

JASPER GRASPER

OR

“ALL THAT GLISTERS . . .”

The Cardboard Opera

By PAUL WRENCH

JASPER GRASPER

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The Cardboard Opera

A burlesque operatic pantomime in two acts.
being a musical reflection on the many-sidedness
of human nature

CHARACTERS

JASPER GRASPER, <i>an old miser</i>	Bass
MRS. NOTHING (<i>who misses nothing</i>), <i>a widow</i>	Mezzo-Soprano
NICK AND NARK, <i>two very honest burglars</i>	Baritones
ERNEST LEIGH, <i>a very thoughtful policeman</i>	Baritone
A GROUP OF PERFECT CHILDREN	Trebles
TOMMY, <i>their leader</i>	Treble
COLIN, <i>his left-hand man</i>	Treble
THE MOON, <i>a bewildered and dumb spectator</i>	
Also the HAND OF FATE, <i>reaching out now and again</i>	
CHORUS of <i>City men, neighbours and passers by, housewives, etc.</i>	

Time: about 1895, or from 1870 if desired

ACT I

One afternoon, not long before Christmas, in front of
Jasper Grasper's house

ACT II

The same night

*First performed at Wymondham College, Norfolk,
December 1956*

JASPER GRASPER

THE CARDBOARD OPERA

ACT I

THE SCENE is set in front of Jasper Grasper's House, a "stagey" tumbledown affair, with a front door and two or three bedroom windows. To one side of the stage is a street lamp, as yet unlit, and the whole stage is covered in snow. As the curtain rises, a group of children in Victorian attire enter, and snowball each other as they sing:

Winter's here!
Its icy voice is calling
With the joys
That all the seasons bring.
Never fear
The snow that's softly falling,
Girls and boys
The praise of Winter sing.
While we are a-playing
Sliding and a-sleighting
Far and near
We'll crown the Winter king!

Joys abound
Where Nature in her bounty
Spreads about
Her tapestry of snow.
All around
In every town and country
Let us shout
Her praises as we go.
While we are a-playing
Sliding and a-sleighting
Let the sound
Re-echo high and low!

Come with me
Where all the water's frozen.
See today
What Nature's hand has done.
There you'll see
The places she has chosen
For our play
Our jollity and fun.
While we are a-playing
Sliding and a-sleighting
Let our glee
Keep sorrow on the run!

They carry on with their play, but are interrupted by a fanfare of trumpets. They retire to one side of the stage and with interpolated giggles they sing as a line of CITY MEN enters, jauntily swinging their walking sticks as they march round in a circle.

CHILDREN. Here come the City Men! [giggle]
Such pretty men! [giggle]
Such witty men! [giggle]
Sing us a ditty, men!
Sing us a song of the town!
Sing of your city life,
Your gritty life,
Your witty life,
Your med-i-o-crity life
As you go up and down!

CITY MEN. We are the City Men [twirl walking sticks]
Such pretty men!
Such witty men!
When we've sung this ditty, then
We'll have no more to say.
We're home from the city life.
Our gritty life,
Our witty life,
Home to a pretty wife
To end a perfect day!

They stop and face the audience in a line.

We are Men of daring!
Trumpet fanfare.
Hear the trumpets blaring!
Trumpet fanfare.

Yet we're declaring
 Fanfare.
We find life very wearing
As you shall quickly see!

They go round in a circle once more.

For it's
Up to the city on the early morning train.
In the city sitting pretty
Until back we go again.
A life of mere utility
Is one of sheer futility.
Up we go, down we go,
It's really most inane!

We are the mighty minions
Of commerce and of trade.
And all our trite opinions
Are neatly ready-made.
For all the views that we express
Are taken from the "penny press."
 Talking shop.
 Without a stop.
A garrulous brigade.

Our clothes are most respectable
In very perfect taste.
They're always most delectable
(Though bulging at the waist).
But if you should examine it
You'll find there's not all jam in it.
For hills and hills of tailors' bills
Are what we haven't faced!

Life is not at all for us
A thrilling interlude.
The writing's on the wall for us
(We'd like to make it rude)
But it must always be our fate
To copy out (in triplicate)
 Swarms and swarms
 Of silly forms
In sorry solitude!

Our ways are not sententious.
A steady life we crave.
We're not at all pretentious.
We crave to slave to save.

And wrapped in sheer obscurity,
No past and no futurity,
Dick and Tom,
Travel from
The cradle to the grave.
And we're fine old English Gentlemen,
All of this golden age!

*The CITY MEN retire opposite to the children as a chorus of
Victorian housewives enters.*

LADIES.

In days secure and spacious,
So formal and so gracious,
We ladies, most loquacious,
Pay our daily call.
And habited most neatly.
Demurely and discreetly,
We smile upon you sweetly,
From our pedestal!

MEN.

In days secure and spacious,
So formal and so gracious,
These ladies, most loquacious,
Pay their daily call.
They're habited most neatly,
Demurely and discreetly,
And smile upon us sweetly,
From their pedestal!

LADIES. We idolise you menfolk!

MEN. We love you, too!

LADIES. Flatter you so, and then joke.

MEN. As women do!

LADIES. Our stilted locomotion
Can't give you any notion
Of our profound devotion,
We are not what we seem.

MEN. Although they're sentimental,
So calm, and oh! so gentle,
And very ornamental,
Yet they reign supreme!

LADIES. Yes, we reign supreme!

They all face the audience.

[Tearfully] Now we'll be leaving you,
Forcing a smile,
Pity us our fate,
Our poor Suburban State,
Pardon our grieving you
Just for a while,
With this mournful roundelay,
We are but men, like you,
Ah, yes, but then, like you,
Full well we ken like you
The sadness of life!

CITY MEN.
Fiercely inside us burn,
Like anthracite.
Pity us our fate,
Our metabolic rate!

CITY MEN.
Longings that brightly burn,
By day and night,
Though what they mean
We cannot say.

CHILDREN. Life is sad!
[Tearfully]

CHORUS. Yes, life is sad!

CHILDREN. But we can add.

CHORUS. Yes, we can add
There's comfort in a tearful eye!

CHORUS. Back to our domicile,
Cheerful and bright,
Pity us our fate,
Our matrimonial state.
There we will bide awhile
Just for tonight,
For strength to face the coming day!
For

CITY MEN.
We are the City Men!
Such pretty men!
Such witty men!
When we've sung this ditty,
then,
We'll have no more to say.
We're home from the city
life!
Our witty life!
Our gritty life!
Home to a pretty wife
To end a perfect day!
A perfect day!

LADIES.
Brightly inside us burn.
Burning by day and night.
Pity us our fate,
Our metabolic rate!

LADIES.
Brightly they burn,
Fiercely they churn,
Inside us now.

OTHERS.
They are the City Men.
Such pretty men.
Such witty men.
When they've sung this
ditty, then,
They'll have no more to say,
Etc.

The CHORUS depart, leaving the CHILDREN on the stage. They are about to do more snowballing, when ERNEST LEIGH appears and interrupts them.

E.L. Now then, you lot, not so much noise, please. The people round here like a bit of peace and quiet you know. If you want to play around, there's always the heath or the downs.

TOMMY [correctly]. Oh, yes, we know that all right, Mr. Leigh; as a matter of fact, we were on our way there.

E.L. Yes, and you can't get into any mischief there either. I'll be bound. I know you lot well enough.

TOMMY [blandly]. What us—us? We—we would never dream of doing anything naughty, would we? You see, we are demure, modest, obedient, well brought up, affectionate, loving children of Victorian perfection. [He clasps his chest, and waves his other arm.] Our little loving hearts go out to all in dewy-eyed affection [sighs]. We know no slang, no improper speech, no back-chat, no ungrammatical English, no rough words. We go to bed early, rise early in the morning, clean our shoes regularly, and practise the piano three hours a day at least.

COLIN. Words such as "legs" are unknown to us; ankles we have never dreamt of. Our trousers we refer to as "unmentionables." We are always tidy, clean, neat and properly dressed, and our hair is always brushed. Occasionally we are seen; we are, however, rarely heard.

RODNEY. We're always most polite [attitude].

1ST BOY. And we never, *never* fight [attitude].

1ST GIRL. We brush our teeth at night [attitude].

2ND BOY [grinning fiendishly]. And do nothing out of spite.

2ND GIRL. Our mothers think us dears [attitude].

3RD BOY. When we wash behind our ears [holds ears].

3RD GIRL. Our bearing's most demure [attitude].

4TH BOY. Our thoughts are ever pure [stares blankly].

4TH GIRL. We are trained to faint [she reels].

5TH BOY. And we never say "I ain't" [cockney].

ALL. In short, we're creatures of perfection,
Never subject to correction.
We never fail, oh
Never!
We wear a halo
Ever!

E.L. [sarcastically]. Is that so? Very well, Angels, I'll trust you for once, but I should get along now while there's still time. Spread your little wings and hop it. Oh, by the way, are you lot doing any carol singing this year?

TOMMY. Oh, yes! Mr. Sharpe, our choirmaster, has been training us to raise money for the organ fund. Our pure voices will rend the impure air.

E.L. Oh, will they? Well, remember, none of that Good King Wenceslas stuff through the letter box this year. And if you lot are as good as you think you are, perhaps you could help me as well. I want you to keep your eyes skinned for a couple of burglars we believe to be in the district.

COLIN. Burglars? Oh, rapture! But how should we recognise them?

E.L. Well, the funny thing is, they're exactly alike—identical twins we call them.

TOMMY. Do you think you'll catch them?

E.L. Who, me? Oh, you never can tell, really. It isn't as easy as all that, you know. These things require great thought, you know, great thought. Thinking comes before action, as they say. I've been thinking all my life now.

On many things I've pondered,
It's a habit that I've had
Ever since I was a lad,
And all my time I've squandered
With my solitary repartee,
When thinking I'm in clover,
With the very greatest care,
Build my castles in the air,
And then I knock them over,
Improvising my philosophy.

CHILDREN. For he is Ernest!

E.L. At my sternest
When my thinking must be done.

CHILDREN. Life is real.

E.L. I am earnest!

CHILDREN. Life and Ernest must be one!

E.L. I chose a job, no wonder,
To combine a manner sage
With a weekly working wage,
Where I could freely ponder
And give my brain its proper due.
You may not think it proper
To discover such pursuits
With their intellectual roots,
Yet any British copper
Has a cerebellum same as you!

CHILDREN. For he is Ernest.
E.L. At my sternest, etc.

Air "In Cellar Cool"

And now I think I'll get along
And so resume my thinking,
For I can see that on my song
The sun is quickly sinking.
But from my thoughts I'll not retreat
I'll face them without shrinking.
But always while I'm on the beat
I'm thinking, thinking, thinking,
T - H - I - N - K - I - N - G.

Exit ERNEST LEIGH thoughtfully, the children gazing after him somewhat puzzled.

At this point, there is the sound of someone calling off-stage

Wuffles! Wuffles!

TOMMY. Who on earth is that? Oh! Victoria Station!
It's Mrs. Nothing.

Enter MRS. NOTHING, a rather tall, thin lady, somewhat overdressed. Her conversation is somewhat exaggerated and high-pitched. She holds a dog-lead in one hand.

MRS. N. Wuf-fles! Wuf-fles!

TOMMY [rather over-polite]. Good afternoon, Mrs. Nothing. Is anything amiss?

MRS. N. Oh, Tommy, dear boy, it's my dear little dog, Wuffles, that's missing. Tell me, have you seen him anywhere? I've lost him completely.

TOMMY. No, I'm afraid not, Mrs. Nothing; but we'll keep our eyes open for him.

MRS. N. Oh! thank you, Tommy, dear boy, thank you. That is most kind and thoughtful of you. Oh where, where can he be? Now let me see, perhaps he went in here. [She looks up at Jasper Grasper's house.] Oh, by the way, do you children know who lives here?

TOMMY. No, Mrs. Nothing, but I'm sure *you* do.

MRS. N. Why, of course I do, dear boy, of course I do! However did you guess!

The CHILDREN look at each other and roll their eyes.

Why it's the house of the famous, or should I say notorious, Jasper Grasper. They do say he's the greatest

miser and the meanest man who's ever lived—why, he's never been known to give away a penny. They say he's been like that ever since he lost his two baby sons, for they were kidnapped when they were quite, quite tiny. Such a tragedy, such a tragedy [sighs] and such a nice man, really!

COLIN. That sounds interesting! What's he like, Mrs. Nothing? Do, do tell us.

CHILDREN. Yes, do, do tell us, do!

They all crowd round MRS. NOTHING in the centre of the stage. Music starts and she looks half coy and half bewildered, darting her glance from one to the other, obviously pleased to be the centre of attraction.

BOYS. Would you say that he was happy?
GIRLS. Or his temper rather snappy?
BOYS. Is he thrifty?
GIRLS. Shaking fifty?
BOYS. Goes out fishing when he can?
GIRLS. Does he live alone or mingle?
BOYS. Is he married, is he single?
GIRLS. Plays at poker?
BOYS. Is a smoker?
GIRLS. Or a strong and silent man?

As before:

[or individually]

Is he ill or is he healthy?
(Though we know he's very wealthy)
Does he chatter?
Can he flatter?
Is he fussy with his food?
Does he have a funny feeling?
Underneath a sloping ceiling?
Is he burly?
Rather surly?
Or invariably rude?

Is he loose, or very rigid?
Very hot, or very frigid?
Has he beauty?
Is he snooty?
Is he fat or is he thin?
Does he practise acrobatics?
Does he suffer from rheumatics?
Does he fret much?
Does he bet much?
Can he sew or can he spin?

Is he very hale and hearty?
Rather nervous at a party?
Likes to ramble?
Or to gamble?
Has a gossip for a wife?
Is he effortless and tireless?
Fond of listening to the wireless?
Fond of reading?
Or of speeding?
Eating green peas with a knife?

Is he always pleasure questing?
Fond of saving or investing?
Keeps up horses
For race courses?
Has a morbid fear of tramps?
Is he rather overbearing?
Or a little hard of hearing?
Fond of riding?
Or of gliding?
Or collecting foreign stamps?

Is he very fond of racing?
Rather shy and self-effacing?
Is he plucky?
Is he lucky?
Knows the riddle of the sphinx?
Does he have attacks of fainting
At the sight of modern painting?
Has a liking
To go hiking?
Or of snatching forty winks?

MRS. N. That makes thirty-nine plus one.
[quasi Rossini]

CHILDREN. That's exactly forty winks!

MRS. N. That makes thirty-nine plus one.

CHILDREN. That's *exactly* forty winks!

This leaves MRS. N. rather exhausted.

MRS. N. Oh, dear me, one question at a time, please, one question at a time. Well, all I know is that he is very wealthy, but he hardly ever spends anything, only money for the barest necessities. He won't even have a servant in the house, as he says he can't afford one. He's been like that ever since his two baby sons—twins, they were, too—were mysteriously kidnapped. And now he's a widower, all by

himself in this lonely, lonely house. So tragic! So, so tragic! And he's been a miser ever since. He must have hundreds of gold sovereigns in his house now, for he doesn't use a bank; he says he doesn't trust them.

COLIN. [Thinks.] Well, if he's got all *that* money in his house, why surely we could get *something* out of him. It's all in a good cause, after all.

RODNEY. Yes, we might try some of our carols on him; that'll make him or break him, I fancy.

MRS. N. Oh no, dear boy, you'll never be able to get a penny out of him—it's been tried many times before, you know, but it's never been successful. He has one great charity which he dotes upon and will give anything to—himself.

TOMMY [thoughtfully]. He might give us something for going away!

MRS. N. Do you know, I feel so certain, so very, very certain that he won't give you anything that I'll make a wager with you over it—there now, aren't I rash? [giggles.]

CHILDREN. Gambling, Mrs. Nothing? We are very, very shocked!

MRS. N. Ah, but this isn't gambling, dear children, it's a certainty. Besides, as you say, it's all in a good cause. Listen very carefully to my plan and to my offer—it's most, most generous!

The children gather round her again.

TOMMY [sarcastically aside to the audience]. The plot thickens!

During the following number, the CHORUS of passers by and neighbours assembles and joins the group.

MRS. N. [Sings.] Now listen all, to me.

CHILDREN. Oh, fa la la la la la, fa la la la la la!

MRS. N. I have a plan, you see!

CHILDREN. Oh, fa la, etc.

MRS. N. Tonight abandon everything,
To Jasper's house your fellows bring,
And underneath his window sing
So—beautifully.

CHILDREN. Beautifully?

MRS. N. Beautifully!

CHORUS. Beautifull-ee!

MRS. N. This plan you must pursue.

CHILDREN. Oh, fa la, etc.

MRS. N. Then this is what I'll do.

CHORUS. Oh, fa la, etc.

MRS. N. Although I'm very poor, but yet,
I'll have with you a little bet.
For every penny that you get,
I'll add another one.

CHILDREN. 'nother one?

MRS. N. Another one.

ALL. Another one, too!

CHILDREN [hopelessly]. Oh, that is kind of you [minor key].

ALL. Oh, fa la, etc.
[or MRS. N., coyly]

CHILDREN. We're very grateful, too.

ALL [or MRS. N.] Oh, fa la, etc.

TOMMY. Do not our talents overate,
Our singing's in a shocking state,
And as to how we'll operate,
We haven't a——

MRS. N. Haven't a?

CHILDREN. Haven't a ——

ALL. Haven't a clue!

MRS. N. I'll leave it all to you.

ALL. Oh, fa la, etc.

MRS. N. To try and see it through.

ALL. Oh, fa la, etc.

MRS. N. So try to put a spurt on,
Though Jasper, I'm quite certain,
Will, through his iron curtain,
Keep an eye on

CHILDREN. Iron?

MRS. N. Eye on

ALL. Eye on you!

TOMMY. Right then, Mrs. Nothing. The wager is on!
For every penny we get, you'll add another one to it, no matter
what way we do it, as I construe it.

MRS. N. Yes, I must be the judge to see how you carry
it out. But stick to the plan carefully. Come to the house
tonight at about half past eight, and decide upon your plan.

But I should try singing to him if I were you; your sweet little voice may yet soften him to the tune of one halfpenny at least. Sing, sing for your supper. [Aside] I, too, must think and try to hatch a plan. This batch of boys may help me catch a man!

Exit MRS. NOTHING.

CHILDREN. [To Beethoven's Fifth Symphony.]

The Hand of Fate,

At half past eight,

Comes groping to enfold us!

O, wretched state!

Its horrid weight

Descends upon our shoulders!

COLIN. Oh dear, now we've done it! We've got to shatter his defences somehow; but perhaps he isn't so fearsome as Mrs. Nothing made out. Perhaps he's quite timid, really.

1ST GIRL. Yes, perhaps he's sweet, gentle, timid and nice, with the voice of a turtle dove!

ALL [sighing]. Ah! A turtle dove!

Suddenly, Jasper Grasper's bedroom window flings open, and Jasper himself appears in nightcap and nightdress. He flourishes a blunderbuss.

JASPER GRASPER. I am Jasper Grasper.

[singing in recitative] The Miser! [cackles loudly.]

CHORUS. He is Jasper Grasper, the Miser!

The children rush off in terror.

J.G. Although you may despise a miser,
Nevertheless, no one could be wiser than me.

You see,

I lean in one direction.

In fact, I have a predilection for gold.

I'm like the leaning tower of Pisa!

How I hate everybody,

I even hate myself!

The only thing I care for is gold!

Lovely - shining -

Aria Gold, Gold, Gold!

For it I am yearning,

Only Gold, Gold, Gold!

For it I am burning,

Only Gold!

CHILDREN [knees knocking]. Oooh!

2ND GIRL. And his mouth!

CHILDREN [clinging to each other]. Ooooooh!

TOMMY. Never mind, kids! We must get *something* from him *somehow* [soliloquizes]. Thinks— [holds his head and gazes up.] What *are* we poor, wee, darling, innocent children to do now, helpless against the tyranny of a hardened heart? Where are our friends? Who *can* help us most? Ah— We'll consult the oracle of Nature for an answer to our problem; [pompously, with great exaggeration.] The ethic obtained from the forces of Natural Selection!

CHILDREN. Oh, dear. Now we're in a plight,
[vigorously] What are we going to do?
Don't fear, this very night
A plan we must pursue.
We'll see if Nature can resolve
Our problem with a clue.
Oh, dear! The matter we must solve,
Or meet our Waterloo!

Bzz! Bzz! The busy, busy bee
Never falters in his stride.
Bzz! Bzz! Frequently
He lays his pride aside,
For he abandons everything
To keep his queen from harm.
Bzz! Bzz! Though we haven't got a sting
We have a strong right arm!

Mew! Mew! The artful pussy cat
Knows how to get his way.
Mew! Mew! He's very good at that.
He knows that charm can pay!
But though his fur is soft as silk,
His green eyes open wide,
Mew! Mew! He doesn't get his milk,
Until he's really tried!

Tweet! Tweet! The happy little bird
Carols from every tree.
Tweet! Tweet! For happy is the word
To match his melody.
And we must carol, too, of course,
If we would have our way.
Tweet! Tweet! Better than force,
Persuasion is, they say!

TOMMY [recitative].

Yes, we know we've got to sing, but what?

COLIN. Something which isn't slush, but rather lush!

CHILDREN Let's sing an old-time melody,
[in ridiculous attitudes] Designed to melt the hardest hearts,
And then infuse more potency
By singing it in several parts.
Ah, yes! Ah, yes!
By singing it in several parts.
And so to make the tune complete,
The tempo true, the cadence keen,
We'll make the mixture sugar-sweet
And add our share of saccharine!
Ah, yes! Ah, yes!
And add our share of saccharine!
Now Saul of old can testify,
That music can a mood reverse.
The hand that dabs a well-filled eye
Might wander to a well-filled purse!
Ah, yes! Ah, yes!
Might wander to a well-filled purse!

Exit the CHORUS and the CHILDREN. To menacing music and dimming lights NICK and NARK enter furtively. They are dressed like comic-paper burglars, and address the audience hoarsely and confidentially.

BOTH. We are two burglars,
Jolly lads are we,
Climbing pipes and pergulas,
Easy as can be.
We always work with greatest care,
And most efficiently,
But hark! Keep it dark!

NICK. Now I've a taste for jewellery,
Or anything I find,
And it seems so cruel to me,
To leave a thing behind.

NARK. We've even taken Cheddar Cheese
And only left the rind!

BOTH. But hark! Keep it dark!

NICK. Once we made a great mistake
[or Both] When setting out to rob,
For the safe we came to break
We thought an easy job.

NARK. We got the Forces Network
When we twiddled with the knob.

BOTH. But hark! Keep it dark!

NICK. The cost of Education, now,
Is really something cruel,
It won't affect the Nation,
If I break a little rule.

NARK. I'll have to crack a crib or two,
To keep my boy at School.

BOTH. But hark! Keep it dark!

BOTH. We're honest in our dealings,
Fraud is never our intent,
We own the finer feelings,
As our consciences we vent,
By returning to the owners goods
At only ten per cent!
But hark! Keep it dark!

[Changing key] We're fond of music, only,
Like the Nightingale or lark,
We carol while we're lonely,
Whilst we're working in the dark.

NICK. I whistle bits of Mozart.

NARK. And I'm very good at Bach,
But Hach! Keep it dach!

BOTH. Sometimes when we're working
We're as thirsty as can be.
We do not call it shirking,
As I hope that you'll agree,
When, like the Civil Service,
We brew up a cup of tea.
But hark! Keep it dark!

They face the audience with a fixed stare.

NARK. Is this the place, Nick?

NICK. This is the place, Nark!

NARK. Is this the house, Nick?

NICK. This is the house, Nark!

NARK. Is this the day, Nick?

NICK. This is the day, Nark!

NARK. Tonight, Nick?

NICK. Tonight, Nark!

NARK. At half-past eight, Nick?