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CONCORD
THEATRICALS

BETTER OFF DEAD

by Alan Ayckbourn

SAMUEL FRENCH

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BETTER OFF DEAD

First performed at the Stephen Joseph Theatre, Scarborough, in the Round auditorium on 11 September 2018, with the following cast:

ALGY WATERBRIDGE	Christopher Godwin
JESSICA WATERBRIDGE	Eileen Battye
THELMA BOSTOCK	Liz Jadav
JASON RATCLIFFE	Laurence Pears
GUS CREWES	Leigh Symonds
DCI TOMMY MIDDLEBRASS	Russell Dixon
DS GEMMA PRICE	Naomi Petersen

Director Alan Ayckbourn
Designer Michael Holt
Lighting Jason Taylor
Associate Sound Designer Paul Stear

CHARACTERS

ALGY WATERBRIDGE – an author, seventies
JESSICA WATERBRIDGE – his wife, seventies
THELMA BOSTOCK – his PA, fifties
JASON RATCLIFFE – his publisher, thirties
GUS CREWES – a journalist, seventies

The Figments

DCI TOMMY MIDDLEBRASS – fifties
DS GEMMA PRICE – mid-twenties

TIME

Over a week or so of one summer.

SETTING

The summerhouse and part of the surrounding garden of the Waterbridge's remote home in rural Yorkshire.

ACT I

Scene One

The summerhouse and part of the surrounding garden of the Waterbridge's remote home in rural Yorkshire.

The summerhouse itself is probably originally Victorian but has been recently modernised and converted into a writing workplace for Algy. Brick-built, hexagonal, with windows on the three sides facing south, with a single doorway at the back leading out, via a pathway, to the unseen house.

The garden is a "wild garden," favouring shrubs, trees, low bushes and wildflowers rather than a formal layout. Vegetation has been encouraged to run wild, with an occasional bright splash of colour against a background of varying greens. The paths that weave maze-like, hither and thither, are made of loose gravel rather than formal paving.

At the far end of the garden is the (also unseen) boundary wall which leads, by way of a gate, to the country lane beyond. At this end of the garden there is also a weathered wooden bench.

All in all, it is the most perfect, secluded and private space.

At the start, the area is in semi-darkness, lit only by a watery moon, and it is apparently the middle of the night. An owl hoots.

After a moment, from the far end of the garden, the bulky figure of **DCI TOMMY MIDDLEBRASS** *enters stealthily. He is a craggy Yorkshire detective who has seen and experienced just about everything there is to experience.*

He is followed by the slimmer figure of his long-suffering loyal sidekick, **DS GEMMA PRICE***, somewhat less experienced than her DCI, but learning fast.*

TOMMY *(softly, rather impatiently)* Come on, Sergeant, don't hang about, woman!

GEMMA *(softly, nervously)* I don't think we should be doing this, guv, I honestly don't –

TOMMY Oh, for God's sake, you great whingeing hunk of angel cake –

GEMMA How do we know this bloke's even here?

TOMMY Trust me, he's here all right. Or hereabouts. I can tell it in me water. It's a well-known saying, lass, DCI Tommy Middlebrass's water's never far wrong.

GEMMA With respect, guv, we need a lot more justification than your bladder before we start breaking and entering, surely? We need a warrant, don't we? If we enter without a warrant, it'll constitute illegal trespass –

TOMMY Bugger all that! We don't need a warrant, lass, not to reconnoitre. This is just reconnoitre. In the old days, what we used to call a casual spontaneous reconnoitre. Perfectly legal.

GEMMA These days known as illegal search –

TOMMY Perhaps that's what you called it back in Sussex. That's not what we call it up here, love –

GEMMA *(wearily)* Surrey. For the hundredth time, Surrey –

TOMMY – I would remind you you're in Yorkshire now, lass –

GEMMA – I don't need reminding –

TOMMY – And up here, we do things different!

GEMMA You're telling me!

TOMMY Listen, people like this bloke in there, people like Leonard Arthur Hemp, if they deliberately choose to put themselves outside the law, disregard it when it suits them, like, they can't suddenly turn round and demand their legal rights, can they? Fair dos. They can't have it both ways, can they? They've broken the contract. They're no longer covered. They're out of benefit. Their legal cover's expired. They get what's coming, serve 'em bloody right. Now, you up for this or not, you southern softie?

GEMMA *(shaking her head, muttering)* The things you call me, I don't know why I put up with it…

TOMMY Cos I'm a brilliant copper, lass, that's why. Now, follow on. And mind how you go. It's dark along here so watch your feet, girl. We don't want you toppling over a garden gnome…

They grope their way forward cautiously.

At this point, the light gradually begins to build on **ALGY WATERBRIDGE** *in the summerhouse, seated typing at his keyboard.*

GEMMA *(as they go)* Should have brought the torch, shouldn't we? Left it in the car.

TOMMY Don't need a torch. Wake the bugger up, else, won't we?

GEMMA Assuming he's even home.

They move a little further.

What's it you've got against this bloke? It's really personal this, isn't it?

TOMMY Aye, very personal. Remind me to tell you about it sometime. The complete history of me and Leonard Arthur Hemp. He's highly dangerous this one –

GEMMA *(stubbing her toe on something)* Ow!

TOMMY – You right? – He's killed before and he won't hesitate to kill again. Ten years since he last struck, but he'll still have the taste. They never quite lose it. The taste for blood.

GEMMA If he's that dangerous, what are we doing in his back garden in the middle of the night with no backup?

TOMMY Just going to take a look in the window, that's all. Get the lie of the land, like. I said, this is just a casual reconnoitre. We just happened to be passing, we heard something odd, not quite right, untoward, like. And you said to me, "Hello, did you hear that, guv –?"

GEMMA Did I?

TOMMY – And I said, "Yes, Sergeant, I certainly did. I think we should investigate without delay, don't you? There may, after all, be human life at stake."

GEMMA Honestly, guv, brilliant copper or not, there are times when you don't half talk a load of – *(bumping into something)* Ow! Shit!

TOMMY You right?

GEMMA You weren't joking about garden gnomes, were you –

TOMMY *(disappearing off)* Wait there! Won't be a moment!

GEMMA *(left alone, to herself)* I think I've broken my sodding toe...

She sits on the bench, nursing her foot, as **ALGY** *continues with the narration. At this point, the convention is established that, whenever he narrates, he speaks directly into the dictation system built into his laptop. Whereas during the Middlebrass dialogue sections, his hands move silently over the keyboard.*

GEMMA, *during the next, limps off after* **TOMMY**, *colliding with further obstacles and silently cursing as she does so.*

ALGY *(speaking into his laptop mic)* ...Despite his not inconsiderable girth, Gemma concluded that Tommy Middlebrass must possess the night vision of a cat, so swiftly and effortlessly did he move along the winding paths, skilfully avoiding all unseen obstacles, the self-same obstacles which the luckless sergeant found herself drawn to as if by some invisible magnet. The watery excuse for a moon which had afforded them, till now, some faint illumination finally conceded defeat and retreated behind thick cloud. The darkness had now become impenetr–

JESSICA WATERBRIDGE *enters from the house, abruptly interrupting* **ALGY** *in mid-flow.*

The lighting changes sharply and the garden is flooded with morning sunshine. Birds sing.

JESSICA *(calling loudly and cheerfully)* I'm just popping down to the shops –

ALGY *(startled by the interruption)* Wah! *(angrily, to the screen)* Stop dictation!

JESSICA – Won't be long! Back in a tick!

She turns and goes out again as suddenly as she arrived.

ALGY *(vainly, after her)* How many more times do I have to tell you not to interrupt me when I'm working? How often do I have to say it? *(rising, shouting angrily at no one in particular)* How the hell can I possibly create a masterpiece when I'm continually being interrupted?

He takes an angry turn around the garden to work off his fury. Finally calming down, he returns to his seat, takes a deep breath and prepares to resume writing.

(gathering his thoughts) Where was I? *(after a pause, frustrated)* I've forgotten where I'd got to now. Bloody hell! *(studying the screen)* Where did I get to? *(re-reading his*

last sentence) "The darkness had now become – I'm just popping down to the shops –" Oh, for Christ's sake!

He angrily stabs the backspace key several times. The lights, during the next, dim back to their previous nighttime state.

(muttering as he does so) I'm just popping down to the sodding shops! Now then. *(bracing himself to continue)* After a moment, satisfied the house was unoccupied, they returned to the garden.

TOMMY *and* **GEMMA** *return.*

TOMMY Place is deserted.

GEMMA Said it would be.

TOMMY All right, clever dick.

GEMMA There's still no positive evidence he's even back in the district, is there?

TOMMY He's here. I can tell...

GEMMA – Yes, I know, you told me, it's in your water...

TOMMY No, I can smell he's here. I can smell the bugger. It's in my nose. He's here, I know he is. Ready and waiting for another victim.

GEMMA What with your water and your nose, I don't know why we bother with a crime kit. CSI's redundant, isn't it?

TOMMY Bugger CSI! I'd trust my nose sooner than that lot. Come on then, Sussex smart arse, time for a pint. You fancy one, do you?

He heads back across the garden.

GEMMA *(following him)* I keep saying, I can't drink that stuff...

TOMMY Yorkshire ale, lass! Best in the world! How I ever got landed with you, I'll never know...

GEMMA If it's any consolation, the feeling's mutual, guv...

They leave.

ALGY Once back in the village, Middlebrass wasted no time and made straight for the public bar, leaving the reluctant Gemma to park the car, as she did so, preparing herself for another long evening ahead. For she knew to her cost, Tommy was never a man to quit a pub before last orders or frequently long after into the small hours. Gemma sighed to herself. There was, after all, only so long she could spend eking out one small glass of pink tonic...

Under this last, **THELMA BOSTOCK** *has made her way cautiously from the house and now stands behind* **ALGY.**

THELMA *(softly, under him)* Algy... Algy... *(slightly louder)* Algy!

The lights abruptly resume their daylight state.

ALGY *(loudly and savagely)* WHAT? WHAT THE HELL IS IT NOW, FOR GOD'S SAKE? *(belatedly, to the screen)* End dictation!

THELMA *(jumping nervously)* Algy, you haven't forgotten your meeting this morning, have you?

ALGY Meeting? What meeting?

THELMA With this journalist.

ALGY What bloody journalist?

THELMA You agreed to meet him this morning.

ALGY I'm not meeting anyone this morning. Especially not a journalist.

THELMA But you agreed to this meeting, Algy, you really did. You said at the time you were perfectly happy to do it. It's been in your diary for weeks.

ALGY I never look in my diary, you know that.

THELMA That's hardly my fault, is it? You agreed to meet him today and I put it in your diary specially, so you wouldn't forget.

ALGY Well, I had. I'd entirely forgotten.

THELMA He's an old school friend, apparently. You agreed to see him.

ALGY What's his name?

THELMA *(consulting a slip of paper in her hand)* Gus Crewes.

ALGY Gus Crewes?

THELMA C – R – E – W – E – S. Crewes. He was at school with you, apparently.

ALGY Gus Crewes? I was never at school with anyone called Gus Crewes.

THELMA It seems he was a year or two below you. I did mention this over a month ago, Algy. You said you vaguely remembered him and were perfectly happy to talk to him.

ALGY Gus Crewes? *(shaking his head)* No. Don't remember him at all. Below me, you say? Probably fagged for me. Made my bed. Fetched and carried. Tidied my study, that sort of thing.

THELMA *(dryly)* Much like we do now, then?

ALGY What are you talking about? I've never asked you to make my bed.

THELMA No, Mrs. Henshaw does that, doesn't she? I do practically everything else, though.

ALGY Nonsense. You never have to clean the house or do the washing? Or the cooking?

THELMA – No, that's Mrs. Henshaw, as well.

ALGY Then, what are you talking about? You do bugger all. Living a life of luxury, I don't know what I pay you for.

THELMA All I'm saying, Algy, is you never have to do anything for yourself. Practically nothing. Apart from writing, that is –

ALGY Apart from writing? What do you mean, *apart* from writing –?

THELMA – Yet the moment I ask you to do a simple thing like look in your diary –

At this point (and it won't by any means be the last occasion it occurs) **ALGY** *lapses into what can best be described as "Middlebrass-speak." His accent becomes northern and his vocabulary noticeably coarsens. It's as if his darker ID had suddenly emerged.*

ALGY *(indignantly)* What the bloody hell are you talking about? I don't do anything? I would remind you, lass, you're talking to a major fucking novelist – so watch yourself –

THELMA Yes, well, I just wish that, as a major novelist, you would –

ALGY I sit out here out the back in this – shack, slaving away! Rain or shine. Sleet or snow. Just so that you lot can be fed and clothed, have a sodding roof over your heads. I'd remind you that, but for my creative genius, you'd all be out on the bloody streets! Earning a living the hard way. It's thanks to me you're living in the lap of luxury, I would remind you. If I didn't churn out sentence after sodding sentence, year in, year out –

THELMA *(over this last)* – Yes, all right, Algy, all right –

ALGY – Paragraph after pissing paragraph –

THELMA – Algy, that will do!

ALGY – Book after buggering book –

THELMA *(finally silencing him)* ALGY! THAT'S ENOUGH!

A silence.

ALGY *(finally, truculently)* Well. *(muttering)* Count yourself lucky you don't find yourself back on traffic, that's all.

THELMA Traffic?

ALGY Nothing.

THELMA Back on traffic? What on earth are you talking about?

ALGY You know what I mean.

THELMA God, that man, honestly. He's taken over again, hasn't he?

ALGY What man?

THELMA Tommy Middlebrass. I can tell you're writing him. I can always tell. He takes you over. The minute you start a new book. You get as bad as him, don't you?

ALGY How do you mean?

THELMA A self-opinionated bully. I'm not your detective sergeant, you know. Poor woman, I don't know how she puts up with it, I really don't.

ALGY She loves it. Secretly.

THELMA I very much doubt that.

ALGY Got a thing for him. Only she won't admit it. She does. Come on. So do you, if you're honest. You've got a bit of a thing for Tommy, as well, haven't you?

THELMA *(evasively, a trifle flustered)* All I'm saying – and I know, I know, I'm aware that I am talking to one of our major living writers, I hadn't forgotten – all I'm saying, Algy, is the world also consists of people other than yourself and your fictional characters, brilliant as they may be. And I do wish occasionally you would consider the rest of us in the real world. That's all I'm saying.

A slight pause. **ALGY** *glares at his screen.*

How's it going? Are you making progress?

ALGY *(muted, depressed)* Comes and goes. Fits and starts. I don't know.

THELMA Look, are you prepared to see this man or not? Otherwise I'll send him away. But he has come all the way from East Sussex.

ALGY East Sussex? Why the hell's he coming from East Sussex?

THELMA He lives there. He's freelance, apparently.

ALGY Freelance?

THELMA So he says.

ALGY God! He's not from *The Mail on Sunday*, is he?

THELMA I don't imagine *The Mail on Sunday* would be particularly interested in you, surely? Not unless you've done something dreadful.

ALGY Like murdering my staff?

THELMA Look, as soon as you've seen him, you get a really good run at it. I know all these interruptions must be so frustrating, I do understand. But once you've finished with this man, the next few days you've got absolutely nothing at all in the diary. It's completely clear. Days and days of uninterrupted writing time.

ALGY *nods glumly. He rocks to and fro, deciding.*

THELMA *waits.*

ALGY *(finally, grudgingly)* Well. I can give him five minutes. I can't stop work longer than that. I'll lose the flow. I'm poised here in mid-chapter.

THELMA I'll tell him he can only have a few moments.

ALGY When's he due?

THELMA *(glancing at her watch)* Any minute now, actually.

ALGY Now?

THELMA We arranged to make it eleven. Give you time to get out of bed.

ALGY *(stiffly)* I have been working out here since the crack of dawn, I'll have you know.

JESSICA *enters from the house as before.*

JESSICA *(calling loudly and cheerfully)* I'm just popping down to the shops –

ALGY *stares at her.*

THELMA *(equally cheerfully)* Righty-ho, Jessica, see you later!

JESSICA – Won't be long! Back in a tick!

She turns and goes out again.

A slight pause.

ALGY *and* **THELMA** *watch her go.*

ALGY She's getting worse, isn't she?

THELMA *(concerned)* Yes.

ALGY She's already said that to me once this morning. Only minutes ago.

THELMA Yes, she's said it to me, too. Several times.

ALGY Worrying.

THELMA It would be really worrying if she did try and go to the shops on her own. God knows if she'd ever find her way there. And as for getting back again…

ALGY That bad, is it?

THELMA Don't worry, I'll walk down with her later, once I've seen this man in. I've got one or two bits and bobs to update, too, on the website.

ALGY My website?

THELMA Of course yours. I don't have one, do I? I try and keep it up-to-date, you know. I don't totally fritter away my days, even if you think I do.

ALGY *(gloomily)* Don't know why you bother. There can't be much to update, these days, surely?

THELMA You'd be surprised. There's always something. Some new translation, usually Eastern European…

ALGY Oh, good-o. All of ten p, then. That'll pay the rent.

THELMA And that television company from Finland, they're still in touch occasionally, about making a new version of Middlebrass, did I tell you?

ALGY In Finnish?

THELMA Presumably.

ALGY Good luck to them.

THELMA Now, you mustn't be defeatist, Algy. You'll be back in fashion soon. Things come full circle, eventually. All the best writers go out of fashion, now and then. Till they're rediscovered.

ALGY *(dryly)* Can't wait.

A slight pause.

(impatiently) Where the hell is this bastard, then?

THELMA It's only just gone eleven.

ALGY Well, he's late. He is now eating into valuable writing time.

THELMA He'll be here soon

ALGY Just as I was on a roll.

THELMA Oh, dear. Poor you.

A slight pause.

I'm afraid, my mother's going much the same way as Jessica, you know. She gets up to go to the bathroom in the middle of the night and then she…

ALGY Ah, and then she can't find it?

THELMA Oh, yes, she can find her way there, all right. Mercifully. But after she's – been, she often can't find her way back again. I found her one night in the box room searching frantically for her bed. Claiming someone had stolen it.

ALGY Oh, dear.

THELMA You haven't had that sort of problem with Jessica yet, have you?

ALGY Not yet. That's something to look forward to.

(dryly) Can't wait for that.

A doorbell jangles in the distance.

THELMA Ah, here he is. Ready for him, are you?

ALGY As I'll ever be.

THELMA Now. Don't forget to mention the new book, will you?

ALGY The one I'm struggling here to finish, you mean? The one he is now actively stopping me from finishing...?

THELMA *(admonishingly)* Algy...

ALGY All right, all right, I'll remember. I wish to hell I could remember him, that's all.

THELMA *(as she leaves)* Maybe once you see his face, it'll come flooding back. Gus Crewes. Remember... Gus – Crewes...

She leaves.

After a moment, **ALGY**, *frowning, closes his laptop.*

ALGY Gus Crewes? Gus Crewes...? *(shaking his head)* No. Don't remember him from Adam.

He paces up and down, going through a little private ritual in the manner of someone unused to meeting strangers, in an effortful attempt to gear himself up into a sunnier persona, forcing his face into a ghastly smile.

(as he paces) Ha – ha! Ha – ha – ha! Well, well, well, well, well! Aha! Ha – ha! *(tiring from the effort, wearily)* God! How I loathe strangers!

THELMA *returns with* **GUS CREWES**, *a careworn, rather neglected, unloved-looking man.*

THELMA This way, just out here!

GUS Hello, there.

ALGY *(somewhat over-effusively)* My God! Gus Crewes! By all that's holy! My dear fellow! My word, my word! How good to see you after all this time, old chap.

GUS *(a little taken aback)* Algy! You remember me?

ALGY How could I forget old Gus Crewes?

GUS It's been quite a few years. I thought you might have done.

THELMA *(loyally)* Algy never forgets a face. He's remarkable like that.

GUS It's been rather a long time. I was somewhat junior to you, of course...

ALGY *(indicating the summerhouse)* Do come in, dear chap, have a seat.

GUS Thank you.

THELMA I was going to offer Mr. Crewes a cup of coffee...

GUS Oh, lovely, if it's not too much trouble...

THELMA Not at all. Would you like coffee as well, Algy?

ALGY No, thanks, not just at the moment.

GUS *(immediately retracting)* Ah, well, in that case, I don't think I will either...

THELMA It's no trouble, really...

GUS No, really. No, thank you...

THELMA Really? You're quite sure? I was just on the point of making some...?

GUS No, no, really, please...

THELMA You're quite sure?

GUS Really and truly.

THELMA *(after a slight pause)* Well, I'll leave you both to it, then.

ALGY I wouldn't say no to a glass of water, Thelma. If you're passing a tap.

THELMA Yes, of course. Would you care for a glass of water, Mr. Crewes?

GUS Lovely, thank you. If it's not too much trouble...

THELMA Not at all.

GUS Thank you.

THELMA You're sure you won't change your mind and have a coffee...?

GUS No, no, no...

THELMA You're perfectly certain? It's really no –

ALGY *(sharply)* Thelma, just bring him a glass of water, for God's sake!

THELMA *goes off.* **GUS** *looks nervous. A pause.*

GUS *(looking around)* So this is where it all happens, eh?

ALGY Sorry?

GUS *(producing a small recording device)* Sorry. You don't object to these things, do you?

ALGY No, not at all. Best to get these things accurate.

GUS *(laughing)* A lot safer than my rusty shorthand, anyway.

He sets up his recorder.

Yes, as I say, I was a year or two junior to you. I'm amazed you even remembered me...

ALGY If I recall correctly, didn't you used to fag for me, at one stage?

GUS What a memory! Yes, I did. I used to clean your wicket-keeping pads.

ALGY Aha!

A slight pause.

My wicket-keeping pads?

GUS Yes, rather badly, if I recall. Wet white all over the straps…

He laughs.

ALGY I never had any wicket-keeping pads.

GUS You didn't?

ALGY I never kept wicket.

GUS No?

ALGY I loathed cricket.

GUS Did you?

ALGY Never played if I could possibly avoid it. I was strictly a squash man. I used to play a lot of squash.

GUS Ah!

ALGY Perhaps you used to polish my racket?

GUS *(slightly mystified)* No, I can't remember doing that –

ALGY Or possibly scrubbed my squash balls, eh?

He laughs.

GUS *(laughing nervously)* No, no, I'm sure I would have remembered doing that –

ALGY *(laughing)* Yes, I'm sure you would have done.

They laugh again.

Quite a bit of that in our day, wasn't there?

GUS Yes. Oh, Lord, yes. *(hastily resuming his task)* One… Two… Three… Testing. Gus Crewes talking to Algy Waterstone.

He plays it back.

Yes, that all seems to be working…

ALGY Waterbridge.

GUS Sorry?

ALGY Water*bridge*. The name's Water*bridge*.

GUS *(blankly)* Water*bridge*?

ALGY Water*bridge*.

GUS Water*bridge*? You prefer that emphasis, do you?

ALGY What?

GUS You prefer the emphasis on the second syllable? On the bridge? Water*bridge*?

ALGY No. Just plain Waterbridge.

GUS *(thoroughly confused)* Ah!

ALGY Only you said Water*stone*. My name's not Waterstone, it's Waterbridge.

GUS Oh, I see. Did I say Waterstone? I meant to say Waterbridge. I do beg your pardon.

He laughs.

ALGY Best to get the name correct. Start off on the right foot, anyway.

He laughs.

GUS *(laughing)* Waterstone! What on earth was I thinking of? Waterstone! Probably thinking of the pub, wasn't I?

ALGY *(slightly mystified)* The pub?

GUS Waterstones.

ALGY I think you're thinking of Wetherspoon's.

GUS Wetherspoon's! Yes of course! I don't know why I said Waterstones. Wetherspoon's. I meant Wetherspoon. Algy Wetherspoon, of course. Sorry.

ALGY Waterbridge.

GUS Sorry?

ALGY Waterbridge. Algy Waterbridge. Not Wetherspoon.

GUS Waterbridge, yes. Sorry.

He laughs.

A slight pause.

ALGY You do a lot of this sort of thing, do you?

GUS Sorry?

ALGY In-depth interviews? You do a lot of them, do you?

GUS Well, actually, I tend to specialise in obituaries. Of late.

ALGY Obituaries?

GUS Most of the people I write about are usually dead and gone by the time I get to them. To be perfectly frank, I'm finding it a bit off-putting, talking to someone who's still alive and kicking.

He laughs.

ALGY *(laughing)* Ah, well, at least the dead can't complain if you get their name wrong, can they?

GUS *(laughing)* No...no...

ALGY Mind you, you might just get a bit of flack from the relatives.

He laughs.

GUS *(laughing)* Yes...yes...

ALGY But I'm afraid, in my case, you're a trifle early. I'm not dead yet.

GUS *(laughing)* Oh, dear, that's too bad. *(realising his gaffe)* For me, that is. Too bad for me.

A slight pause.

Sorry.

THELMA *returns with two glasses of water on a tray.*

THELMA Sorry to take so long.

GUS Thank you so much. That's really most kind of you.

THELMA Not at all, you're very welcome. And you're sure you won't change your mind and have a cup of coff–

ALGY *(sharply)* He's perfectly happy with water, Thelma.

GUS Perfectly.

THELMA Just call out if you need anything, won't you? Biscuits, tea, coffee? I think there's even a little bit of seed cake left over from the other day, Algy...

GUS *looks eager and about to say yes.* **ALGY***'s look says otherwise.*

No? Right.

She leaves.

GUS That's what we could all do with, eh, the love of a good woman?

ALGY Oh, yes...

GUS What every chap could do with, eh?

ALGY Rather...

GUS A good wife behind him, eh?

ALGY She's not my wife.

GUS She isn't?

ALGY She's my secretary.

GUS Secretary?

ALGY Secretary. PA. General dogsbody. Perfectly pleasant but I wouldn't want to marry her.

GUS Oh, I understood she was your wife. I'm so sorry.

He shakes his head.

ALGY You have come to the right house, I take it?

WAIT, THERE'S MORE!

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