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*Dramatic Publishing*

# **Gas and Candles**

**A Full-Length Comedy**

**By**

**DAVID HENRY WILSON**



**THE DRAMATIC PUBLISHING COMPANY**

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(GAS AND CANDLES)  
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**IN MEMORY OF JIMMY WAX,  
AND FOR THELMA WITH LOVE**

**GAS AND CANDLES**  
A Play In Two Acts  
For Two Men and One Woman

**CHARACTERS**

**FRANK MARTIN**.....aged seventy

**MARLENE MARTIN**.....aged sixty-seven

**DEPUTY ASSISTANT**

**CHIEF CONSTABLE HOWELL**.....aged fifty

**VOICES HEARD OFFSTAGE OR ON RADIO:**

**VARIOUS POLICEMEN**

**ANNOUNCER**

**REPORTER (COX)**

**MRS. POYNTON**

**THE SET:** The Martins' living room and kitchen. There is a door right leading to the hall, bedroom and bathroom - none of which is visible. The furniture is old and drab, and includes table and chairs, arm-chair(s), and an ancient TV set. On the walls are various posters of old films, and one large announcement of a personal appearance by Roger Livesey at the Majestic Cinema. The kitchen section contains a gas stove, a sink unit, cupboard and a clothes line. The overall effect is one of bareness and poverty, although the flat is clean and tidy.

ACT ONE

SCENE ONE

AT RISE OF CURTAIN: MARLENE is huddled over the gas stove. FRANK enters.

FRANK. Bit cold in here.

MARLENE. There's a power cut.

FRANK. This time o' the morning?

MARLENE. They're early risers.

FRANK. Who?

MARLENE. The power cutters.

FRANK. There's no power cutters. There's only power workers.

MARLENE. That's their story.

FRANK. Well, light the fire.

MARLENE. What with? (FRANK looks round and grunts.) You'll just have to keep moving, that's all.

FRANK. Where to?

MARLENE. Buckingham Palace. Around. Move around.

FRANK. I can't keep moving around all day. Shove over. (He goes towards the stove, but as he arrives she turns off the gas and picks up the kettle.) What did you do that for?

MARLENE. It's boiled.

FRANK. I wanted to...

MARLENE. We can't afford it. (She makes a drink.) Come and have your breakfast. That'll warm you. (He looks at her, then sits at the table. She also sits. Pause.)

FRANK. Well?

MARLENE. Well what?

FRANK. Where's breakfast?

MARLENE. It's drawing.

FRANK. Bread?

MARLENE. There's a shortage. (Another pause. She pours out the drink.) Here. There's no sugar.

FRANK. Milk?

MARLENE. Not unless I get pregnant. (They drink.)

FRANK. Even the tea doesn't taste like tea.

MARLENE. It isn't. It's coffee.

FRANK. Can't tell the difference these days.

MARLENE. If you can't tell the difference, how do you know it doesn't taste like tea? (Pause.)

FRANK. I remember the old days. (Pause.)

MARLENE. Well?

FRANK. Eh?

MARLENE. I thought you were going to say something about the old days.

FRANK. I remember them, that's all.

MARLENE. Well, they've gone.

FRANK. I know they've gone. That's why I remember them. You can't remember something if it hasn't gone, can you? I mean, I can't remember tomorrow, can I?

MARLENE. Don't flog it.

FRANK. Had meat you could taste in those days. Eggs for breakfast. Meat for dinner.

MARLENE. We had money, too, in those days. At least, we had it till you got rid of it.

FRANK. What do you mean, got rid of it!

MARLENE. Sorry. Invested it. On horses that wouldn't win and football teams that wouldn't draw.

FRANK. I was always unlucky.

MARLENE. And your luck was always about to change. The next time that never came. Wasn't I always saying we should put something by for our old age?

FRANK. I might have made a fortune.

MARLENE. Between us we did make a fortune, over the years. Two lots of wages. We could have had a house of our own with the money you threw away, instead of renting this place. "Only temporary," he says, "till our ship comes home." Forty years waiting for disembarkation.

FRANK. We lived all right.

MARLENE. We did, so long as I hung on to my wages. Now look at us. I should have listened to Roger.

FRANK. Who's Roger? Oh no not him!

MARLENE. He told me that I was too good-looking to be selling ice-creams.

FRANK. The great ten-second love affair.

MARLENE. Well, he was right. But I had to go and fall for Fearless Frank, up in the little dark room.

FRANK. When you could have been on the silver screen with Rollicking Roger.

MARLENE. Maybe.

FRANK. And maybe Sam Goldwyn's lions ate popcorn. (Pause.) It was just bad luck they closed down the Majestic. Another few years...

MARLENE. Another few years would have made no difference. We'd still have had nothing but what the Government gives us.

FRANK. Well, I still don't see why we can't afford food. Other people eat.

MARLENE. We'll be able to eat on Friday.

FRANK. Other people don't have to wait until Friday to eat, do they?

MARLENE. Maybe other people don't have to pay the sky-high rent we pay, or the rates, or the gas, or the electricity, or your subscription to Rent-A-Grave. (She gets up and fetches a tin.) Here.

FRANK. What is it?

MARLENE. A matzah. Got it in Tesco. Reduced. (He takes one and eyes it suspiciously. He has a bite, and thinks about it.)

MARLENE. What's it like?

FRANK. Cardboard.

MARLENE. Dip it in your coffee. (He does and has another bite.) Well?

FRANK. Wet cardboard.

MARLENE. It's all there is, unless you want lunch for breakfast.

FRANK. What's for lunch?

MARLENE. A sausage.

FRANK. What would we have for lunch if we had it for breakfast?

MARLENE. Supper.

FRANK. And what's for supper?

MARLENE. Matzahs.

FRANK. Leave it. Sooner have something to look forward to. Can't you just light that thing for a few minutes...warm us up a bit?

MARLENE. We're supposed to economize.

FRANK. Not on gas. On fuel.

MARLENE. Gas is fuel.

FRANK. Gas is gas. Coal is fuel.

MARLENE. Gas is fuel. (She lights it all the same.) Don't suppose this'll make much difference to the balance of payments. (They both huddle up to the stove.)

FRANK. I remember when they were talking about nuclear power...cheap electricity we were going to have. Then the gas came along...cheap gas we were going to have. North Sea oil next. Then it'll be the sun. Bloody marvellous how they keep inventing these golden futures.

MARLENE. It was going to be gold when the war ended.

FRANK. Yes, "When the lights go on again." We've got less light now than we had then.

MARLENE. No use looking back.

FRANK. No use looking forward.

MARLENE. No use looking anywhere. Eat your matzah.

FRANK. If I could have my life over again... (Pause.)

MARLENE. Well?

FRANK. I'd go and be a native.

MARLENE. You are a native.

FRANK. I'm not.

MARLENE. You're a native of England.

FRANK. Not that sort of native...in the jungle!

MARLENE. You?

FRANK. Out of all this. They don't have economic crises in the jungle.

MARLENE. They have snakes and crocodiles instead.

FRANK. A life with Nature...it's healthier anyway.

MARLENE. Except for the diseases.

FRANK. What diseases?

MARLENE. You think they all die of ripe old age, do you? Malaria. Yellow Fever. They're all dead by the time they're thirty.

FRANK. No worries.

MARLENE. Not when they're dead. You don't have worries once you're dead.

FRANK. No. (Pause, as he thinks about this.)  
No.

MARLENE. Doesn't do any good talking about it anyway. Best to talk about cheerful things.

FRANK. Such as?

MARLENE. Cheerful things...that'll cheer you up. Like the chap who won half a million on the pools last week. Seventy-eight years old, and he won half a million.

FRANK. Be able to afford a nice funeral for himself then, won't he?

MARLENE. It'll make a difference to him.

FRANK. It won't make much difference to me, though, will it? Unless he sends me some of it.

MARLENE. It might happen to you.

FRANK. I think the world's coming to an end.

MARLENE. Now don't start, Frank.

FRANK. More you think about it...war, floods, famines...(She takes the cups and saucers to wash up.)

MARLENE. Like a broody chicken once you start; sitting on your little miseries.

FRANK. Economic crises, the Middle East, Ireland, all these bomb attacks, hi-jackings, kidnappings, shortages...

MARLENE (singing).

Now hands that do dishes  
Stay as soft as your face,  
With mild new Fairy Liquid.

FRANK. They should never have closed the Majestic. People would have come back. Half a lifetime cooped up in there, and what have I got to show for it now? Roger Bloody Livesey on the living room wall. Marl, how did we get so poor?

MARLENE. I told you. Investments.

FRANK. That lad next door...

MARLENE. Pete?

FRANK. He goes in the bookies. I've seen him. But they're never short. Two cars, clothes, cigarettes.

MARLENE. He's got a job, hasn't he?

FRANK. He's got two jobs. Clocks in on one, nips out the back and clocks in on number two. Told me himself. He's paid for loading when he's delivering and he's paid for delivering when he's loading. Bloody fiddler. That's what's wrong with England today. Everybody's fiddling and nobody does an honest day's work.

MARLENE. We used to do an honest day's work, and look where it got us. Maybe we should have fiddled. Could have had a nice cheap council house and eggs for breakfast.

FRANK. The world's coming to an end. Capitalists, Communists, they're all as bad as each other. Over there they daren't say anything, and over here they daren't do anything. And we'll all finish up frazzled.

MARLENE. Oh stop being such a misery-guts. You've been forecasting the end of the world ever since we got married.

FRANK. Doesn't say much for our marriage, does it?

MARLENE (singing).

Nuts! Whole hazel nuts!

Cadburys make them

And they cover them with chocolate!

Come on, stop making love to the gas stove  
and let's go out.

FRANK. Out?

MARLENE. Out in the world, while it's still there.

FRANK. I don't want to go out. Nothing to go out for.

MARLENE. What is there to stay in for?

FRANK. Nothing.

MARLENE. We could go over to the Welfare Office. See if they'll tide us over.

FRANK. I'm not going there again.

MARLENE. They might give us some money, Frank.

FRANK. No. I'm not scraping my knees for a handout. Get ping-ponged from one department to another, queue for four hours and finish up with a ten-page form in double Dutch.

MARLENE. They might give us a luncheon voucher.

FRANK. I'm not going. Anyway, how would we get there?

MARLENE. We can use our free ticket on the buses, if there are any buses.

FRANK. You go. I'm quite happy being miserable here.

MARLENE. I'm not going on my own.

FRANK. Why not?

MARLENE. You know I don't like being on my own. We could go to the Council, and you could make up one of your stories. That's always a bit of fun. Remember that time you complained of young women doing business in the old people's home...that was a good one.

FRANK. Yeh, that shook 'em up a bit.

MARLENE. Wonder if they ever followed it up.

FRANK. I've had some good ideas.

MARLENE. We could take a bus somewhere and do another one.

FRANK. Like when we went to the Police and told them you'd had your diamonds pinched.

MARLENE. I was scared then.

FRANK. I couldn't do it now.

MARLENE. You could.

FRANK. No point.

MARLENE. We had a laugh.

FRANK. No.

MARLENE. Let's go out, Frank.

FRANK. It's the end of the world now. What you said was right. There'll be no worries when we're dead.

MARLENE. I want to go out.

FRANK. Marlene.

MARLENE. What?

FRANK. Let's do it.

MARLENE. You'll come?

FRANK. Let's kill ourselves. (Pause.)

MARLENE. No.

FRANK. Just shove our heads in there...all be over, and we wouldn't even have to pay the bill.

MARLENE. There's only room for one head in there.

FRANK. You could go first.

MARLENE. Frank! Is there another woman?

FRANK. Don't talk rot!

MARLENE. Well, I'm not killing myself.

FRANK. There's the sleeping pills.

MARLENE. No.

FRANK. I could get some more from the Doctor. He doesn't mind giving you pills, so long as he doesn't have to look at you. We could go to bed, take 'em and flake right out.

MARLENE. You need your head examined.

FRANK. We could do it like a protest. Swap our pension for a gallon of petrol, and set fire to ourselves. Outside Number Ten.

MARLENE. They'd probably come out and warm their hands on us. You shouldn't talk like that, Frank, you shouldn't.

FRANK. I mean it. I've had enough. They've knocked us around all our lives; no one's going to lift us up now. I'd rather know how it's going to happen...choose my own way.

MARLENE. I don't want to die yet, and that's all I've got to say about it. You can stop that talk.

FRANK. We could get the TV people here. Have to let 'em know in advance. Who should we get...BBC or ITV? Best get BBC...the others'll put in an advert just as you light the match. I could make a speech. They might pay us a bit of attention then.

MARLENE. You'll get your attention in a padded cell. Here! (She picks up the kettle and pushes it against his hand.)

FRANK. Ow! What did you do that for, you...?

MARLENE. Hurt, didn't it?

FRANK. Of course it bloody hurt.

MARLENE. Burnt you. (Pause, as the message sinks in.) You'd like that all over, would you? (Pause, for recovery.)

FRANK. It doesn't have to be burning.

MARLENE. Going to jump off the top of Nelson's column, are you?

FRANK. Might do.

MARLENE. How are you going to get up there? By pigeon? Anyway, you never could stand heights. The man who wanted a safety net to clean the bedroom window.

FRANK. I'll find a way. There's no hurry. I'll think it out.

MARLENE. You think of something else. I don't like it.

FRANK. What do you want to go on for? We're just a couple of fag-ends. I can't take any more...no money, no food, nobody interested. If we did die now, quietly, in here, there's not a bloody soul in this world would bat an eyelid. Not a bloody soul. (Pause.)

MARLENE. Perhaps...if I could have had children... (A moment of emotion.)

FRANK. Best thing that ever happened to us - not having children. Who wants to bring children into this mess?

MARLENE. They'd be grown-up by now.

FRANK. And unemployed, and cursing us black and blue. England's finished, and the world's rotten.

MARLENE. We could emigrate.

FRANK. Where to, the moon?

MARLENE. England's not so bad, anyway. I wouldn't like to go to France. All that garlic.

FRANK. You said you liked France.

MARLENE. Not to live. It was all right for our honeymoon.

FRANK. I expect it's changed by now.

MARLENE. At least in England we can talk to people

FRANK. Who do we ever talk to?

MARLENE. Each other.

FRANK. We could talk to each other in France.

MARLENE. They speak French in France.

FRANK. We don't.

MARLENE. But they do.

FRANK. We wouldn't speak to them.

MARLENE. That's what I mean.

FRANK. Well, we're not emigrating. I'm going to kill myself.

MARLENE. And what about me?

FRANK. We'll both go together.

MARLENE. I'm not going.

FRANK. Then I'll go on my own.

MARLENE. Selfish.

FRANK. If you can give me one good reason why I should stay in this lousy world, I'll stay. One reason.

MARLENE. Me. (Pause.) Well?

FRANK. I want you to come with me.

MARLENE. Well, I won't.

FRANK. That's not a very good reason, then, is it?

MARLENE. Why not?

FRANK. Because...you should come with me. I mean, it's not a reason if you say you won't.

MARLENE. I'm not ready to die, and you're supposed to look after me, and love me and cherish me.

FRANK. Till death us do part, that's all.

MARLENE. You're not supposed to commit suicide. You don't love me - that's the truth of it.

FRANK. Course I love you. That's why I want you to come with me.

MARLENE. If you loved me, you'd want us to stay alive together. I don't find it very loving if you want to pour a gallon of petrol over me and send me up in flames.

FRANK. Ha...burning passion!

MARLENE. I'm not laughing.

FRANK. We've had our innings. Things'll only get worse, now.

MARLENE. As far as I'm concerned, nothing is worse than dying. I don't care if I have to eat matzahs for the rest of my life, so long as I'm still here.

FRANK. You won't always be here!