

A Midnight Date With Doctor Frankenstein

My mother liked nothing more than a visit to the cinema. It was a passion she shared with millions during the Thirties as a way to escape from grim reality into a dream-world peopled by pretty dancing girls, murderous gangsters, brave cowboys, savage Indians and infallible detectives. Few members of the working classes could resist the appeal of what was commonly known as 'three pennyworth of dark'.

However, as a child of the thirties there were a number of films we were unable to see. Some ambitious youngsters would walk on the balls of their feet or talk in a deep voice to try and get into a film underage, but there was always the chance that even if you got in the manager would appear at the end of the row and thunder, 'Come on you – out!' Such exits were never less than embarrassing.

I was thrown out only once, and it was my mother, who brought about the dismissal. We were staying with Aunt Flo and Uncle Bill at the time of the unhappy incident involving the hard-boiled eggs and our ejection from the Electric Plaza.

The day had started off well, with my mother announcing that she intended to take me to the pictures that evening.

'You be waiting for me outside the factory at half past five and we will go straight to the pictures,' she said. 'If we get there nice and early we ought to get good seats.'

'What about tea?' I asked. Food was seldom far from my thoughts in those days.

'I've made us some sandwiches,' she said, 'We can eat them while we are watching the film.'

The day passed quickly enough and, my mother and I wasted no time in starting the long walk to the Electric Plaza. Soon we were curled up in two nice seats, ready to be entertained when my mother opened her shopping bag. It was as the trailers for the next week's films started that my mother handed me a slightly clammy, oval-shaped object. It was a hard-boiled egg with the shell removed.

'Don't drop it on the floor,' she whispered.

I looked round at her and saw her take a huge bite from her egg. As is the nature with some hard-boiled eggs, a somewhat unpleasant smell began to permeate the air around her. Several people in the row in front looked over their shoulders and I could hear them muttering.

I had only just bitten the end off my egg when the manager marched up the aisle and stood looking down at my mother

'Excuse me madam,' he said. 'Are you eating hard-boiled eggs by any chance?'

My mother let out a mumble through her mouthful of egg.

'Yes she is,' said the man sitting next to us, 'And it's a right pong. It shouldn't be allowed.'

The manager bent down towards my mother, 'This is not a restaurant,' he said.

'Well,' said my mother swallowing 'you sell ice cream and chocolate. That's eating, isn't it?'

'I'm afraid I must ask you to leave,' said the manager. 'If you don't go at once, I shall have to call the police. You are upsetting all my patrons.'

When my mother suggested we return the following evening, I took the coward's way out.

'Do you mind going on your own mam?' I said. 'I've promised to go round

and play at Norman Mason's house tomorrow night.'

Episode TWO

Norman Mason was probably my best friend during that stage of my life. He had one fault, though. He could not keep a secret.

It was my friendship with Norman that sparked off the midnight adventure to the cinema and provided me with an insight into the bizarre world of grown-ups. It all started while I was listening to Uncle Bill reading out stories from the newspaper.

'Hell's bells, listen to this!' he said and proceeded to read out a story about the Regal Cinema, which was due to show a horror-film double bill the following week – Frankenstein and Dracula.

The story revealed that the manager, Mr Horace Templeman, had offered a prize of five pounds to the first woman who volunteered to sit alone in the deserted cinema and watch the two films – starting at midnight. Uncle Bill roared with laughter.

'And you'll never guess who's going to do it,' he said.

'Who?' said Aunt Flo.

'It's her next door!' said Uncle Bill howling with laughter.

'That doesn't surprise me at all,' said Aunt Flo. 'That Daphne Shore is daft enough to do anything.'

'And with anybody,' said Uncle Bill.

'Don't say things like that in front of the boy,' said Aunt Flo primly.

Daphne Shore was notable for quite a few things, not the least of them being her short tight dresses and the height of the heels of her shoes. She was certainly popular with the male inhabitants of the estate although not too well regarded by the womenfolk..

Her husband Harry, however, was small and mild of manner. Before he married he had been in the Merchant Navy and had sailed to all parts of the world. I once heard Uncle Bill say, 'I wouldn't mind betting he'd rather be on the high seas now than be here with her.'

As I lay in bed that night, thinking about the two horror films to be shown at the Regal and Mrs Shore, a plan of my own began to take shape.

The following day I discussed it with Norman Mason.

'I wouldn't mind seeing that Frankenstein film,' I said.

'We'd never get in,' said Norman. 'The manager would throw us out as soon as we got in the foyer.'

'What if we sneaked in the back way the night Mrs Shore watches the films on her own?' I asked. 'No one would spot us if we did that.'

Norman, who was ever-ready for an adventure fell in with my plan readily.

The day came and we got into the cinema no problem through the rear exit, then came the long wait. Eventually the opening music to Frankenstein began and we began to crawl into the auditorium. As my eyes became accustomed to the darkness, I could see Mrs Shore was sitting in the centre of the ninepennies, the best seats downstairs. But she was not alone.

Sitting beside her was Mr Templeman, the cinema manager. I knew it was him because of his shiny bald head. He had both arms around her and they appeared to be kissing. Suddenly Mrs Shore sat up straight and pushed Mr Templeman away.

'Now,' she said, in the firm manner in which I had heard her address her husband many times. 'You're sure you have ordered the removal van for Wednesday?'

‘Of course I have,’ said Mr Templeman. ‘It’ll be there at eight ‘o’ clock.’

‘And the van mustn’t be late coming. I want us well on our way before Harry comes home. There could be a terrible carry-on if he catches us. You know what these quiet blokes are like when they are roused.’

‘Don’t worry, it’s all arranged. I’ve never let you down, have I?’

With that, the kissing resumed and Norman and I crawled as far away as possible so that we could watch the films with the minimum risk of being spotted.

Two days later, on the fateful Wednesday, I was playing a game of marbles with Norman in Aunt Flo’s back garden. Harry Shore came out of his kitchen door and looked over the fence.

‘Is your auntie in?’ he asked. He appeared serious and even paler than usual.

When I nodded, he vaulted over the fence and tapped on the back door. Aunt Flo opened it and said, ‘What’s the matter, Harry? What’s the trouble?’

Without a word Mr Shore beckoned us all to follow him. When he opened his front door, the sight that confronted us brought a squeal of astonishment from Aunt Flo.

She had good reason to be shocked. The living room was completely bare except for a small stool standing in the centre. On top of the seat were a cup and saucer, a plate and a knife, fork and spoon.

‘That’s all she’s left me,’ said Mr Shore.

‘What do you mean, Harry – that’s all she’s left you?’ said Aunt Flo.

‘Daphne. She’s gone. She’s run off with that bloke who manages the Regal. They’ve gone to Southport to live – according to that,’ said Mr Shore, pointing at a farewell note propped against an empty jam jar on the mantelpiece.

‘When did all this happen?’ asked Uncle Bill.

‘This morning, not long after I went to work, according to her on the other side,’ said Mr Shore. ‘A removal van turned up, they piled everything into it, and off they went.’

As we walked back to Norman’s house, Norman had little to say. He appeared puzzled.

‘Poor old Mr Shore,’ I said, ‘I can’t get over her clearing off like that and not telling him. It must have come as a bit of a shock when he got home and found she had gone.’

Norman was silent for a few seconds and then he said, ‘But, he knew.’

‘Knew what?’

‘That Mrs Shore was going to run away with Mr Templeman.’

‘How could he know if she didn’t tell him?’

‘Because I told him,’ said Norman sheepishly ‘I saw him coming home from work last night, so I went up to him and told him what we heard in the cinema.’

‘What did he say?’

‘He just gave me a funny smile and said, “Really?” Then he gave me a shilling and asked me to promise not to tell anybody else about it.’

For a minute, I looked at Norman blankly then the penny dropped and it all became clear. Mr Shore actually wanted her to leave. And, in keeping with his nature, he was anxious that it should happen with as little fuss as possible.

A week later, Harry Shore rejoined the Merchant Navy. We never saw him again, but he sent Aunt Flo a postcard from Hong Kong. It contained a short but revealing message: ‘Never been happier in my life. Regards. Harry.’