

## A Fading Star

By Derek G Rogers

Harry Sheffield stood uncomfortably behind the deep red velvet curtain and listened to the Presenter announcing him. "...He is one of Britain's best-loved entertainers. You've bought his records, admired his dancing and laughed at his stories, he has appeared..." The litany went on and on making Harry's mind wander back to the days when all that had been true. He had made records and later CDs. He had appeared on all the TV stations and in almost every theatre in the country; he'd even made a couple of films. His name had always been in the papers for one reason or another. Yes, in his time he had been a truly great star.

Now though, the TV shows were few and far between, and those on which he was asked to appear were either chat shows, to talk about the "Old days", or to support a rising star that probably wouldn't last half as long as he had. His hand, shaking slightly, took hold of the curtain waiting for the moment when, with a great flourish, he would throw it aside and saunter, as he always had, to the little star marked on the floor beside the piano. The small band smiling broadly waited expectantly on the other side of the postage-stamp sized dance floor. They would strike up his signature tune as soon as he made his entry.

He scanned the tables surrounding the dance floor and saw that the Starlight Club was full. It increased the edgy feeling in his stomach. He was used to that though, he always felt like that just before going on. He noticed that the edges of the ageing curtain were just slightly faded and felt dry and unfriendly to his touch.

The Presenter was still working hard for him his voice reaching a crescendo..."So ladies and gentlemen, it is with great pleasure and much pride that I introduce and ask you to welcome....HARRY SHEFFIELD!!!!!!" The applause didn't match the enthusiasm of the announcer and Harry's experience told him he was in for a difficult sixty minutes. But he was a professional and would give no sign that he was aware of the lack of interest. It did cross his mind as he strolled across the dance floor to his marked spot that it wasn't that long ago that the audience would have been on their feet applauding him as he made his entry. He hoped there would be someone at one of the tables who would either be a bit tipsy or unwise enough to heckle him. There usually was.

His style had always been a reactive one. He would open by making derogatory remarks about the band-leader. "Hi Charlie nice to see you're out again. Did you take this lot with you to entertain them in

Brixton? Did The Jailhouse Rock go down well?" The musicians would grin and in their turn become the butt of a few more remarks that would draw chuckles from the audience. He would then encourage anyone that felt they could exchange one-liners with him to do so. They always ended up providing the rest of the audience with huge entertainment. He would then sing a couple of the songs from his heyday and add, these days a very short, soft-shoe shuffle or tap dance. Lately he'd had considerable success with his impersonation of John Huston's "September Song".

About half-way through his set he knew he wasn't going across as well as he wanted. They laughed in the right places but not that deep infectious laugh that all comedians strive so hard to draw from their audiences, and which in his time he had been able to achieve so easily. They applauded his songs and clapped politely after his dances but he really didn't feel that he had a hold on them. Not like he used to have, he felt tired. No one had heckled him so far, even the band leader hadn't risen to his taunts. He too had just smiled. The 'old professional' in him came to his aid. He felt a rush of blood to his head. He'd make the buggers react; he'd earn that applause just as he always had.

He leaned conspiratorially towards his audience. "I'm going to tell you a Christmas Tree Story," he began. "Well, it is Christmas, and you lot are all enjoying your Office Parties, so why not?" He looked all around the Club again, winked at no one in particular and began. "It was the day before Christmas in Santa's Grotto. Everyone was incredibly busy. Well they would be wouldn't they? After all it's no easy matter getting all those toys delivered to all the children in all the world, is it?" Without waiting for any sort of response he continued. "Of course there are a lot more children about these days so the Fairy Queen had sent her most hard working fairies to help Poor Old Santa cope with his work load and they were well ahead of schedule."

He stopped and looked around, his mind projecting itself through the cigarette smoke into the semi-darkness and hoping someone would react soon. No one did so he carried on. "Suddenly there was a blast on a trumpet." He stopped and looked at the band.... "Oi!" he shouted. "I said suddenly there was a blast on a trumpet." There was a feeble blast in response this time and it provoked an equally feeble round of thin laughter but it was enough. "The blast announced the entry into the Grotto of the Fairy Queen herself." Then it happened! "There is a God" thought Harry, as the voice came out of the gloom at the rear of the dining area. "We don't believe in Fairies!"

Harry reacted instantly. Turning smoothly to the stage manager sited behind the other curtain he said. "Put the spotlight on that man." The brilliant beam of light shot across the room and picked out the

owner of the voice. A young man in a pale blue suit, dark shirt and silver tie put his hand across his eyes to protect them from the intensity of the beam. "Stand up!" said Harry. "I can't see you properly from here." Egged on by his companions around the table, the young man complied and almost shimmering in the spotlight stood defiantly facing him across the room. "I'm sorry I must be getting old, I didn't quite catch what you said," lied Harry. "Would you be kind enough to repeat it?"

Foolishly the young man walked into the trap. "We don't believe in fairies," he repeated loudly and grinned broadly to his friends at the table.

"Well until I saw you stand up, neither did I," quipped Harry. "But don't worry this club accepts anyone as long as they pay their bill." The spotlight went out and the audience burst into the sort of laughter that Harry had been seeking all night. He was away....he turned back to his Christmas Tree Story. "The Fairy Queen called everyone together. She had had, she told them, a fantastic idea. In addition to all the toys and sweets and things that Santa was to deliver that night she wanted every house to receive, with her compliments, a beautiful Christmas Tree! To help with the deliveries she was instructing all the fairies, gnomes, elves in fact everyone that could work even the smallest magic to help. She would brook no argument. That is what she wanted and that is what she was going to get. Everyone would report to her in her Throne Room at four o'clock on Christmas morning to confirm that her order had been carried out to the letter. In the face of such an order there isn't much anyone can do except get on with it. No one argues with the Fairy Queen!" He looked again in the direction of his heckler and added. "I bet even you wouldn't argue with her would you?" as the laughter died down he returned to his story.

"On Christmas Day at four o'clock in the morning, on the dot, they all assembled in the Throne Room, all that is except Santa Claus. He hadn't returned from his round-the-world journey and The Fairy Queen wasn't in a mood to accept excuses even from him. She flew into a rage. That I can tell you is not a pretty sight." He wagged his index finger at the audience to emphasise the point and looked again in the direction of the young man in the pale blue suit. "Ask him, he'll tell you," he said. "She'll give him hell when he gets back to the grotto tonight." The audience again enjoyed the discomfort of the young man.

Harry was now feeling very relaxed and confident. They had now become his audience not just the audience. He could feel the warmth towards him coming from them in waves. No longer feeling so tired he hurried on. "Santa arrived in the Throne Room about fifteen minutes late and had to face the wrath of the Fairy Queen. He apologised for being late of course but she was not in a forgiving mood and after a tirade of recriminations, and it must be said some thinly veiled threats of what she would do if his behaviour

didn't improve, she finally began to calm down. Then.... Horror of Horrors! She saw it! On the back of Santa's sleigh! There it was, a Christmas Tree. "I told you to deliver every tree..." she screamed. "And I meant every one. Not just some, or, all but one, EVERY ONE!"

Santa butted in. "Look," he said. "I delivered every one that I could. The address on that one didn't exist so I brought it back here."

"That's no excuse," shrieked the Fairy Queen. "I now have a Christmas Tree and nowhere to show it off. What, at this time on Christmas Day am I supposed to do with a spare Christmas Tree?"

Harry paused for maximum effect, slowly looked all around the club and, with raised eyebrows, gazed expectantly at his audience. "Well my friends," he said spreading his hands expressively in front of him, "You don't need me to tell you what Santa replied to her do you? It's obvious. That is why from that Christmas onwards every year on Christmas Day you see the Fairy Queen on top of the tree." He was given the applause he had been working for and with it peals of boozy laughter. He felt vindicated. He may not be as good as he had been but he could still jazz up an audience.

From there to the end of his set he had them in the palm of his hand. He told them all the old elephant and parrot jokes, satirised the politicians, scored point after point off the young man in the blue suit (Who by the end of his performance had, somehow, become the Fairy Queen's toy boy) sailed a bit close to the wind with a couple of others and ended with the whole audience roaring with laughter and telling each other that they had seen him on the telly but how much better he was in real life. By then they would have laughed at anything he said. He bowed his thanks, wished them all a Very Happy Christmas and left the floor the way he had come. The band played his signature tune "I'll be seeing you".

They all patted him on the back on the way back to his dressing room and told him how good he had been. "You can still do it large Harry Boy," one old stage-hand had said as he passed. Harry knew otherwise. He felt unbelievably tired as he came down off the 'high' he had worked up to during his performance.

He sat in front of the mirror in his dressing room and looked at the grey face staring back at him. "Perhaps it's time to stop," he thought. He put his head into his hands and closed his eyes for a second. It felt so good. He saw in his mind's eye all the places he had ever played. He heard again the rapturous applause from the packed theatres. He recognised all the faces that drifted past his memory. They had all been such good friends of his. He felt warm and comfortable. It had all been worthwhile.

Rex Thomson, the manager of the Club was delighted with the reception given to Harry's act. He

had been a bit uncertain whether or not to book what he recognised was a fading star. But he had gone over so well. That Christmas Tree Story.....He was still chuckling over that one. And that young man in the blue suit, that was funny too, he must remember to plant someone in the audience in future. He would go to Harry and book him for a further season. He knocked on the door. There was no answer. He turned the handle and walked in.

Harry was seated at the mirror, his head in his hands. "Fantastic performance Harry Congratulations!" he began. Harry said nothing. Rex walked across to stand behind Harry and put his hands onto his shoulders. "You were bloody marvellous, Harry. Bloody marvellous." Still Harry said nothing. "I want you to continue here for another six weeks, Harry, how do you feel about that? Shall I talk to Jack about it? Might even be able to improve the terms." Still Harry remained silent.

It wasn't until Rex shook Harry's shoulder, thinking that he had fallen asleep, that he realised, with a shock, a further season didn't matter to Harry any more. Nothing did. He had given his last performance. It speaks volumes about the business that Rex's first thought was, 'Sod it! That means I'll have to find another act for next week."

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