

King Lear Of "The Gables"; or A Christmas Concert

Poor Arthur!

I was due to take over from my colleague Michael Bennett at "The Gables" Geriatric Hospital in the new year. So, when he invited me to attend the Christmas Concert to be held by the patients — "You may as well see what you're in for," he said — I accepted willingly.

That there was excitement in the camp was inevitable, certainly among the staff who felt keenly the need to impress the patients' relatives — sons, daughters, even grandchildren — who had been invited for the occasion. The atmosphere, brightly illuminated by a dozen fluorescent globes, hummed with chatter, laughter and expectation. True, there were bored, lonely faces, too, in the audience, particularly among those hugging the doorways ready to escape. But withdrawn into their private cocoons of indifference, they were few, quietly morose and, in the main, unnoticed. Most visitors, however, huddled in little circles about Grandpa or Grandma or Uncle or Auntie and showed some degree of lively animation. Nibbling at savouries and potato crisps and sipping their beers, they told stories and laughed and marvelled at the surroundings, the "lovely pitchers" on the walls, at the multi-coloured streamers and Santas and holly leaves that had been strung across the converted dining-hall. The tables had been pushed back into a far corner, the chairs assembled in long green rows, and a makeshift platform, bearing a piano and a microphone, erected towards the front.

It was from there that Doctor Radford, the superintendent, tall, genial, imposing and completely at ease, bade the audience to take their seats, the participants in the concert in the front row.

Who could refuse the worthy man? The little clusters broke up, young and old made their way good-naturedly to the seats and, comfortably settled, fixed their gaze expectantly upon Doctor Radford.

Holding the microphone to his lips and brushing the long robust fingers of his free hand through his virile mass of whitening hair, he addressed his audience. Little mobile

wrinkles of mirth played at the outer corners of his benevolent eyes.

“Let us tonight imagine,” he began, “that we are one big extended family. Well-known to one another, comfortable in each other’s presence, ready to share in the pleasures to be proffered by your fathers and mothers, your grandads and grandmums.”

The audience looked at other members of their “family” and tittered.

“And they *shall* be the pleasures, to be sure. No talent quest this; there are no judges, there shall be no prizes. But talent there is, too often untapped, unsuspected, ignored, locked in darkness behind jammed doors until a team such as ours at “The Gables” discovers the key, the oil and hinges, as it were, and brings it into the light of day.”

An enthusiastic member of the audience showed his appreciation. He began to applaud but stopped abruptly and bashfully when he saw that no-one else jointed him.

Doctor Radford beamed and addressed the zealot.

“You may collect your cheque from me later.”

The audience laughed, though I did notice, here and there, vacant immobile dull-witted elderly faces in their midst.

“But the evening is not mine. It belongs to our esteemed senior citizens. And it is upon them that I shall now call. You will hear ‘Silent Night’ sung by Mrs. Winifred Bilson, ‘Galway Bay’ by our resident Irish laddie Mr. Patrick O’Flaherty and our own beloved ‘Waltzing Matilda’ by Mrs Constance Whitehead. Mr. Alfred Measham, a one-time barber, will relate some amusing stories. Miss Elizabeth Cruickshank will play a piano medley of popular melodies, Mr. Rupert Forbes will recite Paterson’s ‘Clancy of the Overflow’ a la Peter Dawson, and finally, Mr. Arthur Reynolds” — here Doctor Radford indicated with extended arm a lean bent bald man in the front row — “will deliver a passage from the great English bard’s ‘King Lear’.”

“So he’s going through with it, after all,” said Michael Bennett beside me, then added, “We couldn’t stop him.”

“And now,” Doctor Radford said with an extravagant flourish of a large hand, “may I introduce to you Miss Hazel McKenzie, our devoted and resourceful occupational therapist, a lass of many talents who will accompany our performers at the piano. — Hazel.”

A woman approaching thirty-five, barely a "lass" any more, stepped forward, and briskly, smiling between teeth too large for her otherwise foreshortened face, went up on to the platform. Doctor Radford, the perennial gentleman, offering his hand in assistance, bowed to her.

Then on a cue, an older woman of seventy if a day, dumpy and doughy-cheeked, her hair tinted for the occasion, tripped forward with quick short steps. A burst of applause from a bevy of supports accompanied her. From the end of one row came the cry, "Good on yer', Mum!"

Doctor Radford stepped back, sat down unseen behind the piano, and "Mum" — Mrs Winifred Bilson — folded her hands between her breasts. Miss McKenzie struck the first chords and Mrs. Bilson, faltering but slightly, raised anchor and launched into song.

"Oh, God, Winnie dear, you can do better than that," said Michael Bennett beside me as the first words "Silent Night, Holy Night" broke forth in a shrill jagged quivering shriek that made the audience titter and giggle.

But the singer was oblivious to the audience. She held her eyes shut, lost in flabby wrinkled folds of flesh, swayed tremulously on the turbulent waves of her song and rocked her head on rising mighty crests of cacophonous sound as holy infant so tender and mild slept in heavenly peace.

The verse at an end, the singer opened her eyes, stared glazedly into the audience, clamped them shut once more and, clasping her fingers together still more tightly, set sail again in a repetition of the song. Michael Bennett beside me groaned. Miss McKenzie pounded the piano keys more forcefully to make herself heard, but Winifred Bilson, irrepressible, and in any case lost in the oceans of her passion drowned her out. Only when she was about to embark on her third voyage did Doctor Radford, smiling benevolently, emerge from his retreat. Applauding her and repeating "Very nice, thank you Winifred, very nice indeed," he took her gently by an elbow, bade the audience show its appreciation and escorted the now awakened, at first bewildered and then beaming old lady back to her seat. Once more, a cry sprang out from near the aisle, "Well done, Mum, we're proud o' yer' ", followed by a gust of breezy hilarity.

While the audience was applauding, the sound of sobbing arose from the front row. There, hunched over, his shoulders heaving, his bald head quivering, the man pointed out by

Doctor Radford as Arthur Reynolds was weeping. He sniffed, snorted, snivelled. Three women in their forties sitting immediately behind him leaned forward. One rested a large coarse hand on his shoulders. Another whispered into his ear. He became placated.

“Good old Arthur,” said Michael Bennett. “Next thing you know he’ll be choking with laughter.”

Mr. Patrick O’Flaherty and Mrs. Constance Whitehead who followed Winifred Bilson sang as if overawed by the occasion. With the Irishman, the tune was certainly that of “Galway Bay” but the words were beyond recognition. They were lost in the mesh of a thick deep-throated vibrating brogue. And as for Mrs. Whitehead, a tiny shrivelled woman of seventy-six with a pinched nose and pixie-like chin, she made a stiff self-conscious gesture inviting the audience to join her in her “Waltzing Matilda”, but receiving less than a half-hearted response from the gathered “family”, she battled dourly through all the verses of her chosen song, heaved visible signs of relief when the ordeal was over, and scurried rabbit-like from the stage.

Hazel McKenzie, smiling between her big teeth and clutching her music sheets, followed after.

This time, a protracted insane chuckling sound arose from the front row, a thin fragile cackle that simmered, waned and simmered again, rising in little explosive convulsions punctuated by jagged snorts as though some weird inhuman creature — a dog, hyena — were being tickled in the ribs.

“What did I tell you?” Michael Bennett said.

In unison, the three women sitting behind Arthur Reynolds leaned forward again.

“Chekhov,” Michael Bennett said.

“Chekhov?” I echoed.

“The Three Sisters,” he said, indicating the women. “The old man’s daughters.”

Doctor Radford, introducing the next performer, cast a quick glance at his cackling patient and raised his voice tactfully to divert attention.

As Doctor Radford had promised, Arthur Measham, the one-time barber, himself a balding man with a florid mobile moon-like face did relate some amusing stories. That they were ancient and corny seemed to disturb no-one. The audience laughed encouragingly. He was in good form.

Succeeding him, the acts of Miss Elizabeth Cruickshank and Mrs. Rupert Forbes were pale offerings indeed. The pianist, a severe bird-eyed wizened reed of a woman sitting stiff and spinsterly behind the piano, served up a tinkling pot-pourri of aged tunes, humourlessly interspersing honky-tonk levity with ponderous renditions of "Greensleeves," "Ash Grove" and "Londonderry Air". As for Mr. Forbes, every inch the retired Army colonel and later civil servant, with jowls, whiskers, immaculately-parted hair and haughty gaze — he was, alas, no Peter Dawson. His voice was a grater, coarse and rough, its range as meagre as gold in Hades.

"Just as well young Clancy's not around to hear this," Michael Bennett said.

But the audience — Doctor Radford's "big extended family" — was in sufficient good humour to be generous in the allowances it made to artistic aberration and, to judge from its applause, gaiety and chatter, obviously did not share Michael Bennett's cynical misanthropy.

"That's uncharitable," I said.

"Wait till you hear our friend."

"Our friend?"

With his chin, he indicated Arthur Reynolds who, in response to Doctor Radford's call, had risen with difficulty from his seat and was now shuffling pathetically towards the makeshift stage. I looked at the three sisters. One of them, obviously the eldest, was standing tensely, her gaze fixed rigidly upon her father. The others held their breath.

"Mrs. Richardson, Mrs. Logan, Mrs. Strauss," Michael Bennett said, pointing to the sisters in turn. "At least one of them visits old Arthur each day. They take it in turns."

Doctor Radford, dexterously manoeuvring the awkward Arthur Reynolds to his position before the microphone, was maintaining the steady patter. Wherever the old man was placed, there he stood.

"Our Mr. Reynolds," Doctor Radford said in his cheerful deep finely-modulated voice, "was an actor long before Sir Laurence Olivier was a twinkle in his father's eye, as the saying goes. In his time, he performed with the Camberwell Players, acted in a number of comedies at the old Savoy, and reached his zenith in the Melbourne Repertory Company's production of 'King Lear'. It is in this role that we shall see Arthur Reynolds this evening as he brings that noble king to

life before you. Ladies and Gentlemen, friends, brothers and sisters — King Lear!”

A few people applauded. The sisters, one, two, and three, bit their lips.

Arthur Reynolds looked anything but royal. For a full minute, he stood before the microphone, a bowed, bald man with vacant eyes, and dressed in a grey suit become too loose for him and a creased bow-tie sitting askew beneath his stubbled chin. For a full minute, not knowing what to do with his hands, he smacked his lips, scratched at an ear and blinked.

In the audience, feet shuffled impatiently, a girl giggled, her mother leaning over said “Hush.”

When the first words came, they were an explosion. Arthur Reynold’s face was contorted in a grotesque grimace of distance, confusion and void, although the narrow eyebrows knitting together gave hint of burgeoning emotion.

“What?!” he howled. “Deny to speak with me? They are sick?

They are weary?

They have all night travelled?

Mere fetches; fetch me a better answer!”

Mrs. Strauss, the youngest of the daughters, looked around, embarrassed. Mrs. Richardson, expressionless, held her gaze fixed upon her father. Mrs. Logan between them, looked at the floor.

Arthur Reynolds smacked his lips again. His dull eyes blinked. Then he snickered madly, stopped, scratched his nose, reached into a nostril and set forth once more, this time his voice rising too shrill and high-pitched.

“Darkness . . . and devils!

Horses my saddle! Call my train together!”

“Forgive him, O Father William Shakespeare,” said Michael Bennett, “for he knoweth not what he doeth.”

“Ooohh!” the performer then shrieked, raising a thin white wiry hand upward where it remained as if suspended.

“Better . . . better . . . better thou hadst not been born better not to have pleased me!”

"Pity his daughters," Michael Bennett said. "But he insisted. . . They have really been so good to him."

"Suspend . . . suspend thy purpose," the actor then howled, "if thou didst intend

To make this creature fruitful!

Dry . . . dry up in her the organs of increase

And from her de . . . de . . . derogate body never spring

A babe to know her! If she must . . . learn,

A child of spleen create

Let its wrinkles stamp into her youth of brow

With cadent tears fry . . . fret channels in her cheeks

That she may feel to l . . . laugh . . . laughter and contempt

How sharper than a serpent's tooth it is . . . it is . . . it is . . .

To have a childless . . . to have a child . . . to have a thankless child!"

The speech ended, old Arthur stood bewildered, his thin arm still in the air. He looked to right and left, obviously saw nothing. His tie had become still more askew. The audience applauded, the suffering daughters breathed more easily, Doctor Radford stepped forward.

But the old man had not yet finished. Once more, he drew himself up. His bald head glistened under the fluorescent lamps; he stared into the space before him and lowered his arm to shoulder height, extending a rigid quaking finger, stark and unyielding as if in accusation.

"Doth any here know me?!" he cried out.

The three sisters sat bold upright like a marble in their seats.

"This is not Lear!" Arthur Reynolds shrilled.

"Doth Lear walk thus? Speak thus? Where are his eyes? . . . Who is it that can tell me who I am?"

Who first noticed, it was hard to say. But in the audience, there arose a titter. It spread quickly, especially among the children who gave in to more open rolling laughter, and then among some older individuals wanting in tact. Others lowered their heads to suppress their merriment; others still coughed into their palms. Mrs. Richardson, the eldest, stood up, said, "Oh, no!" and bade her sisters get up with her. And

in the midst of the merriment, a child's clear voice rang out, "Look, Mum, Dad, he's wee'd in his pants."

And it was true. For in the middle of the old man's declamation, a stain appeared, at first small and round in the region of the crotch, then, expanding and extending, ribboning black and tortuously, a snake, down the length of a trouser leg towards the baggy cuff.

"King Lear, my word," said Michael Bennett, nudging me in the ribs.

Arthur Reynolds was clearly unaware of the stir which he had created. Standing, grotesque in his pose upon the stage, he repeated again and again the last line of his delivery.

"Who is it who can tell me who I am?

Who is it who can tell me who I am?

Who is it. . ."

Miss McKenzie and two nurses, realising what had happened, hastened to the platform. Doctor Radford was by Arthur Reynold's side and was leading him away by an elbow. But it was the sisters, the old man's daughters, Mrs. Richardson, Mrs. Logan and Mrs. Strauss who took him swiftly and expertly under their wing.

Doctor Radford tried with humour to divert attention, but the bemused eyes of the audience still clung to the performer as the three sisters guided him down the steps.

"It's just a small accident, Father," Mrs. Richardson said. Leading her father by his thin bony hand and avoiding the stares of those about them, she bore the air of a martyr, but it was a martyrdom which she had no intention of enjoying.

Her sister, Mrs. Logan, taking her father's other arm also obliterated the surroundings from her awareness. She consoled her father, if consolation was to be needed. "A wonderful performance, Dad. King Lear and all. The real thing. You were the star of the evening."

It was Mrs. Strauss, the youngest, who must have felt the ignominy of the situation the most. She was certainly the most embarrassed. And embarrassment ignited action. She flushed crimson as she followed down the aisle on her father's heels. She turned her small chiselled face to right and left, flared black, her eyes angry and burning upon the audience, raised a menacing palm and shouted in a voice amazingly forceful for so small a creature:

“What are you ogling at, you beasts, you peasants, you . . . you insensitive creatures?! Have pity, respect. He’s an old man, after all, an old old man!”

The huddled group with Arthur Reynolds in the centre pressed down the aisle. People, in no way touched by the woman’s outburst, smiled, giggled, pointed. Children clapped their hands. Michael Bennett who should have known better snorted “King Lear,” and I, too, who would soon have old Arthur as my patient, stared after him.

At the door, they paused. Arthur Reynolds, looking with his dull stupid eyes at his daughters, reached out to each in turn. He was smiling at them. Yet it was not a smile. It was something grotesque, a mere crooked stretching of the lips.

Mrs. Richardson, Mrs. Logan and Mrs. Strauss closed in upon him.

“You are such fine, such gentle ladies,” Arthur Reynolds said in a thin whining voice that I barely caught. “If only . . . if only my daughters . . . my daughters . . . if only *they* were like you.”