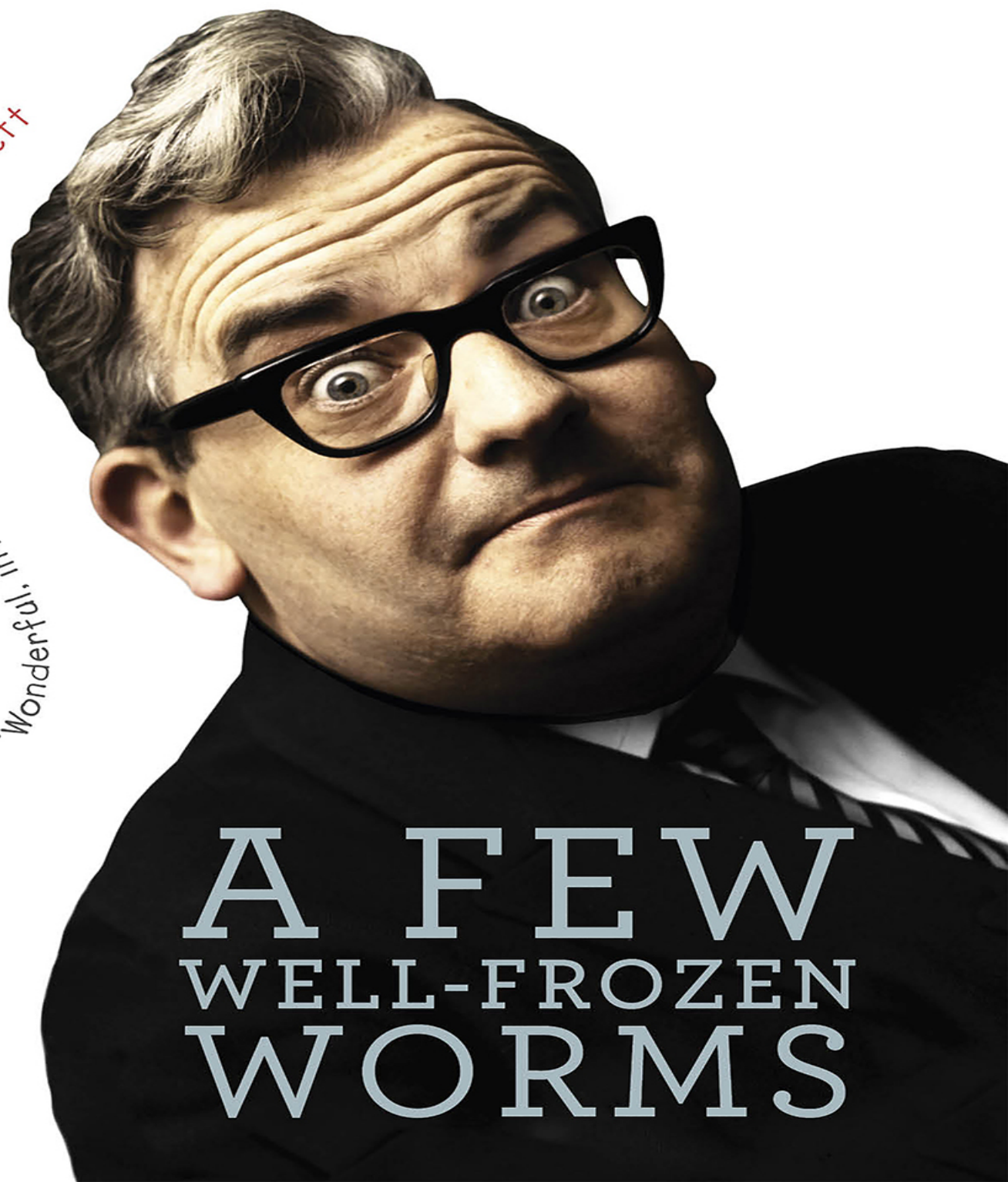


RONNIE BARKER

Wonderful, inventive and gloriously funny.
Ronnie Corbett



A FEW
WELL-FROZEN
WORMS

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ABOUT THE BOOK

For more than twenty years Ronnie Barker was one of the leading figures of British television comedy. Drawing on his background in serious theatre acting, he portrayed characters ranging from a frilly frockwearing woman in 'The Sex Equality Monologue' to the stammering shopkeeper, Arkwright, in *Open All Hours*. But Ronnie was more than just a comedy actor.

A master of wordplay, Ronnie – under the pen-name Gerald Wiley – wrote many of the sketches, monologues, songs and poems he performed. From television spin-offs, such as *The Picnic* and *By the Sea*, to the much-loved *The Two Ronnies* series, he was unstoppable and soon established himself as a national treasure.

Collected and celebrated in this second volume is more of the bery vest of Ronnie Barker.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Born in Bedford in 1929, Ronnie Barker first joined the Manchester Repertory Theatre as an assistant stage manager. Before long he took to the stage as a performer, progressing to radio in shows such as *The Navy Lark*. Barker started working with his comedy partner Ronnie Corbett while writing for and performing on *The Frost Report*. Legend has it that they were signed up by the BBC after they impressed producers by filling in when a technical hitch occurred during an awards ceremony. A gifted character actor, he also starred in the classic sitcoms *Open All Hours* and *Porridge*. He was awarded an OBE in 1978 and a lifetime achievement BAFTA in 2004. Ronnie Barker died in 2005.

A FEW Well-Frozen WORMS

MORE OF THE BERY VEST

Ronnie Barker



EBURY
PRESS





ALL OF US reading this have grown up with our own idea of Ronnie Barker. To all of us he is everything: a clipped, trimmed, razor-sharp delivery; a precise, pin-pricked perfection of pronunciation and performance; he is character, he is conviction, he is cartoon; he is broad, bowling-ball-eyed bawdiness. He is British comedy.

However, it is too easy to forget that this genius came with the understated, underplayed bashfulness of the quintessential Englishman.

The delightful, ribald and bombastic early sketches that follow were almost all written by Barker under pseudonyms, for fear of revealing a boastful, 'showbiz' look-at-me aspect. Often he even went as far, when looking over the scripts he had himself written, as to dismiss one or two with a 'He's let us down there' or a quizzical 'I don't understand this line. What's he getting at?'

On one early occasion, Barker – under the pseudonym Gerald Wiley – anonymously wrote a sketch for Ronnie Corbett and actually went as far as encouraging Corbett to reject Wiley's fee of £3,000 as 'too expensive', so keen was he to keep up the pretence and avoid the limelight.

For all the wordplay, wisecracks and wit, Ronnie Barker was ultimately a modest and unassuming writer who wanted the quirks, quips and quality of the writing to speak for itself.

As you're about to discover, there is no doubt that it does.



THE ELIZABETHAN DRAMA

(Early radio piece - 1960)

ANNOUNCER: The scene is a wood near Venice. The chorus enters, and bows low.

CHORUS:

Good gentle people all, hear me I pray.
A tale will I unfold: upon this day
The feast of good Saint Pancras, you will hear
A history that will delight your ear.
'Tis this: two boys, sired by the same good knight
(I trust, in sooth, I am informed aright),
Born at the self-same hour, twins were they named;
Now both, their dead sire's lands and deeds have
claimed.
And each have sworn to murder one another
Should either each meet up with either other.
Venutio and Velutio are their names -
But soft; who comes? We'll watch the fun and games.

(He withdraws.)

(Enter Fruitio, a clown.)

CLOWN: Here's a pretty catch of fishes, as the dame said to the ironmonger: for though Velutio is my master, yet I do prefer Venutio, and have done since all proverbial. How can I desert the one, without getting my deserts of the other? Would I were not I, I would! I would I were not that I wished I was; for if I were not that I would not be! Those that do not rise early, get no wenching o' market-days, as

the Oracle tells us. Therefore I will resolve to quit my master Velutio, and follow Venutio – or is it turn about, as Lucifer has it. Whate’er it is, I will do it straight. But here comes my master, and with the Doge of Venice. There’s company indeed, as they all have it. I’ll hide within this bush, and learn little if not much, I trow.

(He conceals himself within a bush.)

(Enter Velutio with Hirsutio, the Doge of Venice.)

VELUTIO: And there, good uncle, you have all my tale.

DOGE: In faith, good sir, I thank thee much for that. And whither goest thou from hence, to thither?

VELUTIO: To Padua, and thence to Mantua, by-passing Turin, and Rome’s ancient pile, up to the Bay of Naples, and from thence cross Africa, and to the farthest shores of the Antipodes, my chart is set.

DOGE: Take thou provisions, thou will’st need them, straight.

VELUTIO: My thanks to thee, good father; that I will. And now adieu, for Phoebus’ golden steed e’en now wings down her dappled shadow-show and wraps the earth in sleep – I must be gone.

DOGE: Then go, and talk no more – it groweth cold. But stay! who comes from yonder hence to here moving as if he’d Charon on his back?

VELUTIO: It is my cursed brother, mark, ’tis he!

DOGE: Not Mark, but young Venutio, as I see.

Here, take this cup of poison, which I keep
always beneath my robe in case of thieves,
and make him drink it.

VELUTIO: Nay, I'll use my sword
to settle this encounter; mark me on't.

(He calls to Venutio.)

Thou damned black fiend that once I called my brother
have at thee now, till one shall slay the other!

(They fight.)

FX: *(Long loud scream.)*

DOGE: So brave Velutio falls, and worst is done
But wait – the bodies – there is more than one:
Three bodies? If my brain doth serve me true
we started off the fight with only two!
What of the third? 'Tis Fruitio, the clown!
Whilst crouching in that bush, they struck him down.
O horror! Now my sorrow gives me pause
My life is forfeit to the general cause;
My jewelled dagger now shall pierce my heart.
Let it strike thus!

(Stabs himself.)

And I have done my part.

(Dies.)

(Enter Chorus.)

CHORUS:

Thus speaks the noble Doge, and nobly dies,

Now all are dead; each on the green earth lies.
Thus, gentles all, our entertainment ends;
But ere I take my leave of you, good friends,
A cup of wine stands on the greensward here.
I drink a toast to you – God give you cheer!

(He drinks and gasps.)

'Tis poisoned! And I die! I should have known
had I learnt all the lines, not just my own.
With dying breath, I must announce, with reason,
this is the last play in the present season.

(Dies.)



THE FARCE

(Early radio piece)

ANNOUNCER: This week our critic went to see a revival of the famous farce, *A Cuckoo in the Rockery*.

CRITIC: Good evening, theatre-lovers. This week I saw an amateur production for a change. I travelled down to Little Shelfont, in Kent, to see the Shelfont Country Club Thespians' production of this famous farce. Strangely enough, I had never seen this play until now; however, one's luck can't last forever, I suppose.

The play was performed in the Old Corn Exchange; it's an interesting thought that this must be the first time for hundreds of years that this historic building has been used for its original purpose – that is, the exchange of corn. For corn it certainly was. Not that I have anything against the amateur; providing he is as good as the professional, he is often much better. But there are amateurs and amateurs. These, unfortunately, were the latter.

My ticket was marked L10. I found row 'L' eventually (it was in between row 'M' and row 'N'). The seat itself turned out to be eighteen inches of wooden school bench, with 'L10' chalked boldly right across the bit where one is supposed to sit. There was nothing for it but to sit on the chalk, and I did so, certain in the knowledge that when I got up again I would have 'oil' on the seat of my trousers.

(Not real oil, you understand, but the word 'oil'.) (Those of you who still don't understand what I'm getting at, please discuss it with the person next to you; but not now!!)

I opened my programme, which seemed to have been printed by an itinerant Indian bookseller, and began to read the interesting misprints. I noted that coffees and teak would be served in the interval; and that the incidental music had been taken from 'Handel's Large', played on the solo crumpet by Mr Higgins. My favourite one, however, was the special programme note saying that the company would like to thank the many willing helpers for all their hard work, especially the big stiff backstage.

But on to the play. The lights in the hall went out suddenly, with a loud click, the curtains half opened to reveal a maid in short black skirt and feather duster, staring in horror at the curtains, which had stuck. They went back and forth a few times, and, when they finally settled, she began to dust. There were seven doors in the set, a bed that folds up into the wall, and what was intended to be a secret cupboard, which for some reason wouldn't stay shut. It clicked open at the most inopportune moments, and everyone on stage gallantly took turns in sidling over and kicking it shut with their feet.

The play itself was quite good of its kind, but it needed bringing up to date a little here and there; the jokes about the Kaiser and the Dardenelles didn't go down well at all.

(The next paragraph is played very fast.)

The plot is fairly simple; a boy and a girl, having been secretly married, because the boy's mother disapproved of the match, arrive at a country cottage to spend their honeymoon. The dragon-like housekeeper, however, doesn't believe they are really married, so she phones the girl's mother, who arrives, indignantly demanding that the girl return home at once. So the young couple pretend they are to be married there and then, and that the vicar is arriving to marry them. They quickly phone up an actor friend, who turns up in about ten minutes flat, dressed as a vicar. From

then on, it's anybody's guess what happens. I must admit I lost track of the plot at about this point, just after the maid had got shut in the fold-up bed with the actor, who was pretending to be the vicar. I remember the girl's father making love to the butler, who was dressed as a woman, pretending to be the boy's mother. The vicar, who was pretending to be the actor, lost his trousers while being chased by the housekeeper, and bumped into the girl's father, dressed as a woman, in order to meet the butler secretly, whom he had fallen for when the butler was dressed as the boy's mother. Then on comes the boy, dressed as a woman, and is questioned by the butler, who is now dressed as the vicar, because the actor has now become the housekeeper, who has left in high dudgeon. At this point, the dialogue goes something like this:

(The following played very fast.)

BUTLER: Ah! There you are!

BOY: Ah! So I am!

BUTLER: Who are you?

BOY: I'm a dark horse!

BUTLER: Then why are you wearing a blonde wig?

BOY: That's a fair question!

BUTLER: Do you live here?

BOY: No, do you?

BUTLER: Yes.

BOY: Is this the Vicarage then?

BUTLER: No.

BOY: Then why are you dressed as a vicar?

BUTLER: I'm a visitor.

BOY: No visitors allowed except on Wednesdays and Saturdays. Good morning!

BUTLER: Are you a woman?

BOY: Don't be personal. Look out, here comes mother. Talk about something else.

BUTLER: What else?

BOY: (loudly, as woman) My little Else! She's my eldest, you know! She's such a comfort to me – always brings me my shaving water in bed of a Sunday morning, she does! Dear little Else!

CRITIC: The play hurtled on in this vein for another hour and a half, until everybody was dressed as a woman, including most of the women – except for the maid, that is, who was shut in the secret cupboard, not dressed as anything. Thank goodness they managed to find her a dressing gown for the curtain calls, or we would have been there all night. The play ended happily, and the producer of the company came on, dressed as a man, and thanked us for being a wonderful audience, and said she hoped we'd enjoyed it. I left the Corn Exchange rather dazed, and it was only when I got outside that I remembered I had 'oil' written in chalk on the seat on my trousers. I bent to brush it off, and my braces broke. Still, it didn't matter – the people coming out thought it was all part of the act. Goodnight!



CONVERSATIONS 1

(Variety Playhouse)

ANNOUNCER: An aspect of the British character which continues to stand firm against the march of progress is the complete timelessness of our country life. Machinery now does much of the work that once was accomplished by the honest sweat of the rustic – which means, of course, that the rustic has more time to pursue his favourite pastime – the gentle art of conversation.

A: Evening, Bertie.

B: Evening, Arnold.

A: I reckon we're gonna get some weather afore long, by the look of that sunset. You know what they say, 'Red in the sky, Shepherds' Pie!'

B: Ah. It's gonna be a rough old night all right!

A: Never mind, soon be double summer time, then it'll get lighter. Though I do confess I never do understand it.

B: What? Why, it's simple Arnold – it's a thing worked out by the government to make it light before daybreak, so that we can get more sleep without being woken up in the middle of the night first thing in the morning.

A: Well, my two sisters have to get up and do the milking, and they hate it. The poor old cows don't get enough sleep as it is.

B: Eh? Oh, I see what you mean. But it shouldn't make any difference, Arnold. You just put a couple of hours on in the morning, and take 'em off at night. Just like your trousers.

A: Ah, but the cows don't wear trousers, so they don't understand. And my sisters don't either.

B: Oh yes they do. At least, Sarah does.

A: How do you know?

B: I've seen her.

A: Seen her what?

B: Wearing trousers. Doing the milking.

A: I'm not talking about that. I said she can't understand it.

B: No, I can't understand it either.

A: What?

B: Why she wears trousers.

A: Look, just forget about her trousers for a minute, will you?

B: Well, I'll do me best. What was we talking about?

A: The weather.

B: Ah. It's gonna be a rough old night all right.

A: Ah. Well, I reckon it won't matter what sort of weather it is soon. We shall all be at a loose end afore long.

B: What do you mean, Arnold?

A: Well, I seen in the paper where it says they're doing away with the plough altogether. March of Progress, or summat.

B: What, getting rid of it? The plough?

A: Ah, and you know what that means, don't you?

B: Yes. Us'll have to go and drink somewhere else, shan't us?

A: Ere, I could use a pint of old and filthy now, to wet me down a bit.

B: You'll be wet down in a minute. Look at them clouds. It's going to be a rough old night all right.

A: Ar, us had better get back to the village. Shall we wait for the bus?

B: When's the next one?

A: Thursday.

B: Oh hang it, we'll walk. Ere, I see they be building one of they newfangled bus shelters on the main road, for when it's raining.

A: Ar, I seen it. That'll never get used.

B: Why not?

A: 'Tis too small. The bus'll never get under it. Ere, I know what I meant to ask yer, Bertie.

B: What's that then?

A: Are you coming to the Annual Muckspreading Festival in the Village Hall on Saturday night?

B: I dunno, what's it like?

A: Ooh, smashing. It's all fancy dress, you know. They do give prizes too.

B: Oh ar?

A: Ar. The squire's wife won it last year – she went as a railway left luggage office.

B: Oh? What did she wear?

A: Tin trunks, and a hold-all. Right boozy do it is, you ought to come.

B: I think I will. Ere, is your sister Sarah going?

A: Oh yes. She's going as a cowboy.

B: Cor! Will she be wearing them trousers?

A: Oh ar!

B: Arnold! You know what?

A: What?

B: It's gonna be a rough old night all right.



CONVERSATIONS 2

(Variety Playhouse)

ANNOUNCER: Another aspect of the British character is the helpfulness and civility shown by representatives of our public services. A typical member of the public, played by Ronnie Barker, approaches the clerk of a coach station ticket office, played by Leslie Crowther, to buy a ticket.

R: Ah, good morning.

L: (Cockney, officious) Morning.

R: Is there a bus to Dingford Stanley?

L: There are buses to everywhere, sir.

R: Oh, good. Well, could you tell me the time?

L: There's a policeman over there, he'll tell you the time. I'm a clerk, not a clock.

R: No, no, I mean the time of the bus.

L: Oh. Let's see. Dingford Stanley, wasn't it? Do you mean the Dingford Stanley near Reading?

R: I suppose so.

L: You suppose so? Don't you know where you're going?

R: Yes. What I mean is, there can't be more than one.

L: Oh, can't there? Do you know how many Newports there are in Britain? Five.

R: Well, I'll settle for the one near Reading.

L: There isn't a Newport near Reading.

R: No, I mean the Dingford Stanley, near Reading.

L: Oh, right. Now then, let's see. Ah! Well. Now then. You don't want to go today.

R: Oh, don't I?

L: No. Should've gone yesterday. There was a special excursion yesterday. Straight through. Only took 25 minutes, four and eight return.

R: Oh, pity. But I've got to get there today.

L: I think you'll be unlucky, mate. Let's see - Well, you can get there, but you'll have to change.

R: Oh, well, that's all right.

L: Right. Which way d'you want to go?

R: What do you mean?

L: Well, you can either change at Locks Bottom, or Opsley.

R: Well, which do you advise?

L: Oh, that's up to you. I'm only here to advise you, not tell you how to get there. I mean, if you change at Locks Bottom, you got to go all round the world to get there. You see, that local bus takes you right through the Gremlies, and back.

R: Oh, well—

L: Whereas, if you go to Opsley, you can wait an hour and a half and pick up the fast Bradbury bus. That doesn't stop at all. It takes a bit longer, but it's quicker.

R: Oh, well – I'd better do that, then.

L: Which?

R: Eh? Oh, er, the fast one. That, er, that second one.

L: Right. Day return?

R: Is it cheaper?

L: 'Course it's not cheaper. You can't have returns cheaper than singles, otherwise nobody would buy singles, would they?

R: No, I mean, is it cheaper than buying two singles?

L: 'Course it is. Otherwise nobody would buy returns, would they? Have some sense, do.

R: Oh, very well. One day return, please.

L: Right, there we are. Seven and fourpence.

R: Thank you.

L: You can't get back tonight, you know.

R: What? Can't get back?

L: No. No connection.

R: But I've just bought a day return!

L: Well, that's your look-out. I asked you which you wanted.

R: Oh, this is ridiculous! What can I do? Is there a train?

L: Train? Oh, well, if you want to mess about with trains, you should have said so. I thought you wanted a bus. Trains is another thing altogether.

R: Look, please, all I'm asking is, IS THERE ONE?!

L: What, a train? 'Course there is. Every ten minutes from Paddington!



CONVERSATIONS 3

(Variety Playhouse)

NURSE: This way, Mr Pettigrew, he's over there, the third bed down.

PETTIGREW: (Lancashire) What, do you mean that big pile of plaster and bandages down there? Blimey, they've made a thorough job of him, haven't they. (Laughs.) Thank you, nurse. (Calling out) Hallo, Bert! I've come to visit you.

BERT: Oh, hallo, Mr Pettigrew. How are you?

PETTIGREW: Oh, not so bad. Don't get up! (Laughs.) Well, well, you're looking very well, what I can see of you! (Laughs.)

BERT: I'm feeling a bit better, thank you, Mr Pettigrew.

PETTIGREW: Here, here, what's all this Mr Pettigrew lark? I'm not your foreman here, you know! Call me Arnold.

BERT: Oh, thank you, Mr Pettigrew.

PETTIGREW: I brought you some grapes, but I ate them on the bus. Saves all those jokes about 'em, doesn't it? I see you haven't collected any autographs on your plaster yet, Bert!

BERT: No, well, it hasn't been on very long.

PETTIGREW: No, well, let me start you off. Now, where shall I sign, on that leg that's hoisted up in the air, or

across the top of your head?

BERT: Well, I don't mind really ...

PETTIGREW: Here you are, on the sole of your foot, that'll do. Well now, tell me all about it. How it happened, I mean.

BERT: What, you mean how I fell off the scaffolding?

PETTIGREW: Yes – I was having me tea-break at the time, so I missed it, unfortunately. (Laughs.)

BERT: Well, you know I was working next to the house that the boss bought, don't you?

PETTIGREW: Oh aye, that's where the boss's daughter hangs out, isn't it?

BERT: Yes, well, I happened to look up, and that's what she was doing.

PETTIGREW: What?

BERT: Hanging out.

PETTIGREW: What d'you mean?

BERT: Hanging out of the window. I thought she was falling, and I rushed to help her, and fell off the scaffolding. Turned out she was only cleaning the windows.

PETTIGREW: Ha! I bet you felt a fool, didn't you?

BERT: I didn't feel anything until I came to in here, all done up in plaster.

PETTIGREW: I hear you dropped your lunch-box as you jumped up, and it hit old Charlie right on the head.

BERT: Aye, that's right.

PETTIGREW: How did he feel about that?

BERT: Why don't you ask him? He's in the next bed.

PETTIGREW: (laughing) By gum, it must have been a laugh. How long do they reckon you'll be in here then?

BERT: About six months, I think.

PETTIGREW: Aye, I thought it would be something like that, so I mentioned it to the bosses.

BERT: Oh?

PETTIGREW: Yes – and they agreed with me, to a man.

BERT: What about?

PETTIGREW: Well, they don't want you to feel that you've got to try to hurry back to the job. They told me to tell you that you can take as long as you like to get better.

BERT: Oh really?

PETTIGREW: Yes – you're fired! When do they bring the tea round here?