

Drink Me

or

The Strange Case of Alice Times Three

By Fengar Gael

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*“Children three that nestle near,
Eager eye and willing ear,
Pleased a simple tale to hear:*

*Long has paled that sunny sky;
Echoes fade and memories die,
Autumn frosts have slain July.*

*Still she haunts me, phantomwise,
Alice moving under skies
Never seen by waking eyes.*

*Children yet, the tale to hear,
Eager eye and willing ear,
Lovingly shall nestle near.*

*In a Wonderland they lie,
Dreaming as the days go by,
Dreaming as the summers die:*

*Ever drifting down the stream,
Lingering in the golden gleam,
Life, what is it but a dream?”*

Lewis Carroll

CHARACTERS

DETECTIVE CHIEF INSPECTOR GORDON FOSSMIRE, mid-thirties

LADY ALICE AUGUSTA GRANVILLE FOSSMIRE, his widowed mother; late fifties

MADLINE COBBLES RIME, an Oxford professor and mother of triplets; early forties

HUGO BRIMLEY RIME, a Cambridge professor and father of triplets; early fifties

EMMALINE RIME, a twenty year old menace

URSELINE RIME, a twenty year old menace

VALENTINE RIME, a twenty year old menace

DOCTOR FLORA WHETSTONE, a psychiatrist; age early thirties

DETECTIVE SERGEANT RUPERT SLATER

THE HIGH PRIESTESS

SUGGESTED DOUBLING

Hugo Brimley Rime / Detective Sergeant Rupert Slater

Madeline Cobbles Rime / Doctor Flora Whetstone / High Priestess

TIME

The present

PLACE

London, England. A gloomy shadow-strewn set evokes a gothic ambience and depicts lecture halls, offices, Gordon Fossmire's bedroom, New Scotland Yard, the Rime sisters' parlor, Regents Park, a ritual chamber, and Lady Augusta's sitting room.

ACT I

PROLOGUE

(A lecture hall where the formidable LADY AUGUSTA stands at a podium and speaks directly to the audience. Her speech is interspersed by the VOICES OF THREE GIRLS singing verses of a nursery rhyme.)

VOICES OF THREE GIRLS

*Over in the meadow,
in the sand in the sun,
Lived an old mother crab
and her little crabby one.*

LADY AUGUSTA

Ladies and gentlemen, we English are famous for cherishing the soil and sun, but today I'm here to tell you we are embarking on a New Dark Age, a Millennium of Misery. The continuing devastation of our resources is being caused by the most profligate of mammals: human beings. We are pillaging the planet of its atmosphere, its oceans and rivers, its rich variety of plant and animal species, and what have we spawned in its stead? What will our children and our children's children receive as their heritage? A barren heath, a ravaged wasteland, a desert of desolation teeming with nothing but creatures like themselves. There are nearly nine billion of us on the planet, with one in four the result of an unwanted pregnancy, and although we Europeans are dwindling in numbers, we will soon be replaced by poor starving wretches from countries in chaos. Already nations in Africa, Asia, and South America experience severe water shortages and spiraling cycles of disease, starvation, and anarchy -- anarchy caused by people! People! Too many people!

VOICES OF THREE GIRLS

*Over in the meadow,
in a hole in a tree,
Lived an old mother crow
and her little birdies three.*

LADY AUGUSTA

Hear me, my friends! We are the guardians of Mother Earth, and it's time we noticed that her capacity to carry us is sorely strained: Her back is bent from the weight of the old; her breasts sag from suckling the poor; and her mind boggles at the consequent burdens to people like us. Do we really want to keep paying their bills? Educating their offspring? Listening to them bitch about their bloody rights? Well, who gave them the bloody right to breed like rabbits?! If they're going to consume all our resources, then they should be willing to become resources themselves! We've all heard of Jonathan

LADY AUGUSTA (cont'd)

Swift and his solution for surplus populations: "Let's eat them," he said, and I say, "Why not?" A healthy infant is the most delicious of delicacies. They can be boiled, broiled and fried; their organs stored for transplants; their blood purged for puddings! Well, I know all about this. You see, I've just eaten my son, Foss, for supper. He was a nasty nipper, over coddled, half-baked, and usually stewed, but ohhh, ladies! He made a lovely little brisket! Ha, ha, ha, ha, ha!

(LADY AUGUSTA laughs hysterically as lights fade.)

VOICES OF THREE GIRLS

*Over in the meadow,
on the moor by the fen,
Lived an old mother toad
and her little toadies ten.
"Eat" said the mother,
"We ate," said the ten;
And they croaked till they choked
on the moor by the fen.*

(Hideous croaks are heard. Blackout.)

SCENE 1

(Morning in a luxuriously furnished bedroom. The croaks fade as GORDON FOSSMIRE awakens from his nightmare. A dashing, disheveled man of thirty-seven, he sits up gasping, relieved to be among the living, then lights a cigarette. On his bedside table is a glass of whiskey. His mother, LADY ALICE AUGUSTA, enters.)

LADY AUGUSTA

Foss! I want you out of bed this instant!

FOSSMIRE

Oh, god.

LADY AUGUSTA

Right now or I'm calling Doctor Hornsby!

FOSSMIRE

Lower your voice!

LADY AUGUSTA

If you don't move about you'll get bedsores,...

FOSSMIRE

Damn.

LADY AUGUSTA

...your muscles will atrophy, and stop smoking! Oh, Fossie, please, tell me what's wrong.

FOSSMIRE

I told you, I'm vexed! I'm on a case and I'm stumped, and you know I do my best thinking in bed.

LADY AUGUSTA

Five days is *not* thinking; it's hiding! From what?!

FOSSMIRE

Nothing.

LADY AUGUSTA

Please, let me help you.

FOSSMIRE

Nothing can help me. Leave me alone.

(LADY AUGUSTA sniffs the glass of whiskey.)

LADY AUGUSTA

Scotch?! It's ten o'clock in the morning! What is it, Foss? What's wrong with you?

FOSSMIRE

What's wrong with me is me. I can't seem to move; I have to crawl to the loo on my knees. My dreams torment me; my heart races; my head swells. It's bloody hell and I'm done for.

LADY AUGUSTA

Have you seen a doctor?

FOSSMIRE

No. I'm not physically ill; I'm spiritually ill; I've been cursed.

LADY AUGUSTA

How? By what? Tell me!

FOSSMIRE

I can't. You're one of them.

LADY AUGUSTA

One of whom?

FOSSMIRE

A woman! You're a woman. It started with a woman. Oh, Gussie, have you ever had an idea take hold in your mind? I mean, something that reeks of evil, something absolutely preposterous, unthinkable, something that goes against everything you've ever believed, and yet it...it settles. *Why* does it settle?

LADY AUGUSTA

Maybe because it's not so preposterous; maybe because it's true.

FOSSMIRE

It can't be.

LADY AUGUSTA

Oh, for heaven's sake, what is it?!

FOSSMIRE

Well... *(pause; he sighs)* It began nearly three months ago. It seems that people have been disappearing, vanishing -- poof!

LADY AUGUSTA

Who? What people?

FOSSMIRE

Men, always men, mostly vagrants, homeless beggars and the like, but they still become part of their communities, and sometimes they're missed. Sometimes someone actually wonders where they've gone and reports it. Well, each week there's more and more reports, ergo fewer vagrants, and people are starting to notice. Most are rejoicing, of course, but where did they go? Many had passports, police records, and some still had families. So here we are: tracing hundreds of missing men, and drawing a blank every time. It's uncanny, absolutely uncanny.

LADY AUGUSTA

So you think it's some sort of serial murderer?

FOSSMIRE

Yes, but there's no corpus delicti -- not a single solitary one. It's as if they marched off the face of the earth.

LADY AUGUSTA

Or into a mass grave.

FOSSMIRE

But where? And why?!

LADY AUGUSTA

Some hideous scheme, some neo-Nazi fanatic trying to thin out the undesirables.

FOSSMIRE

It's more than one, it has to be. Last week we planted one of our agents outside Liverpool Station. He befriended several of the chaps, and last Friday the whole lot of them disappeared -- like so many crumbs off the carpet. We've started placing notices in the Times and Telegraph, some with photographs, and last Thursday this woman came in...

(Lights reveal an office at New Scotland Yard where MADELINE COBBLES RIME, a smartly dressed woman in her mid-forties, stands holding a briefcase.)

FOSSMIRE

Madeline Cobbles Rime. She struck me as well educated, a woman of refined taste and sensibilities.

(FOSSMIRE leaps out of bed, slips off his robe, and is dressed in a suit to join MADELINE.)

FOSSMIRE

How do you do? I'm Detective Chief Inspector Fossmire. May I offer you some coffee? Tea?

MADELINE RIME

No thank you.

FOSSMIRE

Do you mind if I record our conversation?

MADELINE RIME

I'd rather you didn't.

FOSSMIRE

Yes, well then. I understand you're here to report the whereabouts of our missing indigents.

MADELINE RIME

No, not exactly. I should begin by telling you that I've been here before. I once reported an abduction.

FOSSMIRE

Abduction...?

MADELINE RIME

You see, Chief Inspector, I'm an anthropologist. Twenty years ago I wrote a dissertation on witchcraft. My research required attendance at a coven meeting in Sudbury where I was drugged, driven to a cottage, and raped. Nine months later I gave birth to triplets: all girls.

FOSSMIRE

Good lord.

MADELINE RIME

I didn't realize what had happened until they were ten years old. That's when I made my report.

FOSSMIRE

Ten years *after* the incident...?

MADELINE RIME

My psychiatrist put me under hypnosis; that's when I dredged up my memories.

FOSSMIRE

Ah.

MADELINE RIME

You see, my husband, Hugh, and I had been trying to conceive for several years, so when I became pregnant we thought the fertility drugs had finally taken effect. It's all documented. (*withdrawing a folder from her briefcase*) This contains copies of their records and signed statements from the attending physicians.

FOSSMIRE

Yes, I see.

MADELINE RIME

What the records don't say is that they're not human.

FOSSMIRE

Not one of us, eh?

MADLINE RIME

They're half-demons, part devils, the result of ritual impregnation. Oh, they appear human, and their blood tests indicate they're human, but believe me, Chief Inspector, they're not.

FOSSMIRE

And just how did you determine this?

MADLINE RIME

Do you have children?

FOSSMIRE

No.

MADLINE RIME

Well, if you did, you'd notice certain characteristics that remind you of yourself or your wife. I suspected early on that they weren't really ours, but it was more a feeling than any sort of rational deduction, and I felt so callous for wanting to...to escape them, so I worked incessantly. As did Hugh.

FOSSMIRE

At what may I ask?

MADLINE RIME

We're both professors. I'm at Oxford and Hugh's at Cambridge, so we employed nannies. In fact, it wasn't until they were learning to speak that we were certain something was... peculiar. You see, Hugh teaches 17th century literature, and he started reading plays to the girls when they were toddlers. They were quite taken with them, enthralled really, so enthralled they adopted the language as their own. At first we thought it was quaint and amusing, but then...well, they refused to learn modern English.

FOSSMIRE

So they actually speak this...archaic English?

MADLINE RIME

Yes, despite scores of private tutors and speech therapists.

FOSSMIRE

They must be very...isolated.

MADLINE RIME

They had to be educated at home. They're extremely intelligent and didn't seem to need much mothering, which made me despondent. That's when I became a patient of Doctor

MADLINE RIME (cont'd)

Whetstone's and found out about the abduction. Hugh's never believed me, and finally he...left.

FOSSMIRE

Well, this is all very provocative, Professor Rime, but how does it pertain to our missing indigents?

(MADLINE opens her purse, retrieving a small pouch.)

MADLINE RIME

Here. I have some buttons.

FOSSMIRE

Buttons...?

MADLINE RIME

You see, the last time I paid a visit, there were four unsavory tramps perched on kitchen stools eating sheperd's pie. The girls said they were giving them a good supper then sending them back to the streets. I took them aside and told them it was charitable but dangerous, and the stench was appalling. Emmaline ignored me, and started snipping all the buttons off their coats. Then Urseline tossed them into an enormous chest full to the brim -- with thousands of buttons. That was three weeks ago, and I'd forgotten the incident until I read the article in the Times.

FOSSMIRE

So you think these buttons came from our missing men?

MADLINE RIME

Well, I can only vouch for the ones I saw.

FOSSMIRE

Forgive me, Professor, but are you suggesting that three young women are abducting and dispatching people they don't even know?

MADLINE RIME

Look, Chief Inspector, I know what you're thinking, and I'm sure you and your sergeants will have a jolly good laugh when I leave, but I had hoped you'd at least want to trace them -- the buttons -- which is why I picked the unusual ones.

FOSSMIRE

Tell me, why do you visit the girls at all -- feeling as you do?

MADLINE RIME

Well, I...I'm not indifferent to them, and they...they've given me a key.

FOSSMIRE

Where do they live?

MADLINE RIME

In the West End, in Belgravia.

FOSSMIRE

What do they do to support themselves?

MADLINE RIME

They invest in the stock exchange.

FOSSMIRE

What's their flat like?

MADLINE RIME

Oh, it's hardly a "flat". It's a magnificent Victorian on Belgrave Square, though it's gloomy inside except for the glowing computer screens.

FOSSMIRE

What about your husband? If I decide to confirm your statement, I'll need his address. I'll also need the girls' address and photographs.

MADLINE RIME

It's all in the folder.

(As MADLINE pulls out three photographs, lights reveal the RIME SISTERS. They are striking creatures, dressed in black, with luxuriant hair, pale skin, and crimson lips.)

MADLINE RIME

The first was Emmaline, followed by Urseline, then Valentine. Their births were traumatic and when they finally arrived, they had tails and were so jaundiced that Hugh called them "The Mustard Pots".

FOSSMIRE

Tails...?

(Instantly, the SISTERS burst into song.)

EMMALINE, VALENTINE, URSELINE

Whose little pigs are these, these, these?

Whose little pigs are these?

They're Roger the cook's,

I know by their looks,

I found them among my peas!

(Blackout.)

SCENE 2

(FOSSMIRE is seated in an office at Cambridge speaking with PROFESSOR HUGH BRIMLEY RIME.)

HUGH RIME

They weren't tails! Just tiny caudal appendages, and naturally we had them removed. But really, Chief Inspector, you're wasting your time, and I have a tutorial in five minutes.

FOSSMIRE

Could you tell me when you and your wife separated?

HUGH RIME

About ten years ago -- it was either that or follow her to bedlam.

FOSSMIRE

So you think she's...?

HUGH RIME

Absolutely! My daughters are brilliant girls, talented financiers, but completely asocial and hinged at the hips.

FOSSMIRE

Tell me more about their births.

HUGH RIME

When I first saw them -- all yellow with their slanted eyes -- I thought we'd given birth to a trio of mongoloid aliens. But believe me, Chief Inspector, they're no less human than you or I -- that's just Maddy's way of avoiding responsibility.

FOSSMIRE

So the abduction is a deliberate fabrication?

HUGH RIME

Oh, no, she really believes it -- she and that doctor of hers. My own doctor says it's an archetypal transformation, a subconscious defense that absolves her from this mad world and the daughters she set loose in it. But Maddy's felt guilty from day one when she didn't have enough milk to go round -- though I rather enjoyed the bottle feedings. Do you have children?

FOSSMIRE

No. Now about this language of theirs...

HUGH RIME

It's the language of drama from the mid-sixteenth century to the mid-seventeenth. It's the language of Shakespeare, Johnson, Marston, Middleton, and it's studded with obscure words and phrases that sound ludicrous today, but I find quite captivating, so naturally I marveled that my daughters could speak it so fluently -- until later when they vulgarized it beyond recognition.

FOSSMIRE

When was the last time you saw them?

HUGH RIME

Two years ago at Christmas. Maddy organized a family reunion in their home. It was pleasant enough -- if you don't mind the frequent retreats to their nest of computers. Still, they managed to serve a marvelous dinner complete with a flaming pudding.

FOSSMIRE

I hear they're quite adept at investing.

HUGH RIME

"Adept" is hardly the word. Without showing their faces to the world, they've amassed a bloody fortune.

FOSSMIRE

What's their home like?

HUGH RIME

Quite opulent, except that everything's blue.

FOSSMIRE

What about boy friends?

HUGH RIME

They never seemed to want or need friends of either sex, but they wouldn't be interested in boys very much.

FOSSMIRE

And why is that?

HUGH RIME

They've been indoctrinated -- with esoteric theologies. You see, Maddy's pet subject is goddess religions, so to her the common enemy is patriarchal religions. She's respected in her field, mind you. Last year The Guardian featured a four page profile on her.

FOSSMIRE

Tell me, is she a witch herself?

HUGH RIME

You can't study witchcraft without joining a few covens and mystery groups -- that's what they call themselves. It's all nonsense if you ask me, but the girls loved it. When Maddy was writing a text on the ancient divinities, they were always coaxing her to tell stories of the goddesses. They even made little altars, and burned incense.

FOSSMIRE

Were they ever hostile toward you?

HUGH RIME

No. They just didn't want much to do with me.

FOSSMIRE

And why was that?

HUGH RIME

Because Madeline forbade my reading of any more plays until they agreed to speak proper English. We were never as close after that.

FOSSMIRE

So tell me, Professor, can you think of any possible motive they might have for amassing so many buttons?

HUGH RIME

Buttons...?

FOSSMIRE

Are they still worshipping their goddesses? Could they be collecting things to sacrifice at their altars? You know, goose feathers, crockery and...buttons?

HUGH RIME

I've no idea.

FOSSMIRE

Well, was there anything else that struck their fancy? Any hobbies or sports?

HUGH RIME

They loved to sing -- all the songs of the nursery, you know, "London Bridge" and so forth. It was quite delightful when they were toddlers.

FOSSMIRE

But girls do grow up, don't they?

HUGH RIME

I suppose. *(pause)* That Christmas, when they were huddled together with their six arms and legs, Madeline said they looked like a freakish spider spinning its web. Not a pleasant thing to say about one's own daughters.

FOSSMIRE

But did they -- look like a spider?

HUGH RIME

Well...

(Lights reveal the THREE SISTERS singing while creating a spider from their limbs.)

EMMALINE, VALENTINE, URSELINE

*The eency weency spider
Went up the water spout;
Down came the rain
And washed the spider out;
Out came the sun
And dried up all the rain;
Then the eency weency spider
Went up the spout again.*

(Blackout.)

SCENE 3

(DOCTOR FLORA WHETSTONE, an attractive psychiatrist of thirty-five, is seated in her office, speaking to FOSSMIRE.)

FOSSMIRE

I'm curious about the alleged abduction.

DOCTOR WHETSTONE

First of all, it's not "alleged". It's real.

FOSSMIRE

To her.

DOCTOR WHETSTONE

To both of us. And I have other patients who've experienced similar incidents.

FOSSMIRE

Ah. Then is witchcraft a specialty of yours?

DOCTOR WHETSTONE

Let's just say I'm sympathetic.

FOSSMIRE

Are you also an advocate of astrology, crystals, and New Age curatives?

DOCTOR WHETSTONE

No, but I believe my patients.

FOSSMIRE

So you didn't find her story incredible?

DOCTOR WHETSTONE

Of course it's incredible -- even she didn't believe it. But her testimony under hypnosis was undeniably genuine.

FOSSMIRE

Have you examined the daughters?

DOCTOR WHETSTONE

I only met them once. They were children at the time, but already quite unique. Surely you agree.

FOSSMIRE

I'm afraid I haven't had the pleasure.

DOCTOR WHETSTONE

They appeared normal except for their language, but inventing a language to express themselves could be a necessary step toward healing their own trauma. I was quite eager to analyze them -- for a thesis for publication -- but Hugh declined permission, and frankly, I was devastated.

FOSSMIRE

Really?

DOCTOR WHETSTONE

Multiple birth children have the closest of all human relationships -- closer than husband and wife or mother and child, and hardly anyone's studied the bond between sisters.

FOSSMIRE

And why is that?

DOCTOR WHETSTONE

In male dominated societies sisters tend to be trivialized, and there's a genuine fear of women in groups, of their power. Sisters are uniquely close, and most end up completely dissimilar, but twins and triplets have to struggle for their individuality. And what about you, Chief Inspector? Do you have any siblings?

FOSSMIRE

My parents thought one new Fossmire was ample.

DOCTOR WHETSTONE

Any children of your own...?

FOSSMIRE

No! Now about the girls -- could you be more specific? What were they like?

DOCTOR WHETSTONE

Fearless, yet completely interdependent. Most children go through phases of identifying indiscriminately with either parent, but they identified with each other. They formed an exclusive little club and their own mother wasn't given the password -- which broke her spirit.

FOSSMIRE

And explains why she might think they're demons.

DOCTOR WHETSTONE

Madeline wanted nothing more than to love her daughters. That she couldn't caused her terrible suffering -- until she found out about the abduction.

FOSSMIRE

Sorry, Doctor, I'm a skeptic, much too earthbound for satanic impregnations, but perhaps you can tell me why three young women would want anything to do with downtrodden indigents, most of whom are certifiably insane?

DOCTOR WHETSTONE

I can't even speculate on that.

FOSSMIRE

Did Madeline mention the buttons?

DOCTOR WHETSTONE

Yes, but people collect all sorts of things for countless reasons. The buttons might have been bought at jumble sales or pinched from the rubbish.

FOSSMIRE

Not this button. (*retrieving a brassy button from his pocket*) It's rather distinctive, don't you think? I was going to let the whole business slide, but couldn't resist shuffling through the lot, and when I found this hog's head, I had my detectives trace it -- to a seamstress at the National Theatre. It seems it belonged on a cape she'd given to a homeless musician, a chap named Horace Craggins. He's disappeared, but used to play his violin outside the entrance. It's not much, but it's the only lead we've got. Nothing else has surfaced, not a single credible clue to the whereabouts of five hundred and sixty-two missing persons.

DOCTOR WHETSTONE

My god.

FOSSMIRE

All of them indigents, and all of them men. I'd appreciate your discretion, doctor.

DOCTOR WHETSTONE

Of course, but surely you don't think...?

FOSSMIRE

I don't know what to think. Is Professor Rime still your patient?

DOCTOR WHETSTONE

No. She was one of my first and I liked her very much, but it's the sisters I pity -- their isolation and loneliness. They seem to have the disease for which there's no cure.

FOSSMIRE

And which disease is that?

DOCTOR WHETSTONE

Detachment: the plague of the future.

FOSSMIRE

But if you come into the world in triplicate, perhaps you don't need anyone else.

DOCTOR WHETSTONE

We all need each other, Chief Inspector, and if you ever need me -- to help with the case -- I'd be happy to oblige.

(Lights fade as the RIME SISTERS are heard singing.)

VOICES OF EMMALINE, VALENTINE, URSELINE

*Boys and girls come out to play,
The moon doth shine as bright as day;
Leave your supper and leave your sleep,
And join your playfellows in the street.*

(Blackout.)

SCENE 4

(The Rime sisters' parlor furnished in varying shades of blue. EMMALINE RIME sits demurely on the sofa reading a scroll of computerized graphs. The doorbell rings and EMMALINE responds, greeting FOSSMIRE with a curtsy as HE displays his official identification.)

EMMALINE

The best of welcome, sir. How may I attend thee?

FOSSMIRE

How do you do? I'm Detective Chief Inspector Fossmire. I wonder if I might have a moment of your time? *(pause)* Perhaps I could step inside?

EMMALINE

Faith, sir, forgive me; I pray you not think me poorly bred.

FOSSMIRE

No, heavens, no. I'll sit here, if you don't mind, Miss...?

EMMALINE

Rime. Emmaline Rime.

FOSSMIRE

Surely you don't live in this big house by yourself.

EMMALINE

Nay, sir, my sisters have gone to market.

FOSSMIRE

Well, your home is certainly very...blue.

EMMALINE

Aye, your lordship, 'tis a great bliss and burden, but we forebear best in blue.

FOSSMIRE

Ha! That's the first time anyone's ever called me "your lordship" though my mother's a genuine lady, the daughter of an earl. I must say, you certainly have an antiquated way of expressing yourself.

EMMALINE

Aye, we sisters have forsworn the speech of our kinsmen, and this be the tongue we willfully wag.

FOSSMIRE

Well, I find it very...quaint. Your youthful appearance suggests a thoroughly modern woman.

EMMALINE

Troth, by heaven, I'm as old as I am young!

FOSSMIRE

Really? How do you mean?

EMMALINE

I'm wise, but oftimes witless too.

FOSSMIRE

Well, aren't we all?

EMMALINE

Please, sir, willst thou state thy business so I might pursue my own.

FOSSMIRE

Of course. I have a photograph here of a man who's gone missing. We're asking the local residents if they've seen him.

EMMALINE

Faith, he is not of my acquaintance.

(Giggling sounds are heard as VALENTINE and URSELINE enter, carrying bundles of groceries.)

EMMALINE

O' sisters, sisters, the most piteous misfortune! A man hath vanished from our streets.

VALENTINE

Oh, horrors!

URSELINE

Oh, horrors!

EMMALINE

May I present my sisters: Valentine and Urseline, maids of much modesty and charm.

FOSSMIRE

My pleasure, ladies. I'm Detective Chief Inspector Fossmire. My goodness, you're all such...pretty girls.

VALENTINE

We use possets for plumping the breasts,...

URSELINE

...sleeking the cheeks,...

URSELINE

...and blanching the teeth.

VALENTINE

And blanching the teeth!

URSELINE

Lest we grow pruned and puckered as old trot's tit!

FOSSMIRE

Ah, well. (*presenting the photograph*) Now, here's our missing man. His name is Horace Craggins. He's a beggar and quite innocuous, but we're afraid he might have come to some harm.

URSELINE

'Tis a base face, like a curst dog let loose at midnight.

VALENTINE

Such men dwell as doth the beetle on a dung heap.

FOSSMIRE

You're certainly being very hard on the poor fellow, but I do have something that belonged to him.

(FOSSMIRE reaches into his pocket and brings forth the hog's head button.)

VALENTINE

Pon my soul!

URSELINE

I fancy that button!

EMMALINE

Your Mister Craggins was no ordinary beast.

FOSSMIRE

No, indeed. He was a violinist, and before that a butcher in Brighton. It seems he had a cycling accident from which he never quite recovered.

EMMALINE

Who brought thee to us? Shall we venture shrewd conjectures?

URSELINE

A kinswoman of middling age with tresses o' tainted henna!

FOSSMIRE

As a matter of fact, yes. Three days ago, a woman brought this button to New Scotland Yard. She said it came from this very house.

VALENTINE

Fie! 'Tis our melancholy mum!

URSELINE

'Twas wicked of her to pilfer from our pyre!

EMMALINE

Didst mumsy dare defame us? Call us foul fiends of nature, though troth, I am brain mad.

VALENTINE

I am heart mad.

URSELINE

And I am horn-mad!

EMMALINE, URSELINE, VALENTINE

(Laugh!)

FOSSMIRE

Well, mothers do tend to worry. They don't approve of their daughters inviting vagrants home to supper. They think it's imprudent, and I dare say they're right.

EMMALINE

'Tis a wee lapse in a lawful life -- for we are chary chicks who dwelleth in seclusion.

URSELINE

Aye, in nobody's books or bonds.

FOSSMIRE

Ah, so you're independent, self-reliant. Well, that's certainly commendable, yes indeed. Now about this button: your mother claims she found it in a large chest, and wondered if it might belong to one of our lost indigents. Perhaps you're unaware that London is experiencing an epidemic of missing men -- very like the fellows you've been having to supper.

URSELINE

Baseborn rogues sniffing the pavement for crumbs. Troth, 'tis shameless but we fatten a few, 'tis true.

VALENTINE

Scraps for the chaps, but 'tis only pottage and only on the Sabbath.

FOSSMIRE

Do these "chaps" have names?

URSELINE

Aye, but none we've heard spoken.

FOSSMIRE

Well, where do you find them?

URSELINE

Hither and yon.

FOSSMIRE

Do you know where they go when they leave here?

EMMALINE

From wither they came.

FOSSMIRE

Can you be more specific?

EMMALINE

In the underground, 'twixt Whitechapel and Notting Hill Gate.

FOSSMIRE

When you remove their buttons, do you provide them with new ones?

VALENTINE

Aye, hooks and clasps on greatcoats to match their breeches.

FOSSMIRE

What do you do with the buttons?

URSELINE

We forge a pyre to Circe.

VALENTINE

Mistress of the Wild Things.

FOSSMIRE

Ah, yes, she's Greek, isn't she?

EMMALINE

Our tribal mother, nymph and sylph,...

EMMALINE
...river and echo.

VALENTINE
River and echo.

URSELINE
River and echo!

FOSSMIRE
Well, then, you're modern pagans. Are you part of a cult? A coven?

EMMALINE
None but our own. Art thou a good Christian?

FOSSMIRE
Well, no, I...I'm not religious.

URSELINE
How now? A heretic! Dost thou believe in nothing?

FOSSMIRE
I believe in doubt, in questioning, and in staying clear of people who believe too strongly in anything.

URSELINE
Posh! 'Tis a middling piddling way.

FOSSMIRE
Perhaps, but I'm not here to discuss my spiritual life. I need to know everything you remember about the men you've brought here, and precisely where, when, and how you acquired this particular button as it might lead to the whereabouts of Mister Craggins. And if you don't mind, I'd like to see the rest of the buttons -- in the chest.

URSELINE
Nay, nay! T'would offend our Mistress!

VALENTINE
A pyre is as private as a privy.

FOSSMIRE
I don't mean to offend, but I do have a search warrant.

EMMALINE
O', villain, thou hast wronged us with suspicions!

URSELINE
Faith, sisters, he lieth like a snake 'neath a stone, feigning ignorance whilst knowing mumsy.

FOSSMIRE

Please, ladies, this is a very serious business. Now please show me where you keep the buttons.

VALENTINE

In yonder chamber, behind that bolted door.

EMMALINE

By my troth, the key is lost!

VALENTINE and URSELINE

Horrors!

FOSSMIRE

Please, open it.

EMMALINE, VALENTINE, URSELINE

Nay!

FOSSMIRE

You do realize I can have you arrested for obstructing an investigation!

URSELINE

Impudent wretch! Banish him from the house!

(EMMALINE gestures for URSELINE to restrain herself as FOSSMIRE attempts to open the door.)

EMMALINE

Cold frost, he is obstinate!

FOSSMIRE

I'm going, ladies, but I'll be back -- with a locksmith and warrants for your arrest!

VALENTINE

O' leave us, leave us!

URSELINE

A pox on your pecker, sir!

EMMALINE

Shush, Urseline! Come, good sisters, show some civilities.

(EMMALINE signals for the SISTERS to curtsy, then offers her hand to FOSSMIRE.)

EMMALINE

Good day, your lordship.

(FOSSMIRE unthinkingly grasps Emmaline's hand.)

FOSSMIRE

Ahhhhhhhh!!!

(Stricken with pain, FOSSMIRE screams, retracts his hand, and backs away as EMMALINE sings.)

EMMALINE

Oh, where, oh, where has my little dog gone?

URSELINE, VALENTINE, EMMALINE

Oh, where, oh, where can he be?

With his ears cut short

And his tail cut long,

Oh, where, oh, where can he be?

(Blackout.)

SCENE 5

(FOSSMIRE has donned his robe, returned to bed, and continues conversing with LADY AUGUSTA.)

FOSSMIRE

They're the triplets from hell!

LADY AUGUSTA

Yes, dear, now relax, try taking deep breaths.

FOSSMIRE

I think I've seen evil.

LADY AUGUSTA

You should never have gone there alone.

FOSSMIRE

I despise and abhor their very names -- such innocent ladylike names, but they're *not* innocent, there's nothing innocent about them -- especially their laugh. It's false and flutey, at a pitch that could splinter your spine. What do you suppose they're doing at this very moment? Who are they killing and how? Poison probably, hemlock in the pottage. Pottage! They'll take out the whole of London with their damn pottage!

LADY AUGUSTA

Really, Foss, calm yourself.

FOSSMIRE

You've no idea what's happening, Gussie. At the Yard there's a chart of the missing men, and every day we watch with ghoulish fascination as the numbers climb up, up, up! It's pathetic, because people have the decency to report the fellows missing, but no one's pressing us to actually find them.

LADY AUGUSTA

Well, if these men are the sort you say they are, then they've already disappeared -- from decent society. They've been living on the margins and have simply left the page.

FOSSMIRE

Even their families don't want them, poor buggers. It makes me think of Hitler and his war of eugenics, but this war's being waged on the homeless, the hapless.

LADY AUGUSTA

Aren't all wars a form of eugenics? They clear the population of the least productive, least promising young men before they wreak havoc at home.

FOSSMIRE

I wish you wouldn't say such things. It frightens me, Gussie, it really does.

LADY AUGUSTA

Why? We all know the males of our species have hormonal levels far exceeding their evolutionary usefulness. Women are far less toxic to society -- if only they weren't so keen to reproduce.

FOSSMIRE

You're such a brute, Gussie, you and your Zero Pop Party. You're just like old Scrooge who wants everyone who isn't useful to check out of the game. Well, everyone living has a right to their lives -- every wog, rogue, and rotter. They didn't ask to be born; I didn't ask to be born. Suppose someone wanted to declare me unfit and unworthy? Should I sacrifice myself for the space I'd leave in my absence? All the scotch I wouldn't drink, the kippers I wouldn't eat...

LADY AUGUSTA

The grief you wouldn't give your mother! Oh, shush, Foss! You're really most annoying! I'm sure you're giving me heartburn.

(FOSSMIRE groans, grasping his chest.)

LADY AUGUSTA

What's wrong, Foss? What is it?!

FOSSMIRE

Oh, Christ, they've done something to me, I know it!

LADY AUGUSTA

Who? Who's done what?

FOSSMIRE

Those harpies! When I left, the one called Emmaline clasped my hand. It was repulsive -- like touching slime. Then I felt a tingling and sparks crackling through my veins. I'm sure she tried to electrocute me, but *how* for godssake?!

LADY AUGUSTA

Electrocute you...?

FOSSMIRE

I'm probably rabid, frothing at the mouth, and every time my foot touches ground, my heart beats the band! Oh, Gussie, what if I'm having some sort of breakdown? I can't spend the rest of my life supine, and I can't let three loonies be the ruin of me. I'll continue the investigation from here if I have to.

LADY AUGUSTA

I think I'd like to meet them -- the girls.

FOSSMIRE

Please tell me you didn't just say that. They could be murderers, for godssake! At the very least they're odious misfits, and nothing like real girls -- women really -- and certainly nothing like the women you know.

LADY AUGUSTA

You mean they're not refined and restrained.

FOSSMIRE

They're pit bulls with breasts! Their own mother doesn't claim them.

LADY AUGUSTA

Well, at least they're independent; they have their own home, their own language...

FOSSMIRE

Their own bats in the belfry! Good Lord, you sound like you admire them!

LADY AUGUSTA

Only that they live on their own terms, with elements of the past and the future...

FOSSMIRE

The future?! They live in a crypt! The place reeks of death. It's obscene and tawdry, and I'm sure I saw mold on the carpet.

LADY AUGUSTA

But imagine having two other people like yourself. It could make you seem larger than you really are, capable of bigger and better things.

FOSSMIRE

Bigger and better mischief!

LADY AUGUSTA

Yes, I suppose, but, well, Foss, I...I have a little secret. I never even told your father, but when I was a child, I pretended there were three more of me.

FOSSMIRE

You? Tripled?

LADY AUGUSTA

Alice times three plus me, so that's four actually. We played in the woods, beyond the boundaries of the estate -- that's how we escaped Nanny and my brothers. We were very fetching, and all the birds and squirrels invited us to tea. Oh, I know it's typical for children to have imaginary playmates, but mine were very vivid, very special.

FOSSMIRE

So was it traumatic when you knocked them off?

LADY AUGUSTA

I didn't actually. I just left them in the woods one day.

FOSSMIRE

That wasn't very sporting.

LADY AUGUSTA

It's good to see you smiling again.

FOSSMIRE

No, that's my teeth chattering. Look, Gussie, are they coming loose? There's a taste -- like copper and sardines -- and I think I'm feverish. Feel my forehead.

LADY AUGUSTA

You do seem warm.

FOSSMIRE

I wonder if I should ring that Doctor Whetstone? Perhaps she'll drop in and prescribe something.

LADY AUGUSTA

Listen, Foss: I'm going to help you cross the room. Then we'll draw a nice hot bath...

FOSSMIRE

No, no, it's hopeless; the room's reeling. Now, please, Gussie, call Doctor Whetstone. Her number's in my appointment book on my desk. Then go away and leave me in peace. I'm dead tired.

LADY AUGUSTA

You're dead drunk!

(LADY AUGUSTA departs as FOSSMIRE falls into a deep slumber, and lights fade to black.)

SCENE 6

(A clock chimes three times as shimmering lights reveal EMMALINE, VALENTINE, and URSELINE creeping onto Fossmire's bed, snuggling next to him.)

EMMALINE, URSELINE, VALENTINE

*Hush-a-bye, baby,
on the tree top;
When the wind blows,
the cradle will rock;
When the bough breaks,
the cradle will fall;
And down will come baby,
cradle and all.*

(FOSSMIRE awakens and sits bolt upright!)

FOSSMIRE

Ahhhhhhh!

EMMALINE, URSELINE, VALENTINE

Greetings, your worship.

FOSSMIRE

Get out! Out of my bed!!!

VALENTINE

He reeks of the drivels.

FOSSMIRE

How...?! How did you get here?

URSELINE

Through the hairline crack of a dream.

FOSSMIRE

Owwwww, my...my heart...

EMMALINE

Sisters! Hold fast his arms!

(URSELINE and VALENTINE pin Fossmire's arms as EMMALINE places one hand on his forehead, the other on his breast.)

EMMALINE

His brain's aflame, and his heart held fast in the jaws of an asp.

FOSSMIRE

What...? What asp?! What are you doing?! Why are you torturing me?!

URSELINE

O' fie! We've come to fettle thy fidgets!

EMMALINE

Drink this potion! 'Twill banish the scourge!

(EMMALINE forces a potion down Fossmire's throat.)

FOSSMIRE

You! You're the scourge! The scourge of over six hundred men! Where are they? What have you done to them?

URSELINE

Slit their gullets and pitched them in the Thames.

VALENTINE

Hung them in the gallows -- hoisted and cracked.

URSELINE

Poisoned them with oleander, fatal flower 'o mercy.

FOSSMIRE

Where are the bodies?! Where are they buried?!

VALENTINE

Down,...

EMMALINE

...down,...

URSELINE

...down the rabbit hole!

VALENTINE

Faith, if it's bodies ye crave, the cobbles o' London are aswarm with multitudes.

URSELINE

Thick as maggots on a tor o' turds! 'Tis time for weeding the wretches.

FOSSMIRE

Is that it then? You're thinning out the masses? Oh, Gussie will love this.

EMMALINE

"Gussie?" (*to her sisters*) Doth he mean the Lady Augusta who dwelleth 'neath this gabled roof?

FOSSMIRE

What?! You...you know her?

URSELINE

Troth! She's writ of oft enough!

EMMALINE

She governs a cause we follow with fervor.

FOSSMIRE

Oh, lord, tell me I'm not awake, tell me they're not real.

EMMALINE

Faith, sir, we are as real as thyself.

FOSSMIRE

Are you? Then tomorrow you're going to have your real door broken down, and I'll upturn every inch of the premises till I find the real bodies of real men!

EMMALINE

O' posh and tosh!

URSELINE

By my bum, he's all ablush.

VALENTINE

Doth he find us as bewitching as we find him?

FOSSMIRE

No he "doth" not! He finds you odious and repellent! Now bugger off!

URSELINE

Then why is thy manhood stiff as a poker?

(The SISTERS laugh, pouncing on FOSSMIRE.)

FOSSMIRE

Stop that! Get off me! No, noooo, ohhhhhhh...

(The SISTERS ravish FOSSMIRE till he climaxes then faints.)

EMMALINE

Sleep well, fearless Foss. Anon thou willst sail the River of Dreams to the moorings of the morrow.

(The SISTERS sit atop FOSSMIRE as if he were a boat, then row with invisible oars, singing a round.)

EMMALINE, URSELINE, VALENTINE

*Row, row, row your boat,
Gently down the stream,
Merrily, merrily, merrily, merrily,
Life is but a dream.*

(Blackout.)

SCENE 7

(The next morning. FOSSMIRE sleeps, attended by LADY AUGUSTA and DOCTOR WHETSTONE.)

LADY AUGUSTA

Is Foss in a coma?

DOCTOR WHETSTONE

(wielding a syringe) More of a mild stupor. I'm giving him a B complex injection. Be sure he drinks fluids, and here are some tranquilizers in case he should need them.

LADY AUGUSTA

Do you happen to have anything for dyspepsia? I'm afraid all this excitement has wreaked havoc with my digestion.

DOCTOR WHETSTONE

No, I'm afraid not, and you really should ring his regular physician.

LADY AUGUSTA

I would have, but Foss insisted I call you. Now that you're here, I can see why. Would you care for some tea?

DOCTOR WHETSTONE

No thank you. I really should be going.

LADY AUGUSTA

What are you doing next Friday? Sir Sidney Rubble's giving a lecture for the ZPP, the Zero Population Party. Oh, please stay -- just a bit longer. Let me give you one of our pamphlets. *(handing her a pamphlet)* That's Sir Sidney with some tribesmen from Ghana. Look at the poor dears: still living in the Stone Age, still tilling their tiny plots, frantically feeding offspring who will never hold a fork much less read the menu. Since wars and viruses have failed to control the population, the ZPP is building clinics all over the world. *(indicating another photo)* Here, you see, we've just financed a laboratory in Sidney where they're working on vaccines to sterilize everyone incapable of rearing a child. Do you have any?

DOCTOR WHETSTONE

Children...? No. My husband died two years ago, and we...well, we were hoping to have a family.

LADY AUGUSTA

Oh, dear, I'm so sorry. Well, motherhood can be a great adventure -- or a life sentence.

DOCTOR WHETSTONE

My sister, Fiona, has a son and absolutely adores him. He's the joy of her life -- and her husband's too.

LADY AUGUSTA

How lovely, and I do hope their feelings won't change if he grows up to disappoint them.

DOCTOR WHETSTONE

Did your's disappoint you?

LADY AUGUSTA

(selecting a photograph from a side table) That's young Foss -- first in his class at Eton. Now he's a detective and it's a sordid business, dealing with the very worst sort of people, though I must say his cases make for scintillating conversations. These girls for instance -- imagine being tripled. I was just telling Foss about my own triplets, my imaginary Alices.

DOCTOR WHETSTONE

They were all named "Alice"?

LADY AUGUSTA

After me. You see, I'm Lady "Alice" Augusta. The Alice was for Alice Liddell, the original Alice in Wonderland and a friend of my Great Aunt Augusta. Of course, *my* Alices were silly girls, pranksters. They had a secret lair in the forest, a bottomless pit where they tossed stray cats, rats, and any creatures who crossed them.

DOCTOR WHETSTONE

So even as a child you were solving the population problem.

LADY AUGUSTA

Oh, yes, we were ghastly girls. We hated everyone.

DOCTOR WHETSTONE

Your childhood wasn't a happy one?

LADY AUGUSTA

I had twin brothers. When they were seventeen, they went on safari with my Uncle Godfrey, and one of the guides -- a Dutchman from Durban -- got rip roaring drunk and shot the whole lot of them.

FOSSMIRE

(groaning) Uhhhhhhhhh...

LADY AUGUSTA

Oh, he's rallying! Hello, Fossie, wake up! Welcome home!

FOSSMIRE

Oh,...oh, god, my...my head's throbbing.

LADY AUGUSTA

Your Doctor Whetstone's here, dear. We've had a very nice chat.

DOCTOR WHETSTONE

Can you sit up? *(pause)* Good. Do you think you can walk? Here, let me help.

(FOSSMIRE slips cautiously out of bed.)

FOSSMIRE

The palpitations seem to be... Yes, they're...they're gone! Look, look, I can walk! Oh, thank god, thank heaven! I'm better, I'm really better. They came last night and cured me. They said I was cured and I am!

LADY AUGUSTA

Who came?

FOSSMIRE

The sisters, they... oh, lord, listen to me! It must have been a...a dream, obviously, just a dream.

DOCTOR WHETSTONE

Well, apparently it was a curative one.

FOSSMIRE

Christ, it's good to be grounded again, and I actually have an appetite. Gussie, would you be an angel and bring us some tea?

LADY AUGUSTA

Of course, dear.

(LADY AUGUSTA departs.)

DOCTOR WHETSTONE

I really think you should sit awhile. You might have some vertigo.

FOSSMIRE

Oh, but it feels so wonderful to stand! And I must thank you for coming to my rescue.

DOCTOR WHETSTONE

No trouble, though I've done nothing, really.

FOSSMIRE

Not so, your very presence is a bridge to the world. And please forgive my appearance. I must look a sight. *(pause, smiling)* So did Gussie convince you we're balmy? Well, we are, especially me -- still living with mother at my age. Please try not to take her too seriously. She's had more breakdowns than my Jag, and means to control the world someday, so she practices on me. I'm sure she told you I've met the sisters and think they're involved somehow -- in the disappearances. Are you still willing to help?

DOCTOR WHETSTONE

Yes, of course.

FOSSMIRE

Then I'd like you to pay them a visit. Perhaps they'll remember you; try to win their confidence. Tell them you're researching female triplets and you'd like to ask some questions. You'll be wired of course.

DOCTOR WHETSTONE

I could give them some tests -- neurological and personality profiles. I'll bring my equipment, and since I'm interested anyway, I'll be convincing, though I've been wondering: if it's really conceivable that they're involved with all these missing men, then how...? And where are they hiding the bodies?

FOSSMIRE

Down the rabbit hole. Well, that's what they said in my dream.

DOCTOR WHETSTONE

Really? Alice in Wonderland fell down a rabbit hole, and your mother's triplets were all named Alice.

FOSSMIRE

She told you about her Alices?

DOCTOR WHETSTONE

Yes. Perhaps your mother's triplets and the Rime triplets became confused in your dream, along with your memories of the Alice books.

FOSSMIRE

The subconscious loves to rearrange things, doesn't it? Now when can you call?
Is tomorrow all right?

DOCTOR WHETSTONE

I'll need to reschedule my appointments.

FOSSMIRE

Shall we meet around two o'clock? I'll pick you up at your office.

DOCTOR WHETSTONE

Fine. By the way, Chief Inspector, I've left some tranquilizers with your mother -- in case you need them.

FOSSMIRE

Please call me Foss -- everyone does.

DOCTOR WHETSTONE

All right, and I'm Flora.

(LADY AUGUSTA enters with a tea tray.)

FOSSMIRE

Can you stay for tea?

DOCTOR WHETSTONE

I'm afraid not. It was a pleasure meeting you, Lady Augusta.

LADY AUGUSTA

Do come again, my dear.

(DOCTOR WHETSTONE exits.)

LADY AUGUSTA

Here, Foss, I've baked fresh scones. Now what did you tell Doctor Whetstone?

FOSSMIRE

Everything. Her name's Flora, and she's calling on the girls tomorrow.

LADY AUGUSTA

Oh, I wish I could tag along.

FOSSMIRE

So do they. In my dream, they knew all about you; we had quite a chat. I even asked where they stashed the bodies, and they said “down the rabbit hole.”

(LADY AUGUSTA blanches, dropping her teaspoon.)

FOSSMIRE

Gussie...? Are you alright? You’ve gone white as a sheet.

LADY AUGUSTA

Have I? Oh, it’s nothing really, just my digestion. All this talk about triplets brings back memories. Mine were twelve when we parted.

FOSSMIRE

Twelve! You kept your imaginary friends till you were twelve!?! That’s frightening, Gussie, it really is.

LADY AUGUSTA

They were good company.

FOSSMIRE

Well, these girls are *not* good company. They’re very real, very dangerous, and very likely to be involved with our missing men.

LADY AUGUSTA

Maybe they don’t like men much. My Alices didn’t.

FOSSMIRE

Why ever not?

LADY AUGUSTA

Well, my brothers were not very kind, always pinching and poking their peckers, and snatching the heads off my dolls.

FOSSMIRE

Poking their what...? What did you say?

LADY AUGUSTA

My dolls. They snatched off their heads.

FOSSMIRE

No, you said they were “poking their...” their what?

LADY AUGUSTA

Did I?

FOSSMIRE

You know you did.

LADY AUGUSTA

Well, really, Foss, it’s nothing.

FOSSMIRE

Then why are you flushed?

LADY AUGUSTA

I’m not.

FOSSMIRE

Look, you just said your brothers were always pinching and poking their... their what?

LADY AUGUSTA

Well, if you must know, they were poking their...their...well, “pushing” really.

FOSSMIRE

Pushing what?

LADY AUGUSTA

Oh, for heaven’s sake, Foss...

FOSSMIRE

Pushing what?! Say what you mean!

LADY AUGUSTA

Well, their...their male organs.

FOSSMIRE

What about their male organs?

LADY AUGUSTA

Oh, Foss, really.

FOSSMIRE

Tell me about their male organs.

LADY AUGUSTA

Well, they...they pressed them into my...well, you know.

FOSSMIRE

(pause) My god, Gussie, are you saying that your own brothers...*molested* you?

(LADY AUGUSTA nods, but remains composed.)

FOSSMIRE

Both of them?! My god, that's...that's terrible! It's...it's savage, inhuman! Their own sister!

LADY AUGUSTA

Half sister.

FOSSMIRE

So did you...did you tell your parents? Were they punished?

LADY AUGUSTA

They said they'd kill me if I snitched, and when you're only five...

FOSSMIRE

Five! Where was your mother? Your nanny?

LADY AUGUSTA

Well, they noticed the bruises, but I said they'd come from riding my ponies. Mummy and Nanny were both tipplers, you know, but they loved the boys, especially Nathan.

FOSSMIRE

Where the hell was your father?!

LADY AUGUSTA

On his business trips.

FOSSMIRE

Oh, Gussie, I'm so sorry. How...how long did it go on?

LADY AUGUSTA

Until I was ten.

FOSSMIRE

Was there anyone to confide in? Did you ever tell anyone?

LADY AUGUSTA

Well, no, I always thought the subject...inappropriate. Of course, today's it's all the rage: fathers and daughters, brothers and sisters, even mothers and sons. You can't open a book or see a play where there isn't some vulgar scene or revelation.

FOSSMIRE

(pause as he holds his mother's hand) Strange, isn't it? Just when we think we might fathom a person, we find we know nothing, nothing at all.

LADY AUGUSTA

Well, dear, you're my miracle. The doctors said I'd never bear children, and here you are!

FOSSMIRE

Is there anything I can do, Gussie? Anything to make you happy?

LADY AUGUSTA

Well, yes, dear, there is.

FOSSMIRE

What...? What is it?

LADY AUGUSTA

Introduce me to the sisters.

FOSSMIRE

God, no!

LADY AUGUSTA

But you said they knew all about me!

FOSSMIRE

That was in my dream!

LADY AUGUSTA

I could help with the case.

FOSSMIRE

No, certainly not! I absolutely forbid it! You're the only mother I've got and I won't have you risking your life -- especially since I'm just getting to know you. Now let's have our tea and pretend they're gone, flown off on their broomsticks.

LADY AUGUSTA

The color's coming back to your cheeks.

FOSSMIRE

Yes, I'm feeling better, better than I've felt in weeks.

LADY AUGUSTA

Maybe you're smitten.

FOSSMIRE

Smitten...?

LADY AUGUSTA

With Doctor Whetstone. "Flora" is it? She's quite lovely.

FOSSMIRE

She's probably married.

LADY AUGUSTA

No, she's a widow.

FOSSMIRE

Really?

LADY AUGUSTA

Do take care, Foss.

FOSSMIRE

Oh, why should I? Look at me. I've come very near to dying and it's about time I lived.

LADY AUGUSTA

Then here, dear, finish your scone. There's plenty of marmalade.

FOSSMIRE

(pause, munching his scone) I want to learn more about my mother, my country, and the whole blessed world. Oh, Gussie, I've squandered too many chances. *(standing)* I want more happiness, more life, more... Ahhhhhhhh!

(FOSSMIRE collapses to the floor)

LADY AUGUSTA

Oh, nooooooo!

(Blackout.)

SCENE 8

(Lady Augusta's "nooooooo!" is overlapped by the RIME SISTERS' "Ohhhhhh" as lights reveal their parlor. THEY sit wired to a polygraph machine monitored by DOCTOR WHETSTONE who presents them with enlarged photographs.)

VALENTINE

'Tis a curious contrivance.

DOCTOR WHETSTONE

It's similar to a lie detecting polygraph. Now I'm going to show you some photographs accompanied by music. Your responses will be measured accordingly. Are you ready?

EMMALINE, URSELINE, VALENTINE

Aye!

(Mozart is heard as a picture of Kew Gardens is shown.)

EMMALINE, URSELINE, VALENTINE

Ohhhhhh...

(Brahms is played as a picture of infants is shown.)

EMMALINE, URSELINE, VALENTINE

Ahhhhhh...

(A funereal dirge accompanies a picture of mourners by a grave.)

EMMALINE, URSELINE, VALENTINE

Ahhhhhh...

(Sensual jazz accompanies a scene of naked lovers.)

EMMALINE, URSELINE, VALENTINE

Ohhhhhh...

(Heavy metal percussion accompanies a scene of gruesome slaughter.)

EMMALINE, URSELINE, VALENTINE

Ahhhhh...

DOCTOR WHETSTONE

Thank you, ladies.

(DOCTOR WHETSTONE detaches the SISTERS from the equipment as VALENTINE snatches the printout of their responses.)

VALENTINE

Behold: 'tis the handscript of a poet with palsy.

EMMALINE

Feigned shadows of our natures.

DOCTOR WHETSTONE

(peering over their shoulders) Your responses are incredibly similar and...unusual. Look, you've registered the exact same response to Kew Gardens as you did to brutal slaughter.

URSELINE

Dost thou think us craven and churlish?

DOCTOR WHETSTONE

I'm not judging you; I'm merely saying it's highly irregular. I mean, you...well, you don't seem to feel much. It's possible you lack a substance called oxytocin. It's a hormone that stimulates feelings and emotions.

EMMALINE

Why wouldst we lack such a substance?

DOCTOR WHETSTONE

It's usually caused by a trauma or injury to the head, or lack of stimuli in childhood. Some people don't develop the cerebral cortex sufficiently in infancy. They don't receive enough attention or...love.

URSELINE

Aye, 'tis true. Once we sprouted teeth, mumsy loved us naught.

EMMALINE

And father forsook us, made us foundlings.

URSELINE

We mothered ourselves, by troth!

DOCTOR WHETSTONE

I've come to know your mother quite well. She says she loved you very much, but that you preferred your own company.

URSELINE

'Tis true. We cleave to one another like warts on a troll's bum.

VALENTINE

We slumber in the same chamber, in the same bed,...

URSELINE

...neath the same bedding,...

EMMALINE

...where we dream the same dreams.

DOCTOR WHETSTONE

So you're never apart?

EMMALINE

No longer than the thrice it takes for the dispatch of business: bathing, banking, and...*To market, to market...*

VALENTINE, URSELINE, EMMALINE

*...To buy a fat pig,
Home again, home again,
Jiggety, jig!*

DOCTOR WHETSTONE

Well, I...I do have a few more questions. Can you tell me your favorite color?

EMMALINE, URSELINE, VALENTINE

Blue.

URSELINE

Ain't it obvious?!

DOCTOR WHETSTONE

Yes, yes, of course. And do you have a favorite sport?

EMMALINE, URSELINE, VALENTINE

Hunting.

DOCTOR WHETSTONE

Really? And what do you hunt?

VALENTINE

Men mostly, and snakes.

DOCTOR WHETSTONE

How do you hunt them?

URSELINE

Armed with cunning, prowess, and essence o' lavender.

DOCTOR WHETSTONE

And what do you do once you've captured your game?

URSELINE

They go down...

EMMALINE

...down...

VALENTINE

...down the rabbit hole!

DOCTOR WHETSTONE

The rabbit hole? You're not speaking literally, of course. I mean, you don't actually hunt men and push them down a hole.

VALENTINE

Why ever not? 'Tis great sport.

DOCTOR WHETSTONE

I think you're having sport with me.

URSELINE

Cold frost, speak no more!

DOCTOR WHETSTONE

Please, I'm curious. If there really is a rabbit hole, where is it located?

EMMALINE

Thou must track the rabbit, but pray, cease thy sniffing.

DOCTOR WHETSTONE

Just a few more questions if I may: Do you have any personal ambitions? I mean, do you ever yearn for romance, a family, some special place in your community?

VALENTINE

Aye! Romance.

EMMALINE

The romance of destiny: a vintage claret, songfests on Sunday, ...

URSELINE

...a bawdy game o' billiards,...

VALENTINE

...frippery and frocks!

DOCTOR WHETSTONE

Yes, those are all lovely, but I was thinking of more intellectual, more...intimate goals.

VALENTINE

Oh, we have those, Milady, fair fancies and pleasures.

DOCTOR WHETSTONE

Yes, but which pleasures?

VALENTINE

Good victuals!

DOCTOR WHETSTONE

Food...? All right, what's your favorite food?

EMMALINE, VALENTINE, URSELINE

Meat.

DOCTOR WHETSTONE

What kind of meat?

EMMALINE

Dark and light.

URSELINE

Fat and lean.

VALENTINE

Skewered on a pike or boiled in a cauldron.

URSELINE

She thinks us filthy flesh mongers, but fear not, your sort don't whet our appetites.

DOCTOR WHETSTONE

Good. *(pause)* Do you belong to any sort of religion?

EMMALINE

We worship the female dieties.

DOCTOR WHETSTONE

So you're witches?

EMMALINE, URSELINE, VALENTINE

Aye.

DOCTOR WHETSTONE

Are you good witches?

EMMALINE

To light a candle is to cast a shadow. Every act hath its opposite effect.

URSELINE

We're forsworn to silence, so cease thy meddling!

DOCTOR WHETSTONE

I...I didn't mean to...intrude. Now, I wonder if you can tell me your first memory?

VALENTINE

'Twas the great gush of mumsy's waters.

EMMALINE

Her womb pitched and pursed and near crushed our skulls.

DOCTOR WHETSTONE

You mean you actually remember your birth?

EMMALINE

Aye, and infancy. We were slaves unto appetites and slumbering, and dreaming of who we were afore this turn o' tides.

DOCTOR WHETSTONE

What do you mean, "afore this turn o' tides?"

EMMALINE

Afore this life.

URSELINE

Come, sisters! Enough of this prying medicine monger! 'Tis time she left us to our labors.

EMMALINE

Patience, dearest Urseline, permit the posing of three more queries, but only three.

DOCTOR WHETSTONE

Thank you. Well, I...I'm curious -- why have you chosen to speak the way you do?

EMMALINE

Living in a dark age, 'tis best to speak a dark tongue...

URSELINE

...in a dark dwelling. Dost thou agree?

DOCTOR WHETSTONE

Well, yes, we do seem to be living in a dark age. There's a tragic sense of...decline.

EMMALINE

Of civilization!

VALENTINE

Of civility!

URSELINE

Madness reigns!

EMMALINE

We ought to know.

EMMALINE, URSELINE, VALENTINE

(Laugh!)

DOCTOR WHETSTONE

That's why I encourage my patients to make art, to paint and write and play music. I tell them we need art to give form to our madness -- before it forms us.

EMMALINE

Aye, mold the muck o' madness, ere it bubbles o'er the pot and befouls the world with rancor, plagues,...

URSELINE

...and buboes!

DOCTOR WHETSTONE

And how do you mold your madness?

EMMALINE

We create,....

URSELINE

...and are ourselves creations.

DOCTOR WHETSTONE

But what do you create?

URSELINE

Marmalade!

VALENTINE

By the buckets! 'Tis Urseline's own recipe.

EMMALINE

And Valentine carves figures, waxen effigies of freak-folk and whimsies.

VALENTINE

And Emmaline leads us in singsongs, ditties from the heyday o' youth.

DOCTOR WHETSTONE

Yes, I'd love to hear another.

URSELINE

'Twill be the last thing you hear. Thy queries are thrice answered so 'tis time to get thee gone.

DOCTOR WHETSTONE

Yes, of course, and I...I'm very grateful for your...patience.

EMMALINE

Let us sing our sister song! *I love you well, my little sisters,...*

(VALENTINE and URSELINE join in perfect harmony. As they sing, the SISTERS surround DR. WHETSTONE, stroking her arms.)

EMMALINE, URSELINE, VALENTINE

*And you are fond of me;
Let us be kind to one another
As sisters ought to be.
You shall learn to play with me,
And learn to comb my curls;
And then I think that we shall be
Three happy little girls.*

(EMMALINE and VALENTINE kiss DOCTOR WHETSTONE'S cheeks.)

DOCTOR WHETSTONE

Ohhh!

(Blackout.)

SCENE 9

(FOSSMIRE is in his bedroom, seated in his robe. The sisters' song has mingled simultaneously with a recording DOCTOR WHETSTONE is playing on a smartphone as LADY AUGUSTA sits nearby.)

DOCTOR WHETSTONE

So there you have it: every word of our encounter.

FOSSMIRE

How curious that they mentioned a rabbit hole. In any case, I don't approve of your going without me. You'd make a dreadful subordinate.

LADY AUGUSTA

I'm afraid that's my fault. When Flora rang, I told her you'd had a relapse and suggested she go alone.

FOSSMIRE

From now on, Flora, you're to take your orders from me.

DOCTOR WHETSTONE

Your blood pressure's low. How are you feeling?

FOSSMIRE

Like a raw rotting wound. I'm afraid you haven't seen me at my best.

DOCTOR WHETSTONE

You're going to need some tests. I'm taking you to Saint Anne's hospital.

LADY AUGUSTA

That won't be necessary. I know exactly what's wrong with Foss. It's those tranquilizers you left me: I hammered them to powder and sprinkled them into the marmalade.

FOSSMIRE

You what...?!

DOCTOR WHETSTONE

How many?

LADY AUGUSTA

Eight. That was Friday and he's already rallying. By tomorrow he'll be right as rain.

FOSSMIRE

What in god's name...? Why?!

LADY AUGUSTA

You forbade me to see the sisters so I thought if you were laid up a bit longer, I could pay a visit, you know, track them down and do some sleuthing of my own.

FOSSMIRE

Good god, my own mother -- you could have killed me!

LADY AUGUSTA

Nonsense, but you gave me such a fright when you fell, I decided to stay by your bedside instead.

DOCTOR WHETSTONE

Really, Lady Augusta, you could have done great harm.

FOSSMIRE

Whatever possessed you?! I'm furious, Gussie, really I am, and you've no right to interfere in *my* case!

LADY AUGUSTA

But it's not just your case; it's mine too. You see, dear, they're *my* triplets; they're my Alices. They've found themselves a family and entered the world.

FOSSMIRE

Now, listen to me, Gussie: your triplets were a child's fantasy. You conjured them to comfort yourself until you didn't need them anymore. Now they're gone, finished, dead!

LADY AUGUSTA

Oh, no, they're not dead. I just sent them packing. I told them to find a real home with real parents who'd give them names and faces and voices of their own.

FOSSMIRE

I need a drink.

LADY AUGUSTA

It would be just like them to speak an antiquated language.

DOCTOR WHETSTONE

But Lady Augusta, wouldn't your Alices be as old as you? These girls are only twenty.

LADY AUGUSTA

Imaginary children can't age until they're born like the rest of us.

FOSSMIRE

The operative word here is "imaginary." Your triplets are fictitious; the Rime sisters are flesh and blood women. Yours were a solace; the Rime's are a menace.

LADY AUGUSTA

Well, mine were a menace too -- that pit in the forest, you know.

DOCTOR WHETSTONE

Your pit -- do you think it's anything like the Rime sister's rabbit hole?

LADY AUGUSTA

No, it's not the same, not at all.

FOSSMIRE

Well, what is it then?

LADY AUGUSTA

I can't say.

FOSSMIRE

You mean you can't or you won't.

LADY AUGUSTA

I won't. And I can't.

FOSSMIRE

Well, does it really exist? I mean, are we talking literally or are we talking nonsense? Get a grip, Gussie!

LADY AUGUSTA

I haven't slipped my tethers in years, and I'm quite certain those triplets are mine. I had my suspicions when you mentioned the buttons.

FOSSMIRE

What about the buttons?

LADY AUGUSTA

We collected them. It's all on your recording -- their favorite color, their love of singing, and all that talk about the Dark Ages. Well, my Alices wanted a New Age of Light. That's why they've waited till we were well into the new millennium.

FOSSMIRE

For a whole new Wonderland! You're mad, Gussie, mad as the March Hare, the Cheshire Cat, and the whole lot of them put together. And I'm mad for sitting here listening to this rubbish!

LADY AUGUSTA

I'm sorry you think it's rubbish, but to me it makes perfect sense. You see, Doctor, I was molested by my twin brothers. That's why I created the girls in the first place. The psyche can be very creative in defending itself, and my triplets outnumbered the twins.

FOSSMIRE

Well, Flora, you're the doctor. What do you think? Is she dotty? Loony?

DOCTOR WHETSTONE

I don't think you can declare a person "loony" unless you're absolutely certain of your own sanity, and quite frankly, I find that morally unacceptable -- for myself at least.

LADY AUGUSTA

You have a compassionate nature, Doctor, but I'm not fool enough to think I'd convince you on my own -- so I've invited the girls to tea.

FOSSMIRE

You what...?

LADY AUGUSTA

Tea on Thursday at four.

FOSSMIRE

Here? In this house?! Tea?!

LADY AUGUSTA

They're listed in the directory, you know. We'll have Dora polish the silver and make those lovely little lemon cakes.

FOSSMIRE

You've invited three mass murder suspects to tea?!

LADY AUGUSTA

You're both invited as well.

FOSSMIRE

Beastly girls who could be homicidal maniacs, psychopathic witches or worse!

LADY AUGUSTA

They said they'd be delighted.

FOSSMIRE

Thursday! My god, that's....damn! You've got me so rattled, I don't even know what day it is.

DOCTOR WHETSTONE

Monday -- at half past nine.

FOSSMIRE

That gives me three days. Gussie, bring me some coffee, the strongest ever brewed!

(LADY AUGUSTA exits.)

FOSSMIRE

And try not to poison it!

DOCTOR WHETSTONE

(pause) Will you be all right?

FOSSMIRE

No, no, I will never be all right. My mother's off her trolley and I'm weak and wasted to the bone, and now I have to interview the parents again, call on the sisters, and assuming I survive, I'll be attending Gussie's tea party. What about you? Are you coming?

DOCTOR WHETSTONE

I wouldn't miss it for the world.

(Lights reveal the SISTERS singing.)

EMMALINE, URSELINE, VALENTINE

*Polly, put the kettle on,
Put the kettle on,
Put the kettle on;
Polly, put the kettle on
And we'll have some tea!*

(Blackout.)

End of Act I

ACT II**SCENE 10**

(Fossmire's dream: A dimly lit lecture hall where the RIME SISTERS are heard singing while LADY AUGUSTA speaks from a podium.)

LADY AUGUSTA

Ladies and gentlemen,...

VOICES OF EMMALINE, URSELINE, VALENTINE

There was an old woman who lived in a shoe,...

LADY AUGUSTA

...we are a species out of control.

VOICES OF EMMALINE, URSELINE, VALENTINE

She had so many children she didn't know what to do.

LADY AUGUSTA

We are reproducing at alarming rates,...

VOICES OF EMMALINE, URSELINE, VALENTINE

She gave them some broth without any bread,...

LADY AUGUSTA

...and our Earth Mother's milk of human kindness is turning sour.

VOICES OF EMMALINE, URSELINE, VALENTINE

Then whipped them all round and sent them to bed!

LADY AUGUSTA

In fact, she's poisoning us, especially in Cairo, Calcutta, and Mexico City where the population's grown so rampantly they can't control the sewage. There's such high levels of fecal dust in the air that intestinal parasites are infecting the tourists -- not to mention the natives. If you've read our pamphlet, you know one out of seven of us lives on less than two dollars a day; one out of three lacks modern sanitation; nearly eight hundred million lack sufficient water; and eighteen thousand children under five die every day from preventable causes. So how can we endure these calamities? The Zero Population Party proposes universal vasectomies for all adolescent males -- after they preserve semen samples for potential future families. This simple operation will guarantee that no child is ever again born unwittingly or unwanted. And it's high time for men to take the initiative! For decades women have subjected their bodies to chemicals that induce

LADY AUGUSTA (cont'd)

life threatening strokes, cancers, and bloatings so severe they inflate like balloons and fly east -- to China where they once wisely legislated one child per family, only one. If we follow this dictum the standard of living in the whole world will rise. If we don't, Mother Earth will plague us with fires, floods, famines, and national psychoses -- with countries selling their excess into slavery or committing mass genocide. But what is genocide? A systematic solution? A war against humanity? An ugly little word? Or maybe it's a tea party. Oh, invitations have already been sent to the Jews, the Armenians, Albanians, Cambodians, Bosnians, and Tutsies. And where did they go? Down, down, down the rabbit hole to a tea party. Tea Party. Tea Party. Genocide. Genocide. It's all just words, you see, words, words, words!

(LADY AUGUSTA laughs hideously as the RIME SISTERS appear, dancing around her.)

EMMALINE, URSELINE, VALENTINE

*Here we go up, up, up,
Here we go down, down, down,
Here we go backwards and forwards,
And here we go round, round, round.*

(Fade out.)

SCENE 11

(The office in New Scotland Yard wherre FOSSMIRE is asleep at his desk. DETECTIVE SERGEANT RUPERT SLATER enters, carrying a file folder. HE coughs and rouses FOSSMIRE who sits bolt upright!)

FOSSMIRE

Oh, god... Sorry, Sergeant, I...I must have dozed. I keep dreaming about my mother.

DETECTIVE SERGEANT SLATER

(handing a file folder to Fossmire) You wanted a list of the latest disappearances, sir. They're mostly off the streets and the underground, and a growing number in hospitals as well. In the past hour there's seven gone missing at the Bedford Juvenile Detention Center; twelve at a recovery clinic in Newcastle; and twenty-four prisoners working at a low surveillance laundry in Wellingborough, causing a near riot and making a grand total of four thousand, six hundred and fifty-seven missing males as of nine hundred hours this morning. There's even a few gents, reputable sorts with trades, and last night a magistrate from Bloomsbury.

FOSSMIRE

And not a single solitary soul has actually witnessed these vanishings? No bolts of lightning, no slow dissolves or falling into sinkholes?

DETECTIVE SERGEANT SLATER

No, sir. They're alone when it happens, and it's usually at night. It seems they'll leave a room or turn a corner and then they're gone without a clue except for the occasional odd buttons, but forensics still hasn't traced them to the owners whereabouts.

FOSSMIRE

So what's the scuttlebutt, Sergeant? What are the rumor-mongers of the press peddling today?

DETECTIVE SERGEANT SLATER

Well, sir, The Tattler says it's the end of the world so aliens are sucking chaps onto space ships to steal their sperm for future generations.

FOSSMIRE

Ah, yes, that would explain their wanting only men. Later they'll come down for the women -- for their eggs.

DETECTIVE SERGEANT SLATER

The Times, The Telegraph, and The Guardian continue to blame extremist cults trying to rid the world of undesirables. The foreign press is starting to notice and they're hounding us with questions, and on his blog, Lord Rockston claims it's a conspiracy of radical feminists knocking off potentially violent men.

FOSSMIRE

So he's blaming the feminists, is he?

DETECTIVE SERGEANT SLATER

Yes, sir, but it's not likely.

FOSSMIRE

Why not?

DETECTIVE SERGEANT SLATER

Well, you know, sir: women are usually acquainted with their victims, and they commit only a small percentage of murders.

FOSSMIRE

Maybe they're trying to catch up!

DETECTIVE SERGEANT SLATER

Well, whoever it is must be having a jolly good laugh -- watching us chase our tails and getting bloody nowhere.

FOSSMIRE

This morning I ordered round-the-clock surveillance on an address in Belgravia. I've told DCI Flint I want reports on everyone coming and going, and I want them every hour. So let's stay in contact, Sergeant.

DETECTIVE SERGEANT SLATER

Yes, sir.

FOSSMIRE

Just one more question: what's your personal opinion?

DETECTIVE SERGEANT SLATER

I'm sorry to hear about the gents and juveniles, but the rest won't be missed much.

FOSSMIRE

I meant what do you think is the modus operandi -- the how and the who?

DETECTIVE SERGEANT SLATER

I think it's extremists, and they're well off. I don't know how they manage the abductions, but they've got the technology to dispose of the corpses -- chemicals and furnaces for cremation.

FOSSMIRE

Or maybe they're running a chop shop? You know, spare body parts: odd sets of lungs, eyeballs and knee caps -- just joking, Sergeant. So are we sending out the bloodhounds, tracking the scent of scorched flesh?

DETECTIVE SERGEANT SLATER

Yes, sir, but nothing's come of it yet.

FOSSMIRE

Ha! We ought to be chasing old Robin the Bobbin.

DETECTIVE SERGEANT SLATER

Who, sir?

FOSSMIRE

You know, the nursery song: *Robbin the bobbin, the bouncing Ben.
He ate more meat than four score men.*

(Suddenly FOSSMIRE is joined by the RIME SISTERS haunting VOICES, then FOSSMIRE'S voice trails off.)

FOSSMIRE AND THE VOICES OF THE RIME SISTERS

He ate a cow, he ate a calf,...

VOICES OF EMMALINE, URSELINE, VALENTINE

*He ate a butcher and a half,
He ate a church, he ate a steeple,
He ate a priest, and all the people.*

DETECTIVE SERGEANT SLATER

No, sir.

FOSSMIRE

What...?

DETECTIVE

I don't know the song, sir.

FOSSMIRE

Did you...did you hear anything just now? Some girls singing?

DETECTIVE SERGEANT SLATER

Just you, sir.

FOSSMIRE

Well, bring in the professors, Sergeant, and thank you for your candor.

DETECTIVE SERGEANT SLATER

There's only the lady, sir.

(DETECTIVE SERGEANT SLATER exits.)

FOSSMIRE

Are you here? Are you bloody bitches hovering around me? I'm not afraid, you know.
No, I'm beyond fear, way way beyond

SCENE 12

(MADELINE RIME enters as FOSSMIRE composes himself.)

FOSSMIRE

Good morning, Professor Rime, do sit down. I've met your daughters, and I must say they're quite extraordinary. (*indicating a dense text*) I'm reading one of your books. It's fascinating, though I've always thought of English culture as priding itself on rationality.

MADLINE RIME

It does. I was attempting to make the arcane of magic more intelligible.

FOSSMIRE

I wonder who actually buys your books? Other witches?

MADLINE RIME

All sorts of people from all sorts of professions. Most of them simply want more ritual in their lives, something more esoteric than the usual Sunday service.

FOSSMIRE

Yes, but *how* esoteric. What do they actually believe?

MADLINE RIME

To put it simply, they believe that through certain rituals, the mind can affect matter.

FOSSMIRE

But *how*?

MADLINE RIME

The physical world is energy patterns in flux. Witches change those patterns through chanting, meditation, and concentrated will power.

FOSSMIRE

So are your daughters capable of changing these patterns?

MADLINE RIME

I really can't say.

FOSSMIRE

Well, I can. I mean, it...it seems quite likely.

(HUGH RIME enters.)

HUGH RIME

Sorry I'm late. Hello, Madeline.

MADLINE RIME

Hugh.

HUGH RIME

So what's this all about, Chief Inspector? Where are my daughters? Have you arrested them?

FOSSMIRE

No. I'm still trying to fathom why they'd want to eradicate a very large and ever growing number of men.

HUGH RIME

They wouldn't; it's utterly preposterous. Now, please, Chief Inspector, I'm extremely busy. What is it you want?

FOSSMIRE

Details. Specifics. You see, I believe the clues to our destinies lie in our childhoods, and I'm looking for clues -- any crumb you've got. But first let me explain the position of the Metropolitan Police: we're lost. Believe it or not, your daughters are our only suspects -- well, *my* only suspects. It's been difficult persuading my superintendent that three quaint young women are dangerous sociopaths, and to complicate matters further, my own eccentric mother thinks your daughters are her Alices, her imaginary childhood playmates sprung to life. So there you have it: Now it's your turn; what do you think?

MADLINE RIME

Maybe you should listen to your mother. (*pause*) When they were six, Emmaline decided to discard her name. She preferred to be called Alice. (*to Hugh*) Don't you remember? Then Urseline and Valentine said they wanted to be called Alice too, but it was only a childish whim that lasted a few weeks, and soon they were back to being....themselves.

FOSSMIRE

Why Alice?

MADLINE RIME

From Alice in Wonderland. They especially liked the Dormouse because he knew three sisters who lived on treacle at the bottom of a well.

FOSSMIRE

And did your daughters have a well?

MADLINE RIME

No, but they loved treacle.

HUGH RIME

Yes, yes, and they still love treacle and so do we all, but what of it?! How is it connected, and what bloody difference does it make?!

FOSSMIRE

Now that, you see, is the conundrum: there's no logic here, no rational deductions, no evidence, no answers -- only questions.

HUGH RIME

That's life, Chief Inspector, that's life!

FOSSMIRE

But we seek to apprehend the truth, so I need you to shed more light, even a single moonbeam, just one little moonbeam. Please.

HUGH RIME

Sorry, I've given you all my moonbeams.

MADLINE RIME

When they were ten, I said something to Urseline about how different they were, as if they really belonged to another set of parents and were dropped randomly into my womb. Then she replied that there was nothing random about it. They chose me, she said, and they chose Hugh as well.

FOSSMIRE

Did she say why?

MADLINE RIME

She said we were kindly, intelligent and could carry a tune.

HUGH RIME

You never told me this!

MADLINE RIME

Well, it seemed absurd. I mean, if they'd chosen me, why didn't they like me more? Most mothers and daughters bond on many subjects like literature and fashion, but all we ever bonded on was witchcraft. They especially loved candle-making and singing chants.

HUGH RIME

They weren't chants; they were nursery rhymes -- sung shrilly and incessantly!

MADLINE RIME

It was their own form of chanting. You see, chanting changes the state of your consciousness -- so you have access to inner powers.

HUGH RIME

To the goddess within!

MADLINE RIME

Many young girls are attracted to goddess worship, and why not? They haven't any transcendent role models of their own.

HUGH RIME

Watch out, Chief Inspector, she's stepping on her pulpit!

MADLINE RIME

Our culture has completely obliterated the female divinities. The only one left is the Virgin Mary who's been so humbled she kneels before her own son.

FOSSMIRE

Ah, then do witches resent men?

HUGH RIME

Yes!

MADLINE RIME

Many witches *are* men.

FOSSMIRE

Tell me, are you yourself capable of performing their rites and rituals? For example, how would a witch -- an English witch -- get rid of someone?

MADLINE RIME

Modern witches are benign, Chief Inspector, They don't burn effigies at altars anymore. Of course, there are certain banishing rituals...

FOSSMIRE

Yes! Banishing rituals!

MADLINE RIME

But they're for illnesses and misfortunes -- not for banishing people.

FOSSMIRE

Are you sure? You see, when I asked the girls where the men had gone, they said, "down the rabbit hole." Have they ever mentioned a hole of any kind?

HUGH RIME
No.

MADLINE RIME
Not that I recall.

HUGH RIME
They often make inane remarks that mean absolutely nothing.

FOSSMIRE
Do witches dig holes?

MADLINE RIME
No, but they have circles, ceremonial chalk circles. The high priestess draws it at the beginning of her rituals to indicate the boundary between the celestial world of divinities and the world of mortals.

FOSSMIRE
So where is this world of divinities?

MADLINE RIME
All around us -- it's the world of magic.

FOSSMIRE
But is there really any magic?

(Time stops as music tinkles, lights twinkle, and the RIME SISTERS appear as nude apparitions materializing in the walls, singing softly while FOSSMIRE stares in amazement.)

EMMALINE, VALENTINE, URSELINE
*Twinkle, twinkle, little star,
How I wonder what you are.
Up above the world so high,
Like a diamond in the sky...*

(The SISTERS fade, then vanish, humming softly in the background as FOSSMIRE speaks.)

FOSSMIRE
Tell me, could witches be right here in this very room -- wafting about on some nether plane.

MADLINE RIME
Yes, I suppose.

FOSSMIRE

So can we at least presume that your daughters are practicing some sort of black magic?

HUGH RIME

No, we cannot presume anything of the sort!

MADELINE RIME

Virtually all the witches I've met practice white magic.

FOSSMIRE

Yet you claim to have been abducted and impregnated at some sort of ritual. So if your memories are correct, some witches are *not* benign. In fact, some are malevolent and evil.

MADELINE RIME

Then they're not witches; they're sorcerers and warlocks.

HUGH RIME

And our girls are neither! They're mischievous, yes, but not...not evil.

FOSSMIRE

Oh, they're mischievous alright. They even broke into my dreams, crept into my bed and seduced me. In fact, I just saw them right over there -- stark naked.

HUGH RIME

Don't be daft!

FOSSMIRE

(to Madeline) Did you see them?

MADELINE RIME

No, but I...I smelled them. They're like boiled turnips and sage.

FOSSMIRE

With a hint of lavender! Do you smell them now?

MADELINE RIME

(sniffs) No, they're gone.

HUGH RIME

I must say, you surprise me, Chief Inspector. You're sounding like a convert.

FOSSMIRE

I'm still a heretic, but a curious one. You see, in my brief encounter with the girls, I felt both repulsed and...well, quite frankly, attracted, even aroused. But what about you? Were they seductive towards you?

HUGH RIME

Really, they were our children.

FOSSMIRE

Of course, and I'm not accusing...

HUGH RIME

Look, we've told you everything we have to say!

FOSSMIRE

Yes, yes, but I want to know what you can't say. I want to know the unspeakable. What I mean is that for most of us, when such feelings occur, we repress them, but the girls -- were they capable of respecting any boundaries? Did they honor any social taboos?

MADELINE RIME

(pause) No. None whatsoever.

HUGH RIME

Christ, Madeline....

MADELINE RIME

Believe me, Chief Inspector, you've no idea the power of three young girls, always together, day after day.

HUGH RIME

I don't know if it was their own innate natures or Madeline's witchcraft mania...

MADELINE RIME

He's always blamed me, but it was reading all those lewd, licentious plays!

HUGH RIME

Oh, Christ...

MADELINE RIME

That's what made them wild and over-sexed!

HUGH RIME

But it didn't make them murderers! For godssake, Maddy, they're our children -- our children! *(pause, sighing, turning to Fossmire)* Now haven't you heard enough? Surely you can see how upsetting this is. Come, Madeline, let's go.

FOSSMIRE

Please stay. I want you to realize I'm your ally here. In fact, I'll be seeing them on Thursday. My mother, you see, has invited them to tea.

HUGH RIME

To tea...?

FOSSMIRE

Yes, so you see, I have a rather personal stake in this business and the truth is I need you, the whole country needs you. You saw the throngs in our lobby; people from all over England are abandoned and bereft. Where did their fathers and sons disappear to? Where are their husbands, brothers and friends? Well, I've been thinking: if witchcraft took them away then perhaps witchcraft can bring them back.

HUGH RIME

Oh, lord...

FOSSMIRE

(to Madeline) On Thursday the girls will be at the tea party. Their house will be empty and you have the key. What I want you to do is get them together -- all the witches you know and all their witch friends. Then break into their house, into their ritual chamber, and cast a banishing spell or whatever it is you do. I want you to chant all day and all night until somehow...

HUGH RIME

You can't be serious?!

FOSSMIRE

Make the girls impotent, banish their powers or...or banish them.

HUGH RIME

You can't ask her to do that! Good god, man, you should hear yourself!

MADELINE RIME

There are people I can speak to.

HUGH RIME

You're both mad!

MADELINE RIME

There are several local covens and western mystery groups, some with highly intelligent and powerful adepts.

FOSSMIRE

Your book claims that rituals can have special intentions, so the intention of this ritual is to stop the vanishings! Stop them now and forever!

MADLINE RIME

You know, Chief Inspector, you weren't the first to think of this. I could try myself, but... a mother can't banish her children.

FOSSMIRE

But you said it yourself: they're not yours. They're on their own now, and heaven help them!

(Blackout.)

SCENE 13

(The RIME SISTERS are posed in their parlor, singing sweetly.)

EMMALINE, URSELINE, VALENTINE

*I love little pussy, her coat is so warm,
And if I don't hurt her she'll do me no harm;
So I'll not pull her tail, nor drive her away,
But pussy and I very gently will play.*

(There is a rapping on the door which URSELINE answers.)

URSELINE

Fie! 'Tis the Foss!

FOSSMIRE

Good afternoon. I've come to make a few more inquiries, and I understand you've been invited to Lady Augusta's house for tea.

VALENTINE

Shall we fetch the punch and pastries?

FOSSMIRE

No, she'll have everything she needs.

URSELINE

I pray Milady's doctor hath not forbade a quaff of tippie with her tea.

FOSSMIRE

No, she often serves sherry or champagne at her teas. I don't suppose you go out for tea very often.

URSELINE

Since we dwelleth in solitude, we ne'er acquired the manners o' society, but we shall don our finest frocks.

VALENTINE

Silk stockings, and popinjay feathers! What willst thou wear, my lord?

FOSSMIRE

Well, I suppose I'll wear one of my charcoal suits.

VALENTINE

By thy apparel, some wouldst judge thee a courtly man o' vision...

EMMALINE

...and vapors. We hear thou art enamored of the Lady Flora.

FOSSMIRE

Who told you that?

EMMALINE

The cuckoo bird! *The cuckoo is a merry bird...*

EMMALINE, URSELINE, VALENTINE,

*She sings as she flies;
She brings us good tidings,
And tells us no lies!*

EMMALINE

O', the tender strains o' courtship in Spring. Hast thou wrought an ode to Flora's amber eyes?

VALENTINE

Dost thou call her breasts the hills o' Hebe?

URSELINE

Her rump the hump o' Venus?

EMMALINE, URSELINE, VALENTINE

(Laughing) Ha, ha, ha!

FOSSMIRE

I'm not here to discuss my love life -- or my wardrobe! In fact, I came to inform you that you're my only suspects in the disappearance of nearly six thousand men.

EMMALINE

Alas, by the morrow, scores more will swoon to their doom.

URSELINE

And after the shiftless, we shall vanquish the rest, class by class, the nobbs with the Bobs.

FOSSMIRE

But why?! And how?

URSELINE

Said the big brown cow.

EMMALINE, URSELINE, VALENTINE

(laughing!) Ha, ha ha!

FOSSMIRE

You're under surveillance as I'm sure you know, but I've been forbidden to arrest you outright. It seems the buttons aren't sufficient evidence.

(THE SISTERS dance around FOSSMIRE.)

EMMALINE, URSELINE, VALENTINE

*Buttons, buttons, a farthing a pair,
Come, who will buy them of me?
They're round and sound and pretty,
And fit for the girls of the city!*

FOSSMIRE

Stop it! For chrissake, be serious! Don't you see the world's falling apart?! Men are dying and disappearing and leaving the whole of London's in a state of hysteria!

EMMALINE, URSELINE, VALENTINE

*London Bridge is falling down,
Falling down, falling down;
London Bridge is falling down,
My fair lady!*

FOSSMIRE

(overlapping the song) Stop! Stop this instant! Lord, how I wish you were a bad dream!

URSELINE

Wakefulness and dreams -- 'tis all the same for us.

FOSSMIRE

Well, it isn't for me or anyone who claims to have a grasp on reality, and why in god's name did you accept Lady Augusta's invitation?!

URSELINE

'Cause she hath meant to us what she means to thee.

FOSSMIRE

That's not very likely since she's my mother.

URSELINE

Troth, sir, some wenches give birth from their noggins as well as their boggins.

VALENTINE

They spawn souls to wander till wishful wombs beckon them hither.

EMMALINE

Shush, sisters, 'tis a mystery our Foss is not fit to fathom.

FOSSMIRE

No, please, please go on.

EMMALINE

(pause) Afore this life we were spectral companions to a tormented child. 'Twas the Lady Alice Augusta.

URSELINE

Our sisterhood hath lasted many years, but only a score in this mortal mold.

FOSSMIRE

Oh, very clever, ladies, very clever indeed. You're saying this because Lady Augusta told you that you're her imaginary friends.

EMMALINE

Aye, her Alices, her soul's redeemers, spirits thrice-born to throttle her foes.

URSELINE

'Twas men who wronged Milady so 'tis men we extract -- like teeth from the gob of a goat.

FOSSMIRE

So you do it for vengeance?

EMMALINE

For Milady. 'Twas her bidding.

FOSSMIRE

That's ridiculous! Gussie's not vengeful; she doesn't hate men! She's my mother for godssake!

VALENTINE

And our mother too!

URSELINE

We are her bratlings,...

EMMALINE

...her saplings,...

URSELINE

...her chicks.

EMMALINE

Art thou too proud to claim us as sisters?

FOSSMIRE

Sisters...?

VALENTINE

Brother!

EMMALINE, URSELINE, VALENTINE

(pounding, embracing Fossmire) Brother!!

FOSSMIRE

Go away! Don't touch me! Ahhhhhhhhhhhhh!

(FOSSMIRE breaks free and flees!)

SCENE 14

(A foggy mist rises on a London street where DET. SERGEANT SLATER is speaking into his phone.)

DETECTIVE SERGEANT SLATER

Hello? Chief Inspector? Detective Sergeant Slater here. I've been trying to track you down, sir. There's a bit of a panic at the Yard. The lads are afraid to go to the loo never mind cross the street. Nobody's safe 'cept the women. There's even chaps taken to dressing in skirts. Most everyone's staying home and the city's like a morgue. I'm in Regents Park, and there's no one about 'cept some ladies.

(The SISTERS approach, singing.)

EMMALINE, URSELINE, VALENTINE

*Oh, dear, what can the matter be?
Oh, dear, what can the matter be?
Oh, dear, what can the matter be?
Johnny's so long at the fair?*

(As DETECTIVE SERGEANT SLATER pockets his phone, the SISTERS surround him.)

EMMALINE, URSELINE, VALENTINE
*Ring around the rosie,
A pocket full of posies,*

DETECTIVE SGT. SLATER
What the bloody...?

(DETECTIVE SERGEANT SLATER freezes as the SISTERS wield scissors, snipping off his buttons.)

EMMALINE, URSELINE, VALENTINE

*Ashes, ashes,
We all fall down!*

(Hissing sounds are heard as the SISTERS spread their capes and DET. SGT. SLATER vanishes, leaving a few buttons which the SISTERS gather up with glee and lights fade to black.)

SCENE 15

(DOCTOR WHETSTONE is seated in her office as a frantic FOSSMIRE enters.)

FOSSMIRE

Forgive my barging in, but I've just come from seeing the pox sisters. It's not possible, is it? Nobody can will another human soul into being -- I mean, create the essence of a person from the sheer force and agony of their will.

DOCTOR WHETSTONE

Let me take your coat.

FOSSMIRE

Not the person, not the body, but their soul, a kind of spiritual incarnation of their rage, their despair, and then a woman, a real live woman, is chosen to give that rage life, a body, a human baby who contains the rage and allows it to live and grow and wreak unholy havoc!

DOCTOR WHETSTONE

No, I don't think it's possible for people to create souls, but they can create something tangible like a poem or a song that reflects their soul.

FOSSMIRE

Listen, Flora, they said Gussie was their birth mother and Madeline their earth mother, and the worst of it is they accused Gussie of being the real instigator, Gussie and her hatred of men.

DOCTOR WHETSTONE

Does she really hate men? She doesn't hate you.

FOSSMIRE

No, of course she doesn't, but she hated the twins, so you can't blame her for conjuring a trio of devils -- wouldn't you? Madeline says witches can control the material world, so can the world be destroyed by someone's vengeance, someone's wrath?

DOCTOR WHETSTONE

Well, if you mean the wrath of rogue dictators with bombs, yes, I suppose, but if you mean can someone just will the world away, no, I think not.

FOSSMIRE

But why do I feel it's not...impossible?

DOCTOR WHETSTONE

Because you're tired and susceptible to thinking beyond...well, beyond the usual laws of logic.

FOSSMIRE

Logic! Ha! You're right. I'm indulging in exactly the sort of shabby thinking I'm always accusing my sergeants of, but what choice do I have? I've even persuaded Madeline to gather her witches, to bring them all together.

DOCTOR WHETSTONE

You what...?

FOSSMIRE

Oh, yes, the good witches are going to banish the bad with a spell or a curse or whatever it is they do. Oh, stop gawking like that.. The best minds at the Yard have exhausted the possible, so now it's time to try the daft and deranged.

DOCTOR WHETSTONE

The reason I'm "gawking" is that I'm a doctor and you look on the verge of collapse.

FOSSMIRE

One of my sergeants just rang and said there's hundreds more disappearing, just passing out of the picture -- poof! After they finish off the English, will they move on to the Irish? The French? The Chinese? Will no one be spared?

DOCTOR WHETSTONE

You will! If the sisters are right and your mother's responsible, then surely she'd spare her own son. Imagine: you'd be the only man left in the world, the only man and millions -- billions -- of women! (*pause, pondering this*) So you see, Foss, maybe *you're* the one responsible.

FOSSMIRE

My god....

DOCTOR WHETSTONE

For heaven's sake, I'm joking!

FOSSMIRE

Well, it's not funny, not in the least!

DOCTOR WHETSTONE

You're trembling; you need to rest.

FOSSMIRE

What I need is a drink.

DOCTOR WHETSTONE

Go home, Foss. Take a nice hot bath and get some sleep.

FOSSMIRE

Sleep?! Who can sleep while my fellow males are facing oblivion? What day is it?

DOCTOR WHETSTONE

Wednesday.

FOSSMIRE

Tomorrow's the tea party. By tomorrow thousands more will go down.

DOCTOR WHETSTONE

I want you to take a nap. I insist.

FOSSMIRE

Will you take one with me? Sorry, I...I've never met a psychiatrist like you. The chaps at the Yard are supercilious and predictable, but you... *(pause)* Do you suppose when this nightmare's over we could do something very ordinary like go out to dinner?

DOCTOR WHETSTONE

I'd like that very much.

FOSSMIRE

Whatever happens I'm grateful to them for one thing: They led me to you, and you really are so...lovely. You're sure you're not a witch yourself?

DOCTOR WHETSTONE

As a matter of fact, I...I am.

(Pause as a stunned FOSSMIRE retreats.)

DOCTOR WHETSTONE

Several of my patients are witches so I've seen how it's affected them. Really, Foss, it's amazing what happens when a woman believes she's the incarnation of Isis or Athena. It makes her feel empowered, enchanted, so you see, I...I wanted to experience it for myself.

FOSSMIRE

Why haven't you told me this before?

DOCTOR WHETSTONE

I was waiting for the appropriate time. I'm afraid this isn't it. Let's talk later.

FOSSMIRE

No, no, let's talk now, right now. Are you still...?

DOCTOR WHETSTONE

Once a month I attend meetings at a Gardnarian Coven in Kilburn. I'm only a novice, but have my own ritual chamber. In fact, I've only used witchcraft once -- to cure my husband. One of the coven members made a doll-sized model of Donald, and I had his photograph and some clothes which we placed on the altar of a Minoan goddess. Then we all held hands and chanted prayers for Donald.

FOSSMIRE

You perform these rituals naked, don't you?

DOCTOR WHETSTONE

We call it sky clad.

FOSSMIRE

But your spell didn't cure Donald, did it? Yet you still attend the meetings?

DOCTOR WHETSTONE

You don't approve, do you?

FOSSMIRE

(pause) Who am I to judge? Look at me. Any detective can tell you that men living with their mothers at my age are complete misfits, a pathetic lot of layabouts who don't have the gumption to make lives of their own.

DOCTOR WHETSTONE

You can always move out.

FOSSMIRE

I tried once but I...I missed her, and then she tumbled down the stairs and fractured her hip -- which was just the excuse I needed to come back.

DOCTOR WHETSTONE

You're not unlike her, you know. You have courage and vitality, and you've both found causes to feel passionate about.

FOSSMIRE

Oh, she's passionate all right. If she spots a pregnant woman with three toddlers in tow, she'll march right up and tell her she's irresponsible. She's always seen the world in extremis, and her response is to keep it from growing.

DOCTOR WHETSTONE

So long as she doesn't keep you from growing.

FOSSMIRE

No, that's my own fault. Ha! I used to think much of human experience could be mapped, quantified, and predicted. Lately, I'm doubtful about everything, even the fundamental realities of my wretched life. So tell me, Flora, what's real? Are men really vanishing? Can something so terrible really be happening?

DOCTOR WHETSTONE

I'm afraid so; it's all everyone's talking about.

FOSSMIRE

And what about you, Flora? Are you really happening or am I under some sort of spell?

DOCTOR WHETSTONE

I'm really happening.

FOSSMIRE

Can you prove it? Will you...will you hold my hand?

(THEY clasp hands, then embrace as the VOICES OF THE SISTERS are heard.)

VOICES OF EMMALINE, URSELINE, VALENTINE

*Lavender's blue, dilly, dilly,
Lavender's green;
When I am king, dilly, dilly,
You shall be queen.
Come to make hay, dilly, dilly,
Come to cut corn;
While you and I, dilly, dilly,
Keep ourselves warm.*

(Lights fade to black.)

SCENE 16

(The song becomes an eerie drone as candles are lit, illuminating a circle of WITCHES beneath cowled cloaks. The HIGH PRIESTESS is heard, chanting over the drones.)

HIGH PRIESTESS

(chanting) I am She that is Mother, Mistress, Empress of the Elements, Priestess of the Powers of Artemis, Aphrodite, Dido and Demeter. At my will, the winds of the seas and the fires of Hades will banish the foul forces of the Gorgon Furies who have unleashed their dark magic. Let us imagine them as cats! Let all hatred, hindrance, and fatal fluxings be cast forth from their feline hearts!

(The WITCHES join the chant while menacing hisses and growls are heard in the background.)

HIGH PRIESTESS AND WITCHES

*There once were three cats of Kilkenny,
Each thought there were two cats too many,
So they fought and they fit,
And they scratched and they bit,
Till, excepting their nails
And the tips of their tails,
Instead of three cats, there weren't any!*

(The candles are snuffed to the howling of cats.)

SCENE 17

(Lady Augusta's parlor where the tea table is set with trays heaped with cakes and sandwiches. FOSSMIRE, DOCTOR WHETSTONE, and LADY AUGUSTA are seated, all dressed in black.)

LADY AUGUSTA

I distinctly said four o'clock and it's nearly half past. Do you think I should ring them in case they've forgotten or had an accident.

FOSSMIRE

Or maybe they fell down the rabbit hole.

LADY AUGUSTA

That's not possible.

FOSSMIRE

Why? Why isn't it possible?

LADY AUGUSTA

It just isn't, that's why.

FOSSMIRE

You're never going to tell me, are you? *(pause)* Well, then mother, I think there's something I should tell you: your "guests" may not be arriving at all, and if they do, I intend to arrest them.

LADY AUGUSTA

What do you mean "not arriving"?

FOSSMIRE

You see, Gussie, all the good witches of England have been assembled to perform a banishing ritual, and with any luck they've already succeeded in making the Rime Sisters a very bad memory.

LADY AUGUSTA

Foss! You can't be serious?

FOSSMIRE

Why not? They're witches, aren't they? So I'm playing on their own heath.

LADY AUGUSTA

But surely you realize that you might be banishing me as well.

FOSSMIRE

Rubbish! The white witches are cursing the black and you're neither.

LADY AUGUSTA

Don't be so sure. *(pause)* Cousin Gertrude was the Green Hestia and I was the Red. Now there's witches everywhere, but in our day there were only a few respectable groups, and we called ourselves magicians.

FOSSMIRE

You told me you're an atheist!

LADY AUGUSTA

But a pagan at heart, and occasionally I attend the Women's Wiccan Circle on Tuesdays.

FOSSMIRE

But that's your book club! You said so!

LADY AUGUSTA

Nonsense! You just assumed it.

FOSSMIRE

Did I? Am I so obtuse? A detective duped by his own mother! *(to Flora)* Did you know?

DOCTOR WHETSTONE

No, I never even suspected.

LADY AUGUSTA

We're all entitled to our secrets, Foss, but this banishing business is dangerous. In the event of my death, you'll inherit the house and half our fortune, but the other half goes to the ZPP. That's my legacy, my gift to the future. Now, Flora, would you like some tea?

DOCTOR WHETSTONE

Yes, thank you.

FOSSMIRE

Just tell me this: is there a woman left in England who isn't a witch?!

(The doorbell rings.)

LADY AUGUSTA

Please, Foss, answer the door.

(FOSSMIRE opens the door to the extravagantly dressed SISTERS, who scurry to LADY AUGUSTA and curtsy.)

EMMALINE, URSELINE, VALENTINE

Greetings, Lady Augusta!

LADY AUGUSTA

Oh, my goodness, I...I'd never have recognized you. *(pause)* Why don't you tell me your names.

EMMALINE

Emmaline,...

URSELINE

...Urseline,...

VALENTINE

...and Valentine...

EMMALINE, URSELINE, VALENTINE

...Rime!

EMMALINE

Merry have we met, and merry have we been;...

EMMALINE, VALENTINE, URSELINE,

Merry let us dance, and merry let us sing.

Waddle goes your gait, and hollow are your hose;

Noodle goes your pate, and purple is your nose.

(LADY AUGUSTA joins their song.)

EMMALINE, URSELINE, VALENTINE, LADY AUGUSTA

With our merry sing-song, happy gay and free,

And a merry ding-dong, happy let us be!

LADY AUGUSTA

Yes, yes, it is you! My Alices! My girls!

EMMALINE

My mother!

VALENTINE and URSELINE

Mother!!

(The SISTERS embrace LADY AUGUSTA.)

URSELINE

How you've changed, Milady!

LADY AUGUSTA

Ah, too many years, too many pastries, and lately I'm feeling peckish.

EMMALINE

We oft behold thy visage and ponder thy orations,...

URSELINE

...and daily strive to serve thy grand crusade.

LADY AUGUSTA

Yes, well, we really must discuss that.

FOSSMIRE

Yes, we must.

LADY AUGUSTA

But first, please, sit down. Of course, you know Doctor Whetstone, and my son, Foss.

EMMALINE, URSELINE, VALENTINE

Our brother!

FOSSMIRE

(cringing) God help me...

LADY AUGUSTA

May I offer you some tea? I also have champagne.

EMMALINE, URSELINE, VALENTINE

Champagne please, Milady!

DOCTOR WHETSTONE

Well, I must say, this is quite a unique...reunion.

VALENTINE

(munching a cake) Yum! Such sweetmeats and tarts!

EMMALINE

From *The Queen of Hearts*, she made some tarts...

EMMALINE, URSELINE, VALENTINE

*All on a summer's day;
The Knave of Hearts,
He stole those tarts,
And took them clean away!*

FOSSMIRE

Tell me, ladies, are these nursery songs meant to keep us from any meaningful discourse? Of course, if you're put in a cage, you'll have plenty of time to sing.

LADY AUGUSTA

Don't mind Foss, girls. He can be quite tedious. I'm curious though -- you mentioned that you strive to serve my crusade which is controlling the world's population, but I'm afraid Foss thinks you're responsible for all these...disappearances, and if you are -- well, it's very wicked and...cruel. Now all of England's in mourning, all of us wearing black.

VALENTINE

It suits you fine, Milady.

FOSSMIRE

Surely you realize that while Lady Augusta disapproves of an overcrowded planet, she knows that everyone currently living is entitled to live out their lives.

EMMALINE

Aye, but not everyone living's alive.

URSELINE

We nip the dead heads or them that's waning.

DOCTOR WHETSTONE

But how do you decide who's "waning"?

URSELINE

We sniff the Ethers o' The Erinyes, emanations from festered holes in withered souls.

FOSSMIRE

But how?! How do you make them vanish?

VALENTINE

'Tis the power of the dwindles, the curse o' the Dirae.

EMMALINE

The goddesses are vexed from being slighted these many moons. 'Tis a simple twist o' the wrist to harness their power.

URSELINE

Aye, and a pinch o' fungus, codswallop, chalk, chickory, and flux o' the Furies.

EMMALINE

'Tis child's play, a release for them that's plagued with piles, stones, and scabbies.

URSELINE

Some's got their hearts racing, heads pounding, joints full o' the gout.

VALENTINE

'Tis great sport to glimpse 'em fizzle and fade.

FOSSMIRE

But why? Why do this at all?

EMMALINE

'Tis for thee, Milady, for the loss o' thy innocence. Ere we parted, you bade us to ne'er trust any man, to hunt and slay the devils afore they snatch our hearts and hymens.

URSELINE

You said, "The world ain't safe till the last one's dead as mutton!"

VALENTINE

“And afore they pass, be sure to pluck a button!”

LADY AUGUSTA

Did I...? Did I really say that?

EMMALINE, URSELINE, VALENTINE

Aye.

EMMALINE

Come, sisters, lets clasp hands and summon from the vasty deep, our bounty for Milady!
Fee, Fi, Fo, Fum,...

EMMALINE, URSELINE, VALENTINE

*I smell the blood of an Englishman!
Be he alive or be he dead,
I'll grind his bones to make my...*

(Lightning flashes, thunder claps, and cascades of buttons descend from the ceiling, crashing to the floor!)

FOSSMIRE
Good lord!

LADY AUGUSTA
Ohhhhhhhh!

DOCTOR WHETSTONE
Oh, my god...

VALENTINE

‘Tis our buttons, heaps and hoards o’ buttons!

(Pause, then LADY AUGUSTA still trembling, speaks.)

LADY AUGUSTA

I used to bite them off their shirts. When the twins were on top of me, I’d bite through the threads and swallow their buttons so mother would scold the boys for losing them. That was my child’s revenge, so when you first mentioned the buttons -- well, that’s when I suspected the girls were mine. *(pause, she sighs)* Now girls, it’s true I must have said those horrid things, and meant them, but I’ve recovered, you see, and don’t need or even want my innocence, and I certainly don’t hate enough to hurt anyone. Oh, girls, my dear girls, this really must stop, it must! Remember our little song?
For every evil under the sun...

LADY AUGUSTA, EMMALINE, URSELINE, VALENTINE

*There is a remedy or there is none.
If there be one, seek till you find it,
If there be none, never mind it!*

LADY AUGUSTA

Well, this is not the remedy, and if you don't cease this instant my son and the Metropolitan Police will do everything in their power to stop you.

FOSSMIRE

That's right, we'll even fight your magic with our magic. Even as we speak, the good witches of England are banishing you. At any given moment you could all drop dead.

URSELINE

Hah! They couldn't conjure a boil on me bum!

VALENTINE

Or a wart on your wanker!

FOSSMIRE

But what if they're chanting from your very own chamber? Using your very own goddesses against you!

EMMALINE and VALENTINE

Zounds!

URSELINE

The gall o' it all!

LADY AUGUSTA

Stop them, Foss! Ring them up! Drive to Belgravia! Do whatever you have to do, but stop them!

FOSSMIRE

I'll stop my witches if you'll stop yours; stop the vanishings! And where are the men who've already gone?! My sergeant, for instance -- where is he?!

URSELINE

Somewhere dark and damp and down, down...

URSELINE, EMMALINE, VALENTINE

...down the rabbit hole!

FOSSMIRE

But *where* is it?!

VALENTINE

At a tea party!

URSELINE

Ask Milady!

FOSSMIRE

I have but she won't answer.

EMMALINE

'Tis unseemly for a mum to tell a son.

DOCTOR WHETSTONE

You have nothing to fear, Lady Augusta. Please, tell us.

FOSSMIRE

Yes, Gussie, for godssake!

LADY AUGUSTA

Well, the twins, you see...

FOSSMIRE

Yes...? What about the twins?

LADY AUGUSTA

Whenever they...well, whenever they wanted to...to hurt me, they said they were going down Alice's rabbit hole. So you see, the rabbit hole is my...my...

URSELINE

'Tis the tunnel to Milady's womb!

EMMALINE

Her womb's a tomb.

VALENTINE

Must be cumbersome, holding them souls inside.

URSELINE

Tain't comfortable for them neither.

EMMALINE, VALENTINE, URSELINE

(Laughing) Ha, ha, ha!

URSELINE

'Tis why Milady's bloated and paunched as a pot.

LADY AUGUSTA

I...I don't understand. Are you saying...?

EMMALINE

Aye, 'tis where we stash the vanished!

URSELINE

The banished!

VALENTINE, EMMALINE, URSELINE

The lost!

URSELINE

The twin's oft said, "drink me," afore their descent.

VALENTINE

"Drink me, eat me," then down, down, down they went!

(A low droning is heard from the VOICES OF THE GOOD WITCHES as LADY AUGUSTA sits, shaken.)

DOCTOR WHETSTONE

Lady Augusta, are you alright?

(The droning grows louder as the SISTERS are suddenly thrown about in circles, scratching at the air, as the GOOD WITCHES VOICES are heard:)

VOICES OF THE GOOD WITCHES

*They fought and they fit,
And they scratched and they bit,
Till excepting their nails
And the tips of their tails,
Instead of three cats there weren't any!*

(The SISTERS swoon and collapse simultaneously.)

LADY AUGUSTA

Oh, noooooo...

DOCTOR WHETSTONE

My god, what's happening?!

FOSSMIRE

It's the banishings! By god, it worked!

(Blackout to the sound of timorous mews.)

SCENE 18

(The news become the BBC broadcasting tones as dim lights reveal a man holding his smartphone.)

MALE VOICE ON THE SMARTPHONE

From the BBC Internet Radio Three in London: an update on the plague of vanishing men. According to Police Commissioner Reginald Boulder, there have been no reported disappearances since last Thursday. That's five full days of relief from the terror that led to a frantic nationwide search for the bodies of nearly twenty thousand missing males. The men of England are free to walk the streets once again; however, the police strongly advise that they proceed with utmost caution.

SCENE 19

(Fossmire's bedroom where the SISTERS are asleep in his bed. Standing aside are LADY AUGUSTA, DOCTOR WHETSTONE, and MADELINE singing.)

MADELINE, LADY AUGUSTA, DOCTOR WHETSTONE

*Sleep, baby, sleep,
Down where the woodbines creep;
Be always like the lamb so mild,
A kind and sweet and gentle child.
Sleep, baby, sleep.*

(FOSSMIRE enters.)

FOSSMIRE

How are they?

DOCTOR WHETSTONE.

Their fever's down but their blood pressure's low.

LADY AUGUSTA

Foss wants them dead.

FOSSMIRE

I'd be satisfied if they shrank to the size of a wood tick. *(to Madeline)* Can you do that?

LADY AUGUSTA

If only we could harness their energy, make them useful. Think of the service they could be in our clinics.

FOSSMIRE

Right. Instead of murdering men, they'd be rendered impotent. I know how you think, Gussie.

LADY AUGUSTA

Well, why not?

FOSSMIRE

Because it's indecent, immoral, and your own form of genocide. My god, can't you see what's happening? Our whole mad century's full of people wasting their passions, their lives, and for what? Ideologies that breed misery upon misery! Do you really want a world without men?

LADY AUGUSTA

Not without you, my dear.

(Suddenly the SISTERS sit bolt upright!)

DR. WHETSTONE, MADELINE
(*Gasp!*) Ohhhhhhh!

FOSSMIRE
Good lord!

LADY AUGUSTA
Finally!

EMMALINE, URSELINE, VALENTINE

*Croak said the toad, I'm hungry, I think,
Today I've had nothing to eat or to drink.*

(The SISTERS fall back.)

DOCTOR WHETSTONE

Oh, dear, they're rallying.

FOSSMIRE

They can't! They'll start the massacre all over again!

MADELINE RIME

If only we could stop them; I don't want them hurt, only...confined.

FOSSMIRE

If you mean imprisoned, mere walls won't hold them. They'll have to be crushed -- utterly and completely.

MADELINE
Oh, no...

LADY AUGUSTA
They can stay here with us.

FOSSMIRE

What...?! What did you say?!

LADY AUGUSTA

They can stay here.

FOSSMIRE

Absolutely not! I forbid it!

LADY AUGUSTA

The girls are mine, aren't they? So I'm accountable for their actions -- god help me -- and if you crush them, you're apt to crush me.

FOSSMIRE

Tell me, does it work the other way around? Can we get rid of them by getting rid of you?

LADY AUGUSTA

I know you don't mean that, dear, and besides, what would happen to the missing men? Don't you believe my womb holds a multitude of souls?

FOSSMIRE

If it does, then release them! Spit or shit them out! All I know is that they can't stay here, but if you insist, then I'm leaving. Tonight! They've taken over my bed and my life, and I ought to have left years ago. So it's them or me, Gussie!

LADY AUGUSTA

(pause) Well, I...I suppose you could take a room at one of your clubs.

(Pause as FOSSMIRE looks crushed, and DOCTOR WHETSTONE grasps his hand.)

DOCTOR WHETSTONE

You're welcome to stay with me, Foss.

FOSSMIRE

Thank you, Flora. I ought to leave London altogether, give notice to the Commissioner and move to a village near Dundee. I'll buy a country cottage and become a witch myself. *(glancing at Flora)* I might even conjure a child or two.

LADY AUGUSTA

(smiling) You'd make me a grandmother...?

FOSSMIRE

Yes, but I'll still fight your magic with mine!

LADY AUGUSTA

Not to worry, dear. I'll get my chicks back under my wing.

(The SISTERS sit bolt upright again.)

EMMALINE, URSELINE, VALENTINE

*Ride a cock-horse to Banbury Cross
To see a fine lady upon a white horse...*

(LADY AUGUSTA joins in, happily in their thrall.)

LADY AUGUSTA, EMMALINE, URSELINE, VALENTINE

*Rings on her fingers and bells on her toes,
She shall have music wherever she goes.*

(The SISTERS fall back; LADY AUGUSTA starts to fall forward towards them, but FOSSMIRE holds her back.)

FOSSMIRE

My god, Gussie, don't you see..? Your chicks are controlling you!

LADY AUGUSTA

(pause, she sighs) Foss, are you really leaving? Dundee's so far away...

FOSSMIRE

I have to go somewhere. I keep feeling I'm living in an allegory, and if I stay I'll go mad.
(pause) Remember the song father used to sing?
*When I was a little boy,
I had but little wit;...*

LADY AUGUSTA and FOSSMIRE

*'Tis a long time ago,
And I have no more yet.*

FOSSMIRE

Oh, Gussie, whatever will become of us?

(FOSSMIRE kisses his mother's cheek, then turns to FLORA who grasps his hand. THEY embrace and walk off in dimming lights.)

SCENE 20

(Clocks chime the passing of time. Weeks later in a lecture hall, lights reveal LADY AUGUSTA whose belly has ballooned to enormous proportions. SHE addresses the audience while the SISTERS stand aside, beaming with mischievous glee.)

LADY AUGUSTA

My dear ladies, we are venturing through a new millennium, and it is *our* millennium. With more and more men vanquished to oblivion, our numbers are legion, our hearts bereft, our lives spent in mourning. A few have been spared, but who of us has not been deprived of cherished companions? Who of us has not rued the rage that spawned their extinction? Still, we must never forget: we are women, and women can proliferate! Through sperm banks and cloning we'll continue to bear children, but if we dare to do so, we must always remember: They are the forces we let loose in the world!

(As the SISTERS sing, LADY AUGUSTA tilts back her head and opens her mouth.)

EMMALINE, URSELINE, VALENTINE

*There was an old woman
Called Nothing-At-All
Who rejoiced in a dwelling exceedingly small.
She stretched out her mouth to its utmost extent,
And down in one gulp the whole world went!*

(LADY AUGUSTA remains agape as a human howl is heard, echoed by countless others. These are the cries of vanished souls dwelling in the depths of her womb. The howls swell to a roaring crescendo, then cease as thousands of buttons cascade from the ceiling and lights fade to black.)

End of Play

NURSERY SONGS SUNG IN DRINK ME

Over in the Meadow
Whose Little Pigs
The Itsy Bitsy Spider
Boys and Girls Come Out to Play
Where, Oh, Where Has My Little Dog Gone?
Hush-a-Bye Baby
Row, Row, Row Your Boat
To Market
The Loving Sisters
Polly Put the Kettle on
The Old Woman who Lived in a Shoe
Here We Go Up Up Up
Robin the Bobbin
Twinkle, Twinkle, Little Star
I Love Little Pussy
The Cuckoo
Buttons
London Bridge
Oh, Dear, What Can the Matter Be?
Ring Around the Rosie
Lavender's Blue
Three Cats of Kilkenny
Merry are the Bells
The Queen of Hearts
The Giant
For Every Evil
Sleep, Baby, Sleep
Toad and Frog
To Banbury Cross
Lack Wit
Nothing-At-All

