

The Shriekers



Tommy Girdlestone is parking his BMW, a nice little dark green car with leather upholstery. He bought it in at an auction sale he was conducting; a deceased estate in Marbella last winter. Parking is hard in a Friday night at popular local 'The Badger Sett' near Canary Wharf. The pub belongs to a friend and business associate, Jerry English. Jerry has kindly had one of his helpers, a bouncer, hold a space for Tommy.

"Thanks Lenny," he says as he gets out. "How's the band?" Lenny laughs.

"Snorting the white stuff like crazy" he says. "No wonder they get the place hopping."

Tommy is an auctioneer with Dotheboy's. He's a generalist, but he's a whiz on Georgian stuff and in any auction with a deal of Georgian period offerings, Tommy is quickly moved off the general run of stuff and handles the sale. He really knows his stuff. He's pretty impressive, probably around 15 stone and speaks beautifully, always dresses well. He's a bit like Peter Ustinov in his prime. Tommy's been to choir practice at the City Catholic Church of Mary Magdalene near Temple Bar. They have a big Sunday coming up. He goes into Jerry's bar.



"Ah," says Jerry, "take this glass of good red in your hand and we'll go talk turkey to the Shriekers."

This is a band that is rather disorganised; it's one of many Jerry gives a gig to at The Badger Sett. He thinks that Tommy should sign up as manager to this group. Tommy manages six bands as a sideline. It's wearing work at times. But he gets 20% of the gross, organises the gigs and also, if they get lucky, he gets 20% of the record sales too. On many weeks he gets more out of the rag tag bands than what Dotheboy's pays him.

Tommy's quite at home in the fine arts and antiques world. He's as sharp as a tack under his well-spoken and benign exterior and he has his eyes wide open for the main chance. He also owns a share in Finesborough Arts and Antiques in the city. This broadens his exposure to the wider collecting world. Dotheboy's know he's involved in this enterprise, but they see no conflict of interest.

The front bars of The Badger Sett lend themselves to intimate drinking. The place is packed with Yuppie world. Glasses in hand, they enter the sloping brick lined and floored passageway which leads to the annex. Jerry English is a very smart chap and the reason he bought the very run down pub, was due to the old brick store fronting the street behind and backing onto the pub boundary being also for sale. He thus tunnelled through into this to create the space you need for lots of paying customers and room for bands. It's been a great success. There must be 700 paying customers clogging up this atmospheric space tonight. They're drinking like the Watsons; the food bar is being mobbed and sweating chefs are turning out meals with almost robotic attention.

Anabel, Tommy's 'gofor' is lounging against the stage; she's on the lookout for Tommy. Anabel is the third daughter of the Duke of Buccleigh and has been through art school and art history. She's invaluable to Tommy. She expedites and handles the details of his life. She makes sure the bands turn up for their gigs and she also has a folk group on retainer to fly in and fill the gap if the worst happens. The big board is promoting The Shriekers as tonight's band.

“Good name, Anabel,” Tommy says. “Overtones of the soft music of The Seekers as distinct from the ravings of a modern band. Can they read music?”

“Not at all, Tommy,” she says. “Declan’s the singer and they are as quick as a flash in working up what he starts out with; classic improvisation as invented by Gilbert and Sullivan, but make no mistake, Jerry found them in Wolverhampton and he, if anyone, knows what the hip crowd here will listen to. Anyway here they come.”

The drummer is drumming up a storm on stage and the lead singer, the electric violinist, the guitarist and their handsome helper run on cue from the back of the annex and leap onto the stage. It’s an impressive entry, if nothing else, completely spoiled by Declan misfooting as he jumps and smashes his head onto the stage edge. It is right at Tommy’s feet. He jumps down, takes a quick gander, turns to a chap who’s sitting right on hand – he has a white windcheater over his shoulder.

“I have to have that,” Tommy says to him. “Quick now, I’ll sort you fifty quid when we have him on his way to Guys Casualty.”

“No worries, Squire,” the sweater owner says. “Can I help further?”

Tommy is binding up the gash hard with the sweater, which is quickly turning red.

“Yep,” he says, “jump on the mike and call up Lenny, the bouncer.”

Lenny comes on the run; he’s quick on his feet. He gives Lenny the keys to his BMW.

“Here,” he says, “you and my friend here should whizz him around to casualty. If I don’t get some sound going, Jerry is going to lose this mob of paying punters.”

The sweater owner and Lenny fireman lift the singer and go up to the passageway on the run. Tommy takes off his tie, goes up to the band and confers quickly with the players. He hums what he is going to vocalise and conducts as he does it.

“Got it man,” says the guitarist.

This is very spur of the moment stuff indeed. Tommy, as mentioned, has just come from choir practise and the only thing that’s come readily to mind is the Galilee song which they have been rehearsing. He confidently steps up to the mike.

“Good evening, punters,” he says in his soft, but carrying voice. “We seem to have lost our lead singer, so we’re about to kick off with a bit of Church Rock. I know you’re all church goers at heart (raucous laughter and cat calls from this half-cut mob), so here goes.”

The crowd listen intently to his opening bars – ‘Deep within my heart I feel voices whispering to me’. Tommy knows if he can get them to the refrain without catcalls then he’s home and hosed. By the time he gets to ‘So I leave my boats behind, Leave them on familiar shores’, the band is on his heels and they’re away. It’s a tumultuous success and they run through to closing time with the crowd very with them.

“Jesus Tommy,” Anabel says, “I thought you to be entrepreneurial management, not a lead singer.”

“Ah, Anabel,” he says, “I was lucky the crowd gave us the opportunity to get going.”

“Well,” she says, “I am, at least, going to reward you. Let’s get out of here.”

It’s quite extraordinary. Over the next five weeks, they play gigs at The Badger Sett and in West End pubs. Tommy continues with what he dubbed it, that is, Church Rock and just picks out a hymn each week to lead in with. The punters love it. There’s a bit of early learned religion amongst this upwardly mobile crowd

BY THE SEA OF GALILEE

“Galilee Song”

Deep within my heart I feel
Voices whispering to me.
Words that I can't understand;
Meanings I can't clearly hear!

and perhaps Tommy is touching on old memories. Whatever, it works and Tommy, already well known in his profession, becomes a bit of a rising legend in Church Rock.

Of course, his excellent voice goes a long way to the acceptance of this new stuff and EMI come around on the trot to record all this and put it out to the public. They run this through to Christmas and cap all their sterling efforts with an invitation to a gig at Windsor Castle. How much higher can you get! Mind you, there's not much money in obliging Royalty, but the record sales take off like a Katusha rocket and the dosh starts rolling in.

At Christmas, Tommy takes a break. He has been neglecting his criminal activities. He's involved in a form of art fraud. He plays all this very close to his chest and it's all quite apart from his normal fine arts and antique work. He has a retired man with a van who hunts around England and at times France, sourcing old and damaged paintings. These are stacked in a big underground cellar in South London and when time permits, Tommy goes through these. It's his sort of motherlode that he thinks about and develops plans for as he goes.

When he's got a game plan in mind, he brings over a Yugoslav fellow, a very talented art copyist to execute what he has in mind. If, for instance, he wants to produce a near enough painting of some old painter of the past, he has first to get a frame and canvas of the right age. Having scraped the original painting down to the canvas, the copyist does a work of another of the famous painters' earlier works on that canvas and after a bit of ageing in a china painter's kiln, they then overpaint this with the work they want to copy, for a later substitution of the work proper of this painter.

There are quite a few very, very secretive collectors who will pay big money for art originals that they reserve for their own enjoyment in their private gallery. If some suspicion occurs, and the art investigators start researching the substituted work, they practically fall off their chairs to find under the suspect work, an earlier painting, a work up painting of another work. This generally shuts them up. Of course, anyone can paint a copy painting, but this Balkan chap is perhaps the best ever contemporary copyist of brush strokes. He just has it and given that Tommy has got the frame and canvas right, no problems occur, but while this chap is there on a job, he also skilfully repairs and copy brush strokes up the damaged painting set to one side for attention. This is really much smaller money, but it often pays the wages of the copyist who is also working on larger fish.

But all of this is part of a longer game. Tommy, in his work for Dotheboy's, values and appraises the stock of potential sales that have to be got up for the real high summer selling season, when the voracious American collectors and others come to England for acquisitions. Thus at the real dead of winter, Tommy is often a



country houses putting together a sales schedule for the summer. He looks a character at these shows when he takes a break and walks the grounds of upmarket country residences. He wears a voluminous old Australian Drizabone waterproof coat, a big southwester and light rubber boots. Thus, while he's smoking a cheroot and perhaps sipping from a glass of red and appearing to enjoy a break from his intense sale work, he is really having a very discerning

shooftie at the garden statuary, fountains, plaques and shields that litter the grounds of late Georgian and Edwardian country houses. He doesn't appear to be closely

inspecting anything. It just looks as though he's walking and enjoying the country ambience. In actual fact, his photographic memory is calculating what is here that is worth pinching. Thus, after a decent interval of time, a hit squad recruited by Jerry English combs these same grounds and brings back to a safe stash, the pick of what Tommy's eyes have taken in. These, other experts turn into squares of soft plaster, surmounted by quite decent garden statuary that is easily carted off to France, where the many Englishmen are restoring old chateaus, farmhouses, Manor houses and suchlike in the de-populated areas of France. These expatriates or part-time expatriates pay up big for this stuff.

It's very profitable and as Jerry heads up a hijacking syndicate for wines, beers and spirits, much of which he sells at The Badger Sett and his three South London pubs, he has the manpower of his tough bikie gangs to heist the doings. What he doesn't want, he sells on the black to other publicans.

Provided he has enough lead time, Tommy is well placed to substitute his copyists' works for the real thing. He has a major strike when the contents of Stively Manor in Yorkshire look like coming up for sale. There is a Corot among them. As there will be a lot of interest in this, he brings it into Dotheboy's for authentication and then uses the close photos and other authentication details to replicate it. The original is offered at Dotheboy's in September – a time it suits art buyers to travel. It sells for £47 million – cheap enough – and with a deal of skilful sleight of hand in the dispatch department, the original goes to Tommy's cellars and the copy to the Getty Museum in the USA. There are no repercussions and a safe time later, Tommy places the Corot with a Japanese industrialist at a discount. He nets £30 million after slipping a million to the one man at Dotheboy's who's a wake-up.

This is a nice one-off pick up, but he needs another big one and gets it when it is publicly announced that the National Gallery is to mount an exhibition of selected treasures at the Oratory in Birmingham; a very one-off place to use to display old masters of this quality. Working back from the opening date, Tommy can make a very educated guess as to transport dates. Picking the most likely day, he invites a friend from the National Gallery out for a game of golf at his club, which is spitting distance from Windsor Great Park.

His friend has to decline; it clashes with his painting transfer day.

"Buggar Birmingham," he says as Tommy's invitation is a good one, particularly for a middle rank golfer. Thus, by arrangement with Jerry English and his very illegal bikie friends and by the use of a high tech electrical gadget which knocks out the very heavy electronic security for the huge Mercedes van, while a gas spike rushes knock-out gas into the van, they spirit away the 30 world class paintings that are in the same van. The job done, Tommy uses a voice warbler device and rings the private number of the man who matters at the National Gallery. |

"Ah," he says. "I have your paintings."

"I know, I know," says the number one man. "What do you want?"

"About a million each," says Tommy, "plus a bit. Your insurance should cover that. Would prefer this to be a quiet deal, I suggest you damp down the publicity."

"We'll try," the man says. "And....?"

"What I have in mind," Tommy says, "is upping the price if the publicity is too much over the top." He rings off.



In the wash up, he nets £22.5 million from the twenty paintings on the green mail deal over a period. The money in a complex arrangement goes to overseas banks, but a big distraction occurs when he has sold and delivered back 20 of the 30 paintings. The stir concerns a Picasso that Tommy has substituted and sent to a Los Angeles Gallery through his usual man at Dotheboy's. It's a run of the mill deal for Tommy, but what happens is that Los Angeles trades this painting on another deal with the Bulow Collection in Berlin. Now you can fool most of the art world easily enough, but not the Germans. They are something else again.



Tommy still has the original Picasso. He's been quite busy on a tricky deal for very satisfying money. Toby Mathias, the richest man in Victoria has been buying up Munnings horse pictures to lend to the Melbourne Gallery. Tommy has been substituting the copyists work for the whole batch. It's a helluva scan; very audacious and he's only pulled it off due to the paintings going to a very much unsophisticated part of the art world.

Just at this point, the very last thing Tommy wants is for someone to start peeling back the onion skin of his substitution racket he has been running at Dotheboy's.

He cuts his losses; the Picasso that he was near ready to send to a Japanese Industrialist collector, now gets sent to the Bulow Gallery without explanation. Hubbub is replaced by extreme puzzlement; things quieten down and Tommy ruefully thinks of the cost to him of putting the brush fire out. By way of further distraction, the well-known presenter of Hymns of Praise on the BBC comes around to Dotheboys to talk to Tommy.

She wants the Shriekers to do a gig for a yet to be settled programme on the USA Independence Day. Tommy immediately perceives another top selling record to the limitless American market and readily agrees. He wants to personally retract from singing with the Shriekers to concentrate on the records. Their previous efforts, in particular the Galilee Song, are bringing in enormous money and it was only a hymn to start with, thus no composer fees bob up. But he's also been doing a bit of deep thinking. There's a youngish café singer that he has heard several times when over in Belgrade communicating with his copyist. He thinks she would add a lot of pizzazz to what the Shriekers have been doing.

"Hmmm," he says. "We've got three weeks to get it all together. I'll bring in a duet singer. I would be happy if you use Truro Cathedral; the acoustics are the best in England."

"And the programme?" the famous presenter asks.

"Lord of the Dance, then that lovely South African thing – Thuma Mina, Abide With Me, to satisfy the Poms and end on the Battle Hymn of the Republic, to appease the Yanks. We'll keep the rock bits to 4x4 minute separate bursts. If the roof doesn't fall in, we'll be on a winner."

"Rehearsal?" she says.

"14 days," Tommy says. "We'll use the annex at The Badger Sett. Thus we'll be trying it out on the hardened punters there before you buy."

"We don't pay," she says.



“Didn’t expect you to,” Tommy says, “but the record rights stay with the Shriekers, with credits to you.”

“Okay,” she says.

The new girl fits seamlessly into the act and Tommy decides to put the rockers into conservative navy blue suits and ties for Truro. The presenter fronts up at the try-out; is over the moon at the results and they all gather at the bar for drinks afterwards. Tommy finishes the evening with a quiet pint with Jerry.

“Perhaps a problem looming, Tommy,” Jerry says. “The Joker looks like getting out of Wormwood Scrubs on a technicality.”

“How so?” Tommy asks.

“Ah...his silk has appealed his sentence and the chief witness who put there has disappeared; perhaps and very probably permanently.”

The Joker is the boss cocky of the gang they have used on the National Gallery heist and from way back on liquor hijacking. Jerry thinks the Joker may put the screws on them for more compensation, especially as rumours of the value of the stolen paintings have been circulating.

“A deal is a deal,” Tommy says. “They certainly got paid what was agreed.”

“You don’t know the Joker,” Jerry says. “Perhaps if you make....say...an extra half a million dollars available to me, that might put the matter to bed.”

“Okay,” says Tommy, who is very pragmatic when it comes to avoiding trouble.

Immediately after the highly successful gig at Truro Cathedral, Tommy writes up a very favourable recording contract for this with EMI and in this same week, Jerry English gets shot and wounded by some assailant using a .22 pistol. Tommy goes round when they will let him in to see how Jerry is.

“It wasn’t meant to be fatal,” Jerry says, “otherwise they’d have used something heavier. What it’s all about is that the Joker is now in full flight. They know what you got from the National Gallery for the paintings and he’ll be on your wheel with a cocked pistol quite soon....best to blow town mate and to blow soon.”

Tommy moves quickly. He hands over the band acts on to his aristocratic helper, leaves what he has swinging still swinging and just fades from the London scene for a while. He goes out to Melbourne to live. It’s not a bad idea to take a bit of time out from the pressure of the dodgy scams he’s been running and with so much hard cash tucked away here and there, that income from interest alone is not a problem.

Tommy finds Melbourne suits him just fine. It’s very moneyed and has a strong fine arts scene that is perhaps ripe for a low key picking for an experienced operator. We will wait a bit and see what he tackles next.

