

# Ancestral Filing

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# ANCESTRAL FLING

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## CHARACTERS:

Eddie - *publican - excitable, macabre*  
Benjamin - *pub patron - genial*  
Gertrude - *pub patron - sanguine, sometimes triste*  
Titus - *pub patron - morose*  
Charlie Dunwoodie - *prisoner*  
Ada Coffin, sister of May - *prisoner*  
May Coffin, sister of Ada - *prisoner*  
Voice of Samuel Buddicom - *prisoner*  
Guard  
Outside Voice  
Messenger

## SETTING:

*The play is set in a 17th century English pub - and is stated as such on the programme. The bar is stage left. A wooden table and stools are centre right. A door to the outside is stage right. An imaginary window is in the centre front stage - as if it looks out to the audience. However, this is as far as the realism goes. The set could be as if a Brueghel painting, out of which and into which the characters somehow emerge and disappear throughout the play.*

*The curtains open to the sound of distant cathedral bells. Eddie is cleaning the room.*

**Eddie:** *(to audience)* A hanging day, and a good one for business. They'll be needing a drink after watching the poor fellows squiggling on a string. Not that I like it, of course, but they'll be needing a drink, and business is business. *(He goes to the window and looks out).* Best view in town here - through this window. *(He forms the shape of the window with his hands).* Quite a crowd ... *(He taps at the window several times, and shouts).* Get out of the way, you idiot! Out of the way! *(To audience)* There's no stopping them blocking the view sometimes. *(To crowd again).* Out of the way! Move! Move, you idiot! *(To audience)* There's no telling them.

*Eddie exits outside muttering.*

*Benjamin, Titus and Gertrude enter. Gertrude dumps playing cards on the table.*

**Benjamin:** Where's Eddie?

**Eddie:** *(from outside)* Clear off! Move away, you silly old burp!

**Gertrude:** Clearing the view again.

**Titus:** *(calling out at the door)* Eddie! How about a drink?

**Eddie:** Soon. *(To Crowd)* Jolly good! Jolly good! Now keep away!

**Gertrude:** He loves to watch the gallows at each hanging, despite his declarations of distaste.

*Benjamin and Gertrude act out Eddie's actions.*

**Benjamin:** Ooh, he says, oh, look at that! Look at the poor fellow!

**Gertrude:** There's a rope around his neck. Ooh! How awful.

**Titus:** *(at door to Eddie)* Hurry up!

**Benjamin:** *(shouting)* Oh, they're going to push him. They're shoving him off the ladder! There he goes!

**Gertrude:** Ahhh!

**Benjamin:** He's swinging! He's wriggling!

**Gertrude:** Oh how dreadful. It's terrible. I don't agree with it. Ooh, he's still wriggling.

**Benjamin:** How awful.

*Eddie enters.*

**Eddie:** Morning. *(To Gertrude)* Want to risk the usual, Gert? Two witches today, but together, so you get only the one chance. What's the stakes?

**Titus:** *(going to the bar)* The usual.

**Gertrude:** A tenpenny wager, Eddie, and I'll risk it again.

**Eddie:** Tenpence it is.

*Eddie pours them drinks.*

**Benjamin:** Who's first today?

**Eddie:** Dunwoodie. Charlie Dunwoodie. Got caught pinching quilts.

**Gertrude:** Twenty-one guineas worth of quilts. Now what would a man be wanting with all those quilts?

**Titus:** What's the time?

**Eddie:** St Sepulchre's bell'll soon strike. They'll be bringing him here soon for his last drink. Poor fellow. He'll be sweating it out now.

**Benjamin:** *(at window)* The crowd's big. How many all together?

**Eddie:** Two sisters - Ada and May Coffin. Witches. And a chap called Samuel Buddicom.

**Titus:** What'd he do?

**Eddie:** Murder.

**Benjamin:** Did you see the fellow yesterday whipped through the streets at the cart's tail? He'd been caught pick-pocketing at a hanging.

**Eddie:** *(to Gertrude)* Want a practice?

*He shuffles the cards and holds them out to Gertrude face down. She takes one and looks at it.*

**Gertrude:** It's not the knave, Eddie.

**Eddie:** *(looking at the card)* Lucky this time. There's more chance of the knave next time, and then, swing, swing for you. You replace a witch at the hanging tree.

**Gertrude:** It'll be ten pennies I'll get from you, ten from Titus there and tuppence from Ben.

*Distant cheering is heard offstage.*

**Gertrude:** They're moving this way!

**Benjamin:** What's his name again?

**Eddie:** Charlie Dunwoodie.

*A distant church bell begins to chime twelve.*

**Eddie:** *(loud, excited)* It's twelve! It's twelve o'clock! He'll be leaving now. He'll be here soon. Oh, isn't it awful.

*Silence for several chimes, then:*

**Benjamin:** All you that in the condemned hold lie,  
Prepare you, for this day you die;

**Gertrude:** Watch and pray; the hour is near  
When you before your God appear.

**Eddie:** Examine well yourselves, in time repent,  
That you may not to flames be sent.

**Titus:** And when St Sepulchre's bell this day tolls  
The Lord have mercy on your souls.

*When the chimes have finished.*

**All:** *(whispered in awe)* Past twelve o'clock.

*Further cheering is heard offstage and continues, growing in proximity.*

**Gertrude:** I wonder what it's like to die? I don't mean just die? I mean, get hanged.

**Titus:** Pick the knave and find out.

**Benjamin:** That last one at the gallows tree. Did you see him delaying his time for a good hour with long discourses and prayers, one after another, in hopes of a reprieve? It didn't arrive.

**Eddie:** And at last he was flung off the ladder in his cloak.

**Gertrude:** He was a fine looking man, I thought. I was sorry to see him go.

**Eddie:** The crowd's louder! He's getting near.  
*Gertrude goes to the door and looks out. Eddie and Benjamin join her.*

**Gertrude:** They're nearing the bend.

**Benjamin:** He looks quite happy.

**Eddie:** Poor fellow. Poor fellow.

*They return to the bar.*

**Titus:** Another.

*Eddie pours a drink for Titus.*

**Eddie:** And a drink too for the prisoner.

*Benjamin, Gertrude and Eddie go to the door again. Titus remains at the bar. The noise of the crowd is very loud.*

**Benjamin:** Here he is! He's here!

**Gertrude:** Let him in! Let him in!

**Guard:** *(from outside over the noise of the crowd)* Let him pass! Let him pass! Let him enter for a drink.

*Charlie Dunwoodie and Guard enter. The door closes. The noise of the crowd outside gradually dies down. Charlie is in high spirits. He is dressed in a shroud. He goes straight to the bar.*

**Eddie:** What'll it be?

**Charlie:** As strong as you like and as much. It must last for eternity unless a reprieve arrives. In which case I'd have a few more before the sun went down.

**Guard:** Five minutes. Five minutes is all you've got.

**Outside Voice:** *(from outside and with the ringing of a hand bell)*  
All good people, pray heartily unto God for this poor sinner, who is now going to his death, for whom the great bell has tolled.

**Benjamin:** *(timidly)* And what have you done, man, that they're hanging you?

**Gertrude:** You don't seem afraid at all. So what's it like? And why so many quilts?

**Titus:** Drink up. You could fit two in if you hurry.

*Charlie eyes them.*

**Charlie:** There was a fire in Oak Street, a fashionable house. Did you see it perhaps?

**Gertrude:** So?

**Charlie:** Crowds came to watch as some home burnt to the ground. Ooh, squealed the onlookers, what a terrible thing! Fire! The house is on fire. The owners, they said, they'll lose everything. But when the flames rose higher, someone threw water and the flames dropped down. Spoil sport, someone screamed. Let it burn! Suddenly, the flames rose again. Everyone clapped. Ooh, they said, what a terrible thing! They'll lose everything! And when the house was a heap of glowing ashes, they said ooh what a grand fire, oh the poor people in the house (they burned to death), oh what a marvellous thing to watch. (*Pause*). So what you staring at?

**Gertrude:** We was looking. We thought you'd be less full of talk and more remorse.

**Outside** (*again outside and with the ringing of a hand bell*)

**Voice:** You that are condemned to die, repent with lamentable tears; ask mercy of the Lord, for the salvation of your own soul, through the merits, death and passion of Jesus Christ, who now sits at the right hand of God.

**Guard:** One minute left.

**Charlie:** Quick! Another drink. Give me another.

**Eddie:** One's the total. I'm not wasting drink, good drink at that, on someone what won't be round enough to feel it.

**Charlie:** Please, please. Just a little.

**Eddie:** Sorry. One's the limit.

**Guard:** Time's up.

**Benjamin:** Give him his nosegay.

*Gertrude takes a nosegay from behind the bar and gives it to Charlie.*

**Gertrude:** Sweet-scented, sir, and with God's peace.

**Charlie:** It don't strike me as too much God's peace, woman, but I'll take it none-the-less.

*He smells the nosegay.*

**Benjamin:** Unrepentant. I wouldn't be saying that now if I was you.

*Eddie accompanies Charlie to the door. The noise of the crowd begins again when Charlie appears at the door.*

**Gertrude:** Good luck and God's peace.

**Benjamin:** Good luck, sir.

**Titus:** God's peace.

**Eddie:** Sorry about that.

*Charlie and the Guard leave. The door closes. Gertrude, Benjamin and Eddie rush to the window. Titus remains seated at the bar.*

**Titus:** Get me another drink, Eddie.

**Eddie:** Soon. Just let me watch.

**Titus:** There's plenty of time.

**Eddie:** Oh, the poor fellow. Isn't it awful?

**Gertrude:** He's reaching the gallows now.

**Benjamin:** He's at the tree.

**Titus:** *(louder)* A drink.

**Eddie:** Yes, yes. I'll be there.

*Eddie hastily pours a drink and returns to the window.*

**Titus:** Let's know before it happens.

**Gertrude:** They're tying the rope.

**Eddie:** Oh look at that! Look at the poor fellow! There's a rope round his neck. Ooh! Poor fellow. Oh it's ghastly.

**Benjamin:** They're making him climb the ladder.



**Gertrude:** Quick Titus! He'll be pushed off soon. This one won't be messing round.

*Titus joins them at the window. The noise of the crowd gradually dies down.*

**Benjamin:** Here comes the priest.

**Gertrude:** He's blessing himself.

**Eddie:** Oh they're going to push him. It's dreadful.

**Titus:** He's not going to make a speech.

**Gertrude:** They're pushing him.

**Benjamin:** There he goes!

**Titus:** He's going!

**Eddie:** He's gone.

*Gertrude makes a small scream. She temporarily hides her face, then continues to watch. A huge cheer erupts from the outside crowd.*

**Eddie:** Oh how awful.

**Titus:** He's wriggling. He's squiggling on the rope.

**Gertrude:** He's dead. Oh the poor fellow.

**Benjamin:** He's gone.

**Titus:** He's swinging!

**Eddie:** He's dead. The end of Dunwoodie.

**Titus:** *(returning to the bar)* Well there's one that won't be needing another drink.

**Gertrude:** They're taking him down already.

**Benjamin:** His neck'll be broke.

**Eddie:** He's down. How sickening.

*Eddie, Gertrude and Benjamin leave the window and sit at the table and chairs. The noise of the crowd fades away.*

**Benjamin:** Another drink all round, Eddie. I'm needing one.

*Eddie gets drinks.*

- Titus:** When are the others to be hanged?
- Eddie:** Soon. Straight after I think. The sooner the better, and then I'm open for business.
- Titus:** There's two in the next lot. Double in one.
- Gertrude:** Wasn't it rotten? Did you see his face before they pushed him? It was so ...

*The distant church bell begins to chime twelve again.*

*Several chimes later:*

- Benjamin:** All you that in the condemned hold lie,  
Prepare you, for this day you die;
- Gertrude:** Watch and pray; the hour is near  
When you before your God appear.
- Eddie:** Examine well yourselves, in time repent,  
That you may not to flames be sent.
- Titus:** And when St Sepulchre's bell this day tolls  
The Lord have mercy on your souls.

*When the chimes have finished:*

- All:** *(whispered in awe)* Past twelve o'clock.

*Once again cheering is heard offstage and continues, growing in proximity. Gertrude goes to the door and looks.*

- Benjamin:** Who's up now?
- Eddie:** Ada and May Coffin. Sisters. *(To Gertrude)* Are you ready for the gamble?
- Gertrude:** *(returning)* I heard of them. These are the two that stole the right glove of a man.
- Titus:** Thomas Turner.
- Gertrude:** And they rubbed it on the back of their cat.
- Eddie:** Their spirit, Rutterkin.

**Gertrude:** And they put the cat into boiling water, and pricked it and buried it in the garden.

**Benjamin:** And often the cat would leap on their shoulders, they say, and suck blood.

**Titus:** What? After it was buried and boiled?

**Gertrude:** Witches. I hope they're not going to drink in here.

**Eddie:** They are. Scared of the gamble maybe? All stop here before the gallows. Witches and all.

**Gertrude:** But is it safe?

**Titus:** The gamble's not safe, the witches are.

*Gertrude goes to the door again.*

**Gertrude:** They're bringing them on a cart. The two of them.

*Benjamin goes out the door with Gertrude. They rush back, shutting the door.*

**Benjamin:** Quick! They're nearly here! Look natural.

**Titus:** They can't hurt you.

**Gertrude:** Oh I wish I wasn't here. I wish I wasn't in here. How wretched. They're witches.

**Eddie:** Take the gamble! Take the gamble! *(Holding the cards spread out face down)* Pick a card. Tenpence the stake.

**Titus:** What witch will she replace at the gallows if she gets the knave?

**Eddie:** Which one? Which one?

**Benjamin:** Let her pick.

**Gertrude:** And it's tenpence from you too, and tuppence from you.

*Gertrude chooses a card and holds it to her breast. The door opens.*

**Guard:** *(from outside)* Let them pass! Let them in!

*The Guard enters. Ada and May Coffin enter - always with their backs to the audience so their faces are not seen. They are dressed to the nines. They go to the bar. The noise of the crowd dies down gradually. There is silence. Titus remains seated at the bar. Gertrude and Benjamin keep their distance, watching suspiciously - Gertrude*

*still holding the card to her breast. Eddie goes behind the bar, gives them a drink but also keeps his distance.*

**Guard:** Five minutes.

**Outside** *(from outside and with the ringing of a hand bell)*

**Voice:** All good people, pray heartily unto God for these poor sinners, who are now going to their deaths, for whom the great bell has tolled.

*A long silence while they drink.*

**Eddie:** Look at the card, Gert.

**Benjamin:** Is it the knave?

*A silence, while Gertrude looks at the card. Relief.*

**Gertrude:** Give me my pennies. It's not the knave at all and my neck's saved from swinging.

*Eddie looks at the card.*

**Eddie:** Saved.

**Benjamin:** Nosegays. Give them their nosegays, Gertrude.

**Gertrude:** *(quietly scared)* I'm not. You do it.

**Titus:** Give me the nosegays, Eddie.

*Eddie passes Titus the two nosegays.*

**Titus:** *(to Ada and May)* Here.

*They take them. Silence. Until now, the silence has been perhaps amusing. Now it turns pathetic as the fear of Ada and May become apparent. They turn suddenly to reveal to the audience that their frightened eyes are masked.*

**Guard:** One minute left.

*They have finished their drinks and are standing there.*

**Titus:** Give them another drink, Eddie.

*Eddie quickly pours them another drink and hands it to them.*

*Silence. They clutch the mugs and nosegays - but do not drink. They are dazed.*

**Eddie:** *(holding the cards out again)* There's two witches. Pick another card for tenpence wager.

**Gertrude:** *(feeling horrid)* No. No, I will not.

**Guard:** Time up.

*Eddie nonchalantly takes the mugs and puts them on the table as Ada and May leave - with Guard. The crowd noise rises the instant May and Ada reappear outside. Benjamin and Eddie go to the window. Gertrude sits at the table. Titus remains seated at the bar.*

**Gertrude:** *(fearful)* Two mugs, undrunk, touched by witches. Not really witches, I don't think.

*Pause, during which the crowd noise dies down.*

**Eddie:** They're at the tree. They've got two ropes.

**Benjamin:** They're offering the priest.

**Eddie:** He's not wanted.

**Benjamin:** They've refused him.

**Eddie:** They're standing there. Just standing with their flowers.

**Gertrude:** *(still looking at the mugs)* Poor things. I wonder if they really did have a cat called Rutterkin.

**Eddie:** They're pushing them up the ladders.

**Titus:** I don't want to hear.

**Gertrude:** Two sisters.

**Benjamin:** They're not saying anything. They're just standing on the ladders.

*Gertrude drinks from one of the mugs. She replaces the mug on the table with a sudden loud thud.*

**Eddie:** They've pushed one! It's Ada! They've pushed her. She's wriggling, wriggling, wriggling like a worm. It's awful! It's awful! They haven't done the other one yet.

*Benjamin looks away. Silence. He looks back.*

**Eddie:** They've pushed the other. She's swinging. She's swinging back and forth. Her legs have hit the ladder. The ladder's fallen. She's shaking. She's dead. She's dead. They're both dead.

*Gertrude drinks from the second mug. Again she replaces the mug on the table with a sudden loud thud.*

**Eddie:** They're both dead. How wretched.

*Silence.*

**Titus:** Give us a drink, Ed.

**Eddie:** Nasty business this. Nasty business.

*He goes to the bar and pours Titus a drink. Benjamin goes to the table and sits with Gertrude. Except for Eddie, they are all a little worn out with the activity.*

**Eddie:** It's a wonder they were dressed up so. The hangman gets the clothes. They should've worn cheap shrouds. They never learn.

*Again, the distant church bell chimes twelve. There is silence throughout. The noise of a distant crowd begins again.*

**Benjamin:** Who's this time?

**Eddie:** The murderer. Samuel Buddicom.

**Gertrude:** Is this the last?

**Eddie:** The last today.

**Titus:** Who'd he kill?

**Eddie:** Don't know. They say he didn't do it.

*Pause. Gertrude goes to the door.*

**Gertrude:** He's nearly here.

*She returns, leaving the door open. The crowd noise becomes very loud. The procession clearly reaches the door.*

**Guard:** *(from outside)* Let the prisoner enter.

*The crowd noise fades.*

**Samuel:** I don't wish to enter.

**Guard:** *(from outside)* Come on, man, a final drink.

**Eddie:** *(going to door)* Come on in. It's on the house.

*Gertrude, Benjamin and Titus also go to the door.*

**Samuel:** I don't want a drink. Take me to the hanging tree.

**Guard:** *(from outside)* You're free to choose.

**Samuel:** I've never had a drink in my life. Get it over with. Lead me on.

**Gertrude:** Come on. Come in, come in.

**Guard:** *(from outside)* Lead him away. Move out. Come on. Make room.  
He wants no drink.

*The crowd noise begins again.*

**Eddie:** *(as he closes the door speaking to someone outside)* We'll be open soon. When this one's finished.

*Eddie, Gertrude, Benjamin and Titus go to the window.*

**Titus:** This one means business.

**Benjamin:** They've got the rope! They've got the rope!

**Eddie:** He's up the ladder already.

*The crowd noise fades. Pause. There is a loud banging at the door.*

**Eddie:** *(calling towards the door)* Go away. We're not open yet.

*Eddie holds out the cards face down to Gertrude who picks one and looks at it.*

**Gertrude:** It's the knave! It's the knave! But I'm safe!

*Another banging on the door.*

**Eddie:** We're not open yet.

*The door opens. A Messenger enters.*

**Messenger:** Is the prisoner here?

**Eddie:** He never had a drink.

**Messenger:** *(waving a paper)* A reprieve! He has a reprieve!

**Titus:** He's out there. They're hanging him.

**Messenger:** Samuel Buddicom?

**Eddie:** The same. See.

*The Messenger comes quickly to the window and looks. He races out. The crowd noise erupts.*

**Benjamin:** They've let him off!

**Gertrude:** He's waving the reprieve!

**Benjamin:** He's blocked by the crowd!

**Gertrude:** He's through! He's through!

**Titus:** The hangman's got the note! He's made it! He's made it through!

**Eddie:** He's jumped! Buddicom's jumped! He's jumped himself!

**Gertrude:** The prisoner's jumped!

*Horror.*

**Titus:** Not much of a wriggler. Just a shudder.

**Benjamin:** God! He never made it. The message never got there.

**Gertrude:** He never made it on time.

**Eddie:** He's dead! He's dead!

**Gertrude:** They're taking him down. He's dead.

**Eddie:** They missed it! They missed it!

**Benjamin:** If he'd had a drink.

*Silence.*

**Benjamin:** If he'd had a drink.

**Eddie:** How ghastly. Nasty business. Nasty business.

*Silence.*

**Gertrude:** *(going to table)* Two witches' cups. If I'd thought to give him his nosegay.



**Benjamin:** If he'd had a drink.

**Titus:** *(by now fairly drunk)* I'd better have his drink myself.

**Gertrude:** It's twenty-two pennies I've won.

**Eddie:** *(going to the door and opening it)* Funny day this. Funny day.  
Not the usual. *(Calling out)* Pub's open! Pub's open all day!

*He gathers the witches' cups from the table as the light fades.*

**THE END**