

# A TRAVELLER IN TIME

Adapted for the stage by  
MICHAEL JOHNSTON

From the novel by  
ALISON UTTLEY

Michael Johnston  
2 Woodfall Avenue  
Barnet (Herts.)  
EN5 2EZ UK

## CHARACTERS

### *20<sup>th</sup> Century*

Penelope Taberner Cameron

Ian Cameron, her brother [doubled with Anthony]

Alison Cameron, her sister [doubled with Arabella]

Carlin Cameron, née Taberner, her mother [doubled with Mary]

Great-Aunt Cecily “Tissie” Taberner [doubled with Dame Cecily]

Mrs Appleyard, farm servant [doubled with Tabitha]

Jess, their farmhand [doubled with Jude; non-speaking role]

2<sup>nd</sup> Lieutenant Frank Bramble [doubled with Francis]

### *16<sup>th</sup> Century*

Dame Cecily Taberner, housekeeper to the Babingtons

Tabitha, maidservant

Jude, deaf-mute and crippled kitchen boy

Francis Babington, youngest son of the family

Anthony Babington, oldest son

Mistress Mary Babington, Anthony’s wife

Arabella Babington, a cousin of the Babington boys

There are eight actors required, one being a non-speaking role.

This adaptation has been made with the kind permission of the  
Trustees of the Alison Uttley Literary Property Trust

©2011 Michael Johnston

ACT ONE

*The scene is the kitchen in Thackers, a Derbyshire farmhouse that dates back to Elizabethan times and earlier. The kitchen range and oven are upstage towards the left with a passage off to the larder to the left of them. Another exit downstage left is to the rest of the house. A large wooden door is stage right and stands slightly ajar. There is space to the right of the door for a small set behind the kitchen wall for two later scenes. There is a solid oak kitchen table, an oak cupboard, an old-fashioned rocking chair, and a very ancient grandfather clock.*

*It is the spring of 1912 and Great-Aunt Cecily “Tissie” Taberner is bustling around the kitchen assisted by Tabbie (“Tabbie”). They are anticipating the arrival from London of Penelope Taberner Cameron, Tissie’s great-niece.*

TISSIE: Any minute now! I think I hear the cart coming into the yard.

TABBIE: Any minute, any minute. How long is it since?

TISSIE: She was only ten, so that makes nigh on three years. Her Mam says she’s shot up. Outgrown her strength really. And besides; London, Chelsea, all that bad air. Not surprising she’s been sick. But a few weeks here’ll work wonders; of that I’m certain.

TABBIE: That’s right. London fog’s famous. Pea-soupers they calls ’em. Catch me supping that kind of soup and I don’t think. Potato and leek’s more the thing. The *real* thing.

TISSIE: She’ll be in the door this minute. Go up now, Tabbie, and see the fire’s doing well in her room.

TABBIE: Right away, mistress. (*Exits left*).

*Tissie looks approvingly round the kitchen, smooths her apron and pats her hair. Penelope bursts in stage right crying out in delight at being back at Thackers and rushes over to Tissie. They share fond embraces.*

PENELOPE: Darling, darling, Aunt Tissie. It’s so wonderful to be here. It’s been years and years and years. It seems like hundreds!

TISSIE: My little poppet. But you’re not so little though. My, how you’ve grown! But we’ll have to put some flesh on your bones and some roses in your cheeks, just like your Mam says you need.

PENELOPE: Oh, Mummy sends her love, lots and lots of love and so do Ian and Alison and Daddy too.

TISSIE: That’s nice.

*While Tissie sets out cutlery, plates and food, Penelope runs round looking at everything then finishes up sitting and gently rocking in the chair.*

PENELOPE: Aunt Tissie, this is so wonderful. I have so missed it all and nothing's changed, just nothing. The table, the big clock, the pots and pans. The lovely big cooker and that ham hanging from its great big hook. And the gorgeous smells of everything.

TISSIE: A farm is certainly full of smells, that's certain sure. But I promise you it isn't the same ham you saw last time. That's long since eaten. The oven and the range must be more than fifty years old though, because *my* mam put it in when her gran died; that was your great-great-grandmother Cecily Taberner: We're all called Cecily. But I reckon some of the pots and pans might be even older. I don't know when last we bought any.

PENELOPE: When I was getting better from diphtheria, Mummy used to sit on my bed and talk about how much she loved growing up here and how Thackers had been the family home for hundreds and hundreds of years. About the things she could hear, lying in bed in the early morning, that meant she could *picture* what was happening without even needing to get up and see it: all in her imagination.

TISSIE: She had a great big imagination, your mam.

PENELOPE: It just feels like us Taberners have been here for ever and ever, Amen.

TISSIE: Maybe we have. That's something I couldn't tell. But mind you, Thackers didn't always *belong* to the Taberners. Way back, we were servants to the family as used to own everything around here, above ground and underground, and a big house in Derby too.

PENELOPE: I expect they were what Ian calls 'the stinking rich'. He's a socialist.

TISSIE: I don't know as I cares for your brother's choice of language but there was a time when the Babingtons must have had a pretty penny. They lost it all, of course.

PENELOPE: The Babingtons: that's a nice name: almost as nice as Taberner. When did they own Thackers? Why did they lose it?

TISSIE: Questions, questions! You'll tire yourself out and fade away; and you that's here for country air and good food and plenty of exercise to make you big and strong again. No, my pet, I don't know how long they were here, maybe hundreds of years too; right back to William the Corn Curer perhaps, but when that King Henry wanted to make everybody Protestants the Babingtons said no thanks and stuck to their old religion, and that's

really what got them in so much trouble. They lost all their money, all their land, the lead mines too, and poor Master Anthony was put to death.

PENELOPE: My goodness, how terrible. What had he done? Mummy never told me any of this.

TISSIE: Quite right too. We don't want to go giving a ten-year-old nightmares.

PENELOPE: But I'm *thirteen* now! I'm in the middle school in Chelsea. Oh, do tell me!

TISSIE: You're here for a bit, my pet, and we can talk as much as you like when the work is done.

*Tissie hands Penelope knives and forks to set out. She begins to do this but cannot suppress a question.*

PENELOPE: But why was Anthony Babington put to death?

TISSIE: It was all to do with his trying to help the imprisoned Queen escape. The Scottish Queen and the English Queen didn't like each other; what with one being a Catholic and the other a Protestant. That mattered so much to everyone then.

PENELOPE: Mary, Queen of Scots! Of course, I learned about her when we did Kings and Queens at school. Alison can name them all from William the Conqueror right up to King George the Fifth; long may he reign!

TISSIE: Your big sister is going to be a school teacher; of that I'm certain.

PENELOPE: I expect so. And Ian wants to be a farmer; but *I'm* going to be a writer like Daddy. But Queen Mary didn't really escape, I don't think, because she was executed. So she can't have got right away, at least not in the end. I think she did escape very romantically once in a rowing boat, but they caught her that time too. How did Anthony Babington get mixed up in it all?

TISSIE: That you'd have to ask him, as if you could! All I remember is he actually tried twice and the second time he was betrayed and Elizabeth's people dealt with him pretty harshly. Mind you, that's what they did in those days. And all to do with religion, and whose turn it was to be king or queen next. I do remember my gran saying it was back around that time they built the church here. It's C of E now, of course, but, when they built it, it was the family's private chapel because they were R Cs and the king was stealing all the churches and they wanted to keep their own. It's me and Tabbie, that's Mistress Appleyard, as keeps it clean and Jess tries to keep it repaired more or less; but there's only a service here once a month now and

only four or five of us in the pews most times; except Christmas. In olden times, I reckon they were in and out of there several times a day.

PENELOPE: I didn't know Thackers was so full of history. Just think of the hundreds and *hundreds* of people who've lived here. I wonder if there are any ghosts. Have you ever seen a ghost, Aunt Tissie? I'd love to see a ghost. Really I would.

TISSIE: Be careful what you wish for! As for me, I'm too busy to see ghosts and too tired at nights to dream of them. Mind you, I remembers my gran saying as how she'd seen some once; old lead miners coming out their tunnels, and some of them Babingtons flitting about and singing and dancing. My mam used to get angry with her, saying she shouldn't scare the children, but we all loved it, and that's a fact.

*Jess, the farm hand, enters carrying some luggage.*

TISSIE: Right now. Here's Jess with your bits and pieces. (*To Jess*) Take these up to Penelope's bedroom, Jess, and tell Tabbie to help her unpack and get washed. Now, off you go, young lady. We can't keep supper waiting and you mun have an early night after all that time travelling today.

*Penelope gives Tissie a hug and follows Jess offstage. Tissie looks around and then remembers something.*

TISSIE: Firewood! We'll be out of firewood in a quarter of an hour if I don't bring some more in right now. We can't be serving a cold supper tonight, dear me no! (*She bustles offstage*).

*The lights dim and the kitchen is 'transformed' into how it was in the Spring of 1582 but many of the kitchen props, including the table and rocking chair remain. As the lights come up again, loud cock crows are heard suggesting that time has passed and it is the following morning. An offstage voice is heard calling out for Dame Cecily. Tabitha enters stage leading a puzzled Penelope by the hand. Penelope is wearing a green dress with wide sleeves.*

TABITHA: Dame Cecily! (*To Penelope*) You come along-a-me, my dear, and she'll see to you, whomsoever you may be. Don't you fret now: but you belong in the servants' quarters, not wandering about up there.

*Dame Cecily enters with a basket of eggs.*

CECILY: Tabitha! Did you send that Jude for firewood. How can I be expected to cook with no firewood? (*Taking heed of the stranger in her kitchen and Tabitha gesturing*) And, Lord a' mercy, who might you be, young miss?

PENELOPE (*with relief at a 'familiar' face*): Aunt Tissie! It's me, Penelope, your niece. But everything has changed and the house is so much *bigger* upstairs.

TABITHA: I found her wandering up there. She'd even looked into Master Anthony's study and then Mistress Babington's bedroom. Lucky she was off to chapel. Missie here says she's just arrived from somewhere.

CECILY (*not unkindly*): No one has called me Tissie in many a long year. That's a name for a she-cat! Dame Cecily Taberner is my name, and Thackers is my home, and Heaven's my destination. And my word is law in this household, I'll have you know. Aunt you say. Great Aunt more like by the look of you. And where might you have sprung from?

PENELOPE: From London, Dame Cecily. I live in Chelsea. But my mother was born here in Thackers.

CECILY: And what would her name be then, and yours for that matter?

PENELOPE: She's Carlin Taberner, and I'm Penelope Taberner Cameron. My mother sent me here to get some country air. I've not been very well.

CECILY: Penelope? The last Penelope Taberner has been lying in the churchyard this many a year. But you look like a Taberner, right enough; even with your hair cut like a youth's and those curious weeds you're wearing! Well, well then: a mystery solved. We've never heard anything of my niece Margery's daughter for many a year since she went off south with that handsome scrivener; but if you be George's granddaughter then you're welcome my child; and stay as long as you like for there's plenty to do and, thank the Lord, plenty to do it with. I'd say you're better here than in London with all its stinks and plagues. So what can you do? Canst sew; canst cook; canst milk a cow?

PENELOPE: I'm sorry Aunt Cecily but I'm not very good at cooking or sewing, and I've never milked a cow.

CECILY: Lord a' mercy, maybe you've been eddicated above thy station then. Canst read and write like the quality?

TABITHA: Read and write!

PENELOPE: Yes, Aunt Cecily, I can.

CECILY: Well I never. Is that what they do with young maids in London? You'll have to learn our ways here, my dear.

*Jude, a farm servant, enters during the previous speeches and puts his load of firewood down then sees Penelope and reacts with some alarm, pointing at Penelope but not speaking.*

TABITHA: Will you take a look at Jude!

CECILY: Stop your nonsense, Jude. Sit there by the fire and be quiet and do your bit carving or summat. (*To Penelope*) He can't speak but he's harmless. I reckon he sometimes sees things that aren't there. And you, Tabitha, give Penelope a clean apron and show her what needs doing to make Mistress Babington's posset. The poor lonely woman will need a hot posset to set her up.

PENELOPE: Why is Mistress Babington lonely, Aunt – Dame Cecily?

CECILY: My, you're a one for questions; but, 'tis simple enough. The pair of them, Master Anthony and Mistress Mary were wed these four years since when both were seventeen, but ever since he's been off and away. First to be one of Scottish Queen's pages where they had her locked up in Yorkshire, but now his so-called friends think his good looks and charm might persuade Queen Elizabeth to be kinder to her prisoner, maybe even set her free; so off he goes to try and catch her eye at court. And all this while Mistress Babington's left here; but there's no babbies, and nothing to keep her busy. Get on with that posset now. She'll be here any minute looking for a hot drink after a cold chapel, I don't doubt.

*During the scene, Tabitha and Penelope have been chopping up some herbs and then Tabitha brings over a kettle from the fire and makes the infusion in a pot.*

TABITHA: That's right, chop them fine. They do say young Master Francis should be managing the estates but he's just a lad of sixteen and it stands to reason he likes hunting, fishing and playing his lute more than learning his numbers and good husbandry. After all, what's he going to do? Younger sons have to fend for themselves. That's the way of the world in this year of our Lord one thousand five hundred and eighty-two.

PENELOPE (*gasping*): Fifteen eighty-two!

CECILY: 'Tis true: unless he catches a wealthy bride then it's off to be a soldier. There's no future for him in the church unless he gives up the old religion.

*As Tabitha pours the infusion into a beaker, Jude sidles over to Penelope and touches her clothes in amazement then shows her the little manikin he has been carving.*

PENELOPE: Why that's lovely. A little man with such a neat little ruff at his neck: you're very clever with your hands. (*Jude offers his carving to Penelope who takes it and admires it. She makes to return it but Jude shakes his head and gestures to her to put it in her pocket.*) Well, thank you.

But don't you want to keep it? (*She touches his hand and he starts back in seeming fright.*)

CECILY: Enough now, Jude. Leave her be. Fetch more wood. Off with you, now. (*To Penelope*) Don't let him fret you. He's really timid as a hare but Our Lord's given him some extra sense to make up for the ones he's missing. He knows when there's a storm brewing or sometimes even a death coming. He'll play a sad tune on that little elder pipe of his and we'll all know something's coming.

*Jude goes towards the door and then steps back quickly from it and bows. Mistress Babington (Mary) enters, carrying a small but distinctive wooden box. Both Dame Cecily and Tabitha bob quick curtseys. Penelope, seeing this, makes her own slightly awkward curtsey. Mary places the box on the table and heads for the fireplace, holding out her hands for warmth. Jude exits.*

MARY: That's better. It's so cold in the chapel; summer and winter. It makes it a *real* penance and I kept thinking about my hot posset instead of my prayers; may God forgive me.

TABITHA: We have it ready, my lady.

MARY: And who have we here? Somebody new, Dame Cecily?

CECILY: If you please, my lady, this is my great-niece Penelope as has been sent up from Chelsea near London for some country air. She'll be helping me in the household but, if I may make so bold, she says she can read and write and might you want to use her to read to you in the afternoons, now that your cousin Arabella is going home to Derby?

MARY: A kitchen wench and you can read! How different matters seem to be in Chelsea! Do you know your Bible, child?

*Penelope hesitates.*

CECILY: Answer the Mistress when she addresses you.

PENELOPE: Yes my lady; and I should be very pleased to read for you. I do know many of the Bible stories.

MARY: Excellent. I shall send for you. Tabitha, bring my posset to my chamber please. I want to try and finish my embroidery before the Master comes home.

*Tabitha curtseys and picks up the beaker. Mary picks up her box and both exit left. Jude enters right with more wood.*

CECILY: Now that's good. Mistress Babington has taken a liking to you. She can make use of your London ways more than I can. Lord a' mercy but 'tis a strange world when a long lost niece can just turn up and in no time she's part of the family. Now then, I must make haste. There's dinner to prepare. Canst peel carrots, Penelope?

*Penelope nods but then looks with amazement at the huge bundle of carrots Cicely produces from the trug on the table and the knife she is handed. As she looks, Tabitha enters and also picks up a knife and gets started on the carrots too.*

TABITHA: Scrape, don't cut! You'll waste all the goodness.

*Offstage, a lute begins to play Greensleeves quietly.*

TABITHA: There's young Master Francis practising his new tune for Master Anthony's return. He says it be fresh from London, just like Penelope here.

CECILY: Took much talking. Get on with your work, you two. I'm going to fetch the trout from the larder and I'll expect you to be finished afore I get back. *(She exits towards the larder.)*

PENELOPE: That's 'Greensleeves' he's playing. It's lovely and there are words to go with the tune.

TABITHA: You knows it! Well, of course you must; since Master Francis says it be all the rage in London.

*From offstage there is the sound of horses clattering into the farmyard accompanied by shouting. The lute stops abruptly. Jude jumps up and down in excitement and, waving to Penelope and Tabitha to follow, he takes out a whistle made from an elder twig and tootles cheerfully on it as he dances off and out of the door.*

TABITHA: He's here! They must have been riding since afore dawn. Come Penelope. We mun go and bid him welcome.

PENELOPE *(gesturing at the pile of carrots)*: But ... what about all the ...?

TABITHA: We'll get back to that. Come on. Let's go and see, or we'll miss all the fun.

*Penelope discards her apron and the girls rush off through the door. The noises off fade to silence and the lights dim as the scene is 'transformed' back to Thackers in 1912. A cock is heard again crowing loudly. Penelope rushes in through the door.*

PENELOPE: Dame Cecily! Dame Cecily, do come! Master Anthony is home. He's just got here and ...

*She halts in confusion. There is no one there and she sees that the scene has altered. She stares round her in amazement. Aunt Tissie enters from the larder carrying a dish with several trout which she places on the table.*

TISSIE: Good morning my poppet. You've certainly had a good long sleep. Are you ready for your breakfast? I have an egg and a slice of ham keeping warm in the oven. Then we can have a mug of tea while I do a bit of sewing as needs finishing off afore I clean these fish. We're having a special treat for lunch. Our neighbour's boy, Frank Bramble from Wingfield Manor, just brought some fresh caught trout. Did you sleep well?

PENELOPE (*gazing round in some confusion*): But Aunt Cecily ... I thought it was the middle of the day already. I really thought ... well I hardly know what I thought. It all seemed ... as if ...

TISSIE: Now then; Cecily's my Sunday-go-to-church name. I prefers Tissie. 'Tis being in a strange room and a strange bed, I expects. Now you eat up and I'll sit by you and do my sewing.

*Penelope nods and tucks into her breakfast while Tissie settles down with an old shirt, very big, and opens up her sewing box, laying her needles, thread and scissors on the table and a little wooden manikin wrapped round with some sewing thread.*

TISSIE: I've been making new collars for my brother Barnabas from his shirt tails. We buy them extra long so there's always enough to do that, but we don't even get round to doing that until we've turned the collar once already. You could help me if you can sew.

PENELOPE: But I told you I can't sew very well.

TISSIE: When did you do tell me that, my dear?

PENELOPE: This morning, earlier ... but I didn't, did I? I'm getting confused.

TISSIE: Then come and stand behind and watch what I do. You'll soon pick it up.

*Penelope moves behind Tissie and leans over her.*

PENELOPE: That's a lovely smell on your dress. What is it?

TISSIE: Tansy and woodruff. I puts them in the clothes cupboards and chests to scare away the moths. What does your mam use?

PENELOPE: Mothballs. She buys them in Selfridges. They smell of camphorated oil. It's not very nice. (*Then she spots the manikin and picks it up.*) Oh, Aunt Tissie, how very, very strange! What is it?

TISSIE: I can't rightly say. 'Tis a funny little thing, isn't it! It's been in my sewing box since my gran gave it me. It used to be hers and maybe her gran's before that for all I know. I wraps my sewing threads round it.

PENELOPE: It's a little Elizabethan man; look at the ruff round his neck. But I saw ... I saw Jude carving it ... He gave it to me ... I saw them ... here, this morning ... They seemed so real ... I can't explain it.

*Tissie looks concerned and takes Penelope's hands, pulling her down to sit beside her.*

TISSIE: Penelope, my poppet, what are you saying? Are you saying you see'd them: *really* see'd them?

PENELOPE: I was upstairs, Aunt Tissie, and coming down for breakfast but everywhere seemed so much bigger, more rooms and everything and then a young servant woman appeared and asked me who I was and brought me in here. The kitchen was the same and yet it was all different.

TISSIE: You're just like my gran. She reckoned she see'd them too. She said she saw the people who lived here in the olden times and for her they were still here or hereabouts. Don't let it worry you, my dear, but we should keep it to ourselves. 'Tis the big secret of Thackers. Here, you have the little manikin now, since you say someone wanted to give it you afore.

PENELOPE: Thank you very much. I shall treasure it. (*She strokes it for a moment or two then slips it in her pocket.*) But the Babingtons: what happened to them?

TISSIE: What little I know, I'll tell you, my dear. There was some terrible to-do they called the Babington Plot and it was discovered because Queen Elizabeth's spies were reading the Scottish Queen's letters and Master Anthony Babington's too. My old gran always told me there was something else happened right here at Thackers, a couple years afore that and Master Anthony went off to France; but he just ended up getting into more trouble, as did poor Queen Mary.

*Tabbie enters carrying a basket of eggs.*

TABBIE: The hens have been real busy this morning, mistress. There's enough to make a custard tart and I could pickle a dozen or more if you have a mind to.

TISSIE: Nay, we've got some old loaf to use up so get you busy on a bread and butter pudding instead, and, when you've got that in the oven, we've

taters and carrots to peel. I'll clean the fish when I've finished this collar. My, my; will you look at the time! I must get on.

PENELOPE: But tell me what happened at Thackers. I'm bursting to know.

TISSIE: And wouldn't I have a worry explaining that to your mam! "She got so curious," I'd have to tell her, "she just bursted ... all over the kitchen. And poor Tabbie had to clean it all up." (*They all have a laugh.*) Now my dear, there's so much to do, we'll have to talk later. (*Tabbie exits to the larder with the eggs.*) We'll talk when there's just the two of us, my poppet. Off you go and get some fresh air in the garden and have a good look around. You haven't been outside since you arrived. Be off with you. Shoo!

*Tissie makes a game of chasing Penelope out of the door.*

*The set changes to the Thackers garden with fruit trees, a tall hedge with a gate through to the herb garden beyond and the top of a square church tower visible in the background.*

*A cuckoo calls a couple of times, a peacock cries and rooks caw from time to time throughout the scene. Offstage, a lute begins to play and a young man begins singing 'Greensleeves'. Penelope enters stage right looking around her, seemingly puzzled. The music stops and the young man in Elizabethan costume enters stage left carrying the lute. They stare at each other for a moment.*

FRANCIS (*putting the lute over his shoulder*): By all the saints, a real Lady Greensleeves! Ah yes; I saw you when Anthony arrived. My sister-in-law says you're Dame Cecily's niece, newly come from Chelsea.

PENELOPE: And you're Francis.

FRANCIS: *Master* Francis, if you please. And Mary tells me you can read and write. That's some accomplishment for a kitchen wench. I'm impressed.

PENELOPE: I've started Latin at school.

FRANCIS: *Gaudeamus igitur!*

PENELOPE: *Juvenes dum sumus.*

FRANCIS (*unable to continue*): Exactly. Well, well! My sister will be impressed; as indeed am I. *Et parlez-vous français, mademoiselle?*

PENELOPE: *Un petit peu, monsieur.*

FRANCIS: Now fancy that! I think I shall have to ask you to read to *me* as well. Maybe you could read to me while I'm fishing. Did you know I caught a dozen trout this morning? Dame Cecily was pleased because it's Friday, and Tabitha had forgotten to put the salt cod in to soak last night. Anthony would have made a big scene. He's very strict about eating fish on Fridays. Now that he's at home, we shall all have to be more observant. Are you a Catholic?

PENELOPE: No; I'm Church of England.

FRANCIS: That's what they call it, just as they choose to call the old faith the Church of Rome but, one day, please God, Protestants and Catholics will come together again in one holy Catholic Church. At least that's what Anthony says. We all attend the church here at Thackers to listen to the Protestant minister for they keep a record of who attends you know, but Anthony has his own priest to say Mass privately. Oh dear, I shouldn't really be talking about such matters to you. It can be dangerous. Wicked and cruel things are being done to Catholics.

PENELOPE: Then why doesn't Anthony stay at home? Doesn't he like Thackers?

FRANCIS: Oh yes: this is his home. He inherited everything from our father: the lands as far as you can see, over the hills and far away, with farms and homesteads and faithful, loyal tenants. There's good hunting and hawking, and the rivers are so full of fish you can just about scoop them out with a net. But Anthony is caught in another net.

PENELOPE: What net is that?

FRANCIS: The net of politics. A net that's baited to catch young Catholics and a queen too, I'll warrant. I fear my brother is being used by others stronger than he. Anthony isn't clever enough to dissemble. He shows his true feelings too easily. He's no plotter like these townfolk. He's a simple Derbyshire squire but now, though he's of age and could set his own course, the prisoner queen has captured *him*.

PENELOPE: The prisoner queen?

FRANCIS: Mary of Scotland. Anthony was a page at her small court and now he would give his life for Mary Stuart.

PENELOPE: But he has a wife. Doesn't he love her?

FRANCIS: My brother loves his wife in a right and proper way; of that there is no doubt. But there are many different sorts of love, not just one. There's courtly love for a sweetheart; there's true love for a wife; and the love parents have for their children. In a man there's love of his country that makes him want to be a soldier and fight for its just cause. But there's yet

another love, born of beauty in sorrow and that's the way my brother Anthony loves the greatest and unhappiest lady in the land.

PENELOPE: You mean Mary, Queen of Scots.

FRANCIS: Aye, but the Scots didn't want her, did they? If Anthony and his fellow schemers had their way, she would be the true heir to Elizabeth and then it would be safe once more to be a Catholic. Who knows; it might even happen.

PENELOPE: But you're his brother. Couldn't you make him see sense; that it would be better to stay at home. You could help him manage the estate.

FRANCIS: Now there's a fine thought! That sort of thing may happen in Chelsea but here in Derbyshire the younger brother doesn't dabble in the estate's affairs. It's none of his proper business. And besides, I'm much more interested in hunting and archery and all the things the younger son has to be good at if he wants to make his way in a cruel world.

PENELOPE: Then could Mistress Babington support him?

FRANCIS: Nay, you must be thinking of Bess of Hardwick. Still, if Anthony would trust us, perhaps she and I could do something. It's just that I have no inclination and, if truth be told, no skills in that regard. I'd rather go fishing. Come, I'll show you my favourite spot. (*He makes to lead her off.*)

*From offstage comes the voice of Anthony Babington.*

ANTHONY (*offstage*): Francis. Hold there. Don't disappear again.

FRANCIS: We've left it too late! Another time; I hope. Come; let me introduce you to my brother. (*Enter Anthony, dressed more richly than Francis. Francis bows with a mocking flourish and Penelope curtseys.*) Anthony of Thackers, welcome to your humble abode.

ANTHONY: When, I ask myself, will you ever grow up? And who is this you're dallying with? Off with you wench!

FRANCIS: Nay, Anthony, hold hard. This is Mistress Penelope, the long-lost niece of Dame Cecily who's been living in Chelsea all these years. Didn't you take Mary there when you were first wed?

ANTHONY: Mistress Penelope! My wife has already spoken of you and one day I would fain return to that delightful cottage in Chelsea; so far from London one could not even smell it on the breeze. I have doubts about educating servants beyond their station but Mistress Babington speaks well

of you, and if you can help to lighten her cares when I am gone again, then may God give you strength to do so.

FRANCIS: Gone *again!* But Anthony, you're scarce off your horse. Have you so little love of Derbyshire you would be quit of it and quit of your family to dance at court?

ANTHONY: Not at once, dear brother, but all too soon. My friends expect me in France. There is much to be done there if she who should be Queen is ever to be brought to her English throne. (*He looks warily at Penelope.*) Perhaps t'were better if you returned to your duties, Mistress.

FRANCIS: Mistress Penelope is a loyal and trustworthy friend and servant of the Babington family, Anthony. She too would rejoice if the captive queen had her liberty, whether or not she gained another throne. Show her that locket around your neck. One glance at that will have her in thrall to Mary, just like *you* are.

ANTHONY (*fingering the locket*): Have a care, Francis, not to make it sound like witchcraft: but yes, this picture casts a spell. The painter has truly captured her likeness.

*As Anthony reaches for the heart-shaped locket both locket and chain slip from his neck and through his fingers. He has to stoop to pick them up.*

ANTHONY: Ah, fie! I must have the catch on this chain repaired or I shall lose the most precious of all my possessions. (*He opens the locket and shows it to Penelope who is joined by Francis. All three gaze at it.*) Look at this lady. See the flaming red hair and delicate features, and that flower she holds is as fresh as if it had been picked this morning.

PENELOPE: She is truly beautiful, and that carnation is perfect.

ANTHONY: 'Sops-in-wine' they call them round here and our garden is planted full of them in her honour. And this is a lifelike image of Her Blessed Majesty, Mary, who one day will be Queen of England on her rightful throne, and then the true religion will come back again, and all will be well on earth as it is in Heaven. (*He snaps the locket shut and puts it in his doublet pocket*): Well now Francis; will you join me at prayer in the chapel?

FRANCIS: Anon, good brother. I must take my lute back to my chamber and then I shall join you.

ANTHONY: Haste you then. Good day, Mistress Penelope.

*He exits. Francis watches him go and grins at Penelope. He takes the lute from his shoulder.*

FRANCIS: Now then, Mistress Greensleeves, you must hear a stanza of my newest air before I take the lute in.

PENELOPE: I heard you playing. (*She sings the line.*) “Greensleeves was all my joy.”

FRANCIS (*grinning broadly and singing too*): “Greensleeves was my delight.”

*They sing the next two lines together and before they have finished, Arabella enters angrily.*

PENELOPE/FRANCIS: “Greensleeves was my heart of gold,/ And who but my Lady Greensleeves.”

ARABELLA: Cousin Francis, here you are. I have been seeking you hither and thither. Who is this with you? Is it that new kitchen wench? Be off with you at once, before I box your ears! Come along Francis; we’re going riding if you remember.

FRANCIS: Hold hard, cousin Arabella. Mistress Penelope has graciously joined us from London and is to become a maid and companion to my sister. She can read and write, speaks Latin and French, and can sing too. She’s very accomplished. I’ll join you shortly – when we’ve finished discussing her duties. (*He bows with a flourish.*)

ARABELLA: Well, *I* have nothing to discuss with servants. (*To Penelope*) Don’t ever cross *me*, hussy! (*She storms off stage left.*)

FRANCIS: Pay no attention to her. She’s always like that. I think she wishes she had been born a boy. And even if she doesn’t want to see you again, I certainly do. But I must hurry and join Anthony in the chapel or he will be cross with me. You won’t be cross with me, will you, Penelope? And you’ll stay here, won’t you? I’d like that.

PENELOPE: I shall have to go back some time.

FRANCIS: Back where; to Chelsea?

PENELOPE: It’s too hard to explain but back where I really come from; back to the future.

FRANCIS: The future? Do you have the gift of second sight? I can’t believe you are some sort of spirit. (*He squeezes her arm.*) You’re flesh and blood as I can feel. Do you speak true? (*Penelope nods.*) I don’t know if I can believe that but I do believe you are our friend and will do us no harm. Wilt thou swear to that?

PENELOPE: Oh, Francis, I swear.

FRANCIS: Then I shall see you anon. If you're still here! *He waves and runs off, taking his lute. Penelope waves after him. Offstage and receding, he sings and plays but the song fades and there is a subtle shift in the lighting. As Penelope continues to wave and gaze after Francis, Tissie bustles on stage right. She has a basket of cleaning materials and a mop.*

TISSIE: Here's me just done shooin' you out the door but Tabbie's cleaning the trout so I've time to give the church a quick going over. Come along, my dear. You can dust the pews while I take the mop round the floor.

PENELOPE: Is it nearly dinnertime, Aunt Tissie? It seems to me like I've been out here in the garden for ages.

TISSIE: Dinnertime! Lord a' mercy, you've just eaten. This country air must be doing you good already.

PENELOPE (*gazing around in bafflement*): Really!

TISSIE: I'll make you some toast when we get back so come along now.

*Penelope laughs and takes Tissie's hand as they walk off, stage left.*

*The lighting dims and to the right two pews are revealed, one behind the other, open fronted so that the audience can see through them. Behind the first pew, Anthony and Francis are kneeling at prayer with their rosaries. Anthony has his head bowed but Francis is looking around. After a moment or two, Anthony raises his head and crosses himself. Francis copies him then both rise and walk to the end of the pew, bow to the (unseen) altar and exit right.*

*The lighting brightens on the pews. Penelope and Tissie enter left. Tissie hands Penelope a big yellow duster and points at the pews.*

TISSIE: You can dust the pews while I take the mop round the vestry floor. You do know how to dust, I suppose.

PENELOPE: Oh yes. Mummy gets me to do that quite a lot.

TISSIE: And you're not afraid of mice or creepy-crawlies then?

PENELOPE: I quite like mice and I don't really mind creepy-crawlies, not too much anyway, but I'm not fond of spiders.

TISSIE: See how you get on then. I'll be back in two shakes. (*She exits right.*)

*Penelope looks around for a moment and then, starting with the rear pew, begins to dust. As she works, she sings a verse of the hymn, "O God, our help in ages past".*

"Time like an ever rolling stream,

Bears all its sons away;  
They fly forgotten as a dream  
Dies at the opening day.”

*When she has dusted the front pew, she kneels where Anthony and Francis were praying.*

PENELOPE: Please God, I don't know what you can do but I'd like you to take care of all the Babingtons and, of course, Dame Cecily and everybody, especially Francis ... and even Arabella. I know there's nothing I can do to help them or to stop what's bound to happen. And I can't even tell them or warn them because they'd think I was a witch and they wouldn't like me anymore. It's such a shame that Queen Elizabeth and Queen Mary can't be friends: after all, they're cousins. It's just they all seem to be so much more horrible to each other in those days. I'm sure we'll all be much nicer to each other in the twentieth century. God Bless King George the Fifth, (*singing this bit*) happy and glorious, long to reign over us. God save the King. (*She lowers her head as if to pray and then, abruptly, screams and jumps up.*) A mouse! A great big mouse! Oh dear, I forgot I said I wasn't afraid of mice and, really, it wasn't *so* big. But he disappeared into a tiny hole down here. (*She crouches and peers into the corner of the pew where Anthony was kneeling.*) Mousey, mousey, come back. I'm sorry I screamed. Won't you come out so I can say sorry? If I poke my finger in, you won't bite, will you? (*She pokes her finger into the corner of the pew.*) Are you there? Hello, little church mouse. Oh dear! I've broken off a bit of wood. (*She holds up a small piece of wood.*) It must have been rotten. I hope Aunt Tissie won't notice. (*She slips the piece in her pocket and crouches again.*) Now that I've made your front door a little bit wider, won't you come out? I'll poke my finger further in now and tickle you. Now what's this I've got hold of? Let me see. (*Scrabbling for a moment longer, she draws out a small object about the size of a walnut.*) What can this be, all black and dusty? My goodness, it's heart-shaped. Heart-shaped: just like ... it can't be, surely not, don't be ridiculous! But he did say the catch on the chain was loose. And he said he was going to the chapel to pray. (*She stands up, holding what she has found and fiddles with it. The object 'opens' slightly and she peers closely.*) Oh my goodness! Aunt Tissie! Aunt Tissie.

*Tissie comes in holding a damp mop.*

TISSIE: What's amiss my dear? Are you hurted, or unwell?

PENELOPE: No, Aunt Tissie, I'm all right, really. But look what I've found. I think it's a locket. I'm sure it's got a picture inside of a beautiful lady, holding a carnation.

TISSIE: What a dirty looking thing! It must have been there for ages. Some child must have dropped it, but Heaven knows when.

PENELOPE: It's a picture of Mary, Queen of Scots. And the locket used to belong to Anthony Babington.

TISSIE: Lordy me, what an imagination you do have, Penelope Taberner Cameron. I think your old auntie has been telling you too many stories. I shall have to watch what I say. Anyway, you keep it since you found it. Nobody else is likely to want it. Now then, we must get back to the kitchen and then you can go and help Jess feed the chickens and make up the feed for the calves. They must get their dinner before we do. That's the country way. Come along now. You hold the mop while I fetch the bucket.

*Tissie exits right. Penelope holds the mop in one hand and the locket in the other.*

PENELOPE: I promise I'll take care of it. I'll take it back to Chelsea and clean it up so I can bring it back to Thackers next time. But, Anthony, will I ever be able to give it back to you? Will I ever see Francis again?

*Tissie enters right carrying her bucket. She picks the duster off the pew and hands it to Penelope who puts the locket into her pocket and takes the duster.*

TISSIE: Off we go then.

*They exit. The lights dim and the curtain falls.*

End of Act 1.

ACT TWO

*The scene is Thackers kitchen in the summer of 1914. Nothing has changed there over the two years that have passed but the characters are all two years older. This is more obvious in the case of Penelope who has a rather more 'grown up' appearance, being now a fifteen year old.*

*As the curtain rises, there is no one on stage. Jude enters with a small trunk on his back and a bag hanging from the other arm. He crosses the stage and as he exits, Tabbie runs in from the left and Penelope and Tissie come in from the right.*

TABBIE: The fire's burning and the room's really warm. 'Tis a pity about the summer rain but welcome back to Thackers, Miss Penelope. My, but you have become a young lady!

PENELOPE: Tabbie, Tabbie! How wonderful to see you! Oh my goodness, it's like travelling back in time. Nothing, but nothing has changed. *(She rushes round much like she did last time.)*

TISSIE: Lord a' mercy, nothing's changed in Thackers for two hundred years, never mind just two. But get your coat off, my dear. Tabbie mashed the tea as soon as we heard the cart coming up the hill. We'll have a sup of tea and good gossip. *(Penelope takes off her coat and hangs it on the rocking chair then sits in it and has a little rock. Tabbie brings the teapot from the fireside and pours out three stout earthenware cups.)* What's the news of the rest of the family?

PENELOPE: Everyone's fine really, in their own different ways. Mummy's very busy with the Primrose League but Daddy doesn't altogether approve because he's a Pacifist and he says the League would quite enjoy another war. The big news is that Alison has finished her teacher training and she's going to teach in a school for poor children in the East End. And she thinks Mummy and Daddy don't know about it but she's become a suffragette.

TABBIE: What's that? What's she suffering from?

PENELOPE: It means she's a campaigner for votes for women.

TISSIE: Votes for women! What do we know about politics? Let the men get on with that sort of thing. It gets them out of the house.

PENELOPE: Mummy says we don't need a vote anyway because we women are already in charge. It's just that the men don't realise it. But if we get the vote then the men might wake up to it and make things difficult for us. She says the best times for the country have always been when we had women in charge, like Queen Victoria and Queen Elizabeth.

TISSIE: And what about young Master Ian?

PENELOPE: Poor Ian! He's having the hardest time.

TISSIE: Now why should that be? Hasn't he done well at school and won't he be going to University in October to become a lawyer. Imagine, Tabbie, my great-nephew a lawyer at the Old Bailey.

TABBIE: Wouldn't he just have given that Dr Crippen what for!

PENELOPE: No, you see, he's nearly eighteen and he was quite a star of his OTC at school so, what with all the talk of war ...

TISSIE: What's an OTC, my love?

PENELOPE: The Officer Training Corp. Lot's of his older friends have already joined the Army, some of them are in the Brigade of Guards but Daddy says there's no way he'll give him an allowance to afford that sort of thing and besides he doesn't approve of war or fighting. Ian complains to Mummy but she won't contradict Daddy even if she would secretly love to see him in uniform. She's telling him to go to university first and think about the army later, because it will probably all blow over. After all King George and the German Kaiser are cousins, and so is the Czar of Russia, so they're not going to fight each other, are they? At least that's what Mummy thinks.

TISSIE: I'm sure she's right, my dear. We don't need any fighting. Never mind, here at Thackers we've plenty to do, and now that you're a big girl ...

PENELOPE: Yes: I'll soon be sixteen – well, fairly soon.

TISSIE: ... So you will and at your age I was already milking the cows twice a day. I promised your mother I'd break you in gently but I need help with the hens and it'll soon be time for haymaking and that's all hands to the pump at Thackers. No time for day dreaming. You brought some old clothes like I told you?

PENELOPE: Yes, and an old straw hat of Mummy's which she wore here when she was a girl. I've brought it back to Thackers after all these years.

TABBIE: That'll be a sight for sore eyes.

PENELOPE: Oh, and I nearly forgot. You remember that old locket I found in the church last time?

TISSIE: That old thing, yes.

PENELOPE: You should see it now. I cleaned it and cleaned it with Silvo and the picture inside is really beautiful. I must run upstairs and get it for

you to see. I do hope I remembered to put it in my trunk. That would be awful if I've forgotten. It has to come back to Thackers too, even more than Mummy's straw hat. Can I go up and get it now?

TISSIE: Yes, yes, my dear but now the rain's stopped I mun go and pick some of the Victoria plums so we can have a pie tonight. When they start to get ripe they all come at once so it'll surely be jam making next week as well as everything else.

TABBIE: I'm as sure as sure can be Miss Penelope would like a drop o' custard with that pie so I'll go and see if the hens can oblige.

PENELOPE (*rushing off*): I'll be back in a moment. Oh, but I must look at my old bedroom too.

TISSIE (*smiling at Tabbie*): It's going to be just like old times, I think.

*Tissie and Tabbie pick up baskets and walk off stage right.*

*As the lights dim for a moment, the kitchen transforms itself into Thackers in the summer of 1584 and there is a spit in front of the fire on which Jude is turning a couple of large birds. After a moment, Anthony Babington enters carrying paper, ink and quills.*

ANTHONY: I'd like to know when my steward is going to get that leak in the thatch mended. I cannot even write a letter in my study because there has to be a bucket on my desk to catch the drips. Imagine if I were to let the rain fall on my cipher book ... well, never mind. Go you and tell Master Francis to get men on the roof straight away. It's shameful the way things have been allowed to fall into disrepair while I've been in France.

*Jude points at the spit he is turning and shakes his head.*

ANTHONY: All right, all right. I'll tell him myself when I've finished this letter. Now, where was I? I can't afford a single mistake or no one will be able to decipher it.

*Francis enters and reacts with surprise at seeing Anthony in the kitchen. His boots are muddy.*

FRANCIS: What brings *you* into the kitchen? Were you in need of bread and cheese and some small beer too? I'm ravenous.

ANTHONY: You know full well why I'm not in my study. The thatch leaks and yesterday you promised to get it repaired.

FRANCIS: I'm sorry, Anthony, but I think you will be pleased with my news. I've been down into the mine tunnels with Tom Snowball and we managed to make our way at least a mile and a half south of here. We must

have been more than half way to Wingfield. Tom says there are galleries from their mines that must come very close to ours. So, almost certainly we can do what you're asking but it will take months: three or four months at least.

ANTHONY: That is most wonderful to hear. Praise be to God for this!

FRANCIS: But if it doesn't work, these men will have expended months of back-breaking labour for nothing. Wouldn't it be simpler to raise a big enough band of men to overwhelm her escort while she's being conveyed from Sheffield Castle?

ANTHONY: You know very well that if we were to attempt such a thing the hue and cry would be immediate, and here we are, right in the middle of England, surrounded by enemies and spies. And besides, there would be the certainty of bloodshed. *Our* plan is safer. We shall have her far away before her absence is even noticed.

FRANCIS: Is she *certain* to be moved to Wingfield?

ANTHONY: That is what it says in the letter I've just finished deciphering. But it may not be before the autumn or even later. They want to cut down the size of her household and moving her to Wingfield means she will only have around fifty to attend her. It is a disgrace!

FRANCIS: Then we have the time. Can I get Tom Snowball to recruit enough men?

ANTHONY: Yes, but they must all be Catholic adherents, and loyal to our family as well as our faith. And, even so, all we should tell them is we're looking for new seams of ore.

FRANCIS: You know the whole village respects the old faith, and they've been loyal to the Babington family for generations.

ANTHONY: I pray that's true. And talking of prayer, it is time for our devotions. Come; let us pray for the liberation of Mary, Queen of Scots and ask God to make her the next Queen of England. (*He rises.*)

FRANCIS: I must have bread and cheese first or I shall ...

*At this moment, Penelope runs in. She is upset about something.*

PENELOPE: Aunt Tissie, I can't find it. I must have left it at ... Oh, my goodness, it's happened already.

*She manages an awkward curtsey and Anthony stands up. Both men give a slight bow.*

PENELOPE: Master Anthony, Master Francis!

ANTHONY: Mistress Penelope! This is an unexpected surprise.

FRANCIS: Penelope. Where have you *come* from? Why have you been away so long?

*Francis is behind Anthony so that he can make a warning gesture to Penelope when she appears to be about to say she has come from the future.*

PENELOPE: I've been back where I really belong, in the ... I mean to say, back with my parents in Chelsea. I've been at school. I didn't really mean to be away for two years but ... I'm back here for several months because my parents have gone abroad until Christmas. But I have missed you both. I was afraid I wouldn't ever see you again.

ANTHONY: You are most welcome, and I'm sure Mistress Babington will be pleased to see you here again. She still speaks of how well you read to her. And of course, Dame Cecily will be more than pleased to have you back with her again. We expect her back from Derby any day now. She's been visiting her brother Barnabas.

FRANCIS: And *I* am pleased, that is we, all of us, are pleased to see you. Have you any news from ... from wherever it is you have been?

PENELOPE (*gasping as she remembers*): Oh yes I have! Master Anthony, I must tell you straight away. Just before I left to go home to Chelsea two years ago, I found your precious locket wedged in a mouse hole in the chapel. I put it in my pocket and I took it Chelsea.

ANTHONY: The locket with the miniature of Queen Mary?

PENELOPE: Yes: you must have dropped it.

ANTHONY: I hunted everywhere but I never could discover it. I went to France with even greater sadness, for without that locket I could not gaze on her likeness to remind me of the one to whom I have devoted my service and my life. Have you brought it back to me?

PENELOPE: I thought I had but I've just looked everywhere in my trunk and I can't see it. I think I must have left it in Chelsea, but I was so sure I'd packed it. I'm terribly sorry.

FRANCIS: At least we know it's been found and that, thank God, it's in a safe place. That must give you strength for the new enterprise, dear brother.

ANTHONY: Hush, Francis. We must guard our secrets.

FRANCIS: Anthony, if Penelope were minded to betray us, she has had two years living surrounded by our enemies in London and we should have been arrested and worse long ago.

PENELOPE: I would never betray you or anyone here.

ANTHONY: Forgive me young lady; but ... Here! (*He holds out his small bible.*) Will you swear on this testament that you are a true friend to her sacred Majesty, Queen Mary of Scotland and to the Babington family?

PENELOPE (*putting her hand on the Bible*): I swear; I solemnly swear.

ANTHONY: Now go, both of you, and leave me in peace to finish my letter.

*Tabitha enters right with a basket of eggs and nearly drops them in surprise at seeing Penelope who is near enough to help catch the basket and carry it to the table.*

TABITHA: Lord a' mercy, 'tis our Penelope come back after all these years! Dame Cecily will be overjoyed for she has truly missed you.

FRANCIS: Tabitha, take Mistress Penelope to my sister's closet straight away and help her to put on a riding habit. I shall take her to the fair over at Wingfield. (*To Penelope*) You can ride; as well as all your other accomplishments?

PENELOPE: Well, yes, I can, but not very well.

TABITHA: Going riding with the young master! Well, well I never. What next? Come then Penelope and get yourself ready. (*She takes Penelope by the arm and bustles her off.*)

ANTHONY: Francis, I beg you. Take care. So much depends on our plans.

FRANCIS: Dear brother, I shall. But I need to remind myself of the lay of the land from here and over the hill to Wingfield Manor, so what could be less suspicious than riding over to the fair with a young lady and pausing every so often to look at the view. Tom Snowball has pointed out some of the ventilation shafts on our land and I shall be on the lookout for more of them on the Wingfield estate. If we have to dig a connecting tunnel, we'd best do it in as straight a line as possible.

ANTHONY: That's well enough but, I implore you; do not tell that young girl too much. There are spies and informers everywhere and it only needs one betrayal for years of planning to come to nothing. Remember, all our lives are at risk.

FRANCIS: If you are doubting Penelope's loyalty I think you're being unjust. You've only just had her swear a most sacred oath, which she did without hesitation. Besides, the Taberner family have lived here as long as the Babingtons and are bound to us by generations of service. They're true as steel. And, apart from that, I do have this feeling she can see into the future and can maybe even foretell ...

ANTHONY: Stop! That's close to witchcraft. None of us can divine the future which is known only to God himself. But we have free will and our faith which tells us the right course to pursue. God is telling us to work to free Queen Mary and when she is transferred to Wingfield Manor we shall have the best chance that has ever come our way.

FRANCIS: I've pledged my self and even my life to help you in this, Anthony. But allow me this word. You have *two* Marys. There is not just the Queen of Scotland. There's your own dear wife for six years now, who has had the loneliest of lives while you've been around and about and abroad on Catholic business. She deserves better of you and, for that matter, so do the rest of your family and the whole estate.

ANTHONY: I can only plead guilty to your charge. But a greater destiny than that of the Babingtons is at stake.

FRANCIS: Please God your judgement is right in this. (*He looks off stage.*) Ah, here she comes.

*Penelope, now dressed in a simple Elizabethan riding habit, enters followed by an admiring Tabitha, to be greeted by a stiff little bow by Anthony and a flourish by Francis.*

FRANCIS: Is my lady Penelope ready to ride out to Wingfield Fair?

PENELOPE: I am indeed, sire. Your sister must be exactly the same size as me.

FRANCIS: Then let me escort you to the stables and we shall be off.

*Francis and Penelope exit as Tabitha gazes fondly and claps approval. Anthony stands very stiffly, looking worried. The lights dim as there is a scene change to the garden of Thackers. There is now a bench centre stage and, as the lights go up again, Francis and Penelope enter and pause in front of the bench.*

FRANCIS: You mustn't be upset by Anthony's manner, Penelope. He's so single-mindedly devoted to the cause he sees anything that might threaten it or hold it back as something of a personal challenge.

PENELOPE: I think I understand but I do sometimes feel a great sense of fear and foreboding in his presence; as though something was hanging over

him, hanging over the Babingtons and Thackers. You know, when I'm with you, Dame Cecily and all the others, I do feel I belong here and yet a part of me still feels I belong somewhere else ... in some other time.

FRANCIS: You said the same sort of things last time. You talked of the future as if you had been there. It cannot be, and yet ... it did seem to be. If you *are* some kind of sorcerer then I ought to protect my brother and sweet Mary. Tell me you are not really a witch; not even a good witch.

PENELOPE: I don't think I even know what a witch *is*, never mind being one. I try to find the words to tell you but, when I'm *here*, I can't always remember my other life. It's just some time other than this and in the future. I think that's why I couldn't find the locket and bring it back to Anthony. Lost things like that, found by people in the future, can't be brought back because what has happened to them *now*, in your time, cannot be undone. We can't unmake what's already happened, or maybe what's going to happen. All I can tell you is I feel such a weight of worry for Anthony and for Mary, Queen of Scots ... about what is going to happen to them.

FRANCIS: I can't even *begin* to understand you but I do trust you and I believe you mean us well. And I like you very much, Penelope. I would fain have you stay here, with us, with me, in the here and now; in this year of grace fifteen hundred and eighty-four.

PENELOPE: I don't know if I can, even if I want to.

FRANCIS: We shall see if I can persuade you. Listen Penelope; maybe if I tell you what is afoot here, you can use your gifts to foresee such things as might give us pause and the need to revise our plans, and prevent them going wrong. I do believe in free will.

PENELOPE: And so do I!

FRANCIS: Then listen well. Queen Mary is to be moved from Sheffield Castle because they want to save money. She would need a much smaller household if they sent her to stay in Wingfield Manor on the other side of the hill. It may be six or seven miles by the tracks a cart would take but riding over the top it's only four miles. And, if you were to go straight *through* the hill, then 'tis only a couple of miles at most.

PENELOPE: Straight through the hill? That's impossible.

FRANCIS: Oh yes, it *is* possible. Derbyshire is full of lead mines since Roman times or even before. The tunnels still exist although there's little mining nowadays. Wingfield Manor had its own mines too and back in the time of King Henry VIII, when they started to persecute us Catholics, rumour has it they dug a secret passage from Wingfield into their own mine and that Thackers miners dug a tunnel to connect our two houses through the hill, so as to let priests escape.

PENELOPE: And is it still there?

FRANCIS: Alas, no. Either it has collapsed or maybe it never really existed. But we think we can find a way through, and if we can do that in time, it would be a way to spirit the Queen out of Wingfield. Then she could gallop far, far away before anyone even knew she'd left.

PENELOPE: But for a beautiful lady like her to crawl through the darkness underground: it's just too terrible to think about. I don't think I could ever face such a prospect.

FRANCIS: Queen Mary is a seasoned escaper. She's just been unlucky to be recaptured each time. But, this time, Anthony has his plans made to spirit her swiftly across the country to Norfolk and then by sea to France; until her triumphal return to take the throne of England. She *is* Elizabeth's cousin and her rightful heir, you know.

PENELOPE: I think I remember my mother saying to me that cousins should be friends.

FRANCIS: Well, we must pray Catholics and Protestants learn to live together. Will you help us in this great plan, Penelope?

PENELOPE: Oh yes, Francis, yes!

*At this very moment, Arabella, finely dressed in Elizabethan riding costume, enters, looking daggers. Francis and Penelope spring up off the bench, looking guilty.*

ARABELLA: So here she is, dressed up like a popinjay: the wench you would rather invite to ride to the Fair than your own cousin.

PENELOPE: Why shouldn't I? Francis has asked me and, after all, it's a free country.

ARABELLA (*addressing Francis*): Do you hear the baggage? Is it a free country, Francis? Is it a free country for the Babingtons while Queen Elizabeth is on the throne? Send her packing!

FRANCIS: You forget yourself, Cousin! Mistress Penelope is a Taberner and, yes, I have invited her to ride to the Fair with me.

ARABELLA: Do you intend to insult me, then? Send her away, back to the kitchen where a scullion belongs.

FRANCIS: Hush, Arabella, I command you!

ARABELLA: *You command me?* I can see who commands *you*; but what do you really know of her? She turns up here unannounced, boasting family connections with one of your servants, but who is to say she hasn't been sent here by Walsingham himself, to spy on us? It seems to me that you and Anthony are a gullible pair.

PENELOPE: I'm not a spy. I'm a true friend of Thackers.

*Arabella and Penelope square up to each other and Francis tries in vain to push them back from each other.*

ARABELLA: Hussy! When they burn you as a witch, I shall be the one to light the pyre. *(She turns on her heel and storms off.)*

FRANCIS: Do please forgive her. I fear she's jealous of our friendship. Come! We shall put all this behind us and ride off into the fresher air on the hill. Let's off to the Fair.

*He proffers his arm which Penelope takes in a rather proprietorial way and they walk off stage right. Francis sings a verse of Greensleeves as they exit and the last lines are off stage.*

FRANCIS: "My gayest gelding I thee gave, / To ride wherever likèd thee. / No lady ever was so brave, / And yet thou wouldst not love me."

*After a moment, Anthony and Mary Babington enter, arm in arm, and he helps her to sit on the bench before standing behind her with his hands on her shoulders. She puts one hand up on his.*

MARY: Don't go there, husband. It's too dangerous for you to be seen yet again at Sheffield Castle; and what guarantee have you that they will let you in to see her? It will only serve to draw more suspicion on you. Thackers has been such a peaceful by-water. There have been no persecutions, no sudden alarms and arrests like they have had in Derby. And besides, I need you here – your duty lies here with me, your *own* Mary.

*Anthony comes and sits with her on the bench, taking both her hands. He seems about to speak but she puts a finger to his lips.*

MARY: No, hear me! Life is sweet here and you and I are only on the very threshold of our marriage and our life together. We should have many years of happiness before us, carrying on the work of your forefathers who have wrought prosperity and goodness out of this land and shared it among the people. Stay here, my dearest. Don't leave me again. I cannot bear the separation and the agony of fear for your safety.

ANTHONY: My beloved, I must keep faith with all *three* Marys in my life. I owe my duty to the blessèd Mary, Holy Mother of Jesus; to Mary the

queen in captivity; and also to you, my own Mary, my dearest wife. It is not divided loyalty but a holy trinity of loyalties.

MARY (*shocked*): Oh! Beware of speaking blasphemy!

ANTHONY: That I shall never do.

MARY: Then let me speak of another trinity. You, my husband; me, your loving and devoted wife ... and ... and our unborn child.

ANTHONY (*gasping with delight*): A child! At last! Oh, Mary. What blessed news.

*Anthony fondly embraces Mary as the lights dim and the scene changes back to Thackers kitchen in 1914. Aunt Tissie and Tabbie enter with baskets of plums and eggs which they set on the table.*

TABBIE: Shall I mash a pot of tea before we set about the cooking?

TISSIE: And we'll have a little bit of gingerbread, perhaps. Yes, put the kettle on the hob. I wonder what that Penelope is up to.

*Penelope rushes in stage left holding the locket in her hand.*

PENELOPE: I've found it, Aunt Tissie; I've found it! For a moment, I really thought I'd left it back at home but it was tucked inside one of my slippers. Do look at how lovely and shiny it is now. And see here inside: look at this picture.

*Tissie and Tabbie crowd round her to see.*

TISSIE: My, what bright red hair!

TABBIE: What's that flower she's holding? Is it a rose?

PENELOPE: It's a carnation. Sops-in-wine they're called.

TISSIE: How did you know that, you clever girl? That's a real Derbyshire name.

TABBIE: But who is the lady?

PENELOPE: Mary Queen of Scots. Isn't she beautiful?

TISSIE: If you say it is then so she shall be. I'll get you a ribbon to thread it onto and you can wear it round your neck like a locket should be. Or maybe you'd like a chain. We could buy one at the village fair next week.

PENELOPE: No, not a chain. The catch can come loose and then I would lose it and I might never see it again.

TISSIE: Then put it back in your room, my dear, and I'll look out an apron for you so you can help make the pastry for the plum pie.

PENELOPE (*dashing off stage left*): I'll be right back.

TABBIE: Didn't that Mary, Queen of Scots, come to a bad end and get her head chopped off?

TISSIE: She did, she did, Tabbie, and that poor Anthony Babington was chopped into bits for trying to help her. But mercy on us, she's only fifteen so let's not talk about that in front of the child. We're supposed to be looking after her and keeping her happy while her parents are off in foreign parts. And talking of foreign parts, the young curate was saying the London papers are full of stories that there's certain to be a war now they've killed an Archduke somewhere in the back of beyond. But nothing of that to Penelope, mind!

TABBIE: My lips are sealed.

TISSIE: Then you won't be wanting any of my gingerbread! (*She picks an apron off a peg and walks towards stage left, calling out.*) Come along, Penelope. No day-dreaming up there. Where are you?

End of Act 2.

ACT THREE

*The scene is Thackers kitchen. It is now the autumn of 1914. Aunt Tissie and Tabbie (Tabbie) are busy on kitchen chores.*

TABBIE: My, they did look a splendid sight. And everybody was cheering and the youngsters were running alongside. It fair made me proud to see it. Then, in the market square, the recruiting sergeant made a speech and said how we need to kick that Kaiser where it hurts and how Lord Kitchener wants more men to join the Yeomanry but they'd better be quick or they'd miss all the fun.

TISSIE: Some fun, Tabbie my dear, if they goes and gets themselves killed. You know what happened to your uncle when he went charging off to fight the fuzzy-wuzzies.

TABBIE: My auntie always said he must have died happy because he was forever getting into scraps on a Saturday night down at the Dog and Partridge in Tandy.

TISSIE: All well and good for him maybe; but let's you and me keep mum about the war in front of our Penelope, if you please.

TABBIE: Of course, Mistress, but what's the news of her family? Are they still in foreign parts?

TISSIE: Alison's letter said her parents should be home by the third week of September but all the sailings from France are upset because of the war so you never can tell. Young Master Ian is more the worry, I reckon.

TABBIE: 'Tis hard for a big sister to be the one in charge. Did she have to go and fetch him back?

TISSIE: She was lucky the doctor recognised him and knew he was fibbing about his age. Otherwise Master Ian would have taken the King's shilling and been packed off. The boy's been horrid to her ever since.

TABBIE: Might he be happier here at Thackers? He could work on the farm?

TISSIE: That's a good thought and here's another: where's that Penelope? I need apples to put in this pastry and they're still on the tree. (*She goes to stage left and calls.*) Penelope! Are you there?

PENELOPE (*offstage*): Coming, Aunt Tissie. (*A moment later, she enters.*) I was writing a story. Good morning, Tabbie.

TABBIE: Good morning, my dear. When are you going to read us one of your stories? What are they about?

PENELOPE: I'm trying to write about Thackers long, long ago.

TABBIE: Well I never!

TISSIE: Well, right here and now, my dear, I'm wanting to bake some apple pies and all I've got so far is the pastry. So off you go and fill a small basket. When we've got them baked I want to take one over to Wingfield Farm. Mistress Bramble has had a dose of the 'flu and I want to cheer her up. She's missing her young Frank.

TABBIE: He's gone to be a soldier. Oh!

TISSIE: Tabbie! ... *(To Penelope)* When the pies are baked would you like to come with me?

PENELOPE: To Wingfield Manor? Oh yes, please!

TISSIE: Nay, 'tis no manor these days. The old manor house has been a ruin for hundreds of years I reckon, but there's still a farm.

PENELOPE: A ruin? But it looked so splendid ... I mean, in the old days, it must have looked splendid when Mary, Queen of Scots, came there.

TISSIE: *If she was there; but that's the story they tell round here.*

PENELOPE: That's the story I want to write.

TISSIE: Well, just you think about it while you go and get me those apples.

PENELOPE: I'll go at once. *(She exits carrying a basket.)*

TABBIE: What an imagination!

*The scene becomes the Thackers garden in 1584 and Francis is sitting on the bench, strumming and tuning his lute. He begins to sing to the tune of Greensleeves.*

FRANCIS: "Penelope was my delight".

*He has only sung one verse when Anthony enters, waving a letter.*

ANTHONY: Francis, we have the news we've been waiting for. They have set a date at last.

FRANCIS *(springing up)*: How soon?

ANTHONY: She will set off from Sheffield Castle in three weeks time. I imagine it will take two days for them to ride over to Wingfield Manor; longer if it rains again. Why did they have to wait until the middle of September before deciding? How is the tunnelling going? We must be ready in time.

FRANCIS: Anthony! Even with the best will there's at least another two months of hard work in front of us. And while you've been away in Derby there have been two accidents.

ANTHONY: Serious?

FRANCIS: Bad enough. Tom Snowball's leg was broken by a fall of rock. God willing, he will live but it means he'll not be able to go underground again and he was by far our most able miner.

ANTHONY: Alas, poor Tom. I shall ask Mary to send his family some comforts. And what else?

FRANCIS: Bringing up what we dig out is already taking more time than the actual digging. I just hope all this is going to be worthwhile.

ANTHONY: God's work is always worthwhile.

FRANCIS: Ay so, but does God know where the concealed entrance is to be found at Wingfield? We ought to do something about that at once, before the Manor is crawling with guards and spies.

ANTHONY: I have known that all along. I have just not wanted to tell anyone. The entrance is in the ... (*He notices Penelope arriving*) ... hold hard ... say nothing more. Yonder comes Penelope.

FRANCIS: Penelope! Welcome! (*He greets her as she enters stage right carrying a basket of Bramleys.*) I have just composed a new song, and Anthony and I were just talking about the news that Queen Mary ...

ANTHONY: ... that Queen Mary was well when last seen. Enough Francis! Have a care.

PENELOPE: I'm glad you've had that news. How I would love to see her when she comes to Wingfield Manor. Is that ever going to happen?

ANTHONY: It may.

FRANCIS: It *will*!

ANTHONY: It must, but all in God's good time.

*Mary Babington enters. She is visibly pregnant.*

MARY: Penelope! I heard Dame Cecily calling for you just now. Have you picked the apples for her pies? The oven is hot and the pans lined with pastry. Hurry off with you.

PENELOPE (*hurrying off stage right, after a curtsey to Mary*): At once, Mistress.

FRANCIS: Good morrow, sweet sister. Can I trust you to care for my lute for I must hie me to the churchyard and the diggings. (*He hands her the lute with a bow. She accepts it with a smile and a curtsey but hands the lute on to Anthony. Francis hurries off.*)

ANTHONY: Let's sit a short while, my love, in the last of this year's sunshine. Then I must follow Francis for I need to see for myself if the passages through the hill are large enough for a tall lady, even one as bold and hardy as Queen Mary.

MARY: I do not think I could bear to crawl in the darkness for mile after mile, even to save my life.

ANTHONY: Who knows what any one of us might do to flee from persecution.

MARY: Persecution seems to be lying in wait. Cousin Arabella has told me such horrendous stories.

ANTHONY: It was wicked of her to regale you with such tittle-tattle in your condition. I truly wish she had stayed behind in Derby as your mother wanted but she is a headstrong young woman and, besides, it seems clear to me she is hoping that Francis will begin to take more notice of her

MARY: Not while he's so distracted by Dame Cecily's niece. I do love that girl, and she is talented beyond her station in life, but I don't like to think what your mother would have to say. I'm glad she's remained in Derby but you know she will be here for my confinement, and when she is here there is nothing she will not find out about what is going on. It is her way.

ANTHONY: When our work here is finished and the dear Queen has escaped to France, I shall purchase Francis a commission in the French king's army ...

MARY: So much fighting and killing, husband!

ANTHONY: ... and then you and I will live quietly here with our child until the royal Mary returns at the head of our liberators and is restored to the throne.

Mary: These are all imaginings. You can have no certainty it will happen. Queen Elizabeth seems to have the loyalty of so many of her subjects; and that wicked Walsingham seems to find conspirators wherever he looks. Oh, Anthony! (*She starts to sob.*)

ANTHONY: Come, come, my love. I will go and fetch Arabella to escort you to your chamber. It is time for you to rest and I must go after Francis. All will be well here at Thackers. Please trust me. (*He rises and with guilty glances back at his wife he exits stage left, taking the lute. Mary continues to sob.*)

*The scene changes to Thackers kitchen in 1914. Tissie and Tabbie are still in the middle of the conversation we left earlier.*

TABBIE: Have we time for a sup of tea before we peel the apples?

TISSIE: If she's out there daydreaming then we might have time for *two* sups but I'd really like to get a start.

*Penelope runs in with her basket of Bramleys.*

PENELOPE: Sorry to keep you waiting Dame Cecily ... I mean, Aunt Tissie!

TISSIE: Now what did I say? Not only daydreaming but no sense of time. Penelope, you can't have been gone five minutes! You must have run all the way to the orchard and back again.

TABBIE: I've hardly had time to mash the tea.

PENELOPE: Oh, Aunt Tissie, I really don't understand what happens. I could swear that ... that someone ... someone came to tell me you were calling me and that I was keeping you waiting, or I think I would still be there.

TISSIE: You're not getting a fever again or sickening for anything are you, child?

PENELOPE: Not at all. I feel very well.

TABBIE: You certainly have a rosy glow. Has someone been paying you compliments, perhaps?

PENELOPE (*puzzled and flustered*): Compliments?

TABBIE: Here; give me those apples. I'll peel while I sup my tea.

PENELOPE: Aunt Tissie; you remember when we went to see old Mrs Snowball, how she had all these mining things?

TISSIE: How could I forget, my dear! You were that interested.

PENELOPE: Did the tunnels ever go right through the hill to the other side?

TISSIE: My brother Barney is the one to ask about that sort of thing but he did tell me of two rival mines going after the same seam of lead ore from opposite sides of the hill and all of a sudden coming face to face with each other down in the depths. The strangest place to meet, I'd say.

PENELOPE: So it could have happened? There could be a tunnel right through the hill from here to Wingfield Manor.

TISSIE: Maybe we'll invite the curate to stay on for a bit of dinner after the service next Sunday, and you and he can have a good old chinwag. He and Barney talked a lot when last he was over and I learned summat my brother never told me before.

PENELOPE: A secret!! Oh, do tell.

TABBIE: I'll just take some apple peelings out to the chickens. (*She picks up a basin and carries it out stage right. Offstage, she is heard calling the hens and their eager response.*)

TISSIE: Barney told him that when he was just a little boy and I were just a babby a big hole suddenly appeared in the corner of the churchyard and didn't it just turn out to be one of they secret entrances. Imagine that!

PENELOPE: Is it still there? I must go and see.

TISSIE: Nay, before there could be a nasty accident, they had it filled in. But it stands to reason there must be others.

PENELOPE: At Wingfield Manor too?

TISSIE: You'll have to ask Mrs Bramble but I suppose so. But if you digs a secret hole then, somehow, you mun hide it too or 'tis sure to be found. And then there's trouble.

*Tabbie comes back in with an empty basin.*

TABBIE: Oh Mistress Taberner, I swear you and Missie here could talk all day if we let you.

TISSIE: I stand rebuked. Now then, young girl: there's pastry left over and if the pears are ripe enough we could make a one of my pear tarts for supper tonight so off you go again and see if you think they're ready. Four big fat ones, if you please. You know where the tree is?

PENELOPE: Right at the foot of the orchard, near that tumbledown building.

TISSIE: That's the place. Now off you go. Here's your basket. Only ripe ones, mind!

PENELOPE: I'll hurry, I promise. (*She takes her basket and makes to hurry out.*)

TISSIE: Don't rush too much. Pretend you're taking your little wooden manikin for a walk and show him all the sights.

PENELOPE: You're teasing me, Aunt Tissie, but I do think he's my lucky charm. I keep him in my pocket all the time and sometimes I tell him my

stories. (*She shows it off for a moment and then puts it back into her pocket.*) I'll be right back. (*She makes her way to the door, stage right.*)

TISSIE: Take your time. You don't want to make yourself unwell again. That would never do.

*Penelope exits, waving.*

TABBIE: She does seem to have a high colour in her cheeks today.

TISSIE: All part of growing up: at least I hope so. I mean I wouldn't call her delicate but she did have that nasty spell two-three years back. We were all lucky she recovered from it.

TABBIE: Country air and country food. That's the best recipe.

TISSIE: She's much stronger, I think, but I sometimes wonder if she won't catch a fever from that imagination of hers and all that curiosity. It fair tires me out, I can tell you. Right then! Let's put the apple pies in the oven and then it's the calves to feed. It never stops.

TABBIE: Day or night.

*The scene changes to the garden at Thackers in 1584 but there is no bench but on the right there is a small stone building and more garden depicted behind it (where the pews were in Act One.) Some planks are on the ground to the side of the building and, as the lights come up, Arabella emerges from the open door of the building, carrying another plank which she drops onto the others. Then she notices Jude picking windfalls over towards stage left. She storms towards him.*

ARABELLA: Get off with you, hobgoblin. Get back to the kitchen and the dung heap where you belong. Go on, get out of my sight.

*Jude gets up and backs away cringing and exits. Arabella turns back towards the little building and Penelope enters, carrying her basket.*

ARABELLA: So; it is *you*, wench. I wondered how long it would take you to come around with your long prying nose and shifty eyes.

PENELOPE: Arabella!

ARABELLA: *Mistress* Arabella, hussy! You forget yourself. You may be able to read and write but you are no lady. And I suspect you are something worse.

PENELOPE: Worse than what?

ARABELLA: Even when you first appeared around here, coming from who knows where, you were saying things; telling Francis things that no one could know.

PENELOPE: What are you accusing me of?

ARABELLA: Francis is too gullible and much too susceptible to a saucy kitchen wench flashing her ankle and pretending she can see into the future.

PENELOPE: The future? No, it's just that ... oh, it's too difficult to explain.

ARABELLA: There's naught to explain. You may not be a sorceress but you are trying to bewitch my cousin Francis. No, I suspect you're something simpler and more sinister.

PENELOPE: Like what?

ARABELLA: "Like what?" says the strumpet! Like a spy! That's what.

PENELOPE: I'm *not* a spy. I'm loyal to the Babington family but I worry about what may happen to them all. I love Mary, Queen of Scots too, but I fear for her, as all do. And I'm a Taberner like Dame Cecily. We've been a part of Thackers as long as you and your family.

ARABELLA: That's what all spies would say. But tell me this: how is it you seem to come and go from here without any explanation? For two years now, you've been hanging round Thackers like a bad smell and always when something seems to be happening. Where do you go when you disappear and why does nobody ever see you going? One moment you're here and then the next you're gone like a puff of smoke.

PENELOPE: You would find it hard to understand.

ARABELLA: How dare you mock me, you wicked creature! What is so wrong with my understanding? You seem to think it's something Francis can understand and, what's more, you seem to have him singing songs to you when he should be singing them to ... well, never you mind. But it must all end. Too much is at stake. I need some proof of your loyalty to us: something that will convince me, once and for all, that you're not some creature of Walsingham's, ready to betray us and sell the whole family into torture and death.

PENELOPE: What can I do or say? You seem to have made your mind up about me a long time ago.

ARABELLA: Very well then! If I reveal a secret to you, will you swear never to reveal it even under torture?

PENELOPE: Arab ... Mistress Arabella. I have never revealed anything I have seen or heard here at Thackers; nor shall I.

ARABELLA: No, a kitchen wench who can read and write is just too suspicious. I'm sure you are already making up stories about us that you will sell to the highest bidder.

PENELOPE: I don't think there's anything I could do or say that will change your mind about me. You've never liked me.

ARABELLA: A true word at last. No, I have never liked you, but I will give you one final chance to change my mind.

PENELOPE: What chance?

ARABELLA: I came here to this place with a message for Francis from Master Anthony. Francis is below; working on a new entrance, for fear the one in the churchyard is discovered. Anthony wants him to come up immediately. He would have come here himself but Mistress Babington is so unwell he wishes not to quit her side. I have called and called but he cannot hear me and I confess I am afeared to climb down there. If you will take the message down to Francis then I might just begin to believe you are not a spy, or a witch.

PENELOPE: Then I will do it. I do so want you to feel that I am your friend and ally.

ARABELLA: Ally perhaps: in times of war one makes strange allies. But friend: I have my doubts. Make haste then?

*Penelope puts the basket down and gathers her skirts in her hand. Arabella opens the well house door and ushers Penelope forward.*

ARABELLA: There is scarce room for both of us. Step in and feel with your feet for the ladder.

*Penelope enters the well house gingerly. Arabella looks around to see if she is observed and then gives Penelope a hefty shove and shuts the door. Penelope cries out but her voice is faint.*

ARABELLA (*triumphantly*): No, Mistress Penelope Taberner, there is *no* room for both of us.

*Arabella opens the door again and a faint cry of 'Help' can be heard.*

ARABELLA (*calling down the well*): So, you've survived the fall, have you? Not for too long I hope. This is a dry well that no one has used in years. So, my dear spy, my poor witch and my unsuccessful rival, you can stay there and die. I hope it takes a long time.

*Arabella drags the planks that lie outside the well house and puts them inside, covering up the top of the well. The cries for help diminish. Then Arabella shuts the door and puts a stone in front of it.*

ARABELLA (*shouting at the door*): Farewell, Penelope, forever! (*She runs off.*)

*The scene changes to the Thackers kitchen in 1584. Anthony and Francis are washing dirt off their hands and faces while Dame Cecily bustles around with basins and towels then feeds the men as they talk.*

ANTHONY: I owe you a great debt of gratitude, dear brother. You and your miners have laboured mightily. I'm sure you will break through to the Wingfield galleries very soon.

FRANCIS (*shaking his head*): It may seem like that to you above ground here in the warm kitchen but down there, in the cold and wet, the task seems endless.

ANTHONY: I shall ask Father Jerome to say a special Mass.

FRANCIS: He might be of more use if he could wield a pickaxe.

ANTHONY: Do not mock, Francis. He takes as many risks as your miners every day.

FRANCIS: Forgive me. I am just too weary. But you must tell me soon how we are to effect Queen Mary's escape from Wingfield. She cannot be expected to dig; nor any of her retinue, I imagine.

ANTHONY: I shall tell you everything but, on your word of honour, you must not reveal one iota of this to another soul; not even to Arabella or young Penelope. They are both loyal, of that I'm sure; but if ever they knew the secret they could be forced to reveal it under questioning and we would all be doomed.

FRANCIS: You have my word, but if I am to guide the tunnelling I need to know all.

ANTHONY: Very well. Nigh on fifty years ago, when King Henry started on the dissolution of the monasteries our neighbours at Wingfield Manor had the foresight to ask the friars to create a priest hole in their private chapel.

FRANCIS: Aha! But in such a bare stone building, where could that be?

ANTHONY: They were fortunate to have a master mason among the friars and it was he who devised a clever mechanism that allows the altar itself to be slid aside by means of a lever. It can be rolled to one side in only a minute and then rolled back again, using that stout bishop's crook made of cast iron that hangs in the nave.

FRANCIS: Ingenious!

ANTHONY: They dug down from there and found a natural passage in the rock below. That led towards the copse on the hillside close to the entrance to their own mines.

FRANCIS: But will it work now. What will the passage be like after all these years?

ANTHONY: Please God it does work and that is what you and I are going to find out directly.

FRANCIS: When? How?

ANTHONY: On the feast of St Michael and all the Angels.

FRANCIS: Michaelmas? But that's tomorrow.

ANTHONY: Sir Ralph has agreed to let us say our private prayers in the Wingfield chapel tomorrow. I have told him it is a penance for this feast of obligation and that we wish to be alone to fast and to pray.

FRANCIS: Brilliant. If the mechanism works, then there is a chance.

ANTHONY: There is so much more to arrange. Getting messages to Queen Mary is becoming much more difficult. Her warden has everything searched before it reaches her. Still, we shall find a way.

FRANCIS: Bravo, Anthony! And our miners will find the way too. We just need time and some good luck.

ANTHONY: And our earnest prayers.

CECILY: Masters both; I need my kitchen table and Master Anthony, you should be seeing to your wife. She's not well and you know it.

ANTHONY: I ...

*Jude comes rushing in, very agitated. He dances up and down in front of Dame Cecily and points back at the door. Then he tries to pull Francis towards it.*

CECILY: Lord a' Mercy! What's with the poor creature?

FRANCIS: Desist, Jude. This is no times for fun and games.

*Jude rushes out again.*

CECILY: 'Tis the full moon or something that has possessed him. I'll give him a strong posset when he's calmed down.

FRANCIS: I think he needs a purge, to be bled or something.

ANTHONY: He needs our prayers, poor tormented soul.

*Jude runs back in, this time waving the basket that Penelope was using for her apples. He shakes it in Francis's face and begins to drag him towards the door.*

CECILY: That's Penelope's basket. What's amiss?

FRANCIS: I'd best see what's upsetting him so much. I'll come back to you anon, Anthony. There is still much to discuss. (*To an ever more agitated Jude*) All right, I'm coming.

*Francis exits, dragged by Jude.*

CECILY: Master Anthony. Since we are alone for a moment, I pray you hear me even if I risk giving offence.

ANTHONY: Dame Cecily, you have known me all of my short life and been a loyal and loving servant to my family. What could you say to me that would cause offence?

CECILY: I could chide thee, Master Anthony, for neglecting your duties as a loving husband.

ANTHONY: Such a rebuke might anger any man but since I hope I am an honest one I can only acknowledge that over the years since we were so happily wed other weighty cares have lain so heavy on me that I have not been the fond and ever-present husband that my wife deserves.

CECILY: Acknowledgement of error is only part the way to repentance and true repentance requires the penitent to give up the error of his ways. Master Anthony; she is going to make you a father. Please God you will have a son and heir. Let there be something for him to inherit.

ANTHONY: Do you have such doubts and fears for the future? I can only pray you may be proven wrong. I have given my solemn word to God that once Queen Mary has been set free, I shall not stir from my wife's side. I will be a true heir to my own father and manage all his estates as he did. Do you doubt me?

*Tabitha rushes in.*

TABITHA: Dame Cecily – oh, forgive me, Master Anthony – but dost know that Mistress Arabella has ridden off with only a groom for company and the word is she's heading for Derby. What shall we do with all her closets full of dresses and shoes?

CECILY: The young mistress has clothes enough in Derby but it were a foolish act to ride off with so little escort. I reckon it will be dark afore they get to Babington House. What took the girl?

TABITHA: Saving your presence, Master Anthony, her maid says she's been in a regular tizzy for days now.

ANTHONY: Enough of this. If my cousin is so wild, she must take the consequences. She has always been headstrong.

*Francis rushes in, shouting.*

FRANCIS: Anthony, you must come at once. I have sent men for ladders and ropes but I need you there to help me lift her out.

CECILY: Lord a' Mercy! Lift who out? From where?

FRANCIS: Lift Penelope out of the old well in the orchard. Good dame, get blankets and bandages ready. Anthony, you must come, now!

*Francis drags Anthony off.*

CECILY: Go you at once to the chest and fetch two of the best blankets and I will fetch bandages.

TABITHA: Has her curiosity got the better of her? What ever was she doing in the old well house?

CECILY: That old well was covered with timbers for safety. I doubt that Penelope had the strength or the curiosity to move them.

TABITHA: Then how ...

CECILY: Fetch those blankets, woman, and hold your peace!

*A cowed Tabitha bobs a curtsy and runs off followed at a stately pace by Dame Cecily. The lights dim to indicate a short passage of time and when they go up again there is a small group, Dame Cecily, Anthony, Francis and Tabitha, gathered round a blanket-wrapped Penelope sitting in the rocking chair. Jude crouches by the fireplace.*

CECILY: Sip more of it, my dear. Warm milk and honey is a restorative. You, Master Francis, ride at once to Tandy and fetch the physician. It may be no more than cuts and bruises but he must attend at once, tell him.

FRANCIS: At once. Dearest friend, I shall return to your side just as swiftly as my horse can carry me.

CECILY: Don't return without the doctor.

FRANCIS: I am gone! *(He exits right.)*

CECILY: Master Anthony, your place is by your own wife's side for she has certainly heard all the commotion and needs your reassurance. Go now.

ANTHONY: Wise counsel as ever. *(He exits.)*

CECILY: Tabitha, go tend the fire in Penelope's chamber. We'll carry her there directly. *(Tabitha nods and exits.)*

PENELOPE *(in a very quiet and tremulous voice)*: Jude!

*Jude comes forward and crouches at her feet. Penelope holds out a hand. Jude wipes his hand on his tunic and takes hers.*

PENELOPE: Thank you Jude. I know it was you who saved me. I thought no one would ever find me. (*Jude hangs his head with embarrassment.*) When I was down there I asked your little manikin to get help for me. Here, look. I still have him. (*Jude takes it, kisses it, and puts it back into her hand.*)

CECILY: Well now: practical matters. We needs more firewood and plenty of it so off with you, good fellow, and fetch a-plenty. (*Jude exits looking back fondly at Penelope.*)

*Dame Cecily sits down beside Penelope and takes her hand.*

CECILY: Now tell me true. Was it that Arabella? (*Penelope nods silently.*) I guessed as much. Well, since the baggage has ridden away, I think we shall see none more of her at Thackers. When she hears you are safe, she'll never dare to show her face. But heed me now, my poppet. These are anxious times for all the Babingtons. This is not the moment to add family disputes on top of it all. The men think you fell down there through the rotten timbers. Let them go on thinking that. Now, you've supped your drink, so rest awhile. I mun get busy about the house.

*Dame Cecily kisses Penelope on the brow and exits slowly. Penelope falls asleep and the lights dim while the kitchen is transformed to 1914. Penelope, still wrapped in blankets, is sleeping in the rocker. Jess enters with firewood and Aunt Tissie enters carrying a bottle and a spoon.*

TISSIE: Are you awake then, my dear? You had us all worried. If Jess hadn't seen you fainting you might have been lying there in the long grass for long enough and caught your death of a chill. What took you?

PENELOPE: I don't know. I remember I was worrying so much about Mummy and Daddy and having such awful thoughts that I might not see them ever again.

TISSIE: Goodness mercy me! Here, sup this cordial and when your bedroom is warmed by the fire, I'll have Jess carry you up there.

*Tissie spoons cordial into Penelope.*

PENELOPE: Oh, that's delicious. Medicine usually tastes horrible. And thank you Jude, I mean Jess. Thank you very much. (*Jess grins, waves then exits.*)

TISSIE: Let me see if Tabbie has run the warming pan under the eiderdown yet. (*She exits.*)

*Left alone, Penelope brings the little wooden manikin out from under the blankets and holds him up.*

PENELOPE: Dear little manikin, we seem to share these adventures. I wish I understood how it happens. It all seems so real while it's happening and yet so dreamy afterwards. And when I'm there, back in their time, the present seems so hard to recall. I seem to know, somehow, what will happen to them, yet I can't tell them. It's all such a puzzle. Poor Mistress Babington and sad, sad Anthony. Dear, dear Francis.

*She snuggles down in the blankets and quickly falls asleep. After a moment, Tissie returns. She stands beside the chair and rocks it gently.*

TISSIE: Sleep on my poppet and sweet dreams. The bed's not warm enough yet. *(She walks to the door and calls out.)* Jess, bring more firewood, please.

End of Act 3.

ACT FOUR

*The scene is Thackers kitchen on Christmas Eve, December 1914, but there are few acknowledgments of Christmas other than a hanging ball of mistletoe. Tissie has mixing bowls on the table and is busy preparing Christmas food. Penelope, wearing her locket prominently on a ribbon round her neck, and Tabbie are bustling around helping. Jess enters right carrying a freshly-cut Christmas tree. While Penelope and Tabbie react with delight, Tissie has other ideas.*

TISSIE: Well done, Jess. 'Tis a real beauty but I can't abide it in my kitchen a moment longer, shedding needles all over the floor and maybe getting in my mince pies. Now just you get it through here and into the hall.

*Jess touches his cap and quickly carries the tree off. Penelope takes a broom and sweeps the floor towards the door.*

TABBIE: When they be cooked we'd never notice, Mistress!

PENELOPE: I've never seen a Christmas tree so beautiful and so big.

TISSIE: And too big for this kitchen! The tub is all ready for it in the hall and when Jess has it safely put up you can take as long as you like to decorate it.

PENELOPE: I'll start as soon as we've finished helping you here.

TABBIE: There be lots of ribbons and stars and paper-chains and a lovely china fairy to go right at the top.

TISSIE: Jess will hold the steps when you go up to do that bit: just in case. We can't have you taking another fainting turn like last time and no one around to catch you.

PENELOPE: I can't wait to see Mummy's face when she sees it. Our tree at home is always so tiny. And Alison will love it, I'm sure, although Mummy says she is so very serious these days, now she's doing war work.

TABBIE: What war work are women doing, my dear?

PENELOPE: Lots and lots, Mummy says. Alison is working in one of the Ministries. It's secretarial work rather than teaching but Mummy says it makes Alison feel important because she's helping win the war.

TISSIE: Doing her bit, like everyone else. And what's the news of Ian?

PENELOPE: Mummy didn't say very much in her letter but, anyway, he'll be here tonight and we can ask him.

TABBIE: 'Tis wonderful he has leave for Christmas.

PENELOPE: Yes it is, but he'll have to go straight back afterwards; unless we all get snowed in. Wouldn't that be marvellous?

TISSIE: With cattle to feed and milk; with the hens all cooped up – thank you very much, my dear. I'll happily see the snow clouds pass over to the other side of the hill and give us a miss.

TABBIE: Oh yes, Mistress? I expect Mistress Bramble over in Wingfield is in her kitchen right now, hoping the snow falls on Thackers instead.

TISSIE: You could well be right. I wonders how young Frank is getting along; in the Derbyshire Yeomanry. He was always a bright lad was Frank.

PENELOPE: I do wish Daddy was coming with them.

TABBIE: Poor man. Imagine being sent back to France almost as soon as he got home from there.

PENELOPE: Mummy can't tell me who it is but she says he's working as an interpreter for somebody really important.

*Jess enters stage left and invites all to come and see. Penelope and Tabbie clap their hands and set off but Tissie calls them back.*

TISSIE: Just you two hover a blink, now. Tabbie, you get these mince pies in the oven first, and Penelope, I want you to take that locket off and put it in a safe place before you get it caught on the branches.

TABBIE: Yes, Mistress.

PENELOPE (*taking off her locket*): Yes, all right, but where can I put it that's really safe.

TISSIE: Now, as it happens, I have just the thing. I came across it in the attic last night when I was fetching down the Christmas decorations. (*She goes to a cupboard and brings out a small but attractive wooden box that was last seen in Act 1 belonging to Mistress Babington.*) Here, my dear. You can have it now and keep your precious things in it.

PENELOPE: Oh Aunt Tissie, it's gorgeous and it looks so old. The funny thing is I'm sure I've seen it before.

TISSIE: Well I mun doubt that, poppet, unless you've been rootling around in the attic. I reckon that box has been up there since my old gran or even afore her time.

PENELOPE: It looks beautiful, Aunt Tissie, and Mummy will like it too because it's a part of Thackers. She says she's very excited too. This will be her first Christmas at Thackers for more than twenty-five years.

TABBIE: We're all excited. It'll be wonderful.

PENELOPE: I wonder: how did they celebrated Christmas back in Elizabethan times when the Babingtons lived here? I mean, the Christmas tree is something quite new. Daddy says it was Prince Albert who started it all when he married Queen Victoria.

TISSIE: There's many a farmhouse round here where they still burn a Yule log in the big fireplace and all the farm workers and their families come in on Christmas Eve and sing carols and hymns. The Babingtons must have done that too, I reckon.

PENELOPE: I'd love to see that.

TISSIE: Just you be careful what you wish for. And what I wish for this moment is a jug of fresh cream from the dairy, so off you go and fetch one this instant and then you can start on the tree. We need all this finished before they get here.

PENELOPE: I'll just put my locket in the box. There. Now I'm off like the wind. (*She dashes off stage.*)

TISSIE: Take care out there: it's colder than charity and only half as generous. And don't you drop the jug, now! Tabbie, go you and see to the bedroom fires. I want them all burning brightly. Then hurry back. Be off now.

TABBIE: Yes, Mistress. (*She exits.*)

TISSIE: And we need firewood too. (*She bustles off.*)

*As the lights dim the scene transforms itself to Christmas Eve 1584. The same signs of Christmas decorations are to be seen, including a ball of mistletoe hanging from the ceiling and there are bowls of foodstuffs on the table. There is a small table downstage right with a three-legged stool. Jude enters carrying more firewood and then sits beside the fireplace turning a spit that holds a couple of large birds. The voices of Dame Cecily and Tabitha are heard singing before they enter stage left and sing the second verse on stage. [The box is no longer on the table.]*

CECILY/TABITHA (*starting offstage*): "Here we come a-wassailing, / Among the leaves so green. / Here we come a wandering, / So fair to be seen. (*Completing the carol on stage*) God bless the master of this house, / God bless the mistress too, / And all the little childer, / That round the table go." (*The laugh heartily.*)

TABITHA: Nothing like a good sing. It fair lightens the spirits, I always say.

CECILY: We certainly needs it, my dear. I've never known a more sombre Yuletide at Thackers. Still and all, let's put a brave face on matters and get this kitchen ready for everyone coming.

TABITHA: I've never seen a bigger Yule log in the great fireplace: have you?

CECILY: Not since Master Anthony was born and his father felled the largest tree on the whole estate. But this is young Master Francis's doing. He found it on Wingfield Hill. He says it's to celebrate the arrival of his nephew which, God willing, should see the light of day any day now.

TABITHA: A Christmas babby: now there's a good omen for the family.

CECILY: Which they're in sore need of. Now, where's that cream?

*Penelope, wearing a smock over her dress, enters stage right carrying a jug carefully which she sets on the table.*

PENELOPE: It was so full Dame Cecily I had to walk very slowly so as not to spill it.

CECILY: And here was me thinking you'd just disappeared again. Here, take these parsnips over there and peel them. There's no room on this table.

*Penelope takes a small trug of parsnips over to the small table and sits on the stool to work while Cecily and Tabitha busy themselves at the big table.*

TABITHA: A babby'll make such a difference but I still says what I always says. Master Anthony seems to give all for the Papist queen and yet he has his whole life here: a sweet and loving wife, good health and fine looks, land, cattle, and crops, and all a man could need and more. Maybe this babby will hold him here at last.

CECILY: Hush now. Us folks mun do as we're bid by the quality. 'Tis not business for the likes of us to meddle in. And don't let him catch you calling Her Grace a Papist neither. She belongs to the old religion and we were all a part of it not so long ago. Some have changed and some have not. But whatever we are, we mun be faithful to God and the Babington family.

TABITHA: If Master Anthony can save the Scottish queen well and good but if he cannot then I do fear for the mistress and for him too.

CECILY: I'll say amen to that; for I can see all this is costing the Babingtons dear in land and gold. I do worry sometimes they're going to be ruined whatever happens.

TABITHA: Then what would become of us?

CECILY: Well I've never met a soothsayer who could really foretell the future, but that may be a blessing. Hush now! *(She gestures offstage and Francis enters, sees Penelope and rushes over to the low table.)*

FRANCIS: Penelope! You're here again! Have you heard what brother Anthony has been up to? *(He remembers his manners.)* Good morrow,

Dame Cecily. Let me have a knife and I'll peel parsnips too. I'm in such a good mood. (*He takes a knife from the big table and kneels at the low table.*)

CECILY (*exchanging meaningful looks with Tabitha*): Lord a' mercy! (*They look on and listen as Francis and Penelope have a tête-à-tête over the parsnips.*)

FRANCIS: Anthony has *seen* the Queen! Last week; at Wingfield.

PENELOPE: How on earth did he manage that? I thought she was so carefully guarded.

FRANCIS: Anthony is a master of disguise. He dyed his hair with walnut juice, and stained his face and hands too, and he put on torn leather breeches and an old jerkin. Then, bold as brass, he walked into Wingfield Manor by the servants' door.

PENELOPE: But dressed like that, how could he expect to be admitted to her presence?

FRANCIS: That was the masterstroke. He took a pedlar's pack, heaped with ribbons and all kinds of trinkets and gewgaws such as you womenfolk crave; silver beads and glass baubles.

PENELOPE: Does Queen Mary have need of such things?

FRANCIS: Ah but, among it all he had some special things, fit for a queen: silver toys such as Her Grace loves and buttons of enamel and gold, silver tinsel and a pomander of silver wire. When the Queen's ladies saw these, he had no difficulty in being shown in to see her; so little entertainment do they have, poor women.

PENELOPE: To see her must have been wonderful for him, but how could he speak with her? There would be all her ladies-in-waiting and servants eavesdropping.

FRANCIS: The story gets better and better. When he approached the queen with a tray of precious things, he whispered a secret word or two and Her Grace immediately understood. She told her attendants she wanted to make some purchases for Christmas gifts and that she wanted them to be a surprise so everyone else had to withdraw.

PENELOPE: How clever and how bold!

FRANCIS: That meant he was able to deliver a letter to her. It was in cipher but he had to be very careful. It told her there were plans for a rescue but did not say how. Simply that she would have to be ready at a signal from her priest and that she would have to come alone, with no attendants.

PENELOPE: Was she pleased to hear this? I would have been petrified.

FRANCIS: Her Grace is made of royal timber. She is ready and willing.

PENELOPE: How will the priest know when to give her that signal?

FRANCIS: Anthony would be cross if he knew I had told you but he went to confession in Wingfield's chapel and told the priest how to operate the lever to move the altar. The priest promised to practice moving it, so that it would work well on the day.

*At this point, Tabitha exits so that she does not see what happens next.*

PENELOPE: How soon will it be?

FRANCIS: Nay, I must not tell you that, but it must be soon. We are nearly there underground.

PENELOPE: I wish I had seen Anthony as a pedlar. I might have bought something for myself.

FRANCIS: I confess, dear Penelope, I bought something for you. Here. Do you like this?

*He offers her a green hair ribbon.*

PENELOPE: Oh, that is so pretty. How kind of you. I shall always wear it.

FRANCIS: Will you put it in your hair now?

*Penelope wipes the parsnip peelings off her hands and ties the ribbon in her hair. Cecily cannot let this go any further.*

CECILY: Now then, wench: where's my parsnips. I wanted them peeled, not carved into candlesticks. Get you gone, Master Francis. There's much to be done before the mummers come round, and the folk from the estate to see the Yule Log, so go see to that if you would be so kind.

*Waving to Penelope and blowing a cheeky kiss to Cecily, Francis skips off stage as Tabitha returns from the larder.*

TABITHA: Go you Jude and stoke the fire in the laundry right now or the pease pudding will not be cooked before January, I swear. Oh, will you take a look at her! Where did you get that lovely ribbon in your hair? Nay, there's no need to tell me. Your blushes tell it all. Master Francis has been paying court, I'll swear.

CECILY: Tabitha, be off and see to the bedroom fires. Jude: about your business! *(Both exit in haste.)* Now hark ye, Penelope. He's a fine, handsome lad and you be a pretty wench but he's one of the quality and we Taberners are their servants, so put any foolish nonsense out of your head. If there's trouble ahead, it might go very ill with you if ... well, never you mind. Now, help me put these meat pies in the oven.

*Mary enters.*

MARY: Good Dame, I need a posset even before I go to church, it so cold today.

CECILY: This instant, Mistress. Penelope, chop these herbs, good and small. Be quick now.

*Francis enters.*

FRANCIS: The Yule log is catching well. By the time the mummers are here it should be a cheery blaze. May I help you chop these herbs, Mistress Penelope?

*Tabitha enters.*

TABITHA: The bedroom fires are all seen to, Mistress.

*As they are all busy in the kitchen, there are offstage sounds of a horse galloping into the yard and, moments later, Anthony bursts in through the door, looking distraught and exhausted. He takes a pitcher of water from the table and has a long drink before putting it down and slumping into the rocking chair.*

CECILY: Lord a' mercy, Master Anthony; what's amiss?

ANTHONY: All is discovered at Wingfield. And before long, I fear they will be here and our part in it discovered too.

*All react with dismay and horror.*

CECILY: May Heaven preserve us!

ANTHONY: The Queen's priest it seems was just too zealous. He kept closing the chapel to practice moving the altar with the bishop's crook and one of the guards began looking through the keyhole and saw what was happening. The poor father was threatened with the rack.

MARY: Then all will be revealed. We must flee at once and on such a holy night as this. But where can we go? Must my child be born in a stable?

*The women gather round Mistress Babington to comfort her.*

ANTHONY: We may well be discovered but there is one faint hope. Father Hurd has told the warden he heard about the priest's hole when he was in France many years ago and no one else knew of it. He just wanted to explore it for himself, in case he had anything to hide.

FRANCIS: But the passage from the chapel goes scarce twenty yards before it comes to fallen rock. We've seen it ourselves.

CECILY: There's a mercy. Then surely all is *not* discovered, Master Anthony.

ANTHONY: I would that were so, but Walsingham's agents are no fools. They may pretend to believe Father Hurd but if they should ride out to visit the other manors on the lookout for anything that smacks of plans to rescue Her Grace, they will certainly come here first, for we are the nearest place.

FRANCIS: If they do that, it will take them no more than two minutes to discover everything.

TABITHA: Lord a' mercy! What will become of us?

MARY: Oh Anthony. Our child!

PENELOPE: But can't you just cover everything up?

CECILY: Mistress Babington, you shall not ride out like the Blessed Virgin Mary to have your baby in some strange stable. Master Anthony, Master Francis, go to. It may be Christmas Eve but get the miners back here to block the tunnel entrance with all the earth and stones that are lying round the churchyard. Rouse yourselves.

FRANCIS: Let *me* go. You must stay here and care for dear Mary. I'll have that tunnel blocked and covered up long before Queen Elizabeth's spies come nosing round.

ANTHONY: Yes, go Francis, for I am spent with riding back here. God speed you!

FRANCIS: I'm gone this instant. (*To Penelope quietly*) Please don't go off again. Please stay here. (*Penelope nods and smiles at him as he dashes off before she gives Cecily a slightly guilty look.*)

CECILY: Tabitha, escort the Mistress to her chamber and see her fire is bright and the bed warm then come back here for her posset.

TABITHA: Yes, Dame Cecily.

*As Tabitha escorts Mary off, Anthony sits dejectedly with his head in his hands.*

ANTHONY: It has all been to no purpose. All that effort, all that time; all the gold I have spent.

PENELOPE: But if nothing is discovered at Thackers, can you not start again when the fuss has died down?

ANTHONY: I haven't told you the worst.

PENELOPE: What could be worse?

ANTHONY: They have decided that the Queen be moved to Fotheringay.

PENELOPE: Fotheringay? But that's where she will be ... oh dear ... what am I saying?

ANTHONY: They will leave Wingfield two days after Christmas. It seems they had a plan to move her there all along.

CECILY: Then I mun say that nothing could be better news. If they move the poor woman away from Derbyshire, then take that as a sign to give all this up and tend to your wife and babby, your fields and farms, your own people too, like God intended.

ANTHONY: Dame Cecily, how could you say such a thing? To abandon all I have strived for so much of my life; to desert a royal and a religious cause at its greatest moment of peril! May God forgive you for such a sinful thought!

CECILY: And may God forgive you if you will not see where your true duty lies! You be so zealous for your cause you cannot see that even if you can rescue Queen Mary, and spirit her away to France, Queen *Elizabeth* will never surrender. She's made of stubborn stuff like her father. Protect what you have and what you can still hold on to, if your plans and plots are not discovered this time.

ANTHONY: I shall hear not another word of this. Mistress Penelope, with your better education, tell Dame Cecily I must go on!

PENELOPE (*kneeling beside Anthony*): Master Anthony, I truly fear that if any plot is discovered then ... then I could see Queen Elizabeth using that as a reason for ordering Queen Mary's execution.

ANTHONY: No! Never! You lie, or you are a witch after all.

CECILY: Heaven forefend!

PENELOPE: I'm not a witch, Master Anthony, but surely you can see it will go very badly for anyone even suspected of taking part in a plot. Then what would happen to you, to Mistress Babington, to everyone ... to Francis?

ANTHONY (*with a deep sigh*): Young lady, forgive me; Dame Cecily too. You have been true friends to the family and especially to my poor wife. (*With a smile to Penelope.*) Oh yes, 'tis not only Francis who sings your praises. I must go and see poor Mary now; and I shall think about what you have said, both of you, but you must know that as one of the true faith I may be unable to help myself. I have devoted my life to Queen Mary and I must even be ready to *give* my life for her too.

*He rises and slowly exits as both Cecily and Penelope wipe away tears. He is no sooner off stage when Cecily suddenly remembers other things.*

CECILY: Lord a' mercy, the mince pies! They'll be burned to a cinder. Jude, get these birds back from the fire. Penelope, we need more cream for whipping. Get you to the dairy this instant.

*There is frantic bustle as the light dim to indicate a passage of time.*

*As the lights go up they reveal piles of cooked food on the kitchen table with Dame Cecily, Tabitha, Jude and Penelope about to carry it into the hall from where the sounds of carols and hymns and loud, cheery conversation can be heard. The offstage mummers are singing.*

MUMMERS (*offstage*): "Here we come a-wassailing / Among the leaves so green. / Here we come a-wandering, / So fair to be seen. / God bless the master of this house, / God bless the mistress too, / And all the little childer / That round the table go."

*Loud cheers follow and then, above the hubbub, Anthony's voice is heard.*

ANTHONY (*offstage*): Good folk, I thank you all and bid you welcome. I have never heard you in better voice. Welcome all. Come drink up. Mistress Babington and I shall serve you and good Dame Cecily has been cooking and baking for you all day.

CECILY: Come along now. Carry everything in. Make haste lest they come storming in here looking for their victuals.

*With Jude leading the way with a roast goose on a platter, all four set off stage left with mounds of food. Each arrival is greeted with cheers from the offstage company in the hall. One at a time, Jude, Tabitha, Cecily and Penelope come back for more. Finally, Cecily sets off leaving Penelope last on stage with one dish of small pies left on the table. The hubbub and singing has carried on all this time but dies down as Francis enters from stage right.*

FRANCIS: Penelope!

*Penelope puts down the dish and runs towards him and they embrace tenderly.*

FRANCIS: The job is done. The tunnel entrance is sealed. It would take a month to undo what it has taken us three hours to do.

PENELOPE: Thank goodness. Well done, Francis!

FRANCIS: Aye, but Penelope, that job is done but nothing is concealed after all.

PENELOPE: What do you mean? The entrance is blocked yet you say nothing is concealed?

FRANCIS: We should have realised even before we spent all that time and effort. All around the churchyard the earth is churned up and scored by the timbers and stones we had to drag and roll towards the shaft. There are deep hoof marks all round the church and leading off in all directions. They won't even need to look: they'll trip over the evidence.

PENELOPE: What are you saying?

FRANCIS: I am telling you that unless you have some magic powers to make grass grow overnight then anyone riding over from Wingfield will take one look at the place and arrest Anthony, and probably all the men of Thackers. It will take a miracle to save us.

PENELOPE: Won't they come tonight?

FRANCIS: I think not. If they are truly afraid of a plot, they'll not venture out into the night for fear of ambush. All they have at present is the evidence of a short tunnel from the chapel and a foolish priest who played too often with his mechanical toy. But they will surely suspect more. For all they know, that crowd singing, drinking and eating in our Hall there could be a troop of cavalry, bowmen and halberdiers intent on a determined assault. Everyone will be under suspicion.

PENELOPE: So: tomorrow? Will they ride here on Christmas Day?

FRANCIS: They may well.

PENELOPE: But there must be *something* you can do.

FRANCIS: We could flee; but they would pursue us the length and breadth of the country; and our flight would be an admission of guilt. Or we could stay; and the churchyard will convict us even if we fail to confess. Or we could pray. Penelope, even the women will be in danger. I think you should leave tomorrow and go home.

PENELOPE: Francis, Thackers has been my family home too; for a long, long time.

FRANCIS: Dearest Penelope, that gladdens my heart to hear and I would dearly love you to stay here for another long, long time but, after tomorrow, I cannot imagine that I will be here to share any of that time with you. Come; take a last look at the Christmas stars and send up your prayers for one to guide us or, better still, send us a miracle.

*They walk, hand in hand to the door of the kitchen and open it wide. They stand on stage, gazing out at the farmyard. Francis puts his arm round Penelope's shoulder. They stand for a moment or two and then, suddenly, Penelope points.*

PENELOPE: Look, look! Do you see what's happening? There's your miracle. It's starting to snow: and very thickly! I just *know* you are all going to be safe this time, I promise you. Come on!

*Penelope drags a bemused Francis out through the door and the stage lights dim. The scene is transformed to the Thackers kitchen in 1914 with the door to the farmyard half-closed.*

*Tissie enters through the door, carrying a bundle of small logs for the fire and brushing snow off her shoulders.*

TISSIE: Jess! Come here this instant. Tabbie!

*Tabbie enters.*

TISSIE: Would you believe it? The snow is falling thick and fast. Go now and bring in several lots of wood for the fires and some coal for upstairs before it all gets buried. Where's that Jess?

TABBIE: Mistress, he's been gone near an hour ago to the station with the dog cart to fetch the visitors like you told him. They mun be here any moment.

TISSIE: If they don't get stuck in the snow! Go see where that dreamy Penelope has got to. I sent her for a jug of cream from the dairy. I don't want to find her frozen in a snow drift. Her mother would take a dim view of that, I warrant. Be off with you!

*But Penelope enters, carefully carrying a jug with a saucer on top which she steadies with her hand. As a result of having both hands occupied, she has not been able to brush off a good dusting of snow on her head and shoulders. Tabbie pulls her scarf over her head and exits.*

TISSIE: Lord a' mercy, Penelope Taberner, and if you catch your death of cold your mother will never forgive me. Come over here to the fire this instant. What took you so long?

PENELOPE: Oh Aunt Tissie, it was wonderful. I can tell you but no one else would understand. I was bringing the cream back and when I came in here there were all the Babingtons and they were so upset because the guards at Wingfield Manor had discovered a secret passage out of the chapel and were going to move Mary, Queen of Scots, to Fotheringay.

TISSIE: Doesn't your day-dreaming just cap all! Surely you're just imagining things after all the stories you've heard from me and Mrs Bramble these past six months.

PENELOPE: But Aunt Tissie, it was so real. Master Anthony looked so terribly downcast. All his work was going to be wasted and he was afraid Mary's jailers at Wingfield would come here; just to see if the Babingtons were up to something. Everyone was afraid the entrance in the churchyard

would give everything away but Francis took charge. He was wonderful. He got the miners to come back and they completely blocked the entrance.

TISSIE: Now there's good news then! So the Babingtons were spared.

PENELOPE: Only just. You see, the ground in the churchyard was so churned up with all the workings that it might as well have been signposted. Francis didn't know how to break the news to Anthony but then there was a miracle and I saw it first. Francis and I went out to stand in the yard and just let the snow fall on us like in the Christmas carol. Deep and crisp and even. Everything was covered up.

TISSIE: My sweet poppet; put your locket on now and get ready for the family.

*Penelope goes to the box on the table and takes out her locket on its green ribbon, identical to the one Francis gave her.*

PENELOPE: Francis gave me a green ribbon just like this to put in my hair.

TISSIE: Lord a' mercy! I think we brought you back from your daydreams just in time by the sound of things; or we might never have seen you again. What would folks have said, I ask myself?

PENELOPE: It can't all be daydreams, Aunt Tissie. I know you gave me this ribbon but it could have been here at Thackers for hundreds of years, just like this box. And the locket is real, here round my neck.

TISSIE: I'll let you have it your way, my dear, since 'tis Christmas Eve.

*Tabitha runs in carrying some small logs for the fire. She too has a layer of snow to brush off.*

TABBIE: Oh Mistress, 'tis snowing like billy-ho, and the wind is getting up. It looks like we'm having a blizzard. I likes a covering of snow at Christmas; but I can't abide a storm.

TISSIE: Let's all pray the snow doesn't drift too much on Tandy Hill. I hope our Jess took his shovel.

PENELOPE: Do you think they'll be all right? You did tell me to be careful what I wished for. I wanted snow, but not a storm.

TISSIE: You two get busy then. Tabbie; put the kettle on for a sup o' tea the *moment* they arrive. Set the cups out and then warm the soup. Penelope: start toasting the tea cakes and keep them warm beside the oven. Let me have a look at the chickens.

*The three women busy themselves. Noises offstage announce the arrival of the cart in the farm yard and voices call out.*

PENELOPE: They're here!

TISSIE: Thank the Lord.

*As Penelope and Tissie start towards the door, it opens and in come Carlin Cameron, Penelope's mother, and Alison, her sister. Both have wide Edwardian hats and long coats which have accumulated a fair amount of snow. Alison is something of a schoolmarm of twenty wearing spectacles. They are cold but relieved to have arrived.*

PENELOPE: Mummy! Alison!

TISSIE: Carlin, Alison, come in, come in and get yourself out of your wet coats.

*The women embrace and the visitors take off their hats first, shaking off the snow and then their coats which Tabbie gathers up and takes off stage left. They all head towards the fireplace.*

CARLIN: Dear Aunt Tissie; it's been so long; and goodness me, Penelope, how well you look! I swear you've grown inches since the summer. Come, give me another hug.

PENELOPE: Oh Mummy, I've been so happy here but now you've arrived I'm beginning to feel how much I've missed you. Oh, I'm sorry Aunt Tissie! I don't mean I haven't had a wonderful time here.

TISSIE: Don't you be sorry, my dear. Family is what matters and we both know it. But where's Master Ian? You haven't left him in a snowdrift, now have you?

CARLIN: Not this time but he was very good, I must tell you. It was truly dreadful on Tandy Hill and with Jess having to lead the horse, Ian had to get out and wield the shovel like a navy, or we might be there yet. I'm sure the road must be blocked behind us now.

PENELOPE: How exciting! Well done Ian.

ALISON: I was very impressed. Being a young soldier seems to have done wonders for him.

TISSIE: But where is he then?

CARLIN: He went to help Jess put the cart away and stable the pony, and I expect he's swapping soldier's stories with your extra visitor, Aunt Tissie.

PENELOPE: A visitor: on Christmas Eve? It can't be a carol singer. They always come in groups.

TISSIE: There's always room for one more at the inn, but who can it be?

CARLIN: We met him at the station and offered him a lift part of the way: but because of all this snow he'll never get home tonight. It's young ...

*Carlin is interrupted by the noisy entry stage right of Ian, barely eighteen but tall and lean. He too carries a bag and has an overcoat and hat covered in snow but he is in civilian clothes. He sheds his coat and hat as he speaks. Meanwhile Tabbie is pouring tea and buttering toasted tea cakes.*

IAN: Aunt Tissie, here I am. Did you wonder if I'd fallen off the dog cart? I've had such a wonderful time and after all that exercise I'm ravenous. I hope you've been baking and cooking like mad. I could eat a horse.

TISSIE: Oh no you don't! That horse has work to do. You'll have to make do with chicken; but there be lots of other things besides. Come here and give your old Auntie a kiss. *(They embrace.)*

IAN: And let me see my little sister. Well, well; I don't usually like little sisters but I'm prepared to make an exception for *you*. My, don't you look just top hole! *(He gives her a hug.)*

PENELOPE: I am glad to see you, and Alison and Mummy. I've so much to tell you about life at Thackers.

CARLIN: It's bound to be interesting, my dear. I have such fond memories.

PENELOPE: You've simply no idea, Mummy. I don't know where to begin.

TISSIE: Let your folks get a sup of tea before you start, there's a poppet. Come and help.

PENELOPE: Of course, sorry!

ALISON: Let me help too!

*Penelope and Alison hand round the scones while Tabbie passes out mugs of tea.*

PENELOPE *(stopping in mid stage)*: But you haven't told us who the visitor is. It's not Father Christmas is it?

*At which point, the door opens again and Jess comes in carrying a small trunk. He touches his cap to everyone, stamps and shakes the snow.*

TISSIE: Straight up to Mistress Taberner's room with that, Jess, then quickly fetch in more firewood and coal before the snow gets too deep. Mistress Appleyard, go look to the bedroom fires again. I'll just take a look at the chickens.

TABBIE: Mistress!

*Tabbie and Jess exit. Penelope is still standing centre stage but looking after the departing Tabbie. Ian is standing close beside his young sister.*

CARLIN: And here's your surprise visitor, Aunt Tissie.

*All turn to look as through the door comes a young man in the uniform of a Second Lieutenant in the Derbyshire Yeomanry. He stands there somewhat diffidently, holding a small kit bag and take off his cap, revealing blonde hair. Penelope nearly drops her plate of scones which Ian manages to catch. For the next few moments she stares dumbstruck at the young man.*

IAN: Oops, butter fingers.

TISSIE: Why, 'tis you! Welcome, welcome! But what will Mistress Bramble be thinking. She's going to be that worried for you.

FRANK: Not tonight, Mistress Taberner. She isn't expecting me until Boxing Day but I managed to get away two days early. And now I can't get home. I'd planned to walk from here but, by now, Tandy Hill has six foot of snow.

TISSIE: Well, wasn't that good fortune you met up with my family and now you know them all except my great-niece Penelope. She's being staying with me since the summer.

*Frank smiles broadly and advances towards Penelope, holding out his hand. Penelope takes it and they hold hands through their dialogue. Tabbie enters.*

PENELOPE (*almost gasping for air*): Francis!

FRANK: Not even my mother calls me that nowadays. I'm just Frank; Frank Bramble. But she's mentioned you in her letters. I'm glad to meet you at last.

PENELOPE: You're all right then?

FRANK: I haven't seen a shot fired in anger. That's a treat in store.

PENELOPE: Oh, do take care!

FRANK: Since you're kind enough to ask, of course I will.

TISSIE (*interrupting*): Now then, supper on the table in fifteen minutes so everyone off to their rooms. Tabbie, show them up and get the spare room fire lit and the bed made up for young Frank here, then hurry back and set an extra place for him.

*Everyone except Penelope and Francis bustle off stage. The two stand still, holding hands and looking at each other.*

FRANK: I don't mind if you want to call me Francis. I quite like the way you say it.

PENELOPE (*with a sigh*): I think I'll keep it for special occasions.

FRANK: Then will I know if it's a special occasion when you say it?

PENELOPE (*now feeling a little shy*): I think you'd better hurry upstairs and get ready for supper. Aunt Tissie doesn't like us to be late at table.

FRANK (*grinning broadly*): Just like my Colonel. I'll be off. See you in a moment.

*He hurries off stage left, leaving Penelope alone on stage. She folds her arms across her chest and gazes after him.*

PENELOPE: Francis, oh Francis!

END