

NELL DASH
The Gruesomely
Merry Adventures Of An
Irrepressibly Sensible Capitalist
With A Vengeance

By
Doug DeVita

NELL DASH

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NELL DASH

NELL DASH,
The Gruesomely Merry Adventures
Of An Irrepressibly Sensible Capitalist With A Vengeance
is dedicated to my migraines;
without them it would never have been born.
And to Marialana Ardolino,
who was instrumental in giving the play a second life.

NELL DASH

CHARACTERS 4W, 4M, 1 Gender Neutral. Diverse casting encouraged.

NELL DASH A cheerful but sensible pie-maker.

LADY FANNY DASHWOOD An evil, upper-cruited “Lady.”

NANCE Nell's younger sister, a prostitute; *also plays:*

ESTELLA Adopted child of Miss Havisham.

CELIA PEACHUM Polly's ambitious mother; *also plays:*

MISS PROSS An elderly customer of Nell's; *as well as:*

WACKFORD SQUEERS A one-eyed hospital attendant.

DODGER A teenage pickpocket; *also plays:*

EDWARD FERRARS Fanny's gentle younger brother; *as well as:*

MR. TODD A socially awkward barber; *and:*

EXECUTIONER An executioner.

FAGIN An elderly leader of thieves; *also plays:*

MR. BROWNLOW The Dashwood family solicitor; *as well as:*

DR. GRIMWIG A grumpy doctor; *and:*

ABEL MAGWITCH Another elderly thief.

TOBY MUZZLE A dim-witted but gentle footman; *also plays:*

MISS AURELIA HAVISHAM A recluse; *as well as:*

THE BEADLE An unctuous minor official; *and:*

KING STANLEY V8 The King of this alternate England.

POLLY PEACHUM A crafty little girl, very pretty; *also plays:*

BILL SIKES A notoriously violent thief; *as well as:*

TIGER BROWN An ambitious but genial policeman; *and:*

MR. JAGGERS The Havisham family solicitor.

NARRATOR A genial narrator; *also plays:*

THE REVEREND MR. COLLINS A little priest; *as well as:*

BULLSEYE A dog. Can also be a puppet manipulated by the Narrator

NELL DASH

NELL DASH... was first produced in an abridged, one-act version at the Hudson Guild Theatre in New York, February 2017. The production was directed by Dennis Corsi and the cast was as follows:

Nell Dash | Jessica Vera
Lady Fanny Dashwood | Erika Amato
Muzzle, et al... | Rob Maitner
Dodger, et al... | Eric Percival
Celia Peachum, et al... | Carole Monferdini
Nance, et al... | Billie Aiken-Tyers
Polly Peachum, et al... | Sean Barry Parsons
Mr. Brownlow, et al... | Doug Rossi

NELL DASH... was subsequently produced in its full two-act version by The Heights Players in Brooklyn, New York, December 2021. The production was directed by Dana DiAngelo, and the cast was as follows:

Nell Dash | Cecilia Auerswald
Lady Fanny Dashwood | Noelle Teagno
Muzzle, et al... | Michael Fewks
Dodger, et al... | David Mackler
Celia Peachum, et al... | Qianna Brooks
Nance, et al... | Isabel Maher
Polly Peachum, et al... | Miranda Cashman
Mr. Brownlow, et al... | Michael Janove
Narrator, et al... | LaRena Iocco

NELL DASH

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BOOK ONE

A (Gender Neutral) Narrator appears and addresses the audience.

NARRATOR. NELL DASH, the Gruesomely Merry Adventures Of An Irrepressibly Sensible Capitalist With A Vengeance, by Doug DeVita. Book One, Chapter One: In which Lady Fanny Dashwood puts things in irrevocable motion. *(The Narrator disappears.)*

A Drawing Room In Berkeley Square, London. 1820. *(LADY FANNY DASHWOOD is sealing an envelope with hot wax. She rings for MUZZLE, her footman. He enters.)*

FANNY. You do know where to deliver this, Muzzle?

MUZZLE. Yes, Lady Dashwood. If you please, mum, / your

FANNY. / Ma'am, Muzzle. How many times must / I

MUZZLE. / Ma'am, your solicitor has been waiting nearly a quarter of an hour now.

FANNY. Oh, yes. Please send him in as you leave to deliver this most urgent message. Hurry, now, Muzzle. Wait for a reply.

MUZZLE. Yes, mum Ma'am.

FANNY. And do not partake of her gin this time, Muzzle.

MUZZLE. No, Ma'am. *(He exits. Off:)* If you please, sir, her Ladyship will see you now. *(He shows MR. BROWNLOW into the room, then exits.)*

FANNY. Mr. Brownlow, thank you for coming so quickly. You were the first person I contacted after the death of my husband this very morning.

MR. BROWNLOW. May I offer my sincere condolences on the / loss

FANNY. / Yes, yes, yes, thank you.

MR. BROWNLOW. He was not yet 40, was he? So young, compared to his father, the late Sir Henry.

NELL DASH

FANNY. Yes. So sad. You have brought my newly late husband's last will and testament?

MR. BROWNLOW. Yes, yes, yes of course.

FANNY. I am to be left everything, then? The enormous country house and lands in Devonshire, the jewelry, the Dashwood meat packing business, everything will now be in my name?

MR. BROWNLOW. As you have no male heirs... Well, nearly everything, yes.

FANNY. Nearly?

MR. BROWNLOW. The terms of the late Sir John Dashwood's will, may he rest in peace, are quite clear: in the event he were to die childless, and as his legitimate younger sister Mrs. Margaret Ferrars has predeceased him, also childless, he wished to leave an annuity of two thousand, five hundred pounds per annum to each of his sisters, Elinor and Marianne Wood, as his sole remaining blood relations.

FANNY. Half-relations, Mr. Brownlow, half-relations. Do remember: their name was Wood, and not Dashwood.

MR. BROWNLOW. Nonetheless, they are his blood relations.

FANNY. I am quite assured they are dead. Nothing has been heard of them for years.

MR. BROWNLOW. Quite assured is not completely certain, now is it, Lady Dashwood? Every effort must be made to ascertain whether or not Miss Elinor and Miss Marianne Wood are still living.

FANNY. They nearly broke their father's heart when they ran away. They are hardly deserving of an enormous annuity of two thousand five hundred pounds a year. Each!

MR. BROWNLOW. My dear Lady Dashwood, what are 5,000 pounds a year compared to the 60,000 a year you stand to inherit?

FANNY. 5,000 less than 65,000, Mr. Brownlow. And those ungrateful girls were given two quite expensive strands of pearls by their half-sister Margaret, may she also rest in peace. Those pearls should stand them in good stead. IF they have not succumbed to disease or drink. The last I heard they had become whores.

MR. BROWNLOW. Nonetheless, these are your newly late husband's wishes, and as his solicitor, I shall undertake an extensive effort to locate his half-sisters.

FANNY. An impossible task, as I am sure they are dead or irrevocably missing. And if they are still alive, they will then never die.

MR. BROWNLOW. I beg your pardon?

NELL DASH

FANNY. People live forever when there is an annuity involved. And if those exquisite pearls have not disappeared with them, they will, by all rights, be returned to me, will they not, as the sole surviving member of the Dashwood family?

MR. BROWNLOW. Unless one or both of them has had a surviving male child, and that child, or children, as it were, be still alive. The terms of Sir John's will are quite clear and quite incontestable.

FANNY. A surviving male child? Or more?

MR. BROWNLOW. It's very possible, Lady Dashwood. I myself had nearly given up hope I would ever find my beloved niece Emily, and while my hopes were dashed to find she had indeed died, how overjoyed was I to discover she had not died before giving birth to my great-nephew, a delightful young man recently restored to me.

FANNY. How wonderful for you, Mr. Brownlow, but not every story has a happy ending. I would hate to be the cause of you wasting your time, which I know is quite a valuable – and expensive – commodity. I am grief-stricken enough by the death of my beloved Sir John.

MR. BROWNLOW. My expenses are not drawn from the principal sums of your accounts, Lady Dashwood, and as for your grief, well... I leave you to it. Good day, Ma'am. (*He exits.*)

FANNY. A surviving male child? Or more? Good heavens, I had not thought of that. Will there be no end to the hell those two illegitimate harlots are to put me through? (*The Narrator appears.*)

NARRATOR. Chapter Two: In which Nell vows her vengeance, and Muzzle partakes of her gin. (*The Narrator disappears.*)

Nell's Pie Shop In Fleet Street. Later that morning. (*NELL DASH, stirring dough with a big wooden spoon. Muzzle enters.*)

MUZZLE. If you please, Ma'am, a note for you. Oops. The wax broke.

NELL. I see. What's she want now, eh, Muzzle?

MUZZLE. I'm quite sure I can't say, Ma'am.

NELL. Oh, I'm quite sure you can, Muzzle.

MUZZLE. Your brother, Sir John Dashwood, has passed away this morning.

NELL. Half-brother, Muzzle. I guess I must go pay my respects to his widow.

NELL DASH

MUZZLE. She doesn't want you coming 'round, Ma'am. And she's taking the opportunity, now she figures she's running things, to cut your meat supplies and charge you for 'em.

NELL. And they say you can't read well.

MUZZLE. That's what they say, Ma'am.

NELL. My own father's meat business she's using against me now? I must say I saw this coming.

MUZZLE. I'm to wait for a reply, Ma'am.

NELL. (*Quickly scanning the note.*) Yes. No. No. And GOD no. Have you got that?

MUZZLE. Yes, Ma'am. Yes. No. No. And GOD no. She won't like that.

NELL. (*She pours a glass of gin.*) Here, she won't like this either.

MUZZLE. Thank you, Ma'am. She's not a very nice woman, is she?

NELL. You shouldn't be talking about your employer that way, Toby Muzzle, you know that. But... Yes, she is a hard one, isn't she?

MUZZLE. I'm so afraid now, with both the Mr. Dashwoods gone, she's going to sack me. I'm not really a very good footman, you know, but Mr. Dashwood the elder kept me on after my mother, the housekeeper, passed. He was a kind man, wasn't he?

NELL. Yes, he was. My father was a very kind, loving man, with a heart big enough for all God's creatures. I wish I could take you on here, Toby, but times are hard. (*Giving him a pie.*) You can always count on me for tot of gin and a pie or two, so you'll never go hungry, at least.

MUZZLE. You're a good Christian woman, Nell Dash, that you are. You and your sister were such sweet affable little things, I always had a soft spot for the two of you, and your mum, too. (*Taking a bite of a pie and grimacing.*) She was a good cook, your mum. You remember her secret? Stir for an hour, with a big wooden spoon. Makes the filling nice and smooth.

NELL. Mum never had to bake 12 dozen pies at a time.

MUZZLE. She used to let me lick that big wooden spoon. Then she'd hit me with it. I liked her.

NELL. We were all almost like family below stairs there in Devonshire, now weren't we?

MUZZLE. Yes, Ma'am.

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NELL. Now off with you. And remember, you don't know who I really am. Fanny would sack you quicker'n a greased pig at the Devonshire fair if you ever let it slip.

MUZZLE. I'll remember, Ma'am. *(He goes, muttering to himself.)* Yes. No. No. And GOD no. Yes. No. No. And GOD no. Yes. No. No. And... Uh oh. *(He comes racing back into the shop)* Excuse me, but I have to use your... you know. *Nell chuckles and points in the direction of her "loo" as he runs off.)*

NELL. You know where it is, dear. *(She goes back to stirring her dough, a little less cheerfully. A moment, then Toby reenters buttoning his trousers.)*

TOBY. *(As he exits.)* Thank you, Nell Dash.

NELL. You're welcome, Toby Muzzle. *(She watches him leave, and then sighs.)* I must now send for my sister and tell her there are but three blood-related Dashwoods left in this world. *(She pours herself some gin and re-reads the note. She speaks in a more refined accent now.)* Fanny Dashwood, you are a piece, aren't you? You can keep my sister Marianne and me from paying respects to our departed half-brother. You can make my beloved Edward, your brother, marry my half-sister Margaret instead of marrying me like he wanted. You can force me and Marianne to change our name from Wood to Dash and leave our father's enormous country house and lands in Devonshire. And with my half-brother John now gone, you can even try to charge me for the rotten bits of beef you will condescend to sell me from my own late father's business. But as God is my witness, Lady Fanny Ferrars Dashwood, you will never, ever, ever get your greedy little hands on my string of pearls, the only worldly reminder of my past life of quiet half-gentility. But I must first get them back myself. *(The Narrator appears.)*

NARRATOR. Chapter Three: In which pleasant conversations between Fagin, Celia Peachum, and The Artful Dodger have far reaching consequences. *(The Narrator disappears.)*

Fagin's Lair On Saffron Hill. Shortly after. *(FAGIN, CELIA PEACHUM, and her pretty little daughter POLLY.)*

FAGIN. Equal partners, eh?

CELIA. Equal partners, Fagin. I've been pimpin' yer girls and motherin' yer brats for fifteen years. It's me due.

FAGIN. Celia Peachum, dear lady! Time's bein' so hard, the law breathin' down our necks, and ye want to take the bread out of our mouths?

NELL DASH

CELIA. What about the bread for me own little Polly over there, what's soon to grow into a fine young lady, worth somethin' to us?

FAGIN. I don't doubt she'll make us both a small fortune, me dear, yes, a small fortune.

CELIA. That she will. But listen, ye old skinflint: 50% now, or ye ain't gettin' me Polly later. (*THE DODGER pops in from a hidden entrance.*)

DODGER. Fagin! I got yer news!

FAGIN. Not now, Dodger me dear. We're conductin' a little business.

DODGER. Right ye are. (*Dodger lurks in the shadows. Polly stares at him lovingly.*)

CELIA. Ye heard me, Fagin. Ye know what I want. Think it over carefully. Very, very carefully.

FAGIN. I'd hate to think it's come to threats after all I've done for ye since ye were but yer little Polly's age. Always been one of me favorites, ye have.

CELIA. And after all I've done for ye, too. C'mon, Polly, we're goin'. POLLY! Stop yer moonin' afore I cuff you one! (*Celia grabs Polly and exits, then motions for Polly to sneak back in. Polly hides in a corner, watching.*)

DODGER. She's yer favorite?

FAGIN. Yer all me favorites, Dodge, yer all me favorites. So? The news?

DODGER. Me half-crown?

FAGIN. Ye'd take the bread out of our mouths?

DODGER. That's a laugh. C'mon, Fagin, me half-crown.

FAGIN. Turn around. (*He does. Fagin goes to a dark corner, takes out a chest and removes a coin. He puts the chest back, slaps Dodger's butt, hands him the coin.*)

DODGER. The kid is with the old gentleman.

FAGIN. The one ye pinched the tenner from?

DODGER. He's his grand-dad, or uncle, or something like that.

FAGIN. This is bad, Dodge, this is bad. If he peaches it's the drop for all of us then, me dear.

DODGER. For ye maybe, but not fer me. They don't call me the Artful Dodger fer nothin'.

FAGIN. Now, Dodger me boy, how can you talk to yer old Fagin like that? Ain't I took care of you like you was me own from almost the cradle to now, ever since you were dropped on me doorstep? Always given' ye the least moldy sausages?

DODGER. Not for less than a sovereign.

NELL DASH

FAGIN. A POUND, DODGE!?! I ain't even asked ye yet!

DODGER. I can always tell when you need me fer somethin' big. A sovereign, or nothin'. (*Dodger holds out his hand. They repeat the business.*)

FAGIN. Find out how we can get the kid back from the old gentleman.

DODGER. See ye tomorrow. (*Making sure he's gone, Fagin takes out the chest, pulling out piece after piece of jewelry, ending with two necklaces – two lovely strings of pearls. He studies the clasps.*)

FAGIN. Ah. "M." And "E." ME! Me beauties. Me fortune. Me security. Me legacy. (*Polly sneaks back out.*)

CELIA. Well? Did ye see where he hides his stash?

POLLY. Yes.

CELIA. And?

POLLY. I want a string of pearls, mummy. (*The Narrator appears.*)

NARRATOR. Chapter Four: In which the grieving Fanny invites her brother Edward to partake of her special blend of tea. (*The Narrator disappears.*)

Fanny's Drawing Room. A week later. (*Fanny and her brother, EDWARD FERRARS.*)

EDWARD. Dearest sister Fanny, I came as soon as I heard about my poor unfortunate brother-in-law.

FANNY. We are all we have now, Edward. Tea?

EDWARD. No, thank you. I did not know that John also suffered from acute stomach problems.

FANNY. Yes, apparently the Dashwoods are not a hearty lot. My poor dear father-in-law, Sir Henry Dashwood, your poor, sweet wife, Margaret, and now my beloved husband, Sir John. All... Gone. Leaving us only their fortunes, and yours.

EDWARD. Yes, dear sister. Unless we each remarry and have sons, we are each other's heirs.

FANNY. Where is that useless Muzzle? I've ordered a lovely tea for you.

EDWARD. No, thank you, Fanny.

FANNY. But Edward, it's the special blend you like from Fortnum & Mason. I ordered it especially when I received your letter telling me you were coming. Dear Brother.

EDWARD. Dear Sister. Thank you, but no.

NELL DASH

FANNY. But I insist. You've traveled so far; that journey all the way from Plymouth / must

EDWARD. / Bath.

FANNY. I beg your pardon?

EDWARD. I live in Bath now, Fanny.

FANNY. How extraordinary. Well. Your journey all the way from Bath must have been exhausting. *(She pulls the servant's cord and calls out in a hearty, guttural bleat.)* MUZZLE!!! *(Back to her more "refined" voice.)* Honestly, Edward, my late father-in-law was a lovely, generous man, but he was entirely too kind when it came to retaining his family retainers.

EDWARD. He was loyal to the people who served him, Fanny. I don't see what is so wrong with that.

FANNY. At least my late husband's half-sisters had the good sense to leave after their mother, the cook, passed away. Imagine how awful it would have been for the poor girls to continue living in a house where they had no real social standing?

EDWARD. What of the Misses Wood? Our half-sisters-in-law? Marianne, and... and... Elinor?

FANNY. Dearest Edward, your late brother-in-law spent much of his time and our resources trying to find the dear girls, but they disappeared so quickly after their mother died and you married Margaret, leaving not a trace. I very much fear they are dead.

EDWARD. Oh, dear.

FANNY. You need tea.

EDWARD. No, Fanny, I'll be fine. It's just... I had always hoped...

FANNY. *(A louder bark.)* MUZZLE!!! *(Muzzle instantly enters with the tea.)*

MUZZLE. Is there anything else you require, mum?

FANNY. Ma'am.

MUZZLE. Ma'am? *(She dismisses Muzzle and begins preparing the tea.)*

EDWARD. I never should have listened to you and mother. I loved Elinor, not Margaret.

FANNY. Mother was right, Edward. Margaret was entirely the better match. Look at the fortune she brought you on your wedding day!

EDWARD. What do I care about a share in the Dashwood Meat-packing fortunes? I have my own comfortable income and inheritance, Fanny. Oh, my poor, dear

NELL DASH

Elinor. (*He turns his face, perhaps wiping away a tear. She quickly pulls a locket from her pocket and drops a pellet into his tea.*)

FANNY. This is where we are different, dear brother. You have never understood the utter importance of money and social standing. Tea?

EDWARD. If you insist.

FANNY. I do. Now that you are back in London, we shall have tea every afternoon. Dear brother. (*Smiling sweetly, she hands him the tea and watches intently as he takes a sip. The Narrator appears.*)

NARRATOR. Chapter Five: In which Nance, The Whore, visits her sister Nell, The Pie Maker, with a risky plan. (*The Narrator disappears.*)

The Pie Shop. Evening, the same day. (*A scattered customer or two. Nell and NANCE are having a whispered conversation. As they are both "in public," Nell and Nance speak in a sort of Cockney accent.*)

NELL. And he gave ye what for? Again?

NANCE. I asked for it, he says.

NELL. They always do, Nance, they always do.

NANCE. He was drunk, again.

NELL. They always are, Nance, they always are. Look at that eye! And that lip! Ye need to see a doctor. Have ye got any money?

NANCE. (*Shaking her head "no."*) I'll be fine. He's given me worse'n this before.

NELL. 'Course, if ye hadn't given Fagin our pearl necklaces what our rich half-sister Mags gave us before we left Devonshire, we wouldn't both be so hard up all the time.

NANCE. The kid, Nell! I need a safe place to stash the kid 'til I can bring the uncle to him.

NELL. Ye want me to keep the kid here? A kid what yer Bill stole? With Constable Brown and the Beadle already snoopin' round the place?

NANCE. What's they got on ye?

NELL. Nothin', Nance, nothin'. But ever since that crooked Mrs. Mooney was caught stuffin' pussy cats into her pies, they been lookin' at all us legitimate bakers. How'm I goin' to explain a kid to the Beadle?

NANCE. I'm tryin' to do right by him, ain't I, bringin' him back to the uncle?

NELL. Why ye stick with that Bill Sikes, I'll never understand.

NELL DASH

NANCE. He needs me. And as long as he needs me I know / where

NELL. / Save yer sad song, Nance, I've heard it too many times now.

NANCE. Ye ain't got a lick of romantic sensibility in ye anymore, Nell.

NELL. And ye ain't got a lick of common sense, Nance, you never had. So where am I supposed to stash this kid? This ain't exactly a private, out of the way little nook ye know.

NANCE. Ye got plenty of hidin' places here. Down in the bakehouse?

NELL. Ain't ye been listenin' to me? That's the first place his high and mightiness looks.

NANCE. What about upstairs? Ye ain't been able to rent that place for years.

NELL. A barber's movin' in. I hope it improves me own business. A shave and a pie, eh, Nance?

NANCE. Then how about down in the tunnels between here and St. Dunstan's?

NELL. I suppose that could work. Let me think on it.

NANCE. That's all I'm askin' Nell, that's all I'm askin'.

NELL. When do ye need me to hide the brat?

NANCE. Next week, I told the uncle.

NELL. Beadle was here day before yesterday, usually don't come back but every five days. If ye bring him the day after it might work. But what's in it fer me, eh?

NANCE. Do yer little sister a good turn?

NELL. I'm always doin' me whore sister a good turn.

NANCE. We're both whores in a way, ain't we?

NELL. Like our mum, God rest her soul. Except she was able to keep her whorin' in the kitchen and off the streets.

NANCE. And she could really make a pie. Don't ye remember her rule? Stir the fillings for an hour!

NELL. Who's got time for that? Get me string of pearls back.

NANCE. How can I do that? Even if I could find where Fagin keeps his stash, the old miser'd miss 'em in an instant.

NELL. Ye had no right givin' that Tea Leaf me pearls in the first place.

NANCE. I had to, Nell. I can't tell ye why, but I had to.

NELL. Me string of pearls, nothin' less. Then I'll hide the kid for ye. Lord, look at the time! I gots to be closin' up me shop in a minute.

NANCE. I better get goin' myself, Nell. Me Bill gets suspicious when I ain't with a customer.

NELL DASH

NELL. Wait a bit, I'll give ye a savory and a sweet pie to take with you.

NANCE. Yer pies? The only thing harder up than us are yer pies, Nell.

NELL. At least they ain't made of pussy. Can ye imagine stirring a pussy cat for an hour? *(They laugh. The one remaining customer leaves. She shouts.)* HERE!

WHERE YOU GOIN'? *(In a quieter voice.)* You poor, old, cheap, deaf thing.

MISS PROSS. YOU OUGHT TO BE PAYING ME, EXPECTING ME TO EAT THIS SHIT YOU CALL A PIE. I'LL BE UP ALL THE NIGHT WITH THE STOMACH CRAMPS.

NELL. AND YE'LL BE PASSED OUT ALL THE DAY FROM ME GIN. HAND IT OVER. ME MONEY! *(Miss Pross pays and exits.)*

MISS PROSS. SEE YE NEXT WEEK, NELL?

NELL. NEXT WEEK THEN, MISS PROSS. Heh, heh, heh, Prossy's a sweet old thing. We do that every week. Lost most of her hearin', poor dear, in a cat fight with a French revolutionist in Paris, years ago. She got the better of it, though; I heard she killed the Frenchie. *(As they are now alone, she drops the cockney and speaks in her Devonshire accent.)* Look what we've come to, dearest Marianne.

NANCE. *(She drops the cockney, too.)* Oh, Elinor, if only mum had been his wife, instead of his cook...

NELL. We still would not have inherited, dearest.

NANCE. But we'd have had social standing and been able to marry well.

NELL. And lived a nice, prosperous life in blissfully quiet anonymity. Perhaps by the sea. Just us, our husbands, our children, and our pearls. As our older half-sister Mags might have, had she lived.

NANCE. Dearest Margaret. A purer heart never beat so sweetly.

NELL. Poor dead thing.

NANCE. She was good to us when she was alive. Not like our older half-brother John and that dreadfully selfish wife of his.

NELL. Mags was more like our dear father. John was more like his mother: weak and vain. Ah, well, there's no profit in crying over our now dead half-relations. This is the hand we've been dealt... *(Resuming her Cockney accent.)* ...so we've got to play it for all it's worth.

NANCE. I suppose. I'll come by next week with the kid.

NELL. And me string of pearls.

NANCE. The kid's name is Oliver. And the uncle's name is Brownlow.

NELL DASH

NELL. Brownlow. Why is that name familiar to me? (*Nance shrugs, puts her shawl over her head and darts off. Dodger pops out of the shadows and follows her. Bill Sikes appears and follows them at a discreet pace.*)

BILL. (*Off.*) Bullseye! (*A small pit bull races across the stage. This can be a puppet manipulated by the Narrator. CONSTABLE TIGER BROWN, genial but ambitious, enters. Nell curtsies.*)

TIGER BROWN. Good evening, Nell Dash. Locking up for the night, are you?

NELL. Yes, Constable Brown.

TIGER BROWN. Good thing. Unsavory types around here lately.

NELL. Yes, sir.

TIGER BROWN. Just you be careful, Nell Dash, but not to worry. Me and the Beadle, we're looking out for our friends and neighbors. (*She darts to the counter and returns with a pie.*)

NELL. Here ye are, sir, a nice, sweet pie for ye. Black currant, just as ye like, and on the house as usual.

TIGER BROWN. Good night, and thank you, Nell Dash. (*The Narrator appears.*)

NARRATOR. Chapter Six: In which Nell is visited by a Thief, a Beadle, and a Barber. (*The Narrator disappears.*)

The Pie Shop. Morning, three days later. (*Nell is stirring.*)

NELL. 20 minutes to go. No wonder mum had such strong arms. (*Fagin enters. She immediately switches accents.*) Oh, it's the old Tea Leaf.

FAGIN. Now Nell, is that any way to speak to yer old friend Fagin?

NELL. Since when have I ever been friends with the likes of ye? Ye wouldn't even be here if ye didn't want somethin' from me.

FAGIN. A simple exchange of favors, perhaps? If a child, say a small boy, were to wander into yer shop askin' to be hidden, ye might not be predisposed to help him? Fer anyone?

NELL. Now what business have I got hidin' brats? (*Fagin pulls out a string of pearls.*) Me pearls!

FAGIN. It would be such a shame if word got out the respectable Nell Dash was really Miss Elinor Wood, the unmarried mother of a boy she had with her late, half-sister's future husband and who was paid to "disappear," now wouldn't it, me dear?

NELL DASH

NELL. Only me sister Nance knew about me boy... She told ye, didn't she! That's why she gave ye our pearls, isn't it?

FAGIN. Sad, the love of the gin, no? One sip, one slip of the tongue... And hard-earned respectability can just pffft, disappear. Now, I might be willin' to keep me silence. Ye gives me the kid, I gives ye yer pearls.

NELL. Yer afraid the kid's gonna peach, ain't ye?

FAGIN. Ah, then we do understand each other? Just a simple exchange of favors. I'd be thinkin' hard about it if I were ye. Miss Elinor Wood. *(He stuffs the pearls back into his vest pocket and slithers out.)*

NELL. *(To the audience.)* Oh, Lord, what has my Marianne gotten us into now? *(THE BEADLE, oozing puffed up oily charm, enters.)*

BEADLE. Ah, my lovely Nell Dash. It's time for another poke around your ovens and larder. The highlight of my week.

NELL. Ah, Beadle! Yer worship! Shall we inspect the bakehouse, or will ye be wanting yer sweetie first?

BEADLE. My sweetie first. Do you have cherry, perchance? I'd dearly love to pop a cherry into my mouth, especially a cherry what's been baked into a pie made by your lovely little hands.

NELL. I'm afraid cherry season is well past, yer worship.

BEADLE. Ah, but Mrs. Mooney has a cherry pie on her menu.

NELL. That's all very well if ye like yer cherries dried and sour. *(MR. TODD enters carrying a Barber Pole.)* Mr. Todd! Almost ready for yer business to start?

BEADLE. A business?

NELL. Mr. T is opening a "Tonsorial Parlor" upstairs, yer worship. Shaves, haircuts, nail trimmin's, all sorts of lovely things fer yer gentlemanly splendors.

BEADLE. Do you massage the feet, Mr. Todd? I do dearly love a good massage of the feet.

NELL. Of course he does! And all on the house, too.

BEADLE. Oh, how lovely. Just like you, Nell Dash. Isn't she lovely, Mr. Todd?

MR. TODD. *(Clearly, intensely smitten.)* Lovely. Yes.

BEADLE. Well then, I shall be 'round before the end of the week, Mr. Todd.

MR. TODD. An honor, sir, to number you among my clients.

BEADLE. It very well could be. Shall we go down in the bakehouse, my dearest Nell Dash, and then after, perhaps, a bit of gooseberry pie? *(He "gooses" Nell. Mr. Todd caresses his razor.)*

NELL DASH

NELL. Oh! Yer worship!

BEADLE. I look forward to meeting you again, Mr. Todd, perhaps in your chair?
(*Nell and the Beadle exit.*)

MR. TODD. My chair. Yes. (*Mr. Todd hangs his Barber Pole next to Nell's sign. The Narrator appears.*)

NARRATOR. Chapter Seven: In which Nell reneges on a promise made, and Polly Peachum makes a promise. (*The Narrator disappears.*)

A Dark Alley. Late that night. (*Nell enters.*)

NELL. (*Whispering.*) Nance?

NANCE. (*Also whispering.*) What ye doin' here, Nell? I'm workin'.

NELL. Ye told Fagin about my boy, Nance. How could ye?

NANCE. He threatened to ruin us both.

NELL. Well, everyone has their limits. Even me with ye.

NANCE. What do ye mean, Nell, what do ye mean?

NELL. I'm out. Here's five pounds. Get yerself out too. They're on to ye.

NANCE. But I promised the uncle I'd bring him the kid.

NELL. This ain't about the kid, it's about our lives! I'm out of it, I tell ye.

NANCE. What if yer own little Maxwell was in danger?

NELL. My Maxwell ain't in danger. Is he?

NANCE. Your Mackie's too smart to get himself into a corner like that. But little Oliver ain't. He don't belong in this world.

NELL. Neither do we, yet here we are. Ain't me problem.

NANCE. But it is mine, Nell. Please!?!

NELL. I ought to have me head examined, I ought, but ye are me sister, me own flesh and blood. Now listen to me – don't ye be bringin' him; they're all watchin' ye. Send him on his own and I'll have Mr. Todd sneak him into the tunnels through the sewer openin'. He's small enough, ain't he?

NANCE. He's a little slip of a thing.

NELL. Good. Tell the uncle to meet Mr. Todd in front of St. Dunstan's, and they can bring him up from the tunnels and out through the sanctuary. Thank God it's always open. Now get the kid, get me pearls, and get the devil out of here before Bill does us both bad.

NANCE. Tomorrow midnight.

NELL DASH

NELL. Tomorrow midnight. God bless us both. *(They exit in opposite directions. Dodger pops out.)*

DODGER. Maxwell? What kind of name is Maxwell? *(Leaving, he is intercepted by Polly.)* Here, what ye doin' out this time of night, young Polly Peachum?

POLLY. I'm followin' ye, Jack Dawkins.

DODGER. Get lost.

POLLY. But I likes ye.

DODGER. Tough luck. And I don't need some moonfaced kid taggin' me all night. *(He darts off.)*

POLLY. I'm as quick as ye, and just as quiet! *(A hand reaches out and pulls Polly aside. It's Celia.)*

CELIA. Polly! Fagin's at the Inn of the Three Cripples, nearly passed out from the gin. And I gots everybody out workin' the crowds in the West End. Ye know what that means?

POLLY. No, mummy.

CELIA. Don't play dumb with me, Polly Peachum. Get yerself up to his lair and get me that stash! *(Polly hurries to the hiding place in Fagin's lair, looks around to make sure she's alone, and takes the box of loot. She hides the pearls in her apron pocket and sneaks back out.)* Well, me little Polly?

POLLY. I got most of it, mummy. *(Celia dumps fistfuls of cash and jewels in a sack and tosses the now empty chest into the gutter.)*

CELIA. What's this? Where are the pearls, eh?

POLLY. They weren't there, mummy! And I wanted them so! *(To the audience.)* And I'm going to keep 'em! *(The Narrator appears.)*

NARRATOR. Chapter Eight: In which Fanny continues her plans, and Mr. Brownlow forms one of his own. *(The Narrator disappears.)*

Fanny's Drawing Room. The next afternoon. *(Mr. Brownlow and Fanny. She is signing documents.)*

FANNY. Is there anything else?

MR. BROWNLOW. Just this last, then all titles and funds will be transferred into your name, and you will be one of the wealthiest widows in London.

FANNY. How lovely! *(She signs with a flourish.)*

NELL DASH

MR. BROWNLOW. Just one question, if I may? Whilst going over the family papers and accounts at Tellson's Bank, I noticed a payment of 3,000 pounds made to one Nell Dash, and a contract signed by her for large meat deliveries from the Dashwood Meat-packing Company, free of charge in perpetuity.

FANNY. I left all business matters to my father-in-law, and after he passed, to my husband.

MR. BROWNLOW. I see. And yet there is a more recent directive to begin charging this Nell Dash whilst decreasing the size of her meat order, apparently signed by Sir John on the very morning he passed away. "20 pounds of cheap cuts of the experimental variety at a cost of 20 pounds per week." I attribute the shakily written difference in his signature style to his attenuated state.

FANNY. How very fascinating, Mr. Brownlow. Tea?

MR. BROWNLOW. No, thank you. What's even more fascinating is this was all done without my knowledge. Doesn't that strike you as somewhat peculiar?

FANNY. I don't know if it strikes me at all, Mr. Brownlow, as I have no head for business and little interest in affairs such as those. When can I expect the land titles and funds transferred?

MR. BROWNLOW. I will get these papers to Mr. Lorry at Tellson's Bank. Everything will be in order no more than a day or two from now. Good day, Lady Dashwood. (*He stops in the doorway.*) I must say I found it interesting that the original contract drawn up with this Nell Dash was made just about the time Miss Elinor and Miss Marianne Wood disappeared. And it was signed by your husband, not your father-in-law who was, as you know, very much alive at the time.

FANNY. How extraordinary. You must tell me more. Are you certain you would not like tea, Mr. Brownlow? I have a very special blend I'd love to share with you.

MR. BROWNLOW. No, thank you, Lady Dashwood. I don't wish to trouble you.

FANNY. Oh, it's no trouble at all. My dear younger brother Edward takes tea with me every afternoon and shall be here presently. I am happy to have you join us.

MR. BROWNLOW. Thank you, but I have an appointment to retrieve my great-nephew this evening and must prepare for our joyous reunion.

FANNY. Ah, yes. I was so saddened to hear he has become a thief.

MR. BROWNLOW. He has not become a thief! He was abducted by thieves and is being returned to me by a very kind young woman. Strange, but her countenance seemed familiar to me.

NELL DASH

FANNY. How lovely for you. We must celebrate his return and your mutual good fortune. With tea.

MR. BROWNLOW. Another time, perhaps. Good day, Lady Dashwood. (*Muzzle enters.*)

FANNY. Mr. Brownlow requires his hat and topcoat, Muzzle. And please be ready to serve the tea as soon as Mr. Ferrars arrives.

MUZZLE. Yes, mum.

FANNY. MA'AM!

MUZZLE. MA'AM! (*Muzzle holds the door open.*)

MR. BROWNLOW. (*Whispering and giving him a sealed envelope.*) Mr. Muzzle? I have a most important errand for you. Tomorrow, you must take the person named in this envelope to the address I have written down. And say nothing to anyone.

MUZZLE. Yes, sir.

MR. BROWNLOW. If my hunch is correct, I may have found the Misses Wood. At least one of them.

MUZZLE. Oh, my lady won't like that. She'll think I said something.

MR. BROWNLOW. What's that?

MUZZLE. Nothing, sir, nothing.

MR. BROWNLOW. Yes. Well. It will be our secret. This is for your trouble.

MUZZLE. Ten pounds! Oh, thank you sir. And may I say, sir, I never once for a second believed your nephew was a thief, and I am glad you will both enjoy a joyous reunion this very evening. Sir.

MR. BROWNLOW. Thank you. ... You know I will be reunited with my nephew this evening?

MUZZLE. (*Mumbling quietly.*) Yes, sir.

MR. BROWNLOW. Mr. Muzzle, at times I think you know more than you let on.

MUZZLE. At times I think so too, sir. (*Edward enters.*)

MR. BROWNLOW. Good afternoon, dear Mr. Ferrars. You're looking a little pale. Perhaps our London weather is not as agreeable to you as that which you're used to in Bath?

EDWARD. I think perhaps not.

MUZZLE. This way, Mr. Ferrars. You know how Lady Dashwood hates to be kept waiting. (*Brownlow exits. Edward enters the drawing room.*)

FANNY. Ah, dear brother. So punctual. The tea, Muzzle. Now. (*The Narrator appears.*)

NELL DASH

NARRATOR. Chapter Nine: In which a happy new beginning for Mr. Brownlow causes a sad ending for someone else. (*The Narrator disappears.*)

In Front Of St. Dunstan's. Midnight. (*Mr. Brownlow is pacing. Mr. Todd enters.*)

MR. BROWNLOW. Ah! You are the gentleman who will bring me to my great-nephew?

MR. TODD. Your great-nephew. Yes.

MR. BROWNLOW. And what of the kind young woman who was to bring my nephew here? Where is she?

MR. TODD. I know nothing of that, sir. Come. Quickly. (*Todd motions for Brownlow to follow him off. Nance appears from the shadows.*)

NANCE. There's that part of the story done now. Goodbye little Oliver, and God bless us all. (*She darts out, followed by Bill Sikes.*)

BILL. Ye did betray me, Nance, ye did. (*He exits, whistling and calling the dog. Bullseye! The dog races across the stage. Dodger pops out and follows.*)

NANCE. (*Off.*) NO, BILL, DON'T! (*A muffled scream, a struggle, then silence. The Narrator appears.*)

NARRATOR. Chapter Ten: In which Bill Sykes meets Mr. Todd, and Nell has a possibly profitable idea. (*The Narrator disappears.*)

The Pie Shop. A short while later. (*Nell, a glass of gin in one hand and stirring with the other. A bloody Nance appears outside the shop, but she falls before entering. Dodger pops on.*)

DODGER. (*Whispering.*) Bill Sykes'll finish her off fer sure if he sees her here. (*He pulls Nance's body off.*)

NELL. What was that!?! Who's out there? (*She looks out, sees nothing, and continues stirring. Bill suddenly races into the shop in an insane rage.*)

BILL. The kid! Where's the kid?

NELL. Bill! What the devil are ye doin' here and it's bloody almost daylight?!

BILL. I saw me own Nance, that filthy betrayin' whore, bring him here.

NELL. Don't ye call me sister a whore, ye whore-mongering whore monger!

BILL. Plenty's the time I've heard ye call that whore a whore yerself.

NELL. That whore's me sister, I can call her what I like.

NELL DASH

BILL. Well, that whore ain't gonna whore no more now, is she? And if ye don't stop tryin' to distractify me, ye won't either. Where's the damn kid, Nell!?!

NELL. Yer all covered with blood! Where's me sister? Where's me own Nance?

BILL. I'll kill ye too, it makes no never mind to me.

NELL. If ye kill me how're ye gonna find the kid, eh? (*Bill begins to shake her. She hits him with her large wooden spoon.*) Help! Mr. T! Mr. T! Help! (*Bill raises his knife to cut her. Todd races in and slices Bill's throat. Bill falls and dies.*)

NELL. Nasty bugger he was, killed me beloved sister he did, and Lord knows how many others. I dare say no one'll miss the evil bastard. Coo, what a lot of blood to clean up before me customers start comin' in the morning.

MR. TODD. Customers, yes. (*Nell takes Bill's knife and goes through his pockets.*)

NELL. There must be 50 pounds here! Well, the Lord does provide, as I always say. Here, help me get the body downstairs and into the oven.

MR. TODD. The oven. Yes.

NELL. Such a big, beefy brute of a man.

MR. TODD. Beefy. Yes. (*Nell gets an idea.*)

NELL. Ye know, Mr. Todd, I've just been thinkin'... With me meat supplies dwindle, and not enough money comin' in to refresh the stores of beef I now have to pay fer, I ain't been able to provide me customers, such as they are, with any savory pies.

MR. TODD. Savory. Yes.

NELL. How about we start a little business arrangement? I send up some customers for ye, strangers what won't likely be missed, and ye send down some supplies for me pies?

MR. TODD. Pies. Yes.

NELL. I can't believe I've come to think like this, but ye have to play the hand yer dealt, that's what I always say. (*She kicks Bill.*) That's fer me Marianne. A piece of shit ye were, a piece of shit ye'll be.

MR. TODD. Shit. Yes. (*They drag Bill's body off, his head thumping against the stair treads. Nell returns and begins to scrub the floor.*)

NELL. Oh, Marianne. I will find you. I swear I will, and I will make sure you get a proper burial, at least. (*Tiger Brown enters.*)

TIGER BROWN. You're up late, Nell Dash! And bloody, too?

NELL DASH

NELL. Bill Sikes! He was here, all covered in blood. Said he killed me sister Nance. He tried to kill me too! But lucky thing, Mr. T upstairs heard the commotion. He came runnin' down in the nick of time and chased him off, he did!

TIGER BROWN. Which way did he go? Which way did he go?

NELL. Down towards the embankment! Quick, maybe ye can get him!

TIGER BROWN. Bill Sikes! I catch him, it's a promotion for me for sure!

(The Narrator appears.)

NARRATOR. Chapter Eleven: In which both Nell and Miss Pross see ghosts. *(The Narrator disappears.)*

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