

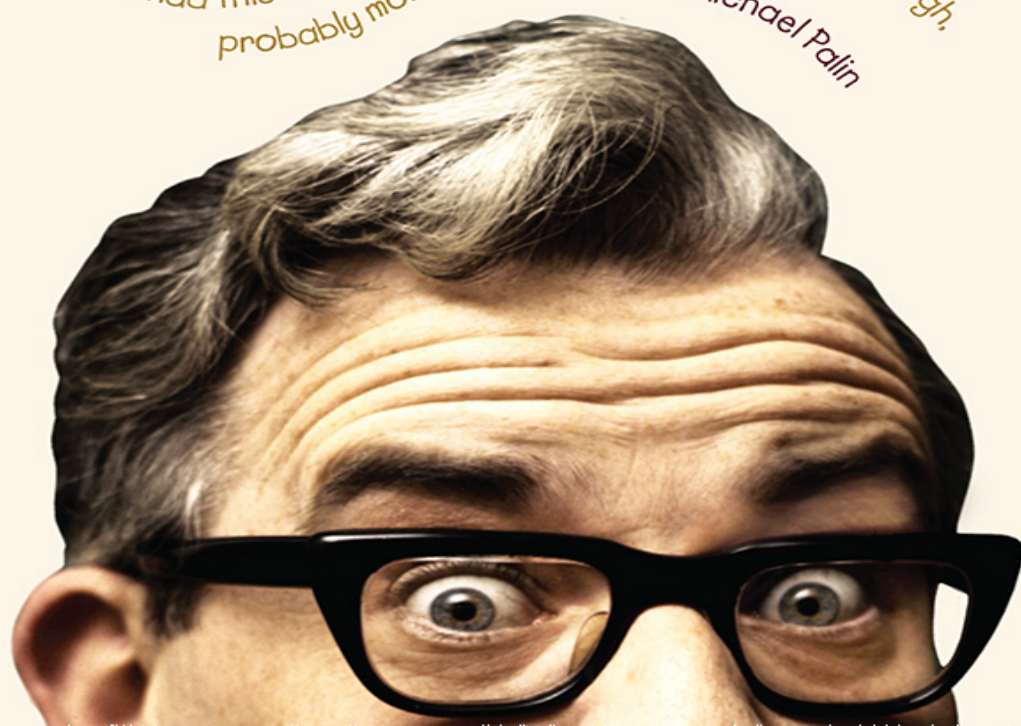
FORK HANDLES

the berry vest of

RONNIE BARKER

*'He had this extraordinary ability to make the nation laugh,
probably more than anyone else I know.'*

Michael Palin



Contents

Cover

About the Book

About the Author

Title Page

FOREWORD BY RONNIE CORBETT

EARLY SKETCHES

Little Fish

Law

Doctor's Waiting Room

You Are What You Eat

Impersonator Sketch

Find the Lady

Three Classes: Leisure

Three Classes: Work

Three Classes: Family Life

Antique Shop

Party Pooper

A Wedding Service

Poisoning

Husband Swapping

THE (ALMOST) SILENT COMEDIES

Futtock's End

THE TWO RONNIES: THE TWO-HANDERS

Fork Handles

Humphrey and Godfrey (1)
The Case of Mrs Mace
Life In the Trenches (Part 2)
Humphrey and Godfrey (2)
Hear Hear
The Grocery Shop
Mark My Words
Humphrey and Godfrey (3)
Limerick Writers
"High Nigh"
Humphrey and Godfrey (4)
Humphrey and Godfrey (5)
Look Here
Knotty Problem
The Yokels
Hotel Loungers
Tramps:
 1 Rich
 2 Food
 3 Money
 4 Prison
 5 Mean
 6 Telescope
 7 Shoes
 8 Marriage
 9 Age
You Can Say That Again
Barmy Army

Say It Again, Sam

THE TWO RONNIES: MONOLOGUES & SPOKESPERSONS

Pismonouncers Unanimous

An Appeal for Women

Swedish Made Simple

An Ear in Your Word

The Minister of Poetry

A Sermon

Pismonunciation (2)

More Worms

The Sex Equality Monologue

Plain Speaking

THE TWO RONNIES: ASSORTED SKETCHES

Star Trek

Dr Spooner in the Bookshop

George's Bedroom

Welcome M'Lord

Mileaway

Upstairs Downstairs

Open Window

I Married a Poltergeist

Colditz

Quiet Wedding

Cheers

Bar Room Sketch

A Clinic in Limerick

The Regiment

That's What I Said
Patients, Patients
Doctor Spooner Revisited

THE TWO RONNIES: THE SERIALS

Done to Death

SONGS: A PINT OF OLD AND FILTHY

Not Too Tall and Not Too Short
I Believe in Doing Things in Moderation
I Go Oompah
They Tell Me There's a Lot of It About
I Can't Stand By and Watch Others Suffer
Our Mary Ann, Is With a Hairy Man
Black Pudding March
Not Round Here
I Put It in the Hands of My Solicitor
All Sorts
Billy Pratt's Bananas
Bang, Crash, Ooh, Ah ...
Nell of the Yukon

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About the Book

In the golden age of Saturday night entertainment, seventeen million people regularly tuned in to watch *The Two Ronnies*. The tightly-scripted sketches, speeches and songs relied on clever wordplay, hilarious puns and surreal plots. On screen Ronnie Barker's impeccable delivery and comic characters were key to the show's success, but what few realise is that he was also responsible for the brilliant scripts at the heart of it all.

Early in his career when he was writing and performing sketches for *Frost on Sunday*, Barker began submitting much of his material under a pseudonym, to make sure it was judged on its own merit. He particularly delighted in writing caricatures of British life, like bumbling toffs, dim-witted yokels and bosomy barmaids and, although he disliked crude humour, Barker was the master of cheeky innuendo.

Even after his death Ronnie Barker's comic genius continues to entertain generations of the British public and inspire a whole range of modern comedians. Collected here for the first time is a definitive selection of his very best work.

About the Author

Born in Bedford in 1929, Ronnie Barker first joined 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 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.

Fork Handles

The Bery Vest of Ronnie Barker

Volume One

Ronnie Barker



EBURY
PRESS



Foreword

I can remember, so clearly, the time in our lives when Ron revealed himself as such an elegant and funny writer ... such a funny writer.

We had always enjoyed the support of an amazingly varied and inspired team of lads ... they were in those days lads. It's curious that at that time we never bumped into lady authors, but that's all changed now, I'm pleased to say.

But to dear Ron. When we were doing *Frost on Sunday* – live each week from ATV Studios in Wembley – a mysterious writer appeared, via Peter Eade, Ron's then agent. Ron told me the texts had arrived at Peter's office from an unidentified gentleman, either a novelist, a playwright or a journalist, and Peter didn't even know the source, but the quality was amazing and all sorts of people were being credited with it all ... Tom Stoppard, Noel Coward even. But come the last night of recording for the series, I was honoured by a visit to my dressing room by Ronnie B ... and let into the secret that the clever rascal was – you've guessed it by now – Ronnie B. So the quality pervading all these words was not so surprising. He very kindly gave me the rights, among other things, to a lovely sketch, which I have performed in Summer Seasons, and I give him six crystal glasses, initialled not with RB but, awkwardly, GW, thereby telling the story, the story of the wonderful, inventive and gloriously funny writer, Gerald Wiley ... no, sorry ... I mean Ronnie Barker.

Ronnie Corbett
2013





Early Sketches

RONNIE BARKER ACTUALLY did his first writing for television back in the late 1950s, penning some episodes of *I'm Not Bothered*, a situation comedy starring his friend and early comedy mentor, Glenn Melvyn. Melvyn paid him £50 a go and took authorship credit himself:

"I remember the director, Henry Kendal, in his later years directed one of the shows I had written and in the bar afterwards I said, 'That went well, Mr Kendal, didn't it?' And he said, 'Bit of quality in the writing, old boy.' And I still couldn't tell him, but I was delighted with that. That was the first praise I'd had for my writing."

Receiving no on-screen credit suited Ronnie just fine. In fact it was something he was to maintain for the rest of his writing career, writing all his material under a series of assumed names, the most "famous" of which was a certain "Gerald Wiley".

"I remember going to David Frost at the end of one of the Frost shows, and it hadn't gone well, but David was always so optimistic, he said, 'What a wonderful show that was.' And I said, 'No, it was bloody dreadful, David. It was terrible, the scripts were awful.' I felt I had to say it, that we must somehow do better than this."

“So I went home and I thought people aren’t writing stuff for us. And so I decided that I would write something. I had a couple of ideas and I decided I would write them and send them in under an assumed name. I spoke to my agent and he said, ‘Well, you’ll have to send them through me. I’ll have to pretend I’m this man’s agent as well.’ So I picked this name, ‘Gerald Wiley’, because I thought most people when they have a pseudonym, they always have a glamorous name like ‘Rock Armstrong’ or something wonderful. So I picked a really ugly name that no one would dream of picking as their pseudonym. ‘Gerald Wiley’ – that’s a really ugly name. Then I said, ‘Supposing they want to see me?’ And my agent said, ‘I’ll tell them you’re a bit of a recluse, an older man I’ll say, but you’ve seen the shows and thought you might try your hand.’ So in came the scripts and the producer said, ‘I’ve got two new scripts in from another writer, must be something to do with David I suppose, a man named Wiley.’ And we laughed, and I laughed, and we sat and read the scripts and he said, ‘What do you think?’ And Ronnie C said, ‘Well, they’re not bad. I think we ought to try them.’ So we tried them. And I was very pleased, secretly. And for the next three weeks we did sketches by Gerald Wiley, as well as other sketches.”

Only at the end of the series (after several more sketches had been accepted and, in fairness, some rejected) did Ronnie reveal himself as Wiley, at which point speculation was running wild, with everyone from Alan Ayckbourn to Frank Muir to Tom Stoppard being mooted as the potential author.

Wiley lived on as the staff writer for *The Two Ronnies*, although Barker continued to employ a number of other pseudonyms – the important thing for Ronnie being that the public was never aware that he was the writer.

Many of the pieces Wiley wrote for *Frost on Sunday* are collected in the following chapter. There are also some early radio sketches from *Variety Playhouse* and the like, and

some from Ronnie's 1971 radio series, *Lines from My Grandfather's Forehead*.

(It should be noted that for the majority of his writing career Ronnie knew very clearly who he was writing for. Consequently character names in his scripts were substituted for "RC" and "RB" - obviously for Ronnies Corbett and Barker. The Editor has maintained the use of these initials here as they invariably provide a shorthand to characterisation in all these pieces.)

We begin, however, not with a sketch, but with a poem (itself attributed to Jonathan Cobbold, later the "author" of the *His Lordship Entertains* series) which, in its simple evocation of lost innocence and days gone by, speaks volumes about the work contained in this volume:



LITTLE FISH

Three boys were standing in the village stream:

The old man bellowed "Oi! Come out o' there!
You'll cut your feet to ribbons on them stones.
They're poisonous, them weeds - or don't you care?
Look well if you got stuck in that there mud
And someone had to come and get you free!
The water's full of tins, and broken glass."

The boys looked up, and rubbed a muddy knee
With a wet hand - but stayed there, in the stream.
The old man glared, but saw it was in vain;
And muttering "You'll catch your death of cold"
Stumped off; and wished he was a boy again.



LAW

(The Frost Report)

A court room.

A man (John Cleese) in the dock with a policeman standing at the side of him. The man appears slightly taller than the policeman. The judge on the bench, the counsel for the prosecution and the defence counsel (a lady) are all in evidence.

JUDGE: Arthur James Peterson, you are charged with being too tall in Arkwright Street on the morning of the sixteenth of May of this year. How do you plead?

PETERSON: Not guilty, your honour.

JUDGE: Mr Wigg?

WIGG (*Prosecutor*): How old are you, Mr Peterson?

PETERSON: Thirty-four.

WIGG: That's a little old to be doing this sort of thing, isn't it? Most people give up that sort of thing when they reach the age of twenty-one. Why do you persist in it?

PETERSON: I don't know what you mean - I've been this height since I was eighteen.

WIGG: Oh. So you've been getting away with it for sixteen years. Have you any previous convictions for this offence, Mr Peterson?

DEFENCE COUNSEL: Objection!

WIGG: Very well, I'll put it another way. Have you ever seen inside a prison?

PETERSON: No.

WIGG: Not even by looking over the wall?

PETERSON: Certainly not.

WIGG: Is it not possible to have entered a prison by walking under the crack in the door?

PETERSON: No.

WIGG: Why not?

PETERSON: I'm too tall.

WIGG: Thank you, Mr Peterson. Call Bernard Botley!

(Bernard Botley enters the witness box.)

WIGG: Now, Mr Botley, tell us what happened in your own words.

BOTLEY: I was walking along Arkwright Street on the sixteenth of May when I saw a man being much too tall outside the tobacconists. I went up to him and asked him what he meant by it, and he tried to cover it up by kneeling down and pretending to be a pavement artist.

WIGG: And what did you do?

BOTLEY: I put threepence in his cap. Well, he was bigger than me.

WIGG: Thank you, Mr Botley. That is the case for the prosecution.

JUDGE: I wish to discuss a point of law with "Prosecution", so there will therefore be a ten-minute recess. The accused will remain where he is.

PETERSON: Excuse me, your honour.

JUDGE: Well?

PETERSON: I wonder if I might sit down, I feel rather faint.

JUDGE: But I ordered a chair to be brought to you earlier on!

PETERSON: I know.

JUDGE: Well, what have you done with it?

PETERSON: I'm standing on it.

JUDGE: Case dismissed!



DOCTOR'S WAITING ROOM

(Frost on Sunday - first piece written and submitted by Gerald Wiley)

A doctor's waiting room in Harley Street. Eight or nine well-dressed patients are waiting, reading old copies of The Tatler and The Field. One has a bandaged foot, another an eye patch, another, a cough. Ronnie Corbett enters - a very well-cut suit, gloves and spats, and carries a newspaper (the Telegraph).

RC: Good morning! *(No response from anyone.)* I said, good morning.

(No response.) Oh, so nobody's speaking, eh? Isn't it amazing!

(He sits next to Ronnie Barker, who is a very smart, moustachioed military type of some sixty years.)

RC: Isn't it extraordinary how no one ever talks to each other in a doctor's waiting room? *(No response from Barker.)* Odd, isn't it? *(No response.)* No, of course it's not odd. *(Answering himself)* Oh, I thought it was. Well, it's not, so keep quiet. Sorry. Don't mention it.

(A pause. RC picks up the newspaper.)

RC: I see they are stopping all the tube trains tomorrow.

(There is a slight shuffling and a lowering of magazines from the patients.)

RC: To let the people get on and off.

(He smiles, encouragingly. The patients, without a flicker, return to their magazines.)

RC: *(standing up)* Simple Simon met a pie-man,

Going to the fair.

Said Simple Simon to the pie-man,

Pray, what have you there?

Said the Pie-man to Simple Simon,

Pies, you fool.

(No response. RC sits down – then stands up again, singing, quite charmingly)

Night and Day, you are the one –

Only you beneath the moon and under the sun,

(He moves round the room, a sort of soft-shoe shuffle as he sings in strict tempo.)

In the roaring traffic's boom,

In the silence of my lonely room,

I think of you – Night and Day –

(He begins to tap-dance, very fast.)

Day and Night, under the hide of me,
There's oh, such a hungry, yearning burning inside of me.
Whether near to me or far,
It's no matter darling where you are, I dream of you,
Night and Day!

(He finishes the tap-dance. The patients are now staring at him. He sits.)

Well, I've done my best. I can't think of anything else.

(A pause. Ronnie Barker stands up.)

RB: John has great big water-proof boots on
John has a great big water-proof hat
John has a great big water-proof mackintosh.
And that, says John, is that.

A A Milne.

(A maiden lady of forty claps politely. She is joined by two or three other patients.)

RC: Ah, that's more like it. Anyone else know anything?

(The maiden lady stands up. She begins to sing sweetly.)

LADY: If you were the only boy in the world, and I was the only girl

Nothing else would matter in the world today
We could go on loving in the same old way.

LADY & RC: A garden of Eden, just made for two

With nothing to mar our joy-

LADY, RC & RB: I would say such wonderful things to you.

ALMOST EVERYONE: There would be such wonderful things to do.

ALL: If you were the only girl in the world,
And I was the only boy!

(Everyone bursts into applause - by now they are all on their feet)

RC: Wonderful, wonderful! Right! Everybody conga!

(Singing)

Aye, aye Conga!
Aye, aye Conga!

(They all form into a conga line, kicking their legs, etc.)

ALL: I came I saw I conga-ed
I came I saw I conga-ed.
La La La Laa
La La La Laa

(They are all going round the waiting room in a line)

RC: Come on everyone, back to my place!

(Still conga-ing, they go out of the door. A pause. The door to the doctor's room opens and a nurse enters. She speaks to the doctor inside)

NURSE: Doctor, there's no one here!

(The doctor appears round the door.)

DOCTOR: Ah, I thought as much. That bloody little Doctor Corbett has been here again and pinched all my private patients!



YOU ARE WHAT YOU EAT

(Frost on Sunday)

A restaurant, smartish, at lunch time. RB, the waiter, is seating RC, the customer.

RC: Thank you. Sorry to barge in without booking. I know it's frowned upon by the management, but I thought I'd just dodge in and sort of merge in with the background, and he might not notice.

RB: That's alright, sir. Would you like a drink, sir?

RC: Yes. I'll have a ...

RB: Gin, sir – tonic?

RC: How did you know I wanted gin?

RB: Your subconscious sir – you've already said it three times since you came in.

RC: Have I?

RB: Yessir – barge in, dodge in, and merge in. Oh yes – I always know what people want – it's the same with food as well – people behave like what they eat, you know. You can tell by what they say, what they'll order.

RC: How interesting. Speaking as one who knows absolutely nothing about such things, I would hazard a guess that you're talking a load of absolute cods-roe, old chap.

RB: Not at all, sir.

RC: Pure unadulterated cabbage-water. Alright, what about this chap – what's *his* favourite meat?

PERKINS: *(Passing by.)* Shan't be a minute, waiter – just getting some cigarettes from the Baaar.

RB: From the where, sir?

PERKINS: From the Baaar.

(He goes)

RB: *(To RC)* Lamb.

WARBECK: *(Approaching.)* Waiter – could I have my bill – bit late. Got to make a mooove.

RB: A what, sir?

WARBECK: A mooove. When you've got to mooove, you've got to mooove.

RB: Yes, sir – you had the beef, sir, right? *(Gives bill to Warbeck.)*

WARBECK: Thank you.

RC: Very clever! What about him over there? *(Indicates man on open wall phone near bar.)*

PHONE MAN: Quite, quite, quite, quite, quite. *(He quacks these in a northern accent.)*

RB: Duck. Oh yes, they're all at it. Listen to her over there.

(Cut to woman. Another woman is whispering in her ear.)

MRS BROWN: Oh dear. Dear, dear. Oh, dear, dear, dear.

RB: Venison. Listen to him over there.

(Cut to George and David at table.)

GEORGE: I just cleared off for the weekend – just stuffed everything into the banger.

RB: Sausages.

DAVID: I wish I could, but I daren't – I'm too scared of her – I'm terrified, I just daren't.

RC: What about him?

RB: He's chicken.

(Cut to a German, with a girl.)

GERMAN: Oh ja, I have lived in Hamburg most of my life. I love Hamburg. It's my home.

RC: I suppose he's a Hamburger.

RB: No, Beef Stroganoff.

RC: He didn't *mention* Beef Stroganoff.

RB: I know, but it's all down the front of his tie.

MR FOX: *(talking to another man)* Oh, she was fabulous, I mean, she had big round, you know, and this low-cut dress made them, you know, and I mean she's just got absolutely wonderful, I mean, you know.

RC: And what's *his* favourite food?

RB: Dumplings.

RC: This is all absolute rubbish. Now, come on then, listen to this, and then tell me what I'm going to have.

"Oh, I must go down to the sea again,
To the lonely sea and the sky -
And all I need is a tall ship
And a star to steer her by."

... and don't say fish and chips.

RB: You're going to eat chicken liver pâté, followed by lamb chop, cauliflower and new potatoes, trifle and cream and coffee.

RC: What? How can you *possibly* know that?

RB: That's all we got left.



IMPERSONATOR SKETCH

(Frost on Sunday)

RC is at a restaurant table, being seated by the head waiter. RC is expensively and somewhat flashily dressed.

HEAD WAITER: There we are, Mr Pigeon. I'll get someone to take your order right away, sir.

RC: Thank you, Alfred. *(He speaks rather better than one would expect from his clothes.)*

HEAD WAITER: Incidentally, sir, may I say how much the wife and I enjoyed your last TV show. We didn't stop laughing all evening, thinking about it. By the time we got to bed we were helpless.

RC: Oh – not *too* helpless, I hope!

HEAD WAITER: Er, no, we – *(Then seeing the joke)* Ah, you're too quick for me, sir. I'll get Luigi to take your order now, sir.

(He goes.)

(Ronnie Barker comes and sits at RC's table.)

RC: Good morning.

RB: *(with the same inflection)* Good morning.

(Luigi, the waiter, arrives to take the order.)

RC: Ah!

RB: Ah!

(The waiter gives them each a menu.)

RC: Good morning, Luigi!

RB: Good morning, Luigi!

(Luigi stares at RB, who is obviously a stranger to him.)

RC: *(looking at menu)* Well, now ...

RB: *(ditto)* Well, now ...

RC: I think a fillet steak, very rare, you know, barely singed – er *(drums fingers on table)* and a coleslaw salad on the slide. *(He laughs)* Difficult to say that, isn't it? A coleslaw salad on the side. And have you any lobster pâté?

LUIGI: Yes, sir.

RC: Fine – lobster pâté to start with.

LUIGI: *(To RB)* And for you, sir?

RB: I think a fillet steak, very rare, you know, barely singed – er *(drums fingers on table)* and a coleslaw salad on the slide. *(He laughs)* Difficult to say that, isn't it? A coleslaw salad on the *side*. And have you any lobster pâté?

LUIGI: Yes, sir.

RB: Fine – lobster pâté to start with.

(RC stares at RB as the waiter goes. RC lights a cigarette – so does RB. RC takes off his glasses, and sucks at the side piece – so does RB. RC starts to put them on again – so does RB. RC stops – so does RB. Finally, RC settles them on his nose again – so does RB.)

RC: *(clearing his throat)* A-hem!

RB: *(ditto)* A-hem!

RC: *(rather desperate now)* Waiter!

RB: Waiter!

(The waiter arrives.)

RC: Could I have some water?

RB: Could I have some water?

(The waiter goes.)

RC: *(To RB)* It is rather warm, isn't it?

RB: *(To RC)* It *is* rather warm, isn't it?

RC: Nice place, this.

RB: Nice place, this.

RC: Yes.

RB: Yes.

RC: I'm in show business.

RB: I'm in show business.

RC: What do you *do*?

RB: What do you *do*?

RC: I'm a comedian.

RB: I'm an impersonator.



FIND THE LADY

(Frost on Sunday)

A fairly seedy bedroom. Enter RC dressed in top hat and opera cloak with red lining. He dumps a suitcase on the bed.

RC: Come on in, darlin'.

Enter a popsie - a showgirl or dancer, wearing a PVC raincoat.

GIRL: Is it alright?

RC: 'Course it's alright. I told you, the wife's staying at her mother's. By the time she comes back on Tuesday, we'll be at the Theatre Royal, Huddersfield.

GIRL: I wouldn't like anything to happen, Marvo.

RC: Oh, wouldn't you - well, you've come to the wrong place then, darling - it's all going to happen here in the next

twenty-four hours, eh? *(He grabs her)* Come here, let's have a look at you.

GIRL: *(soppily)* Oh, I do love you, Marvo!

RC: Look, don't keep calling me Marvo, darling – that's just for the act, isn't it? I'm not a magician when I'm with you. I'm pretty sensational, but I'm not a magician.

GIRL: I think you're wonderful.

RC: Yes, well never mind that, you get your coat off and that, and I'll get us a drink.

(They disentangle themselves and the girl exits. RC goes to bedside cupboard and gets out bottle of gin and two tumblers. He pours out two drinks, gets out a bottle of tonic, opens it on the side of the table, and puts some into the glasses. He then takes off his cloak and top hat, and drapes them over a chair. The girl enters, wearing a shortie nightie with a short negligée over it.)

RC: (looking up) Blimey, that was quick!

GIRL: *(giggling)* I'm used to quick changes!

RC: Yes, well hop into bed and have a nice drop of gin.

(She takes off negligée and gets into bed. There is a door slam offstage. Panic from both of them.)

RC: Oh gawd!

GIRL: What is it?

RC: The wife – quick.

GIRL: (leaping out of bed) You said she was with her mother!

RC: Get in there! (*indicating built-in wardrobe*) Her mother's probably died or something. Trust her to spoil the weekend. (*He bundles her into the wardrobe, shuts the door and just has time to sit on the bed, when in walks the wife.*)

RC: Hello, dear.

WIFE: Hello, Johnnie.

RC: I thought you were at your mother's.

WIFE: She's not feeling well.

RC: Oh good.

WIFE: What?

RC: I meant good 'cos you've come home.

WIFE: (*sniffing the air*) What's that perfume?

RC: Which perfume is that, dear?

WIFE: The perfume I can smell.

RC: Oh. Oh that perfume would be on the carnation in my buttonhole. Smell it.

(*Wife does so – it squirts water at her.*)

WIFE: Oh, for heaven's sake, don't mess about, Johnnie. Stupid jokes – (*She sees two gin glasses.*) What are these two glasses here?

RC: (*quickly picking them up*) Oh, I was just practising a trick, dear – see? (*He pours one into the other and the liquid changes colour.*) Rather good, isn't it?

WIFE: I suppose so.

(She turns away to remove her coat, and as she does so RC notices the girl's negligée on the floor. He quickly stuffs it down his trousers.)

RC: *(As the wife goes to hang up her coat up in the wardrobe)* No, I'll do that for you, dear. *(Takes coat and stands with it for a moment, then puts it on top of his own on the chair)* I'll hang it up in a minute. No point in hanging it up just yet. You go and make some tea and when you've gone I can while away my time hanging up your coat.

WIFE: You're being very strange. *(Sees bulge in trousers)* What's that bulge in your trousers?

RC: Where? Oh that's another trick. *(He begins to pull out yards and yards of silk flags from his trousers. They go on for ever.)*

WIFE: You're up to something, Johnnie. *(She goes to him and discovers the negligée. Holds it up.)* You've got a woman here! *(She looks under the bed.)*

RC: 'Course I haven't – I use this in the act –

WIFE: You've got a woman here. *(Starts to go to wardrobe.)*

RC: *(grabbing gun from suitcase)* Keep away from that wardrobe.

WIFE: Don't point that stupid toy gun at me!

RC: Alright – I warned you!

(As the wife opens the wardrobe door, RC fires the cap pistol into the air, and a flock of pigeons fly out of the empty wardrobe.)

