

## That`s the spirit!

To be honest, I didn`t fancy going out on Boxing Day. I were half asleep by the fire, Zulu were on the telly, and Michael Caine – `Front rank, fire!` was showing cold British steel to the Fuzzie-Wuzzies. From the bay window of the front parlour, snow dusted the roof tops of Bembridge.

We`d had a belting dinner. Roast beef and Yorkshire pudding, carrots, crispy roast potatoes and cabbage – and you could stand a spoon up in the gravy. Follow that with rhubarb crumble and custard, and you know you`ve had a dinner. I had hopes that Adele might have forgotten my promise, but she hadn`t. Zulu had just got to the part where the South Wales Borderers sing *Men of Harlech*, when she walked in from the kitchen all red-faced – I think she`d just loaded the dishwasher.

`Right, monkey,` she said, putting on the tweed overcoat I`d bought her for Christmas in Debenham`s sale. `Are we ready?` She picked up her handbag and patted her hair in the mirror. Well, that`s as good as a royal command.

`I suppose I`ll be driving,` she said, with the kind of sniff that strong men dread. I decided to beat a retreat, threw on my sheepskin jacket, and opened the door to the teeth-rattling bite of a wind that had come straight from Siberia. My God, it were cold! The wind howled across the Solent, and flurries of big wet snowflakes settled on our shoulders as we trudged down the garden path. The goldfish were like frozen carrot slices in the pond, and the cat gave us a smug smile from the window.

Twenty minutes later we clattered into the foyer of Shanklin Theatre, stamping our feet to shake off the snow. I`d booked the theatre tour as a Christmas treat for Adele, and

costumed actors pretending to be theatrical ghosts and showing you round sounded like her idea of fun. Anyway, after the tour they were showing Peter Pan; it's Adele's favourite, and to be fair I *had* promised. We hadn't been to Shanklin Theatre for years, and somehow we picked the wrong corridor. Well, we hadn't gone ten yards when a bloke pops out from a trapdoor! Ba-Boom! Right in front of us, with a great roar of laughter, and a puff of green smoke. He were a raffish, fancy-dressed sort of bloke with a hook where one of his hands should have been. He gave a sweeping bow - and there were nowt wrong with his lungs, I can tell you that. You could have heard him in Southampton.

‘Hello! I'm Sir Gerald Fitzpaine, the noted Theatrical Spirit. Do step inside and take a seat – it'll only take a minute.’

Clipping our tickets, he opened his dressing room door, and waved us to a seat - a scruffy old red Chesterfield on castors. He sat at his dressing table mirror, and I caught the flash of steel where he'd skewered the greasepaint stick onto his hook. The actorish tones were a bit lah-di-da for my taste – I'm a plain speaking Yorkshire chap – but I'd paid to come in and fair enough, I was enjoying myself. He waves the hook.

‘Do pass me the slap, now there's a good chap, for I'm a spectacular spectre – I say, would you care for a drop of Scotch? Jock McSporran – and it's absolute nectar.’

*Champion!* A baritone-voiced luvvie talking in verse? Well, for five quid apiece on a bum-freezing Boxing Day afternoon you can't complain can you? Next job, he opens the whisky. Hey up, I thought, he's a proper Christmas Spirit is this lad! He poured three glasses – and they weren't small. Adele sloshed hers down the hatch.

‘Will you be treading the boards tonight, Sir Gerald?’ she asked, with what she

thought was a girlish simper.

He turned to her, twirled his moustache and waved his hook again.

‘Yes, I’m a villain bound for hell, and I’ll roast that little Tinkerbell!’

Well, this knocked her bandy. She were lapping it up - though I could see she didn’t fancy the idea of poor old Tinkerbell having her bum roasted – neither would I come to think of it. He took a stance, sort of wide-legged and leaning backward – they did a skit of it once on Blackadder – and treated us to a speech that rattled the roof tiles.

‘Not a bad old job this haunting lark, dressed up like the Queen of the May,

And five nights a week I give out a shriek, like the witch in the Scottish Play.’

With this, he beckoned us through the door with a flourish of his three-cornered hat, and strode down the corridor with those great ten-foot strides that actors are so good at. We trundled five yards behind him. I’d had a few be vies at dinner time, and Adele’s a bit short on the old pins, anyway. We caught up with him at the foot of a staircase; he fixed us with his best Rada-trained villain’s leer, and gave us more verse - you can’t grumble, can you? Not for five quid you can’t.

‘A puff of smoke, a swish of the cloak, a snarl and a pinch on the rump.

Hysterical laughter from up in the rafters - that’ll make the buggers jump!’

He bounded up the stairs, giving out with a hysterical cackle that must have splintered windows in Ventnor. We hoofed it after him. By this time I were just about cream-crackered. All this running about on top of one of Adele’s dinners? Dicy, at my age. There’s a price to pay for rhubarb crumble - and I didn’t want to die while next door still owed me a tin of paint. In the loft, dabbing his eyes with a scarlet handkerchief, he let rip – and good and proper, too.

‘Of course back in my mortal days I was noted for my technique,

Now, though the Christmas Spirit is willing, I’m afraid the flesh is weak.’

Tell the truth, I felt sorry for him. Living on past glories. Bit of a come down from the Old Vic to Shanklin Theatre. So saying, he climbs a few steps, flings open a skylight – and climbs out of the loft! I felt Adele’s nails digging into my hand as we gaped out of the skylight. Well, if you’ve paid to come in you want your money’s worth, don’t you?

Sir Gerald hadn’t finished yet. With a spectacular Captain Hook-ish pirouette, and a swirl of his cloak, he pounced onto the parapet. Stroll on! I wouldn’t have done it for a gold clock. Eighteen inches of crumbling Victorian masonry separated him from a trip to the great dressing room in the sky. Silhouetted against the moon, and waving his hook about, he got stuck into his party piece.

‘I’ll strut and preen like an old-time queen, bowing low for my encores

Goodnight, sweet prince, and from the dark? Applause, applause, applause!’

Then he fell off! No, honestly, I’m telling you - he fell off! Gob-smacked?

I should think I were. Lucky for him, he landed in a snow drift. Leaning over the parapet, we saw the outline of his body in the snow like a Tom and Jerry cartoon. Turns out he had two broken legs, a fractured skull and multiple bruising, but he’ll live. Of course we had to give a statement at the police station – all of us stood about like Newport Green Room Players rehearsing Dial M for Murder on a wet Wednesday.

‘He was the answer to our prayers, Inspector,’ said the theatre manager – short bloke in a dinner jacket and a hairpiece like a dead rat. ‘You see, our regular Captain Hook - silly old chuffer - ran off with a lady fish-fryer from Freshwater. His wife were heartbroken. He took every penny they had and left her a note saying she’d never

understood him, and he didn't think much to her drop scones, either. Then this bloke turns up on Christmas Eve, said he'd seen the role in the Job Centre window. Well, you can't be fussy, can you? Not round here, Inspector. You try finding a half-decent Captain Hook for a Boxing Day matinee in Shanklin. Not ten a penny.`

`No, sir,` gloomed the Inspector. `I don't suppose they are.`

`Where was he from then, this Captain Hook?` asked Adele. Doesn't miss a trick, my wife. She'd have made a good copper. Got the face for it, too.

`The Grange, madam,` despaired the policeman, lighting his pipe like some sort of second-rate Isle of Wight Maigret. `A hospital for the criminally insane, over Bournemouth way. He hijacked a caravan on the car ferry - nice young couple driving back from a swingers' convention in Lymington - and cut both their throats in a lay-by with that great long hook of his. Shocking business.`

`This raises the question, Inspector,` said the theatre manager – you had to laugh at that wig, you really did - `of how he obtained the hook in the first place.`

`Made it himself,` sighed the policeman. `Creative therapy workshop – Adventures in Metalwork - marvellous the facilities they have these days.` He gave a short bark of a laugh. `D'you know, you've been very lucky,` he said, waving his pipe at me like he were conducting the Portsmouth Philharmonic and I were second trombone. `He's a paranoid schizophrenic with delusions of grandeur - thinks he's Sir Gerald Fitzpaine, a celebrated Victorian actor - so I'm told.`

I was starting to get the picture. `Hey, up,` I said, `just one more thing, we will be getting our money back, won't we - now the show's been cancelled, like?`

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I'm sitting here in the bay window of the parlour at home, looking out to sea over the Sandown rooftops; it's Christmas day again. I think about last Christmas a lot. Been better off with Zulu, said it all along. You know where you are with Michael Caine and the Fuzzy-Wuzzies. As for Sir Gerald? Some Christmas Spirit he turned out to be! He were `detained at Her Majesty's Pleasure`. She must have a queer sense of humour, that's all I can say. I'd give him creative therapy if I got my hands on him. I'd give him the toe of my boot - right up his artistic temperament, and no mistake.

I can hear Adele messing about in the kitchen. She's a good lass. She'll be here in a minute with cheese and biscuits. Oh, and a nice drop of Scotch –Jock McSporrán as it happens. Now, that's what I call a proper Christmas Spirit!

The end