

DONNER

by

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## ACT ONE

Independence, Missouri, Spring 1846

A bon voyage dinner party for George and Tamsen Donner, emigrants to California. As the overture finishes, the curtain rises to reveal a tableau. Characters are seated around a formal dinner party in a state of revelry. Caught in mid-sentence, mid-fork, mid-bite. Music revs up to party atmosphere and the scene un-freezes.

### **JAMES REED**

Before we start . . . a toast  
. . . to our host . . .  
. . . and to those we love the most.

### **CHORUS**

Here, here!  
Ay yes. To all!

### **JAMES REED**

And of course . . . the reason we are here,  
Our friends, of whom we are no fonder,  
Our friends, George and Tamsen Donner.

### **CHORUS**

To Donner! To Donner! To Donner!

### **GEORGE DONNER**

(George and Tamsen stand arm in arm as he sings)  
One and all, I thank you all  
For kindness and honor.  
To be here, to thank you here  
My wife and I are honored.  
We hope you think not less of us  
As we depart tomorrow.  
We love you all and think of you,  
As if on the road you follow.  
To eat, to drink -- here with you -- we will remember.  
And tonight, a pledge we make --  
We make to all -- to extoll, honor valor.  
A pledge here, a pledge to all, to make the world better.

### **LEWIS KESEBERG**

(Laughs, aside)  
Or at least seem better.

### **CHORUS**

Here, here. Ah, yes. To all! To Donner!!

### **GEORGE DONNER**

Life can be a cruel, hard thing and drag you in the  
gutter.  
But friends extend hospitality,

And make a moment better.  
A moment, lasting all time;  
A sparkle in a darkness.  
A gift, a dinner for good friends,  
Extolling brighter virtues.  
And asking us, tonight with you,  
Dignifies us, bestows honor.  
To everything we do tonight,  
Give meaning and remember.  
Intensify our love of life.  
Strive to provide pleasure.

(Somewhat introspective, confused)  
Is this so bad?  
Is this too much?  
Do I ask us to lie?  
(Tamsen breaks away from him in distress)  
To pretend nothing is wrong,  
When war is near,  
Confusion here, and squalor all among us?  
And each and everyone of us are failing human beings.  
Does one thing sum up all our thoughts and lead us no  
further?  
Or is there hope?  
Are we obliged?  
Do I make sense or do I ramble?  
Tell me friends!  
Give me answers!

### **CHORUS**

(General tension among the guests)  
What? Huh? What does he mean?  
What have we done?

### **GEORGE DONNER**

I take it back!  
What have I done?  
Spoiled this fine occasion.  
Let me word it differently, and give you my answer.  
(Tamsen rejoins George)  
Before us now, a feast so fine.  
Good wines and food aplenty.  
What work has gone before we dine,  
For enjoyment and pleasure,  
Quality and grand style, produced with great effort,  
Is here tonight, before us now,  
To show respect and honor.  
Humbled by your presence here,

I proudly stand among you.  
The wheel turns on, not knowing us.  
But we know well each other.  
To you my friends, and all attempts to make life grand.  
To us, tonight, and only things important said!

### CHORUS

To us! To all!! To Donner!!!

A toast to our friends.  
A toast one and all.  
A toast to George Donner.  
May good things befall.  
Here's a glass to our host  
And a drink to good health,  
Long life, great wealth,  
To Donner, to life  
And good times ahead.  
To the man on the road,  
May his fire always burn,  
And his food never run out!  
To Tamsen and George Donner,  
And the highway ahead.  
A drink for tomorrow.  
And the dinner tonight.  
A toast to the promised land  
And the loves left behind  
May one be as good as the next  
If not that, then better.  
Ha, ha, ha!  
Drink hearty, raise glasses.  
To Donner, to Donner!  
Come one, come all  
Join in our praise.  
Lift up your glass  
And empty it all.  
Drink to yourselves, your friends and to Donner!

(As the merriment continues, Margret Reed breaks away and goes to the side to listen to her son Thomas, a young boy about eight years old. He pulls on her skirt.)

### THOMAS REED

Mom, I'm tired. Mom, I'm bored.  
Can't I go home please.  
There's no one to play with here  
And nothing I like to eat.

### MARGRET REED

Hush my son and clean your plate.  
Be polite, sit up straight and  
We will go home soon.

### THOMAS REED

But mother, I don't like the food.  
We eat it all the time.  
I'm sick of everything we eat . . .

### MARGRET REED

Hush, my son, sit up straight  
And clean your plate . . .

### THOMAS REED

But mother I can't stand pork chops,  
We eat them all the time.  
Pork chops, pork chops,  
Every single day.  
Pork chops, pork chops,  
Nothing but the same.  
Pork chops and dinner parties,  
They're both the very same.  
Boring talk, stupid people,  
Eating . . . talking, just the same.  
Pork chops, pork chops,  
Every single day.  
I want to go to California with the Donners.  
Cross the Sierras into the promised land.  
Pork chops, pork chops,  
Every single day.  
Boring talk, stupid people,  
Nothing but the same.  
I want to go to California with the Donners.  
Cross the Sierras into the promised land.  
Life must be better somehow, somewhere  
And I want to live it to the fullest if I can.  
Just give me no more . . .  
Pork chops, pork chops,  
Every single day.

### LEWIS KESEBERG

(Lewis Keseberg, who is lame, has kept silent during most of the toasting and speech making, not really participating. As he speaks, the other guest expect a toast and cannot quite comprehend his words. As his predictions become more concrete and ominous, they become agitated and react defensively. Then as he ends his speech, trailing off on an introspective note, they lose interest and begin talking among themselves.)

Silently I've sat and listened to your words.  
Noble people, proud speeches,  
All of these things I've heard,  
And yet before me, in my hand  
The word of God, the Bible, the Book of Job.  
This too I've read and thought about  
And listened to your speeches.  
If age is wisdom, then surely I,  
The youngest among you,

Have given wisdom chance.  
But I have greater wisdom in my youth  
And I know where your words will lead.  
What you have celebrated and said tonight  
Sets in motion events that will not go right.

If only you had kept silent!  
This would mark true wisdom tonight.  
Now let my fear teach my mouth to speak.  
And if you condemn my words, remember,  
I did not use crafty speech.

All we say and do tonight  
Writes our future, describes our lives.  
Every moment in our time, sets a pattern,  
The pattern of our lifetime.  
And all that a man does  
And all he becomes  
Can be discovered in the way he stands,  
The way he talks and the food he eats.  
Look before us, at what we've said and done tonight.  
Our future is foretold.  
As carnivores we feast.  
I know not why my mind's awry,  
What moods my thoughts will lead.  
But I know I see that loathsome food,  
Ever before my eyes.

Am I the only one that heard  
The Mason's sermon of last night?  
"My farewell," said he, "consigns you all to the grave."

As we devour dinner tonight  
And devour all that we hold right.  
We will devour our gods in order to survive.  
Must we also devour ourselves?

(Now reading from the Book of Job.)  
"Barren with want and hunger  
Who gnawed in the wilderness  
Disfigured with calamity and misery.  
And they ate grass, and bark of trees,  
And the root of the juniper was their food."

God spoke to Job from a whirlwind.  
From chaos came understanding.  
And God will speak to you  
Out of tragedy about to unfold.

"A man blameless, upright,  
Fears God, avoids evil.  
Put forth your hand,  
Destroy all he owns,  
And he will curse God and die."

The tolerance of hardship, suffering and misery --  
Americans all will be tested tonight.  
And the part I'm compelled to take

In this tragedy, is all predestined.

When I hoped for good, evil came;  
Where I waited for light, there was darkness.  
I have marked out my home in the realm of the dead.  
The pit of darkness I call my father,  
And to the worm -- mother.

(The crowd is overcome by the heaviness of Keseberg's  
speech and confused by his predictions. They break off  
into twos and threes, trying to reassure each other,  
trying to re-establish the group celebration. Suddenly,  
someone enters in extreme jubilation, and as each  
revelation is given, holds aloft three newspapers that  
have front page titles saying "STATEHOOD", "WAR"  
and "PLANET DISCOVERED".)

#### MESSENGER

Good news! Good news! Good news, my friends!  
(Aside, casually to one person.)  
Why do you look so gloomy?  
(Continues to all)  
The great territory of California  
Has petitioned the United States of America  
To join the ranks of statehood!  
Think what this means my friends.  
You leave for a new land  
That already you can call home.

And here, again good news my friends.  
About this war we know so little.  
The United States of America has offered to aid all  
Californians  
In their fight with the rebel invaders.

Brotherhood, comrade emigrants  
Godspeed your safety, grant you peace!

#### CHORUS

(All join in except Keseberg, who sits at the table with  
his head in his hands, shaking his head no.)  
Good news! Great news!

#### MESSENGER

And finally, news from the world of science.  
The great discovery of Planet X!  
It's in the paper (points) . . . there, I read it.  
Let me tell you what it says.  
Perhaps this story, in the headlines,  
Somehow tells us more instead.

It says, "Astronomers have found a new star."--  
No, a planet, Planet X.  
A new finding of the heavens.

In the water sign, they found it,  
Slippery and lubricant.  
Neptune they call it.  
Like the Universal Solvent used so long ago by  
alchemists.  
Escaping narrow-minded visions,  
Planet X escaped detection.  
And resting half way out in space,  
As if between a God and man,  
Will this planet change our quality of thinking?  
Or, like a glare, only glamorously reflect?  
This discovery of human success  
Comes to this year's emigrants,  
As hope and faith in our progress.

**LEWIS KESEBERG**

Water is neither air nor solid  
And just as this planet lies between God and Man,  
It must therefore be a home for the dead.

**MESSENGER**

(Toasting the Donners.)  
Cast your gaze on Sagittarius --  
The center of the galaxy,  
And to the way our west!  
To the challenge!  
Leaving behind your safe surroundings  
To choose an unfamiliar road ahead.  
May your promises be fulfilled,  
But in a way as yet unknown.

**GEORGE DONNER**

(George Donner stands up front and sings the following  
call to the West. As he does so, the other members of the  
dinner party fold up the dinner table and form it into the  
Pioneer Palace Car, with its side entrance. Lewis  
Keseberg stands to the side of the events, foreshadowing  
tragedy.)

Westward Ho!  
Come on boys.  
Westward Ho!  
We need strong men and women.  
Who wants to go?  
It won't cost you nothing.  
You can have all the land as far as you can see,  
Out in California, they give it for free . . . so  
Westward Ho!  
We need strong men and women.  
Westward Ho!  
Young men of good character,  
Can you drive an ox team?  
We're leaving now,  
Come share our dream.

**CHORUS**

(All except Keseberg.)  
Westward Ho!                      Westward Ho!  
To the new life ahead.            Good luck on the road.  
Westward Ho!                      Westward Ho!  
Farewell to our friends.        Farewell to Donner.

(A rainbow of lights appear in the sky.)

Look there, a sign, a message from heaven.  
A beautiful light, a path for our brethren.

(One of the group holds up a sign that says:  
"CALIFORNIA 2,300 MILES")

Westward Ho! etc.

**LEWIS KESEBERG**

(Lewis Keseberg, who has been watching and shaking  
his head in disbelief, has not joined in any of the  
merriment. As the chorus continues, the farewells, good-  
bye hugs, kisses and handshakes are made. Keseberg  
makes comments to the side. Where he quotes, he reads  
from the Book of Job.)

Can they not see, are they so blind?  
What do I know, what rules my mind?  
A pretty light?  
A heavenly sign?  
Where rainbows are, a storm lies.  
These people focus on their party, but all around us  
today,  
In this very town -- a birth, a wedding, a death --  
All the ceremonies of life. Life's parties!  
Just as Job's children were killed during feast,  
Around us, death strikes as we sit down to eat.  
It's true, as they say,  
To dine is no simple fare.  
But as Donner leaves,  
Death follows from this town square.

Hear my words, George Donner:  
"Gird up your loins like a man.  
The test of life is close at hand.  
Skin for skin.  
All a man has he will give for his life.  
You'll trails will be many,  
You'll suffer plenty.  
You'll beg for your life.  
And then curse God and die!"

**CHORUS**

(The Donners and the group have been ignorant of Keseberg's speech. They continue their good-byes and as the chorus continues, George and Tamsen Donner pull the wagon off-stage.)

Westward Ho!

Farewell!

Good luck in California!

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