



A close aftershave

Simon Kelly

Arnold the parrot sidled along its perch mistrustfully. Its head feathers rose as it cocked its head and regarded the new dayman with a suspicious beady eye.

"Quark!" it said. "Got a nut?"

Bernie unstopped the bottle of Old Spice making soothing noises. Behind his back he was holding a substantial chunk of cheese. The parrot made a noise like a train coming out of a tunnel, then gave a quick snatch of the Rite of Spring.

"Blimey mate. What a turn up. Quark!"

Arnold watched Bernie's approach, rocking from side to side. Bernie held the unstopped bottle under the parrot's beak. The parrot inhaled the heady aroma for a few seconds.

"Ar Har! Jim Lad!" said Bernie, then gave it the cheese.

He watched the parrot for a while as it singlemindedly demolished the Danish Blue. It really went for the stuff in a big way. It was its all-time favourite in the whole world. That parrot would do anything to get its beak on a bit of ripe Ponky.

Bernie let himself out of the dressing room carefully, looked up and down the corridor. The coast was clear. He sneaked away, only breathing easier when he reached the safety of the empty Green Room. He tucked the cologne bottle away behind the cupboard and picked up his paperback book on the life of Pavlov. Another couple of sessions with Arnold should do it, he

thought.

High above the stage on the fly floor, the customary card school was going full blast. Seated on coils of rope were the other daymen for the 'Treasure Island' production, scientifically separating the Lighting Designer and the Sound Man from their money. The fire buckets were filling up with dogends steadily. There were that many dogends in the sand, accumulated over several years, that if the buckets were ever used to fight a fire in the theatre the fuel content would transform the place into a nicotinic inferno. There was another hour and a half before the final dress rehearsal—plenty long enough to clean the visiting Techs out. Bernie's head appeared at the top of the fly ladder.

"Wye aye, lads," he said in his Geordie accent, "Are ye ganning' on al' reet? Deal me in, will ye."

He helped himself to a bottle from the crate of Newcastle Brown Ale and took a seat round the upturned tea chest that served as a card table.

Earl Grey was looking, as usual, out over the Tyne, high above the city of Newcastle on his column, Far below in Grey Street was the grand old Theatre Royal, its magnificently collonaded entrance thronged with eager customers queueing for seats for the touring production of 'Treasure Island' which was starring the famous but bad-tempered actor Donald Rawlings in the Long John Silver role. This gentleman was

just returning from a morose pre-dress run drink in a nearby pub with Doctor Livesey and Squire Trelawney. He went to his dressing room to prepare. Arnold the parrot watched him put his makeup on and climb into his costume. Rawlings went to the dressing room door.

"Hey! Mandy! Give me a hand to strap up my leg, will you?" he bellowed.

He waited impatiently until Mandy White appeared. She had been with the tour as his dresser since it started and was getting pretty fed up with the Star of the Show. She gave him a smile, making the best of it. He repaid her with a grunt. Arnold watched the leg-tying-up procedure with interest, making comments of a 'give us a nut' variety.

"Bloody bird," said Rawlings, "I hate parrots. You can catch psitticosis from them. I don't like the way that one looks at me."

"Oh, I think that it's a nice old bird," said Mandy, scratching its poll. Rawlings grunted again.

"Make sure I've got a cup of coffee in the Green Room when I come off after the first act," he directed. "Hot. I hate working with animals. Bring the bloody thing over, I suppose it had better sit on my shoulder for a while."

He practised stumping up and down for a while, Arnold clinging on with wings flapping.

In the orchestra pit the band was warming up, the SM was sitting in the stalls conferring with the newly skint Lighting Designer, Jim Hawkins was talking pop records with Blind Pew in the wings, Billy Bones was being woken up by the DSM, the daymen were finishing off the Sound Man in the flies, and Bernie was talking on the telephone.

"Yes, truly," he was saying, all traces of the accent now missing, "I'll have it there tomorrow for the opening. Guaranteed. Trust me. No problem. I won't let you down. . . . Yes, I know. Leave it with me."

He replaced the receiver and went to take his place at the front of house Tab controls.

The Director was deferentially listening to Rawlings' complaints about everyone and everything.

"Yes. As to the parrot, Donald, I'm afraid that it is the only one that could be had in the whole of Newcastle. It actually belongs to one of the daymen on the production. We were lucky to get it. As you know, we were going to tour a parrot as a member of the cast, so to speak, but the admin problems were a little extreme."

He went over to Arnold and peered at it. "It seems docile enough," he said.

Arnold gave its pneumatic drill impression and squawked. Rawlings grunted.

"It had better behave, or I will personally wring its neck" he said darkly, touching up his teeth with tooth-black.

The Director went on stage and clapped for attention.

"All right everyone, I want a good crisp run-through. I know it's difficult, getting used to a new theatre. Just give it everything you've got. Tonight's a sell out."

A few pirates and mutineers listened to