

## A piece of cake

‘Dying, Sir Gerald? Nothing to it, old boy. A piece of cake as the saying goes. In my case it was a bit of Battenberg wedged in the old windpipe. *Un morceau de marzipan* takes up residence in my trachea – and that was it. I popped my clogs. I say, I have got the right person, haven’t I? Sir Gerald Throgmorton, is it not? Ear nose and throat specialist? Recently knighted by Her Majesty the Queen and fell down a lift shaft?’

‘Yes, that’s me. A trifle dishevelled I must admit-’

‘Well wouldn’t we all be, dear boy? Ah, now I remember. Saw you in the obituaries column only this morning. Perhaps I should introduce myself. I’m the *late* Mortimer Montgomery, actor and elocutionist, and comfortably esconced – if esconced is the word I want, here in jolly old heaven. Had a spot of bother getting in at the Pearly Gates – St. Peter can be *awfully* difficult about the sins of the flesh - but nothing that couldn’t be cured by a ticket or three for a Wednesday matinee of *No, no Nanette* at Worthing Town Hall. Ha-ha! To be honest, Sir Gerald, I wasn’t *that* bothered – about snuffing it I mean, what with gout, in-growing toenails *and* halitosis, you find you haven’t got many friends left.’

‘Perhaps you would tell me about it, Mr Montgomery. I am fond of a theatrical story.’

‘Eh? Tell you about it? Well, I *suppose* I could. After all, we’ve got Eternity, haven’t we? Now, you just make yourself comfy, dear boy - nothing worse than a stray harp-string twanging round the necessaries, is there? Now, would you care for a little refreshment?’

‘How kind, Mr Montgomery. Tea and cakes would be very acceptable.’

‘Oh, all right. I’ll just give the waiter a call. I say, Singleton...oh, would you believe it!

Deaf as a post....I say, Singleton! Would you mind bringing some tea and a biscuit or two? I'll take a sweet sherry, myself – purely for medicinal purposes, of course. Now, Sir Gerald, where was I?

‘You were about to tell me an amusing anecdote of your life in the theatre.’

‘Spot on laddie, spot on! So, where to begin? I remember it was a lovely spring day - droves of daffodils and battalions of bluebells and what not. At that time I had a charming art-deco house in Brighton and I was at the height of my career. The public – dear old darlings – loved me, and Denys and I got along famously. Of course, it was the late Fifties and in those days one had to be *very* discreet. Oh, here comes tea and cakes - thank you, Singleton. Yes, the sherry is to my liking...no, that will be all. Now, Sir Gerald, I'd come down from London for the weekend on the Brighton Belle - this was just after dear old Larry had made *such* a fuss about the kippers.’

‘Larry?’

‘Sir Lawrence Olivier, don't you know. So, there I am in The Cottage, trolling about in my quilted dressing gown, not a care in the world and a merry tra-la-la on the lips. I'd opened at the Shaftesbury the night before in *‘Death At The Double’* - some dreadful nonsense about a pair of twins on a killing spree, and the reviews had been kind. I was playing both twins separately d'you see – hardly off stage, dear boy, and guess what the Telegraph had to say? *‘Mr. Montgomery gave a sharp twist to his parts...’* Well, I mean to say, what? When I showed it to the cleaning lady – silly old tart – she said, “yes, and that wouldn't be the first time would it?” Saucy baggage! Oh, how's your tea, Sir Gerald? More hot water? Another praline perhaps?’

‘I have quite enough, thank you, Mr Montgomery. Very toothsome.’

`Good, well I think I might just risk *une autre* sweet sherry - tones up the tonsils a treat, you know. I say, Singleton, would you mind topping up the teapot? Thank you, and perhaps the teensiest dropette of Oloroso *pour moi*, if you would be so kind. So, Sir Gerald, now we know each other, shall I go on?

`Please do, a most interesting and amusing anecdote`

`Very well. I can see the house lights dimming. I can hear the late punters scuttling back to their seats after a swift gee-and-tee in the interval - and at least the rustle of chocolate creams in the front stalls drowns out the mobile phones. Ready old chap? Here we go then. I remember Denys was away when it happened. Sunday lunch at his mother`s in Neasden, never misses. – my demise, I`m talking about. The final curtain as one might say. I`d just made a pot of tea and settled on the chaise-longue with the colour supplements when I had an urge for a nice slice of Battenburg. Do you know the confection, Sir Gerald?`

`I fear not.`

Well, it`s a sort of square pink and yellow job wrapped in marzipan. Absolutely divine, though it does play havoc with the dentures. So, off I toddle, stage left to the kitchen, slice a slabette of the cake in question and take a bite – and that was the beginning of my misfortune. Lord knows I`ve died a hundred times on stage - shot, stabbed, bludgeoned, poisoned and shoved over a cliff - but this was the real thing. Bloody great wedge of Battenberg lodges in the old gullet. I totter out of the kitchen and stagger down the steps – not unlike Edward G. Robinson in *Little Caesar*, and coughing and spluttering I sink to my knees in the herbaceous border - ruining the spring bedding and squashing next door`s cat. Thirty second later I was dead. Dead, dear boy, dead! Denys found me - oh, look, here he is now. Denys, dear boy, do come and join us won`t you? That`s it, take a seat and help

yourself to tea. I was just telling our newest arrival about the day I died-`

`Hardly my fault, Mortimer...`

`Mmmm...? No, I know it wasn't your fault, Denys – you didn't exactly shove the cake down my throat I'll admit, but had you left Mummy's embrace just a smidgeon earlier might I not be treading the boards today? Yes, well... So, Sir Gerald, there I was, face down in the long grass and cooking gently in the afternoon sun, when who enters stage right and proceeds to mow the lawn? Denys - as if you haven't guessed. Not a thought for poor old me as long as he can get his stripes right. Eventually, of course, it penetrates his skull. Where *is* dear old Mortimer? he asks himself. Is he in the saloon of the Dog and Sausage, perchance - quaffing pints of Guinness and boring the bum off the barmaid with his stage stories? Or slumped against the bar of the Bosun's Boudoir, winking at sailors and doing his Long John Silver impersonations? I say, do you find it cold, Sir Gerald?`

`Not at all, Mr Mortimer, and this is...?`

`Denys... Denys Twelvetrees. Junior leads and dashing young swains and available for panto by arrangement. So, more tea? Not at the moment? Well, do forgive me if I have *une derniere swigette* of sherry, won't you? What was I talking about, Denys?`

`Your demise, Mortimer.`

`Ah, yes, my demise. What an occasion my funeral was – St. Pauls - *naturellement!* - and not a spare seat to be had. Dear Johnny was in the front stalls – he was never one to miss a chance, and Larry gave the address. Well, my dears, I blush to recall his words – but I shall try. Prompt, Denys, if you please...`

`Most distinguished...`

`Of course. "Most distinguished of his generation...noted for his remarkable Bottom –

that brought a few sniggers from the cheap seats. His King Lear was a thing of beauty. Not a dry eye in the house...a wondrous talent has passed. We shall not see his like again..." Poor Denys was quite overcome, weren't you, dear boy? Didn't even do his Max Miller impersonation at the party afterwards - and that was a blessed relief to one and all. Now, did I tell you what Sir Donald Wolfitt said about my Othello – Oh, must you go? Theatre date with St. Peter? No, no Nanette at Worthing Town Hall? Well, lucky old you to get the tickets! And Denys is invited? Well, no show without Punch, I suppose...No, you go, dear boy. Just go along with your new friend. I shall be all right...alone. Au revoir, mes enfants. I shall just settle here by myself, toodle-pip!

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Mmm...what a bloody bore this is...not a soul in sight. `Oh, hello, Mortimer Montgomery at your service, and you are...? Sandy McGonegall, I see. Do I detect a hint of the Caledonian? I thought so. And what, pray, did you do in your earthly life, Alexander? You worked in a whisky distillery? How exciting! And what brings you to the Promised Land this fine day? You fell into a thousand gallon vat of `Wee Jock McSporran Finest Malt` and drowned? What! I don't believe... it took you an hour to die? How was that, may one ask? You got out three times for a pee? Well! Now, you must take a seat, dear boy, and tell me *all* about it... I'll order some tea. Oh, and perhaps a piece of cake. Singleton, I say, Singleton!

The end

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By

Fred Canavan

121, Old Road,

East Cowes,

Isle of Wight,

PO326AU

[canavanhome@googlemail.com](mailto:canavanhome@googlemail.com)

01983291612

1608 words

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