



TURNUED OUT NICE AGAIN

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# TURNED OUT NICE AGAIN

**A Variety Bill  
of Short Stories,  
with Interludes, Songs  
and Sketches**

*by*  
**Deborah Tyler-Bennett**



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These stories are for Martyn and my family,  
they're also for my two Granddads,  
Joseph Tyler and Charles Lindley,  
and for Max Miller:  
'There'll Never be Another!'

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## Historical Note

At the beginning of World War Two, *Variety* venues were closed for a period. As they re-opened, and many acts joined ENSA, it was clear the nature of *Variety* was changing. Some theatres never re-opened, whilst others found audiences swelling with the influx of foreign soldiers. Although routes taken by performers (in both pre-Beryl stories and those featuring her) plus certain venues, names, and show titles were largely invented for this book, the spirit of the acts was based on films, memoirs, recordings, and anecdotes all of which strive to keep *Variety* alive for new generations.



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***HOMETOWN:***

***AS SEEN BY BERYL POTTER***





## Introducing George Formby

Not the film star ...

Banjulele player ...

Cheeky cheery northerner ...

Rather, our budgie - Grandwem's to be precise. Who couldn't clean windows (for obvious reasons) but was renowned for slaughtering a few bars of "Leaning on a Lamp-post". Well, at least that's what Shirl claimed.

"Georgie's a clever boy. Who's the brightest budgie in the cage?" She'd trill, making her devilled-lips a perfect bow.

"Georgie's a clever boy ... brightest budgie in the cage. Go on! Bloody say it then!"

To be accurate, Georgie was the only budgie in the cage, after his partner, Fat Edna, named after Old Lass Byars down the street, had done away with herself by flying into a window.

"She were mental day't Shirley bought her 'om," Grandwem opined. "And poor Georgie's a widower, say it, Georgie's a widower."

“Have a pint, Win,” he seemed to trill, “and bogger Hitler.”

“Shirley, have you been teaching that poor little sod obscenities again?” Grandwem’d laugh.

“Typical,’ Mum would snort to no one in particular, ‘now he can be as crude as the rest of us.”

Mum’s opinions on the Bean and Potter families, post Dad, post Shirl’s husband, Kenny (both killed in North Africa) wasn’t high. She wanted me to be a lady, rising above Grandwem’s accent, above Shirl’s flaming lips, definitely above having a pint and boggering Hitler. “No wonder Georgie’s lady friend went spare,” she’d hiss, pulling my hair into recalcitrant curls. “It’s been a madhouse since your poor Dad.”

Fat Edna went doolally shortly after Grandwem caged her. A few struts, then she began head-butting the bars. Released, she flew straight into the parlour window and that, as the bloke said, was that. “Not bloke,” Mum would have it, “but gentleman.” Well, as the gent said, after a few minutes, Grandwem picked up the inert budgie by one leg, declaring Edna “for’t compost.” For once, Mum hadn’t disagreed.

George Formby didn’t seem to mind, happily uttering a note sounding strangely like the “bollocks” that Norrie, Grandwem’s surviving brother, used to come out with whenever Mum said something disparaging about Uncle Billy’s Variety career. Not that we saw Norrie often or, for that matter, Uncle Billy. In fact, until I was thirteen, Uncle Billy remained as exotic to me as Casablanca ... far off as my dead Dad.

Ironic, but if you asked, I could to this day describe George Formby down to the black skin-flap that protruded

over one of his talons, but Dad? ... Kenny? Two slick-haired men, Dad had brown eyes, and I think Kenny's were blue: fair-isle sweaters; corded-trousers; shiny shoes. I know Mum resented them both dying so young, and Billy being invalidated-out early with what seemed barely a scratch. Billy's return to Variety seemed beyond the pale to her.

"He's just messing," she'd say, lips tightened to almost nowt. Even when Dad was alive, Mum saw Variety as a waste of adult time. No matter her brother was near topping the bill. No sweat he'd teamed up with Courtney "The City Gent" Cooper, to form "Cooper and Bean: The Boys Most Likely To..." Courtney Cooper, so famous he was almost Max Miller. To Mum, especially during wartime, and despite the fact Cooper and Bean had both been invalidated out early, with honours, Variety was time wasting on a heroic scale. Someone, she thought, ought to put a stop to it.

Sometimes, gazing on reddening coals, Mum'd sigh: "Why'd he have to be taken, your Dad? When some bloody Cap-Knappers are sitting pretty?" "Bloody Cap-Knappers" was the closest Mum came to real swearing. Bunking off school in Mansfield was "Knapping the Cap", or "Capping the Wag", no one seeming to know why. Same in my day as it had been for her, and similar for Grandwem when she was a nipper. Even Norrie, believing as he did in time off as a religion, called Old Man Ackroyd (who'd never worked a day in eighty years and sported the filthiest string-vest on God's earth) "Grand Cap Mester" or "Maestro di Cappino." For Mum, cap-knapping was the highest form of abuse. "Your Dad and poor Kenny, both grafters, gone, while some fools live to lark about. Cap-knappers all."

If Grandwem heard Mum entering this vein she'd defend Billy with: "En't times hard enough for you, Rita?"

My Bem gone, all me brothers but one, wi one thing or another. All I have's sweet Norrie. A fine look out if I turned my back on him like you have on our Billy. One day, girl, you'll want that larking brother of yours, and he'll be a stranger."

Mum usually left the room at this point, leaving Shirl to mumble: "Mam's right, Rita." Right or not, Mum winced when George Formby tuned up for "Leaning on a Lamp-post", saying: "I wish you wouldn't teach him vulgar nonsense, Shirley, I want Beryl to grow up nice, and you're all against me."

"Vulgar" was one of Mum's precious words, others being "lady", "ladylike" and "just" followed by "so". "You ought to cross your legs just so when you sit, Beryl, otherwise you'll never be a lady." "That new scent's a bit vulgar, Shirl, not like 'Evening in Paris', now that's ladylike."

Inwardly, I often said "bollocks," Norrie style, though of course never did. Sometimes, my imagination uttered this so loudly, I really thought it was said, and waited to be told-off. Then, I'd wonder why I had to be an only child, wishing for a doll-like little sister, who'd enjoy being poked and prodded into lady-like-ness. As Mum pinched and teased my lumpen form into a series of "costumes" she saw a pink and creamy ingenue. I witnessed the Many-Jointed-Marvel cousin Joyce remembered seeing at Blackpool Tower Freak Show.

"Your hair looks so delicate after curling, Beryl" (usually claimed after she and Grandwem had singed my lanky locks into frazzled ringlets). The occasional whiff of burning was so strong Shirley rushed from next-door to make sure the house wasn't alight. Needless to say,

sometimes I arrived at school with a farthing-sized burn on my forehead. Once I told Mum I'd end up like Fat Edna if she kept curling. "Rubbish, one day you'll be grateful, you'll see." She'd snapped, pushing burning tongs against my already blushing scalp.

Whipping-up a dress from an old pair of lemon curtains, Mum imagined me resembling a girl from *Woman's Weekly*. Such fantasies had already resulted in ballroom lessons (cancelled), piano classes (sadly ongoing), choir practice (thrown out for bad behaviour) and a series of unfortunate frocks. "She'll not let you alone, you're her little lass, all she's got," Grandwem was right. With crisped hair, puff sleeves, and lack of Variety, I was ripe for more lessons, more stepping on dance-partners' toes, and further school nick-names (current favourites being "windmill" (hair-bow), "Hovis" (singed) and "Miss Frilly Arse" (obvious, really).

As a girl, Fat Edna was well out of it; that was certain. George, the only budgie in the cage, didn't know how lucky he was to be a whistling, cuttle-fish worrying boy. Although, sometimes, when Grandwem opened the front door and he joyously proclaimed "Have a pint, Win, and bogger Hitler," I'd inkling that he might.

"George's a happy fella."

Not George the film star ...

Variety strummer ...

Zillionaire ...

But definitely the brightest budgie in our cage.

Turned Out Nice Again





## Old Wives

From Ada's grim radio, *The Man in Black* led me to expect fear. Though it was then derelict, I wandered Faro Rushworth's house, fingers lifting off caked-banisters, eyes catching beads imitating pupils in stuffed birds. Faro's mouldy-beaked collection pursued me in my dreams. My nostrils inhaled fumes from acidic papers clotting the old man's bed.

I often wonder when I first realised an adult could be scared. Probably when Ada thought she'd seen Jesus, imprinted on the bathroom window. Ada hadn't experienced revelation. What happened, as her husband (from then on known as Sherlock Jim) worked out, was a pigeon flew into said window, leaving marks of chest and outstretched wings on glass. The pigeon negative wasn't visible by day, shining only at night. When Ada walked in without reaching for the light, a bulb from the old stable opposite transformed it to a whitened crucifix.

"Why would son of God visit bloody Mansfield?" Jim scoffed.

"Born in a stable, warn't he?"

"He'd have a job round here, unless he wanted to share space with mi ewd mower."

Then there was the time Norrie almost stopped a Bible-salesman's heart.

Patter ready, salesman knocked. Inside Ada's, Norrie'd piled too many coals on the fire before falling asleep. Waking to discover a flaming rag-rug at his feet, he lifted it on a shovel, leaping to the door.

"Do you know, Sir, a miracle happened today?"

"There'll be another bastard miracle if you don't step out of't road."

Ada got back from town to discover Norrie and the recovering salesman in the front parlour.

"Love, meet Mr Umbeke, he's from Africa, originally. I said he could stay for a bite."

Norrie got on with everyone. Sometimes staying with Ada and Jim, tea was seldom for three. Norrie once said seeing Ada afraid was like watching John Mills get shot at a film's end. "Me daughter's never frit," he smiled, "unless Jesus comes calling."

Still, Ada's (too-literal) cry of "Jesus!" and Mr Umbeke's brief view of Norrie as crackling demon seemed less scarring than my dread. Mum blamed this anxiety on family storytelling and Valentine Dyall, the radio's "Man in Black".

"Why don't you come home as soon as they kick off? They give you the willies then let you listen to *Appointment with Fear*. You don't half clatter up that genell when you've heard Valentine Dyall, or paid heed to those old fools."

Mum was right. If not thinking about Dyall oozily describing a drowned sailor's return, I lay awake, hearing Evie Shed howling through wind-thrummed elms. According to Ada, mad Evie ended up in a barred-room of

her family house. Cassie Rickers, who'd lived next door to Shed's, said some nights she'd woken to Evie's wails. Not cries, Grandwem repeated, roaring.

After visiting Ada, I'd sprint past Shed's, though Evie was long dead, thinking I heard crying behind top windows. Truth was, Grandwem and Ada relished hearing the slamming front door, as I legged it past the front garden's yew. Singularly, they were capable of making me gasp. Together they were my women in black, getting me starting at each wind-trembled gate.

Even now, blown sheets recall Mona Lambert's chalky figure. "You don't want to hear that old thing." Grandwem'd said, before launching into Mona's story.

"Poor little Mona lived two streets away from me, down Rosebay Lane. I were six when she were killed, mekin' her five and a bit. We all played together on "The Stacks" ("The Stacks" being fields, so called because Gilbert's Hosiery stacked crates there).

"Day she died, Mona played house with Bethula Dove. 'The Stacks' were great for playing on ... allus wooden boxes to make tables and chairs. Anyway, come tea time, Bethula ran home, but Mona never got there."

"Bethula allus said", Ada'd put in, "that just as they turned the corner, Mona searched her pockets and realised she'd left her little china teapot behind. Now, in them days, you didn't have much as a nipper, and what you had, you prized. Didn't you, Win?"

"You did that." Grandwem continued the story. "Anyway, even though it were dusk, Mona turned back. Bethula said the last she saw of her mate were her little white pinny, heading for "The Stacks". Mona's parents were frit when she warn't home by six, and raised the alarm. Billy

Mason found her. Someone strangled the poor mite, then legged it. They allus said it were a vagrant... Years on, when her Uncle Gideon passed away he left a note with his will, saying as he killed her. Gev no reasons. Gideon played Snap we us. No one suspected."

Fool that I was, I'd wait eagerly for the next part.

"They've been seen. Mona and Gideon. Near 'The Stacks'. Sometimes separate, her wandering the lane, him waiting behind a hedge. It's said he looks mournful as if he wants to say summat, and can't. Others've seen him light a fag. They've been noticed together, n' all. Say they're flour white, her holding his hand."

"He were her Uncle, she trusted him. When seen alone, she's allus heading home."

As if Mona and Evie weren't enough, there was Ada's speciality - Faro Rushworth, "King of High Close". High Close glowered over the town. When Grandwem was a girl, Rushworth's was the only house built there. Now the house's abandoned, but the road boasts Rushworth's Free Library, named for the town's only really moneyed family. As plumber's apprentice, Jim had to fix gold taps in Rushworth's master bathroom. Called it the muckiest house he ever set foot in.

"Full of stuffed bods, weren't it, Jim?"

"Rup." (Jim's favoured response.)

At the time of Jim's visit, there were four Rushworths - a son, Toby, twin sisters (forever known as 'Misses Rushworth') and Faro, King of High Close. Faro'd been an ambitious builder, known for turning shite to sovereigns. Jim caught one glimpse of frosted-hair peeping out from behind paper stacked, matted candlewick. Rumours why Rushworth became reclusive included a best friend cheated

out of a machine-patent, an elephantine skin disease, or dead factory-worker mistress. Whatever made him seek solace in rooms far filthier than one of his worker's tenements, Faro didn't emerge from the house until his final journey in oak-and-brass-overcoat.

"Jim niver saw mould like it. Did you?"

"Rup, that's reet."

"Family of tramps they were, squatted in that fine old house's remains. No wonder Faro come back for a gleg at the town. He were buried in that house years afore he died."

Here, Ada paused for effect, before telling how Rushworth was spotted weeks after his funeral, smoking a pipe on his front lawn.

"Not ewd Faro, but the younger man. Father, as's said, of many babbies conceived after Ennis, his wife, passed on. He started to be seen walking High Close after closing time. In fact, some didn't see him at all, but heard his tapping stick on the causey behind them."

Even though we lived nowhere near High Close, I used to fly home, spurred on by phantom sticks. Sometimes, turning at the sound of my own shoe heel, I'd expect Rushworth's bristly face. After nightmares, Mum complained to Ada and Grandwem, but stories never stopped. Soon, I was telling Rushworth tales myself, realising what pleasure it was seeing a pink young face turn grey, hearing a fearful little voice ask: "then what?"

Though then derelict, I used to wander Rushworth's house, making others haunt it too. Nowadays, I ghost Ada's - pull on my red coat after storytelling, as Grandwem tells Norrie his pipe smells like "summat rotted."

"Tek your Mam some of that malt loaf!" Ada yells.

## Turned Out Nice Again

Eventually leaving with a brown bag smelling of tea-sodden sultanas, I pass yew through space where a front gate should hang ... past next door ... past old man Clarke's, pram frame making skeletons dance in the front garden. Then, over the road. Close my ears to tapping. Don't want to turn and meet Faro's bearded face. Half expect to catch sight of a white pinny, as it disappears in Rosebay Lane's direction.