

THE KING'S COINER

The true story of Isaac Newton, detective

A radio drama by Philip Palmer

BBC Radio Afternoon Theatre
Producer: Toby Swift

FOR EDUCATION PURPOSES ONLY

SCENE 1

ACOUSTIC: A ROOM IN A BOARDING HOUSE.

CHALONER: You are very beautiful. Let me hold your hand. Oh yes. And let your eyes look into mine. I can see your soul. You are full of love. You will meet a man, and he will love you in return. He will be...dark haired. With a ferocious temper. But kind. He'll hold your hand, as I am holding it now, and he will stroke your arm...

HOLLOWAY: Steady on, man.

CHALONER: Play the part Tom. He will be a tailor by trade. You will have five children. Four girls, and a boy.

HOLLOWAY: Can't I have all boys?

CHALONER: But beware. Beware of water!

HOLLOWAY: This is going to work for us, is it?

CHALONER: Trust me. I'll make us a fortune.

HOLLOWAY: I preferred the thieving.

CHALONER: I'll do the talking. My name is Dr Huygens, I am Dutch. No, my name is Dr Paracelus, I am from Germany. I also dabble in alchemy.

HOLLOWAY: If you touch my arse, doctor, will it turn to gold?

CHALONER: It will feel like gold, but tragically, t'will smell the same.

HOLLOWAY:

Ha!

SCENE 2

ACOUSTIC: ROYAL MINT, WALKING PAST THE
PRINTING PRESSES.

NEWTON:

The mills start up at four of the morning. And I am always here to watch them. Otherwise, the men will smoke and gossip and waste whole minutes.

HALIFAX:

This place stinks like the very devil.

NEWTON:

Horse shit and molten gold, a heady brew. We have ten mills, fifty horses. Each of these men has his allotted task, the sizers, the nealers, the blanchers, the markers, the coiners. When I first came, I made a study of every man, every step and motion made. If you co-ordinate the action of the press and the movement of the coiner, a single man can flick out a coin and insert a new blank between fifty and fifty five times a minute. I count them. Even when I am not here, they feel me counting them.

NEWTON AND HALIFAX WALK ON THROUGH THE
MINT, PAST THE MILLS AND PRESSES.

HALIFAX:

You've done fine work, Isaac.

NEWTON:

(ACID) I know.

HALIFAX:

But?

NEWTON: When you offered me this position, you said you needed help with the great task of re-coinage. You told me that as Chancellor you wanted a man you could rely upon.

HALIFAX: I meant every word of it.

NEWTON: You omitted to say it would be part of my role to investigate and apprehend felons.

HALIFAX: It's a necessary evil, Isaac. A job that no one else would want to do.

NEWTON: It's a job that I do not want to do! These counterfeiters and coin-clippers are the very dregs of society. What's worse, everyone knows that my agents are corrupt, and the constant vilifying of them is a reflection upon me. I am also exposed to the calumnies of Coyners and Newgate Solicitors, who accuse me of the vilest crimes. Charles, I cannot endure a moment more of it!

HALIFAX: (UNIMPRESSED) What can I do to help?

NEWTON: (QUICK AS A FLASH) I need a clerk.

HALIFAX: Isaac! We've funded the regional mints, we've increased your manpower. The Treasury can't afford to....

NEWTON: I need a clerk, or I'll throw over the whole damned business. You can find some other fool to run your Mint.

PAUSE.

HALIFAX: Very well, you shall have your clerk.

SCENE 3

ACOUSTIC: A ROOM IN AN INN.

CHALONER: What took you?

HOLLOWAY: Damn you William, I could have been killed! All because you chose to feel your way to heaven with the baker's wife.

CHALONER: It was worth it.

HOLLOWAY: It was worth it for you!

CHALONER: Ah, sweet Isabelle!

HOLLOWAY: They told me her name was Maria.

CHALONER: Perhaps. In the heat of the moment, names sometimes escape me. You're bleeding, let me...

HOLLOWAY: Leave it! You've done enough harm. Will, I'm sick to the stomach of this quack doctoring.

CHALONER: And so am I! I have another trade I'd like to resume. In Warwickshire, you know, I was a craftsman. Acknowledged master of the Birmingham groat.

HOLLOWAY: (ANXIOUS) Counterfeiting's a hanging offence.

CHALONER: Getting caught is a hanging offence, Tom. Here, here, look at this.

HOLLOWAY LOOKS.

HOLLOWAY: It's a piece of earth.

CHALONER: Break it open.

HE DOES.

HOLLOWAY: A shilling.

CHALONER: Take it out. You see the impression left inside the two pieces of clay? That's the perfect impersonation of your shilling. Here, give me all your money.

HOLLOWAY: We could try using your money.

CHALONER: Don't be timid. Stoke the fire. Put the coins in the ladle. The real Paracelsus claimed he could turn lead into gold. But here we start with silver, melt it, add some base metal.

HOLLOWAY: Is that hot enough?

CHALONER: Pour the coins in.

A CHINK OF COINS.

CHALONER (CONT'D) We take silver coins and turn them into thick, thick broth. Adulterate, dilute, transform. You know I love a bit of magic. That's why I liked the prophet business: you spin a yarn, look a girl in the eye, then magic the skirt over her head. Ah, happy days! No matter, this will be better. Stir, stir. Look at that, oh you beauty.

SCENE 4

ACOUSTIC: NEWTON'S HOUSE, DINING ROOM.

HALIFAX: Calm yourself, Isaac. It's an anonymous broadside, we should ignore it.

NEWTON: It was drafted by Leibnitz himself! Trust me, I know his style. That conniving, sly, beetle-headed lawyer!

CATHERINE: Which discovery is the writer referring to?

NEWTON: Hush Catherine, don't interrupt!

HALIFAX: Fluxions, my dear. What Leibnitz refers to as 'the calculus'. Isaac, my advice to you is to say nothing. Take the moral high ground.

NEWTON: Leibnitz received my private letters on this matter and never acknowledged the fact!

CATHERINE: Lord Halifax, pray forgive me - what exactly are fluxions?

NEWTON: Chatter chatter chatter! For pity's sake a man can't hear himself think!

HALIFAX: That's unkind, Isaac, your niece was merely...

CATHERINE: (OVERLAPPING) I'm sorry, I didn't mean to...

NEWTON: Leibnitz is a charlatan! He knows no mathematics!

HALIFAX: Oh for heaven's sake! Give the man some credit.

NEWTON: He is my enemy and I shall destroy him!

CATHERINE: Perhaps, uncle, we could invite Mr Leibnitz to dine?
Repair the breach somehow?

DEADLY SILENCE.

NEWTON: (SCORNFUL) An excellent notion! We'll lay out our best silverware, and search him as he leaves to see how many knives he's stolen!

CATHERINE: Oh no, searching him would be very crude. I propose we count the knives before he comes, count again when he's gone, then simply subtract. A rather more elegant mathematical method, don't you think?

HALIFAX ROARS WITH LAUGHTER. NEWTON IS ALSO AMUSED.

NEWTON: (KINDLY) Fluxions is a method based on infinitesimal approximations. You find the slope of a curved line by drawing a tangent that's approximately the same.

(CONT'D OVER)

NEWTON (CONT'D): And then a closer tangent. And a closer tangent still. You sneak up on the truth, with ten million tiny footsteps. This is Newton's method, and it allows me to formulate the laws of motion, among many other things. Do you understand any of that child?

CATHERINE: Very little. (BEAT) But tomorrow, I shall try to know a little more. The day after, a little more still.

NEWTON: (AMUSED) Very good. (BRUSQUE) I'll give you some tuition. In the mornings, 11 till 12.

CATHERINE: Uncle, I....

NEWTON: Be sure I never have to wait on you.

SCENE 5

ACOUSTIC: WITHIN THE WALLS OF THE TOWER
OF LONDON.

HOLLOWAY: I don't feel comfortable here. Look at that pike.

CHALONER: Just walk with a swagger, make it look like you own the place.

HOLLOWAY: That's Traitor's Gate, I lost both great grandparents down there. And they've got prison cells in there, in the White Tower.

CHALONER: Not for the likes of you and me, Tom. That's incarceration for the Quality, that is.

HOLLOWAY: Are you sure this is such a good idea, William?

CHALONER: It can't fail. Here we go, the Royal Mint is this tower here.

HOLLOWAY: I wonder if we're seeing the right person. They say that the Master of the Mint, Thomas Neale, is a man you can do business with.

CHALONER: No, no. Neale has palms so greasy, it's a wonder he can take a piss. He'd be too smart for us. But this other man, he's an academic. Spent his entire life in a Cambridge college. Trust me, Tom; we'll run rings round him.

SCENE 6

ACOUSTIC: NEWTON'S CHAMBERS, THE ROYAL MINT.

NEWTON: Mr Holloway. Mr Chaloner. How can I help you?

CHALONER: Pleased to make your acquaintance, Mr Newton. Your reputation precedes...

NEWTON: Time presses, Mr Chaloner, how can I help you?

CHALONER: (WRONG-FOOTED) Well sir. Good question. A very fine question. (PAUSE) Let me go straight to the heart of the matter. (PAUSE) You sir, are a fine looking gentlemen.

NEWTON: Five seconds, then we're through.

CHALONER: And I can see you're also a proud man. Not one to suffer fools gladly. (INTERRUPTS HOLLOWAY, EVEN THOUGH HOLLOWAY HASN'T ACTUALLY SPOKEN)
No Tom! I have to speak my mind. (PAUSE) There's evil and corruption at the Royal Mint, Warden!

NEWTON: I wouldn't doubt that.

CHALONER: Bribes and backhanders. They say the Master, Mr Neale, is implicated. I've known of innocent men who've gone to jail, so the Master's agents could claim the reward money.

NEWTON: It is, indeed, a wicked world.

CHALONER: Aye, it is.

HOLLOWAY: It is, aye. Wicked.

LONG AWKWARD PAUSE.

CHALONER: If I can advise you any further in this matter, you only have to say the word.

LONG PAUSE.

You're not the garrulous kind, Warden. I admire that.

HOLLOWAY: The heart of it is, Warden...

CHALONER: No, no, Tom. We should be on our way.

HOLLOWAY: But we have a proposal to...

CHALONER: We have here a man who already knows the truth. See, Tom, how he meets my gaze. That's a man who needs no telling. He knows he is surrounded by knaves, and has contrived a strategy for the routing of them. Good day Mr Newton, it's rare to meet an honest man such as yourself.

CHALONER GETS TO HIS FEET.

Tom?

HOLLOWAY: We are going then?

CHALONER: I just said so, didn't I?

NEWTON: Wait.

PAUSE.

CHALONER: We are waiting.

NEWTON: What do you want of me?

CHALONER: I merely wish to be of service.

NEWTON: You want me to pay you for information? That can be arranged.

CHALONER: It must be vexing for an educated man like yourself to have to deal with coiners and clippers, the very tag rag and bobtail of society. I'm sure you've often thought to yourself: If only there was a way to nip this problem in the bud!

NEWTON: Your supposition is correct.

CHALONER: Take a look at this.

HE SPINS A COIN, NEWTON CATCHES.

NEWTON: It's a golden guinea.

CHALONER: Counterfeit.

NEWTON: Are you bribing me with counterfeit currency?

CHALONER: The devil I am! I want that back. But look at the workmanship. See how high the King's Head is raised.

NEWTON: It's better craftsmanship than any coin I make at the Mint.

CHALONER: And see how the edges are milled and grooved. No ordinary counterfeiter would have the patience or skill to do that. I made that coin myself. It took me a month.

NEWTON: You're an artist, sir.

CHALONER: I've taught the method to my friend Tom Holloway here. Give him a job at the Royal Mint, and he can make you a thousand coins as good. And then you'll find, as if by magic, all the counterfeiters will vanish from the Kingdom!

NEWTON: If I adopted this plan, what would your role be?

CHALONER: Well I'd work side by side with Tom. And I could help you, if you wished, with your Warden's duties. I could be your deputy.

NEWTON: Can you read?

CHALONER: (AFFRONTED) Indeed yes.

NEWTON: Without mumbling aloud?

CHALONER: That's an impossibly high standard to set, sir, for a man of my background.

NEWTON: I stand justly rebuked. What is your background, Mr Chaloner?

CHALONER: I am a humble weaver's son, sir.

NEWTON: You have intriguing qualities.

CHALONER: Thank you sir. You're a rare gentleman sir.

SCENE 7

ACOUSTIC: NEWTON'S HOUSE, DRAWING ROOM

CATHERINE: Uncle, are you leaving already?

NEWTON: (HEADING FOR THE DOOR) Yes, yes, the afternoon shift....

CATHERINE: (FIRM) You have a letter.

NEWTON: From Germany. Yes I saw.

CATHERINE: You should open it.

NEWTON: It would only vex me.

CATHERINE: It might be an apology from Leibnitz.

NEWTON: Pigs might fly.

CATHERINE: Uncle! Open your infernal post.

NEWTON: Pass it here.

HE READS.

As I thought. A trap. I have to leave.

HE MOVES TOWARDS THE DOOR.

CATHERINE: Uncle!

HE EDGES BACK.

NEWTON: (SULKY) Very well.

CATHERINE: Let me read.

SHE READS.

It's a challenge. A mathematical problem that the greatest minds in Europe have been unable to solve.

NEWTON: He wants to show me up.

CATHERINE: 'To determine the curve line connecting two given points, at different distances above the horizon and not in the same vertical line, along which a body passing by its own gravity shall descend to the lowest point in the shortest time possible.' Easy. A parabola.

NEWTON: You're not allowed to guess, Catherine.

CATHERINE: Or another curvy line, they all look much the same to me. But honestly Uncle, how hard can it be to solve this one?

NEWTON: I shan't even make the attempt.

CATHERINE: But you have to.

NEWTON: Can't you see! If I fail, Leibnitz will taunt me. If I succeed, he'll know I used calculus, and I'll once again stand accused of being a common thief.

CATHERINE: But you invented calculus!

NEWTON: Catherine, no!

CATHERINE: (COOL) Then I shall write and inform Mr Leibnitz that you have declined his challenge, on the grounds that you no longer have a head for the mathematics. There's no shame in that, Uncle, is there?

NEWTON SIGHS.

SCENE 8

ACOUSTIC: NEWTON'S STUDY AT HOME.

NIGHT/EARLY HOURS OF MORNING.

CATHERINE: Uncle?

NEWTON: Yes Catherine?

CATHERINE: It's late.

NEWTON: I will not sleep tonight. My head is alive with thoughts. If only we knew today what the Ancients knew. All knowledge was theirs. And for all our industry, and invention, all we can ever hope to do is...catch up.

CATHERINE: Perhaps in some areas, we know more than they.

NEWTON: No. Not so. (PAUSE) My work is not complete. But I don't know how to finish it.

CATHERINE: You have your book on Optics, still unpublished.

NEWTON: But even so, I'm still no closer to knowing how it all fits together. Through the study of the frame of nature, we can come to a knowledge of the deity. I could know God. I could stand at his shoulder, and stare in his eyes.

CATHERINE: You expect too much of yourself.

NEWTON: I have half turned the key in the lock.

CATHERINE: You're tired. You should go to bed.

NEWTON: I do feel...(SLURRING SLIGHTLY, THROUGH EXHAUSTION)...very tired.

CATHERINE: Perhaps you need to spend a few days away from the Mint. So you can look at Leibnitz's problem with fresh eyes.

PAUSE.

NEWTON: Oh that. That. I solved that little puzzle three hours ago.

CATHERINE: You solved it. In a night?

NEWTON: (WITH FRESH ENERGY) It's a cycloid. You know what a cycloid is? This shape here. I had to devise some new mathematics to get there, but the result is certain. Cycloid!

CATHERINE: Cycloid indeed. Well, well. That's one in the eye for that damned German lawyer!

NEWTON AND CATHERINE SHARE A LAUGH.

SCENE 9

ACOUSTIC: A TAVERN.

CHALONER: We could go elsewhere. If you're uncomfortable. The Blue Boar is not your roughest kind of public house, but it does have its detractors.

NEWTON: I am quite content. I spend much of my time these days in taverns and prisons.

CHALONER: Get that down you.

NEWTON: I've never been a drinking man.

CHALONER: Nor I. Abstemious to a fault, that's me. (DRINKS) Aside from the drink, and the women.

NEWTON: Nicely qualified.

CHALONER: I'm a master of the judicious qualification, sir.

NEWTON: On the subject of which we last spoke: there are financial implications. The cost per coin is too great.

CHALONER: That's damned depressing news.

NEWTON: But that's not to say we might not find some other way of working together.

CHALONER: Ah, now my spirits soar.

NEWTON: I make no promises though.

CHALONER: And hence, my spirits plummet! Soar, plummet, soar, plummet, damn me, that pint of ale has vanished itself away.

NEWTON: Let me buy the next. (CAUTIOUS) I may have a vacancy for a clerk at the Mint.

PAUSE.

CHALONER: Now, that would be of interest to me. Would you care to play a hand of cards sir?

NEWTON: I'd be of little use. I haven't played since my student days.

CHALONER: I bet you're a dab hand at counting the cards though.

NEWTON: It is, in truth, one of my accomplishments. (WITH A LAUGH) Shall we play for pennies?

CHALONER LAUGHS: MEANING, YES.

CHALONER: I warn you, Mr Newton: I have the luck of the devil.

SCENE 10

ACOUSTIC: NEWTON'S HOUSE, THAT NIGHT

CATHERINE: Have some wine, Uncle?

NEWTON: I think I shall.

NEWTON IS EVER SO SLIGHTLY PISSED.

CATHERINE: You seem flush.

NEWTON: Pleasantly so. I had a convivial meeting with a man I may hire as my clerk. We played a few hands of cards in a tavern nearby. (BEAT) Ha! I won five guineas off him!

CATHERINE: Indeed.

NEWTON: Yes, indeed. Some things you never forget!

CATHERINE: (KNOWS NOW HE'S BEEN DRINKING) Hmm. (BEAT)
Your hand – is it scorched?

NEWTON: It's nothing. I scalded it during an alchemical experiment.
It happened last night, as you slept.

CATHERINE: I didn't notice it this morning.

NEWTON: No matter. (PAUSE) Perhaps you can play the
harpsichord for me. After we've dined.

CATHERINE: My playing is still very raw.

NEWTON: Still, it pleases me.

CATHERINE: What's his name? The man you plan to have as your
clerk.

NEWTON: William Chaloner. (PAUSE) Some might consider it an eccentric choice. But Chaloner has...exceptional qualities. He has...(LONG PAUSE) He has more life in him than the next man. Do you understand what I mean?

CATHERINE: Not entirely.

NEWTON: He...lifts me. It's as if...forgive me, I'm talking rot. (BRUSQUE) Well play then.

SCENE 11

ACOUSTIC: LONDON STREET.

CHALONER IS SINGING DRUNKENLY IN THE STREET, WITH TOM HOLLOWAY.

CHALONER: (with HOLLOWAY) (SINGING)
There was an old woman who lived under a hill
 Fa la la, la la la la la la
If she's not dead she lives there still
 Fa la lo, fa la lo, fa la la la la la lo
A jolly young man came riding by
 Fa la la, la la la la la la
He called for a pot for he was dry
 Fa la lo, fa la lo, fa la la la la la lo
He called for a pot and then another
 Fa la la, la la la la la la
He kissed the daughter before the mother
 Fa la lo, fa la lo, fa la la la la la lo
And when the day was gone and spent

(CONT'D OVER)

CHALONER (CONT'D): Fa la la, la la la la la
He bed the daughter with the mother's consent.
 Fa la lo, fa la lo, fa la la la la lo!

We funned him, Tom! For all his cleverness, we have
made Mr Newton a fool at the end of a stick!

HOLLOWAY: And this will make us rich, will it?

CHALONER: (SOBERLY) Aye it will. William Chaloner, the most
accomplished counterfeit coiner in London, will have his
own office at the Royal Mint. I shall be Isaac Newton's
right hand man!

SCENE 12

ACOUSTIC: NEWGATE PRISON.

NEWTON: (WRITES AS HE SPEAKS) The Information of Thomas
Carter, 4th July 1697. He saith that on January last he
was familiar with one Sheila Pymm, who is a confederate
to Counterfeitors of the coin of this country and that the
said Sheila Pymm did tell this informant she put off some
Spanish pistoles on behalf of one Alfred Michaels and his
companion Grosvenor... (CONVERSATIONAL) Did you
meet Michaels and Grosvenor?

CARTER: I drank with them one night. Those two men can hold
their liquor. Especially Grosvenor. Grosvenor's brother
William was there that night too, drunk to the pulp he
was.

NEWTON: And is this William also involved in the counterfeiting business?

CARTER: Oh he's the arch-rogue of them all. The most notorious counterfeiter in London town.

NEWTON: I've not come across his name before. Who are his other associates?

CARTER: He used to be in with Blackford Coppering, till he was hanged. And he's a pal of Tom Holloway and his brother John.

NEWTON: Tom Holloway. I know that name. (TRANSCRIBING) The said Grosvenor is confederate with notorious counterfeiters, in chief his brother William Grosvenor, who was formerly an associate of Blackford Coppering, hanged these twelvemonths ago.

CARTER: Chaloner.

NEWTON: What?

CARTER: Grosvenor is the man's first name. His surname is Chaloner. The two brothers are Grosvenor and William Chaloner.

A MOMENT OF STILLNESS.

NEWTON: William Chaloner. Associate of Thomas Holloway. Is a counterfeiter?

CARTER: He's been in Newgate twice, but he always gets off, thanks to his trick of trumping up his services, and stifling the evidence against him.

NEWTON: William Chaloner.

SCENE 13

ACOUSTIC: NEWTON'S HOUSE.

NEWTON: You're late.

CATHERINE: It's barely a minute past eleven, Uncle.

NEWTON: (FURIOUS) Lateness is the token of a slovenly mind.

CATHERINE: Then...I apologise.

NEWTON: I'm wasting my time with you.

CATHERINE: I hope you do not feel that. I've learned so much... I feel I am beginning to...

NEWTON: You are a faithless betraying woman.

CATHERINE: Uncle!

NEWTON: Don'ticker with me! I will not have this bickering!

CATHERINE: Uncle, you're being unfair. I did not...I see, something is disturbing you. Is it the business with Flamsteed?

NEWTON: (SPITEFULLY) The business with Flamsteed is no business of yours.

CATHERINE: (ALMOST IN TEARS) Then...once again, I apologise.

NEWTON EXITS.

SCENE 14

ACOUSTIC: LORD HALIFAX'S HOME

CATHERINE: Please forgive me for calling on you like this, Lord Halifax.

HALIFAX: You are a welcome guest. (PAUSE) What is it? (HE CAN SEE SHE IS UPSET) It's your uncle.

CATHERINE: (TACTFULLY) Something is preying on his mind. It makes him abrupt.

HALIFAX: He's known for his terrible rages. As his friends it is our duty to forgive him.

CATHERINE: What can be distressing him so?

HALIFAX: He once told Locke he wished he were dead. He insulted Pepys. We're all afraid of your uncle you know.

CATHERINE: I have always found him...kind.

HALIFAX: But scary.

CATHERINE: Oh yes.

THEY LAUGH. PAUSE.

CATHERINE: I should go.

HALIFAX: I'll see you to the door.

CATHERINE: Or I could stay a while. If that would be proper.

HALIFAX: It would be...quite proper.

CATHERINE: We could converse on political topics.

HALIFAX: Or poetry. We could discuss our favourite writers. Do you read poetry?

CATHERINE: Widely. Voraciously. Do you?

HALIFAX: Damn, no.

CATHERINE: (LAUGHING) We should stay on politics then.

SCENE 15

ACOUSTIC: CROWDED TAVERN.

HOLLOWAY: Mr Newton.

NEWTON: (ICY COOL) Where's Chaloner?

CHALONER BARGES THROUGH THE CROWDED
BAR TO REACH HIM.

CHALONER: What brings you here, my friend?

NEWTON: Mr Chaloner, I've come to inform you that your application to be my clerk will no longer be looked upon favourably.

CHALONER: I'm damned sorry to hear that sir.

NEWTON: And so I'll bid you good day.

HE STARTS TO LEAVE.

CHALONER: Perhaps, Mr Newton, we could...

NEWTON: (FURIOUS) Take your hands off me! I know your game! I'll see you hanged, Chaloner!

CHALONER: (SHAKEN) You'll catch cold with such threats, sir. Take care.

NEWTON: I did not come alone.

CHALONER: A knife in the ribs could, nevertheless, be discreetly managed.

NEWTON: I've said all I have to say. I'll see you hanged!

CHALONER LAUGHS.

CHALONER: You soft headed cully.

NEWTON: Don't mock me. I will not be mocked.

CHALONER: (CALM) You are mocked.

SCENE 16

ACOUSTIC: A ROOM IN PARLIAMENT.

NEWTON: I do not make hypotheses. I observe, I theorise, and I test my theories against those observations.

HALIFAX: Your point escapes me.

NEWTON: You and my niece. I've seen you touch fingers.

HALIFAX: She has a charming manner. And charming fingers too.

NEWTON: You mustn't take advantage of her, Charles.

HALIFAX: She looks set fair to take advantage of me. She is a true beauty. I have written verses in her honour.

NEWTON: Your verse writing is execrable.

HALIFAX: Isaac, I have a serious matter to put before you.

NEWTON: (PLAYFUL) Don't change the subject. Your verse writing is truly execrable! And I'm not the only one to say...

HALIFAX: Allegations have been made.

NEWTON: Against me?

HALIFAX: Yes.

NEWTON: I'm used to that. Death threats, too, have become a matter of course. Whitfield and Frances Ball both say they will shoot me. Well, let them try.

HALIFAX: The House Select Committee into the Royal Mint want you to appear before them. As Chancellor, I serve on the Committee, I have no choice but to be one of your inquisitors.

NEWTON: Inquisitors? Am I being brought to trial, like a common criminal?

HALIFAX: In effect, yes.

NEWTON: (STUNNED) I will appeal to the King about this.

HALIFAX: The King is already involved. He has taken the side of the Complainant. Isaac, you face total disgrace. You should prepare yourself.

NEWTON: I am the only uncorrupted Warden of the Royal Mint in the history of the post. You cannot doubt that.

HALIFAX: Your accuser has persuaded many people otherwise.

NEWTON: And shall I know the name of my accuser?

HALIFAX: William Chaloner.

NEWTON: What!

HALIFAX: You know him?

NEWTON: I do. He is a...a... (BAFFLED) You're saying, he has supporters in Parliament?

HALIFAX: Chaloner is a remarkable man. (PAUSE) It seems very likely we will vote to appoint him as Supervisor of the Royal Mint.

NEWTON: That would never be acceptable to me.

A LOADED SILENCE.

That's impossible. (PANICKED) This cannot be.

SCENE 17

ACOUSTIC: COMMITTEE ROOM IN PARLIAMENT

CHALONER: Good morning, Mr Newton. Please, take a seat.

NEWTON HARUMPHS HIS SCORN.

NEWTON: Mr Secretary Vernon. Lord Halifax. Members of the Committee. I bid you good day.

HE SITS.

CHALONER: And good day to you sir.

NEWTON WILL NOT SPEAK TO HIM.

NEWTON: I have briefly read these...allegations.

VERNON: Indeed.

NEWTON SHUFFLES PAPERS, MUTTERS UNDER
HIS BREATH:

NEWTON: 'It hath been proved and demonstrated...That there hath been a great quantity of Counterfeit....'

VERNON: Perhaps, Mr Newton, you would like to take more time to prepare your case.

HALIFAX: A sound idea, Mr Vernon.

NEWTON: No, no, I am content.

VERNON: Then let us proceed....

NEWTON: (RUDELY INTERRUPTING) I shall tackle Chaloner's main points in turn. First, 'That there hath been a great quantity of Counterfeit Money Coyned in the Mint.' There is no truth to that. Second, ' That there hath been puncons given out of the Mint to make stamps to counterfeit money with.' Perhaps, but I have no knowledge of it. Third, 'That our present money is so disingeniously Coyned, that it may be easily Debased and Counterfeited.' Which is false. In short: all these allegations are utter nonsense.

VERNON: Mr Chaloner has....

NEWTON: I've given you my reply sir! There is no more to be said.

CHALONER: As I warned you, Mr Secretary Vernon. He's fiercely defensive.

VERNON: (FORCEFULLY) Mr Chaloner has demonstrated to us a superior method of Minting Coins. We have been very impressed by his diligence, intelligence, and courtesy.

NEWTON SNARLS...

VERNON: We are mindful of your reputation in other spheres, Mr Newton. Perhaps the role of Warden isn't fitted for your particular talents.

NEWTON: Chaloner's methods will not work! I'd stake my reputation on it.

VERNON: We've seen these methods demonstrated, and were much impressed.

NEWTON: Then...I concede they work. But they are not practicable.

HALIFAX: In which case, I would urge this Committee to bow to the Warden's expertise.

VERNON SNORTS HIS CONTEMPT.

VERNON: (NASTY) Mr Newton, do you know for a fact that Chaloner's methods are not practicable? Or are you merely...speculating?

LONG PAUSE.

NEWTON: I know it for a fact. (PAUSE. THEN A 'CHINK' AS HE DROPS A COIN ON THE TABLE) This is a coin we pressed with Chaloner's method. You see, it's buckled and broke. The blank is too thin to stand having a raised impression. It will not work.

CHALONER: You fool. You simply make the coin thicker!

NEWTON: I've explored that option also.

ANOTHER COIN, ANOTHER 'CHINK'

NEWTON: (CONT) Perhaps you would look at this coin which, as you can see, is thicker, and has the King's Head raised in Chaloner's way without any signs of cracking.

CHALONER: A fine piece of craftsmanship.

VERNON: I agree. Superior to the Mint's previous efforts.

NEWTON: It was not made by the Mint, I cast this myself in my rooms, with a forge and a hammer. Because of the thicker metal, it's relatively easy to hammer out the impression of the King's head. Thus repudiating the idea that Chaloner's coin is harder to counterfeit.

HALIFAX: You counterfeited a coin, Isaac?

NEWTON: (SNAPS) Purely as an experiment. Here. (ANOTHER 'CHINK') This coin, by contrast, was made legitimately by the officials of the Royal Mint, using Chaloner's method. Can you notice anything amiss?

CHALONER: Beware, it's a trick!

VERNON: It seems genuine to me.

NEWTON: And so it is. Except that I have hollowed and scooped out a portion of silver from the centre, and plated it over again with copper. This gives us a new way of debasing coins, you don't just clip from the edges, you can gouge out from the middle.

CHALONER: There may be ways of preventing that. Perhaps with time you and I could find a way to...

NEWTON: No! (PAUSE) I believe I have demonstrated that Chaloner's way does not work. Am I done now?

VERNON: Mr Chaloner has made a useful suggestion. Perhaps you and he should collaborate, and make a joint presentation to this committee in a month's time.

LONG PAUSE.

NEWTON: Perhaps.

SCENE 18

ACOUSTIC: NEWTON'S HOUSE, DINING TABLE.

NEWTON: ...staring at the sun for half an hour at a time. I even tried putting needles in my eye.

CATHERINE: Uncle!

NEWTON: To see the patterns of light which emerged. Fascinating. But of course, I could easily have blinded myself. I see now, I went too far.

HALIFAX: Age has mellowed you.

NEWTON: Oh certainly.

HALIFAX: I'm surprised to find you so jovial. After that bruising encounter with the Select Committee last week.

NEWTON: I think my views prevailed.

HALIFAX: Indeed, but it must have been galling. To be called to account in such a way, by a man like Chaloner.

NEWTON: No, no. I am a great believer in frank and honest criticism. And I accept there have been abuses by some of my agents, which perhaps I have been slow to deal with. With hindsight, I see Mr Chaloner has done me a great service.

CATHERINE: My Uncle is learning to forgive and forget.

HALIFAX: (DRYLY) I'll warn Leibnitz.

SCENE 19

ACOUSTIC: NEWGATE PRISON

NEWTON: Deposition of Thomas Holloway, 3rd March 1698.

HOLLOWAY: I will not speak.

NEWTON: (TRANSCRIBING) He saith that he hath known William Chaloner, now prisoner in Newgate, for five years or more. They met at Wood Street Counter, where both men were imprisoned for debt.

HOLLOWAY: How did you know that?

NEWTON: You shared a cell with John Newboll. Newboll has become my informant. (TRANSCRIBING) On being discharged from Wood Street both men fell into bad practices, and practised a trade as quack doctors, otherwise known as 'piss pot prophets', assuming the names of Dr Paracelsus and his servant Gustav.

HOLLOWAY: Are you a wizard? How could you know all that?

NEWTON: You bragged one night to Coppering. Coppering told the chaplain who shrived him before he was hanged. The Chaplain told me. We also have a private deposition from the baker's wife. Shortly after this you met Elizabeth, who became your wife Elizabeth Holloway, who will shortly be arrested and tried as a common bawd.

HOLLOWAY: You would not do that.

NEWTON: She'll likely escape with a flogging.

HOLLOWAY: I will not speak against William Chaloner! Nothing will induce me.

NEWTON: Then you will hang with him. We have another witness who can testify you and Chaloner are counterfeiters.
John Peers, the clockmaker.

HOLLOWAY: Damn it! I never liked that mean-hearted son of a bitch!

NEWTON: He tells me you made Spanish coins together.

HOLLOWAY: We did, aye.

NEWTON: How many?

HOLLOWAY: Forty. And as many guineas. (PAUSE) And some Treasury Bills. (PAUSE) Am I your Evidence now, Mr Newton?

NEWTON: You are, Tom Holloway. (TRANSCRIBING) 'The informant saith that....'

SCENE 20

ACOUSTIC: NEWGATE, PRISON CELL.

CHALONER:

(SINGS SOFTLY)

There was an old woman who lived under a hill

 Fa la la, la la la la la la

If she's not dead she lives there still

 Fa la lo, fa la lo, fa la la la la la lo

THE CELL DOOR OPENS.

CHALONER:

Lord Halifax. I'm honoured.

HALIFAX:

Please don't get up.

CHALONER:

You're too kind sir. Pray, put your arse to anchor on that stone bench.

HALIFAX:

I can give you only a few minutes of my time.

CHALONER:

That's all I need. To tell you the truth about Isaac Newton.

SCENE 21

ACOUSTIC: NEWTON'S OFFICE.

NEWTON:

'The Information of John Peers taken upon Oath, 18th Day of May 1698.' Look, this bit is good: 'further that he', that is Peers, 'hath heard the said Chaloner often say that he hath fun'd the Lords of the Treasury and the King out of 1000 pounds and that he would not leave the Parliament until he hath fun'd them likewise, which this informant understands to be deceiving them.' You see, categorical proof....[of Chaloner's villainy.]

HALIFAX: Isaac, Chaloner has made an allegation.

BEAT.

NEWTON: That is typical of him.

HALIFAX: He admits showing Holloway how to counterfeit coins. But claims he did it as an experiment.

NEWTON: Let the jury decide on that.

HALIFAX: But he says he was never in business with John Peers. Peers came to him, possessed of counterfeiting tools, in an attempt to draw him in.

NEWTON: Peers is a counterfeiter.

HALIFAX: He has no such reputation, as far as I am aware.

NEWTON: What are you suggesting?

HALIFAX: Such abuses have been known. Innocent men, deceived and lured into committing crimes. But perhaps you were led astray in this matter by Morris, the Messenger of the Mint.

NEWTON: Morris is my tool. He does my bidding. What has Chaloner told you?

HALIFAX: He said he has invented a new and superior method of counterfeiting, with the use of a metal plate. Only two men know his method – Tom Holloway, who has told no-one, and you.

NEWTON: Me?

HALIFAX: He claims he taught you his method, one afternoon, in the Blue Boar Inn.

NEWTON: He would have been mad to do so. I am Warden of the Mint!

HALIFAX: He said, he taught you as a jest, and you took it in good part.

NEWTON IS SILENT.

And yet when Peers approached Tom Holloway – he knew all about this method, and had the requisite plates and other materials. Fortuitous.

NEWTON: Hardly. These are birds of a feather.

HALIFAX: Chaloner believes you paid John Peers. That you set him up in the counterfeiting business, in order to draw Chaloner in.

NEWTON: I admit or deny nothing.

HALIFAX: Isaac, Peers is known to have been putting off counterfeit coins. With material supplied by you, with techniques taught to him by you!

NEWTON: (CAREFULLY) If we were to suppose, on a hypothetical basis, that I had done all you say I have. Then - what of it? It's caught me Chaloner, hasn't it?

HALIFAX: You are taking a terrible risk. If you are exposed, you will be disgraced. You might even be hanged as a confederate of counterfeiters!

NEWTON: I have learned to accept an element of risk in my affairs. Mine is a dangerous business.

HALIFAX: Yours is a – Isaac, you're a mathematician!

NEWTON: (CALMLY) No, I am the wrath of God.

SCENE 22

ACOUSTIC: NEWTON'S HOUSE, MUSIC ROOM.

CATHERINE IS PLAYING THE HARPSICHORD.
SHE FINISHES. NEWTON APPLAUDS GENTLY. HE
KNOWS SOMETHING IS ON HER MIND:

NEWTON: Tell me then.

CATHERINE: I am in love.

NEWTON: I am pleased for you.

CATHERINE: Lord Halifax has said that he loves me too. (PAUSE)
You...don't approve?

NEWTON: Lord Halifax is my friend. (BEAT) He is also a...man of
the world.

CATHERINE: He drinks. He likes to gamble. He has known many
lovers.

NEWTON: You know of this?

CATHERINE: He tells me everything.

NEWTON: I doubt that.

CATHERINE: He tells me...Enough. Enough to shock a little provincial
girl.

NEWTON: You're hardly that, not any more. This is a delicate
matter, Catherine. Charles is a baron, he comes from a
noble family. Marriage to someone of your background
would be...

CATHERINE: I know all that. We will not marry.

NEWTON: Then...what? (PAUSE) No, don't answer, let me pursue
the argument to its logical conclusion. You will be
his...mistress?

CATHERINE: I believe that is, indeed, the correct term. We will live
together.

NEWTON: Catherine, damn you, you will do nothing of the sort!

CATHERINE: We will be as man and wife.

NEWTON: I won't allow it! You cannot live with Halifax! Either he marries you or I will bar him from the house.

CATHERINE: Uncle, don't be foolish!

NEWTON: I won't see you insulted like this.

CATHERINE: I'm not insulted! I love him, and he loves me in return.

NEWTON: (FURIOUS AND PETULANT) Yes, you said.

CATHERINE: But we have to live by the rules of society. He cannot marry me.

PAUSE.

NEWTON: If you live with him, it will be a scandal.

CATHERINE: We will brazen it out. (PAUSE) I would like you to give us your blessing.

NEWTON: And if I will not, then what then? Will you turn him down?

CATHERINE: Yes, I will.

PAUSE. IT'S MORAL BLACKMAIL – AND IT WORKS...

NEWTON: Oh damn you!

CATHERINE: I love you Uncle, I would do nothing to hurt you.

PAUSE.

NEWTON: Did Charles tell you about Fatio?

CATHERINE: I have heard of the gentleman, yes. A brilliant young mathematician.

NEWTON: Charles calls him my folly. I adored him...I...He was more to me than...I....stepped to the brink, then stepped back. For I knew there might have been a scandal.

CATHERINE: You are averse to scandal.

NEWTON: I am averse to anything that means people are prying into my business. I am my own man. Closed off. Answerable to no one but my own God.

CATHERINE: Uncle, I could not bear you to disapprove of me.

PAUSE.

NEWTON: (GENTLY) I do not disapprove.

SCENE 23

ACOUSTIC: OLD BAILEY

CLERK OF COURT: And do you find the defendant William Chaloner guilty or not guilty?

CHAIRMAN OF JURY: Not guilty.

HALIFAX: Isaac, stay calm.

NEWTON: I am calm.

SCENE 24

ACOUSTIC: OUTSIDE AND INSIDE LORD
HALIFAX'S HOUSE

HALIFAX OPENS THE DOOR.

HALIFAX: Well. What a very...pleasant surprise.

CHALONER: I'm a free man, your lordship.

HALIFAX: Yes I know.

CHALONER: I've come to shake you by the hand.

HALIFAX: There's no need. It's the jury you gulled, not me.

CHALONER: Ah, you've a sharp wit sir. May I have five minutes of your time?

HALIFAX: (AMUSED) Come in.

CHALONER ENTERS.

HALIFAX: Catherine.

CATHERINE WALKS INTO THE HALL.

HALIFAX (CONT'D): This is the scoundrel I told you about. William Chaloner.

CATHERINE: I thought you were to be hanged.

CHALONER: Not yet. And not ever, if I can help it. If I can persuade that dung-loving Warden of the Mint to cease his harassment of me.

CATHERINE: The Warden, Mr Newton, is my Uncle.

CHALONER: Madam, I am mortified. Shall we adjourn, to the drawing room?

HALIFAX: I think not. Speak your piece man. Do you want charity?

CHALONER: I am drafting a letter to the King.

HALIFAX: What?

CHALONER: Now this misunderstanding is cleared up. I thought a role might be found for me...

HALIFAX: You thought wrong. Flee London, while you still have time.

CHALONER: I'm not without friends.

HALIFAX: Secretary Vernon has disowned you. We have all disowned you.

CHALONER: Ah, but you're in my debt. I have opened your eyes to many matters concerning the counterfeiters' trade.

PAUSE.

HALIFAX: You do, I suppose, have a point.

CHALONER: (EAGERLY) Then you will help me?

HALIFAX: (EXASPERATED) Chaloner, for pity's sake...I cannot....I cannot....

CATHERINE: Mr Chaloner, correct me if I'm wrong. You are a professional thief, are you not?

CHALONER: Madam, I am the leopard who will change his spots.

CATHERINE LAUGHS.

SCENE 25

ACOUSTIC; THE ROYAL MINT

WE HEAR THE PRESSES IN THE BACKGROUND.

NEWTON: I don't understand your role in this affair, Charles.

HALIFAX: I like the man. He charms me.

NEWTON: He does have charm.

HALIFAX: And talent.

NEWTON: Considerable talent. He can lie even when inhaling.

HALIFAX: He deserves a chance.

NEWTON: You think so?

HALIFAX: I do.

NEWTON: If he commits a crime, should I ignore it?

HALIFAX: No, no, of course not. All I ask is that you refrain from...
(IE. REFRAIN FROM HOUNDING CHALONER.)

NEWTON: What?

HALIFAX: Can you not let bygones be bygones?

PAUSE. NEWTON DOESN'T ANSWER.

NEWTON: I miss Catherine.

HALIFAX: You see her every day.

NEWTON: Even so. (PAUSE) She seems happy.

HALIFAX: We are both happy.

NEWTON: Good. Is there more to be said? I need to return to work.

HALIFAX: Yes, of course. We're agreed then. About Chaloner?
(PAUSE) Isaac?

NEWTON: Good day, Charles.

SCENE 26

ACOUSTIC: CHALONER'S LODGINGS

CHALONER: Mr Newton! You are most welcome.

NEWTON: Thank you. May I...

CHALONER: Come in, come in.

NEWTON: I cannot stay long. Mr Chaloner, you live a charmed life.

CHALONER: I was fairly acquitted, Mr Newton, you know that.

NEWTON: I know nothing of the sort! You bribed Tom Holloway to flee to Scotland. I have documentary proof of it.

CHALONER: The verdict still stands. (BEAT) Tom's a good lad.

NEWTON: But I concede, in your dealings with John Peers the clockmaker, you proved to be a fly cove. Holloway was implicated, you were not.

CHALONER: I'm a good judge of character. Most of the time.

NEWTON: Still those days are done.

CHALONER: They are. I have turned over a new leaf.

NEWTON: I'm glad to hear it.

CHALONER: I have truly learned the error of my ways.

NEWTON: Good, good. You should not have made an enemy of me, Chaloner.

CHALONER: I realise that now. But you can be sure, Mr Newton, I'll steer clear of your neck of the woods from this day on. I'm not one to make the same mistake twice! (CONFIDING) To be perfectly frank, I'm thinking of standing for Parliament. You know they passed a Bill based on my recommendations about the Mint? That's a boost to a man's self esteem, if ever there was one.

NEWTON: I admire your ambition.

CHALONER: Lord Halifax has promised to help me.

NEWTON: To stand for Parliament? I doubt that.

CHALONER: Nevertheless, his good word means a lot to me.

NEWTON: Aye, he's a loyal friend. Tell me Chaloner. Are you familiar with a man called Thomas Carter?

CHALONER: I can honestly say I've never heard of him.

NEWTON: (SUDDENLY TENSE) He claims you and he counterfeited Malt Tickets together. Also a hundred Spanish pistoles, and as many guineas. He claims he has had dealings with you these five years hence.

CHALONER: I've never even met him!

NEWTON: He has made a full and frank deposition.

CHALONER: Mr Newton, please! If you're going to produce perjured witnesses, you might at least find a man who knows me!

NEWTON: Carter knows you as well as any man alive. He knows every detail of your life, he knows of the quack doctoring and the Birmingham groats, he knows of your girl in Hatton Garden. I've coached him so well, he half believes himself to be your soundest friend. When they hang you, it will break his heart.

CHALONER: No, no. I don't believe you. You would not...? (CHARGED SILENCE) A week ago I walked out of court a free man. You can't send me back to die on the Evidence of some man who counterfeits himself my friend!

NEWTON: The King's Messenger is waiting outside to make the formal arrest.

CHALONER: You have won, Mr Newton. I have been well and truly beat. Isn't that enough?

NEWTON: I said, I would see you hanged.

CHALONER: In the name of God, have mercy on me sir!

NEWTON: And I shall.

END