

CURTAIN CALL:
MURDER



MISS TAYKE INVESTIGATES
A RUM DO AT THE GRAND
THEATRE BLACKPOOL

JIM GREEN

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ONE



‘It’s a rum do and no mistake,’ reckoned Arnold Robertshaw, scratching his bald pate thoughtfully, ‘I’ve been managing the Blackpool Grand for nigh on thirty years, 1921 to 1950, and we’ve never had anyone die on us before, not onstage at any rate, not for real that is. Some as died in the theatrical sense from nerves, stage fright, and first house audiences - but not in the flesh, no sir’

‘Well,’ replied Inspector Bull reviewing the corpse outstretched on the stage where it had fallen to the floor lifeless sometime earlier, ‘you can mark this one up as a first, it’s as dead as cold mutton’

‘Will you want to interview the cast?’

‘And the stagehands, anyone in the vicinity when the tragedy occurred; tell them all to stay put until I instruct otherwise’

‘That’s the forensics team arrived inspector,’ announced a young constable arriving onstage hurriedly.

‘Right then, clear the area and leave them to it’

Half an hour later Inspector Bull was informed by the police doctor attending the incident, ‘Death by natural causes,

no sign of anything suspicious; I will arrange for the mortuary to collect the remains'

TWO



Some six weeks earlier Miss Tayke, owner of the Grand Theatre in Clackley, had assembled the members of the Chiltern Repertory Players onstage for an impromptu meeting. ‘This morning I received a communication from the management of the Fylde Amateur Dramatic Players based in Blackpool. It contained an intriguing invitation’

‘Pray tell us.’ The speaker was the stage director Cedric Gascoine.

‘Basically it’s in the nature of a challenge, an exchange visit; the Fylde Players coming to the Clackley Grand for a week and us appearing in one of their productions at the Grand Theatre Blackpool for the same period’

‘Very intriguing, I’d say, me,’ assessed Cedric.

‘There is however a condition to the exchange,’ added Miss Takye, ‘inasmuch as one Chiltern player stays behind in Clackley and one Fylde player remains in Blackpool.’

‘What on earth for?’ asked Helen Mayberry.

‘I have no idea but we’d best agree if we decide to take up their offer which incidentally I have pencilled in for six weeks from now’

‘What’s the production in Blackpool?’ enquired Cedric incisively.

‘An Inspector Calls’

‘Bags me the lead...’

Miss Tayke countered, ‘Don’t you think Charles would be more suited to that role? He’s tall, handsome, and distinguished looking’

‘Oh, I say,’ preened Charles clearly delighted.

‘And I’m short, fat and ugly, is that what you mean?’ retorted Cedric scathingly to the suggestion.

‘No, no, Cedric; I see you as Arthur Birling but as stage director the final decision on casting is yours of course’

‘Hmm, bigger part that, bigger than the inspector’

‘Well, no doubt you’ll sort it all out at the meeting this afternoon,’ suggested Miss Tayke.

‘What’s scheduled here in Clackley for that week?’ asked Helen.

‘As You Like It’

‘They won’t’ said Cedric firmly.

‘They won’t what?’

‘Like the play’

‘Why ever not’

‘Anything by the Bard will be totally beyond that bunch of amateurs,’ replied Cedric with marked hauteur, ‘not a genuine thespian among them I’ll be bound’

‘I don’t agree,’ contradicted Miss Tayke, ‘the troupe contains several experienced semi-pros

‘Semi-pros,’ scoffed Cedric.

‘Cedric, I am fast forming the impression that you are not overly enthusiastic about this proposed visit; it’s not compulsory you know; you don’t have to go. Perhaps you would be more comfortable being the one staying behind to wet nurse the Fylde Players’

‘No. no, no, I love to be by the seaside, I do, me; fresh air, ocean breezes, moonlight walks along the cliffs. No, no, count me in’

‘Well then,’ said Helen mischievously, ‘let’s see some passion from you regarding the visit Cedric’

‘Cheeky devil...

Miss Tayke called for a vote on the invitation, ‘Do we take up the offer or not?’

‘Yes,’ the Players agreed in unison.

‘That being settled it only remains to decide who stays behind’

The cast members drew lots and the loser was veteran actor Rutherford Lang.

‘Never did like that particular resort,’ announced Rutherford on learning of his fate, ‘much too noisy, much to common for my liking’



While Charles Frobisher appeared best pleased with his award of the lead in *An Inspector Calls*, the other cast members were unimpressed, regarding him with pronounced suspicion; not an unreasonable state of affairs considering he had just come among them again after a lengthy absence occasioned by his swindling the stage door keeper and the local hostelry owner out of a sizeable sum of money.

Mysteriously the victims of his fraudulent activity had been reimbursed prior to Charles’ reappearance but the entire episode was still fresh in the memory of his peers and they were wary of him.

The stage door keeper Alf Cartright had cut Charles dead in his tracks when the latter endeavoured to bring about a truce. ‘You’re a right bad un as far as I’m concerned, I don’t want any more to do with you – and you’re barred from the Crown & Garter for life’

‘Oh, I say Alf, I’m most awfully sorry and all that, but at least you and Bill Biggins got your money back’

‘Aye, and that’s all we got; you promised us extra wedge over and above with your rotten investment scheme. So shove off and don’t come near either of us again if you want to stay in one piece’



At the production meeting that afternoon the leading roles for ‘*An Inspector Calls*’ were established as follows:

Charles Frobisher Inspector Goole

Helen Mayberry.... Eva Smith

Toby Wing.... Sheila Birling

Donna Westlake.... Sybil Birling

Cedric Gascoine Arthur Birling

Glyn Trefoil.... Eric Birling

Gloria Stuart.... Kellie: Birlings’ Maid

The supporting roles would be played by actors recruited from dramatic societies based in and around the Blackpool area.

‘I have played Sybil Birling once before,’ announced Donna Westlake airily.

‘Oh, where was that?’ asked Gloria Stuart eyeing her curiously.

‘At the Lyric, the oldest theatre in Shaftesbury Avenue’

‘Bit of a comedown doing it again in Blackpool wouldn’t you say? I mean you’ll probably be playing to audiences bedecked in knotted handkerchiefs’ remarked Cedric impishly

‘A matter of no consequence, a good part is worth repeating anywhere,’ countered Donna in a superior tone. ‘The ambience is immaterial, it’s the quality you inject into a role that is of ultimate significance’

Not to be omitted from the reminiscences, although he had been left out of the cast, Rutherford Lang added his tuppence worth, 'I knew JB Priestly personally'

'Really,' replied Donna with a pronounced sniff.

'Oh yes, we met at a grouse shoot in Yorkshire'

'I don't think they shoot grouse in Yorkshire, do they?' asked Charles for clarification.

'Well, Scotland or some other northern location,' continued Rutherford matter-of-factly. 'Old JB winged a beater instead of a bird. We did laugh, it was hilarious'

'Not so funny for the beater I shouldn't wonder. Was he injured?' enquired Helen Mayberry.

'Oh, minor wound, caught a shot of blast; he was up and running about again in next to no time'

'Fancy,' observed Cedric sarcastically, 'the fascinating lives you members of the nobility do live'

Still in awe of the older cast members, Toby Wing and Glyn Trefoil did not attempt to contribute to the general discussion but instead conversed between themselves in whispers.

'Have you ever visited Blackpool?' asked Toby.

'God Lord, no, my family always holiday abroad; Austria for winter skiing, Monte Carlo for summer vacationing'

'Mum, dad and I go caravanning in South Wales'

'How perfectly ghastly for you'

THREE



In La Strada, the classy restaurant across the street from the theatre, Miss Tayke, Helen and Cedric were partaking late afternoon tea.

‘What do you know of the Fylde Players and the Grand in Blackpool?’ enquired Cedric pointedly of his employer.

‘Of the players nothing, of the Grand quite a lot actually; I’ve been swotting up on it since receiving the letter this morning. The Blackpool Grand has 1100 seats and was designed by Frank Matcham in 1894. Apparently the theatre is a wonder of restoration and revival, presenting a full range of every performing art form with a well balanced programme; from tragedy to light comedies’

‘Wow, what a mine of information you are Miss T,’ complimented Helen.

‘Does it have a circle?’ asked Cedric.

‘Circle, upper circle, and gods,’ confirmed Miss Tayke.

‘Wow and double wow,’ said Cedric unctuously. ‘Any thoughts yet on where we’ll be staying in Blackpool?’

‘Yes,’ replied Miss Tayke, ‘I have given the matter some thought and I reckon the Boston Hotel is as good as any; it caters for theatricals and their rates are reasonable’

‘Oh splendid,’ enthused Cedric, ‘there’s bound to be a goodly smattering of thespians from the other summer shows staying there’

‘You might renew some old acquaintances Cedric,’ teased Helen.

‘Now, as to travel arrangements,’ interposed Miss Tayke, ‘I wonder what you both think of this suggestion; the cast journey by hire coach, leaving on the morning of departure and stopping along the way for lunch. That way they’ll all be together all of the time eliminating the head counting that would occur if we chose to go by rail’

‘Good idea,’ agreed Helen.

‘Rowley Travel on the high street are sound on group travel I’ve heard tell,’ volunteered Cedric sagely.

‘Thank you Cedric’



When the bar came down on Charles at the Crown & Garter he rapidly discovered that he was equally unwelcome at any drinking establishment within a mile radius of the theatre. No doubt both Alf and Bill had spread the word around about his treatment of them. In consequence he was obliged each eve-

ning, before and after performances, to conduct his socialising at the other end of town, bussing it to and from the Goat & Compass, a particularly dreary public house where he had tried in vain to strike up an acquaintance among the patrons in the hope of scrounging free drinks. So far he was batting zero and because of his terminal penury, reduced to nursing a solitary pint of weak beer on each visit. He hated the stuff but needs must when the devil calls the tune.

He became aware of a presence looming over him and looked up into the enquiring face of a large heavily built woman of indeterminate years.

‘Excuse me but are you one of the actors from the Grand?’ she asked.

‘Ah yes dear lady, Charles Frobisher, member of the Chiltern Players don’t you know’

‘I thought I recognised you from one of their productions. Do you mind if I join you; could I buy you a drink?’

This was music to his ears, the promise of complimentary libation to soothe his desperation. ‘Most kind, I accept your generous invitation’

‘Pint of beer is it?’

‘Ah, no actually, the ale in this hostelry is rancid I fear. Whisky please, large malt for preference’

Some time and several large malts later the lady remarked, ‘I hope you don’t mind me asking you this, but should you be drinking so much prior to a performance?’

‘Ordinarily no, but this is my rest week as it were. Normally I play leads but in the current production I only have but a small role and do not appear onstage until towards the termination of the play’



The subject of penury was also exercising Gloria Stuart’s mind but in her case craving for alcohol was not the reason; rather the sudden cessation of her monthly alimony cheque. At the time of divorce proceedings her ex-husband had agreed to liberal maintenance terms and for over a year had honoured them faithfully. Now the remittances had ceased to arrive and all her attempts to contact him had failed to bear fruit. He had disappeared, gone to ground, or more likely she suspected, underground.

Subsisting on her measly salary had become impossible and she was now four months in arrears on the rent of her digs; arrears that would require to be settled soon or she would face eviction.

The day before she had asked Miss Tayke for a salary increase but this had been refused. ‘If I were to augment your emolument,’ said her employer, ‘I’d have to do the same for the other cast members and quite frankly, that is unviable on current returns. I am subsidising the Players as it is out of my own pocket, week after week’

So broke was Gloria that she would have been unable to participate in the visit to Blackpool were it not for the fact the expenses were all found.



Charles rose to his feet unsteadily, bowed extravagantly, bade farewell to his patron, and promised to meet up with her again next evening; same time, same venue.

As he was entering through the stage door he was upbraided by the theatre manager Henry Travers, ‘This is disgraceful behaviour Frobisher which I shall report to Miss Tayke immediately after the performance. You are fifteen minutes away from your entrance and you will only make that if you manage to get into costume in time’

Somehow Charles managed and walked onstage towards the end of the show to take up his position as Judge Jeffries in the final act of *Where Lilies Bloom*. It was a courtroom scene where he was obliged to sit in judgement on the accused in a murder trial. As he approached the bench, the court rose to its feet, and Charles in his inebriation fell flat on his arse as he attempted to sit. The cast were spellbound but uproar and hilarity soon ripped through the gleeful audience as Charles regained his composure, dusted himself off, and yelled at the top of his voice,

‘Silence in court!’

FOUR



Miss Tayke and Cedric sat together on one side of the desk in her tiny office and a remorseful Charles on the other. He had been summonsed to attend the meeting by the theatre manager at the close of the previous evening's catastrophic performance. Henry Travers had brusquely advised him, 'This is one entrance you'd better not miss; the owner and stage director require your presence tomorrow morning at 10am prompt'

Cedric opened the proceedings tersely, 'You know my views on alcohol and if matters were solely in my hands, you would be dismissed from the company immediately. However, Miss Tayke has prevailed upon me to stay my hand until she has had her say and I have reluctantly agreed'

Charles moved nervously in his chair as his employer took over the discussion.

'What occurred last night in the theatre has not only occasioned me and Mr Gascoine considerable embarrassment but has also impacted on the rest of the Players. Collectively they feel they can no longer trust you in your responsibilities to the company. I do not blame them. This unfortunate episode has put a great strain on all of us'

Cedric leaned across the desk and snapped, ‘I hope you’re taking all this on board Frobisher’

‘Yes, yes, of course, I am terribly put out by the whole affair’ replied the miscreant meekly.

‘*You’re* put out, *you*, give me strength; I feel one of my turns coming on,’ screeched Cedric.

‘Calm down,’ cautioned Miss Tayke.

‘Calm down, calm down; I’d need to down a bottle of valium to do that, I would’

Miss Tayke tackled Charles directly, ‘I took you back into the Chiltern Players on the strict understanding that there would be no more shenanigans from you and now you commit the cardinal sin of the acting profession; you ridicule the production and cause havoc in the audience. My feeling is though that if I throw you out without addressing the root cause of your outrageous behaviour, you will end up in the gutter in a matter of weeks. I do not wish that on my conscience if I can help it’

There was a pause as Cedric and his leader glanced at one another; Charles shuffled his feet awkwardly.

‘Here is what I propose,’ she continued, ‘you will be allowed to remain in post temporarily provided you agree to abstain from strong liquor *immediately* and attend counselling on alcohol abuse; professional counselling sessions which I will personally arrange. There is no room for negotiation in this dictate’

She stopped talking and looked at Charles for a reaction; there was none.

‘Do I have your unequivocal agreement to these conditions or would you prefer to leave my employ as of right now?’

‘I say, it’s most awfully generous of you Miss Tayke but might I have a day or so to mull over the proposal?’

‘No, you may not’ concluded his employer firmly.

Charles sighed heavily, ‘In that event you leave me with no alternative, I agree; I will stop drinking alcohol and attend counselling as regularly and as often as you wish’



Charles sat alone with his thoughts in the snug of the Goat & Compass nursing not a pint of weak beer but a glass of tonic water spiced with a dash of lime cordial. After the morning meeting with his accusers he had determined that for his own survival he would refrain from alcohol until after returning from Blackpool when he would re-assess the situation. He would also attend the bloody counselling sessions, listen to all the guff, and feign commitment. What he would not do though was cease visiting public houses. They were his oasis in the confusion of day to day existence. He would continue to visit them, sit there, and observe the comings and goings of the patrons. He had nothing in common with any of them but just being among the regulars from time to time provided him with a sense of comfort which he was unable to

find anywhere else. He reckoned they lived in the real world whereas the one he occupied was make believe. He looked at his wrist watch; it was just about time for his new lady friend to arrive. What a pisser he reflected; someone on hand to buy him liberal amounts of alcohol and now he couldn't touch the stuff. The door opened and in she walked.

‘Large malt whisky is it?’ she invited.

‘Ah no, dear lady, just a tonic water for me tonight; upset stomach I fear’

They conversed at length until it was time for Charles to leave for the evening performance; he could not afford a repeat of the previous evening's debacle.

‘You're off to Blackpool soon; you told me last night,’ she said.

‘Yes, but not for a few weeks yet’

She opened her handbag from which she produced a pink envelope, ‘Here's a card to wish you bon voyage



Later as Charles sat at his dressing table applying stage make-up, he opened the envelope; the card tumbled out and with it £100 in crisp new large white five pound notes. Pocketing the cash he turned his attention to the evening paper. An item on the front page caught his attention. It was a brief report on the finale of last night's performance which it would appear

had been responsible for an unprecedented queue at the box office that morning and an upsurge in ticket sales for *Where Lilies Bloom*.

‘Hmm...’ speculated Charles ruefully.

FIVE



Sunday, the day of departure for the Players visit to Blackpool had arrived and Cedric was in his element as leader of the travelling troupe, Miss Tayke having gone ahead alone the day before to pave the way. Wearing mustard coloured open neck shirt with matching cravat and vivid sky blue pantaloons, he wandered from seat to seat in the coach conversing with occupants.

‘What a perfectly dinky summer frock Donna; you’ll bowl over the men at the Boston I’ll be bound’

‘Yes, well,’ sighed the matronly Ms Westlake, ‘the Marquis of Queensberry is hardly likely to be in residence there, is he?’

‘Now then you two young blooms, do I sense summer romance in the air?’

‘Hardly,’ replied Glyn huffily.

‘I’m not his type,’ added Toby with a knowing glint in her eye.

When Cedric reached where Charles was seated he glowered and moved on.

Helen was last to board and seeing Charles sitting alone decided to join him.

‘The cast are acting absolutely beastly towards me; I am being avoided like the plague and no one but you will speak to me,’ complained Charles bitterly.

‘What do you expect?’ countered Helen, ‘Your conduct onstage in that unforgettable performance of *Where Lilies Bloom* was disgraceful, totally unprofessional. I’m surprised they have even agreed to appear in future productions with you’

‘Still, forgive and forget,’ persisted Charles forlornly, ‘the quality of mercy is not strained and all that’

‘I wouldn’t bet on it. From the mutterings I’ve heard, one more step out of line and you’ll be sent to Coventry for good’

Silence reigned for a few minutes then Helen continued, ‘Are you still visiting public houses?’

‘Yes’

‘Why?’

‘It’s the only place I can find peace’

‘You’ll be for the chop if Miss T finds out. What do you drink if not alcohol?’

‘Tonic water with a touch of lime fucking cordial’ he replied wincing.

Helen looked at him pityingly. ‘You could still have the odd whisky; one now and again wouldn’t hurt’

‘No, I promised Miss Tayke and that vicious little queen of a stage director I’d lay off the stuff, and I will; for the present at least’

‘Whatever do you mean by that?’

‘I may decide to leave the Players and the profession after we return from Blackpool’

‘Has something else come up?’

‘In a manner of speaking, yes; you see Helen, I have met a lady...’

‘Good for you Charles; it could be the making of you. What is she like, gorgeous?’

‘Hardly that, plain, ugly even, built on the scale of the Albert Hall. No oil painting in effect but she has one redeeming feature’

‘What?’

‘Oodles of cash’



The other cast member on her own was Gloria Stuart who sat at the rear of the coach with her head buried in a magazine.



Miss Tayke was considerably impressed with the Blackpool Grand; the scale, the ambience, the antiquity of the place. She had been met on arrival by the manager Arnold Robertshaw who delighted in recounting to her snippets from his encyclopaedic knowledge of the Victorian theatre in his charge.

‘I suppose you’ve had many famous stars appearing here over years,’ she commented and seconds later regretted issuing the statement.

‘Stars, I should say we’ve had stars; you’d be hard put to name me one that didn’t tread the boards here,’ and then without halting for breath he rattled on, ‘Why, during the first year of the war, 1940 that was, in the five weeks of January alone we had Arnold Ridley, you know, him what wrote *The Ghost Train*, appearing in *Geneva* by Bernard Shaw; Yvonne Arnaud in James Bridie’s play *What They Say*; Roland Curver, Basil Langton, Griffith Jones and Coral Browne in *Believe It Or Not* by Alec Coppel; Yvonne Andre, John Le Mesurier in Terrance Rattigan’s *French Without Tears* and in the final week Zena Dare and her sister Phyllis Dare in *Full house* by Ivor Novello. Then in the first week of February it was *The Women* an all-female drama by Claire Boothe -’

Before he could elaborate further Miss Tayke interrupted his machine gun delivery, ‘How absolutely fascinating, you must speak to my stage director Cedric Gascoine when he arrives. Cedric just loves to hear about the shows of yesteryear’

‘Aye,’ replied Arnold emphatically, ‘I will and all; he won’t be left out’



The coach party stopped for lunch at a country inn halfway to their destination. Cedric fussed over his charges making sure that everyone was seated and had a menu. ‘Don’t go mad now; remember your avoirdupois, I don’t want anyone getting overweight and letting the side down in front of the schmuck audiences we’ll be attracting in sunny Blackpool. Me, I’m having fresh cold salad with salami; scrumptious!’

Helen went up to the bar to place a food order and returned with drinks to where Charles was already seated.

‘Here, get that down you,’ she instructed, ‘tonic water and a dash of you know what’

‘What’s that you’ve got?’ he asked.

‘Brandy and ginger ale’

‘Get thee behind me Satan’

‘Have you noticed how worried looking Gloria Stuart is; she’s been that way for days now’

‘Yes, I had observed her sad demeanour of late’

‘She’s broke and if she can’t lay her hands on eighty pounds by the time she returns to Clackley she will be thrown out of her digs for failing to pay back rent’

‘Here,’ said Charles pulling out a large pink envelope from his inside jacket pocket, ‘give her this’

‘What is it?’

‘A going away present from my new lady friend; I fear I shan’t be needing it now’



SIX



Still resplendent in his mustard and pink travelling attire, Cedric stood awestruck centre stage at the Blackpool Grand, marvelling at the scale of the proscenium. His gaze wandered upwards from the stalls to the circle, upper circle, and gods. This must be one of the finest theatres in the land, he reflected, and now he was to be directing and appearing in a play here. Cedric felt a thrill of anticipation.

‘You’ll be the stage director of the Fylde Players then,’ spoke a male voice accompanied by approaching footsteps, ‘I reckoned you must be; too arty-farty to be owt else’

Cedric looked disdainfully at this intruder on his private contemplation; a short fat little man dressed in a tatty dinner jacket, fawn trousers and brown brogues.

‘Yes, I am he,’ replied Cedric abruptly, ‘and you are?’

‘Arnold Robertshaw, theatre manager. Your guv’nor was here earlier. She reckoned you’d be interested in hearing about the history of the Grand; said as how you’re a bit of an expert on theatrical folklore’

Cedric softened his attitude somewhat and responded, ‘Oh well, there’s truth in what she says, I’ll not deny that’

Arnold coughed, cleared his throat ready for action, and pressed on authoritatively, ‘The Grand Theatre was opened on July 23, 1894, by Thomas Sergenson, Blackpool’s first successful theatrical manager and I’m proud to be following in his footsteps. Sergenson immediately dubbed the theatre ‘Matcham’s Masterpiece’ - good that, eh? – but even more merited now that there are few surviving examples of the work of Frank Matcham, the leading Victorian theatre architect. The theatre took just nine months to build and cost Sergenson £20,000, part of which he had earned by operating two small rented theatres and from a circus that he staged for five summer seasons on the site of the Grand’

‘Well, thank you,’ Cedric broke in civilly, ‘it’s always useful to learn-‘

Arnold was not about to be denied the opportunity of impressing his captive audience of one and continued, ‘With his imposing new theatre, Sergenson surprised Fylde coast folks with the quality of his stars and shows. The theatre opened with a performance of *Hamlet* with Wilson Barrett, a leading actor-manager who had often appeared in Blackpool. But a few weeks later, Sergenson brought a much bigger star to the Grand, Herbert Beerbohm Tree, who also gave *Hamlet* as part of a repertoire of plays’

‘Look, Arnold, isn’t it?’ interposed Cedric once again, ‘this is fascinating stuff but I really do have to be-‘

But the encyclopaedic theatre manager was in full flight now and refused to be deflected. ‘You’ll be wanting to know about musicals, right? Well then, in the first few weeks of the theatre’s existence, the owner-manager also presented the

biggest musical hit of the London season, *A Gaiety Girl*; the comedy hit *Charley's Aunt*; and a visit by the Carl Rosa Opera Company. Sergenson made a valued arrangement with George Edwardes, the king of musical comedy production, to have the first choice in Blackpool of those famous musicals from the Gaiety Theatre and Daly's Theatre, London. During his fifteen years at The Grand, Sergenson presented great stars like Ellen Terry, Madge Kendal, Sarah Bernhardt, Lily Langtry, F R Benson and Dan Leno. In 1909 he sold the theatre for a handsome £47,500 to the Blackpool Tower Company, who ran the Grand for the next sixty-two years'

'But-, ' Cedric was on the brink of despair but helpless to stop the flow.

'The Grand was the first Blackpool theatre to present the two big musical hits of World War One - *The Maid of The Mountains* and *Chu Chin Chow* - and in the 1920s become noted for staging big American musicals like *Rose Marie*, *The Desert Song* and *No No Nanette*. Great stars like Evelyn Laye, Carl Brisson, Tallulah Bankhead, Olga Lindo, Matheson Long and, oh aye, the husband and wife team of Cicely Courtneidge and Jack Hulbert appeared at The Grand in the 1920s. The theatre began to be used by top West End producers for British premieres and for forty years many plays and musicals were seen at the Grand prior to London'

Dropping the niceties Cedric decided the time had come to impose his authority, 'Now really Mr Robertshaw, I have many other matters to-'

But his change of tactics proved fruitless as Arnold forged ahead at lightning speed, 'After the success of talking

pictures, the Grand in the 1930s was a cinema in the winter and staged live shows during the holiday season. Stars included Sybil Thorndike, Marie Tempest, Jack Buchanan and Leslie Henson. Most famous of the 1930s' attractions was Gracie Fields, who made all her Blackpool Variety appearances from 1932 to 1938 at the Grand Theatre'

The hapless Cedric opened his mouth to protest but was beaten to it again before he could utter a single word.

'When the Tower Company began to build the new Blackpool Opera House in 1938, The Grand was returned to its role as an all-year playhouse. In 1939 the theatre's list of stars included Sir John Gielgud, Edith Evans and Peggy Ashcroft in Oscar Wilde's *The Importance of Being Earnest*; Rex Harrison, Diana Wynyard and Anton Wallbrook in Noel Coward's *Design For Living*; and Donald Wolfit in a Shakespeare week.

There was a micro-second pause in the non-stop delivery which Cedric mistakenly took for the end; Arnold though was only recharging his batteries.

'The first summer season show was held in 1940. It was a variety revue starring local comedian Harry Korris, who returned the following summer with a stage version of his famous Happidrome radio show. During World War Two, Blackpool was a safe haven from German bombing and many great stars and shows came to the Grand. There were visits by Gielgud, Evans, Ashcroft, Harrison, Vivien Leigh, Flora Robson, Robert Donat, John Mills and Emlyn Williams. Then in October, 1942, Noel Coward premiered and appeared in two of his plays - *Present Laughter* and *This*

Happy Breed – and the fine fellow threw in *Blithe Spirit* for good measure!’

‘Now look here you boring old fart,’ flared the by now almost spent force Cedric, ‘I’ve had more than enough of this interminable drivel-‘

‘The prestige of the Grand continued into the present time, the 1950s, in spite of the growing impact of television. Ralph Richardson, Michael Redgrave, Alistair Sim, George Cole, Evelyn Laye and Margaret Lockwood could be seen there, while the most frequent visitors were the husband and wife teams of Jack Hulbert and Cicely Courtneidge and Michael Denison and Dulcie Gray. I’ve covered a fair bit-would you like to hear some more?’

‘Oh fuck, no,’ screamed Cedric as he rushed away at a furious pace, pantaloons fluttering in his wake.

SEVEN



The dress rehearsal for *An Inspector Calls* was dragging its heels and Miss Tayke was becoming increasingly concerned, considering the first performance was due to occur the following evening, Monday. The culprit was Cedric who was finding fault with everyone and everything. He began by offending the Blackpool Grand's scenic designer, likening one his backdrops to that of a poster advertising a diarrhea remedy. The crushed creative had fled the stage in tears and it required the combined exhortations of Miss Tayke and Helen before he agreed to return.

'You are acting like a bitch today Cedric,' accused Helen, 'look at the state of that poor sod, you've shattered his confidence'

'I haven't done anything to him,' replied Cedric sedately, 'perhaps it's his bad time of the month'

'That is an outrageous thing to say. You think every man in the profession is a homosexual like yourself'

Well,' retorted Cedric tartly, 'with that eye shadow and overly applied rouge; he's not exactly Errol Flynn, is he?'

'I give up,' said Helen, turning on her heels and walking away.

Ignoring Helen's haughty departure he launched into action. 'Now Frobisher, some background notes for you. It's an accepted fact that the inspector adds drama to the proceedings. He controls the pace and tension by dealing with one line of enquiry at a time. Slowly the story of Eva's life is unravelled, like in a whodunit. He is in command at the end of Act I and the start of Act 2, and the end of Act 2 and again at the start of Act 3. He is a brooding, inescapable presence, very much in control. He is very mysterious and seems to know what is going to happen before it does. Now, take up the dialogue from his opening line at the end of Act 1 and demonstrate how you will get into the skin of the character'

Charles duly obliged and delivered the lines in what he thought was a considered tone.

'Have you listened to a word I just said,' screeched Cedric, 'the inspector adds drama, he controls the pace and tension, he is in command. That reading makes him sound like an embarrassed, embryonic insurance salesman stumbling through an unconvincing pitch on his first ever house call'

'Oh, I say,' protested Charles, 'That remark is out of court old boy'

Brushing aside the bruised actor's complaint Cedric pressed on with his stage directions, 'Donna darling, to assist me in my role as your husband Mr Birling in the play, I'd like to get a feel for your interpretation of Sybil, how you will approach the character. You will recall that she is a prominent member of the Brumley Women's Charity Organisation and in due course persuades the committee not to help Eva Smith in her pitiful plight. Turn to Act 2 and take

up the reading where Mrs Birling recounts her side of the story’

Donna’s rendition fared no better and she too incurred the wrath of the director cum actor. ‘Vacuous, insipid, feeble; I am disappointed in you Donna, an actress of your standing – *and* you’ve played the part before’

‘Yes,’ replied the unabashed Ms Westlake languidly, ‘but that was under stage direction of a superior class orchestrated by a higher authority in the person of the esteemed Terrence Rattigan’

‘Well really...’

‘What’s got into Cedric today?’ whispered Helen to Miss Tayke, ‘he has nothing nice to say to anyone’

‘The theatre manager upset him and I think it’s partly my fault’

‘Why, what happened, and what do you mean by your fault?’

‘Well, to avoid being marooned by Arnold Robershaw when I met him earlier this morning – and when I say marooned I mean having to listen to him waffling on about the history of the theatre, I put him on to Cedric - and apparently he had to endure an never-ending monologue – centre stage’

‘Serves him I right, he’s always purporting to be an expert himself’

‘Where is Roger Pryor, the guest Fylde actor playing the minor role of Mr Timmon the hat sales manager?’ Cedric demanded to know.

‘My apologies, my mistake, I forgot to inform you,’ said Miss Tayke, ‘he is unable to attend the rehearsal. Roger telephoned earlier to request leave of absence due to personal commitments’

‘Personal commitments,’ shrieked Cedric, ‘what does he think we are rehearsing; a go as you please competition? That’s typical I’d say, me, typical of an amateur. I shall have to recast the part now’

‘You can’t,’ provided Helen, ‘there’s no one else – or haven’t you noticed?’

‘Then I’ll play it myself’

‘You’re in a scene together’

‘Oh...’

‘There’s no need for recasting; Roger Pryor is not an amateur, he’s a semi-pro and told me during our telephone conversation that he has played that particular role over fifty times before’

‘Yes, well,’ sniffed Cedric, glancing over at Donna Westlake, ‘we’ve just had an example of why practice doesn’t always make perfect’

His remark drew an outraged snort the offended Ms Westlake.

EIGHT



The erstwhile grumpy stage director was all sweetness and light over breakfast at the Boston Hotel on Monday morning, particularly so when he recognised two fellow thespians from his revue days.

‘Co-eee, Binky, Julian; how lovely to see you again!’ he called out, ‘may I come over and join you for petit dejeuner?’

‘Please do, heart face,’ responded Julian cheerfully, indicating a spare seat at table.

‘Now, tell me all your news,’ began Cedric as he sat down, and then laying a hand lightly on Binky’s shoulder, continued solemnly, ‘but before you do, have you and Peregrine managed to patch up your relationship?’

‘Don’t ever mention that whore’s name in my presence,’ replied Binky tearfully, dabbing an eye with a purple polka dot handkerchief.

Julian leant across the table and whispered conspiratorially, ‘She turned out to be a right bitch that one; engaged she was in the most unseemly ménage a trios-’

The flow was interrupted by a waitress arriving on the scene with a question for Cedric, ‘Are you ready to order sir?’

‘Ooh, ah, yes, now let me see; freshly squeezed orange juice, muesli; dry toast and coffee.’ As an afterthought he added, ‘Do you have decaffeinated?’

‘Yes sir’

‘Oh goody’

Cedric watched her walk away and almost gleefully turned to address his companions, ‘Now darlings, do continue with the dirt on that dreadful hound Peregrine Montpellier...’



At another table Charles was breakfasting alone when Gloria Stuart approached him.

‘My hero,’ she said gently, ‘how can I ever thank you enough; your generosity has been a godsend. Now I can clear my rent arrears and sleep soundly again at night. Thank you Charles, so much’

‘Think nothing of it old girl, glad to be of assistance in your hour of hardship’

Gloria produced a twenty-pound note which she made to hand to him. ‘The arrears amounted to eighty pounds; here, please take this back’

‘No, dear lady, buy yourself a trinket’



Helen Mayberry rose from the table she was sharing with Miss Tayke, Donna Westlake, Glyn Trefoil and Toby Wing and approached Cedric and his companions. She treated them all to a beaming smile and whispered in Cedric’s ear, ‘You expressed an interest in joining the troupe in a stroll along the North Pier; just to let you know we’ll be leaving shortly – and don’t forget, the local paper will be there; they’ve promised coverage in tonight’s edition ’

‘Oh, I don’t want to miss that; I’ll be with you in a tick’

Minutes later the party boarded a tramcar and after some distance alighted at Talbot Square. They crossed the Golden Mile and entered the North Pier. Strolling together and linking arms along the walkway were Miss Tayke, Cedric, Helen, Donna, Gloria, Toby and Glyn; all singing ‘*Oh I Do Like To Be Beside The Seaside*’ for the benefit of the accompanying press photographer.

‘Show some bum and tits Cedric,’ goaded the young man behind the camera.

‘Cheeky devil,’ responded the stage director good humouredly, ‘try Donna’

‘I’ll oblige should the photographer so desire,’ countered Ms Westlake gallantly, ‘but I do think he would do better to employ the charms of the younger gels’

Helen, Gloria and Toby duly complied and the snapper completed the mission before rushing away to meet his deadline.

‘Oh, I do love the ozone I do,’ gushed Cedric, ‘and look everyone, a theatre, a delightful old seaside playhouse...’

The theatre at the end of the pier was running a farce that week, *Rookery Nook*, and Cedric was quick to point out that the thespians with whom he had breakfasted were appearing in it. ‘They both have leads, they always play leading parts, do Binky and Julian’, he said smugly, and continued, ‘dear old Ben Travers, what a writer, what a sense of the comedic; he could elicit a belly laugh from an audience consisting solely of constipated prunes’

‘How picturesque,’ commented Donna flippantly.

What used to be the theatre foyer had been converted into an exhibition area and it housed a display of George Formby memorabilia.

‘Look Charles, let’s go in and have a quick browse,’ suggested Helen as the others wandered off to check out the ocean views.

Charles peered through the window at a panorama of flats and gondolas festooned in show bills and black and white prints. ‘Hmm, best not old girl, perfectly ghastly I should think’

‘No, let’s have a look; it should bring back some memories, you appeared in a few Formby film vehicles, didn’t you?’

As they traipsed around Helen examined one of the posters, ‘*Keep Fit*, 1936,’ and see Charles, there you are in one of the pictures,’ she announced excitedly.

‘Hmm...’ muttered Charles disinterestedly.

‘Which part did you play, do you remember?’

‘A randy fitness instructor, if memory serves me correctly’

‘And here again, *It’s In the Air*, 1938, and oh, how handsome in your RAF officer uniform’

‘Hmm...’

Helen regarded Charles curiously. ‘How many George Formby films in all did you appear?’

‘Six or seven I think; why do you ask?’

‘You must have made a lot of money out of them’

‘No, I did not Helen. The producer Basil Dean was a despotic old tight arse who was reluctantly obliged to shell out twenty-five thousand pounds to George on each film he made. That left little in the pot for the rest of us; at Wardour Street rates in the 1930s, around ten shillings an hour I should estimate’

‘I don’t believe you; you must have earned more than that’

‘Perhaps, but after subtracting agent and managerial fees, the balance amounted to a pittance for me and such as me’

The party decided to have morning coffee in the Carousel Bar opposite the theatre and as they marvelled at the scale of Blackpool Tower, Miss Tayke provided some background to the famous construction, ‘It measures 400 feet from top to bottom and on a clear day you can see as far as North Wales, the Lake District, the Trough of Bowland, and as the sun sets on a clear evening, the Isle Of Man is visible across the Irish Sea’

‘A local scallywag climbed to the top recently, ‘contributed Toby diffidently and in case she was disbelieved added, ‘It was in all the newspapers’

‘I read no account of it,’ opined Glyn churlishly.

‘Anyway, George Formby beat him to it. He scaled the Tower in one of his pictures many years before ducky,’ claimed Cedric with apparent authority.

‘George Formby never climbed Blackpool Tower in *any* film,’ corrected Helen with equal authority. ‘Right Charles?’

‘Yes, pity though, I’m bound to say,’ concluded Charles pensively, ‘jolly fine spot for it...’

NINE



‘How is the house shaping up?’ enquired Cedric of Miss Tayke who was peeping through a chink in the curtain.

‘About half full I estimate and they’re still arriving in dribs and drabs’

‘Half, eh, not bad for a Monday’

‘Damn good I would say,’ contradicted Helen, ‘some nights at the Grand in Clackley there are more people on-stage than in the audience’

‘I reckon that splendid splash on the front page of to-night’s local rag has added a few hundred patrons,’ opined Cedric.

Miss Tayke closed the curtain and added, ‘Just as well; I had a look at the bookings earlier and quite frankly, they were appalling’

‘Five minutes beginners please,’ announced a squeaky voice over the Tannoy.



The play went down well with the audience which had grown to a three-quarter full house as the curtain rose. As one act followed another the confidence of the cast increased in tandem. Charles excelled in his role as the inspector and Donna drew repeated albeit muted applause for her sensitive handling of Sybil Birling after each bout of which appreciation she glanced calculatingly in Cedric's direction.

Disaster however was waiting in the wings and it occurred after the performance ended when the entire cast returned to take a bow. The guest Fylde player Roger Pryor lurched forward in the line up and fell to the floor with a thud. The safety curtain was lowered immediately sealing off the stunned audience from an apparent fainting fit and Arnold Robertshaw rushed onstage to determine what was afoot.

Surrounded by the other cast members Helen was kneeling beside the unfortunate actor checking for pulse and breathing. Looking up at them she announced, 'I reckon he's dead'

'Dead, he can't be dead, he's probably just fainted,' retorted Arnold none too convincingly.

'Check him out yourself then,' said Helen, 'and then you'd best send for a doctor and the police'

'Police, we don't want no police here; it'll be bad for business,' muttered the theatre manager agitatedly.

'It will be worse if he died under suspicious circumstances,' cautioned Miss Tayke who had also arrived onstage.

‘I’d best go speak to the audience;’ flustered Arnold, ‘they’ll be wondering what’s happening back here’

‘I suspect they will,’ piped Cedric unnecessarily.



Inspector Bull stood centre stage beside the corpse and addressed the assembled cast members. ‘Who was first to discover the body?’

‘We all were,’ replied Helen, ‘we were taking a bow on-stage when Mr Pryor fell to the floor. I tried to administer first aid but it was too late; he was already dead’

‘How could you tell that?’

‘I checked for pulse and breathing of course,’ and then she added for clarification, ‘I practiced for some years as a state registered nurse before becoming an actress; you get to recognise sudden death when it happens before your eyes’

‘I’ll want statements from all of you,’ instructed Bull, ‘stay in the theatre until I’ve got around everyone. *An Inspector Calls*, eh, prophetic that is’

Miss Tayke asked, ‘Would it be in order for me to enquire what conclusion the police doctor arrived at after examining the corpse?’

‘Quite in order madam, death by natural causes, but we have to observe normal procedures in the event of someone dieing unexpectedly like this’

TEN



It was Friday, the day after Roger Pryor's funeral, and as a direct result of extensive media coverage recounting the actor's sudden demise onstage, the theatre had been fully booked on each of the previous evenings and the final two performances were also fully subscribed.

As Cedric joyfully reviewed Tuesday's full house prior to curtain up, he had remarked to Miss Tayke, 'They're expecting someone to die onstage at the end of every performance and if they get their wish, you'd best cancel the return coach to Clackley; there will only be two of us left to go home!'

Freewheeling as they now were on *An Inspector Calls* the cast had more free time on their hands and taking full advantage of it. Toby and Glyn had departed after breakfast to visit Stanley Park; Miss Tayke, Helen, Donna and Gloria had gone shopping in the city centre and Cedric had joined his friends Binky and Julian on a trip to Fleetwood Market.

Charles on the other hand set off alone to sample a quaint little bar he had earlier located in a side street between the Grand and the Tower. This watering hole marketed itself as *The Antiquary* and offered patrons a choice of seating arrangements; bar stools or the privacy of individual booths. He had stuck to his resolution to stay off the booze and was still restricting himself to tonic water and lime cordial which

he ordered and collected at the bar before choosing an end booth.

A few minutes later the cubicle next to his was occupied by a well dressed looking young man accompanied by an older less well attired oafish individual who bore the hall-marks of thuggery. He could see them clearly through the dividing slatted partition but they appeared oblivious to his presence; so much so they immediately engaged in open and earnest conversation, the purport of which astounded and disturbed Charles.



Charles returned to the hotel and positioned himself in a seat in reception where he had a clear view of the entrance. He felt impelled to speak to Miss Tayke about what he had seen and heard in The Antiquary. She and the other cast members were still out and he was grateful because it gave him the opportunity to go over in his mind the startling news he was now privy to.

He had heard the two men in the booth next to him mention the name Roger Pryor several times over and saw the younger of the two hand a large bulky envelope to the other. The latter withdrew a number of bundles of what was clearly currency notes and had remarked after counting them, 'It's all there Frank. You know where to come to if you ever want anyone rubbed out again with all the signs of natural causes.' Charles also recalled two other snatches of conversation between the pair, 'The police didn't suspect a thing; there's

no way they could have,’ and from the younger man, ‘My brother won’t be needing his legacy where he’s gone; I’m better off with it’

As soon as Miss Tayke arrived, Charles approached her, ‘I have some news of the utmost importance; I must speak with you immediately,’ he said.

‘Couldn’t it wait until later; I’d like to freshen up before leaving for the theatre’

‘No,’ replied Charles firmly, ‘I must tell you now’

Having apprised her of his findings, Charles added, ‘you will be wondering what I was doing in a public house. Let me explain –’

‘No need,’ she interrupted, ‘Helen confided in me what you had told her earlier and I fully understand why you still visit these places. We all need our own private oasis and you in particular Charles; you’re not very comfortable among theatricals, are you?’ Without awaiting an answer, she continued, ‘now we must tell Inspector Bull what you witnessed’

‘But will he believe it?’

‘Whether he believes it or not; he is duty bound to investigate’



Inspector Bull did not believe Charles's story, at least not at first, but reluctantly agreed to make further enquiries. 'Let's get your actor down to the station to look at some mug shots and we'll take it from there'

Charles duly obliged and was successful in identifying the older of the two men.

'That one is well known to us; a right villain. We'll haul him in straightaway and see what we can get out of him. But remember, all this is hearsay and there are no other witnesses to the conversation in the pub. He will almost certainly deny ever having been there either by himself or in company. If he does, we couldn't hold him; we'd have no grounds'

'Then you might consider exhuming the body of the deceased with a view to having a post-mortem performed,' replied Miss Tayke, calmly.

The inspector exploded with rage, 'That is a monstrous suggestion; you want me to dig up a poor sod who was only buried yesterday? Perform a post-mortem on hearsay evidence from an actor who was probably pissed at the time and only wanted to see his name in the papers? Not bloody likely madam'

'Then before you dismiss my suggestion inspector, I recommend you put a call through to Inspector Barton of the North Yorkshire CID who will assure you that I do not make submissions of this nature lightly'

ELEVEN



On the Wednesday morning following her return, Miss Tayke took a telephone call from Inspector Bull in her office at the Grand in Clackley.

‘In the words of the theatre manager Arnold Robertshaw, it’s a rum do, the strangest I’ve ever come across,’ began the inspector. ‘We got nothing out of the thug but managed to track down the brother of the deceased and he confessed to everything. He had been carrying a grudge against Roger Pryor because he copped the entire estate of their late father. There was a condition though; in the event of Roger pre-deceasing the profligate brother, it would go to Frank. The brother made sure that it did by engaging the services of a villain to do in Roger’

‘But how; how did a death by natural causes turn out to be murder?’ asked Miss Tayke.

‘That’s the rum bit; the thug broke into Roger’s dressing room before the performance and demonstrated what a clever dick he is. You see, the post-mortem brought to light the fact that the stomach contained particles of finely granulated glass. It’s an ancient piece of oriental villainy - murder by torture and incredibly, it gives the appearance of death by natural causes.’

‘So it’s all done and dusted now?’

‘Yes, thanks to you, and the eyes and ears of Charles Frobisher’



At the end of her conversation with the inspector Miss Tayke buzzed Henry Travers on the intercom and requested he locate Charles, instructing the latter to come to her office without delay.

‘You require my presence?’ asked Charles diffidently on entering.

Miss Tayke imparted Inspector Bull’s news – and added in conclusion, ‘And there’s something in it for you personally’

‘Whatever do you mean?’

‘Because of your diligence in clearing up the mystery of Roger Pryor’s death, the slate is now wiped clean’

‘You mean...’

‘Yes I do, you do not require to pay back the monies I expended on reimbursing Alf Cartright and the publican’

‘Oh, I say’

‘Just one more thing Charles, keep up the good work; stay sober’

‘Hmm, yes...’ replied Charles rather doubtfully.

