

Characters

The Angler's Catch

Narrator (M/F)	-	The storyteller
Fish (M/F)	-	An enchanted fish
Kevin Stanyard (M)	-	Melanie's boss
Melanie (F)	-	The Angler

The Bell Inn

Narrator (M/F)	-	The Story Teller
Malcolm (M)	-	Stella's Husband
Stella (F)	-	Malcolm's Wife
Barman (M/F)	-	Barman of The Bell Inn
Voices (M/F)	-	Disembodied voices of Inn customers
Young Man (M)	-	Inn Customer

The Pardon

Narrator (M/F)	-	The Storyteller
Joseph Goodenough (M)	-	Innkeeper
Lord Elkins (M)	-	Husband of the deceased
Prosecution (M/F)	-	The prosecutor
Wardress (F)	-	Prison guard
Charlotte Horsferry (F)	-	The accused
Turnkey (M/F)	-	Jailer
Voices (M/F)	-	Disembodied onlookers
Walter (M)	-	Bystander

World's End

Narrator (M/F)	-	The story teller
Doctor Hubbard (M/F)	-	Botanist
Philip (M/F)	-	Pub Landlord

It is intended that this script is performed as monologues; one actor performing all characters. It could alternatively be played by more than one actor with an onstage or offstage narrator.

Each monologue has the same introductory piece. If all four are being performed in one show, omit this from monologues 2, 3 and 4.

The Angler's Catch

Scene 1 – River bank

Narrator: Somewhere, there is a pub; it might be called the Wagon and Horses, the Queen's Head, the Carpenters Arms or even the Toad and Turnip. Outside the walls may be half timbered, of white pebbledash, hard blue brick or shiny tile. The name of the pub may have been changed, the insides knocked about, landlords come and gone. What is certain, is that inside this pub, there is a snug or failing that, a corner where friends keep up with the latest gossip, acquaintances exchange views and strangers confide. You may think when the heavy doors are bolted at the end of the day, the stories depart with their speakers into the night air; that nothing remains; this is not so. Once spoken or even thought, they enter the patina that builds up with the heat and light and smoke on the horse brasses, the old photographs, the oak beams, the mirroring behind the bar. Some stories are from the present, some have been around for aeons.

Narrator: The Anglers Catch stands in a pretty village, much prettier now that limestone quarrying has ended and the site given over as a nature reserve. Now, willow dripping paths meander between the water filled craters, home to moorhen, mallard, visiting Canada geese and fishermen. The nature reserve is at the smart end of the village and residents with ambition, plot their course towards it.

A large plastic fish hangs outside The Anglers Catch. It is purely representative of the fish in question you understand, which was bigger, stronger and the very devil to land. But there is a limit on the size of fish one can suspend in mid-air near to a public space. Fishy tales however, are happily unfettered by local authority regulations, and can easily extend a mile or two each way.

Melanie was a regular at The Anglers Catch. She'd loved fishing since being taught as a child on holiday how to bait a string, and suspend it over the harbour wall to catch crabs. She didn't really care about such things as *smart* ends, and was quite happy in her flat overlooking the industrial estate where she worked. Mind you, if anyone had offered her the choice between her flat or the fine house Kevin Stanyard, her boss lived in, overlooking the islets and archipelagos of the old quarry, she wouldn't have hesitated.

As union representative at Stanyard Components, some people might have found this surprising, but Melanie had nothing against money. What she was interested in was fair play. Many an evening she'd sat beside the lake with her sandwiches, flask and tin of maggots, watching the western sky turn pink and a colour like liquid gold upon the water's surface, reflecting that fishing was not unlike being a union representative. For both you needed patience, perseverance and strategy. Negotiating with her boss Kevin Stanyard required all these qualities, for he was casual when it came to things like working temperatures, *laissez faire* expecting people to do tasks they weren't hired for, and surprised when they didn't abbreviate their tea breaks as he did when there was a rush job on.

With these thoughts, she felt a tug on her line. It was a strong tug and unlike the usual 'pray excuse me' type tugs from small fry. So strong was it, that in her attempts to reel it in, she was being dragged into the water. About to regretfully cut the line, she observed that in its efforts to free itself, the fish was making occasional leaps. Timing its next jump with a mighty tug on her line, they both went flying.

Scrambling from the water, she found a large fish gasping and writhing on the bank. With rainbow scales, turquoise fins and golden eyes, it was unlike anything she'd ever seen. Contemplating what to do with it, words issued from the fish's pink lips.

Fish: Don't kill me and I will grant you one wish of your heart's desire.

Narrator: One wish of her heart's desire! This was the sort of thing that happened in fairy tales! One wish. The fish had her fixed with its beady golden eye, and as she rummaged mentally for a good wish, it occurred to her that it reminded her of someone. There was something a little crafty about the eye, as if it was holding something back. She could almost hear it saying,

Kevin: This is my best offer, take it or leave it. If you hold out for more, it only hurts all of us.

Narrator: Smiling because she had caught the fish out, she lifted it with difficulty with both arms, and staggered to the keep net. In the keep net, the fish submerged to breathe, then re-appeared, regarding her sorrowfully. It was a look she knew well. It seemed to say,

Kevin: You're killing me. You're taking the cloth off my back!

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Narrator: Melanie said,

Melanie: Forgive me if I'm wrong, but in fairy tales, isn't the usual number of wishes three?

Narrator: The fish blinked and went under water again. Melanie thought, just like Kevin Stanyard, going off in a huff and leaving you to stew in your own juice. Well *it* could stew in its own juice. She took a tuna sandwich from her bag and bit into it. As if it had been observing her, the fish popped up and said,

Fish: Two wishes. This is my final offer.

Narrator: This time it did not go below. Melanie avoided eye contact; it leaves the other party unsure of your strength of feelings.

Melanie: I know my rights. Three wishes, or you'll be in my sandwich tomorrow.

Narrator: The fish appeared to shrug its shoulders, and say,

Kevin: On your head be it if we go bust tomorrow.

Narrator: but in reality, it murmured,

Fish: Very well. Release me and tell me your wishes.

Narrator: Melanie wondered if she could trust it, but in negotiations there had to be give on both sides. Freeing it, she was just turning wishes over in her mind like a tombola drum, when the fish muttered,

Fish: Make your mind up. You might have all day, but I haven't.

Narrator: She could have kicked herself; she was clean out of bargaining positions. Through the trees she caught sight of her boss's house. Property was always a good investment.

Melanie: I'd like to live in a fine house overlooking the nature reserve, like my boss.

Narrator: Giving a little laugh, she added,

Melanie: His will do.

Fish: Second wish,

Narrator: the fish said testily. Kevin Stanyard spoke sharply like that, when he had to concede something. Money, she thought, if in doubt ask for money.

Melanie: I'd like to be financially secure without working.

Fish: Last wish

Narrator: it said, turning tail, starting to swim away.

Melanie: Er, um, er,

Narrator: said Melanie, struggling to choose wisely. Then catching sight of her reflection in the water, called,

Fish: And I'd like a fabulous new outfit.

Narrator: She was annoyed at wasting her last wish, but was being pressurised. Several feet from the shore the fish turned and said,

Fish: I'm a fish not an industrialist.

Melanie: Give me my wishes!,

Fish: I'm a one wish fish.

Melanie: You promised!

Fish: You shall have them, plus one more.

Melanie: One more?

Narrator: This didn't sound like Kevin Stanyard.

Fish: Because you ask so much of me, things may not be straight forward. If you ever want to return to your former life, you too must offer and have a wish accepted. I've had to stretch things a bit.

Narrator: Watching the line of rings disappear on the golden water, she stared at her reflection. Instead of wax jacket and wellies, she was wearing a shimmering rainbow coloured dress, with turquoise sleeves. She looked fantastic, long and trim, but surely something was wrong? Instead of being vertical, she was horizontal, and she was getting very short of breath. She wriggled in the mud in desperation. Hearing footsteps approaching she swivelled and saw Kevin Stanyard on the footpath above. He stopped, stared, and then tentatively approached her. Bending over her, he said

Kevin: Oh my! Oh, my beauty! You shall have a fine aquarium, and come and live with me in my house overlooking the islets and archipelagos of the nature reserve, where you will want for nothing!

Narrator: With a rising tide of panic, Melanie realised that her three wishes had been granted. She was going to live in a grand house, have financial security and own a wonderful new outfit. She recalled with horror the fish's words,

Voice of Fish: I've had to stretch things a bit.

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Narrator: But all was not lost. She had the extra wish hadn't she? If she made it and he accepted it, she could return to her former life. She gasped,

Melanie: Release me and I'll grant you one wish of your heart's desire.

Kevin: An enchanted fish!

Narrator: exclaimed her boss, then noticing her distress, carried her to the keep net where she breathed her fill in its muddy depths. When she surfaced, Kevin Stanyard gazed into her golden eyes. What a glorious creature he thought. But as he stared, there was something, a gleam he seemed to recognise. In fact, the more he looked, the craftier the eyes appeared. He considered the deal the fish had put to him. He'd saved her life, for he felt sure it was a her, and what had she offered him in return - one measly wish. This fish was definitely keeping something under the table. He put his hands in his pockets, and said,

Kevin: Normally, in fairy tales, I believe three wishes is the accepted number?

The Bell Inn

Scene 2 – The Bell Inn Pub

- Narrator:** Somewhere, there is a pub; it might be called the Wagon and Horses, the Queen's Head, the Carpenters Arms or even the Toad and Turnip. Outside the walls may be half timbered, of white pebbledash, hard blue brick or shiny tile. The name of the pub may have been changed, the insides knocked about, landlords come and gone. What is certain, is that inside this pub, there is a snug or failing that, a corner where friends keep up with the latest gossip, acquaintances exchange views and strangers confide. You may think when the heavy doors are bolted at the end of the day, the stories depart with their speakers into the night air; that nothing remains; this is not so. Once spoken or even thought, they enter the patina that builds up with the heat and light and smoke on the horse brasses, the old photographs, the oak beams, the mirroring behind the bar. Some stories are from the present, some have been around for aeons.
- Narrator:** On a foggy evening, the tolling of St. Leonard's bell can be heard throughout the valley. You'd think its sound would travel better when it was clear, but the mist, like unravelled wool, wanders here and there, carrying vibrations seldom heard when the weather is fine. Last century in honour of the gift of the bell, the nearby pub changed its name from the Green Man, to the Bell Inn. Stella and Malcolm, lost in a maze of minor roads on their way home from a concert, heard the bell and made for its muffled call.
- Malcolm:** If there's a church, there's bound to be a village. And if there's a village, there's bound to be a pub. It's a long drive back, I could do with half a bitter, and something hot. What's the special dish round here Stella?
- Stella:** I don't think places have special dishes these days; it's all mix and match. At one time, you could almost tell where you were by the specials; Cornish pasty, Bakewell tart, Welsh rarebit, Huntingdon pie, um
- Malcolm:** Haggis
- Stella:** Cumberland sausage.
- Malcolm:** If we head down this side road, we might be lucky
- Stella:** The fog can hardly get worse. I think there's a reservoir round here; maybe when we're past it, it will clear up. Fog clings around water doesn't it.
- Narrator:** Twisting and turning downhill, the road led them down into a village.
- Malcolm:** The Bell Inn. And the lights are on – hurrah!
- Stella:** That's funny, the fog's suddenly lifted. Listen Malcolm, the church bell has stopped ringing.
- Malcolm:** There's a welcome.
- Narrator:** Pushing open the heavy oak door, they found themselves inside a long room; in the bar area, a real log fire burned brightly. Running the length of the room was a table chock-a-block with diners, who when the newcomers entered, stopped their conversations and stared openly. Addressing the barman, Stella said,
- Stella:** It's nice to find somewhere open. It's such a nasty evening.

Narrator: The barman nodded. His hair was combed forward, as if cut with a pudding basin over it. Around his neck was a lime green kipper tie.

Barman: What can I get you?

Narrator: Malcolm rubbed his hands together,

Malcolm: Oh half of the best, and – for you love?

Stella: I'll have a half too please.

Narrator: They watched as the man pulled steadily at the pump, like a lock gate, releasing the amber liquid. No pressurised pumps here. Stella sniffed,

Stella: The food smells wonderful. I don't suppose you have any spaces? We haven't booked I'm afraid. We're on our way home.

Barman: We don't take bookings. I don't know that we have any vacancies.

Narrator: Disappointed, Stella scanned the long table for empty seats. The diners were dressed in motley fashions from past eras. It must be a theme evening, she thought. In a surreal way, their conversation seemed to encapsulate what they were wearing.

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Voice: In my day, you weren't allowed to leave anything on your plate! If you did, it would be on your plate next meal. And you certainly wouldn't be allowed afters.

Voice: And there was none of this answering back. Children were seen and not heard.

Voice: Good thing too I say.

Voice: Country's gone to the dogs!

Voice: Bring back corporal punishment!

Voice: They never should have stopped national service.

Voice: It's so difficult to get service these days! I remember the time when staff stood to attention when you entered a shop. The customer was king then.

Narrator: A young man with slick brylcreamed hair, wearing a satin shirt mumbled,

Young man: There's only one king.

Narrator: Malcolm took a long draught of his ale.

Malcolm: Oh, this is, mmm. I haven't tasted beer like this since oh -

Narrator: By way of response, the barman said,

Barman: There may be a vacancy.

Narrator: Sensing more flattery might increase their approval rating, Stella added,

Stella: It's wonderful seeing everyone eating round the table together! It's so rare. People don't share food like they used to, do they? It's all TV suppers, and instant this and that.

Narrator: The barman nodding, said,

Barman: You seem to be our sort of customer. We are a little fussy. I think we can fit you in madam.

Stella: Oh excellent!

Narrator: Immediately, a cry of dissent arose from the end of the long table. A man wearing a green felt waistcoat was waving his pipe in the air, and his female companion, in beige twin set and pearls, was holding aloft a coffee cup. Stella reddened, as they echoed indignantly,

Voices: We haven't finished yet!

Stella: Oh please, we're in no hurry!

Barman: You wouldn't be seated at that end. New customers are always placed at the top. If you'd like to wait in the snug please, with your drinks.

Narrator: Inside the snug, lit by flickering gas wall mantles, artefacts from the past were displayed; gleaming horse brasses, polished copper warming pans, rakes and hoes, old photographs of the village. Malcolm turned to Stella,

Malcolm: What a weird place!

Narrator: She giggled,

Stella: It certainly is! All these characters! I wonder how long they've been in here?

Malcolm: From the 1960's by the look of the girl with the beehive hair-do and crimplene dress!

Stella: Fashions do come full-circle though, don't they? Ponchos are back again.

Narrator: As if to prove her point, through a small window of the snug, she saw a woman wearing one. Somehow though, in tan and chocolate brown stripes, hers looked outdated rather than retro. She said,

Stella: I wonder what the barman meant by 'we seemed their kind of customer'?

Narrator: Malcolm shrugged. He turned away from the photograph he was studying when the menu was brought in by the barman. Below his green kipper tie, were purple flare bottomed trousers. Trying not to stare, they studied the menu. Malcolm drooled,

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Malcolm: Rissington roly poly.

Narrator: Opening her mouth to coo, 'Rissington rabbit stew', Stella was forestalled by a commotion; chair legs scraped against the flag tiles, pottery was smashed, doors creaked open, then slammed shut. Worse were the cries, first loud, then diminishing, as if someone had adjusted the volume. Stella saw through the small snug window, that the seats where the man with the pipe, and the woman in the twin set were seated, were vacant. She asked the barman,

Stella: Where've they gone?

Barman: They've gone home. It was time.

Narrator: At the long table, everyone moved along a space, leaving two chairs for Malcolm and Stella. The couple taking the vacated end seats, she in turquoise crocheted dress, he in orange tank top, exchanged nervous glances. Standing by the chairs at the top of the table, Malcolm suddenly said,

Malcolm: You know what love, roly-poly is a bit passé now. I fancy garlic mushrooms! I bet you'd love a toasted goat cheese Stella?

Narrator: Stella stared as if he had gone mad. The barman said stiffly,

Barman: Oh that isn't our sort of thing at all! I recommend the brown Windsor soup.

Narrator: Malcolm replied,

Malcolm: Ugh, no thanks, reminds me of school. You don't have a television, do you? I'd like to watch the football results.

Narrator: A stunned silence was followed by outraged muttering. Stella looked at Malcolm, and he pulled her towards him to whisper,

Malcolm: We mustn't sit down at the table!

Narrator: Unnerved by his strangeness, she said lamely to the barman,

Stella: I think I'll forgo the rabbit stew; poor little bunnies!

Narrator: The barman, snapping the menu shut like an empty trap said,

Barman: The Hearty Goodfellow is on the top road! I think you are more *their* type of customer!

Narrator: Hastily collecting their coats, voices followed them,

Voice: Thank goodness they're not staying! The thought of him sitting here, eating garlic for an eternity, doesn't bear thinking about.

Voice: And why would anyone eat goats' cheese? What's wrong with good old cheddar, that's what I say! That's people today for you.

Voice: But what about the empty chairs?

Voice: Someone else will hear the bell.

Narrator: Outside, Malcolm pushed Stella into the Hillman.

Malcolm: Don't look back. Never look back!

Narrator: Pushing the accelerator, the car stuttered up the hill.

Malcolm: Rissington! As soon as I saw the photograph of St Leonard's in the snug, its spire sticking out of the water, I felt something wasn't right. Rissington was flooded to make the reservoir decades ago! They evacuated the village, but according to legend, the bell still rings out. The Bell Inn exists only in the past!

Narrator: Suddenly an old Riley loomed out of the gloom. Startled by seeing another car on the road, the driver, wearing a camel coloured duffel coat and brown trilby, glared balefully at them. Beside him, the woman in black astrakhan coat and matching hat, did likewise. Stella said,

Stella: Listen! The bell's started up again!

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The Pardon

Scene 3 – The Gallows Inn

Narrator: Somewhere, there is a pub; it might be called the Wagon and Horses, the Queen's Head, the Carpenters Arms or even the Toad and Turnip. Outside the walls may be half timbered, of white pebbledash, hard blue brick or shiny tile. The name of the pub may have been changed, the insides knocked about, landlords come and gone. What is certain, is that inside this pub, there is a snug or failing that, a corner where friends keep up with the latest gossip, acquaintances exchange views and strangers confide. You may think when the heavy doors are bolted at the end of the day, the stories depart with their speakers into the night air; that nothing remains; this is not so. Once spoken or even thought, they enter the patina that builds up with the heat and light and smoke on the horse brasses, the old photographs, the oak beams, the mirroring behind the bar. Some stories are from the present, some have been around for aeons.

Narrator: You can't beat a good hanging for entertainment. I'm not being bloodthirsty, 'tis true. People come into the Gallows Inn after a hanging and celebrate that it wasn't them. Business is always good on hanging days. The turnkeys know they'll get free ale if they bring the convict in on his way to eternity. As for the prisoner well, not many refuse. They know the story of the one who refused to stop, then a minute or two after the hanging, the pardon coming. That's the thing about hanging, it be quite undoable.

I always put the prisoner in the snug, it being more private for final reflections. Then for a silver sixpence, I, Joseph Goodenough, let customers in, two or three at a time to take a peek. Mind you I have to share that dividend with the turnkeys, for there's stiff competition hereabouts for a view of a condemned man - or woman. This time it's going to be a little bit special, because not only is it a woman, but it be none other than the murderess of Lady Elkins. Today in fact, I may charge a silver shilling, for Charlotte Horsferry is reputedly a cool customer. Still, I expect you know that, for the story has filled the paper many a day. But if you don't, I could recount it for a small consideration,

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Joseph: into the black bag there, sir, madam.

Narrator: You'll excuse me for keeping one eye on the window for the approach of the black horse and cart. Well now, it's difficult knowing where to start, but I'll go back to the beginning, as far as 'tis known. Charlotte Horsferry was an actress, well I suppose she still is, because she ain't been hanged yet. Her life is a mystery before she appeared on the London stage. Some say she was a flower girl at Covent Garden; others that she grew up in the debtors' prison at Fleet. But whatever her history, it has been wiped away like spilt ale. Those that gave evidence said she acted quite the lady, full of airs and graces. Maybe that's what gave her the idea of becoming a real lady, Lady Elkins. Trouble was - there already *was* a Lady Elkins! It all started when Lord Elkins saw her on stage and sent her flowers.

Lord Elkins: Just because she was a damned fine actress,

Narrator: he told the judge at the trial. Later though, she applied for the job of governess to his children, saying she had wearied of the stage. What happened next is a matter for conjecture; did his lordship encourage her, or was it all in Charlotte Horsferry's mind? Whichever, within three months, Lady Elkins lay dead, poisoned by nightshade. Charlotte Horsferry was arrested

because she'd given the lady an elderberry cordial the night before. She said if she'd given poison it was by accident; she only made her lady the cordial out of the goodness of her heart. She was an actress, not an expert on hedgerows. And she might have got off but for the upstairs maid. She said she'd seen the suspect parading about in her ladyship's clothes and jewels, whilst the mistress was out. Well, when the actress said she was rehearsing for a new part. The prosecution said,

Prosecution: Prey tell me what part was that - of Lady Elkins?

Narrator: Now I see the black horse pulling up the hill; the person in the back, seated regally as if on a tour. Outside the Gallows Inn, the customers stand round the doorway, gawping. Helping her down, the wardress says,

Wardress: Here we are then Joseph.

Narrator: The black bag is still being passed, coins jingling. Cut three ways there should be a pretty penny for each of us. As the prisoner steps forwards, her eyes miss nothing for she stops,

Charlotte: If it's a show, shouldn't I be paid too?

Narrator: says she. That silences us, but the wardress gathering her wits says,

Wardress: If you have a share, you won't keep it for long dearie.

Charlotte: For my part in this entertainment, I want a quarter of the takings, or I shan't come in.

Narrator: The male turnkey frowns; the least a prisoner can do is co-operate and make things pleasant on their way to a hanging.

Turnkey: If you don't come in, you might be too quick if a pardon comes.

Narrator: Charlotte Horsferry looks thoughtful.

Charlotte: Yes; a pardon might come, for the queen is set to become a grandmother again.

Narrator: This was news to us, but Queen Victoria has so many children, t'aint surprising if one or t'other isn't regularly producing a grandchild. But still Charlotte Horsferry stands her ground.

Charlotte: A quarter of the takings, in advance.

Narrator: The wardress looks at the woman as if hanging is too good for her. However, a cheer goes up from the crowd when the prisoner adds,

Charlotte: If a pardon doesn't come, you can give my share to Lord Elkins poor motherless children.

Narrator: I thought that was a bit rich, seeing it was her fault they were motherless in the first place. Well we give Charlotte Horsferry a quarter of the collection, and troop towards the snug. Of course, there are far too many people to squeeze in. She says helpfully,

Charlotte: I'll shout, for I'm used to throwing my voice on stage

Narrator: Suddenly she spots old Walter the unwashed at the front, and looks at him with an expression of disdain as he squints, mole like, about him; turning his head this way then that like an old hound. Summoning him, she cups her mouth to his ear and says something. He shambles to the back of the crowd where he'll never hear a word, but I'll recite it for him later.

For ten minutes she gives the performance of her life; declares her innocence; says as sure as eggs are eggs her pardon will come. She will set up a small acting academy on the continent; never again make anybody an elderberry cordial. However, when she finishes and no pardon has come, there is a hush. The turnkeys have finished their drinks; and on the hill, Marfoot, the hangman. As the crowd turns, a voice comes loud and clear,

Voice: Pardon!

Narrator: Like wildfire the word spreads,

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Voice: Pardon!

Voice: Pardon!

Voice: It's a pardon!

Narrator: Charlotte Horsferry swoons and half a dozen men rush to catch her. In an instant she recovers and calls out,

Charlotte: Long Live the Queen, and her grandchildren!

Narrator: Naturally, we all echoes 'Long Live the Queen and her grandchildren!' More drinks are ordered and the child's health drunk. T'is a merry mood at The Gallow Inn. When this merriment is over, we notice that not only has Charlotte Horsferry vanished, but so too has the black horse and cart.

The turnkeys are a bit put out. There's paperwork and such to fill in. The Governor will surely grumble at letting her go just like that, pardon or no pardon. Then the turnkeys enquire about the pardon. They heard it of course - but where is it? Ask as we might, we can find no messenger. When we think about it, none can remember that Queen Victoria was expecting a grandchild this day either. Word gets around that an accomplice shouted it from the back, but just then I catches sight of old Walter. Seeing me looking, he grumbles,

Walter: I wants my shilling back!

Narrator: What?

Walter: That Charlotte wots'er'ferry said if I didn't hear, she'd say it all o'er again for me. I only had to say the word.

Narrator: The word?

Walter: Yes, I know my manners. I might say 'what' and 'eh' here, but I know what to say in front of a lady.

Narrator: Pricking up his ears, the turnkey asks sharply,

Turnkey: And what be that?

Walter: You don't know either? Well you both want learnin'! It be 'pardon' of course!

The World's End

Scene 4 – World's End Pub

Narrator: Somewhere, there is a pub; it might be called the Wagon and Horses, the Queen's Head, the Carpenters Arms or even the Toad and Turnip. Outside the walls may be half timbered, of white pebbledash, hard blue brick or shiny tile. The name of the pub may have been changed, the insides knocked about, landlords come and gone. What is certain, is that inside this pub, there is a snug or failing that, a corner where friends keep up with the latest gossip, acquaintances exchange views and strangers confide. You may think when the heavy doors are bolted at the end of the day, the stories depart with their speakers into the night air; that nothing remains; this is not so. Once spoken or even thought, they enter the patina that builds up with the heat and light and smoke on the horse brasses, the old photographs, the oak beams, the mirroring behind the bar. Some stories are from the present, some have been around for aeons.

Narrator: The World's End pub is a monument to Victorian exploration and discovery. On its walls are brown varnished alligators and snakes; by the doorway, an upright bear; in glass cases, exotic birds; everywhere skins, maps, telescopes, winding plants, giant shells, pods, cones. As you relax in the half light, spare a thought for those explorers of old, who without satellite navigation, mobile phones or dehydrated ready packs, braved the unknown and returned with pieces of it. But as you rest, do not close your eyes; least not both at once.

It is tradition at the World's End to fetch beer straight from the cellar and when Philip returned with the earthenware jug, his visitor was sitting with eyes closed. Was it eccentricity that had caused the man to visit the pub in his dun coloured safari suit and pith helmet? Sitting there, old and wrinkled, he resembled a tortoise, camouflaging splendidly into his surroundings. Philip wondered whether he might be mocking him, or if he thought it appropriate wear for the occasion. He thought about the letter he had sent to the university's Botanical Department; written after closing, when he was tired, his imagination in overdrive. Yet, here in rapid response, was Doctor Hubbard.

Sensing Philip, or perhaps it was the yeasty aroma of the ale, the man opened his eyes and watched his glass being filled, like a peaty waterfall. By way of acknowledgement, he reached out a smooth, neat hand, and raised the glass to his tortoise mouth. Then he removed a letter from his breast pocket and lay it on the dark table between them, like a raft in uncharted seas.

Doctor: You say that you have grown a plant?

Narrator: Philip knew that inside the letter, like the filling of a sandwich, was the photograph. Mind you, the plant had grown since then. He opened the lounge curtains fully, for he had been trying to halt the bud's progress, then watched the botanist's expression as he craned his head upwards towards the ceiling, at the serpent like plant with pure white stem and leaves, at the huge central bud, like a veiled hanging chandelier. Behind the man's half-moon spectacles, something flickered.

Doctor: My God!

Narrator: he said eventually. Philip thought if Dr Hubbard was awed, he had done right in getting in touch.

Philip: As I said in my letter, my great great uncle discovered it in the Amazon in Victorian times. The pub's named in his honour 'The World's End'. The seed pod was just one of the things he sent home from the ends of the earth.

Doctor: And you waited all this time to tell anyone?

Philip: What was there to tell, until we planted it? The shell had split you see, like a giant pea, with the seeds showing through. We didn't think it would take, but the wife soaked it in ale, and popped it into compost. The roots go down the wall into the cellar. It's fond of the old ale! But, as I explained, I'm getting worried about it. And it would be nice to have it recorded properly in Uncle's name; Wilfrid White he was. It would be like a memorial, because he never came back from that expedition.

Narrator: The doctor had his eyes shut again and Philip wondered if he'd nodded off, but noticed his thumbs moving in an agitated fashion. Philip too now began tapping his fingers against his arm.

Philip: But my main reason for writing was, well, er, safety.

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Narrator: Doctor Hubbard suddenly became less like a tortoise, more like a dragon.

Doctor: Your ancestor had no right to those seeds! I looked up your man's name on that expedition, and he was a minor player in its discovery! My great grandfather, Professor Hubbard led that expedition. The plant was destroyed not long afterwards. I had no idea seeds might have been sent back! With those seeds went his work in locating the plant. It is his name, and his alone this plant should bear!

Narrator: Philip felt stunned and confused by the lecture. This wasn't how he imagined things going. It wasn't why he wrote. Still, he wasn't having aspersions cast on the integrity of great great Uncle Wilfrid. Politely, as if dealing with an awkward customer, he said,

Philip: If my uncle said he discovered the plant, then he discovered it.

Doctor: I'm afraid not! I have come on behalf of the department to claim the plant, the Hubbard Convolvulus. My ancestor found it; I have relocated it; an apposite ending!

Philip: Hold your horses! It was me what wrote to you!

Doctor: It was I who wrote to you.

Philip: What!

Doctor: Your English is appalling! It was I, who wrote to you, is what you should say. Anyway, it's your word against mine!

Narrator: With a sleight of hand, like a shifty card player, he replaced the letter in his breast pocket. Now Philip understood why the man had asked to meet him alone, without staff or customers as witnesses.

Just then, Philip noticed movement above their heads and looked up. The doctor followed his gaze. It was happening again. As they watched, the sheaths of the chandelier type bloom dropped away like dustsheets, one by one, revealing a dangling mass of snow-white droplets. Philip felt a muddled sensation of pride and horror. On the face of the doctor was naked

ambition; the family name in the annals of botanical history! Philip lay a hand on the man's sleeve, implored,

Philip: We should get out of here now. It's getting bigger and hungrier. That's why I wrote.

Narrator: The doctor moved his arm,

Doctor: You wrote because you wanted publicity for your pathetic pub. If this were a museum it would be a disgrace! Everything higgledy-piggledy; nothing labelled, or properly catalogued. As for the preservation of the artefacts; the best they can expect, is a lick from a beery cloth once in a blue moon.

Narrator: Philip felt bitterly disappointed, and afraid. He hadn't thought the bud would open so soon. It was like being caught in a storm with the thing you'd looked on as a shelter, turning out to be a sheep. The doctor announced,

Doctor: I'm going to measure its roots. When I send transport, the roots will need to be taken up carefully.

Philip: You can't go near the cellar now! It'll have you!

Narrator: The doctor's eyes glittered as he stood.

Doctor: It'll have me? Language can be a wonderful thing in the right mouth.

Narrator: Despite the insults, Philip really hoped the doctor would re-appear, but when the plant's snow-white droplets turned from pure white to blood red, knew he never would. The same thing had happened a few years ago, after the dog had unaccountably disappeared; a few years before that, when the cat had gone missing. Over a century earlier in the Amazonian Forest, he guessed Uncle Wilfrid's blood had given the blossom its blood red blush, when he had excitedly gone to explore its gnarled and twisted roots.

When the hoo-ha was over, the plant went to a secure unit at the university, and was duly named White's Convolvulus. Philip was proud of that, and he reckoned great great Uncle Wilfred would too. The recalcitrant seed pod went, although there turned out to be two seeds missing, instead of just one.

At the World's End, Philip and his wife still keep many unusual plants, overlapping and entwining, dipping and winding, but the pots are checked regularly for interlopers. Have no qualms about relaxing there with a fistful of foaming ale; or even close one eye.