

THE BOYS AND BARS TO GO

David S. Cole
1962

Characters

The COMBINED MAN

his WIFE

The POLICEMAN

The HOOLIGAN

(The playing-area is shallow and flat - an elongated rectangle with the longer side to the audience. Two pieces of scenery delimit the upstage extent of the playing-area: a large flat and a cage.

The flat extends two-thirds of the way along the upstage limit of the playing-area, measured from stage-right. Its basic color is pale blue, like a sunny but misty sky. On the flat is colorfully painted the receding main street of a European town. The perspective of this painting is perfunctory, so that when an actor gets near the flat, the illusion is at once dispelled, and the man towers over the building. The style of the painting is that of the sketchy, characterless water-colors which hang over motel beds.

The remaining one-third of the upstage area is filled by a rectangular cage, large enough for a man to pace about in, mounted on a one-foot platform. The front wall of bars of this cage is not flush with the flat, but slants toward down-left (i.e. in toward the audience). As the interior of the cage forms another playing-area, the position of the cage should be such that all parts of the cage are equally visible. This must not, however, be achieved by cutaway walls or ceiling: the cage must appear a place of oppressive enclosure.

Jutting out from the onstage front corner of the cage is a sort of gibbet from which a clean white rope hangs. At the end of the rope is a shiny red wooden handle.

The POLICEMAN, whose uniform, hat, stick and handle-bar mustache all vaguely suggest a London Bobby (though there is nothing particularly British about his speech), leans against the downstage wall of bars. Relaxed (hands behind back, sole of one foot up against the wall of bars), he faces the audience. From the rise to the moment when the CONDEMNED MAN begins to speak, he puckers his lips and wags his head in time, as if whistling - but he produces no sound. He resumes this soundless whistle with mechanical promptness whenever the CONDEMNED MAN pauses for breath or for any other reason; and he leaves off each time the CONDEMNED MAN recommences to speak. At no point, however, does he seem aware of the passionate narration which the CONDEMNED MAN, feverishly clutching at the bars from inside the cage, begins to address to him directly after the rise.)

CONDEMNED MAN

Now the question was, how were they going to get me here from the City of Justice. Thousands of peasants were mulling around the National Highway, each one of them with a pitchfork he wanted me at the end of. They'd have tumbled an armored car, they'd have made swisscheese of a hay-wagon. So: what was the government going to do?

One of the judges had a suggestion. "I'll tell you what," he said, "I'll tell you what." And the suggestion was this, that they bundle me into a laundry truck and drive through under the peasants' noses; which doesn't sound sensible, but the man knew what he was talking about. Because the peasants assumed that whatever their government undertook to do, it would do in a drums-and-trumpets sort of way; so when this plain laundry truck beeped at them, they just shuffled on to the soft-shoulder. So you have to give the man credit. In fact, the more I think about it, the more convinced I get that it was he - that same devil of a judge - who figured out this...

(indicating the cage)

thing. None of the others had the imagination: Old Trelawney with his salt-water gas-mask routine; Colonel Pinchwit, who watches the strappado the way people watch a bullfight - I know them all, I've worked with them all, and they haven't the imagination. Whereas this new man - I say "new" because I'd never seen him till that day - this new man sat the whole time kneading his skull-cap and you could see the mind going like a pair of scales.

But that's not all, I haven't told the whole story. If I do, if I just point out a few more things, you'll see why I say that that my truck-ride goes right along with this...

(indicates the cage)

arrangement here. In the first place, The truck was open at the back - just a loose canvas so people couldn't see in - and nothing to hold on to, so that if we'd once stopped short, I'd have gone flying out like a pinball in a pinball machine. Now as I wasn't fettered or anything, you might think that would be a good thing

for me. But if you think that, you're not visualizing the situation, you're forgetting about those peasants smoldering around out there, stabbing at the trees for practice. No, there was no need for fetters, and that devil of a judge knew it. What he had done was to forge me chains from the possibility of freedom: my death-sentence was assured by my opportunities for life. Which is what makes me say, regarding that truck-ride, that it was all of a piece with this...

(indicates the cage)

contrivance, and most likely it was that devil of a judge who dreamt up the one and the other.

Well, I'm talking through my hat a little when I say I never thought about escape. I did think about it, I did catch myself thinking, Look: they're only men out there - however many, however vicious, they're only men. I was comparing them, you see, with the Trelawneys and the Pinchwits of this world, because after you've been put through the salt-water and strappado, you can't get too worked up over a pitchfork. And so on, that sort of thing; to secure myself against which, I put the case this way, I said: "Imagine each one of those peasants is a giant slug (I've a woman's terror of slugs); imagine the National Highway is at this moment crawling with numberless giant slugs: Do you want to get out there with them?" That checked me, and then a gust blew the flap open for a moment, I had a view of murderous peasant faces, and then I didn't have to think about the slugs any more.

To get off that. They had me here by three in the morning: out of the truck, into the cage before a pair of lovers embracing over at the fountain could tell what was happening.

Now if you want to understand what's become of me since then, you have to take it by stages. The first week, I never took my eyes off the rope. If someone came within ten feet of it, I began to compose myself for the next world. There was nothing in life for me but fear; and you know what I had a particular fear of?

Children. I could usually frighten them away by roaring like an animal, but you have to sleep. And suppose that as I sleep, a small girl gives the rope a pull. Why should a girl do that? Well, perhaps she 's heard Papa speak of a bogie they keep behind bars in the Great Square, and if you pull a certain rope... But it's not likely the child would remember all that, it's more likely she would just feel like it. There's a rope: children see ropes, they like to pull them. So, as thoughtlessly as she might run her glove along an area railing, the little girl rings down my life. If you can take it the right way, it's ideal: I mean, I'm justified beyond the power of the Tribunal to add or detract. But now, just think for a moment! - that one's death should come as the consequence of a child's lightest inconsequence!

With all this about the children, I'm not just talking about what might have happened, I'm telling you what did happen. What happened every night of that first week. Just after the street-lamps were lighted, a small boy would come racing down the street as if he were afraid he might not make it by closing time. He'd pull up short before the cage, examine me like a painting, and then - you won't believe this - then he would drop me a curtsy. Not some grotesque bit of gaminry, but a quite elegant dance-turn, every night of that hellish week. Then, before I knew what he was about, he had the rope in his hands, he was running it through his fingers like a necklace, and every now and then - jerk! jerk! -

(gesture)

loosening his grip just at the last moment. Well, you try and sit through that half a hundred times in an hour: he got a rise each time, of course he did, and I think that's what he liked, my being so beautifully predictable. He'd never seen a man that way before, nobody ever had. Crowds gathered to watch me try and keep time with the evil impulses of that child. Officer!

Well, that was hell, no other word describes it, but it didn't take me long to realize an amazing thing: No one was ever going to pull that rope! Why should they? Those people had a good thing

going, and if there's one story the peasantry of this country knows, it's the story of the golden goose. You know what they were acting like? They were acting like a lover who shallies and toys and puts off consummation because the consummation means the end of the kicks. So, like the mistress, my attention began to wander.

You see what I'm getting at: it was simply impossible for me to go on believing in all the danger. I mean, what would have been the point? Instead, as I say, I began to let my attention wander a little. There were some fascinating subjects I couldn't wait to start thinking about. For example, the apparatus of this cage.

Now, all I had been told was, "Anyone can pull that rope; and if someone does, you die." The manner of death they didn't specify, and you can see why not. It would have been - as that unknown devil of a judge well knew - all I need. Because I can prepare to hang or drown, to die this or that death; it's death generally speaking one doesn't find the help for.

So: I began to speculate, How would it work? The first thing I did was to examine the cage, to see what sort of mechanism the rope hooked on to. But as far as I could see, the rope didn't hook on to anything; it just vanished into a hole. Well, what were some other possibilities?

(miming the mechanisms as he describes them)

Perhaps the walls would slam together to mangle me. Perhaps a network of spikes would rise out of the floor. Perhaps the bars could be electrified. Perhaps a panel would slide open to admit a poison snake. Perhaps -

(Suddenly the POLICEMAN starts - it must be clear his starting has no relation whatever to anything the CONDEMNED MAN has been doing or saying - and pulls out a pocket watch. He panics when he sees the time. Raising his whistle to his lips, cheeks red and eyes bulging, he blows three long - but soundless blasts - and runs off.

The CONDEMNED MAN looks around to make sure he is alone, then cautiously reaches out between the bars and takes hold of the rope's handle. Just as his fingers close around it, enter the HOOLIGAN, trotting, and trailing a

dead cat on the end of a string. The CONDEMNED MAN draws his arm back into the cage.)

HOOLIGAN

(stopping short before the cage)

You're the one it kills if I pull the rope?

CONDEMNED MAN

I am.

HOOLIGAN

You want to tell me how?

CONDEMNED MAN

What do you mean, "how"? How do I come to be here? You're old enough to know about the Revolution, but there's certain revolutionary activity you would never hear about. I'm referring to the sessions of the Grand Tribunal. I suppose you've wondered from time to time what goes on inside those gates. Well, I could tell you - speaking now not just from my experience as a prisoner, but as one of the prime movers behind the operation. I can say without exaggeration, that's what I was! On the Day of the Great Levelling, I shot the King's armadillo, what do you think of that? Shot it, and waved on the mob with its severed tail, like a banner. Then, when we got things to the organizational stage, I, in my capacity of subprovost -

HOOLIGAN

How the rope would kill you, is what I want to know.

CONDEMNED MAN

Oh, is that it? Well, I really couldn't say. Let me go back and try to reconstruct things for you. This judge never got around to putting on his skull-cap, he had it in his fingers the whole time, and he said, Subprovost: you have given untold pain - this to me, from that devil in a skull-cap, even old Pinchwit had to smile...well, anyway... - you have given untold pain, and

now untold pain shall be given you. You shall be conveyed into a cage erected upon the Great Square of our Capital City. To this cage a rope shall be fixed which any passerby wishing to undertake your chastisement may pull. If and when pulled, the rope dispatches you. He didn't say how. However, if you'd be interested to hear the courses I've been able to enumerate -

HOOLIGAN

I'd be interested to see.

(reaching for the rope)

Suppose I -

CONDEMNED MAN

You just keep your hands off!

HOOLIGAN

The cheek of that! What are you doing, telling me to keep my hands off? The judge said "anyone", didn't he?

CONDEMNED MAN

The judge said, "anyone".

HOOLIGAN

Well then?

CONDEMNED MAN

"Anyone," the judge said, digging his fingers into his skullcap... But you can see no one has; and why should you? What have I ever done to you? I've never seen you!

HOOLIGAN

(holding up the cat to the CONDEMNED MAN)

What has this cat ever done to me? I wanted to see a cat die, so I put a string around her four legs and dragged her through the dust, mile after mile, whimpering and dying because she couldn't get her breath. It is interesting to see a cat die. I want to see a man die.

CONDEMNED MAN

You scum! You scum! I will not receive my death at the hands of such scum!

HOOLIGAN

Will if I choose. And, you know, I do choose
(advancing toward rope)

CONDEMNED MAN

In my time, I put boys like this to the torture. Such boys were
bled! I have bled the life out of such boys!

HOOLIGAN

(his hand on the rope)

Well, then, you won't be getting any worse than you gave.

CONDEMNED MAN

In my time, such boys were put to the saltwater and strappado.

HOOLIGAN

(turning back, interested)

The salt water and the what?

CONDEMNED MAN

Saltwater and strap-pa-do.

HOOLIGAN

(practising the pronunciation)

Strap-pa-do. Strappado. Which is what?

CONDEMNED MAN

Which is -

(Lowering his voice so that the HOOLIGAN is
obliged to drop the rope and come nearer)

Strappado is when you tie a man's wrists behind his back, see,
and then hoist him up so's to dislocate the shoulders. They
scream and scream.

HOOLIGAN

Who screams?

CONDEMNED MAN

The subject, the one you're working on.

HOOLIGAN

How do you know about all this?

CONDEMNED MAN

So quick to dispatch me and not even know my crime?

(The HOOLIGAN is all ears.)

I mean, the crime that's been laid to my account. I never committed any crime; it's my high principles I have to thank for landing me here.

(The HOOLIGAN's attention is wandering back to the rope.)

All right! You asked how I know about the tortures? Good. I can see I'm going to have to tell you what I really was. You didn't believe all that about the subprovost and the armadillo, did you? Ha, ha! Well, listen: I ran the Directorate of Police. I suppose you're too ignorant to know what that involves, hey? Maybe it will help you to understand if I tell you my instructions, which were, to get the required information any way I could. Do you see what that means, "any way I could"?

HOOLIGAN

Well, if you're such big brass, what are you doing in there?

CONDEMNED MAN

So quick to dispatch me, and not even know the circumstances of my arrest? Now that's really surprising. I had thought those colleagues of mine would make sure every street-boy heard about it. Because they knew they were going to have to make my guilt pretty plain if they were going to get the people out from behind me. Nothing short of that would do it. So for a long time I was able to keep to the safe side of their jealousy; because if there was one thing I clearly was not, it was the thing they were trying to make me out: a traitor to the revolution. But they found a way to trip up my heels in the end. Now you listen.

(As before, the HOOLIGAN's attention is wandering back to the rope, but this time the CONDEMNED MAN is too involved in his story to notice.)

On the sixth of October I received a telephone call from someone who claimed to be the Commandant of a counterrevolutionary army. As we possessed no evidence for the existence of such an army, I didn't know what to think; I said to the man, "I don't believe you."

He said, "To prove that my army not only exists, but is at present within striking distance of the Capital, I shall now order two artillery pieces to be fired off."

(Two artillery retorts are heard. The HOOLIGAN starts and wheels across the stage; the CONDEMNED MAN does not appear to have heard the retorts.)

And no sooner had he spoken than two pieces actually were fired off somewhere in the vicinity of the Capital. You could hear the retorts. The Commandant now went on to say, that as his positions were impregnable and his weaponry matchless, it would be no use my attempting resistance. If preparations for any such attempt should be detected - and the Commandant claimed that his sources of information were more than adequate - I would, so the Commandant assured me, suffer assassination later that afternoon. If, on the other hand, I would be willing to throw in my lot with the counterrevolutionaries, I was to give evidence of my compliance by appearing at ten the next morning in the lounge of a well-known coffee-house. And having said that, the Commandant hung up without giving me a chance to reply.

(The HOOLIGAN has recovered himself and is moving toward the rope again.)

Well, I had to go to the coffee-house, didn't I? Aside from just letting myself be killed - and I could see no advantage in that - what else was there to do? If I was to dissuade or apprehend the man, if I was to somehow rescue the Revolution, I had to keep myself alive. I don't say that since then I haven't thought of other ways of doing that, but at the time I could see no alternative to keeping the appointment - which shows my colleagues' ingenuity. It had all been their doing, of course, and no sooner had I set foot in the coffee-house than I found myself under arrest for collusion. My colleagues had tapes of the rigged phone conversation and could now claim to have surprised me keeping the treasonable rendezvous therein appointed. The "Commandant" - it must have been Pinchwit with a cloth over the receiver - was of course never apprehended, though a great show was made of destroying enemy positions near the Capital.

The deception was just gross enough. Tried and disgraced, hustled here with this ingenuity on my head, I haven't a thing to hope and everything to fear from the citizenry and the nation. The colleagues have gained their end.

HOOLIGAN

(his hand closing around the rope)

You said something about saltwater?

CONDEMNED MAN

What?

HOOLIGAN

Before you got on to the strappado, you were saying something about saltwater.

CONDEMNED MAN

Oh. Yes...

HOOLIGAN

(working the rope in his fingers)

I think you'll want to go into that...

CONDEMNED MAN

Saltwater, yes, that is for subjects of extreme difficulty. You tie a gasmask to the face and pump in saltwater - which the gasmask compels the subject to swallow - until the abdomen begins to swell. You then strike the distended abdomen with mallets.

(The HOOLIGAN's eyes gleam.)

But as I say, this technique is used only in cases of extreme difficulty. In general we go after the soles of the feet and the private parts. You know what I mean by "private parts"?

HOOLIGAN

Oh, I do! How did you get into this line of work?

CONDEMNED MAN

As I say, there was this revolution...

HOOLIGAN

Oh. And how does it happen that you're here?

CONDEMNED MAN

I've all this time been telling you!

HOOLIGAN

Well, I'm rather a slow type.

(tightening his grip on the rope)

Maybe you wouldn't mind telling me again.

CONDEMNED MAN

Mind, why should I mind? As I say, there was the jealousy of my colleagues, and then there was my refusal to comply with certain directives of the Grand Tribunal which I considered -

HOOLIGAN

Yes, well, as I say, I'm rather a slow type, but I'll tell you one thing about me: I'm a patriot, truly devoted to my country, that's the sort of young fellow I am. So when you say you don't go along with the Grand Tribunal, I know where my sympathies are going to lie. Being a patriot, you see. Being that sort of young fellow. So what I say is, now we've turned the rascals out, let's turn the rascals off.

(He raises his arm to yank down the rope. The
CONDEMNED MAN turns away.)

Aren't you curious a bit?

CONDEMNED MAN

Very much so. Because I've just had a thought.

HOOLIGAN

Oh, have you? What would that be, now?

CONDEMNED MAN

Only this: I was just wondering, how can you be sure the pulling of that rope won't set me free?

HOOLIGAN

Because the judge said -

CONDEMNED MAN

Oh, yes, the judge said. But the judge is a torturer and I'm a torturer, and shall I tell you the torturer's rule of thumb?

"Give your man - or woman - or boy -

(The HOOLIGAN shrinks away.)

the prospect of death, but never anything more than the prospect. Never the release. Never the coup de gr^âce." Now, if I had you in my studio -

HOOLIGAN

(getting a little nervous)

Yes, but you don't. I've got you. I can do what I want with you.

CONDEMNED MAN

For the moment, yes, you can. Everything's different when you pull that rope. I mean - it's possible. I don't know. I thought the judge an ironical sort of judge. I thought I could make out a gleam of fellow-feeling in his eye. I may be wrong. Or then, I may be right. Perhaps if jaws rise out of the earth, it will be you they'll carry off. Perhaps I'll be set down safe and sound. Then I'll have my will of you, young fellow. I'll take you to my studio. I'll show you around...

(The HOOLIGAN, terrified, screams hysterically and runs off. The CONDEMNED MAN looks after him anxiously, his expression gradually lightening as he realizes the HOOLIGAN is not coming back. For a moment, the CONDEMNED MAN settles back, relieved. Then, as if remembering something, he bounds to the front of the cage, looks in all directions; having assured himself that no one is coming, he cautiously reaches out and takes the handle of the rope in his hand and fingers it.)

Enter the WIFE of the CONDEMNED MAN, carrying some sort of snakeskin handbag. She stops short when she sees the CONDEMNED MAN with the rope in his hand. The CONDEMNED MAN hold out the rope toward her.)

No one knows I can reach it. Or perhaps they all know. What I don't know is, was I meant to be able to reach it.

(lets the rope slip through his fingers)

It's maddening.

WIFE

I should think the whole thing would be maddening.

CONDEMNED MAN

(irritated)

Yes, of course, of course. I meant, that in particular.

WIFE

That in particular... Well, Alfie, you have been having yourself a busy day. I know because I was watching from over by the fountain. That little boy simply would not leave you alone, would he? I wonder if it's ever occurred to you how interesting you must be to children, with your cage. Has that ever occurred to you? Taking that child as an example -

CONDEMNED MAN

About that "child" -

WIFE

Yes, well, you needn't go into it, I saw everything. And before that, you had your conversation with the Policeman. Oh! it's what I call a busy day. And speaking of that Policeman, don't we know him? Weren't you once associated with him or something?

CONDEMNED MAN

I wasn't "associated" with him; how would I have come to be associated with him. He used to hang around Revolutionary Headquarters, you might remember him from there.

WIFE

Was he the one you all used to call "The Zealot"?

CONDEMNED MAN

I can't remember calling him that, although he was certainly getting himself quite a reputation for a young fellow. I was told he spent months putting the Series Nineteen pamphlets into verse so that the colliers would be able to digest them. But he had to keep changing the doctrine to fit the rhyme-scheme, so all he got was a reprimand. I thought he was headed for real trouble, but

I guess not...

I don't know why I'm talking about him so much - I can't recall ever speaking above two words to him.

WIFE

You certainly seemed to be pouring your heart out just now.

CONDEMNED MAN

Well, I was pretending not to know him.

(pause)

Elyse: You have been to the City of Appeal?

WIFE

Was I to have done that for you?

CONDEMNED MAN

I can be killed, you know, momentarily. There's never one moment at which I can think of death as a way off.

WIFE

Yes, Alfie. How wearing! It's really some state of affairs! About the City of Appeal -

CONDEMNED MAN

You have not been there?

WIFE

No, Alfie.

CONDEMNED MAN

Elyse - why should I ~~have~~ ^{have} to keep saying this?, that you're my wife, that -

WIFE

We're husband and wife, that's true, and I want what's best for us. Now we did say something about the City of Appeal, didn't we? - but it had quite slipped my mind, the City of Appeal...

CONDEMNED MAN

I'll tell you what slipped your mind: it was my life, that's what it was that slipped your mind.

WIFE

Oh, Alfie, I see you alive.

CONDEMNED MAN

Oh, alive, yes -

WIFE

Then why do you say -

CONDEMNED MAN

- yes, alive, but shattered and driven and I don't know what. Don't make me keep saying things. Just look at my eyes.

WIFE

No, you needn't. Yes, I'm looking.

(to herself, as if balancing some inner equation)

Well, that's something else again. I cannot be sure...

CONDEMNED MAN

What's this now about being sure? What do you need to be so sure of?

WIFE

There! You've said it! "What do I need to be sure of?" - I can't decide.

CONDEMNED MAN

Decide what? What business have you got going around deciding? What is there to decide?

WIFE

Whether - I'm going to be plain, Alf - whether I think you ought to be released.

CONDEMNED MAN

Is it possible you think I'm guilty? Or - let me put it another way - that you think I'm being rightly punished?

WIFE

Alf, I sat in that courtroom day after day, and I don't think I'm any slower than the next woman, but I was never even able to understand the charge against you.

CONDEMNED MAN

Of course not! You know, to you, Elyse, I really shouldn't have to make speeches about my feeling for the Revolution. You know. You took risks you didn't have to so I wouldn't have to take them alone. You helped me get my proposals into workable language and in the end they were as much your proposals as mine. That's true even of the one that got me thrown off the Tribunal, not that I'm trying to reproach you at this late date...Well, anyhow, you know all this and I know it, there's no point running through it again. But knowing it, knowing it, Elyse, how can you possibly give any credit to the colleagues' deception - a deception so enormous that it couldn't register as one because deceptions had never come that big before? They wanted control of the Tribunal; all right, they got it: Are they going to get control of your judgment, too? Are they going to - or should I say, have they already found a way to make you believe me guilty?

(pause; he remembers something)

Although, come to think of it, you said you don't believe I'm guilty...

WIFE

Right, dear. And all you've been saying is very eloquent and very true and not to the point. When I say I'm not sure you ought to be released, I'm not talking about the justice of your being confined. Oh, if it were a question of that... ! No, but I'm talking about the confinement itself. Now I visit you here day after day, and it's a fact I can't help noticing that you seem... improved.

CONDEMNED MAN

Oh, improved, is that it? Look, have you eyes to see? Well, maybe not; maybe you really haven't eyes to see. All right, if not, close them, close your eyes and try to sense what it's like to pass one hour in here. I'm not just making conversation: go on, close them.

(The WIFE faces away from him, closes her eyes.)

Now - am I supposed to find some word - What? Anxiety? Despair?

(A smile of complete contentment is spreading over the WIFE's face.)

I can't get it very precise, you standing there with your eyes shut...
If I begin about sanity -

WIFE

Oh, well, sanity - sanity, you know, that's neither here nor there, sanity. On the other hand, since you have become more dependent on me, you're showing me much more attention. That's natural, I suppose, but it's one side of the question.

CONDEMNED MAN

Elyse, when a man's life is hanging by a thread, is that the time to be damned feminine?

WIFE

Yes, dear. That is the time.

(opening her eyes and turning to him)

Although I'm not trying to be this or that, I'm really not. I'm just telling you the truth as I see it. And I see that your conditions have done you good.

CONDEMNED MAN

I want you to explain that. While you're explaining, I want you to keep looking at my eyes.

WIFE

Oh, I have been looking, now let me go into this. What I like about your situation is, it's so very concrete. I mean, it can't have failed to occur to you - you with your generalizing mind - that this fix you've got into and that you're making such a thing about, is the same fix every soul on earth has got to live with. The cage, for example. You think it's so queer and terrible to be penned in like this, but I want you to stop and think, is there anywhere such a thing as a man uncaged? Affection, responsibility or force keeps us all to our cages, and there's no such thing as the run of the place. Or again, take the rope: We're every one of us at the disposal of all the rest. I can't

see a difference, I really can't.

Except for this: that when I say the sort of things I've just been saying, it's only a manner of speaking. With you, it's the literal truth, and what a great advantage for you, Alfie! The things most of us must struggle to keep before the mind's eye, you have right there before the body's eye. Bars, nice clean hemp...

(She fingers the rope.)

CONDEMNED MAN

Elyse!

WIFE

(letting the rope drop)

Nervous, Alfie?

CONDEMNED MAN

I was going to say I was, but come to think of it, why should I be? If it were wind, or a careless child - but you, Elyse, - I'm used to placing my life in your hands.

WIFE

With satisfactory results?

CONDEMNED MAN

I don't say satisfactory...

WIFE

Really, my love, have I slain you yet?

CONDEMNED MAN

Oh, no, not slain. A thousand stripes - but never the coup de grâce.

(pause)

I'm sorry I said that.

WIFE

(smiling)

On whose account?

CONDEMNED MAN

Elyse!

WIFE

Alfie?

CONDEMNED MAN

Elyse, would you just never mind all the nice things you have to say about the human lot. Would you just never mind, and instead try to absorb one thing: I'm at the disposal of everyone in this thoroughfare!

WIFE

And as I say, we all -

CONDEMNED MAN

Yes, but as you say, not at all, and as I say, precisely. Now I want you to stop thinking of answers and listen. I'm not referring only to one's life.

WIFE

No?

CONDEMNED MAN

No. If you think that, it's no wonder you can't be more sympathetic. One's life, one's life... ! What about one's past - had you considered that? - just what about one's past? I liked to think of mine as a sort of bronze statue, stern, well-finished, always on display. But living under the discipline of the rope, I've had to scrap the bronze: now it's just boiling metal which I must recast whenever I need a new tool. Do you know what I had to tell a boy just now?

WIFE

Well, if you're ~~ask~~ asking me to guess, I would say, something to the effect -

CONDEMNED MAN

I said to the boy: "Young fellow, I am a torturer, and if you meddle with the rope, and I get out, I shall kill you with torture."

(pause)

WIFE

The alternative to saying which was?

CONDEMNED MAN

The alternative to saying which was, that I let him kill me to find out the mechanism of the rope.

WIFE

(decisively)

Alfie, my dear, I've brought you some tools.

(begins to rummage in her bag)

CONDEMNED MAN

You've what?

WIFE

Tools, tools. There's no longer any question in my mind. It's a danger I can understand.

CONDEMNED MAN

Elyse: what were you making of my months in here? Was that quite negligible?

WIFE

(preoccupied with her search)

Well, dear, it was nothing to get too excited about... You know, rummaging around in this bag, a lot's coming back to me, this old armadillo-skin handbag... But I still - oh, here it is!

(triumphantly pulling out a barber's razor)

CONDEMNED MAN

That, my dear Elyse, is a razor.

WIFE

Yes, dear, that's what it is.

CONDEMNED MAN

Is the implication that I'm to slice my way through these bars?

WIFE

(seriously)

You know, you couldn't do that, dear.

CONDEMNED MAN

Of course I couldn't!

WIFE

No, as I say. But what you could do -

CONDEMNED MAN

What? Cut down the rope? That's really a brilliant idea, but will you please tell me one thing: what's to keep them from replacing it? What's to keep them ten minutes from replacing it?

WIFE

Yes, dear, but will you listen? Suppose, now that you've got this razor, you were to fray the rope, just a little, so it gives if anyone pulls.

CONDEMNED MAN

(his eyes lighting up)

Fray the rope!

WIFE

Of course, they can always put in a new rope. But you never know where people are going to see the hand of Providence. Particularly as they don't know you can reach the handle - I mean, we're assuming that.

CONDEMNED MAN

Fray the rope! Elyse, that's marvelous! Come round to the bars, I want to kiss you.

WIFE

We must all fray our ropes a bit so as not to go off at the first pull.

(She looks at him; he is staring fascinatedly at the rope.)

If you will forgive my making the comparison.

(pause; he is too intent on the rope to reply)

I think on the whole I would prefer not to be kissed.

(She closes the razor and tosses it in.)

Here you are, love.

(He picks up the razor and stares at it.)

The coup de grâce!

(The WIFE exits briskly.)

The HOOLIGAN enters running from up-right. Trailing his dead cat behind him, he darts diagonally across the playing-area, crying, "That's-him-That's-him-That's-him-That's-him-That's-him-That's-him-That's-him"; each time he says the word "him", he makes a jabbing pointing motion with his finger. His gesture is in the general direction of the CONDEMNED MAN, but he goes right past the cage without seeming to notice it, and runs off down-left.

The CONDEMNED MAN looks up puzzled, and looks after the HOOLIGAN, whose offstage cries of "That's-him" eventually fade out.

While the CONDEMNED MAN is looking off, enter the POLICEMAN - apparently in pursuit of the HOOLIGAN - flourishing his nightstick and blowing furiously on his sound-less whistle. He stops dead, right of center, and when he sees the CONDEMNED MAN, he lowers his stick and lets his whistle fall to his chest.)

POLICEMAN

(to the CONDEMNED MAN)

There you are.

CONDEMNED MAN

(He turns startled and quickly conceals the razor.)

What's this?

POLICEMAN

I have something for you.

(He rummages through his pockets.)

CONDEMNED MAN

It would have to be a pardon! What else would you have for me but a pardon?

POLICEMAN

(preoccupied with his search)

No, it's not a pardon...Just a minute... Oh, here we are!

(glancing at the document he has just produced)

It would seem to be a warrant of execution.

CONDEMNED MAN

For me? For my execution?

POLICEMAN

(preoccupied with his reading, he nods affirmatively)

Um... I'm to do it, it says. Right now. With the rope.

(begins to fold up paper; then stops)

Is that right, with the rope?

(unfolds paper and checks)

Um, that's right.

(He folds up the paper, replaces it in his pocket, and begins to move toward the rope. The CONDEMNED MAN moves to the onstage side of the cage to forestall him.)

CONDEMNED MAN

Now you hold on a minute!

POLICEMAN

But it says in my papers I'm to pull the rope. Let me do that, and then we'll talk.

CONDEMNED MAN

If you pull that rope, it's going to kill me!

POLICEMAN

Oh. Then we'd better talk first, and then I can pull the rope.

CONDEMNED MAN

Look, you couldn't possibly have orders to pull that rope.

POLICEMAN

Oh, I do. I can check it again, if you want.

(starts to take out papers, then stuffs them back impatiently)

Oh, I don't want to bother. You can take my word for it. It really does say to pull the rope.

CONDEMNED MAN

You'd better go back for more instructions, because you're making a mistake. That rope's going to be pulled at somebody's good pleasure, or not at all.

POLICEMAN

Would you explain why that would have to be so, please.
Because I really do have these orders -

CONDEMNED MAN

Nobody seems to know my sentence. You- you've been here a whole week, and you don't seem to know my sentence.

POLICEMAN

Well - if I'm getting it wrong, stop me - you have to stay in that cage all the time, don't you? And then, there's something about a rope...

CONDEMNED MAN

Yes, that's the rope you think you're going to pull.

POLICEMAN

(reaching for the rope)

Which reminds me -

CONDEMNED MAN

Now just wait a second. The way that rope gets into my sentence is this - I'm going to try and repeat the words that devil of a judge used, he said - To your cage a rope shall be fixed. If and when pulled, that rope dispatches you. And any passer-by may pull that rope, IF HE SO WISHES. You see, things were left on that voluntary basis. So you couldn't possibly have received an order -

POLICEMAN

Oh, I see the trouble! Well, now I understand; and I think now I can explain if you'll just bear with me because I'm a little slow to express myself. Now you never actually confessed, did you?

CONDEMNED MAN

Confessed! Are you out of your mind? Listen, you want me to tell you something about that "trial", if you can call it a trial -

POLICEMAN

Yes, but as I say, you never actually confessed?

CONDEMNED MAN

Well, of course not! Of course not! Just what do you think there was to -

POLICEMAN

Yes, well, as you hadn't confessed, your guilt wasn't certain, was it?

CONDEMNED MAN

That's the understatement of the week. I'm telling you -

POLICEMAN

Yes, but as I say, your guilt wasn't certain. And so long as your guilt wasn't a sure thing, it didn't seem fair to have your punishment a sure thing. I hope I'm being clear.

CONDEMNED MAN

Are you ever! You're saying the government had no case against me and knew it. Isn't that what you're saying.

POLICEMAN

Well, no...

CONDEMNED MAN

I'm surprised they let their people talk about it, though. In my day, things were tighter.

POLICEMAN

But in fact -

CONDEMNED MAN

But as long as we are just talking here like this, I think we might drop this pretense of not knowing one another. I remember you well enough with your verse-pamphlets; and if I remember you, I'm sure you remember me.

POLICEMAN

Well, there is something about the eyes...

CONDEMNED MAN

I'm sure you remember what I was and what I meant to do. Well,

here's some advice. You probably don't want to be bothered, but listen, if there's one person on God's earth who can tell you the pitfalls, it's me, from down here in my pitfall.

POLICEMAN

I must go on explaining about the rope!

CONDEMNED MAN

Oh, I thought we'd settled that. Well, if you have anymore to say, you just go right ahead and say it. I -

POLICEMAN

(There is an electrical change in his manner. He suddenly becomes incisive and lucid.)

So long as your guilt was in question, we could afford to leave your sentence in question, too. But now a definite order has been issued because your guilt is no longer in question. Having received a transcript of your confession -

CONDEMNED MAN

WHAT? My WHAT?

POLICEMAN

Having received a transcript of your highly-detailed confession, the Tribunal now feels the need of a more explicit presentation of its own views. They want to be as precise in their sentencing as you were in your confessing.

CONDEMNED MAN

Who are they pretending I ever confessed to?

POLICEMAN

On behalf of the Tribunal, I reject the imputation of pretense. A sworn affidavit has been received.

CONDEMNED MAN

Who from, for god's sake, Who from? From my wife? I can believe plenty when it comes to her, but - come on: Who from?

POLICEMAN

From the hooligan with the dead cat.

CONDEMNED MAN

Is attention going to be paid to the mouthing of that scum?

POLICEMAN

You betray the Revolution afresh, speaking the way you do of a patriot and builder.

(Enter the HOOLIGAN.)

It was the Hooligan who brought me the affidavit, and it was the Hooligan who brought me here.

HOOLIGAN

(quietly, as if giving the responses of a litany)

It was me who brought him the affidavit, it was me who brought him here.

POLICEMAN

The hooligan goes on to state that you confessed to the worst atrocities and threatened him with more of the same.

HOOLIGAN

The worst atrocities. More of the same.

CONDEMNED MAN

(to the POLICEMAN)

Is there something the matter with you? My rope was going to be pulled! I was going to die!

POLICEMAN

And so?

CONDEMNED MAN

And so the first thing I had to do was to get him out of there! I don't know ^{what} stories I may have made up: the only way I could stay alive was to frighten that boy away!

POLICEMAN

Clearly, then, you attempted to inflict a mental torture. The boy's account is confirmed, and for all your protest about the confession, you are confessing all over again.

CONDEMNED MAN

Listen, listen, I was never accused of torture; I was tortured.
I was accused of treason.

POLICEMAN

(matter-of-factly)

Oh. I thought you were accused of torture.

(Before the CONDEMNED MAN or the audience realizes what is happening, the POLICEMAN has pulled the rope.)

CONDEMNED MAN

(^aoking away from the front of the cage)

Now, wait, doesn't it make a difference... that you say... that I was tried for something else... some other crime altogether...

Doesn't it even make a difference?

(Impatiently, the POLICEMAN pulls the rope several more times and keeps it in his hand. The CONDEMNED MAN whips out the razor from his pocket, flips it open, whirls away from the audience and cuts his wrists. He staggers to the front of the cage and holds out his bloody hands appealingly.)

Armadillo...

He collapses, twisting away from the audience as he falls. Then, in a vicious, distinct whisper:)

Strappado!

The POLICEMAN, one hand still on the rope, produces his whistle and with puffed cheeks and bulging eyes, blows three long, sound-less blasts.

Immediately after the last blast, the HOOLIGAN raises the dead cat in both hands and flourishes it at the dead man in the cage.

The stage is bathed in red light. Brief tableau.

Blackout.

Immediately after the blackout, in the darkness of the theatre, three long whistle blasts are heard, corresponding in length and spacing with the three soundless blasts the POLICEMAN had blown.

Immediately after the last blast, the houselights come up on an empty stage.

No curtain call.)

THE END