

Never Trust a Nitwit

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It was a bright sunny afternoon and I was sitting on the roof of my flat, enjoying the coolness of the air as fall dispelled the acrid heat of London August. It was one of those rare days of pure leisure, with not plays to rehearse, no agents to hound, no bill collectors to dodge. Indeed, I would be denying my public if I did not confess to thinking all was right in the world. Several months into “Face of Face,” the show I was in, there was no longer the drive to practice and no longer the fear that the show might yet flop. Contentment rained supreme.

I heard once, not long ago, a little piece from New York about adrenaline. I’m a pushover for foreign public radio; a little CBC Radio 1 or a couple hours hour with Garison Keeler have been known to distract me from more important things. Anyway, this piece said that if you are completely relaxed and at ease and the phone rings, your adrenaline will, almost instantly, soar. Funny what these Americans believe, really, but what I’m getting at is, this time they were right.

Adrenaline, though, is a good thing sometimes. This time. Because otherwise I never would have hared my way down to my flat before the chap at the other end hung up. As it was the fourth ring was just starting when I ripped the receiver from it’s holster and bellowed a breathy “hullo” down the wire.

“Mistah Myahs!” shouted the voice at the other end. I knew only one chap who bellowed like that and it was my twin brother, Sam Myers.

“Mizter Myerz!” I returned when my breath caught up with my face.

“Yo! Bro! Help a fellow out!” That’s how Myers talks to me. All this weird superfluity of phrase. I think he’s self conscious that I’m a great actor while he’s just a manager of some store someplace, so he talks all weird to compensate.

“Expound, poor sap. What mission of mercy leads you to call like a caveman to his sabre-tooth?” As you can see, I return the favor just so he doesn’t feel awkward.

“You know Choc Full O’ Nuts?”

“No.”

“Yes you do. It’s the store I run over in Walworth.”

“I say! You actually run the place? I never would have guessed it in a million years!”

“Look, a little less of the chatter, champ. What I need you to do is go over there dressed up as me and deal with the regional overseer until I can make it there myself.”

“Watashi da yo?” Japanese, boss. Means, roughly, “Me? Really?”—or rather “it *is* me!” but then I chose to inflect it English style. . . .

“Sō.” Japanese again. Doesn’t mean much of anything.

“So I scamper down to the Elephant and Castle, breeze in *en rolé* Myers, and shoot the breeze at a blister till the more-prepared-and-able-to-deal-with-business *Monsieur Myers* roles in, pickled and pink and ready to go.” Pretty quick of me to pick it up that fast, but then, I am *the* Mr. Myers

“Right you are. Promptly, chief. Cheese it.”

“Tiggity tog.”

Well, now, it’s just a bit part but I knew I had to do it in style or I’d come to grief. So I slid down the fire escape, crawled into the bro.’s flat (which is just below my own; he’s always a bit below me, as he has no hope of catching up and can’t abide not being nearby) and draped myself as tastefully as his ghastly garb permitted. Then I took the tube and sauntered into the shoplet cheeky and white.

The place is a hole, of course, but a very nice hole. Think burrahobbit and you won’t be far off. Oodles of varnished walnut shelving stuffed with ornate displays of tasties, all presided over by the middle-aged wonder Terrance Waters. Terry’s a fruit, and no mistake; he runs the place completely (which is the only reason someone like my bro. can stay in the business) but only wants a small cut of the profits. The problem is, to me he’s the obstacle. He knows too much for a comfortable impersonation. We had to deship him pronto.

“Ah, Waters,” I said, rubbing my hand through my hair in that way Myers does sometimes.

“Mr. Myers, I didn’t expect you back so soon.”

“Yes, well”—here I gave that little hurr-UMPH noise the other one is so attached to—“I’m expecting a regional overseer here shortly. Go get that back room into ship shape so he’s got nothing to complain about. I’ll watch the shop.”

For a moment I thought I had failed. Waters stood there, looking displeased, and muttered under his breath

with no signs of shifting; but then, after the nerve of a less accomplished actor surely would have been frayed to mere fuzz, he gave a little nod and vacated the premises as requested.

Now, I thought it would be ideal, here, for there to be a little break where the audience can realize the relief of the star player in conquering The Vile Enemy before the entrance of The Even Despicable Dastardly Enemy. I short break for him to move around the set, expressing his agitation turning into a sense of relief would have set the scene better, I think. The entrance of The Even Despicable Dastardly Enemy even before the heels of The Vile Enemy had faded from view was rushing it a bit, I thought. However, rushed or not, that's how it was staged; out goes the Waters, in comes the Overseer in a two-piece Manhattan, Eton tie, and (get this!) Docs. Yes, a deep blue single-breasted with invisible pinstripes, coupled with great clunky and rather worn Doc Martins. Ghastly.

But what was really ghastly was the fact that I had no idea if this cretin was known to my brother or not. This meant that I had to play my part so that, if he was, no suspicion would be aroused; while if he were not, no annoyance would fall upon him due to my over-familiarity. On the whole, I decided to feign not seeing the thing just yet.

"Excuse me," he said as soon as it was clear that I was no noticing him.

"Oh, hey! I didn't see you come in. How do you like this weather?" Seemed like a good lead. either he would laugh and say, "oh, it's well enough, chump" or he would look momentarily set aback at this unexpected greeting and I'd know he wasn't my chum. Yet.

"Weather?" Hmm. Not a useful statement.

"You know, the gentle sunshine?"

"I hadn't noticed." Gag! Had the barmy no life at all? Not noticed? "You work here?"

There it was. Not a known figure. Time to switch into business mode. "I do. How can I help you?"

"I'm looking for the manager of this place. Just down from regional H.Q."

"What luck you have today! I happen to be that very fellow. What can I do for you today?"

You remember what I said about telephones earlier? Yeah, so I guess it depends on where you are. When the phone started ringing here I didn't even notice; just assumed the people who worked here would take it. This overseer type, though, was built of different stuff; when he heard it he moved towards the receiver directly, explaining that he was expecting a call.

I guess he wasn't expecting this one though. The conversation went like this:

"Hallo."

A brief pause, long enough to say maybe a sentence or two.

"Police? I think you've got the wrong number."

That was it.

So, the next little while was pretty bland. A customer came in, but he was "just looking" so I found myself drilled by this ill-clad overseer character about all sorts of oddities.

Just then my brother walked in, dressed up as a policeman. I knew it was my brother at a glance; it was my uniform from when I played in "Sondory Penitentiary" (a flop so complete the manager left town without collecting the costumes, etc), complete with a "Sondory State" badge and aviator's pin on the lapel. You'd never guess the oaf was the brother of a true genius like me. What on earth possessed him to put the thing on?

"Excuse me, officer," this by the overseer, "could I have a word with you in private?" Then, to me, "Might I use your office for a bit?"

Ugh... I've been given a lot of strange leads before, it comes with sharing the stage with people who can't remember their lines, but this was beyond weird. I thought about saying "Sorry?" or "What are you talking about?" but chose "Sure" as being more respectful. I was supposed to be humoring the chump, after all, and what harm could come of having him closeted with my brother? I mean, normally that sort of thing leads to brain damage, but this overseer was, due to forgetfulness of nature when he was being constructed, immune to that particular threat.

It wasn't long after they had closet themselves when the customer came up to me and started asking questions.

"Was that a policeman I just saw?"

"The police actually come here pretty often; nothing but the best for our force when it comes to chocolate." Pretty clever of me to come up with that right off, eh?

"Why did the manager take him into the back room?"

"Oh, I guess they wanted to chat or something. That particular policeman is a friend of mine too; quite the chatter."

"What if it's an emergency instead? Shouldn't you be worried?"

"Oh, I don't worry about emergencies that much. London's a pretty safe place."

"I don't know about that. Fires happen all the time. I don't see any fire extinguishers around; where are they exactly?"

What was wrong with this guy? “They’re in the back, I think.” I was going to add some consoling words, but he didn’t let me.

“You mean that if someone started a conflagration right now you would have to go look for the extinguisher and the whole place would go up in flames?”

“No no, not at all,” I began, and then Waters tapped me on my shoulder.

“Mr. Myers, could I have a word with you? It’s kind of urgent.” And, actually grabbing onto me, he dragged me into the back. We passed the overseer on our way in, and scarcely had the door shut behind us than it opened again and in came my brother.

“That’s alright, sir,” said my brother in a stuffed way, “I’ll explain to the manager. You go let the other policeman I just saw come in know what’s going on.” Horrible! Still, that’s my brother. And I have to say, it worked; Waters shot out of that office like a cannonball.

“‘Other’ policeman?”

“I just needed him out of the way. Come on, let’s change outfits.”

The change completed we left the office, and what do I see as we walk out but the overseer and a policeman walking into it! For a minute I was petrified. Impersonating an officer is a no little misdemeanor, and I don’t usually play for stakes that high. Besides, that idiot brother of mine had just told me the other cop was something he had made up!

My guardian angel was doing overtime. The policeman passed me with nary a glimmer of recognition that I was a policeman. I uttered a silent prayer of gratitude and shot out into the sunshine. All was not over, though; I mean, what do you do when you find yourself illegally attired as a joke policeman in the middle of Walworth?

Then I remembered what I did back in the days of “Sondory Penitentiary”; you take off the helmet, undo the collar, untuck the shirt, and act like someone coming back from a long fancy dress party. Seemed a little weird to play that role in the late afternoon, but I had no other card so off I went.

All of which goes to show, never trust a nitwit to pick a good costume when engaged in daylight impersonations. I mean, really! Am I the only Myers with a brain?