

THE DUMB WAITER

by Harold Pinter

THE DUMB WAITER was first presented at the Hampstead Theatre Club on 21st January, 1960, with the following cast:

BEN Nicholas Selby

GUS George Tovey

THE DUMB WAITER was subsequently presented at the Royal Court Theatre on 8th March, 1960, with the same cast.

Scene : A basement room. Two beds, flat against the back wall. A serving hatch, closed, between the beds. A door to the kitchen and lavatory, left. A door to a passage, right.

BEN is lying on a bed, left, reading a paper. GUS is sitting on a bed, right, tying his shoelaces, with difficulty. Both are dressed in shirts, trousers and braces.

Silence.

GUS ties his laces, rises, yawns and begins to walk slowly to the door, left. He stops, looks down, and shakes his foot.

BEN lowers his paper and watches him. GUS kneels and unties his shoe-lace and slowly takes off the shoe. He looks inside it and brings out a flattened matchbox. He shakes it and examines it. Their eyes meet. BEN rattles his paper and reads. GUS puts the matchbox in his pocket and bends down to put on his shoe. He ties his lace, with difficulty. BEN lowers his paper and watches him. GUS walks to the door. GUS puts the packet in his pocket, bends down, puts on his shoe and tie the lace.

He wanders off, left.

BEN slams the paper down on the bed and glares after him. He picks up the paper and lies on his back, reading.

Silence.

A lavatory chain is pulled twice off, left, but the lavatory does not flush.

Silence.

GUS re-enters, left, and halts at the door, scratching his head.

BEN slams down the paper.

BEN. Kaw !

He picks up the paper.

What about this? Listen to this !

He refers to the paper.

A man of eighty-seven wanted to cross the road. But there was a lot of traffic, see? He couldn't see how he was going to squeeze through. So he crawled under a lorry.

GUS. He what?

BEN. He crawled under a lorry. A stationary lorry.

GUS. No?

BEN. The lorry started and ran over him.

GUS. Go on!

BEN. That's what it says here.

GUS. Get away.

BEN. It's enough to make you want to puke, isn't it?

GUS. Who advised him to do a thing like that?

BEN. A man of eighty-seven crawling under a lorry!

GUS. It's unbelievable.

BEN. It's down here in black and white.

GUS. Incredible.

Silence.

GUS *shakes his head and exits*. BEN *lies back and reads*.

The lavatory chain is pulled once off left, but the lavatory does not flush.

BEN *whistles at an item in the paper*.

GUS *re-enters*.

I want to ask you something.

BEN. What are you doing out there?

GUS. Well, I was just--

BEN. What about the tea?

GUS. I'm just going to make it.

BEN. Well, go on, make it.

GUS. Yes, I will. (*He sits in a chair. Ruminatively.*) He's laid on some very nice crockery this time, I'll say that. It's sort of striped. There's a white stripe.

BEN *reads*.

It's very nice. I'll say that...

BEN *turns the page*.

You know, sort of round the cup. Round the rim. All the rest of it's black, you see. Then the saucer's black, except for right in the middle, where the cup goes, where it's white.

BEN *reads*.

Then the plates are the same, you see. Only they've got a black stripe--the plates--right across the middle. Yes, I'm quite taken with the crockery.

BEN (*still reading*). What do you want plates for? You're not going to eat.

GUS. I've brought a few biscuits.

BEN. Well, you'd better eat them quick.

GUS. I always bring a few biscuits. Or a pie. You know I can't drink tea without anything to eat.

BEN. Well make the tea then, will you? Time's getting on.

GUS *brings out the flattened cigarette packet and examines it*.

GUS. You got any cigarettes? I think I've run out.

He throws the packet high up and leans forward to catch it.

I hope it won't be a long job, this one.

Aiming carefully, he flips the packet under his bed.

Oh, I wanted to ask you something.

BEN (*slamming his paper down*). Kaw!

GUS. What's that?

BEN. A child of eight killed a cat!

GUS. Get away.

BEN. It's a fact. What about that, eh? A child of eight killing a cat!

GUS. How did he do it?

BEN. It was a girl.

GUS. How did she do it?
BEN. She--

He picks up the paper and studies it.

It doesn't say.
GUS. Why not?
BEN. Wait a minute. It just says--Her brother, aged eleven, viewed the incident from the toolshed.
GUS. Go on!
BEN. That's bloody ridiculous.

Pause.

GUS. I bet he did it.
BEN. Who?
GUS. The brother.
BEN. I think you're right.

Pause.

(Slamming down the paper.) What about that, eh? A kid of eleven killing a cat and blaming it on his little sister of eight! It's enough to--

He breaks off in disgust and seizes the paper. GUS rises.

GUS. What time is he getting in touch?

BEN *reads*.
What time is he getting in touch?
BEN. What's the matter with you? It could be any time. Any time.
GUS *(moves to the foot of BEN's bed)*. Well, I was going to ask you something.

BEN. What?
GUS. Have you noticed the time that tank takes to fill?
BEN. What tank?
GUS. In the lavatory.
BEN. No. Does it?
GUS. Terrible.
BEN. Well, what about it?
GUS. What do you think's the matter with it?
BEN. Nothing.
GUS. Nothing?
BEN. It's got a deficient ballcock, that's all.
GUS. A deficient what?
BEN. Ballcock.
GUS. No? Really?
BEN. That's what I should say.
GUS. Go on! That didn't occur to me.

GUS wanders to his bed and presses the mattress.

I didn't have a very restful sleep today, did you? It's not much of a bed. I could have done with another blanket too. *(He catches sight of a picture on the wall.)* Hello, what's this? *(Peering at it.)* "The First Eleven." Cricketers. You seen this, Ben?
BEN *(reading)*. What?
GUS. The first eleven.
BEN. What?
GUS. There's a photo here of the first eleven.
BEN. What first eleven?

GUS (*Studying the photo*). It doesn't say.

BEN. What about that tea?

GUS. They all look a bit old to me.

GUS wanders downstage, looks out front, then all about the room.

I wouldn't like to live in this dump. I wouldn't mind if you had a window, you could see what it looked like outside.

BEN. What do you want a window for?

GUS. Well, I like to have a bit of a view, Ben. It whiles away the time.

He walks about the room.

I mean, you come into a place when it's still dark, you come into a room you've never seen before, you sleep all day, you do your job, and then you go away in the night again.

Pause.

I like to get a look at the scenery. You never get the chance in this job.

BEN. You get your holidays, do you?

GUS. Only a fortnight.

BEN (*lowering the paper*). You kill me. Anyone would think you're working every day. How often do we do a job? Once a week? What are you complaining about?

GUS. Yes, but we've got to be on tap thought, haven't we? You can't move out of the house in case a call comes.

BEN. You know what your trouble is?

GUS. What?

BEN. You haven't got any interests.

GUS. I've got interests.

BEN. Look at me. What have I got?

GUS. I don't know. What?

BEN. I've got my woodwork. I've got my model boats. Have you ever seen me idle? I'm never idle. I know how to occupy my time, to its best advantage. Then when a call comes, I'm ready.

GUS. Don't you ever get a bit fed up?

Silence.

BEN reads. GUS feels in the pocket of his jacket, which hangs on the bed.

GUS. You got any cigarettes? I've run out.

The lavatory flushes off left.

There she goes.

GUS sits on his bed.

No, I mean, I say the crockery's good. It is. It's very nice. But that's about all I can say for this place. It's worse than the last one. Remember that last place we were in? Last time, where was it? At least there was a wireless there. No, honest. He doesn't seem to bother much about our comfort these days.

BEN. When are you going to stop jabbering?

GUS. You'd get rheumatism in a place like this, if you stay long.

BEN. We're not staying long. Make the tea, will you? We'll be on the job in a minute.

GUS picks up a small bag by his bed and brings out a packet of tea. He examines it and looks up.

GUS. Eh, I've been meaning to ask you.

BEN. What the hell is it now?

GUS. Why did you stop the car this morning, in the middle of that road?

BEN (*lowering the paper*). I thought you were asleep.

GUS. I was, but I woke up when you stopped. You did stop, didn't you?

Pause.

In the middle of that road. It was still dark, don't you remember? I looked out. It was all misty. I thought perhaps you wanted to kip, but you were sitting up dead straight, like you were waiting for something.

BEN. I wasn't waiting for anything.

GUS. I must have fallen asleep again. What was all that about then? Why did you stop?

BEN (*picking up the paper*). We were too early.

GUS. Early? (*He rises.*) What do you mean? We got the call, didn't we, saying we were to start right away. We did. We shoved out on the dot. So how could we be too early?

BEN (*quietly*). Who took the call, me or you?

GUS. You.

BEN. We were too early.

GUS. Too early for what?

Pause.

You mean someone had to get out before we got in?

He examines the bedclothes.

I thought these sheets didn't look too bright. I thought they ponged a bit. I was too tired to notice when I got in this morning. Eh, that's taking a bit of a liberty, isn't it? I don't want to share my bed-sheets. I told you things were going down the drain. I mean, we've always had clean sheets laid on up till now. I've noticed it.

BEN. How do you know those sheets weren't clean?

GUS. What do you mean?

BEN. How do you know they weren't clean? You've spent the whole day in them, haven't you?

GUS. What, you mean it might be my pong? (*He sniffs sheets.*) Yes. (*He sits slowly on bed.*) It could be my pong, I suppose. It's difficult to tell. I don't really know what I pong like, that's the trouble.

BEN (*referring to the paper*). Kaw!

GUS. Eh, Ben.

BEN. Kaw!

GUS. Ben.

BEN. What?

GUS. What town are we in? I've forgotten.

BEN. I've told you. Birmingham.

GUS. Go on!

He looks with interest about the room.

That's in the Midlands. The second biggest city in Great Britain. I'd never have guessed.

He snaps his fingers.

Eh, it's Friday today, isn't it? It'll be Saturday tomorrow.

BEN. What about it?

GUS (*excited*). We could go and watch the Villa.

BEN. They're playing away.

GUS. No, are they? Caarr! What a pity...

BEN. Anyway, there's no time. We've got to get straight back.

GUS. Well, we have done in the past, haven't we? Stayed over and watched a game, haven't we? For a bit of relaxation.

BEN. Things have tightened up, mate. They've tightened up.

GUS chuckles to himself.

GUS. I saw the Villa get beat in a cup tie once. Who was it against now? White shirts. It was one-all at half-time. I'll never forget it. Their opponents won by a penalty. Talk about drama. Yes, it was a disputed penalty. Disputed. They got beat two0one, anyway, because of it. You were there yourself.

BEN. Not me.

GUS. Yes, you were there. Don't you remember that disputed penalty?

BEN. No.

GUS. He went down just inside the area. Then they said he was just acting. I didn't think the other bloke touched him myself. But the referee had the ball on the spot.

BEN. Didn't touch him! What are you talking about? He laid him out flat!

GUS. Not the Villa. The Villa don't play that sort of game.

BEN. Get out of it.

Pause.

GUS. Eh, that must have been here, in Birmingham.

BEN. What must?

GUS. The Villa. That must have been here.

BEN. They were playing away.

GUS. Because you know who the other team was? It was the Spurs. It was Tottenham Hotspur.

BEN. Well, what about it?

GUS. We've never done a job in Tottenham.

BEN. How do you know?

GUS. I'd remember Tottenham.

BEN turns on his bed to look at him.

BEN. Don't make me laugh, will you?

BEN turns back and reads, GUS yawns and speaks through his yawn.

GUS. When's he going to get in touch?

Pause.

Yes, I'd like to see another football match. I've always been an ardent football fan. Here, what about coming to see the Spurs tomorrow?

BEN (*tonelessly*). They're playing away.

GUS. Who are?

BEN. The Spurs.

GUS. Then they might be playing here.

BEN. Don't be silly.

GUS. If they're playing away, they might be playing here. They might be playing the Villa.

BEN (*tonelessly*). But the Villa are playing away.

Pause. An envelope slides under the door, right. GUS sees it. He stands, looking at it.

GUS. Ben.

BEN. Away. They're all playing away.

GUS. Ben, look here.

BEN. What?

GUS. Look.
BEN turns his head and sees the envelope. He stands.
BEN. What's that?
GUS. I don't know.
BEN. Where did it come from?
GUS. Under the door.
BEN. Well, what is it?
GUS. I don't know.

They stare at it.

BEN. Pick it up.
GUS. What do you mean?
BEN. Pick it up!

GUS slowly moves towards it, bends and pick it up.

What is it?
GUS. An envelope.
BEN. Is there anything on it?
GUS. No.
BEN. Is it sealed?
GUS. Yes.
BEN. Open it.
GUS. What?
BEN. Open it!

GUS opens it and looks inside.

What's in it?

GUS empties twelve matches into his hand.

GUS. Matches.
BEN. Matches?
GUS. Yes.
BEN. Show it to me.

GUS passes the envelope. BEN examines it.

Nothing on it. Not a word.
GUS. That's funny, isn't it?
BEN. It came under the door?
GUS. Must have done.
BEN. Well, go on.
GUS. Go on where?
BEN. Open the door and see if you can catch anyone outside.
GUS. Who, me?
BEN. Go on!

GUS stares at him, puts the matches in his pockets, goes to his bed and brings a revolver from under the pillow. He goes to the door, opens it, looks out and shuts it.

GUS. No One.

He replaces the revolver.

BEN. What did you see?

GUS. Nothing.

BEN. They must have been pretty quick.

GUS takes the matches from pocket and looks at them.

GUS. Well, they'll come in handy.

BEN. Yes.

GUS. Won't they?

BEN. Yes, you're always running out, aren't you?

GUS. All the time.

BEN. Well, they'll come in handy then.

GUS. Yes.

BEN. Won't they?

GUS. Yes, I could do with them. I could do with them too.

BEN. You could, eh?

GUS. Yes.

BEN. Why?

GUS. We haven't got any.

BEN. Well, you're always cadging matches. How many have you got there?

GUS. About a dozen.

BEN. Well, don't lose them. Red too. You don't even need a box.

GUS probes his ear with a match.

(Slapping his hand) Don't waste them! Go on, go and light it.

GUS. Eh?

BEN. Go and light it.

GUS. Light what?

BEN. The kettle.

GUS. You mean the gas.

BEN. Who does?

GUS. You do.

BEN *(his eyes narrowing)*. What do you mean, I mean the gas?

GUS. Well, that's what you mean, don't you? The gas.

BEN *(powerfully)*. If I say go and light the kettle I mean go and light the kettle.

GUS. How can you light the kettle?

BEN. It's a figure of speech! Light the kettle. It's a figure of speech!

GUS. I've never heard it.

BEN. Light the kettle! It's common usage!

GUS. I think you've got it wrong.

BEN *(menacing)*. What do you mean?

GUS. They say put on the kettle.

BEN *(taut)*. Who says?

They stare at each other, breathing hard.

(Deliberately.) I have never in all my life heard anyone say put on the kettle.

GUS. I bet my mother used to say it.

BEN. Your mother? When did you last see your mother?

GUS. I don't know, about--

BEN. Well, what are you talking about your mother for?

They stare.

GUS. I'm not trying to be unreasonable. I'm just trying to point out something to you.

GUS. Yes, but--

BEN. Who's the senior partner here, me or you?

GUS. You.

BEN. I'm only looking after your interests, Gus. You've got to learn, mate.

GUS. Yes, but I've never heard--

BEN *(vehemently)*. Nobody sways light the gas! What does the gas light?

GUS. What does the gas--?

BEN *(grabbing him with two hands by the throat, at arm's length)*. THE KETTLE, YOU FOOL!

GUS *takes the hands from his throat.*

GUS. All right, all right.

Pause.

BEN. Well, what are you waiting for?

GUS. I want to see if they light.

BEN. What?

GUS. The matches.

He takes out the flattened box and tries to strike.

No. (*Doesn't work*)

He throws the box under the bed.

BEN *stares at him.*

GUS *raises his foot.*

Shall I try it on here?

BEN *stares.* GUS *strikes a match on his shoe. It lights.*

Here we are.

BEN (*wearily*). Put on the bloody kettle, for Christ's sake.

BEN *goes to his bed, but, realizing what he has said, stops and half turns. They look at each other.*

GUS *slowly exits, left.* BEN *slams his paper down on the bed and sits on it, head in hands.*

GUS (*entering*). It's going.

BEN. What?

GUS. The stove.

GUS *goes to his bed and sits.*

I wonder who it'll be tonight.

Silence.

Eh, I've been wanting to ask you something.

BEN (*putting his legs on the bed*). Oh, for Christ's sake...

GUS. No, I was going to ask you something.

He rises and sits on BEN's bed.

BEN. What are you sitting on my bed for?

GUS *sits.*

What's the matter with you? You're always asking me questions. What's the matter with you?

GUS. Nothing.

BEN. You never used to ask me so many damn questions. What's come over you?

GUS. No, I was just wondering.

BEN. Stop wondering. You've got a job to do. Why don't you just do it and shut up?

GUS. That's what I was wondering about.

BEN. What?

GUS. The job.

BEN. What job?

GUS (*tentatively*). I thought perhaps you might know something.

BEN *looks at him.*

I thought perhaps you? I mean? Have you got any idea? Who it's going to be tonight?

BEN. Who what's going to be?

They look at each other.

GUS (*at length*). Who it's going to be.

Silence.

BEN. Are you feeling all right?

GUS. Sure.

BEN. Go and make the tea.

GUS. Yes, sure.

GUS exits, left, BEN looks after him. He then takes his revolver from under the pillow and checks it for ammunition. GUS re-enters.

The gas has gone out.

BEN. Well, what about it?

GUS. There's a meter.

BEN. I haven't got any money.

GUS. Nor have I.

BEN. You'll have to wait.

GUS. What for?

BEN. For Wilson.

GUS. He might not come. He might just send a message. He doesn't always come.

BEN. Well, you'll have to do without it, won't you?

GUS. Blimey.

BEN. You'll have a cup of tea afterwards. What's the matter with you?

GUS. I like to have one before.

BEN holds the revolver up to the light and polishes it.

BEN. You'd better get ready anyway.

GUS. Well, I don't know, that's a bit much, you know, for my money.

(He picks up a packet of tea from the bed and throws it into the bag)

I hope he's got a shilling, anyway, if he comes. He's entitled to have. After all, it's his place, he could have seen there was enough gas for a cup of tea,

BEN. What do you mean, it's his place?

GUS. Well, isn't it?

BEN. He's probably only rented it. It doesn't have to be his place.

GUS. I know it's his place. I bet the whole house is. He's not even laying on any gas now either.

GUS sits on his bed.

It's his place, all right. Look at all the other places. You go to this address, there's a key there, there's a teapot, there's never a soul in sight?*(He pauses.)* Eh, nobody ever hears a thing, have you ever thought of that? We never get any complaints, do we, too much noise or anything like that? You never see a soul, do you? Except the bloke who comes. You ever noticed that? I wonder if the walls are sound-proof. *(He touches the wall above his bed.)* Can't tell. All you do is wait, eh? Half the time he doesn't even bother to put in an appearance, Wilson.

BEN. Why should he? He's a busy man.

GUS *(thoughtfully)*. I find him hard to talk to, Wilson. Do you know that, Ben?

BEN. Scrub round it, will you?

Pause.

GUS. There are a number of things I want to ask him. But I can never get round to it, when I see him.

Pause.

I've been thinking about the last one.

BEN. What last one?

GUS. That girl.

BEN grabs the paper, which he reads.

(Rising, looking down at BEN). How many times have you read that paper?

BEN slams the paper down and rises.

BEN *(angrily)*. What do you mean?

GUS. I was just wondering how many times you'd --

GUS. What are you doing, criticizing me?

GUS. No, I was just--

BEN. You'll get a swipe round your earhole if you don't watch your step.

GUS. No look here, Ben--

BEN. I'm not looking anywhere! *(He addresses the room.)* How many times have I--! A bloody liberty!

GUS. I didn't mean that.

BEN. You just get on with it, mate. Get on with it, that's all.

BEN gets back on the bed.

GUS. I was just thinking about that girl, that's all.

GUS sits on his bed.

She wasn't much to look at, I know, but still. It was a mess though, wasn't it? What a mess. Honest, I can't remember a mess like that one. They don't seem to hold together like men, women. A looser texture, like. Didn't she spread, eh? She didn't half spread. Kaw! But I've been meaning to ask you.

BEN sits up and clenches his eyes.

Who clears up after we've gone? I'm curious about that. Who does the clearing up? Maybe they don't clear up. Maybe they just leave them there, eh? What do you think? How many jobs have we done? Blimey, I can't count them. What if they never clear anything up after we've gone.

BEN *(pityingly)*. You mutt. Do you think we're the only branch of this organization? Have a bit of common. They got departments for everything.

GUS. What cleaners and all?

BEN. You birk!

GUS. No, it was that girl made me start to think--

There is a loud clatter and racket in the bulge of wall between the beds, of something descending. They grab their revolvers, jump up and face the wall. The noise comes to a stop. Silence. They look at each other. BEN gestures sharply towards the wall. GUS approaches the wall slowly. He bangs it with his revolver. It is hollow. BEN moves to the head of his bed, his revolver cocked. GUS puts his revolver on his bed and pats along the bottom of the center panel. He finds a rim. He lifts the panel. Disclosed is a serving-hatch, a dumb waiter. A wide box is held by pulleys. GUS peers into the box. He brings out a piece of paper.

BEN. What is it?

GUS. You have a look at it.

BEN. Read it.

GUS *(reading)*. Two braised steak and chips. Two sago puddings. Two teas without sugar.

BEN. Let me see that. *(He takes the paper.)*

GUS. *(to himself)*. Two teas without sugar.

BEN. Mmnn.

GUS. What do you think of that?

BEN. Well--

The box goes up. BEN levels his revolver.

GUS. Give us a chance! They're in a hurry, aren't they?

BEN re-reads the note. GUS looks over his shoulder.

That's a bit funny, isn't it?

BEN *(quickly)*. No. It's not funny. It probably used to be a café here, that's all. Upstairs. These places change hands very quickly.

GUS. A café?

BEN. Yes.

GUS. What, you mean this was the kitchen, down here?

BEN. Yes, they change hands overnight, these places. Go into liquidation. The people who run it, you know, they don't find it a going concern, they move out.

GUS. You mean the people who ran up this place didn't find it a going concern and moved out?

BEN. Sure.

GUS. Well, WHO'S GOT IT NOW?

Silence

BEN. What do you mean, who's got it now?

GUS. Who's got it now? If they moved out, who moved in?

BEN. Well, that all depends-

The box descends with a clatter and bang. BEN levels his revolver.

GUS goes to the box and brings out a piece of paper.

GUS (*reading*). Soup of the day. Liver and onions. Jam tart.

A pause. GUS looks at BEN. BEN takes the note and reads it.

He walks slowly to the hatch. GUS follows. Ben looks into the hatch

but not up it. GUS puts his hand on BEN's shoulder. BEN throws it off. GUS puts his finger to his mouth. He leans on the hatch and swiftly looks up it. BEN flings him away in alarm. BEN looks at the note. He throws his revolver on the bed and speaks with decision.

BEN. We'd better send something up.

GUS. Eh?

BEN. We'd better send something up.

GUS. Oh! Yes. Yes. Maybe you're right.

They are both relieved at the decision.

BEN (*purposefully*). Quick! What have you got in that bag?

GUS. Not much.

GUS goes to the hatch and shouts up it.

Wait a minute!

BEN. Don't do that!

GUS examines the contents of the bag and brings them out, one by one.

GUS. Biscuits. A bar of chocolate. Half a pint of milk.

BEN. That all?

GUS. Packet of tea.

BEN. Good.

GUS. We can't send the tea. That's all the tea we've got.

BEN. Well, there's no gas. You can't do anything with it, can you?

GUS. Maybe they can send us down a bob.

BEN. What else is there?

GUS (*reaching into bag*). One Eccles cake.

BEN. One Eccles cake?

GUS. Yes.

BEN. You never told me you had an Eccles cake.

GUS. Didn't I?

BEN. Why only one? Didn't you bring one for me?

GUS. I didn't think you'd be keen.

BEN. Well, you can't send up one Eccles cake, anyway.

GUS. Why not?

BEN. Fetch one of those plates.

GUS. All right.

GUS goes towards the door, left, and stops.

Do you mean I can keep the Eccles cake then?

BEN. Keep it?

GUS. Well, they don't know we've got it, do they?

BEN. That's not the point.

GUS. Can't I keep it?

BEN. No, you can't. Get the plate.

GUS exits, left. BEN looks in the bag. He brings out a packet of crisps. Enter GUS with a plate. (Accusingly, holding up the crisps). Where did these come from?

GUS. What?

BEN. Where did these crisps come from?

GUS. Where did you find them?

BEN (*hitting him on the shoulder*). You're playing a dirty game, my lad!

GUS. I only eat those with beer!

BEN. Well, where were you going to get the beer?

GUS. I was saving them till I did.

BEN. I'll remember this. Put everything on the plate.

They pile everything on to the plate. The box goes up without the plate.

Wait a minute!

They stand.

GUS. It's gone up.

BEN. It's all your fault, playing about!

GUS. What do we do now?

BEN. We'll have to wait till it comes down.

BEN puts the plate on the bed, puts on his shoulder holster, and starts to put on his tie.

You'd better get ready.

GUS goes to his bed, puts on his tie, and starts to fix his holster.

GUS. Hey, Ben.

BEN. What?

GUS. What's going on here?

Pause.

BEN. What do you mean?

GUS. How can this be a café?

BEN. It used to be a café.

GUS. Have you seen the gas stove?

BEN. What about it?

GUS. It's only got three rings.

BEN. So what?

GUS. Well, you couldn't cook much on three rings, not for a busy place like this.

BEN (*irritably*). That's why the service is slow!

BEN puts on his waistcoat.

GUS. Yes, but what happens when we're not here? What do they do then? All these menus coming down and nothing going up. It might have been going on like this for years.

BEN brushes his jacket.

What happens when we go?

BEN puts on his jacket.

They can't do much business.

The box descends. They turn about. GUS goes to the hatch and brings out a note.

GUS (*reading*). Macaroni Pastitsio. Ormitha Macarounada.

BEN. What was that?

GUS. Macaroni Pastitsio. Ormitha Macarounada.

BEN. Greek dishes.

GUS. No.

BEN. That's right.

GUS. That's pretty high class.

BEN. Quick before it goes up.

GUS puts the plate in the box.

GUS (*calling up the hatch*). Three McVitie and Price! One Lyons Red Label! One Smith's Crisps! One Eccles cake! One Fruit and Nut!

BEN. Cadbury's.

GUS (*up the hatch*). Cadbury's!

BEN (*handing the milk*). One bottle of milk.

GUS (*up the hatch*). One bottle of milk! Half a pint! (*He looks at the label.*) Express Dairy! (*He puts the bottle in the box.*)

The box goes up.

Just did it.

BEN. You shouldn't shout like that.

GUS. Why not?

BEN. It isn't done.

BEN goes to his bed.

Well, that should be all right, anyway, for the time being.

GUS. You think so, eh?

BEN. Get dressed, will you? It'll be any minute now.

GUS puts on his on his waistcoat. BEN lies down and looks up at the ceiling.

GUS. This is some place. No tea and no biscuits.

BEN. Eating makes you lazy, mate. You're getting lazy, you know that? You don't want to get slack on your job.

GUS. Who me?

BEN. Slack, mate, slack.

GUS. Who me? Slack?

BEN. Have you checked your gun? You haven't even checked your gun. It looks disgraceful, anyway. Why don't you ever polish it?

GUS rubs his revolver on the sheet. BEN takes out a pocket mirror and straightens his tie.

GUS. I wonder where the cook is. They must have had a few, to cope with that. Maybe they had a few more gas stoves. Eh! Maybe there's another kitchen along the passage.

BEN. Of course there is! Do you know what it takes to make an Ormitha Macarounada?

GUS. No, what?

BEN. An Ormitha--! Buck your ideas up, will you?

GUS. Takes a few cooks, eh?

GUS puts his revolver in its holster.

The sooner we're out of this place the better.

He puts on his jacket.

Why doesn't he get in touch? I feel like I've been here years. (*He takes his revolver out of its holster to check the ammunition.*) We've never let him down though, have we? We've never let him down. I was thinking only the other day, Ben. We're reliable, aren't we?

He puts his revolver back in its holster.

Still, I'll be glad when it's over tonight.

He brushes his jacket.

I hope the bloke's not going to get excited tonight, or anything. I'm feeling a bit off. I've got a splitting headache.

Silence.

*The box descends. BEN jumps up.
GUS collects the note.*

(reading.) One Bamboo Shoots, Water Chestnuts and Chicken. One Char Siu and Beansprouts.

BEN. Beansprouts?

GUS. Yes.

BEN. Blimey.

GUS. I wouldn't know where to begin.

He looks back at the box. The packet of tea is inside it. He picks it up.

They've sent back the tea.

BEN (*anxious*). What'd they do that for?

GUS. Maybe it isn't tea-time.

The box goes up. Silence.

BEN (*throwing the tea on the bed, and speaking urgently*). Look here. We'd better tell them.

GUS. Tell them what?

BEN. That we can't do it, we haven't got it.

GUS. All right then.

BEN. Lend us your pencil. We'll write a note.

GUS, turning for a pencil, suddenly discovers the speaking-tube, which hangs on the right wall of the hatch facing his bed.

GUS. What's this?

BEN. What?

GUS. This.

BEN (*examining it*). This? It's a speaking-tube.

GUS. How long has that been there?

BEN. Just the job. We should have used it before, instead of shouting up there.

GUS. Funny I never noticed it before.

BEN. Well, come on.

GUS. What do you do?

BEN. See that? That's a whistle.

GUS. Yes, take it out. Pull it out.

GUS does so.

That's it.

GUS. What do we do now?

BEN. Blow into it.

GUS. Blow?

BEN. It whistles up there if you blow. Then they know you want to speak. Blow.

GUS blows. Silence.

GUS (*tube at mouth*). I can't hear a thing.

BEN. Now you speak! Speak into it!

GUS looks at BEN, then speaks into the tube.

GUS. The larder's bare!

BEN. Give me that!

He grabs the tube and puts it to his mouth.

(*Speaking with great deference.*) Good evening. I'm sorry to bother you, but we just thought we'd better let you know that we haven't got anything left. We sent up all we had. There's no more food down here.

He brings the tube slowly to his ear.

What?

To mouth.

What?

To ear. He listens. To mouth.

No, all we had we sent up.

To ear. He listens. To mouth.

Oh, I'm very sorry to hear that.

To ear. He listens. To GUS.

The Eccles cake was stale.

He listens. To GUS.

The chocolate was melted.

He listens. To GUS.

The milk was sour.

GUS. What about the crisps?

BEN (*listening*). The biscuits were mouldy.

He glares at GUS. Tube to mouth.

Well, we're very sorry about that.

Tube to ear.

What?

To mouth.

What?

To ear.

Yes. Yes.

To mouth.

Yes certainly. Certainly. Right away.

*To ear. The voice has ceased. He hangs up the tube.
(Excitedly).* Did you hear that?

GUS. What?

BEN. You know what he said? Light the kettle! Not put on the kettle! Not light the gas! But light the kettle!

GUS. How can we light the kettle?

BEN. What do you mean?

GUS. There's no gas.

BEN (*clapping hand to head*). Now what do we do?

GUS. What did he want us to light the kettle for?

BEN. For tea. He wanted a cup of tea.

GUS. He wanted a cup of tea! What about me? I've been wanting a cup of tea all night!

BEN (*despairingly*). What do we do now?

GUS. What are we supposed to drink?

BEN *sits on his bed, staring.*

What about us?

BEN *sits.*

I'm thirsty too. I'm starving. And he wants a cup of tea. That beats that band, that does.

BEN *lets his head sink on to his chest.*

I could do with a bit of sustenance myself. What about you? You look as if you could do with something too.

GUS *sits on his bed.*

We send him up all we've got and he's not satisfied. No, honest, it's enough to make the cat laugh. Why did you send him up all that stuff? (*Thoughtfully.*) Why did I send it up?

Pause.

Who knows what he's got upstairs? He's probably got a salad bowl. They must have something up there. They won't get much from down here. You notice they didn't ask for any salads? They've probably got a salad bowl up there. Cold meat, radishes, cucumbers. Watercress. Roll mops.

Pause.

Hardboiled eggs.

Pause.

The lot. They've probably got a crate of beer too. Probably eating my crisps with a pint of beer now. Didn't have anything to say about those crisps, did he? They do all right, don't worry about that. You don't think they're just going to sit there and wait for stuff to come up from down here, do you? They'll get them nowhere.

Pause.

They do all right.

Pause.

And he wants a cup of tea.

Pause.

That's part a joke, in my opinion.

He looks over at BEN, rises, and goes to him.

What's the matter with you? You don't look too bright. I feel like an Alka-Seltzer myself.

BEN *sits up.*

BEN (*in a low voice*). Time's getting on.

GUS. I know. I don't like doing a job on an empty stomach.

BEN (*wearily*). Be quiet a minute. Let me give you your instructions.

GUS. What for? We always do it the same way, don't we?

BEN. Let me give you your instructions.

GUS signs and sits next to BEN on the bed. The instructions are stated and repeated automatically.

When we get the call, you go over and stand behind the door.

GUS. Stand behind the door.

BEN. If there's a knock on the door you don't answer it.

GUS. If there's a knock on the door you don't answer it.

BEN. But there won't be a knock on the door.

GUS. So I won't answer it.

BEN. When the bloke comes in--

GUS. When the bloke comes in--

BEN. Shut the door behind him.

GUS. Shut the door behind him.

BEN. Without divulging your presence.

GUS. Without divulging your presence.

BEN. He'll see me and come towards me.

GUS. He'll see you and come towards you.

BEN. He won't see you.

GUS (*absently*). Eh?

BEN. He won't see you.

GUS. He won't see me.

BEN. But he'll see me.

GUS. He'll see you.

BEN. He won't know you're there.

GUS. He won't know *you're* there.

GUS. He won't know I'm there.
BEN. I take out my gun.
GUS. You take out your gun.
BEN. He stops in his tracks.
GUS. He stops in his tracks.
BEN. If he turns round--
GUS. If he turns round--
BEN. You're there,
GUS. I'm here.

BEN frowns and presses his forehead.

You've missed something out.
BEN. I know. What?
GUS. I haven't taken my gun out, according to you.
BEN. You take your gun out--
GUS. After I've closed the door.
BEN. After you've closed the door.
GUS. You've never missed that out before, you know that?
BEN. When he sees you behind him--
GUS. Me behind him--
BEN. And me in front of him--
GUS. And you in front of him--
BEN. He'll feel uncertain--
GUS. Uneasy.
BEN. He won't know what to do.
GUS. So what will he do?
BEN. He'll look at me and he'll look at you.
GUS. We won't say a word.
BEN. We'll look at him.
GUS. He won't say a word.
BEN. He'll look at us.
GUS. And we'll look at him.
BEN. Nobody says a word.

Pause.

GUS. What do we do if it's a girl?
BEN. We do the same.
GUS. Exactly the same?
BEN. Exactly.

Pause.

GUS. We don't do anything different?
BEN. We do exactly the same.
GUS. Oh.

GUS rises, and shivers.

Excuse me.

*He exits through the door on the left. BEN remains sitting on the bed, still.
The lavatory chain is pulled once off left, but the lavatory does not flush.
Silence.*

GUS reenters and stops inside the door, deep in thought. He looks at BEN, then walks slowly across to his own bed. He is troubled. He stands, thinking. He turns and looks at BEN. He moves a few paces towards him.

(*Slowly in a low, tense voice.*) Why did he send us matches if he knew there was no gas?

Silence.

BEN *stares in front of him.* GUS *crosses to the left side of BEN, to the foot of his bed, to get to his other ear.*

Ben. Why did he send us matches if he knew there was no gas?

BEN *looks up.*

Why did he do that?

BEN. Who?

GUS. Who sent us those matches?

BEN. What are you talking about?

GUS *stares down at him.*

GUS (*thickly*). Who is upstairs?

BEN (*nervously*). What's one thing to do with another?

BEN *fumbles for his paper on the bed.*

GUS. I asked you a question.

BEN. Enough!

GUS (*with growing agitation*). I asked you before. Who moved in? I asked you. You said the people who had it before moved out. Well, who moved in?

BEN (*hunched*). Shut up.

GUS. I told you, didn't I?

BEN (*standing*). Shut up!

GUS (*feverishly*). I told you before who owned this place, didn't I?
I told you.

BEN *hits him viciously on the shoulder.*

I told you who ran this place, didn't I?

BEN *hits him viciously on the shoulder.*

(*Violently.*) Well, what's he playing all these games for? That's what I want to know. What's he doing it for?

BEN. What game?

GUS (*passionately, advancing*). What's he doing it for? We've been through our tests, haven't we? We got right through our tests, years ago, didn't we? We took them together, don't you remember, didn't we? We've always done our job. What's he doing all this for? What's the idea? What's he playing these games for?

The box in the shaft comes down behind them. The noise is this time accompanied by a shrill whistle, as it falls. GUS *rushes to the hatch and seizes the note.*

(*Reading.*) Scampi!

He crumples the note, picks up the tube, takes out the whistle, blows and speaks.

WE'VE GOT NOTHING LEFT! NOTHING! DO YOU UNDERSTAND?

BEN *seizes the tube and flings GUS away. He follows GUS and slaps him hard, back-handed, across the chest.*

BEN. Stop it! You maniac!

GUS. But you heard!

BEN (*savagely*). That's enough! I'm warning you!

Silence.

BEN *hangs the tube. He goes to his bed and lies down. He picks up his paper and reads.*

Silence.

The box goes up.

They turn quickly, their eyes meet. BEN turns to his paper.

Slowly GUS goes back to his bed, and sits.

Silence.

The hatch falls back into place.

They turn quickly, their eyes meet. BEN turns back to his paper.

Silence.

BEN *throws his paper down.*

BEN. KAW!

He picks up the paper and looks at it.

Listen to this!

Pause.

What about that, eh?

Pause.

Kaw!

Pause.

Have you ever heard such a thing?

GUS (*dully*). Go on!

BEN. It's true.

GUS. Get away.

BEN. It's down here in black and white.

GUS (*very low*). Is that a fact?

BEN. Can you imagine it.

GUS. It's unbelievable.

BEN. It's enough to make you want to puke, isn't it? GUS.

(*almost inaudible*). Incredible.

BEN *shakes his head. He puts the paper down and rises. He fixes the revolver in his holster.*

GUS *stands up. He goes towards the door on the left.*

BEN. Where are you going?

GUS. I'm going to have a glass of water.

He exits. BEN brushes dust off his clothes and shoes. The whistle in the speaking-tube blows. He goes to it, takes the whistle out and puts the tube to his ear. He listens. He puts it to his mouth.

BEN. Yes.

To ear. He listens. To mouth.

Straight away. Right.

To ear. He listens. To mouth.

Understood. Repeat. He has arrived and will be coming in straight away. The normal method to be employed. Understood.

To ear. He listens. To mouth.

Sure we're ready.

To ear. He listens. To mouth.

Right.

He hangs the tube up.

GUS!

He takes out the comb and combs his hair, adjusts his jacket to diminish the bulge of the revolver. The lavatory flushes off left. BEN goes quickly to the door, left.

GUS!

The door right opens sharply. BEN turns, his revolver leveled at the door.

GUS stumbles in.

He is stripped of his jacket, waistcoat, tie, holster and revolver.

He stops, body stooping, his arms at his sides.

He raises his head and looks at BEN.

A long silence.

They stare at each other.

Curtain