

# Before Their Very Eyes

By Clare Wigfall

‘Bertie Poyd,’ he corrected, holding out a hand still slick with cold cream.

Frances stood dumb, uncomprehending. She wore a well-pressed but wash-faded linen frock, with a cardigan draped over her shoulders, and clutched a small chocolate box in one hand. The permanent wave to her hair looked tired, and her face had a fretful point to it. This was not the type of woman Bertie Poyd had instructed Front-of-House to send back to his dressing room. His preference was for fleshy blondes, although they were hard enough to come by, didn’t he know it, in these days of ration coupons and peroxide shortages in the chemist shops.

When she failed to take his proffered hand he turned, indifferent, back to the mirror and peeled away an eyebrow.

‘I thought you were a foreigner,’ she said with bewilderment.

He gave a snort. ‘Stepney born and bred, love. No more a foreigner than you, my darling.’ He peeled off the other brow. Without it his face looked somewhat formless in the bright dressing-table lights, his moustache over-black. ‘A name like Bertie Poyd ain’t going to pull in the punters, is it now?’

She gave a slight frown, as if she still didn’t understand, then appeared to check herself, and darted her glance about the room, as if she were looking for someone in the shadows. Her lips took on a confrontational pinch. ‘Where is he, then?’

Poyd took a slug from his gin glass. He studied his reflection in the mirror and wished this woman would go away. ‘Don’t know what you’re on about, sweetheart, but I think it’s time for you to be getting yourself home.’

‘No,’ she said, stiffening, ‘no, I won’t. Not until you tell me what you’ve done with him. Where is he?’

There was a tremble to her lip which Poyd noted as he watched her in the mirror. A crease of a smile tugged at the corner of his mouth. ‘Where is who?’ he asked, with excruciating calmness.

‘Henry,’ said the woman, still struggling to restrain her emotion. ‘My husband Henry.’ She stepped a pace towards him, then faltered. ‘Please,’ she beseeched, ‘what have you done with him?’

The muscles in Poyd’s face fell as he realised, in that moment, who it was this woman was looking for.

‘Oh, bloody bugger,’ said Bertie Poyd.

The day was an anniversary of sorts. That was why Henry had saved up for the tickets. He wanted something to take Frances' mind off things. Wanted a chance to spoil her good and proper. He was thoughtful like that.

Alberto Porelli, it said on the billposter, International Master of Mystery. The name conjured in Frances' mind an image like those framed on the wall of the hairdresser's salon - a tuxedoed gent with a brilliantine sweep of dark hair. 'Ain't never seen an illusionist before, have we, love?' she said breathlessly as they took their seats down near the front. The auditorium resounded with excited chatter. Eyes bright like a starling's, she glanced round the crowd, barely able to stay still in her seat.

'Take a butcher's at what I've got in me pocket, why don't you?' suggested Henry.

She slid her hand in the front pocket of his Sunday jacket and drew out a small box of Fry's Peppermint Creams. 'Where on earth - ?'

'Off a spiv down the market, didn't I?'

As the house lights went down she kissed his cheek. Squeezed his hand tight as the drums began to roll. The crowd quietened. All eyes turned to the stage.

With a flourish, the red velvet curtains swagged back, and the audience craned in their seats to better their view, but the stage stood empty. They held their breath. And then suddenly, with a bang and a swell of smoke, the great man himself appeared, standing frozen above the footlights, his arms lifted and with his cape drawn out like the outspread wings of a blackened moth in a lepidopterist's glass case. The lights burnt ghoulis shadows across his face. There were screams from the ladies, gasps from the men, and furious applause, riotous and unrestrained, erupted all round. Porelli, with a fearsome sneer, opened kohl-lined eyes wide and slowly rotated his gaze across the audience. Watching from the third row, Frances clutched Henry's hand and feverishly sucked the chocolate coating from a peppermint cream.

The incident involving Henry occurred shortly before the interval. The audience had already witnessed Porelli levitate a dining table two metres above the stage - complete with white tablecloth, silver cutlery, crystal wine glasses, and burning candelabra. Through unbelieving eyes they'd watched him saw his assistant - a spindle-legged redhead in an emerald green leotard - into three sections with quite unnerving relish, before putting her back together again good as new. He had produced five live chickens from thin air, a bunch of carnations from his breast pocket, and lifted his top hat to let loose a cloud of butterflies which fluttered up to the theatre rafters.

Now he called for a volunteer.

From beneath dense eyebrows, Sykorelli glowered at the forest of uplifted arms. He lifted a hand and swayed a finger over the audience, wavered a moment to heighten the tension, then swayed back again, until he came to a point in the exact direction of Henry Spencer. With a menacing curl of his lip, he finger-beckoned Henry to the stage.

‘Gor’blimey,’ Henry whispered under his breath, ‘I’m in for it now. Look after the chocs, love.’

They were the last words Henry Spencer was to speak to his wife. Only a few minutes later, before a full auditorium of witnesses, Henry Spencer disappeared.

Of course Frances, sitting forward in her seat, applauded with the rest of them. Even so, she couldn’t deny a gulp in the pit of her stomach, because it was really so very queer to see your husband vanish just like that. One minute there he was up on the stage, grinning somewhat tensely, the footlights showing up for all to see exactly where she had darned his jacket the previous winter, and the next, in a cloud of smoke and an explosion of confetti, he was gone.

Making Henry Spencer reappear should have been simple. Alberto Porelli made people disappear and reappear every evening. But on this particular night, in this November of 1948, when another flare of smoke and confetti dissipated, the square of stage whereupon Henry had stood only moments before remained empty. Porelli made a second attempt. A hush fell over the audience. Again a bang, a cloud of smoke, and again...nothing. On the third attempt, through the clenched teeth of her smile, his assistant hissed, ‘What the bleeding hell?’

The great illusionist raised wild eyebrows in her direction. He could detect a whispering in the audience, the nervous rustle of sweet papers. And so, with an inspired masterstroke, Alberto Porelli turned to his crowd with a sweep of his cape and announced with great aplomb, exactly as if he’d planned this all along, that Henry Spencer must have ‘hopped it down the pub!’

The audience exploded with laughter. Every one of them thought it a marvellous joke. Again Porelli bowed and the cheers rang out. ‘Gordon bloody Bennett,’ the great man muttered to himself as he lowered his top hat towards the audience. His assistant maintained her smile with admirable professionalism. In the wings, the stage manager, frantic, instructed the stagehands to drop the curtain, immediately cutting straight to the interval.

By the time the house lights came up, everybody had quite forgotten Henry and turned their mind to what flavour ices they might choose, or if they had enough spare change for a lemonade. Everybody, that is, except for Frances. She sat beside Henry’s up-flipped seat not quite sure what she ought to do. No doubt he’d be back in the second half, but still, it was all rather odd, and she felt a trifle disappointed to have been left to spend the interval alone. She remained in her seat a few minutes, in case the plan was for his unobtrusive return, but with still no further sign of him, she tucked her cardigan under her chair and went to purchase a refreshment from the vending girl. Frances sipped at her straw, and leant against the wall, her eyes scanning the crowd. Henry’s absence left her rather at a loss, and to make matters worse, she found herself feeling a little queer. She rather thought it must be the bubbles in the lemonade, or maybe too many peppermint creams. Her body seemed strangely numb.

When the bell rang to mark the end of the interval, Henry’s seat still waited empty.

‘But my dear woman,’ Bertie Poyd protested with an incredulous laugh, ‘you don’t for one moment think I really made him disappear. I couldn’t do a thing like that, my dear. Good God no. I’m not a miracle man, my love, I’m an illusionist. All I can do is make people appear to disappear, that’s the honest to God truth.’

‘Well then where is he? You must know something. At least tell me how you do the trick.’

‘How I do it? Oh, no, no, no. I couldn’t rightly tell you that, could I now? A man in my profession can’t let on to his secrets, can he, or else everybody would be having a go, wouldn’t they just? All I know, you and your old man could be in this together, couldn’t you? A ploy to make me release my trade secrets. Ooh no, no, no, Bertie Poyd wasn’t born yesterday. He’s not falling for that one.’

Frances shook her head despairingly. ‘Oh please sir, just tell me what you’ve done with him.’

‘What have I done with him, the lady asks. What have I done indeed? Nowt, my darling, nowt. I’m most sorry to disappoint you, but I cannot be held responsible for your husband’s disappearance.’ His tone had shifted with these words. He sounded unamused now. Weary of this altercation. He swirled the clear liquid in his glass. ‘Have you considered, Ma’am, that perhaps your husband has slipped away of his own accord?’

‘What do you - ?’

‘Oh, I’m not saying anything me, not saying a thing. It’s merely conjecture. Merely idle conjecture. But sometimes a man can long to get away from things for a little while.’

‘Not my Henry,’ she said. ‘Henry wouldn’t dream of worrying me like that.’

He shrugged, his nose crinkling. The woman had nice legs, he considered, it was a shame her face was so plain. Downing his gin, Poyd turned back to his cold cream.

She had trouble when fetching her coat. The cloakroom tag was in Henry’s jacket pocket. Their overcoats were the last two still hanging on the rail. They looked alone and sad. Like abandoned husks in the shape of a couple. The cloakroom lady looked at her with suspicion when she tried to explain what had happened. ‘You can tell your husband he can come fetch his for himself,’ she said coldly on eventually conceding to hand Frances’ coat over.

Frances was trembling as she stepped outside, trembling from more than the night air alone. She boarded a bus and took a seat on the lower deck. She still had the remaining peppermint creams, but even just looking at them made the queasiness surge again so she left them on the bus seat for someone else to find. Only as she was walking down her street in the dull lamplight did she recall Henry’s parting words. That was when she finally started to cry. She thought of the little box of creams he’d procured so thoughtfully, now winging its way alone into the night and far away from her forever.

Their little terraced house was in darkness. Frances turned her key in the lock and the silence she met made her cry even harder.

It was four years to the day since she and Henry had first met. A Friday night, and she was down at the local with a couple of her girlfriends. She was seventeen years old, wearing a frock bedecked with poppies. She was not of an age to drink, but her friend Belinda was pretty enough that the barman was not inclined to question them. Besides, Frances only ever ordered a half pint of shandy. She was there for the lark of it. She liked the camaraderie, the singing. She liked to see the demobbed soldiers up at the bar, although she was far too shy to strike up a conversation. If her dad knew where she was, he'd have had her over the washtub to hide her behind. Her mum knew better what was going on, but turned a blind eye, 'A girl your age needs a bit of fun in her life, sure it's hard enough to come by in these times,' she'd said one night, as Frances was wrapping up to head out. 'You will be sensible though, won't you, love? Don't go forgetting your gas mask and don't go letting any chaps touch you down there.' Blushing red as rosehip syrup, Frances escaped out the door and clattered down the front path. She'd heard other girls talk about what men liked to do to a girl.

In the pub that evening, a soldier started chatting as she was up at the bar. Would she like a drink? A glass of sweet sherry, perhaps? He was still in his uniform and his cheeks were clean-shaven. His lips were very pink and soft-looking. She thought about what her mother had told her and was about to reply when someone burst through the swinging door of the pub shouting, 'Regina Road has been hit!'

Regina Road.

Regina Road, with their little house at the end of the terraced row, and only a stone-flagged back patio, too small to build an Anderson shelter. Her mum and dad at home in the front room, listening to the wireless before the fire. Mum busy at her knitting. Dad with the cat on his lap.

She knew before she arrived that it would all be gone. She had run out the door of the pub in a blind panic, bare-armed into the cold November air, forgetting her cardigan, her overcoat, her purse, her gas mask. She ran wildly through the streets, through the wail of the sirens, smelling building dust and cinder in the air as she drew closer.

Where her street had once stood, she confronted now a mess of rubble and fire and destruction. The inferno was so hot it singed her eyebrows. The air was thick with smoke and black fluttering ashy smuts. It made her cough. She could taste the loss in her throat.

She'd lived with this war long enough to know that this was how it worked. This was happening all the time. People losing everything. But then it happened to you and your world fell away beneath your feet.

A warden saw the panicking smoke-smudged girl in the poppy-covered dress. She was screaming and cawing and clambering over the rubble in frenzied horror. He grabbed her and held her tightly. He wrapped his arms around her and held this weeping, shuddering, trembling seventeen-year-

old girl until eventually she calmed enough for him to wrap a blanket around her shoulders and take her to the neighbourhood base station for a cup of sweet tea.

That warden was Henry.

When, shortly before the evening interval, Alberto Porelli again requested a volunteer from his audience, he had barely a chance to raise his finger before a slight woman near the front stepped from the seat and made her way purposefully toward the stage.

‘Me,’ she said, staring him direct in the eyes. ‘Tonight you will pick me.’

She took the hand of his hesitant assistant and climbed up onto the stage.

‘Evening, Signor Porelli,’ said the young woman, without even a hint of a smile.

‘Buonasera, Madame,’ he responded awkwardly, before giving a flourish of his cape to demonstrate to the audience that he had everything under control.

She took her position on the stage and nodded to Porelli.

The audience was expectant.

Porelli’s assistant looked nervous. Her emerald-green sequins sparkled in the footlights.

‘Uno,’ said Porelli, still with a touch of hesitation.

The subject of his trick stared grimly ahead.

‘Due,’ called Porelli, with more authority this time.

‘Tre!’ he concluded dramatically and held his breath.

There was a great puff of smoke, a flash of confetti. The audience burst into astonished applause.

Before their very eyes, Frances Spencer had disappeared.

At the end of the night, the cloakroom assistant was surprised to find a coat still left hanging on the rail. A black woollen lady’s overcoat with a pair of fawn leather gloves folded into the pockets. It was the second time this week that a coat had been left unclaimed. She checked it over as she placed it in the lost property box at the end of the evening. It was well-worn, and the lining has been repaired more than once by the look of things, but there was still a good deal of life left in it. The cloakroom assistant left the overcoat in the box for a fortnight, but when no one came to claim it, she eventually fetched it out again, smoothed it down, and took it home for her niece.