The Patent Office Robbery

a melodrama for a young audience

by

Andrew Hilton
The Patent Office Robbery* was commissioned and first performed by the Molecule Theatre Company at the Mermaid Theatre, London, on 19th September 1978, with the following cast of five:

Leonard Crisp - Richard Bremmer
Seddon - Paul Large
Adam Taylor - Antony Simons
Ellie Taylor - Lilian Evans
P.C. Thumb & all other roles - Dudley Rogers

Director - Sally Miles
Scientific Deviser - Geoffrey Sneed
Composer - Colin Tarn
Pianist - Martin Turner
Designer - Trewin Copplestone
Lighting - Peter Sutton

Following its Mermaid Theatre run, then played a 23-week U.K tour. It then enjoyed two revivals - and two further tours - with the same design and music, with the following companies:

1983
Leonard Crisp - Ron Meadows
Seddon - Paul Large
Adam Taylor - David Gilbrook
Ellie Taylor - Jo Miles
P.C. Thumb & all other roles - Kevin Martin

Director - Sally Miles
Pianist - Roger Cutts

1986
Leonard Crisp - Peter Czajkowski
Seddon - Tom Keller
Adam Taylor - Mark Dewison
Ellie Taylor - Kathy Milne
P.C. Thumb & all other roles - Kevin Dukes

Director - Harry Sanders
Pianist - John O’Connell

*The play was originally titled ‘The Snatch!’
Characters

Leonard Crisp
P.C. Thumb
Seddon
Adam Taylor
Ellie Taylor
Patent Officer
Caretaker
Newspaper Girl
Bulgarian Agent
Voice of Works Official

The play is set in the City of London in the late nineteenth century
Act One

Scene 1

By the Blackfriars Engineering Company. Factory gates, a small door within one. A lighted gas-lamp.

Music.

Enter Crisp. Overcoat, scarf, hat, newspaper. He looks around as if expecting someone. Enter P.C. Thumb. Crisp disappears behind his newspaper. Thumb patrols past him. Crisp lowers the newspaper and watches. Thumb turns. Crisp disappears again. Thumb turns away, but as Crisp’s face appears again, turns back quickly. Quickly Crisp’s face disappears. Thumb moves silently and slowly towards Crisp. Raising his truncheon in one hand, with the other he reaches to snatch the newspaper from Crisp’s grasp ...

Thumb All right, you - !

Crisp Constable?

Thumb Mr. Crisp - you, sir! I’m sorry, sir. I took you for a villain, ‘idin’ there behind that paper!

Crisp Hiding? What - ?

Thumb No offence! I just couldn’t ... Your face, see, be’ind the ... phew! You gets very jumpy this time o’ night, sir. Partic’ly down ’ere by the river. My most ‘umble apologies.

Crisp Oh, I see! A tall, dark figure like me, skulking here in the shadows on a cold evening - yes, it might seem a little suspicious.

Thumb I wouldn’t suspect a respectable engineer like yourself, sir, not of anything I wouldn’t. But ‘til we know ’oo we’re dealin’ with, you understand ... There’s so many o’ these villains about, Mr. Crisp!

Crisp Is that really so?

Thumb As sure as my name’s Thumb. An’ ordin’ry an’ decent lookin’ people, some of ’em. ‘Er Majesty, Queen Victoria, is not ‘appy about it. Not ‘appy at all. She’s been ‘eard to say - in private you know - that were she to walk down one of our London streets - even in broad daylight - she’d be surprised to meet an honest man!

Crisp Good heavens!

Thumb True, sir! On our toes, us lads in the Force. I see a villain, Mr. Crisp, I nab ‘im. Thumb’s thumb in the small of ‘is back, no questions asked!

Crisp I’m very pleased to hear it, Mr. Thumb. We respectable citizens may rely on you then?

Thumb I think I can say - ‘and on heart - I can sniff out villainy. If I was a villain, sir, standin’ where you’re standin’ now, I’d be tremblin’ in me boots! Well, I’ll be
on my way. Beg pardon for mistakin’ you.

Crisp  Not at all.
Thumb  Won’t ‘appen again. Eyes like razors!

Enter Seddon. An involuntary flinch as he sees Thumb.

Don’t catch your death, now. Good evenin’, sir!

Crisp  Good evening.
Thumb  Evenin’, lad!
Seddon  Evenin’, Constable.

Exit Thumb. Seddon knocks on the small factory-gate door. It opens slightly.

Voice  Oh, it’s you. What do you want now?
Seddon  I want to speak t’ manager. Mr. Blisset.
Voice  You can’t.
Seddon  But -
Voice  Look, Seddon, ‘ow many times do we have to tell you, we don’t employ no gaol-birds ‘ere!
Seddon  But, please -
Voice  Yer wastin’ yer time, mate. Clear off!

The door slams. Seddon stands dejected for a moment, then turns to go.

Crisp  Still out of luck?
Seddon  You what?
Crisp  Seddon’s the name, isn’t it?
Seddon  Well?
Crisp  I’ve seen you here before, Seddon. Three times in the last week.
Seddon  Oh ay? An’ what business it it o’ yours?
Crisp  There’s a chance I could help you. You’ve been trying to get your job back.
Seddon  Ay. On t’ night-shift.
Crisp  How come you lost it?
Seddon  That’s my business. Who are you, anyway?
Crisp  Oh, come on, Seddon, out with it - you’ve been in prison, haven’t you?
Seddon  Ay.
Crisp  What for? What had you done?
Seddon  Bit o’ burglary, smash an’ grab an’ that. Up in Manchester where I come from. It were years ago! I done me time for it an’ all. Three year in Strangeways. When I got out I thought I’d start a new life. Come down to London an’ be an engineer. Always wanted to be an engineer. But bein’ in prison, it follers you everywhere.
They find out sooner or later an’ out you go! If summat doesn’t turn up soon I shall ‘ave to stick to crime after all.

Crisp  Why don’t you?
Seddon  Eh?
Crisp  You and I could make an excellent team.
Seddon  What -?
Crisp  Seddon, I’m offering you the chance of a lifetime. Learn to be an engineer - and make your fortune at the same time!
Seddon  ‘Ow could I do that?
Crisp  A robbery. With me. Tomorrow night.
Seddon  Oh! An’ what would a robbery have to do with engineerin’?
Crisp  Let’s just say I am no ordinary robber. Well? There’d be five hundred pounds in it for you.
Seddon  Five ‘undred pound!
Crisp  That’s right. Think it over. But quickly.

He hands Seddon a small piece of paper.

Here’s where to find me. If you decide to join me, be there tomorrow at ten o’clock sharp. Otherwise I’ll count you out and do the job on my own. Understood?

Seddon  Ay. Ay, well there’s not much else for me now, is there? ‘Least, that’s ‘ow it looks. I reckon you might well see me then.

Crisp  You’ll never regret it, you can take my word for - that policeman’s coming back! You’d better hop it.

Seddon  Ay, right!
Crisp  Two o’clock tomorrow!

Seddon looks at Crisp, then exits.

Enter Thumb.

Thumb  Still ‘ere, Mr. Crisp!
Crisp  Just on my way, Constable. I like to spend a few minutes in the air, contemplate the magnificence of our great city. Even on a night like this.

Thumb  [Bewildered] I’m sure. Very wise. Only wish all o’ them out on the streets at this time o’ night ‘ad nothing more criminal in mind. Still, that’s life.
Crisp  Quite. Well, it’ll be turning very cold shortly. Goodnight.
Thumb  Goodnight, sir! ‘Ave a good day tomorrow, won’t you!
Crisp  I shall, Constable. Thank you.

Music
Exeunt
Scene 2

The next morning. Crisp’s Workshop in a Thameside warehouse. Sets of engineering drawings, tools and other equipment. Two doors: one, a sliding gate, gives directly to the river; the other leads to the street outside.

Crisp is tinkering with a screw-jack. A knock at the street door.

Adam [Off] Mr. Crisp! Mr. Crisp!

Crisp frowns, conceals the screw-jack, unlocks and opens the door. Enter Adam. He is young, and poorly dressed.

Crisp What is it, Adam?
Adam I’m just back from the foundry, Mr. Crisp. They asked me to bring you these wheels.

He hands Crisp four small, railway-type iron wheels.

They said you were expecting them.

Crisp Ah, yes I was. Thank you ... Yes, these should do the job.

Adam What’s that, Mr. Crisp?

Crisp Mm? ... Oh, nothing - just a small experiment.

Adam Well, I’d better get back to work. We’re hoping to finish our invention today. Good luck with the experiment.

Crisp Oh yes - thank you!

Exit Adam. Crisp relocks the door, then looks again at the wheels.

Excellent!

He is fixing the wheels to the axles on a small trolley when there is another knock on the street door. He glances at his pocket-watch.

Who is it?


Crisp unlocks and opens the door. Enter Seddon.

Crisp Come in, Seddon! So - you’ve decided to join me.

Seddon Ay ... ay, I have.

Crisp Splendid!

Seddon On one condition, though ...

Crisp What’s that?

Seddon No violence. No-one gettin’ ’urt like. I’ve never gone in for that.

Crisp Heavens, you needn’t worry yourself on that score. We shall use skill, not force.

Seddon Ay ... right, I see.
Crisp: It’s a deal then, is it? Five hundred pounds for you tomorrow when the job is done?

Seddon: Ay, it’s a deal!

Crisp: Good. My name is Crisp. Leonard Crisp. I’m an engineer. This is my workshop.

Seddon: You’ve a lot of stuff, haven’t you?

Crisp: Yes, I daresay. Tools, working drawings, some old inventions of mine.

Seddon: You’re an inventor an’ all!

Crisp: No! ... No, not anymore. I was an inventor. When I was young. I gave that side of it up.

Seddon: But you are still an engineer?

Crisp: Certainly, yes.

Seddon: What makes you want to turn to crime, then?

Crisp: I have my reasons. There’s no time to waste. Let’s get down to business.

Seddon: Ay. What are we going to do?

Crisp: We are going to snatch a safe.

Seddon: Eh?

Crisp: A steel safe. Snatch it from an office in the City and bring it back here.

Seddon: ’Ow big is it?

Crisp: A good size. About a metre high.

Seddon: It’ll weigh a ton! We’ll never move it.

Crisp: We shall. The techniques are simple. We shall bring it back here, crack the combination, seize the contents, then get rid of the safe into the river.

_He pulls open the river door._

Here, see ...

_Seddon almost falls into the Thames._

Careful!

Seddon: It’s a straight drop into ‘water!

Crisp: Exactly. And it’s never less than three fathoms deep, even at low tide. The safe will just disappear in the mud at the bottom. Clever, don’t you think?

Seddon: Ay ... But why do we ’ave to bring it back ’ere? Why can’t we just break into it on the spot like?

Crisp: There’ll be a caretaker in the building and a policeman on patrol in the street. So gelignite’s out of the question. Cracking the combination will take time and will be better done back here. But more than that, Seddon, it’s a matter of principle. This robbery is going to be a sensation - a triumph of engineering skill.
Seddon  You’re daft, you are. I’m gettin’ out o’ this.

Seddon makes for the door. Crisp beats him to it, locks it and smartly withdraws the key.

Crisp  Oh no, you’re not! You can’t change your mind now! You know quite enough about this scheme already. You’re in it ‘til that safe’s at the bottom of the river and you’re as guilty of the crime as I am! Otherwise – I will chain you to that ring in the wall there and leave you there ‘til you starve!

Seddon  Oh!

Crisp  Simple choice. Which is it to be?

Seddon  I ... I’m with you then, Mr. Crisp!

Crisp  There’ll be no more changes of mind?

Seddon  No, Mr. Crisp.

Crisp  Good. You can’t trust me, Seddon - I do know what I’m doin’!

Seddon  Ay ... right.

Crisp  So ... The safe is in an office with a window that overlooks the street. We shall take the safe out through that window.

Seddon  Eh?

Crisp  Perfectly possible! And there’s no alternative. By that stage we shall have got the safe onto this trolley. We shall lower it to the pavement and simply push it back here. Is that clear?

Seddon  Ay. But ’ow do we do it?

Crisp  We’re going to rehearse how we do it now. Just gone a quarter past ten - six hours before we have to leave. Ample. I’ve got together everything we need. It’s a matter of planning and practice, that’s all. Let’s start with a model of the safe ...

He shifts a tea-chest, to which small feet have been added, to the centre of the room.

This is the right size and shape. Not as heavy as the real thing, of course - nowhere near - but it’ll do to practise on. The first job is to raise it off the floor so that we can get that trolley underneath. How are we going to do that?

Seddon  Search me! It’ll be far too ’eavy to lift. Even the two of us together.

Crisp  Not if we use a machine.

Crisp takes up a long steel pole with a flattened end.

This pole should do for a start.

Seddon  You call that a machine?

Crisp  If I can use it as a lever to lift up the safe, yes I do.

He picks up a wooden block and places it by the chest.

A fulcrum, to pivot it on ...
He levers up the chest.

There. How’s that?

Seddon    Ay, but that’s just a tea-chest. You couldn’t do that with the real thing.
Crisp    Couldn’t I? Do you think you could lift me off the ground, Seddon?
Seddon    No - you’re bigger than me!
Crisp    Have a try. Go on. Try!

*Seddon tries but fails to lift Crisp.*

Seddon    Hopeless!
Crisp    What if I sit here on the chest? See if you can lift both me and the chest off
the floor using the lever.

*Crisp sits on the chest, facing Seddon.*

Seddon    Oh, right.

*Seddon pushes down on the lever.*

Ee, I can, can’t I?

Crisp    Of course you can! And it’s easy, isn’t it!
Seddon    *[Levering again]* Ay ... Ay, it is. ‘Ow’s that, then?
Crisp    Just do it again ... Hold it there. Now, how far have you lifted me up?
Seddon    Er ... about twenty ... no, thirty centimetres, I should
think.

Crisp    Yes! You’ve had to push down thirty centimetres to lift me just ten
centimetres. That’s how the lever works, Seddon, and that’s why it’s a
machine. It does a swap for you, you see. You push down three times as far
as I move up. But in return it’s about three times as easy as it would be
without the machine. Yes?

Seddon    Ay ... I think so.
Crisp    That’s why, with the help of a long lever we should just about be able to get
a heavy steel safe off the floor. So ... if you lever the chest up ... go on ... I’ll
slip these blocks underneath to hold it there ... like that ... Now, take the
lever round to the other side, and we’ll do the same again.

Seddon    Right.

*He takes the lever, but not the block.*

Crisp    Don’t forget the fulcrum.
Seddon  Eh?
Crisp    The fulcrum. The lever won’t work without it.
Seddon  Oh ... no.

_He picks up the fulcrum and places it._

   Right. Ready with more blocks?
Crisp    Yes.
Seddon  ’Ere goes, then ...

_He levers the chest up and Crisp slips two more blocks underneath._

Crisp    There. Well done. Do you still think I’m ‘daft’?
Seddon  No, Mr. Crisp. But I still don’t see ‘ow we get it any further. That trolley won’t go under it like that.
Crisp    I’ve thought of that. We need another machine now ... Here, see. A screw-jack. I’ve made two of these especially for tonight.
Seddon  [Peering at it] I’ve ‘eard about them. Never seen one work before, though.
Crisp    Then watch ...

_Crisp starts to jack one side of the chest up._

   As I turn the screw with this handle, this little platform here, supporting the chest, moves up the screw. Very slowly, you see ... but as my hand is moving so much further - round and round in these big circles – I can use it to lift a very heavy weight.
Seddon  Like the lever, you mean! Another sort of swap!
Crisp    Exactly! My hand must be moving ... what, about a hundred centimetres for every one centimetre I lift the chest ... There, that should be enough. Now you do the other side. Here’s the other jack ...

_A knock on the door._

Adam  [Off] Mr. Crisp! Mr. Crisp!
Crisp    Curse it! What does he want now?
Seddon  [Alarmed] Who is it?
Crisp    Adam Taylor. He and his sister Ellie have the workshop next door. Think they’re going to be great inventors one day!
Seddon  Are you going to let ‘im in?
Crisp   [Dismantling the model] I shall have to. He knows I’m here.
Seddon But -
Crisp   Just act naturally, Seddon! You’re my new apprentice - yes?
Seddon Ay ... right.

*Crisp unlocks and opens the door.*

Crisp Adam. What can I do for you?
Adam   I was just wondering, Mr. Crisp ... Oh!
Crisp   Of course, you haven’t met my new apprentice, Mr. Seddon, have you?
Adam   No.
Crisp   Seddon, this is Adam Taylor. Engineer and inventor.
Adam   How d’you do, Mr. Seddon!
Seddon Er ... ‘ow d’you do!
Crisp   Seddon is just learning some simple machines, Adam. He shows great promise! Don’t you, Seddon?
Seddon Ay ... ‘ope so, Mr. Crisp.
Crisp   Well, is there something I can - ?
Adam   No, I just thought Ellie must be with you. She went out to get some small bolts. I heard voices in here, so I thought it must be her come back.
Crisp   We haven’t seen her.
Ellie  [Off] Adam! Adam!
Adam   Oh, there she is! I’m here, Ellie! Here with Mr. Crisp!
Crisp   [Aside] Curse it!

*Ellie appears at the door.*

Ellie   Hello! Hello, Mr. Crisp!
Adam   I was just looking for you, Ellie. Have you got the bolts?
Ellie   Yes, here -
Adam   Oh, sorry! This is Mr. Crisp’s new apprentice, Mr. Seddon. My sister, Ellie.
Seddon  ’Ello.
Ellie   Nice to meet you, Mr. Seddon.
Adam   We’re ready to assemble, Ellie! I’ve collected the springs from the foundry. They’ve done them beautifully.
Ellie   That’s wonderful!
Crisp   What is this, Adam?
Adam: Our first invention, Mr. Crisp. It’s an improved kind of mangle. You know, for squeezing the water out of washing.

Ellie: We’ve made it spring-loaded, so you can set it specially for each thing you put through it. It’s going to work so much better!

Crisp: I see. So this could be a success for you at last?

Ellie: We hope so! Then we could afford a proper home - and a proper workshop, couldn’t we?

Adam: Yes!

Crisp: Good. Good, I’m very pleased to hear it!

Ellie: Thanks! Come on, Adam - let’s go and get it finished!

Adam: Right! Bye, Mr. Crisp, Mr. Seddon!

Crisp: Oh, Adam, Ellie -

Adam: Yes?

Crisp: You will patent this invention of yours, won’t you? Before anyone else finds out what it is.

Adam: We hadn’t thought of that.

Crisp: You must. You can’t be too careful. If I were you I should take the plans along to the Patent Office this very afternoon.

Adam: Right, Mr. Crisp, we will. D’you know what time the Patent Office shuts?

Crisp: Six o’clock sharp.

Adam: Right. Southampton Buildings, isn’t it? Not far. We’ll be there before then. Thanks, Mr. Crisp.

Ellie: Yes, thanks! Bye!

*Exeunt Adam and Ellie. Crisp shuts and locks the door.*

Seddon: What’s ‘patent it’ mean?

Crisp: You apply for a certificate - to prove that the invention’s yours and no-one else’s. So the idea can’t be snatched away from you and developed by someone else.

Seddon: Oh!

Crisp: That should wipe the smiles off their faces!

Seddon: What?

Crisp: Mm? ... Nothing! Nothing, Seddon - forget it! We must get on. Where were we? Oh yes, we’d just got one side of the safe jacked up, hadn’t we? Let’s put it back how it was.

*They restore the model.*

There. You jack up the other side now.

Seddon: Right.
Seddon places the jack, fits the handle and starts to turn it.

Seddon  It’s slow, isn’t it!

Crisp  When you have a real weight to deal with you’ll be glad of that.

Seddon  Ay ... Is that enough?

Crisp  Let’s see ...

He slips the trolley underneat the chest.

    Yes, that’s it ... Now let’s lower the safe onto it ... Slowly!

They jack the chest down onto the trolley.

    There ... Excellent! Stage one complete!

Seddon  What do we do next?

Crisp  We fix the safe to the trolley, then get them both up onto the windowsill.
    And to do that we use yet another machine.

Seddon  What’s that then?

Crisp  The slope!

Seddon  Eh? You can’t call a slope a machine!

Crisp  Why not?

Seddon  Well! ... Slopes don’t move, or turn or anythin’, do they!

Crisp  So? They can help us, can’t they - just like the lever and the screw? Look...

Crisp picks up a large, right-angled wedge.

Crisp  This wedge is a small slope, isn’t it?

Seddon  ’Spose so.

Crisp  If this was ten metres high and you wanted to get to the top you’d walk up here, wouldn’t you? Not climb up here.

Seddon  Oh, I see! You mean a slope is a long, but like an easy way to climb up an ’ill.

Crisp  Exactly! Up a hill - or onto a windowsill! Another swap, Seddon. The slope is longer than the straight climb up, but it’s much less of an effort.

Seddon  Ay ... I see.

Crisp  To engineers like us, that makes it a machine. And you say slopes never turn ...

He picks up a length of wooden pole, around which a thick rope is wound.

Crisp  Well, what do you make of this?

Seddon  It’s a pole with a bit o’ rope wound round it.

Crisp  Yes, that’s what it is. But doesn’t it remind you of something? One of our machines?
Seddon  I don’t think so ... Lever? No, it’s not like that ... No, you’ve foxed me there, Mr. Crisp.

Crisp holds the pole vertically, close to a screw-jack.

Oh, I see! It’s like the screw, i’nt it?

Crisp  Precisely.

Seddon  I’ll tell you somethin’ else it’s like an’ all! The ‘elter skelter I used to slide down when I was a kid! Round an’ round an’ round you went - wheeeeeeeeee - right from top t’ bottom!

Crisp  Good! So what is it that goes round and round a helter skelter, and round and round a screw?

Seddon  I don’t follow you.

Crisp  Put your foot on that end of the rope ... That’s it. Now...

Keeping the pole vertical, Crisp unrolls the rope by moving the pole away from Seddon. The rope then forms a slope from the floor to the top of the pole. The wedge just happens to be on the floor underneath it, echoing the image.

What does it look like now?

Seddon  It’s a slope!

Crisp  Yes! That’s what a screw is! A long thin slope wound round a pole!

Seddon  So they’re cousins like - the slope and the screw!

Crisp  I’d never thought of it like that – yes! You’ll make an engineer yet! But come, back to our plans - time is getting on. The slope will certainly help us to lift the safe onto the windowsill.

Seddon  Still be ‘ard, though, won’t it -

Crisp  Very hard! And the slope alone won’t be enough. We shall need to use our fourth machine at the same time. The wheel-and-axle!

Seddon  You mean wheels on t’ trolley?

Crisp  No, I mean another kind of wheel-and-axle. One that - like the lever, the screw and the slope - will give us a swap. A swap that will make it easier to haul the safe up the slope. You’ll see how that works later.

Seddon  Oh, right ...

Crisp  Then, with the safe on the windowsill, we shall come to our last problem - how to lift it into the air and lower it carefully into the street. For that, Seddon, we shall use our fifth and final machine - the pulley!

Seddon  What’s one o’ them?

Crisp  You’ll see that shortly. But first, I think we should go right back to the beginning and make sure we know exactly what we’re doing with the lever, the screw-jacks and the trolley. Agreed?

Seddon  Ay!
Crisp: [Dismantling the model] Tonight there must be no mistakes!

Seddon: No, Mr. Crisp!

Crisp: Right. Then let’s start again!

Music.

They set to work as the lights fade.

Scene 3

Adam and Ellie’s Room. A small, impoverished workshop-home.

Adam and Ellie, dressed in overalls, are just finishing fitting a spring-loading device to a large iron mangle.

Ellie: There ... that’s the last nut on this side!

Adam: And ... on this! That’s it - finished!

Ellie: It looks a bit peculiar, doesn’t it?

Adam: Yes, but it won’t - not when it’s all produced as one. Not bits of old and new.

Ellie: No. Anyway, never mind how it looks - let’s see how it works

Adam: Yes!

Ellie: Here’s the washing, all still full of water ... 

Adam: And a bucket - so we don’t have a flood.

Ellie: Now ... let’s start with something really thin, shall we?

Adam: Yes - something we always had to wring out by hand before.

Ellie: Here, one of your shirts.

Adam: Right. I know - (starting to tighten a wing-nut on the mangle top) first let’s set the rollers just about as tight as they always used to be without our adjustable springs ... That’s it!

Ellie: Bit tighter.

Adam: There?

Ellie: Yes, I should think so.

Adam: Now ... let’s put it through, then see if we can get it even drier by tightening up the springs.

Ellie: Right.

Adam feeds the shirt in. Ellie turns the wheel.

Ellie: How is it? Quite a lot of water came out.

Adam: Yes ... but, see - I can still wring more out by hand.

Ellie: Right. Let’s tighten up the springs, make the rollers really squeeze it this time ...
They screw down the springs as tight as they can. Again Adam feeds in the shirt and Ellie turns the wheel.

Adam
More coming out!

Ellie
Yes! ... Can you wring any more out of it now?

Adam wrings for all he is worth.

Adam
No, not a drop! It works, Ellie! It works, it works!

Both
Yippee!

Adam throws the shirt up into the air and lets it come down on his head.

Adam
Now we can really call ourselves inventors, can’t we!

Ellie
Yes! Everyone’s going to want one, I know they are! Think of all the sore hands it’ll save! Let’s mangle some more!

Adam
Yes! Something thick next! I’ll reset the rollers ...

Adam readjusts the springs, while Ellie searches in the washing.

Ellie
Here - your corduroy trousers. We could never put these through at all before.

Adam
Right. Here, I’ll turn it this time ...

Ready?

Ellie
Ready! ... That’s it, it’s through! ... And I can’t wring another drop out of it! Just as we planned, Adam - however thick or thin it is, our mangle will do it!

Adam
Of course! Come on, let’s do the rest!

They continue mangling, adjusting the springs when necessary, and as they do, they sing:

Our ambition’s always been
to be the inventors of a fine machine.
Now we’ve come up with this scheme
to squeeze the washing dry!

Oh, turn, turn the mangle-wheel,
our own new-fangled mangle-wheel.
Turn, turn the mangle-wheel
and squeeze the washing dry!

With this mangle there will be
no more wringing endlessly,
no more aching hands you see
to squeeze the washing dry!
Adam takes a very long and narrow towel from the bucket.

Adam
Right ... this is the last!

He feeds it in. Ellie turns the wheel.

Ellie
It’s strong, this mangle, isn’t it!

Adam
Very! ... Hey, not so fast!

Ellie
Try stopping me!

Adam
I can’t ...

Ellie
Pull! ...You’re a weakling, Adam!

Adam
I’m not! ... It’s the wheel ... giving you so much leverage!

He lets go and falls back on the floor, laughing. Ellie finishes the towel.

You win! Phew! So that’s the lot, isn’t it?

Ellie
Yes. Just hang it up and so much for this week’s washing!

Adam
Ellie, look at the time - almost five o’clock! The Patent Office - it shuts at six!

Ellie
Oh my goodness, I’d forgotten!

Adam
We must go at once. Leave that till we get back. Here, put your coat on.

Ellie
Thanks ... You grab the plans.

Adam
Where are they? ... Here ... Right. All ready?

Ellie
All ready! Let’s go and apply for our first patent!

Music.

Exeunt.

Scene 4

Crisp’s Workshop.

Once again the chest stands on the trolley. Crisp and Seddon are now busy securing the two together with ropes.

Crisp
This should fix it. When we haul it into the air, we don’t want the trolley dropping off!

Seddon
No!

Crisp
Good ... that’s it. The pulley stage at last! We’ll have to move it over there first ... 

Seddon
Right!

By the river door three pulley systems hang from the ceiling: a one wheel, a two wheel, and a four wheel system.
Crisp  That’s fine ... There are the pulleys. I’ve made a special one for tonight, but these
will do to practise on. Just let me get up to them ...

To reach the pulleys he uses a stepladder.

Now ... we’ll start with this ... the simplest kind. Just one pulley wheel, see?

Seddon  Ay.

Crisp  Hook that end to the chest ... Now haul it up level with me ... Good. How does
that feel?

Seddon  Quite heavy! I couldn’t lift the safe like this!

Crisp  No, not with this pulley. All this does is to make it so you can lift the chest up
by pulling down on the rope. And pulling down is generally easier than pulling
up, isn’t it?

Seddon  Er ... ay, I s’pose it is.

Crisp  Let it down ... Now, lift it again, and this time count the number of pulls you
take to get it up to here.

Seddon  Right ... One ... two ... three.

Crisp  Three long pulls. Good. Let it down again ... Unhook it ... Now let’s try a pulley
with two wheels - one at the top and one the bottom ...

They hook up the two-wheeled pulley system.

Right. Let’s see what two pulley wheels can do for you. Haul it up - and count
the pulls again.

Seddon  Right ... One ... two ... three ... four ... five ... six!

Crisp  Aha!

Seddon  Six pulls this time, Mr. Crisp! But it feels much lighter. About half the weight it
was before! ‘Ow’s that?

Crisp  Because this time there are two ropes holding up the load. You have to pull out
twice as much rope to get it to the same height. But you only have to use half
the effort. Just like the other machines, Seddon. By doubling the distance your
arms move, you halve the effort they have to make. Let it down ... Let’s try just
one more ... This one with four pulley wheels ...

Pulley systems are swapped again.

Seddon  Right ... all set, Mr. Crisp. Count the pulls?

Crisp  Of course.

Seddon  One ... two ... three ... four ... five ... six ... seven ... eight ... nine ten ... eleven ...
twelve! It’s really easy now!

Crisp  About twice as easy as last time?

Seddon  Ay! It ‘ardly feels like a weight at all.

Crisp  Good! Let it down ... Now, don’t you think we’ll be able to haul the safe into
the air, using a pulley with even more wheels - with eight?
Seddon  Is that ’ow many we’ll use?
Crisp       Yes.
Seddon  Ay, then I think we will!
Crisp  Excellent! So, we’ve practised almost every move we’ll have to make. A robbery using just five simple machines. The lever, the screw, the slope, the wheel-and-axle and the pulley. But what a sensation it’s going to cause!
Seddon  Ay - if it works!
Crisp  Of course it’ll work! Nothing can go wrong with it now ... Look, it’s almost half past five. We must leave. There’s a lot to take, so we’ll leave the chest on the trolley and put everything into it.
Seddon  Right.
Crisp  Here ... blocks ... [etc.]

He passes blocks, screwjacks etc. to Seddon who packs them into the chest. After the things we have already seen, come two sets of overalls, a dustsheet and a board.

Crisp  Right, Seddon - we’re ready!
Seddon  One thing, Mr. Crisp ...
Crisp  What’s that?
Seddon  You ‘aven’t told me where we’re goin’.
Crisp  Haven’t I? Oh! We’re going to the Patent Office!
Seddon  Where?
Crisp  Her Majesty’s Patent Office! In the Patent Office safe are dozens, maybe hundreds of plans. Marvellous new ideas produced by the best inventors in Britain -

Seddon  [Indignant] What do we want them for? I thought we were goin’ to get rich!
Crisp  We are! At midnight tonight, on London Bridge, we have an appointment with a Bulgarian agent. For those plans he is going to pay us two thousand pounds!
Seddon  Eh!
Crisp  Trust me, Seddon! Everything is arranged!
Seddon  Oh, all right ... But ... but, no, Mr. Crisp, I don’t understand ...
Crisp  What d’you mean?
Seddon  You’re turnin’ on your own kind, aren’t you! Adam and Ellie Taylor for a start! And others - some o’ them must be your friends an’ all, mustn’t they?
Crisp  Friends? Friends! I hate them, Seddon! Every one of them!
Seddon  Eh?
Crisp  For twenty years I’ve hated them! Now, at last, I shall have my revenge!
Seddon  Revenge? Why, what - ?
Crisp
I was an inventor once, Seddon. Just like the Taylors there. Like all of them. Dreaming of being another George Stephenson or Isambard Brunel! You know what happened to me - to my genius?

Seddon
What?

Crisp
Stolen! My finest invention! Copied by the man who worked next door - just where the Taylors are now! Before I’d a chance to patent it, that man sold it off cheap to every manufacturer with wit enough to understand the plans. Within a year it had been built in every city in Europe, and I hadn’t received a penny for it - not a penny! That was the end of career as an inventor, Seddon, and I swore one day I’d be revenged! Revenged on the whole pack of them!

[sings]

When I was young and in my prime
inventing was my trade.
I thought all men were honest then
I’d never been betrayed!
But when - for shame! - a traitor came
and stole my work away
I swore upon the Devil’s name
I’d take revenge one day!

Revenge, revenge, revenge, revenge
I’d take revenge one day!
Revenge, revenge, revenge, revenge
I’d take revenge one day!

So now’s the time to do a crime
that’s daring, rare and bold!
Inventors all I’ll snatch your plans
and sell them all for gold!
For what just one to me has done
I’ll make all good men pay!
I’ll rob them all, yes every one
I’ll take revenge today!

Revenge, revenge, revenge, revenge
I’ll take revenge today!
Revenge, revenge, revenge, revenge
I’ll have my revenge today!

Come, Seddon - to the Patent Office!

Exeunt
Scene 5

An Office Corridor. A door, marked ‘Her Majesty’s Patent Office, Please Knock’.

Music.

Enter Adam and Ellie. Adam knocks on the door. It is opened by the Patent Officer, a middle-aged and smiling civil servant. Adam shows her the plans. After a moment’s confusion - she first studies them upside down - the Patent Officer looks enthusiastic and shakes Adam and Ellie by the hand.

Exeunt Adam and Ellie.

The Patent Officer watches them go, then takes the plans into her office.

Scene 6


The Patent Officer is putting Adam and Ellie’s plans into the safe. She closes it and spins the combination. She looks at her watch, glances round the office, picks up her briefcase and umbrella, goes to the door, opens it. Outside, dressed as painters-and-decorators, stand Crisp and Seddon.

Officer Oh!

Crisp [Broad-smiling cockney] ’Scuse me, Miss. Come to do the decoratin’.

Officer Decorating?

Crisp Yes, Miss ... ’Ere, see ... ‘Ome Office Order No. 2534311: ‘Commence redecoratin’ Patent Office, after it closes for the day, Tuesday, November 31st’ ... Er, today, Miss.

Officer Oh. I’d have thought it was perfectly all right as it is. Still, if there’s a Home Office Order, there’s no use my objecting, is there?

Crisp I don’t think there is, Miss, no!

Officer I’ll leave you to it then. Shut the door behind you when you leave.

Crisp Of course, Miss.

Officer Goodnight. The main door will be locked at six sharp, but the caretaker will let you out.

Crisp Thank you, Miss. Goodnight.

Exit Patent Officer. Crisp locks the door behind her.

Right, Seddon. If we move fast we can be out of here in fifteen minutes. Here’s the safe. Let’s have a heave at it. See just how heavy it is.

They can’t lift the safe at all.
Just as I thought.

**Seddon**
Sure you wouldn’t settle for a nice bit o’ smash an’ grab?

**Crisp**
Nonsense! We apply the machines, that’s all. We’ll start with the lever. Come on - quickly!

*Music*

The robbery begins. But for perhaps one comic hold-up - a trapped finger or the like - it is fast and slick. The safe is levered up onto blocks, jacked up further and the trolley slipped underneath. They are about to jack it down onto the trolley when there is a loud knock on the door. They freeze.

**Seddon**
The caretaker!

*The door rattles.*

**Caretaker**
[Off] ‘Ere! What you locked the door for?

**Crisp**
‘Ang on, mate!

Crisp grabs a dust-sheet, well spattered with paint, from amongst his equipment, and throws it to Seddon.

Cover the safe with that!

Crisp grabs his ladder and leans it against the wall right next to the door. More knocking.

**Caretaker**
[Off] ‘Ey! What’s goin’ on?

Crisp unlocks and opens the door. The Caretaker, an ancient man, stands in the doorway, holding a duster.

**Crisp**
‘Ello, mate! Just about to start paintin’ over the door. On the ladder. Didn’t want you knockin’ me off it, did I?

**Caretaker**
Oh. Sorry! Thought there must be something funny going on!

**Crisp**
What - paintin’ pink elephants on the ceilin’?

**Caretaker**
Eh? [Chuckling hoarsely] Ay! That’d cheer the old place up a bit!

**Crisp**
Anything’d do that, wouldn’t it? Something you want, is there?

**Caretaker**
I gen’rally go round with the duster this time o’ night. Still, as you’re decoratin’ I’ll just do the calendar. I change it in the evenin’ so it’s ready for Miss Protheroe first thing.

He has ambled round to the desk, putting his duster on top of the safe on the way. He picks up the calendar.

She’s particular about the date ... Now, first of December tomorrow, isn’t it ... ooops, gone past it! ‘Ave to turn it right round now ... January, February, March, April -

**Crisp**
Look, mate, why don’t you take it with you, eh? Save it gettin’ covered in paint, won’t it? You can bring it back when we’ve finished for the night.

**Caretaker**
Oh, all right. Don’t want to get in your way ...

*Going, he stops at the safe to pick up his duster.*
Gets bigger and bigger, the safe in ‘ere. Won’t be any room for anything else one o’ these days ... Oh well ... won’t disturb you again.

**Crisp**
That’s all right, mate.

*Exit Caretaker, shutting the door behind him.*

**Seddon**
Eee, that were close.

*Re-enter Caretaker*

**Caretaker**
I ... I suppose you couldn’t paint a pink elephant on the ceilin’, could you?

**Crisp**
What? - No, sorry. No pink paint on the order, was there, Fred?

**Seddon**
Eh? - No, no.

**Caretaker**
Shame. I’d have liked an elephant up there. Remind me of when I was young. Never mind.

*Exit Caretaker.* **Crisp** locks the door.

**Seddon**
What was ’e then - a big game ’unter or summat?

**Crisp**

**Music.**

The robbery continues. The safe is jacked down onto the trolley and pushed a little way towards the window. The ladder provides the slope, the trolley’s railway wheels fitting it perfectly. Block and tackle is then hung just above the window [on the outside], the other end attached to the safe, and the safe is hauled up the slope onto the windowsill, ready to be lifted into the air. Whilst Crisp holds it there, Seddon attaches a guiding-rope and prepares to leap with it into the street. *The set turns into ...*

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**Scene 7**

Outside the Patent Office. It is dark. A street lamp is lit. At the window of the Office, the safe, and Seddon with guiding-rope.

**Seddon jumps into the street. He looks warily each way.**

**Seddon**
All clear, Mr. Crisp!

*He backs away from the window, pulling his rope tight.*

Ready!

The safe, trolley attached, rises off the windowsill. Seddon pulls it away from the wall. It begins to descend slowly. Suddenly, Seddon’s attention is drawn to one side.

Police! Haul it up! Haul it up!

The safe rises until it is at window-height again - about six or seven feet clear of the ground. Seddon bends down to fiddle with his shoe-lace. Enter Thumb. His eyes light on Seddon, not on the safe.

**Thumb**
‘Ello, ‘ello, ‘ello - ‘oo ’ave we ’ere, then?
Seddon  Oh! ‘Ello, Constable!
Thumb  Evenin’, lad. Not loit’rin’, are we?
Seddon  Eh?
Thumb  Loit’rin’ with intent to commit a crime, lad!
Seddon  Oh no, Constable! No, I’m just ‘avin’ a bit o’ trouble with me shoelace like. [Breaking it] It’s broke, you see.
Thumb  Oh yes - so it ‘as! Not what they were, are they, shoelaces? Well, that’s all right then. No offence, lad. Just can’t be too careful. So much crime about these days, got to ’ave eyes in the back of me ’ead!
Seddon  Really, Constable? Is it as bad as that?
Thumb  Worse, lad! London’s thick wi’ villains - you can ‘ardly move along the street for ’em.
Seddon  Good leavens!
Thumb  Still, Thum’ll root ’em out! Matter o’ time, that’s all. Mustn’t dawdle. Never know what might be ‘appin’ in the next street, do you?
Seddon  No!
Thumb  Tip me the wink if you see anythin’ suspicious.
Seddon  Yes, o’ course, Constable!
Thumb  Thumb’s the name. City Branch.

Going, Thumb’s helmet collides with the safe.

Oo, now that’s not safe, is it? Fancy leavin’ that ‘anging’up there like that! Tall feller could ‘urt ’is ’ead on that! Oh well, ’spect they’ll move it in the morning. Mind ’ow you go!

Exit Thumb.

Seddon  Cor! ... All right, Mr. Crisp - all clear!

Music.

The safe descends to the street. Crisp appears at the window, throwing out the dust-sheet with which Seddon covers the safe. Crisp then hands out the ladder etc., detaches the pulley and leaps to the ground. Ladder, lever etc. are arranged on top of the safe, so that it bears some resemblance to a decorator’s barrow. The final touch, a sign advertising ‘SNATCHEM & SELLEM, Painters and Decorators’.

Crisp  Well, Mr. Snatchem - job completed to your satisfaction?
Seddon  Certainly, Mr. Sellem!
Crisp  Excellent!

[Sings] Revenge at last on all my kind, my cruel crime is done! Inventors all you’ve lost your plans I’ve snatched them every one!
At dark midnight from deepest spite
I’ll trade them all away!
Who cares two wrongs can’t make a right
I’ve snatched revenge today!

Revenge, revenge, revenge, revenge
I’ve snatched revenge today!
Revenge, revenge, revenge, revenge,
I’ve snatched my revenge today!

End of Act One
Act Two

Scene 1

A City Street, late evening.

Enter Newsgirl.

Newsgirl Late-night extra! Late-night extra! Read all abaht it! Amazin’ Patent Office Robbery! Read all abaht it ...

Enter Adam and Ellie.

Late-night extra! ... Read all abaht it, sir! Amazin’ robbery at Patent Office! Only a penny, sir!

Adam What!

Ellie [To Newsgirl] Where was that?

Newsgirl Patent Office, Miss. Southampton Buildin’s. ‘Ere, read all abaht it. Only a penny.

Ellie We haven’t got any money.

Newsgirl Not even a penny?

Adam No.

Newsgirl You are ‘ard up, aren’t you! ‘Ere - ‘ave one anyway.

Ellie Oh, thank you!

Newsgirl Late-night extra! Late-night extra! Read all abaht it! Amazin’ Patent Office Robbery! Read all abaht it ...

Exit Newsgirl.

Ellie ‘A huge steel safe, full of plans of new inventions, has been snatched from Her Majesty’s Patent Office in Southampton Buildings in the City of London.’

Adam Oh no!

Ellie ‘The robbery happened at about six o’clock this evening. Two men got into the Office dressed as painters-and-decorators. It seems they took the safe, which weighs almost a ton, out through the window.’

Adam They couldn’t have!

Ellie That’s what it says!

Adam “Already it’s being called the most daring crime of the century.” I should think it is!
Ellie: What could anyone want with that safe?
Adam: The plans - to sell them.
Ellie: Who to?
Adam: Anyone with the skills to make use of them, I suppose.
Ellie: What about the patents on them?
Adam: They aren’t patented yet! Some of them, anyway. Ours certainly isn’t! It’s just waiting for a patent - waiting for the Patent Office to approve it. It takes ages!
Ellie: So they could all be patented by someone else – in another country, possibly. And we’d lose the mangle completely!
Adam: Yes! And our new home and our new workshop!
Ellie: Adam, we mustn’t give up! The police might catch them. Or they might not find a buyer for the plans - it’s quite possible.
Adam: Yes ... D’y you think Mr. Crisp will have heard about it? He might have had some plans in that safe, too!
Ellie: Of course he might! No, I bet he hasn’t heard about it yet. I know he never reads the papers. Let’s go and tell him. He’ll know what we should do about it, anyway. See if we can catch him before he locks up for the night!
Adam: Right!

Music.

Exeunt.

Scene 2

Crisp’s Workshop. Centre, the safe, still on its trolley.

Seddon is trying to crack the lock, ear pressed to the door, hand turning the dial.

Seddon: Ee! Never come across a safe like this before. Combination’s as quiet as a mouse! ... Ah? ... No, nothin’!

A knock at the street door. Seddon freezes.

Crisp: [Off] It’s me - Crisp!

Seddon unlocks the door. Crisp bursts in, brandishing the news-sheet. Seddon shuts the door but forgets to lock it.

Crisp: Look! In print already! ... “The most daring crime of the century!” We’re the talk of London, not five hours after the event! ... See! “A dazzling feat of engineering! ... Police astonished!” Doesn’t it make you proud?

Seddon: Doesn’t it make you afraid they’ll guess who’s done it?

Crisp: Why should it? I’m a respectable man. Respectable men don’t go about snatching safes, do they? Anyway, there are hundreds of engineers in
London. Why on earth should they suspect me?

**Seddon**
No, I s’pose ...

**Crisp**
This is just what I hoped for! Revenge, riches - and a sensation! Well, there’ll be time to celebrate later. It’s gone eleven o’clock. Soon we must leave for London Bridge. How are you getting on with the combination?

**Seddon**
Well, actually, I ’aven’t been ’avin’ much luck like.

**Crisp**
What?

**Seddon**
I’ve never come across one like this before. You can ’ardly ’ear it turn!

**Crisp**
I thought you said you were an expert!

**Seddon**
Yes, but -

**Crisp**
Out of my way!

**Seddon**
Sorry, Mr. Crisp...

**Crisp**
Quiet!

_He presses his ear to the dial and turns._

It’s very faint, but I can hear it ... Yes, there’s the first!

**Seddon**
How many numbers will there be?

**Crisp**
I’m expecting just eight. But it’ll be touch and go now.

**Seddon**
Oh ...

**Crisp**
Shhh!

_He concentrates again._

**Adam**
[Off] Mr. Crisp! Mr. Crisp!

**Crisp**
What?

_Adam and Ellie, panting hard, burst in through the street door._

**Adam**
Mr. Crisp - there’s been a robbery! At the Patent Office! Look! Someone’s stolen the safe with all the plans in! Yes! They say two men got in dressed as painters-and-decorators and took the safe out through the window! It’s incredible!

_Ellie has realised what it is that is standing in the middle of the room._

**Ellie**
Adam ...

**Adam**
The police can’t understand how they did it!

**Ellie**
Adam!

**Adam**
What ... ? Mr. Crisp, what’s that?

_Crisp smiles._

No! It wasn’t you!

_Crisp laughs._

Mr. Crisp!
Ellie  Adam, let’s get the police!
Adam  No! I can’t believe it!
Ellie  Adam!

*She pulls him towards the door. Crisp darts to it and locks it, removing the key, all in one swift movement. With his other hand he picks up the long metal lever.*

Crisp  You can’t get out! Stay still - just where you are! ... Well! We hadn’t planned on being interrupted. What shall we do with them, Seddon? We shall have to silence them somehow. What would be most appropriate? Breaking them on the wheel? Pulling them apart with pulleys? What d’you fancy?

Seddon  I ... I don’t know, Mr. Crisp.
Crisp  We’ll turn it over in our minds while we make our rendezvous on the bridge. Whatever we decide, we can carry out when we get back! ...Get over there!

*He motions Adam and Ellie towards a great iron ring set in the wall.*

Adam  You won’t get away with this, Mr. Crisp!
Ellie  No, you won’t - you won’t!
Crisp  I shouldn’t count on it if I were you. I’ll stop at nothing now! Seddon, chain them to that ring!

Seddon  Eh? Are you sure -
Crisp  Do as I say! There’s the chain, see!
Adam  You’re not going to -!
Crisp  Don’t try to resist, Adam! Or your sister will feel the weight of this! ... That’s better! Those chains will keep you quiet enough. They were used for holding convicts here, not so many years ago. Waiting for a filthy, stinking cargo ship to transport them to Australia, poor devils! Still, at least they had a chance of staying alive!

Ellie  Villain!
Crisp  Don’t fight him, Ellie! Or I’ll finish you both off now ... All secure, Seddon?
Seddon  Ay.
Crisp  Good. Now ... five and twenty past eleven. We must be going.
Seddon  We ‘aven’t opened the safe yet.
Crisp  No - thanks to you, you fool!

*His eyes rove the workshop. They light on a pile of rolled-up plans.*

Ah! Yes, why not? There’s going to be a small change of plan!

Seddon  Eh?
Crisp  Our foreign friend can have these instead. They’re my own. All old and quite worthless. He won’t even look at them until he’s back on his ship and by then our money will be safe! Give me that bag ...
Seddon hands him a large canvas or leather bag.

Later on, when we’ve dealt with these two, we can get the safe open and think about finding another buyer for the real thing. Good, eh, Seddon?

Seddon
Yes, ’spose so.

Crisp
I told you I’d make your fortune, didn’t I? Let’s stuff them all in ... and good riddance! ... That’s it! Right, come - to London Bridge! We’ll leave these two to wonder what’s in store for them when we get back!

Music.

Exit Crisp. Seddon glances at Adam and Ellie, then follows Crisp off. Adam and Ellie look at each other helplessly as the lights fade.

Scene 3

London Bridge, night.

Enter Thumb.

Thumb
Phew! Freezin’ night, this, poundin’ the old beat! Still, got to keep a sharp lookout. See if I can pick up any clue regardin’ this ’ere Patent Office Robbery. Bafflin’ piece o’ work. They come an’ go like invisible men, some o’ these villains! I was in that very harea myself at the time. Saw nothin’ suspicious at all!

Enter, behind, Crisp and Seddon.

Nice an’ quiet ’ere on the bridge, any’ow. Better give the south bank a quick look, see if there’s a bit o’ criminal life about over there. Mind ’ow you go!

Exit Thumb. Crisp consults his watch.

Crisp
This is the spot. Just four minutes to midnight.

Seddon
How will we recognise him?

Crisp
He’ll be wearing a long cloak and a hat with a wide brim. And, like me, he’ll be carrying a newspaper. He’ll walk past us, stop and touch his hat. He’ll then open his newspaper and read it upside down -

Seddon
Upside - ? ’Ow could ’e - ?

Crisp
Pretend to read it, you fool! I shall do the same and he’ll be sure that I’m his man. We’ll shake hands and do the business. It’s as simple as that. Three more minutes. He’s due on the last stroke of the clock.

Seddon
Mr. Crisp - that policeman, he’s coming back!

Crisp
What - curse it!

Seddon
What shall we do, Mr. -

Crisp
Calm, Seddon, calm! We are respectable citizens, out for a quite evening stroll!
At midnight? With a big bag full o’ –

Sshhh!

Enter Thumb.

Good evening, Constable!

Good evening, sir - why, Mr. Crisp again!

Out for my evening stroll, Mr ... Mr Thumb, isn’t it. I’m a little later than usual. Had a very busy day!

I see, sir. Very good.

Oh, you haven’t met, have you? Seddon, my new apprentice.

Oh yes? Very good, lad, very - ‘ere, ‘aven’t I seen you somewhere before?

Er ...

That’s most unlikely. Seddon’s a stranger in London. Come all the way from Manchester to learn his trade with me.

Really? I must’a got confused. Very wise, lad! You’re in good ’ands with Mr. Crisp. Good to see a lad takin’ up an honest trade, isn’t it, sir? So many goin’ to the bad.

Indeed. Seddon’s future is very bright.

Bad do we’ve ‘ad ‘ere tonight. ’Spect you’ve ‘eard, ‘aven’t you?

What, the Patent Office affair? Dreadful, dreadful! Do you think there’s any chance of catching them?

Between ourselves, Mr. Crisp, not much. A clever couple by all accounts. And even if we do, I’m afraid it may be too late to save them plans. Out of the country by now, I reckon. Or well on the way.

I daresay. Foreign buyers, Seddon. Only too keen to snap up a few unpatented inventions. Tch tch.

A clock begins to strike midnight.

Good heavens, it’s midnight! Well, Constable, don’t let us keep you from your work ...

No, indeed, sir! No rest in the fight against crime, is there? Er ... yes, that way, I think. Don’t fall in the river, will you! Goodnight to you both!

Goodnight!

Phew! Ten ... eleven ... twelve!

Exit Thumb. Crisp and Seddon turn to see the Agent, standing in the shadows. Seddon jumps.

Calm, Seddon!

Music.

The Agent approaches. Crisp touches his hat. The Agent passes them, stops, turns and touches his hat. Simultaneously, he and Crisp take out their newspapers [both the ‘late-night extra’

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edition], hold them up to read, peek at each other over the tops, then slowly turn them upside
down. After furtive glances behind them, they shake hands and exchange the large bag for a
bulging envelope. Exit Agent quickly. Crisp opens the envelope.

Crisp  Two thousand pounds! And all for a bagful of useless plans!
Seddon  What’ll ’e do when ’e finds out?
Crisp  He’ll never trace us - I’ve made sure of that. So what can he do? But come,
straight back to the workshop. To deal with Adam and Ellie!
Seddon  What d’you really mean to do with them, Mr. Crisp?
Crisp  Tie them up and throw them in the river.
Seddon  Eh?
Crisp  Why not? A pair of orphans like them. Even if their bodies get washed up in
Gravesend they’ll never be identified.
Seddon  But you said -
Crisp  No ‘buts’, Seddon! Our success depends on it! Come, we’ve no time to lose!

Music.

Exeunt.

Scene 4

Crisp’s Workshop.

As before, except that Adam and Ellie are shouting for help and making as much noise as they
can - banging on the wall, on the floor, anything they can reach. After a few seconds, Adam
gives up.

Adam  It’s no use! There’s no-one around here at this time of night. We’ll just make
ourselves hoarse!
Ellie  We can’t just sit here and wait for those two to get back. Isn’t there any way
we can get out of these chains?
Adam  We’d need a saw that’d cut through steel! ... Unless ...
Ellie  Unless what?
Adam  There’s quite a gap between the two ends of this link. If we could knock a
wedge into it we might be able to force it open. There must be a wedge here
somewhere, if only we can reach it ...
Ellie  Yes ... There’s one over there, look! Couldn’t I reach that - if you squeeze
your hands right through the ring? That’s it! Now ...

They are handcuffed to either end of a long chain that passes freely through the iron ring.
Adam pushes his hands and wrists through the ring as far as they will go. Ellie can’t reach the
wedge, even so.

Ellie  Oh no!
Adam Lie down, Ellie. Get it with your feet.
Ellie Yes, of course! ... Got it!

She gives the wedge to Adam who tries it in the link.

Adam Yes, good. Can you reach that mallet now?
Ellie That’s easy!

Much closer to them, a long-handled mallet.

Ellie Here! Right. Mind your fingers!

She gives the wedge a good thwack.

Adam Yes, good. Can you reach that mallet now?
Ellie That’s easy!

Much closer to them, a long-handled mallet.

Ellie Here! Right. Mind your fingers!

She gives the wedge a good thwack.

Any good?

Adam Opened it a fraction. Not nearly enough.

She gives it a mighty one this time.

A bit more, but still not enough. It’s not going to do it, Ellie.

Ellie Is there anything else we could do? Lever it open - couldn’t we do that?

Adam Maybe ... Yes, use one end of the link as the fulcrum and bend up the other! The wedge has opened it up enough for that. But we’ll need a really strong piece of metal. Long, with a flattened end.

Ellie That metal ruler? No, it’d bend.

Adam Look - a crowbar! ... This’ll do it ... Now, which link was it? This, yes ... If I stand on the chain ... Here, you try ...

Ellie Right ... let’s see if the lever does the trick ...

Ellie heaves on the crow-bar. It slips out of the link.

Adam No ... try again ...

This time the link opens up.

Adam Done it! We’re free! [Parting the chain] We’ll have to carry these chains about with us, but at least we can get out!
Ellie Yes, thank goodness!
Adam Come on, then. Let’s go and get the police!
Ellie Wait, Adam ... What if Crisp and Seddon come back, find we’ve escaped and just push the safe off somewhere else? They’re hardly going to sit here with it and wait to be arrested, are they?
Adam No ... But what else can we do?
Ellie Couldn’t we at least stop them moving it somehow?
Adam Perhaps ... Look, these are the wheels I collected from the foundry this morning! So that’s what he wanted them for! I’d have thrown them straight in the river if I’d known!
Ellie So would I!
Adam: You know, if there was any way of lifting it just a fraction, we could slip the wheels off and take them with us. Then they’d be in a mess, wouldn’t they?

Ellie: Yes - how could we do it?

Adam: They must have used lots of machines in the robbery...

Searching the room, Ellie finds the special pulley system and Adam the screw-jacks.

Ellie: Here - pulleys!

Adam: Yes, but look at these! Screw-jacks! He must have made them specially. These will do it. Quicker than rigging up the pulley.

Ellie: Right!

Adam: They fit perfectly! ... Here’s a handle ... We’ll have it off the floor in a moment ...

They jack the safe up, just clear of the floor.

Ellie: Far enough!

Adam: Should we take the whole trolley away?

Ellie: Er ... no. No, just the wheels like you said. They might not notice then, until they try to move it. That could give us a bit more time.

Adam: Right! ... Off?

Ellie: Off.

Adam: Good! Let’s jack it down again ... There! Now put the jacks back where we found them ... and let’s go!

Ellie: No.

Adam: What?

Ellie: I’m going to stay.

Adam: Stay! What on earth - ?

Ellie: I can hide, can’t I - over there, see!

Adam: But - why?

Ellie: When they find they can’t move the safe what are they going to do?

Adam: Run for it, probably.

Ellie: Exactly! So if I stay here I may just hear where to. Then as soon as you get back with the police we can follow them. It’s just a chance, Adam!

Adam: It’s too dangerous! They’d kill you if they found you!

Ellie: They won’t. They won’t even look for me! They’ll never dream that we haven’t both escaped.

Adam: I ... I ...

Ellie: Oh go on, Adam! They’ll catch us arguing about it at this rate! You go off for the police. I’ll be all right here, honestly!
Adam  But - !
Ellie  I’ve made up my mind, Adam!
Adam  All right. But hide yourself well - don’t take any risks!
Ellie  I won’t! Don’t worry.
Adam  I’ll be back with the first policeman I meet.

Exit Adam with the wheels. Ellie glances round the room and is then about to put the pulley back where she had found it, when she hears a noise outside. Dropping the pulley again, she darts into hiding.

Ellie  They’re here!

Enter Crisp and Seddon.

Crisp  Now, my interfering friends! ... What! They’ve escaped!
Seddon  Eh!
Crisp  You fool! You bungled it! You said they were secure!
Seddon  They were, Mr. Crisp! Honest! ... Look, the chain’s gone completely. They must have broken it.
Crisp  Broken it! Steel chain as thick as that! Don’t be ridiculous!
Seddon  Well, what ... ?
Crisp  There’s no use arguing about it! That’s really fouled things up. They’ll have gone straight for the police!
Seddon  Ay! Let’s go then!
Crisp  What, and leave all the evidence! Seddon, for once in your miserable life, think what you’re doing!
Seddon  Y-yes, Mr. Crisp.
Crisp  There’s still a chance we can bluff our way out of this one. Here, this time I’ll make sure we aren’t taken by surprise ...

He locks the door, leaving the key in the lock.

If we can push the safe into the river, who’s to say it was ever here?

Ellie  [Aside] What!
Crisp  The police will take my word before the Taylors’. And it would sound an incredible story, wouldn’t it? Chained to a wall like convicts, threatened with murder! By me, a respectable engineer! The police’d laugh in their face!

Seddon  What about the plans?
Crisp  We’ll just have to lose them. We’ve got our money, and with the plans at the bottom of the river I’ll have at least a part of my revenge. Let’s open the door ... Oh, turn the lamp down first. We don’t want anyone on the river to see what we’re doing!

Seddon  No!
Seddon turns the lamp down very low, so that it is barely alight.

Crisp  
Right.

Crisp opens the river-door. Moonlight floods in.

There! ... Now, this should be easy. We just have to turn it a bit, that’s all.

Seddon  
Ay.

They apply themselves to the safe. It doesn’t move.

Crisp  
What on earth ...! The wheels! They’ve disappeared!

Seddon  
Ay.

Crisp  
Those two must have guessed what we’d do, the devils - they’ve taken them off! And taken them with them, by the looks of it!

Seddon  
’Ow did they do it?

Crisp  
Pulley, screw-jacks - what does it matter? They’re engineers, aren’t they? If I ever lay my hands on them, I’ll squeeze every last breath out of them!

Seddon  
Ay, but what do we do now?

Crisp  
Drag it!

Seddon  
Eh?

Crisp  
Tie a rope to the trolley and drag it. It won’t be easy but it’s possible. Come on, we’ve no time to lose!

Crisp fetches a rope, coming perilously close to Ellie. He ties it to the trolley, so that he and Seddon can both pull, tug-o-war fashion

Ready?

Seddon  
Ay.

Crisp  
One, two, three - heave! One, two, three - heave ...

The safe moves, though only a couple of inches at a time. Ellie looks round desperately for inspiration. The ‘Heaves!’ continue.

Ellie  
What can I do? Is there a machine I could use? ... Of course - the pulley!

The pulley system is lying on the floor where she dropped it. She creeps out of hiding and reaches for it. Her chains make a noise, just after a ‘Heave.’

Crisp  
What was that?

Seddon  
Eh? Didn’t hear anythin’.

Crisp  
Something on the river. On! One, two, three - heave!

Keeping in the shadow, Ellie attaches the pulley to a ring low in the wall or in the floor, then extends it to reach the safe, taking care that the noise it makes is covered by Crisp’s ‘Heaves!’! Finally, head well down, she attaches it to the trolley. She then creeps back to her hiding-place and starts to apply pressure to the rope.

Crisp  
... One, two, three - heave!
Seddon Suddenly seems to ’ave got ’eavier, Mr. Crisp.
Crisp We’re tiring, that’s all. Pull harder. One, two, three - heave!
Seddon Didn’t move at all that time!
Crisp No. Must be catching on something. A big pull will shift it. Come on - one, two, three - heave!

Ellie digs her heels in and again the safe doesn’t move at all. She watches Crisp carefully.

Curse it – it’s stuck! Let’s have a look ...

As soon as they drop the rope Ellie pulls frantically on hers. The safe moves backwards.

What on earth ...!

Seddon It’s a ghost!

Crisp dashes behind the safe, sees the pulley, follows the line of it until he sees Ellie.

You! You little devil!

Ellie dodges round him. Crisp picks up the crow-bar. Ellie now stands with her back to the open river-door.

Crisp So! You didn’t get out when you had the chance! Stupid, Ellie! Very stupid indeed! When your brother gets back, you see, he’ll have to force his way in. And in the time it takes to do that, I’ll have you and that safe at the bottom of the river.

Ellie You won’t! You won’t!

Crisp Oh yes - believe me! Can you swim?

Ellie N-no!

Crisp Good! Then I won’t have to hit you over the head with this to make sure you drown!

Crisp advances.

Seddon Mr. Crisp ...

Crisp Quiet, Seddon!

Ellie is now only a yard from the edge.

Go on, my dear! Only a few more steps. You can’t escape!

She takes a tiny step backward.

Seddon Mr. Crisp - you can’t!

Crisp Quiet! One more peep out of you and you’ll go with her! Get over there!

Retreating, Seddon brushes against the pulley systems that hang from the ceiling.

Right, my young friend - your time’s up! Out into the river with you!

Music.

Crisp advances horribly close. Ellie stretches out her hands and grips door and wall, straddling the gap. Seddon looks round desperately. He sees the pulleys and quietly picks up both ends
of one. Ellie screams. Crisp laughs. Seddon creeps up behind him and slips the hook through his belt. He pulls quickly on the rope. Crisp is being pulled into the air before he can see what is happening. A loud knocking at the street door.

**Thumb**  
[Off] Open up! Police!

Ellie unlocks the door. Thumb and Adam burst in.

**Ellie**  
We’ve got him, Adam! We’ve got him! She turns up the lamp.

**Thumb**  
Good leavens! Mr. Crisp, this is a surprise! I never thought to find you ‘angin’ in the air in such an unrespectable fashion! Did you, Adam?

**Adam**  
No, Mr. Thumb!

**Thumb**  
An’ I can’t say as I thought to find the Patent Office safe standin’ in the middle of your workshop! May I ask if you’d care to make a statement?

**Crisp**  
Curses! Curses on the lot of you!

**Thumb**  
I see! Well, if that’s all, I think I must ask you to accompany me to the station...

*He holds up a pair of handcuffs.*

Mr. Crisp?

Crisp scowls. *Fade on tableau.*

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**Scene 5**

By the Blackfriars Engineering Company. A bright morning.

Enter Adam and Ellie with a large wooden notice, which reads in bright new letters: ‘Now in Manufacture: Taylors’ PATENT MANGLE! Squeeze your washing almost DRY! Available SOON!’

**Ellie**  
Here ... hang it on the gate, they said. There’s a hook somewhere.

**Adam**  
Right ...

As they hang the notice on the gate, enter Thumb.

**Thumb**  
’Ello, there! What’s all this?

**Ellie**  
Hello, Mr. Thumb!

**Thumb**  
Mornin’, Ellie. Mornin’, Adam!

**Adam**  
Morning!

**Thumb**  
What brings you two this way?

**Adam**  
They’ve taken us on at the factory, Mr. Thumb. We’re working on a new invention for them.

**Thumb**  
Are you now?

**Ellie**  
Yes! And they’ve started making the mangle - look!
Thumb ‘Taylors’ Patent Mangle’ ... I see!

Ellie The first ones should be on sale next week.

Thumb Well, if you ask me, you’ll ’ave a queue stretchin’ from ’ere to Buckin’am Palace! Save a lot o’ work, a good squeeze’ mangle. I ’ad to wring out my own washing last night. ‘Ands were red raw by the finish! You can put my name down for one now.

Adam Certainly, Mr. Thumb!

Enter Seddon from the factory.

Seddon Is it up yet? Oh - ’ello, Constable!

Thumb ’Ello there, lad! So you’re ’ere, too!

Seddon Ay, workin’ with Adam and Ellie. They persuaded fact’ry to take me back after all. With the judge lettin’ me off at the trial like ‘e did.

Thumb Quite right, too! Savin’ Ellie from a watery grave - very well deserved! In fact, it’s turned out best for all concerned, ’ain’t it?

Adam/Ellie Yes!

Seddon Ay, it ’as!

Thumb ’Cept for Mr. Crisp, o’ course! ‘E’s goin’ to be locked away for quite a while. Such a respectable type I thought. Turned out to be a very nasty piece in the event.

Ellie Don’t be too hard on him. He was robbed of his very first invention.

Adam Yes, we’d have felt a bit bitter if we really had lost the plans of the mangle.

Thumb Ay, ’e ’ad bad luck there. Mind, I think tryin’ to murder your sister was takin’ ’is bitter feelin’s a bit far, Adam.

Adam Yes!

Thumb Still, I ’ear ’e’s a reformed character now! Got the run of the prison, they say. You know, I don’t mind sayin’ the way ’e planned that robbery ’as begun to fascinate me. Trouble is, I can’t keep them five machines all in me head at once. I was tryin’ to explain them to my youngest the other day. I started on me fingers like this, you see ... there’s the lever, the wheel-and-axle, the pulley, the screw - and there you are, got to me thumb and can’t think what I’ve missed out!

Ad/Ell/Sed The slope!

Thumb The slope - of course! Mind, I shall forget another one next time! Anyway, better be off. See what tricks the villains are gettin’ up to today!

Adam If you can spare a minute more, Mr. Thumb ... ?

Thumb Yes?

Adam There’s one way you can be sure of remembering the five machines.

Thumb Eh?
Ellie  Yes! Sing with us, Mr. Thumb!

*Adam, Ellie & Seddon sing:*

There are five machines,
five simple machines!
The lever, the slope
they’re the simplest of means!
Five machines
for helping us through,
the wheel-and-the-axle
the pulley, the screw!

Adam  I once had a sack that I wanted to shift,
too big and too heavy for one man to lift.
I said to my sister, ‘What can be the means?’

Ellie  The answer I gave him - ‘Use simple machines!’

There are five machines,
five simple machines! Etc...

Seddon  I was asked by a man - ‘oooo I think you all know!' -
to snatch a steel safe through an office window.
I said, ‘You’re a madman, we ‘aven’t the means!’
‘E said it were easy - ‘Use simple machines!’

All  There are five machines,
five simple machines!
Etc ...

Thumb  When called to arrest Mister Le-o-nard Crisp
I found ‘e was finished, ‘e could not resist.
I said, ‘Mister Crisp, what ‘as done for your schemes?’

*Spotlight on Crisp in prison garb.*

Crisp  I said, ‘I was beaten by simple machines!’

All  There are five machines!
Etc ...

Thumb  ‘Ere, Adam ...

Adam  Yes?

Thumb  I wonder if it’s this song that Crisp is teachin’ ‘is pals in prison?

Adam  What d’you mean, Mr. Thumb?

Thumb  ‘E’s been teachin’ the other prisoners everything ‘e knows, they say. Turned
‘is ‘and to inventin’ again, too.

Ellie  Inventing?

Thumb  Yes. Now what was it they said ‘e was workin’ on ...? Oh yes. Some very
cunnin’ kind o’ ladder. Only about three metres ‘igh, but extends to about
ten. An’ does all kinds o’ tricks. Should prove very popular.
Seddon  I should think so - in prison.

Thumb  What? ... Oh yes, I see!

They all laugh.

Adam  Come on, everyone! One more time ...

There are five machines,
five simple machines!
The lever, the slope,
they’re the simplest of means!
Five machines
for helping us through,
the wheel-and-the-axle,
the pulley, the screw!

The End