

THE PENNY DREADFULS

A COMEDY IN THREE ACTS

By Ray Sheers

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THE PENNY DREADFULS

By Ray Sheers

CAST OF CHARACTERS

(13 MEN, 16 WOMEN; FLEXIBLE CASTING)

- MAD AGGIE**..... In costume, it is difficult to know if Mad Aggie is male or female and deliberately so. 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 onstage and speak directly to the audience.) *(39 lines)*
- BETHESDA NIGHTSOIL**..... *(148 lines)*
- DORTHEA SPROCKETT**..... Both are late middle aged, bordering on old. They run Nightsoil and Sprocket's Pawnshop selling stolen goods brought in by The Penny Dreadfuls. Both are under The Professor's thumb. Neither appears to have a kind bone in their bodies. *(150 lines)*
- CUSTOMER 1** Non-speaking role (OPTIONAL).
- OFFICER CULVER**..... A corrupt policeman. *(8 lines)*

THE PROFESSOR 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. (121 lines)

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

PENNY DREADFULS “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. (PENNY DREADFULS: 11 lines; BOTTLENECK: 19 lines; WORM: 33 lines; SHRUGG: 24 lines; BUMGOREY: 22 lines; BANGLES: 31 line; MAGPIE: 21 lines)

**Though the Penny Dreadfuls are identified as males in the script, it is certainly possible to include a few girls in the group, if desired.*

SCUTTLEBUTT Unofficial leader of the Penny Dreadfuls. (43 lines)

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Note: The Market Scene calls for Scuttlebutt to stand on his head, walk on his hands, or do a cartwheel. However, any of the Penny Dreadfuls could do this. If any of the other Penny Dreadfuls have special talents, they can be incorporated into the Market Scene as distractions so the others can steal. In the original production, one was a musician, one was a dancer, and another performed magic tricks. Though these are optional, they add nice visual effects to the scene. Something to keep in mind when casting: Bottleneck, Worm, Shrugg, Bumgorey, Bangles and Magpie.

MR. & MRS. TEASBERRY A couple who owe money to The Professor and are afraid for their lives, and rightly so. (*MR. TEASBERRY: 16 lines; MRS. TEASBERRY: 22 lines*)

MEDICAL EXPERT This is an optional character. If eliminated, the lines may be delivered by Mad Aggie or dropped altogether. (*1 line*)

LOLITA FOXGLOVE 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 likes large hats and feathery boas. (*31 lines*)

VIOLET The Professor's sister who, with her daughters, pay the Professor a visit. They are completely unaware of his business dealings or his business associates. They think he's a respectable businessman. (*46 lines*)

CONSTANCE The Professor's niece; a rather naive type. (*27 lines*)

SYLVIA Another niece; bitter and somewhat hostile, especially toward Eunice. (*18 lines*)

EUNICE.....The most bizarre of The Professor's relations. She quite literally sniffs out evil, rot, and decay wherever she goes, much to the embarrassment to her sisters and mother. She must be portrayed as eerie, slightly crazy, and possibly other worldly. (21 lines)

STREET VENDORSThese 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, theirs are also in rhyme.

- **FLOWER VENDOR** (12 lines)
- **BALLOON VENDOR** (7 lines)
- **JEWELRY VENDOR** (6 lines)
- **FORTUNE TELLER** (7 lines)
- **PIE VENDOR** (5 lines)

CUSTOMER 2A non-speaking part. Other customers may be added to the Market Scene, if desired.

REPORTERLike the Medical Expert, this is an optional part and can be eliminated, or the lines may be given to Mad Aggie. (1 line)

SYNOPSIS OF SCENES

- Act One: Nightsoil and Sprockett's Pawn Shop
- Act Two, Scene 1: Same (one week later)
- Act Two, Scene 2: Open Market or Street Scene
- Act Two, Scene 3: Nightsoil and Sprockett's Pawn Shop
- Act Three, Scene 1: The Jail
- Act Three, Scene 2: Nightsoil and Sprockett's Pawn Shop (about one week later)
- Act Three, Scene 3: Epilogue

PRODUCTION NOTES

RUNNING TIME: 75-90 MINUTES

MAD AGGIE

Mad Aggie should appear truly mad. **Mad Aggie's costume:** He wears two masks, a half mask on his face (for better voice projection), and another full mask on the back of his head. The double masks are indicative of his double (even triple) character, for he is Mad Aggie, Harry Doyle, and Harry Bottom rolled into one. The mask on the back of his head can be attached to the wig for greater stability. Mardi Gras style masks are very effective. Large shiny marbles can be affixed to the eye holes of the mask worn on the back of his head for an arresting effect. A shiny floor length robe creates an eerie effect and enables Mad Aggie to deliver his opening monologue with his back to the audience and appear to be facing them because of the mask he wears on the back of his head. As soon as he turns to enter the pawn shop, the audience will realize that what they assumed—that he was in fact facing them—was inaccurate, and that things will not always be what they seem to be in this play. Under the robe, Aggie can wear a skirt made of neckties or something else bizarre. Many shiny necklaces also add to the confusion of Mad Aggie's gender.

CHIME

Most school band or orchestras have a small chime. If not, an inexpensive garden wind chime could be used. Suspend it on the set so it doesn't have to be carried onstage and offstage because it will create a distracting noise when moved about. A recorder, flute, or harmonica would work equally well.

PROFESSOR

He should seem severe in appearance and in demeanor. He must be convincingly cruel to the Teasberrys and Calvin in Act One for his subsequent actions toward Scuttlebutt and Calvin in Act Three 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 Act Two, a hooded floor-length cloak will conceal his "condition" until it's time to reveal it. His hairy condition is easily created by using pieces of old wigs sewn or pinned to the inside of his shirt and trousers with the hair sticking out in various places. Sections of wigs can be rubber banded around his wrists and ankles. Another piece should peek out of the collar of his shirt. His condition should worsen from Act Two to Act Three. 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.

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 has 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 Dorthea to be polishing as the play opens. Using carts with wheels makes it easy to move the objects offstage and onstage. Other furniture is optional. The only other piece of furniture required for the set is the chair The Professor spills the potion onto. This chair should “grow” hair. This effect is easily produced by pinning many wigs together and attaching them to the chair with Velcro. Like The Professor's condition, the chair's “condition” should worsen from Act Two to Act Three. If enough old wigs are available, the hair can grow from the chair right off the stage in the final act.

THE JAIL SCENE

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 the 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 Scuttlebutt 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.

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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.

Lolita’s weapon: The weapon Lolita uses on The Professor should be in every Pawnshop Scene and placed so that it’s visible to the audience. She will use it to ward off Eunice in Act Three and later to attack The Professor. The weapon should be large enough to be seen easily and to look threatening. Many schools have banned the used 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.

Drum: (OPTIONAL) A drum offstage can be used throughout the play to punctuate some of the lines. Though this is written into the stage directions and is particularly effective, it isn’t necessary.

Lolita’s “hair”: Like The Professor, Lolita will return in Act Three with hair having grown in profusion. Attach it the same way the Professor’s hair is attached to his costume. (“Medussa locks” would make an interesting variation for her transformation.)

PROPS

Two Stuffed Envelopes

- Officer Culver’s bribe money.
- Letter the from The Professor’s sister.

Large Clear Marble (The “glass eye”)

Walking Stick (Optional)

Eye Patch (Optional)

Several Pillowcases

- Filled with Penny Dreadfuls’ loot.

Several Handkerchiefs

Pearl necklace

Silver necklace

Gold 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, enough to fill several tables; a few brass pots for Bethesda and Dorthea to polish are useful.

Large magnifying glass (OPTIONAL)

Several glass bottles

Medium sized, colored bottles for the potion chime for Mad Aggie to “freeze” and “unfreeze” action; a flute, recorder, or harmonica would work equally well.

Picnic basket or plate

Muffins

Bag of coins (For The Professor)

Coins

To drop from Jewelry Vendor’s pockets.

Pie

Easily made with a pie tin and Paper Mache.

Purse

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 one of the balloons.

Numerous wigs

See PRODUCTION NOTES.

Noose (optional)

See PRODUCTION NOTES.

Goblet

Weapon

The weapon should be large and lethal looking, something one might find in a pawn shop. If desired, a gun, sword, or knife may be used.

ACT ONE

Mad Aggie appears out of darkness in front of the curtain, alone onstage with his back to the audience. He wears a mask on the back of his head and a half mask on the front. He has long wild hair. It should be unclear whether Mad Aggie is male or female. He wears a long robe. He will deliver his first speech with his back still to the audience, revealing only the mask on the back of his head.

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. Dorteia, Bethesda and a customer are frozen in place.

Listen well, I tell you.
For them [indicating Dorteia 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 he enters the pawn shop, the audience will realize that he has two faces. He strikes the wind chime. Every time Mad Aggie strikes the chime, he freezes or unfreezes the action onstage.

DORTHEA: Oh no! Not again!

BETHESDA: Get out of here, Aggie!

MAD AGGIE: (To Dorteia 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 rushes out the door, Dortha is on her heels.

Where's the Professor?

BETHESDA: 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?

Dortha enters.

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: 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.

I have to practice. 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 me 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.

DORTHEA: Wait until the Professor hears about this!

OFFICER CULVER: It's the price of doing business in this town, ladies. I'm sure the Professor of all people understands that. *(Bethesda puts the extra money into the envelope and gives it grudgingly to Officer Culver.)* As always, we are so very grateful for your generosity. *(Exits.)*

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

DORTHEA: One of these days . . .

PROFESSOR: *(Sneaking up behind them accompanied by Calvin, who quickly hides behind a piece of furniture. The Professor clamps a hand on each of their shoulders.)* You two will be hideously old and decrepit.

Both women are startled.

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.

BETHESDA: Look who's talking.

DORTHEA: You just missed Mad Aggie.

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

BETHESDA: And Officer Culver who has raised his rates again.

PROFESSOR: How much this time?

DORTHEA: Fifty more a week.

BETHESDA: What are we going to do?

PROFESSOR: Pay it.

BETHESDA: We did.

PROFESSOR: There's nothing else to do. One hand washes the other in this business, I'm afraid. (*Looking around for Calvin, then pulling him out.*) Look what I've brought you.

BETHESDA: What's that supposed to be?

PROFESSOR: A little present.

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

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

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

BETHESDA: What are we supposed to do with him?

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

DORTHEA: Another mouth to feed.

BETHESDA: Just what we don't need.

PROFESSOR: He'll earn his keep.

BETHESDA: We'll see to that!

PROFESSOR: This, my lad, is Bethesda Nightsoil, and 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 leftovers in the kitchen.

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

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BETHESDA: See if you can find Mad Aggie's toe for him to nibble on. She says you got it in a velvet box.

PROFESSOR: (*Lifting up his eye patch and producing 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 the boy 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, polishes it a little, then gives it back to the Professor.*) That was a near miss. A bit squeamish, aren't you, Calvin? (*Pushing Calvin's head down, forcing him to look at it.*) One would think you'd never seen a glass eye before!

CALVIN: I - I haven't, sir.

PROFESSOR: Well, now you have. 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: (*To Calvin.*) 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. Meat's scarce these days.

DORTHEA: Going to get scarcer. 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 enters, striking the chime. Bethesda, Dortha and Calvin freeze. Enter the Penny Dreadfuls; several carry sacks of stolen goods. Mad Aggie strikes the chime again, causing them to freeze also.

MAD AGGIE:

These are the Penny Dreadfuls,
orphan boys 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!

Striking the chime, unfreezing those onstage; Mad Aggie exits.

BETHESDA: 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.*) 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: (*Examining them closely.*) In the right light, they **might** pass for the real thing.

BETHESDA: (*Pulling Calvin over by his 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 him over to them.*)

WORM: One of us?

SHRUGG: Him?!

BOTTLENECK: Says who?

PROFESSOR: (*Entering unseen by The Penny Dreadfuls.*) **Says me!**

THE PENNY DREADFULS: (*Turning.*) **Professor!**

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

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

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WORM: —he'll have to know who's who -

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 who has wandered offstage.*) Get over here, Worm! (*Rushes onstage.*) This here is The Worm. That's all of us.

CALVIN: Worm?

WORM: (*Approaching him.*) Them that 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.

NIGHTSOIL: And they work dirt cheap!

Throughout the following, the Penny Dreadfuls will be on one side of Calvin, while the Professor, Bethesda, and Dorthea 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 Dreadful 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 pawn shop 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.)

THE PENNY DREADFULS

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, boys! Without us, where would you be at?

DORTHEA: For they're the Penny Dreadfuls -

ALL: And they work dirt cheap!

BANGLES: We'll take your necklace off your necks...

BOTTLENECK: ...your chairs right off your decks!

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: ...and grab your favorite tennis balls.

MAGPIE: We'll steal your 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.*) Now, get out of here, so we can
sort through this rubbish!

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

PROFESSOR: Back to work, lads! I've been scouting out some new
territory for you. (*Pulling Calvin up.*) We'll have to teach Calvin
here what to do. (*To Calvin.*) Listen well to what I say, and mind
you, be careful of the law! You don't want to end up in jail—or
worse! (*They all exit, except for Calvin and Scuttlebutt.*)

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**. Caliban was a hideously deformed monster. 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! (*They exit.*)

As the Teasberrys enter, Mad Aggie approaches them, offering them two identical bottles, and pantomiming directions. Mrs. Teasberry puts the bottles into her picnic basket. Mad Aggie exits as the two enter the pawn shop. They nervously look around for Bethesda and Dorthea.

DORTHEA: (*Entering with Bethesda.*) Why, if it isn't Mr. Teasberry.

BETHESDA: Come to pay up, have you?

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

MRS. TEASBERRY: (*Meekly.*) 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 (*Sniffing the basket.*) ...what you got in there?

MRS. TEASBERRY: Banana muffins.

DORTHEA: Banana muffins? (*Tasting one.*) Not bad.

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

MR. TEASBERRY: Not exactly.

DORTHEA: What do you mean, not exactly!

BETHESDA: We have been very patient, Mr. Teasberry, exceedingly patient, I might say, 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. Money we lent you in good faith...

BETHESDA: ...with the understanding that it be paid back...

DORTHEA: ...in full...

BETHESDA: with interest...

DORTHEA: Something you haven't done!

BETHESDA: And your time is up.

DORTHEA: You leave us no choice but to turn this matter over to...

BETHESDA/DORTHEA: ...the Professor.

BETHESDA: Dorthea, get the Professor.

TEASBERRYS: 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? Your last will and testament made out?

DORTHEA: 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. Starting with your fingers and your toes.

BETHESDA: Your ears, and your tongue and who knows what else!

PROFESSOR: *(Entering.)* Did someone mention my name?
(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, queen of the banana 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!

BETHESDA: 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: *(Roughly yanking 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 him.)* Stop it! Stop it! You're hurting him! You can't do this! Stop it, you...you monster!

Professor drops him, coughing and choking.

PROFESSOR: *(His hands still clenched, he begins to approach Mrs. Teasberry as she 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?

MRS. TEASBERRY: Yes, something quite valuable.

PROFESSOR: Well, what is it?

MRS. TEASBERRY: *(Holding up the bottle.)* This.

PROFESSOR: *(Taking it.)* What is this?

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

BETHESDA: A potion!

MR. TEASBERRY: 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 approach from behind to eavesdrop.)*

PROFESSOR: Oh?

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

Bethesda and Dorthea cackle.

PROFESSOR: *(Obviously embarrassed, adjusting his hat and hairpiece.)* Well, I myself have no use for such a—potion—*(Bethesda and Dorthea snicker.)*

MR. TEASBERRY: *(Nervously.)* Oh, I'm sure, but the day might come years from now 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: Don't you two have some work to do? Perhaps you could inventory the last shipment of goods that just came in!

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

PROFESSOR: *(After they're out of earshot.)* 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. Apply it generously.

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

Mad Aggie enters with Medical Expert; rings chime to freeze action.

MEDICAL EXPERT: *(To audience as she reads with a large magnifying glass the label on an identical bottle.)*

Serious but rare side effects may occur.

Persons with high blood pressure, low blood pressure, or no blood pressure should not use this product.

Persons with warts, boils, or other infections of the skin, cranial bumps, scaly rumps, or double chins should not use this product.

Persons with allergies to milkweed, silkweed, tumbleweed, or stinkweed may experience life-threatening nosebleeds.

Certain persons with arachnophobia or claustrophobia, may experience hallucinations, constipation, dehydration, regurgitation, transformation—

or any combination of the above.

May cause drowsiness, irritability, sterility, flammability, or imbecility—
or any combination of the above.

Aggie rings chime and exits with Medical Expert; others unfreeze.

MR. TEASBERRY: It's perfectly safe!

MRS. TEASBERRY: And effective!

MR. TEASBERRY: Extremely effective! Look at my wife. Two months ago she was bald as a billiard ball. And now, look at her!

MRS. TEASBERRY: *(Shocked.)* What!

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. *(Mrs. Teasberry gives him the second bottle.)*

THE PENNY DREADFULS

MRS. TEASBERRY: We'll be leaving now.

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

MRS. TEASBERRY: *(As they exit.)* What did you have to tell him I was bald as a billiard ball for? *(Stuffs her handkerchief into his open mouth as they exit.)*

DORTHEA: A letter came for you, Professor. *(He doesn't notice her.)* Professor!

PROFESSOR: *(Startled, he spills a little of the potion on the chair.)* Now look what you've done. You made me spill some!

DORTHEA: *(Sniffing the bottle.)* That doesn't smell half bad. If it doesn't cure your baldness, maybe we can sell it as French perfume. *(Giving him the letter.)* Here, this came for you.

PROFESSOR: A letter? Oh. *(He takes it and reads it, obviously troubled by what he's reading.)*

BETHESDA: A problem, Professor?

PROFESSOR: It's from my sister.

DORTHEA: Your sister?

BETHESDA: I didn't know you had a sister.

PROFESSOR: She's coming to visit for a week. And she's bringing her wretched daughters.

DORTHEA: Well, that'll be nice for you.

PROFESSOR: Perhaps, but it does create something of a...situation.

BETHESDA: What kind of situation?

PROFESSOR: Let's just say she would not approve of my business dealings or my business associates.

BETHESDA: *(Offended.)* You mean us?

PROFESSOR: You and the Penny Dreadfuls.

DORTHEA: You mean she doesn't know what you do?

PROFESSOR: No, and she's not going to know. She thinks I'm a perfectly legitimate businessman.

BETHESDA: A legitimate businessman!

DORTHEA: You?!

PROFESSOR: That's right, and while she's here, that's exactly what I'll be. And Nightsoil and Sprockett's Pawnshop will be transformed into ...Nightsoil and Sprockett's Antiques and Curiosities, a most **respectable** establishment.

DORTHEA: Respectable establishment, you say?

BETHESDA: What's that supposed to mean?

PROFESSOR: It means, dear ladies, that for one week we shall all have to be...respectable - (*All grimace.*) - however unpleasant that may prove to be. (*CURTAIN.*)

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