; the doorway is Centrestage. As the lights rise and music fades out, Ellen enters with a Guard who shows her to the visitor’s seat, where she sits. The Guard stands and watches.)

**Ellen:** Well you messed up good and proper didn’t you?

**John:** It could have been worse.

**Ellen:** You’re right, it could have been a hell of a lot worse. How long have you done now?

**John:** Two months, out of a year’s sentence.

**Ellen:** One year’s not bad for attempted murder.

**John:** It wasn’t attempted murder, the jury found that wasn’t proven.

**Ellen:** It was from where I was looking.

**John: (Pause)** What?

**Ellen:** Outside your house. I’d come back for some things and could hear Mrs M shouting at the top of her voice, so I stopped at the window to hear what was going on.

**John:** And you saw…

**Ellen:** Everything. Mrs M having a go at you, you racing upstairs, her sat at the bureau, you coming back down gun in hand, then bang!

**John:** But you didn’t say anything.

**Ellen:** Got what she deserved, I say. Docking my pay, giving me the push, no references, calling me a liar, and I did think, well, *he* might have a fair bit stashed away, with all the cheques he’s been filching…

**John:** I’ve got absolutely nothing. I’d already spent it all on you. You and the other girls. I don’t know what’ll happen to the motorbike, though, as I got it through fraud.

**Ellen:** That all it was then, fraud?

**John: (Nodding)** Uttering forged cheques, they call it.

**Ellen:** Bloody lucky I call it! You should’ve got life for trying to kill her.

**John:** Thought I was done for when she turned up at court, but my lawyer was brilliant, convinced the jury there was this chance that she could have shot herself, so they said attempted murder was not proven.

**Ellen:** She’s still in hospital, gone into a coma.

**John:** Good, at least she can’t say anything more.

**Ellen:** You really are a heartless bastard aren’t you?

**John:** Apparently there’s nothing more they can do now. Lawyer said I was lucky the other guy, McLeod, hadn’t done his homework otherwise I’d be coming out of here in a box.

**Ellen:** Bloody hell, Donnie.

**Guard:** Time ladies and gents please.

**Ellen: (She stands.)** Well don’t you forget who kept their mouth shut, Donnie Merrett.

**John:** I won’t. You’ll just have to wait till I’m out of here.

**Ellen:** I suppose so, but remember I know where you live.

(Music fades in.)

**John:** Will you still be at Picardy Place?

**Ellen: (Dejectedly)** Where else? **(As she exits.)** Just make sure you come round.

(Lights dim momentarily. As they rise again the Guard is showing Mary to the visitor’s seat. Music fades out. John is surprised to see her; the conversation is a little stilted.)

**John: (Rising)** Mary! I didn’t expect to see you.

**Mary:** No? I’m very fond of you Donnie. I was worried about you.

**John:** That’s very good of you, but you… being seen in a prison.

(They sit. A pause.)

**Mary:** Are you alright?

**John:** I’m fine, really I am.

**Mary: (Pause)** Is there anything you need?

**John:** No, thank you.

**Mary:** I’m sorry I’ve left it so long before coming to see you.

**John:** It’s been four months since the trial.

**Mary:** Four months, two weeks and three days. I will try and visit you each week, I know you won’t have anyone else visiting.

**John:** That’s very good of you.

**Mary:** It will probably just be on Mondays.

**John:** Mondays are fine, not doing anything else on Mondays.

(They laugh.)

**Mary:** It’s just Lord Menzies goes down to London on Mondays.

**John:** And he wouldn’t approve?

**Mary:** I don’t think so.

**John:** Not that we could get up to anything.

(They laugh.)

**Mary:** You dear boy.

(Mary reaches for John’s hand; the Guard coughs. Mary looks at him and withdraws her hand.)

**Mary:** Am I not allowed to…?

**John:** No, they’re worried you might pass drugs or a weapon.

**Mary: (To the Guard.)** I don’t have any drugs.

**Guard:** No contact with the prisoners please.

**Mary:** Or weapons.

**Guard:** Nevertheless, Mrs Bonnar.

**Mary:** Mrs Bonnar. You knew didn’t you?

**John:** That you’re not really Lady Menzies?

**Mary:** Yes.

**John:** I knew that day you first came to Buckingham Terrace. Ellen told me. A friend of hers cleans for one of your neighbours.

**Mary:** Thank you for not saying anything.

**John:** You’ll always be Lady Menzies to me. You have the refinement, the style, the manners of a lady, so you shall always be Lady Menzies.

**Mary:** Oh Donnie, you always know the right things to say.

**John:** There’s nothing wrong pretending to be someone else, particularly if that someone else is more like who you really are.

**Mary:** Then I shall be Lady Menzies whenever we’re together.

**John:** Which I hope will be often once I’m out of here.

**Mary:** I shall look forward to it.

**John:** I’m thinking of changing my name when I get out; new start, new name.

**Mary:** Indeed. What to?

**John:** Ronald. Ronald Chesney.

**Mary:** I like that. Ronald.

(Music fades in.)

**Mary:** Now then. **(She stands.)** I’m supposed to be at the Guild, so I really must go. I shall see you next Monday, Ronald Chesney.

**John: (He stands.)** I shall look forward to it, Lady Menzies.

(Mary exits as the lights dim momentarily. As they rise, the Guard is showing Vera to the visitor’s seat. Music fades out.)

**John: (He stands.)** Vera! I didn’t think you’d visit.

**Vera:** No?

**John:** Not after that day up in my room.

**Vera: (She sits.)** I know, it was just all a bit too much too soon, I’m sorry.

**John: (He sits.)** No, not at all, I’m the one who should be apologising. It was just… well, I couldn’t help myself. I’d dreamt of being alone with you for weeks and then, when it finally happened…

**Vera:** I know, I felt the same, but no-one had ever even kissed me before, let alone…

**John:** You should have said.

**Vera:** Donnie, I wondered, when you’re out of here, whether we might…

**John:** Absolutely we might, Vera! Absolutely we will!

**Vera:** The thing is, we’re moving house. Father’s been travelling more and more to London so he’s decided we’re moving down there. To Ealing.

**John:** Ealing?

**Vera:** I shall let you have the address before we go.

**John:** Thank you.

**Vera:** There’s something else…

**John:** What?

**Vera:** Your mother. I’m sorry Donnie, she died yesterday.

**John:** Died?

**Vera:** I’m sorry.

**John:** Did she… did she come out of her coma?

**Vera:** I don’t believe so.

**John:** Thank Christ for that!

**Vera:** Donnie!

**John:** I’ve waited eight months for her to die.

**Vera:** Donnie!

**John:** Thank Christ for that.

(The lights dim and inter-scene music.)

Scene 5

(The Quartermaster’s stores of the Royal Naval Volunteer Reserve, Germany 1945. Angled Downstage Left is a desk with a chair either side; a phone sits on the desk. The doorway is Upstage Centre and the window frame Stage Right of it. John, 37, sits on the Upstage side. Lights rise and inter-scene music fades out.)

**John: (On the phone, with a despatch note in his hand.)** Gunter? It’s Ronnie, from the naval stores. I’ve just had another delivery in. Spam. **(Louder)** No, Spam. Like ham, oink oink… Yeah Schinken, fifty tins, I need fifty marks for it... Fifty... No mate, nein... Forty then. It’s good quality stuff, gut Schinken. **(He puts the despatch note in the drawer of the desk, leaving the drawer slightly open.)** You’ll get two Marks per tin easy… I can’t... Thirty, final price... I’ve got others who’ll give me fifty... No, hang on… Gunter… Bugger!

(Partington enters from Stage Right - passes the window and enters through the door. John stands and salutes reluctantly.)

**Partington:** Who was that, Chesney?

**John:** Er… kitchens, sir, just letting them know supplies are in.

**Partington: (He extends his hand.)** Excellent. Dispatch note?

**John:** Didn’t get one.

**Partington:** Didn’t get one, *sir*.

**John:** Didn’t get one, sir.

(Partington turns away; as he does so John quietly pushes the drawer shut.)

**Partington:** How long is it you’ve been in the Naval Reserve, Chesney?

**John:** Two years, sir.

**Partington:** And still can’t manage basic protocol. I should send you back to Blighty for re-training. So, no dispatch note. Third time this month, isn’t it?

**John:** Believe so, sir.

**Partington:** I did telegraph headquarters last time this happened. They swore blind a dispatch note was sent.

**John:** There’s a war going on, sir. More important that supplies get through than paperwork.

**Partington:** Well that’s the problem. It would appear that not all supplies *are* getting through, not to the men anyway. Problem is, without the paperwork, I can’t prove where they’re going astray.

**John:** Can’t help you there, sir.

**Partington:** No, I’m sure you can’t. Where are they now?

**John:** Stores, sir.

**Partington:** Get the kitchens to come over and I’ll sign them out personally.

**John:** It’s alright, sir, I’m taking them over later.

**Partington:** An order, Chesney. Let me know when they’re here, I’ll be in my office. **(He exits through the door and goes Stage Right past the window.)**

**John:** Sir. **(He salutes then sits, dials and speaks quietly on phone.)** Spud? Ronnie. Delivery’s in, but you’re to come and collect it yourself. I know. Fartington says so.

(Partington returns to outside the window, unseen to John, and listens.)

**John:** And he’s going to sign it out personally. Tell him yourself. We’re going to have to keep a low profile for a few weeks. I’ve got the rest of last month’s stuff for you to deliver. Yeah, to Heinz fifty-seven. He says he won’t pay more than twenty, but tell him there won’t be anything more for a few weeks and try to get thirty.

(Partington enters through the door.)

**John:** Usual place then, after dark. **(He hangs up.)**

**Partington:** Got you at last, Chesney!

(John starts and stands.)

**Partington:** Heinz fifty-seven? Usual place, after dark?

**John:** Sir, you’ve got it wrong.

**Partington:** I don’t think so, Chesney. I’ve always known you were up to something. Consider yourself on a charge.

**John:** Sir, it’s not what you think.

**Partington:** It’s exactly what I think, Chesney. Black market sales. In fact, no, it’s worse than I think, black market sales to Jerry, depriving our boys of food. I’m going to hang you out to dry, Chesney.

**John:** I can cut you in fifty-fifty.

**Partington:** How dare you even suggest such a thing? How dare you!

**John:** Sir.

**Partington:** How long has this been going on?

**John:** Six months. I’d run up debts at the Gasthof.

**Partington:** Drink?

**John:** Gambling. And girls.

**Partington:** You’re a married man, corporal. Wife waiting for you back home. What’s she going to say?

**John:** We’re separated now, sir, me and Vera. Been separated… seven years now, but I still wouldn’t want her to find out.

**Partington:** She’s going to find out once you’re court martialled and discharged, Chesney.

**John:** I resign. I’m going to go back to England. I’ll work at the home.

**Partington:** What home?

**John:** The old folks home, back in Ealing. We own it, me and Vera. Bought it fifteen years ago.

**Partington:** You own an old folks home?

**John:** My grandfather died and left me fifty-grand. I gave ten to Vera when we got married and she bought an old folks home with it. She runs it with her mother.

**Partington:** And the rest?

**John:** Lost it at cards and the horses.

**Partington:** You gambled away forty-thousand pounds?

**John:** I’m leaving. I want out.

**Partington:** You can’t leave, Chesney, but I am going to throw you out.

**John:** I’ll tell them you’re in it too. I’ve got all the missing dispatch notes, with your signature on.

**Partington:** My signature? How…? You’ve been forging my signature?

**John: (He nods.)** You’re in this too, up to your neck.

**Partington:** And who do you think they’re going to believe, a corporal two years in or a captain who’s served for over thirty years?

**John:** Please, sir, can’t you turn a blind eye? I’ll stop. I’ll just run away.

**Partington:** You really don’t get how things work here do you, Chesney? You don’t have a clue, not a bloody clue. What happens is I call the MPs, you get arrested, court martialled and banged up out here in a military cell, guarded by the men you’ve been depriving of food for six months, until there’s a space on a train back to England, and I don’t see that happening for a very long time. But don’t worry, your comrades will be looking after you in the meantime, so things will work out just fine.

**John:** Yes, sir.

**Partington:** Now stay there, do not move, that’s an order. **(He goes through the doorway and exits Stage Right, calling.)** Sergeant!

(John opens the desk drawer, takes out a wad of dispatch notes and hurries through the doorway, exiting Stage Left as the lights dim and inter-scene music fades in.)

Scene 6

(The kitchen of the Sunset Retirement Home, Ealing, February 11th 1954, just before 10.00 am. A draining board unit with a deep butler sink filled with water, is set Centrestage. The doorway is Downstage Right and a chair is Downstage Left. Lights rise as music fades out.)

**Mary: (Now aged 70, frail with dishevelled hair, enters through the door with a used breakfast tray including a coffee pot, which she puts on the draining board.)** Ronnie! Mr Davison’s been ringing, he needs dressing. Ronnie!

**Vera: (Aged 45, pale and untidy, enters with two used breakfast trays.)** Were you calling, mother?

**Mary:** Mr Davison needs dressing. Where’s Ronnie?

**Vera:** We’re not to call him that, we’re to call him John.

**Mary:** I’ll call him what I like. Lazybones is more suited to that one.

**Vera:** He’ll be in trouble if he’s found here.

**Mary:** Well it won’t be anything he doesn’t deserve.

**Vera:** We don’t know that.

**Mary:** We do know that, Vera. If there’s one thing certain in this life it’s that wherever there’s trouble, there’s Ronald Chesney.

**Vera:** John Merrett.

**Mary:** Anyway, where is he?

**Vera: (Unloading the trays.)** Not here. He didn’t come home last night. Again.

**Mary:** Oh, love, I don’t know why you keep taking him back.

**Vera:** This is his. We bought this with his money.

**Mary:** No, love, he gave *you* that money. He gave you ten and kept forty for himself; he’s wasted his, but you’ve spent yours wisely. It’s yours, Vera.

**Vera:** There was never anything written down.

**Mary:** You’re not to give him another penny, Vera. He’s so ungrateful. We offered him a home when he came out of prison, went against your father’s wishes when he asked to marry you and then he deserted. We’ve been hiding a deserter for nine years, Vera. You know how it upset the residents when those military policemen called round.

**Vera:** I know.

**Mary:** *And* when that old captain of his turned up. All red in the face, pointing and shouting how Ronnie’d got him discharged after thirty years’ service. He’s a scoundrel, Vera. I rue that day I connived to meet him in Edinburgh.

**Vera:** Connived?

**Mary:** Everyone at the Guild was talking about him, this charming young man, who flattered the ladies, paid them compliments, made them feel… wanted, admired, everything your father never did. Well I wanted to be flattered, to be admired, but ended up just being used, taken advantage of by the charming Donnie Merrett; who told his mother he spent his days studying at university, but in truth spent them at a seedy dance hall, dancing and sleeping with prostitutes.

**Vera:** Stop it.

**Mary:** He never spent a single day at that university. I should have realised that when he produced that appalling sketch of me. I’ve no doubt what was really going on when he was sketching girls up in his room.

**Vera:** Stop it!

**Mary:** It was a very bad day that day I set eyes on Ronald Chesney.

**Vera:** John Merrett.

(Hand bell rings.)

**Mary:** That’s Mr Davison again. I’m not dressing him, Vera, I’m not. That’s for John to do.

**Vera:** I’ll do it.

(A door slams Offstage Left. Vera and Mary look towards the sound.)

**Vera:** That’ll be him. Now watch your tongue.

(John enters, unshaven, hung over and carrying a half-empty bottle of gin and his jacket with a gun in the pocket. During the following he puts his jacket over the chair.)

**Vera:** Where have you been?

**John:** None of your business.

**Mary:** It is her business. She’s your wife.

**John:** Don’t remind me.

**Vera:** John!

**John:** I need my money. You’ve got my money, I want it back.

**Mary:** She’s not giving you any of it.Vera, you’re not to give him a penny.

(Hand bell rings.)

**Mary:** You’ve worked hard for it. **(To John.)** You’re needed, Mr Davison wants dressing.

**John:** Tell him to do it himself.

**Mary:** It’s your job. You’ve got to do your bit. Vera’s run ragged trying to manage this place alone.

(Hand bell rings.)

**Vera:** Mother, please, would you see to Mr Davison? Just for today, please.

**Mary:** Just today then, for you, Vera, I’ll do it for you.

**John:** Go on then. It’s the only man you’re ever going to get your hands on. **(He laughs.)**

(Mary exits.)

**Vera:** That’s enough, John.

**John:** You don’t tell me when enough’s enough. Where’s my money?

**Vera:** I can give you half. Half, if you promise to go and not come back.

**John:** Half?

**Vera:** Yes.

**John:** Well let’s drink to half then. **(He offers Vera the gin.)**

**Vera:** I don’t want gin. Not at ten o’clock in the morning.

**John:** You’ll drink with me if I say so.

(John forces the bottle into Vera’s mouth and makes her drink, the gin spilling down her.)

**John:** You’re my wife, you’ll do as I say. Where is it?

**Vera:** Where’s what?

**John:** The money.

(Silence and then he forces the bottle on Vera again.)

**John:** I said where is it?

**Vera:** Bedroom, dressing table drawer.

**John:** Knew a drop of gin would loosen your tongue. How much is there?

**Vera:** Five-hundred.

**John:** That’s not half.

**Vera:** It’s all I’ve got here.

**John: (He forces the gin on Vera again.)** Well you’ll just have to find the rest, won’t you?

**Vera:** Is this what you do down at the dance halls? Force gin on the girls?

**John:** I don’t want people knowing about that.

**Vera:** Everyone knows, John, everyone already knows. They knew all about you up in Scotland, they knew you never went to university, not once. **(She starts to feel the effects of the gin.)** They knew you went straight to Picardy Place and spent the day in the arms of strippers and whores. I thought coming down here we’d got away from that. Do you have to get them drunk, to make them do what you want?

**John:** I don’t need to make anyone do anything, I’m in demand down here. They’re queuing up to have a go with Donnie Merrett.

**Vera:** Only cos you’ve got money.

(John slaps Vera.)

**John:** They’d want to dance with Donnie Merrett whether I paid them or not, and not just dance either.

**Vera:** You’re disgusting! Get out. Go and take your money and get out!

**John:** I want it all Vera, not five-hundred, not half, I want all my money back, now!

**Vera:** I haven’t got it.

**John:** You’re lying. Let’s see if this’ll help you to remember where the rest of it is.

(John tries to force more gin down Vera’s throat, but she grabs the bottle and smashes it over his head. During the following John grabs Vera by the hair and drags her to the sink pushing her head under the water. Vera’s arms flail wildly, but John is stronger.)

**John:** You bitch. I can tell when you’re lying, I always can. You’ve got more than five-hundred here, I know you have. You’re going to tell me where the rest of my money is or I’ll kill you. I’ll kill you so I can do what I want, when I want, with whoever I want, without you to answer to. No more questions, no more lies, no more…

(Vera eventually succumbs and slumps to the floor. A moment. The clock begins to chime and strike ten; this should start at a point which allows the tenth strike to coincide with the gunshot.)

**Mary: (She enters with Mr Davison’s pyjama trousers.)** These will need… **(She sees Vera’s lifeless body on the floor.)** What have you done? What have you done to my little Vera? You monster, you absolute monster! Help, police, help!

**John:** Shut up! Shut up!

(John grabs the coffee pot off the draining board and smashes it over Mary’s head. Mary staggers and manages to steady herself. John grabs the pyjamas and starts to strangle Mary with them.)

**John:** You’re nothing but an ugly… sad… old… nagging… bitch.

(Mary fights back scratching John’s arms, but he is stronger. John’s shirt sleeves are torn off revealing the red scratch marks that Mary has just inflicted on him. Eventually Mary succumbs and slumps to the floor. A moment whilst John surveys the scene. Simultaneously the hand bell starts ringing, continuing throughout, and a recording of the Victims’ cannoned rounds from the Prologue, is played - which gets increasingly loud. John hurries to the chair and takes a gun from his jacket pocket, puts it in his mouth and fires on the tenth strike. Blackout and silence.)

(Curtain.)

Production Notes

Setting

Where possible, furniture should be re-used throughout to aid the flow between scenes e.g. the bureau in Scenes 1 and 2 becomes the Judge’s bench in Scene 3, the window frame removed from its stand becomes the dock etc. If the back of the chaise is too low to conceal John and Ellen in Scene 1, the seat can be covered with a throw which reaches the ground, with John and Ellen being on the floor.

Costumes

In Scene 1 John should use the time he is hidden from view by the back of the chaise to remove the scratch marks from his arms. Ellen should be overly made-up and tartily dressed. John’s shirtsleeves in Scene 6 need to be loosely attached to this shirt so Mary can fairly easily rip them off, and John’s arms should be made up with red scratch marks.

Author’s Notes

The play is based on newspaper reports of the time, but some events, characters, circumstances and timings have been changed and/or introduced for dramatic purposes; it is therefore not necessarily an accurate reflection of the facts. Any resemblance of fictitious to actual characters is entirely coincidental and unintentional.

The play covers some thirty years from 1926 to 1955 preferably with the same actors playing the same characters throughout the play, but alternatively different actors can portray the different ages of each character. Whilst some characters will have Scottish accents, John’s should be from New Zealand.

The Prologue is played amongst/in front of the Scene 1 & 2 set. The Scene 1 & 2 set needs to comprise both the lounge and John’s bedroom and the script assumes John’s bedroom is Upstage Centre with the lounge occupying the rest of the stage. The route from John’s bedroom to the lounge is assumed to be exiting Upstage Right and re-entering Downstage Right.

The coffee pot and gin bottle need to be made from sugar glass so they can safely be broken.

The director will decide whether some of the sound effects e.g. the smashing crockery, the hand bell are performed live or recorded.

Props

Prologue:

Lit cigarette (John)

Gun (John)

Scene 1:

Bureau (Onstage)

Two armchairs (Onstage)

Coffee table (Onstage)

Chaise (Onstage)

Two chairs (Onstage)

Doorway (Onstage)

Window (Onstage)

Hatbox and handbag containing chequebook (Bertha)

Handbag (Mary)

Teacup, breakable (Offstage)

Shirt (Onstage)

Blouse (Onstage)

Sherry decanter and glasses on tray (Onstage)

Telephone (Onstage)

Clock (Onstage)

Tea tray with teapot, cup, saucer and milk jug (Onstage)

Crash box, for breaking cups (Offstage)

Scene 2:

Bureau (Onstage)

Two armchairs (Onstage)

Coffee table (Onstage)

Chaise (Onstage)

Two chairs (Onstage)

Doorway (Onstage)

Window (Onstage)

Sketchbook, containing poor sketch of Mary and pencil (John)

Handbag (Mary)

Handbag (Vera)

Handbag containing chequebook (Bertha)

Letter in envelope (Onstage)

Jacket containing a gun (Onstage)

Sherry decanter and glasses on tray (Onstage)

Telephone (Onstage)

Clock (Onstage)

Scene 3:

Judge’s bench (Onstage)

Judge’s chair (Onstage)

Two chairs (Onstage)

Table (Onstage)

Witness stand (Onstage)

Dock (Onstage)

Bench (Onstage)

Doorway (Onstage)

Bible (Clerk)

Folders of papers (Judge, McLeod and Aitchison)

Wheelchair (Bertha)

Note (Offstage)

Scene 4:

Table (Onstage)

Two chairs (Onstage)

Doorway (Onstage)

Scene 5:

Desk (Onstage)

Two chairs (Onstage)

Doorway (Onstage)

Window (Onstage)

Dispatch note (John)

Military telephone (Onstage)

Wad of dispatch notes (Onstage)

Scene 6:

Sink/draining board (Onstage)

Doorway (Onstage)

Chair (Onstage)

Used breakfast tray including breakable coffee pot (Mary)

Two used breakfast trays (Vera)

Pair of pyjama trousers (Offstage)

Half empty, breakable, bottle of gin (John)

Jacket with gun in pocket (John)

Lighting

Prologue:

Cue 1 - **(At rise)** - **The curtain rises on a stage in total darkness, after a moment lights rise slightly.**

Cue 2 - **(John walks forward and stops Downstage Centre.)** - **Spot on John.**

Cue 3 - **(Mary reaches her position.)** - **Spot on Mary.**

Cue 4 - **Mary:** You were an absolute monster, Ronald Chesney. - **Spot on Vera.**

Cue 5 - **Vera:** You were absolutely heartless, Donnie Merrett. - **Spot on Partington.**

Cue 6 - **Partington:** You were a dishonour to your regiment, Corporal Chesney. - **Spot on Bertha.**

Cue 7 - **Bertha:** You were a naughty, lying deceitful son, Donnie Merrett. - **Spot on McLeod.**

Cue 8 - **McLeod:** You ruined the rest of my life, John Merrett. - **Spot on Ellen.**

Cue 9 - **(Ninth clock strike.)** - **Blackout.**

Note: If insufficient spots are available to light the Prologue as suggested, the victims should be positioned radiating out from John in the order they speak, so that the spot illuminating John can gradually be widened to illuminate them.

Scene 1:

Cue 10 - (When cast are in position.) - **Lights rise to general indoor lighting.**

Cue 11 - Bertha: Oh dear, look, I did it again the month before too, how odd, how very odd. - **Lights dim.**

Scene 2:

Cue 12 - (When cast are in position.) - **Lights rise to general indoor lighting.**

Cue 13 - (Sound of gunshot.) - **Blackout.**

Scene 3:

Cue 14 - (When cast are in position.) - **Lights rise to general indoor lighting.**

Cue 15 - Aitchison: There is but one verdict you can return, not proven. - **Lights dim.**

Scene 4:

Cue 16 - (When cast are in position.) - **Lights rise to general indoor lighting.**

Cue 17 - Ellen: Just make sure you come round, you just make sure of that. - **Lights dim.**

Cue 18 - (Once Ellen is Offstage.) - **Lights rise**.

Cue 19 - John: I shall look forward to it, Lady Menzies. - **Lights dim.**

Cue 20 - (Once Mary is Offstage.) - **Lights rise**.

Cue 21 - John: Thank Christ for that. (Second time this line is said.) - **Lights dim.**

Scene 5:

Cue 22 - (When cast are in position.) - **Lights rise to general indoor lighting.**

Cue 23 - (John looks the opposite way, then opens the desk drawer and takes out a wad of dispatch notes and starts to head Offstage Left.) - **Lights dim.**

Scene 6:

Cue 24 - (When cast are in position.) - **Lights rise to general indoor lighting.**

Cue 25 - (Sound of gunshot.) - **Blackout.**

Sound Effects

Prologue:

Cue 1 - **Ellen:** You’re nothing but a lying, cheating bastard Donnie Merrett. - **Music stops, a hand bell starts to ring and a clock begins to strike nine times, on the ninth strike the hand bell stops ringing. After a moment inter-scene music begins.**

Scene 1:

Cue 2 - **(Bertha and Mary enter.)** - **Fade out inter-scene music.**

Cue 3 - **John:** This assignment I’ve been set requires two works, two contrasting works, so I’d have the one of you, elegant and refined, that I can contrast with the one of Ellen with her common, lower class… - **Cup smashing on the floor Offstage.**

Cue 4 - **Ellen:** Well in that case I’d best go and knock off the whole damn tea set. - **Crockery smashing on the floor every four or five seconds.**

Cue 5 - **Mary:** That’ll be it then dear, it’s clear you’ve paid her, the girl’s clearly lying. - **An extra loud final smash Offstage.**

Cue 6 - **Bertha:** Oh dear, look, I did it again the month before too, how odd, how very odd. - **Fade in inter-scene music.**

Scene 2:

Cue 7 - **(Lights up.)** - **Fade out inter-scene music.**

Cue 8 - **Bertha:** Right, I’m going to phone the bank. - **Ten clock strikes, with gunshot on the tenth strike.**

Cue 9 - **(After blackout.)** - **Inter-scene music.**

Scene 3:

Cue 10 - **(As lights rise.)** - **Fade out inter-scene music.**

Cue 11 - **Aitchison:** Young Donnie Merrett may be guilty of many things; deceit, forgery, a disreputable lifestyle perhaps, but he is not a murderer. - **Fade in inter-scene music.**

Scene 4:

Cue 12 - **(As lights rise.)** - **Fade out inter-scene music.**

Cue 13 - **Ellen:** I suppose so, but don’t forget I know where you live. - **Music fades in.**

Cue 14 - **(Mary enters.)** - **Fade music out.**

Cue 15 - **Mary:** I like that, Ronald. - **Music fades in.**

Cue 16 - **(Vera enters.)** - **Fade music out.**

Cue 17 - **John:** Thank Christ for that. **(Second time this line is said)** - **Inter-scene music.**

Scene 5:

Cue 18 - **(Lights up.)** - **Fade out inter-scene music.**

Cue 19 - **(John looks the opposite way, then opens the desk drawer and takes out a wad of dispatch notes and starts to head Offstage Left.)** - **Fade in inter-scene music.**

Scene 6:

Cue 20 - **(Lights up.)** - **Fade out inter-scene music.**

Cue 21 - **Vera:** We’re never together mother, he’s never here. - **A hand bell rings.**

Cue 22 - **Vera:** I’ll do it. - **A door slams.**

Cue 23 - **Mary:** Vera you’re not to give him a penny, it’s yours, love. - **A hand bell rings.**

Cue 24 - **Mary:** Vera’s run ragged trying to manage this place alone. - **A hand bell rings.**

Cue 25 - **(Vera slumps to the floor.)** - **A moment, then the clock begins to chime and strike ten with gunshot coinciding with the tenth strike**.

Cue 26 - **(Mary succumbs eventually slumping to the floor.)** - **Simultaneously the hand bell starts ringing, continuing throughout and we hear a recording of the victims’ cannoned rounds from the Prologue, which gets increasingly loud.**

Note: In Scene 6 the ten strikes of the clock need to be preceded by a chime to cover the amount of dialogue; this will be a different sound effect to the one of the clock striking in the Prologue/Scene 2.

Music Suggestions

Suggested opening music is the first minute of Saturn from Holst’s Planet Suite, with other appropriate extracts from the same piece used for inter-scene music elsewhere. If the Holst is used at the beginning there is a very definite brightening in mood after about a minute, so the recording will need to loop back to the beginning at this point.