

Little Dennis

By

Fred Canavan

So, there I were, perched on my bar stool in the Red Lion with a pint of black and tan and a packet of cheese and onion crisps, when in walks this nervous looking bloke in a Barbour jacket and a pair of green wellies. He nods, and tells me it's raining outside. I sup the last of my pint, set the empty glass on the counter right under his nose, and tell him there's nowt fresh about that round here.

`Never been to Blackborough before? Well, you've not missed much. Scruffy old cotton town where Lancashire meets Yorkshire, that's us. We've a lovely Masonic Hall, big red-brick Victorian job with bottle-green railings. Seagulls are a bastard, mind. One dive-bombed me off the roof last week. ` I wave my bandaged mitt in his face. `Had my chip butty and bloody near three fingers as well. `

`Oh, dear, ` he says – lapping it up. `I say, would you care for a -?

`Pint? I suppose I could force one down. Go on then, squire, I'll try a pint of black and tan - just to be sociable, like. `

`Pint of black and tan, landlord, ` he calls, `oh, and a Campari and soda. `

George gives him a look and grasps the beer-pump. `Pint of black and tan and a Camp Harry, ` he says. Old Nervous Nigel looks baffled.

`Northern humour, ` I tell him.

He looks at me as if I'm Exhibit A in a museum of northern nostalgia. `I expect you've seen some changes, in your time, ` he says. Patronising bugger.

Nostalgia, you see, is all the go with these arty-farty media blokes. Cloth caps and shawls? They love it.

`Used to be a busy old town,` I says, `cotton mills clattering night and day, beer flowing like water and more chip shops than you could shake a clog at - till the ar- begging your pardon, the

bottom fell out of the cotton trade. Tourism's the answer, the council say. Take this new-fangled Industrial Trail. What did that get us? Nowt but a bunch of Nancy-boy yuppies prancing about the place complaining they can't get sun-dried tomatoes. `

`Well, actually,` he says, `I'm on it, too. For the Telegraph. `

`My God,` I said, `I thought you blokes got nose-bleeds if you went north of Watford. `

He laughs at this. He's got me down as Local Colour. Some kind of horny-handed mechanical, dispensing pearls of working-class wisdom. Still, you can't knock it – not with beer at three and half quid a pint you can't

`Characters,` he says, `I'm looking for characters of bygone Blackborough. `

I knew what he meant, all right. Tales of flat caps and whippets and knocker-uppers banging on the window ten minutes before you went to bed.

`No shortage of them round here,` I tell him – with a wink to George.

`Shall we sit by the fire?` Says my new best mate.

`If you like,` says I. `George, can we have a cob of coal on this fire for Mr...?`

`Cavendish,` he says, `Peregrine Cavendish. `

Now then, I mean to say! What? Peregrine bloody Cavendish? Dear God! So, we park our bums by the fire, and George chucks a cob of coal on. Well, if it's characters Peregrine wants, then characters he shall bloody well get. I scratch my head, purse my lips – and click my fingers.

`Little Dennis,` I say, `now *he* was a character. `

`I'm afraid I've never heard-`

`Never heard of Little Dennis! Too busy prattling about in wine bars and eating that sushi muck. That's your trouble, sunshine. `

`Perhaps you'd care to tell me about him? `

`Tell you about Little Dennis? How long have we got, like? `

`Long enough for another pint of black and tan? ` He says.

`Go on then,` I say, `just to be sociable, like...`

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‘Little Dennis,’ I say, rubbing my hands in front of the fire and taking three inches off my pint, ‘was the finest rag-and-bone man in this town. Nine and half stone dripping wet, not an inch over five-foot-five and muscles like knots on cotton – not to mention a flat cap over one eye, a tartan muffler and boots half off his feet. I can see him now trotting down our street with his knock-kneed old nag. He’d a battered old bugle – Dennis I mean, not the horse – and a tin bucket with gold fish in to give the kids for a few old rags. Oh, and donkey-stones. Housewives used to donkey-stone their steps in the good old days.’

Peregrine’s poised over his pencil. George, behind the bar, is drying glasses and giving me dirty looks. I rub my hands in front of the fire again.

‘He loved that old horse, did Dennis. Loved it like a four-legged brother. It were a brown and white skewbald job with great big dinner-plate hooves and teeth like a set of gravestones. He’d stand there nice as pie outside the Dog and Ferret while Dennis had a pint or two. They were legends, they were. Little Dennis and Flash.’

The pencil pauses. ‘Flash..?’

‘The horse! Have you no feelings, man? And me with a bad hand, an’ all.’

He grips my arm. ‘Would a pint of black and tan...?’

‘Help with the pain? I think it might. Oh, and a packet of cheese and onion crisps.’

‘Same again, George,’ he calls and gets the ale in and traipses back from the bar. So, I let him have it.

‘Mind you, it were the neighbours as killed him.’

His jaw dropped – yes, I know that only happens in books – but his jaw *dropped*.

‘What?’ He says, ‘the neighbours killed Little Dennis?’

‘Good as,’ I say. ‘It were that snotty lot on the new estate. Complained to the council. Said Dennis were neglecting Flash. Said as how he’d be outside the Dog and Ferret all afternoon, waiting for him. Called the cruelty men in.’

`But he loved that horse!` cries Peregrine – he`s getting right carried away by now.

`He did, that,` I say, `but it were no good. Cruelty men said wearing blinkers were infringing the horse`s rights, the nose-bag was cultural discrimination - and as for Dennis selling his manure to the allotments committee – the horse`s I mean, not Dennis`s, well, I wouldn`t like to tell you what they said about that. So, that were it, like. They took him away.`

`Who, Little Dennis?

`No, the horse! Last we ever saw of him.`

`You don`t mean them...?` He groans.

`Fraid so,` I say. `Biggest funeral Blackborough`s ever seen. They had a fork-lift truck put his coffin on the back of the cart, and a team of totters pulled it through the streets singing *Any Old Iron*. Folks were standing five deep outside the Dog and Ferret. Very moving.`

`How did Little Dennis take it...?`

`Jumped in the canal the next day. Said there were nowt left to live for – what with Flash`s untimely demise and the price of beer being what it was.`

At this stage I happen to glance over Peregrine`s shoulder – not too difficult as he`s slumped across the table striking into his Camp Harry over this tale of years gone by – and I see George playing an imaginary violin. Cheeky sod! Perry drags himself upright.

`Tell me,` he sobs, `just tell me one thing, where is...I mean, how is...?`

`Flash? Council had him stuffed and put on display in the Masonic Hall. Looks a treat, he does – in the right light, of course.`

`And what happened to...?`

`Little Dennis? They dragged the canal. Found him trapped under a Tesco trolley downstream of Oswaldtwistle.`

`Take me to that tragic spot,` he blethers. `I must get a photograph! If we`re quick I can get it in this week`s colour supplement...`

Honestly, you`ve got to laugh. I`ve been the landlord of the Red Lion for thirty years – and I`ve never known a bloke like Joe Kelly. Take today, for instance. It`s a wet Monday lunchtime and I`m pulling pints behind the bar when he plonks himself on his stool. Blackburn`'s biggest liar`s at it again. He`s got a fresh bandage on his hand – left one for a change, and orders a pint of black and tan – and that was the last one he paid for all day. Five minutes later in comes a man in a Barbour jacket, a Burberry deerstalker and a handful of tourism leaflets. Got BBC written all over him. Joe`s onto him, straight off. Like a dog after a rabbit. Bloke introduces himself as Jamie-Lee Delgado - where do they get these bloody names from - and tells Joe he`s researching for a nostalgic documentary on Northern Life.

`Northern nostalgia?` says Joe, `you`ve come to the right shop, lad. Pint? Very civil of you, squire. I`ll try a pint of black and tan - .just to be sociable, like. Oh, and if it`s characters you want...`

`Well, yes, I suppose I do, rather, ` says Jamie-Lee wotsisface.

Joe goes through his usual palaver of scratching his head and pursing his lips. Then he clicks his fingers. `Little Dennis, ` he says, `now *he* were a character...`

Like I say, you`ve got to laugh. I think I might put another cob of coal on that fire...

