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The Boadicea of Britannia Street

by Ade Morris



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**UNITED KINGDOM AND WORLD
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plays@SamuelFrench-London.co.uk

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1-866-598-8449

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THE BOADICEA OF BRITANNIA STREET was first presented as *THE STORY OF A GREAT LADY* at The Watermill Theatre in Bagnor and on tour in Spring and Autumn 2007. The performance was directed by Ade Morris and designed by Libby Watson, with lighting by Lawrence T Doyle and original music by Paul Kissaun. The cast was as follows:

FRANCESCA LAMB Carrie Hinton
PENNY TEW Erica Rogers
ANNIE TAYLOR Polly Highton

The play was much revised in this version, which was presented by Quidem Productions at the New Town Theatre at the Edinburgh Festival during August 2013. The performance was directed by Ade Morris and designed by Billy Smith, with lighting by Richard Bell and original music by Paul Kissaun. The cast was as follows:

FRANCESCA LAMB Lucinda Curtis
PENNY TEW Lizzie Lewis
ANNIE TAYLOR Polly Highton
JANET MELLER Alice Fyles

PERFORMANCE NOTES

The play is set in Winkham, a fictional small town somewhere in the North Midlands between Stoke-on-Trent and Manchester.

Most of the action is set on or in a backstage area of Winkham Memorial Institute. There are various bits of am-dram scenery, a props basket and a costume rail add functional clutter, amongst which is a useable 'prop' door in free-standing frame.

Stage right is a large props basket, stage left a piano under a dust sheet and a faded Union Jack flag. On top of the piano is a medium-sized round tea tin – which rattles.

There are four village hall-style plastic chairs, and an old table, much abused.

If set on a stage there could be a proscenium of sorts, perhaps faded curtains which can be opened and closed to top and tail Penny's narrative, an old backdrop revealed to indicate the view of Winkham, and a fore stage where the main action occurs...

Incidental music in the production was composed by Paul Kissaun as was music for the song *I'd Like To Be Like Boadicea*. Some of Paul's other atmospheric incidental music was based on the above song, while Paul's music linking most fast paced scenes was inspired by Benny Goodman's *Sing Sing Sing*. Use of the original incidental music is at the producer's discretion and all permissions can be obtained from Paul Kissaun, represented by T.C.G. Artist Management. The simple piano score for the 'Boadicea' song featured in the play is included in this edition.

Ade Morris

*I went to sea in a paper boat
to see if my paper boat would float...
It floated well
until a swell
drowned paper boat and me...
oh well'*

*In memory of the inspirational Jill Fraser, artistic director of the
Watermill Theatre from 1981 - 2006*

CHARACTERS

FRANCESCA LAMB – mid-60s, feisty, local journalist.

PENNY TEW – 30, shortish, a panicked P.E. teacher.

ANNIE TAYLOR – 40s, run to seed, plump, housewife.

JANET MELLER – 20s, librarian, shy, intense, repressed,
reluctant pianist.

ACT ONE

Evening. Winkham Memorial Hall.

Music for opening, then underscore.

PENNY *speaks to the audience from stage right, a formal, slightly nervous manner.*

PENNY. For those of you who don't know me... I'm Penny. I first met Francesca, Fran, at the supermarket, Budgens.

FRAN *comes through the 'prop' door. She has a box of cat food. She peers into the darkness. She is at the back door of her house.*

She was trying to find pilchard cat snacks, I was trying to find baked beans... They'd moved everything around, you see, so there were all these women in there looking for things in all the wrong places – the story of my life...

FRANCESCA. SHAKESPEARE!!!

PENNY. Francesca's known to you all as editor of the arts page on the local paper, but she's also a published poet...

FRANCESCA. SHAKESPEARE! COME HERE YOU FLEA-INFESTED STINKER!!!

PENNY. ... really beautiful poetry actually...

FRAN *exits through the 'prop' door.*

(more relaxed by now) Anyway at this point I didn't know her, I was teaching P.E. at Winkham Comp, and I was a bit, well, frustrated... there's only so much you can do in P.E. at a comprehensive before you have to use guns and whips... Anyway on that last cross country race, half of Year Ten spent the afternoon in The Spotted

Dog and I was in the headmaster's office before you could say 'isotonic drinks'... So, during my second bottle of Côtes Du Rhône that night I read this ad in the *Winkham Weekly Snooze* and thought it was just the thing to take my mind off things... and I wasn't the only one. It was a wet night.

Huge clap of thunder and lightning, then torrential rain.

Bloody hell!... Very wet! And as I struggled down Britannia Street, Fran was already in the hall...

FRAN *is at Winkham Institute. She holds a bucket under the leaking roof.*

FRAN. *(talking to the empty hall as if to a packed meeting)* Thank you all so much for *not* coming along tonight, I must say I am *not* entirely chuffed by the turnout, I really had no idea that so many women in Winkham don't have even the slightest secret desire to be writers, so yes, I am a bit disappointed that you have *not* turned up, even in this bloody terrible weather, to try to touch once more, with me, the holy grail of creativity ... *(Another clap of thunder, FRAN reverts to normal)* All right keep your wig on!... I don't think we're going to experience anything holy tonight except the bloody roof – you miserable old Sod... *(She puts a bucket under a drip)*

PENNY *walks in, dripping wet.*

FRAN. *(to God)* I'm Sorry! *(to PENNY)* Good evening!

PENNY. Hiya. Are you Francesca Lamb?

FRAN. Fran Lamb. It's less of a taradiddle.

PENNY. I saw the ad – the *Weekly Snooze*? This is the meeting, creative writing?

FRAN. Yes! – It started half an hour ago...

PENNY. Oh, sorry.

FRAN. Have you been swimming?

PENNY. No I walked, but it's chucking it down out there! Sorry, that's why I'm late.

FRAN. I'll find you a tea-towel or something.

PENNY. Don't worry, soaking'll do me good, I might grow a bit – like a pot plant

FRAN. Well sit by the radiator, we can watch you steam, want a cup of tea?

PENNY. Love one... Gaspng.

FRAN *starts to make tea.*

Milk, four sugars thanks... So, how many are you expecting?

FRAN. You're it so far.

PENNY. What do you mean?

FRAN. On your shoulders rests all hope for the literary life of Winkham. I hope you can write?

PENNY. I've never really tried. Well, a bit, but you know...

FRAN. Then hope sinks, like a legless frog, into the pond of oblivion...

PENNY. Sorry...?

FRAN. Only joking, dear.

PENNY. There'll be more, I'm sure, we just have to wait... perhaps... they're in the toilet.

FRAN. Heavens! Another optimist, I thought we were all dead?

PENNY. I try to look on the bright side.

FRAN. Me too. Me too...*(she waves the vodka)* Liquid inspiration?

PENNY. Can you have vodka in tea?

FRAN. You can have vodka in anything, dear...

FRAN *gets a green cup from the institute cupboard and pours a tot into PENNY's tea.*

So, what's your name?

PENNY. Penny. Penny Tew.

FRAN. Who the hell called you that?

PENNY. My dad thought it was funny. My mum divorced him, when I was a kid.

FRAN. Do you see him still?

PENNY. He remarried. He sends Christmas cards, you know...

FRAN. And your mum?

PENNY. Oh I still live with her. She works at Wilko's.

FRAN. She marry again?

PENNY. She'd be lucky. This twenty questions?

FRAN. I'm interested, it's my job.

PENNY. She's tricky, my mum, always has been. She likes a drink.

FRAN. Don't we all?

PENNY. I try not to, drink. I mean usually... I think there might be a family weakness, you know, sherry soaked afternoons watching *Bargain Hunt*...

Beat. Suddenly FRAN recognises PENNY.

FRAN. Budgens!

PENNY. Well yeah, they do have quite a nice cheap sherry.

FRAN. No! That's where I've seen you before, been wondering—

PENNY. Pilchard cat snacks!

FRAN. Baked beans!

PENNY. Yes that's it, that's what they call me... Miss Baked Bean.

Pause.

FRAN. So, you're a teacher.

PENNY. How can you tell?

FRAN. Fear of alcoholism, sensible shoes and a nervous twitch...

PENNY. P.E. teacher, Winkham Comp.

FRAN. P.E.? I thought P.E. teachers were all shrink-wrapped in Lycra?

PENNY. Not really, teaching P.E. is a form of self-harm for people who can't teach...

FRAN. So what brings you here?

PENNY. Oh you know, need to do something to take my mind off something else, that sort of thing...

FRAN. Going to tell me what sort of thing?

PENNY. Not yet, no.

Pause. They drink their tea.

What about you? Life in a nutshell?

FRAN. OK. Fran Lamb. Francesca only to my mother, now deceased, old age. Dad died in a tank in Korea. Happyish childhood with Mum despite that, happy adulthood, with Harry, my other half, he died last year, pretty upset about that... No children. Work for the *Winkham Weekly Snooze*, coming up to retirement, can't think where the last forty years went!

PENNY. I'm sorry.

FRAN. Oh don't be, wouldn't change a thing.

PENNY. No, I mean sorry about your husband dying...and everyone else.

FRAN. Oh... Yes... Thank you. These things happen...

PENNY. You were close...

FRAN. Yes we were... Very... got a vicious old Tom bastard of a cat now... and I was standing at the back door the other night and I just thought, this is it. I'm an old woman standing at her back door calling a bloody cat, like all the other old fleabags...

PENNY. Cats?

FRAN. Old women. The brittle backbones of England. I'm too young to be old. I'm only sixty-four, that's not really old is it?

PENNY. No, that's not old...

FRAN. How old is your difficult mum that you can't stand?

PENNY. Sixty-four.

A clap of thunder.

ANNIE enters through the 'prop' door, a plump middle-aged woman in a black balaclava helmet and carrying

a golf umbrella. She is followed by JANET, a shy-looking girl in a Millets mac.

ANNIE. Is this the Winkham Women Writers Troop?

FRAN. No, this is Winkham Alcoholics Anonymous. Who are you? Have the council sent a hit man?

ANNIE *takes off her balaclava.*

ANNIE. Stop mucking about, I'm dropping wet!

FRAN. Where did you get that balaclava from?

ANNIE. Army surplus. Keith says it hides my feminosity, like a Yashmick.

PENNY. Yashmak?

FRAN. Are you a dyslexic, dear?

ANNIE. No, I'm a housewife, but I want to learn how to write literally. So does she, her name's Janet, isn't it, love?

JANET *nods, shyly.*

Are we in the right place?

FRAN. I'm not sure, dear... Why do you need to disguise your feminosity?

ANNIE. Keith say's it'll put off other men.

FRAN. This is the Winkham Memorial Institute dear, it is a sex exclusion zone.

ANNIE. You hear that, Janet? You're out of luck!

PENNY. It might actually attract other men, the Yashmak.

ANNIE. Balaclava. How?

PENNY. Well they might think you had something to hide.

ANNIE. What exactly are you saying?

PENNY. Oh, pants! I'm sorry, no that's not what I meant...

I mean you do have something to hide, plenty to hide... Oh God!

ANNIE. You'd better watch it, you... digit.

FRAN. Midget.

PENNY. I'm nearly as tall as you!

ANNIE. Not horizontally!

FRAN. Now, now, ladies, this is a community of creativity we're trying to form... Let's all calm down and be friends, shall we? Shall we? Janet, tell us all about yourself.

JANET. My name's Janet.

FRAN. Yes I think we've gleaned that dear. You look familiar, are you a Budgens shopper too?

JANET. The library. I work in the library. Er, I'm a librarian.

FRAN. Of course you are! Isn't she?

They silently agree.

FRAN. I'm Fran Lamb. *(she holds out both hands.)*

Both shake.

This is Penny, she's an alcoholic.

PENNY. I am not an alcoholic! My mother's an alcoholic, I'm just dribbling... Dabbling! *(also shaking ANNIE's and JANET's hands)*

ANNIE. Annie Taylor, squeezed to meet you both, so's Janet, aren't you, Janet?

JANET. Yes.

FRAN. We should get started... A few moments ago I was alone, and now I have three companions in search of the spirit of the poets – together we will tread the twinkling firmament of creation!

JANET. Great

ANNIE. Scooper

PENNY. Anyone fancy another cuppa, it's just boiled?

ANNIE. Smashin'.

FRAN. Help yourself to more booze...

JANET. I don't really like it, sorry.

FRAN. What's the matter with young people today?

ANNIE. I'm not young. I'll have some.

PENNY. Me too!

FRAN. You're younger than me dear, age is in the eyes of the mirror. We should get started... Look lets all sit down and think about what to do next.

PENNY. How exciting...

ANNIE. Before we actually start, I think I should say, I mean, I have to say, that I've never written a turd in my life, you know, a creative turd.

JANET. Word?

PENNY. Are you her translator or summat?

JANET. Er, no I'm just try—

PENNY. Is this a weird form of Tourette's you have?

ANNIE. It's my swerves.

JANET. Nerves.

ANNIE. Yes! When I get the swerves there's a bad connection in my pain.

PENNY. Oh God...

FRAN. Well that's never held back some of our most famous writers, dear...

ANNIE. Hasn't it?

FRAN. Lack of coherence is the least of your problems when it comes to writing...

JANET. Really?

FRAN. When I was a young writer on the paper – I thought, what on earth do I write about? I didn't have a story in me, not a sausage, and then the most magnificent thing happened... A life-changing moment!

ANNIE. Insulation?

JANET. Inspiration!

FRAN. Deadlines. Somebody died, then somebody else... and the bloody paper still needed writing.

ANNIE. Lucky.

PENNY. Not for the dead ones...

FRAN. I started as a reviewer... obituaries as well, which were often pretty similar...

JANET. And poems...

ANNIE. Poems?

FRAN. One or two... Now, Annie, coherence is a complete disadvantage when it comes to poetry...

JANET. You've written loads of poems. I've read your collection, *Paper Boats*, I loved it! That's why I'm here.

JANET *quotes, suddenly intense.*

'I WENT TO SEA IN MY PAPER BOAT
TO SEE IF MY PAPER BOAT WOULD FLOAT...
IT FLOATED WELL
UNTIL A SWELL
DROWNED PAPER BOAT
AND ME
(OH WELL)...

FRAN. And etceteraaa... etceteraaa!... It was you that bought it then... I often wondered... You can stay, you lovely girl...

ANNIE. And me?

FRAN. We are here to free your creativity like a lusty mare in search of a wild stallion!

ANNIE. Are we...!?

FRAN. And I will be handing out the deadlines myself!

ANNIE. Deadlines?

FRAN. That magnificent word. 'A deadline means that words must appear on paper...' Repeat with me.

ALL. 'A deadline means that words (*ANNIE says 'turds'*) must appear on paper.'

FRAN. So, by the time we three meet again I want you all to have thought of... Well, a poem... Why not!... To read aloud to the group, it needn't be any good...

ANNIE. What about?

FRAN. Anything you like, having a poo for all I care, and Penny..

PENNY. Yes...

FRAN. As you're a P.E. teacher I'd like you to start us all off next week with a nice little exercise, something to get our minds and bodies ticking over like well-oiled machines.

ANNIE. I'm not sure my body will do flipping over like a well oiled machine.

PENNY. I'm not that sort of P .E. teacher!

FRAN. Really?

PENNY. I'm cerebral, I do theory...

FRAN. Oh.

PENNY. ... I don't actually like P.E., as such, I just like the idea of it.

FRAN. Why are you teaching it then?

PENNY. My Dad was a P .E. teacher, it's genetic, like a disease...

FRAN. Well could you do a cerebral warm up? Exercise for the mind, we don't have to actually move?

ANNIE. Sounds more like it...

PENNY. Anyway I thought this was supposed to be about learning how to write, not just being told to go away and do it, that's what I do at school.

FRAN. Ah but that's the key to it. Very rarely does anybody write anything because it pops into their head. There has to be a reason, some cause... War, poverty and bad sex have inspired more great writers than you could count.

ANNIE. I don't think Winkham's big on war and novelty. Bad sex might be a possibility...

PENNY. I know all about bad sex, I could write the Rough Guide!

JANET. If you write it, can I read it?

FRAN. Writing is all about living, about letting life burn your wings. You can't do it unless – unless dreadful and brilliant things happen to you.

JANET. You talk like a poet. You're all... inflammable.

FRAN. So next week, when we four meet again, we will all be dreadful – and – we will all be brilliant!

PENNY. Or brilliantly dreadful?

JANET. Or dreadfully brilliant!

FRAN. You're getting the idea!

Music, then dipping to underscore.

PENNY is alone again. As she speaks, the scene changes.

PENNY. So over the next week I tried to put something on paper, and believe me it wasn't easy, I mean I know my work's supposed to be a bit creative, but teaching for me was all about screaming at teenagers the size of gorillas, with the intellect of fish and the sex drive of rabbits. I felt about as creative as a used condom.

Back with FRAN, JANET and ANNIE, the following week.

FRAN. Right Penny, what have you got for us? I want to feel the blood in my veins... Your warm up?

PENNY. A warm up? You still serious?

FRAN. Never more so!

ANNIE. I'm not cold, I've got my squermals on.

FRAN. That's not the point Annie, and you're far too young for thermals.

ANNIE. Is there an age when you're old enough?

FRAN. Around 48/49 - depending on your circulation - or your sex life.

ANNIE. Well I've got blood like iced Ribena.

FRAN. Then you need it boiling up! – Penny?

ANNIE. Anyway I thought this was creative writing, not weight watchers...

FRAN. Creative writing is slimming for the mind, a lean, hard brain is the aim... Penny?

PENNY. I don't do this sort of thing anymore, it's too dangerous, there are health and safety considerations.

FRAN. We are not teenagers, or even young, at least I am not. You are safe from the cruel scent of testosterone or Biactol... Come on!

PENNY. Er... Well there's something I used to do... at training college... You all need to stand up.

FRAN, JANET and PENNY stand up.

ANNIE. I'm not standing up.

PENNY. No, of course not, sorry.

FRAN. Why not?

ANNIE. Because I'm not, I don't like this sort of thing.

FRAN. What sort of thing?

ANNIE. All this modern stuff, exercise. Anyway I thought we'd come here to learn how to write?

FRAN. It's to get us all in the mood, loosened up

ANNIE. I don't want loosening up, I like being tight!

PENNY. I would not describe you as tight.

FRAN. This is different...

JANET. Come on Annie, it won't hurt...

FRAN. Well it might a bit, but it's good pain.

ANNIE still does not stand up.

ANNIE. If I stand up. I'm not taking my shoes and socks off.

PENNY. Did I ask you to take your shoes and socks off?

ANNIE. No... but you might.

PENNY. I have no interest in your feet! Why would I want you to take your shoes and socks off!

ANNIE. I did one of these warm up flings before, they made us all take our shoes and socks off...

PENNY. When was this?

ANNIE. When I was six, at school. I've never begotten it.

PENNY. Scarred for life were you?

ANNIE. Too right! The whole class was. It was a vilification of our basic human tights.

PENNY. OK! So I won't ask you to take your socks off but please, please stand up! *(teacher voice)* ANNIE TAYLOR NOW!

ANNIE. Oh God! *(she stands up)*

PENNY. This is worse than Winkham Comp! Now, just, loosen up a little, raise one shoulder...then the other... *(FRAN is fine, very subtle, ANNIE ends up with both shoulders raised)* Then shake one hand like this... then shake the other... *(ANNIE alone keeps shaking the hand that was shaking before)* that's it... Now spread your legs...

ANNIE. I'm not spreading my legs!

JANET. How far? (*almost, or actually if possible, doing the splits*)

PENNY. That's enough! Now slowly bend over and touch the floor, ligament by ligament (*ANNIE keels over, hands on the floor with a thump, bum in the air*) And now lets slowly go up again, joint by joint. (*ANNIE tries, but fails, with a few grunts*)

ANNIE. I'm bloody stuck!!!

FRAN. Better help her...

ANNIE. I told you! I'm not built for bending.

FRAN. You'd better lie down, you too Penny, Janet.

PENNY. Are we doing writing now?

FRAN. Yes Penny we're doing writing, or something on the way to writing, come on, lie down

ANNIE. Do we have to write lying down!?

FRAN. We're going to stimulate our imaginations.

ANNIE. Is that legal on council property?

JANET. Come on Annie...

PENNY and ANNIE *lie down.*

FRAN. It won't hurt for a minute!

ANNIE. The floor's cold and sticky...

PENNY. This is why I can't do this! Now you know what it's like in comprehensive education.

FRAN. Please Annie?... Annie?

Beat.

ANNIE. I'm all ears! (*She lies down*)

FRAN. Right. I want you to close your eyes, relax, breathe deeply, and imagine... Imagine that you're not cold and sticky. Imagine that you're on a desert island, the sun is warming your whole body, there are exotic birds in the high palms all around you, and in front of you is a wide, white, sandy beach, turquoise sea lapping on the shore... Now lets make some of these sounds, lets make this seem real...

FRAN begins to make a swishing sound, then **JANET** joins in with a very loud and harsh parrot.

ANNIE. Can I rent a deck chair?

FRAN. Right that's enough noise, it's a silent island now... And in the distance, sailing toward you, a tall – masted Galleon, a solitary figure on the prow whose silhouette you recognise from a dream. Just watch the ship for a little while... See the sea break at the bow... and listen to the peace of the sea on your beach, everywhere the lapping of the waves, the approaching ship, with the mysterious figure, listen to the sea... Now... When you know, when you're certain... can you tell me who is coming towards you on that distant ship?

ANNIE. I need the toilet!

FRAN. Annie!

ANNIE. It's all this lapping water !

FRAN. You're supposed to be in the moment, lose control!

ANNIE. If I lose control now you'll regret it!

FRAN. Oh go on then.

ANNIE. Thanks Miss...

ANNIE scuttles out, a silence falls.

JANET. It was Kate Winslet.

FRAN. What was?

JANET. Coming towards me on that boat, like in 'Titanic'.

FRAN. Good. Well I'm glad it rang your bell Janet...

Penny? *(then there is a gentle snoring)* Penny? ... Penny...

PENNY is asleep.

FRAN. Oh for God's sake!

Music. Later that same evening, FRAN, JANET AND ANNIE are having a cup of tea on the forestage. PENNY joins them.

PENNY. So how long was I asleep for?

PENNY. Forty-five minutes, we had a lovely cup of tea didn't we?

JANET. Well it was all right...

ANNIE. There were no biscuits.

PENNY. You should have woken me up.

ANNIE. It seemed a shame to, you were snoring like a pooper.

JANET. Trooper.

PENNY. I've been really tired lately... you have to get up at the crap of dawn to get to school.

ANNIE. I could do with being tired, I never sleep a blink.

JANET. Wink.

ANNIE. Why?

JANET. You never sleep a wink.

ANNIE. That's what I said... What?

JANET. Oh never mind...

FRAN. Anyway now we're all awake again, last week I set you some homework, how did you get on?

ANNIE. Not... brolliant.

PENNY. I'll second that, not brolliant at all!

FRAN. It doesn't have to be 'brolliant!'... Annie, did you write anything creative?

ANNIE. Well yes, and, no.

FRAN. Which?

ANNIE. No. I didn't actually write anything... But yes I did... create something.

FRAN. Please go on.

ANNIE. It's a twist, of things, sort've collected.

FRAN. A list? Sounds very promising, will you read it.

ANNIE. It's all rubbish.

FRAN. I said it doesn't need to be good.

ANNIE. No it is all rubbish, actual rubbish... it's a twist of rubbish, stuff that went in the bin this morning.

FRAN. Read it please.

ANNIE composes herself, very nervous. She takes a piece of paper from her pocket, itself the back of an old envelope.

ANNIE. Don't say I didn't horn you duck...

JANET. Warn... Sorry

ANNIE clears her throat and etc., at some length, then begins.

ANNIE. Teabag, PG tits Tin which held Chum Tissue with which I wiped dog's... nose.

(to PENNY and FRAN) Bum would've rhymed I know, but it wasn't true...

FRAN. Beauty is truth, truth beauty, please go on...

ANNIE. Double glazing offer from a company in Surrey, empty Cornflake racket full of last night's slurry.

JANET. Curry?

ANNIE. Slurry, yes *(to PENNY and FRAN)* Well I had to put it somewhere, and if you put it straight in the bin it seeps out of the bin's bottom days later...

'Screw Fix' catalogue

Other mail that's come...

No one writes proper letters anymore

Not like my Mum..... used to

PENNY. That's true that...

ANNIE. *Pair of old pants,*

Holes in front and rear

Jar of Budgens own-brand jam

...Expired last year

(to PENNY, JANET and FRAN) Do you want some more, I told you it was all rubbish?

FRAN. Is there more?

ANNIE. Oh yes.

FRAN. Then I can hardly wait...

ANNIE. *Another teabag, empty biscuit slapper.*

(to PENNY, JANET and FRAN) This was a bit later, like...

Crusty, ripped bag of sugar.

(to PENNY, JANET and FRAN) You know, with all brown round the top where the spoons gone in.

WAIT, THERE'S MORE!

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